Overcoming The Storm

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Overcoming The Storm

by demonstrosity
"No matter how intensely the stormy seas may batter me, I will not fall as long as my feet are firmly planted! ...You agree, right? And if you can't do it alone, just find someone to support you, and you can support them back! That's how you can overcome any storm!" - Kiyotaka Ishimaru

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kiyotaka Ishimaru stared at the towering, imposing form of Hope's Peak Academy. He had scouted it via research, but seeing it in person for the first time was something else.

It was an effigy of affluence, of talent; it was a symbol of hope for the future that broke against the sky like a sore thumb.

*It is quite a building,* he mused to himself. While he knew that he earned his place here through the study and moral effort he had abided by since he was very small, he still couldn’t help but feel surprised that they were interested in someone like him. The grandson of a failed prime minister who subjected the country to an enormous scandal? The grandson of a man who made such poor choices that it brought his family's business to its knees, dragging their family name with it? The grandson of a man who destroyed the family's honor to such a point that he was shunned into silence after he catapulted his family into poverty?

The grandson of a man so hated by the rest of Japan that the stigma against his name, and his family's associated very distinctive bold eyebrows and ruby irises, stuck to him like fly paper and made others hate him before they even gave him a chance, no matter that he wanted the world for them? No small amount of the stigma he bore was related to his grandfather's mistakes. No small amount of the stigma he bore was targeted toward his personality, which formed in part due to his reaction to his life's circumstances. When they weren't bullying him for how he looked or spitting on him for his grandfather's actions, they were bullying him for being so dedicated and rigid and sensitive.


All of this and more from his cohort. He had never had a single friend - anyone who was ever nice to him was out of an act of pity or a setup for further cruelty, and yet he still clung to his hope that one day it could be different. He was always righteous and pragmatic, and it was born from a place of caring for his classmates. He knew what it was like to be tied to the anchor of someone else's failure, and he felt that if he didn't lead others to be the best they could, he would become that anchor. That shackle. There were many things that he didn't ever want to do, want to become, and the thing he hated the very concept of was becoming like his grandfather. To his family, to his classmates, to anyone, ever. Just the thought that he might have an impact like that on someone made him nauseous and lightheaded.

He blinked away the tears forming in his eyes, reminding himself what he was here for. This was his chance to make things better for his family and for himself. He walked into the Academy, his posture
and body language now calculated to hide his weakness. *I don’t want anyone to see me like this. I have to be a leader.*

After the initial shock, his reason was for accepting the invitation this was twofold: He would prove to everyone that Ishimaru was not a bad name; that one could succeed by effort even in the most difficult of circumstances brought on by others. Even if they were talentless. Even if they were ordinary. *I have to become the talentless man who can surpass any genius.*

And he would prove to himself that he was worthy of a good life, and not just the endless pursuit of it.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone! I'm so excited to post this. This is my first ever official fanfiction. I've been engaging with the Danganronpa series with my pal Noël over the past month or so, and it's been amazing. I've gotten deeply attached to Taka, to the point that I've been reading fic, headcanons, and thinking about him extremely frequently. I'm very upset with how he was treated in canon - both by the narrative and the characters themselves; not only was his arc aborted before it could really even begin, but his death was barely focused on in comparison to other deaths (even Hifumi stole the spotlight in that chapter). He finally formed his first close relationship with someone ever, then that someone was summarily executed right in front of his eyes several days later, and *then* he was killed by someone who wanted to fuck the computer that was helping him start to process his grief. It's just so, so tragic and unneeded in a completely unpalatable way. Taka deserves so much more than that, so much better than that. So this is my fix for that: in this fic, Taka will survive Chapter 3.

This fic will stick very close to canon until that point. It will be additive in that all of the events still happen, and there will be extra interactions in between them to flesh things out. I will be using actual quotes from the game as well to stick to canon, keep everyone in character, and show where Taka is coming from in what he says in game. I think the pacing of the first game is wonky and everything happening in like a month made some things feel unearned or otherwise less impactful than they should've been, so I'll also make the free time segments last longer than a couple days (probably somewhere around a month).

This fic will also show Taka's POV and illustrate his depths that were just hinted at in the game. He's a very complex person. I'll be intertwining some interpretations of his character that I think are or need to be canon (like him being autistic, and here's a great post about it: http://charlotteml1.tumblr.com/post/168509859939/kiyotaka-ishimaru-is-autistic-a-writeup) and some things I've come up with to flesh out his backstory to show his struggle to become who he is.

This will be part of a series. The next will be from Mondo's perspective, in which he survives instead. There will be another fic that's more AU and diverges from this one starting a few chapters in. I might also expand this into other fics as well, potentially from perspectives of different characters, but only the two are surefire at this point.

I think that's all for now. I'm really proud of this fic so far, and I'm happy to try to do my boy justice. I hope you enjoy! Please do leave comments and feedback - I love discussing Taka, and I love explaining my reasoning for the choices I've made in writing this!

Also, I've spent a bunch of time getting the game script files, converting them, compiling
them, making them readable, and cutting them by chapter and by relevant fic section (and putting them on Google Drive). Don’t mind the formatting - and there are also a lot of repetitions from scenery interactions, but I can’t possibly cut out all of them so just scroll past. For each of my chapters I will link the specific excerpt that pertains, as well as the full Game Chapter transcript with the relevant page numbers. This is so that anyone who wants to read along with the game text is able, whether you’re a new fan or not!
Taka checked his wristwatch as he passed through the Academy's entranceway. 7:00, on the dot! The orientation meeting was set to start at 8 sharp. Time was very important to him - he always liked to be early to take the reins from the getgo. He also regimented his schedule - he was of the opinion that 'doing whatever you want, when you want' lead to slacking and wasn't the most efficient use of time. He was often mocked for being so obsessed with the passage of time.

We only have so much time in a given day, so we must do our best to maximize it! As it's the first day, I can't really plan my day out, so arriving early is even more important! The concept of not being able to schedule made him feel anxious, but he tried to pay it no mind.

His vision suddenly became blurry. He blinked several times, thinking that maybe his eyes were still teary from a few minutes ago. Then, everything started distorting, warping, twisting... It was like he'd been immersed in a surrealist painting. He held his hand in front of his face and saw that it, too, had become just a pale smear in the strange swirling vortex spreading before him.

What is this? Is... is someone playing another practical joke on me!?

He tried to step backward to get away from it. It didn't work - the throbbing distortion was taking up most of his vision now. As he refused to run in the halls, he tried to quickly pace backward. He tripped, stumbling and landing on his bottom with a thud. A jolt went up his back. He felt tingly, flighty, and above all else, afraid.

Everything suddenly went black.

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He regained consciousness with his forehead pressed against his arms, facedown on an unfamiliar desk.

"What?" he loudly asked the empty room. He was disoriented, and it felt like there was static in the back of his head. "Did I... fall asleep studying?" He was ashamed to admit it, but once in a while he'd study so hard in the evening that he'd pass out at the desk in his room and not wake up til morning. As his father was often away with his job with the police, there would be no one at home to worry about him not coming down for food at his usual times. He’d always wake up starving and on edge – any deviation from his schedule made him feel like he was losing control and that he was a disappointment to himself and others.

He would take that loss and tighten his hold even further. He’d use it as an example of himself that he had to try even harder.

He sat up and rubbed at his eyes wearily. No, that didn't seem to be the case - there weren't any pencils, notebooks, or books on his desk. Where was he even? This couldn't be the school... he didn't even know how he got here. He glanced up at the clock, which was synched with his watch
perfectly and read 7:30. I lost half an hour!? Oh no! His chest was starting to tighten. I should look around and leave quickly so I can still be early…!

He saw with a start that there were no windows, only giant metal plates with sturdy-looking bolts running through them. "What the heck!" He’d never seen anything like that before. He didn’t have the time to spend thinking about why they might be like that, but nothing came to mind anyway. It seemed there was also some sort of camera in the room.

There was a drawing of a weird-looking bear on the blackboard that said "Welcome to Hope's Peak! Shoot for the stars from the highest point, kid! You won’t make it! Puhuuhuhuhu~!" He blinked in confusion. Was he imagining it, or was the message personally addressed to target his weak points? He tried to ignore the discomfort that thought caused him.

"This must be a joke!" he declared. There was also a crudely-drawn map stuck to the blackboard with used chewing gum. He shuddered; that was disgusting! He refused to abide that kind of uncleanly rule-breaking! He used his nail to scrape off the gum and ripped the part of the paper it was attached to. He neatly wrapped it around the sticky substance and threw it in the nearest trashbin. He made a mental note to reprimand whoever had besmirched the facade of a perfectly good teaching device like that, with chewed gum and that weird drawing! Very inappropriate for any learning environment, especially if this really is Hope's Peak!

He looked at the map, which was drawn heavy handedly in crayon like a grade schooler had made it. Taka was used to reading his own neatly-formed evenly-spaced grammatically-correct slang-free writing so it took him longer to decipher what it said. It was a map of the floor he was on. There was a little dot in a room full of desks that said, “U R Hear”. It looked like he was supposed to exit the classroom and walk to the "N Trans Hal", whatever that was. He squinted at the words: I didn't see anyone named Hal on the student roster! And I don't know why this map would indicate that about them! He opened the door and peered out, making note of the gaudy floor tiles and ridiculous lighting. No way such a prestigious Academy would have such strange interior design choices! This can’t be Hope’s Peak!

He opted to follow the line drawn on the map, even though he couldn't decipher the place he was meant to go to.

Upon arriving to his destination, he was immediately struck by the even more bizarre wall of the new room. It looked like some sort of giant opening that was secured shut? But what would it be for? For a few minutes, he looked around, trying to study everything. It took him a few minutes to recognize the rest of the area. “This is the entrance hall I walked through!” Oh, that's what "N Trans Hall"-- His realization of missing the joke was quickly interrupted by another: How is that even possible – that metal door must've taken months to install! But only 30 minutes have passed!?

As he was studying the hatch more closely, a voice rang out from behind him. “It seems I’m not the first one here after all.” He turned around to see Byakuya Togami. As he had looked at the forums announcing this year’s class – it would’ve been odd reading about himself from anonymous posters but he was used to it with his family name - he knew he was standing in the shadow of the Ultimate Affluent Progeny.

“Hello there, I’m Kiyotak—“

“I don’t care.” The blond boy cut him off, looking down his nose. “I’m not here for introductions. Or to ‘make friends’.”

Taka cringed. “O-oh… Uh…” He froze for a moment, unsure what to do. He about-faced back to the hatch, beginning to sweat. He was, to put it mildly, used to being rejected, but it’d never been
from a fellow Ultimate before and he was still off-kilter from the other events of that morning. “I hope you are successful here as well!” he accidentally shouted at the wall. He could still feel the other man’s icy stare, but he remained rigid under the judgmental gaze.

*That… wasn’t a good first impression.* He knew about the Togami family and how much of a snob Byakuya was, but it was different to be the focus of that level of sheer malice directly.

Another person walked in and he turned to face them. Their massive stature was statuesque, with huge muscles and long white hair. Wow… He could see the amount of effort they put into training. He was impressed! Taka himself was very fit and quite muscular, but this person was on another level. *This must be the Ultimate Martial Artist!* The forums kept using the word “Ogre” and referring to them with “it”. Therefore, he wasn’t sure what their gender was. But it was a rude question to ask, he’d learned. *I’ll think of them neutrally unless I hear otherwise.*

“Hello! I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru!”

“I’m Sakura Ogami. Nice to meet you.”

“You as well!” He yelled unintentionally and enthusiastically, excited that he wasn’t completely rebuffed like usual. “I like your muscles, they’re very impressive!”

Sakura chuckled, taking it in stride. “Thank you, Kiyotaka.”

“Feel free to call me Taka!” he said, beaming.

“Very well. I can tell by how you move that you’re very dedicated to fitness and training as well, Taka.”

Taka let out a small gasp. *A compliment!!!* He blushed. *Those are rare! Especially on my muscularity… people assume I’m weak!* He spread his hands before putting them behind his back, beaming the whole time. “Thank you so much Sakura!”

“It’s a pleasure. Keep it up,” Sakura said, and moved to look around.

He was so happy that he had a positive interaction - with an Ultimate, on the first day of school nonetheless! - that he was near joyous tears.

His mood had recovered from Byakuya’s rebuff, although he was still uneasy about the strange happenings earlier.

But then, another person walked in. He hastily wiped his eyes with his sleeve. She had long, purple braids and heavy glasses. He was about to greet her until he noticed that she was staring hard at Byakuya. That was Toko Fukawa. She was talking to Byakuya, who wasn’t responding in any way. He wasn’t sure why she’d be so focused on that rich jerk, but he thought he’d try regardless. “Hi, I’m K—“

Toko rolled her eyes in his direction. She cut him off, saying “S-so a-anyway Byakuya, I read y-your paper on the—” He didn’t have much of a chance to be hurt by that before -

“Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!” someone interrupted. She had huge blonde pigtails, steel gray eyes, and a ludicrously short skirt. *Extremely inappropriate for a school setting!*

Taka couldn’t help it. “Good morning, I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru. Rules keep society operating, and I’m afraid that your skirt is far too short according to the introductory pamphlets detailing the dress code here! I’m sorry, but you need to chang—“
She gave him a strange look, sizing him up. “You wouldn’t know the first thing about fashion, even if you got brained with a Fashion Hammer. You’re definitely the one that needs to change, teehee!”

He stepped back, completely bewildered by her response. *Junko Enoshima, the Ultimate Fashionista…* When her admittance had been announced, the threads were practically falling over themselves in adoration.

“W-well, I made sure that this uniform was compliant! And I have ten of it, so I have nothing else to change into!”

*And we couldn’t afford anything else…* Dad got a large discount for ordering more of the same uniform. Not that he minded - it was one of the few sets of clothes he was actually comfortable in.

“10 copies, huh?” She shrugged dismissively. “That is *so* lame. You’re the lamest person I’ve ever met.”

He cleared his throat “A-anyway! There was something I wanted to ask you!?”

“What, Mr. Stick-in-the-Mud?” He was bad at reading people, but he thought she was likely getting annoyed like most people he interacted with.

“Do you like chewing gum?”

“What!”? She narrowed her eyes. “Why would you ask me that!”?

From across the room, Toko shot, “A-are you some k-kind of c-creep who p-picks girls with the shortest s-skirts to be his v-victims? And then d-drugs them w-with gum and other c-candies!”? She accused, pointing directly at him. “That’s d-disgusting!”

He covered his mouth, caught completely off-guard. *What!?! What a heinous accusation…* He’d had many horrible words thrown at him, but that was definitely a first. “N-not at all! There was a wad of chewed gum stuck on the blackboard in the classroom, and based on your appearance I thought you might’ve done—“

“So you ARE judging her b-based on her appearance! Pervert!”

“Absolutely not! That’s not what I mean at all! It’s a violation of school rules, and as the Ultimate Moral Compass I must reprimand all rule breakers—“

“You wanted to punish me, huh?” Junko played along flatly. “That’s sick.” She walked to the other side of the room to look at a cabinet, presumably to get away from him.

Taka was completely traumatized by that interaction. And he’d thought the interaction with Byakuya was bad… That was one of the worst ‘conversations’ he’d had in his entire life! Tears were falling from his eyes in rapid succession. He felt like he’d been disemboweled verbally.

“Are you okay?” said a concerned sounding voice coming from near where Sakura was standing. He looked up, eyes misty and unable to see who it was coming from clearly. “Oh no…”

“U-um…” he replied wetly. "Hello, I’m—“

“Yeah, you’re Kiyotaka Ishimaru! Taka, right? I’m Aoi Asahina, and you can call me Hina!” she greeted him kindly, smiling.

“How do you know who I am?”
"I was talking with Sakura and I heard that conversation…” Sakura was facing him, but he couldn’t make out their expression.

He cried more. “I’m sorry, I—“

“Nonono, you didn’t do anything wrong!” She reassured him, patting him awkwardly on the shoulder. “They really piled on you… I understood what you meant, but I bet they just hate rules or something. Must be rebels! There’s no way you could win that time.”

He was suspicious she was being nice out of pity, but it was allayed somewhat because he’d read in the thread that the Ultimate Swimmer was cheery, outgoing, and good-hearted. He sniffed, wiping his eyes again. “Thank y—“

“Awwww, man! I get to a place early once in my life, only to see some nerd being consoled by a hottie! Just my luck!” a punk-looking ginger boy grumbled as he walked into the room.

Hina took her hand off Taka’s shoulder and glared at the newcomer. Sakura was suddenly next to her and said, “It’s best you not make assumptions about what happened. There have been far too many of those today…”

The boy put his hands up, assuming a placating posture. “Okay, okay! Don’t hurt me!” He stepped back. “We got off to the wrong foot here. I’m Leon!”

Taka was mostly recovered by this point. He was touched that Sakura and Hina came to his defense… “Leon, I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru.” He eyed the boy’s wild hair and beard. He looked quite a bit different from the photos of him as the Ultimate Baseball Star that were in the forums. “Are you a rebel, too?”

“Whatever, Kiyotaka,” Leon said neutrally. “Just don’t bust my ass for not staying too close to the rules, capiche?” He quickly glanced up at Sakura, who was still towering over him. He probably would’ve laid into Taka for being strict had that not been the case.

Taka was about to respond that he had to, for the good of the class, but Leon walked away. A tiny girl approached him, quivering. “H-hello, I’m Chihiro!”

“And I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru! Taka, if you please!” he smiled down at her.

“I-I didn’t give you my last name! It’s Fujisaki, I’m so sorry…” she looked really disappointed in herself for fudging formality.

“It’s okay, Chihiro. Just make sure you don’t forget to put it on any tests we get!” He joked, smiling, trying to make her feel better. He never wanted to hurt peoples’ feelings anyway, but he immediately felt somewhat protective of her.

“I’d like to place a bet that she’ll forget. And as the Ultimate Gambler, I always win,” said a gothic Lolita with red eyes and a convoluted accent. Chihiro looked stricken. Hina went to console her, her high ponytail bobbing as she jogged over, and Taka could hear her telling Chihiro that the girl was a gambler, not a foreteller.

“You must be Celestia Ludenberg,” Sakura said dispassionately.

“Hmmm, you’ve heard of me, have you?” Sakura stared at her, expression unchanging. “I guess my legend precedes me!”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Byakuya shot from several dozen feet away.
Celestia looked at Byakuya angrily, but it was gone in a second and immediately replaced with her refined humble-bragging demeanor. She said something to Junko, and they talked while yet another student traipsed in. She waved to Taka, Sakura, Chihiro, and Hina.

“Hello, everyone! I’m Sayaka Maizono, the Ultimate Pop Sensation!”

She had a friendly, bubbly, and almost performative demeanor. Taka greeted her in return, and added, “I’ve heard the pop industry is quite demanding.” He’d picked up information about the matter from his regular regimen of news.

She nodded vigorously. “It’s basically been my life since I was young. A lot of people think it’s easy, but it takes a lot of work!”

Before Taka could respond, he became suddenly aware of large boy suddenly standing within feet of them. “I only like 2D… but there are so many pretty girls in this room! Maybe I’ll make an exception for 3D, just this once!” Everyone turned toward him, immediately put off. “I-I mean… I’m Hifumi Yamada! As I am the most talented Fanfic Creator alive, I have already redefined the art form! Consider me The Beginning and The End!”

No one, Taka included, knew what to make of that, so no one responded. Taka just glanced at his watch – it was 7:55. Hifumi slunk off to the corner, invalidated. There wasn’t much time left for the remaining four people… He was used to waiting for lollygaggers, but that didn’t mean he was okay with it.

A girl with lavender hair and black gloves strode in quietly. Taka wasn’t sure who she was, since there were a few students that the threads didn’t mention and no results came up for their names. She looked at him, stoic.

“Hello there. I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru, and I hope we can achieve our goals at this school! What are yours?” he asked her, trying hard to relate with and learn about the mysterious girl on the basis of their goals.

She looked at him with no expression. “Hmmm… I’m Kyoko Kirigiri.”

He definitely didn’t recognize her name. That was odd… she didn’t answer my question! She continued to look at him impassively. It feels like she’s dissecting me. The silence between them grew heavy. She clearly wasn’t going to respond further, so he suppressed a shudder and turned his attention to the next arrival, a boy with very large hair.

He approached Taka first. “Hey dude, I’m Yasuhiro Hagakure! Call me Hiro.”

“Good morning, Yasuhiro! I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru!”

“You look pretty hardcore!”

“What do you mean?”

“You look like you do a lot! I think you should chill out a bit! You know, I’ve had some predictions about our class here, and you’re the subject of a couple!”

“Wha--!? That’s right, he’s the Ultimate Clarivoyant!”

Hiro chuckled to himself. “You know, I’ve seen what you try to do.”

“Er… what do you foretell of me?”
“Wellll…” Hiro smiled, a slightly mischievous look on his face. “I can’t just tell you that, or I’ll be out of a job! Word would spread about me giving free consultations, and then people won’t pay and I won’t be able to pay off my huge debt!”

It’s… surprising that someone as laidback as Hiro would take it that seriously. Or maybe it’s a façade… Wait, a huge debt!? How did—

“Buuuuuuut… it is the first day after all, so I could cut you some slack. 50 percent off, take it or leave it!”

“How much would the total be?”

“Oh, in the ballpark of 500,000 Yen! Depending on how much detail you want!”

“Five… hundred… thousand!?” Taka screamed. “I can’t afford that! I’m a student!”

“Sorry dude, take it or leave it. You could do an I O U and pay me back later, with interest, once we’ve graduated?”

“Impossible, I won’t have that kind of extra money then either! My family is, well, er… very poor… Besides, what are you thinking charging that kind of fee? You’re a student, there’s no way that’s even legal!!” Taka was about to continue to argue with the absolutely wild clairvoyant when he glanced at his watch and saw it was 8 am exactly. He started getting nervous. Then, he glanced at the doorway and saw a buff man with an extremely prominent pompadour walked in.

“Yo, everyone. I’m Mondo Owada. Nice to fuckin’ meetcha all, I guess,” he said, gruffly. He turned and leaned in the corner, away from everyone else. He very much had an aura that he shouldn’t be messed with. Taka remembered that the forum said he was the Ultimate Biker Gang Leader, and that *all* of the biker gangs in Japan lived and died by his word. He was said to be quite fearsome, explosive, and manly. Many were afraid of him.

Taka studied him for a moment. He wasn’t afraid of him. Or intimidated by him. Sure, he looked scary, but he of all people understood that appearances don’t always show what’s in your heart, even if it does go against dress codes. Plus, the intricacy of his pompadour was a clear sign of the effort he was willing to put in, and Taka respected that. He replied to him belatedly, “I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru and you were almost late!”

Mondo waved him off. “Yeah, yeah. I really don’t care. Shit like that doesn’t matter.”

He took that as a personal affront. “Ugh – Punctuality is the basis of productive time management!”

He rolled his eyes, looking annoyed. “I wasn’t even late. Quit naggin’, or I’ll have to come over there.”

Okay, so maybe Mondo’s effort was more… *selective* than Kiyotaka’s was… That was clearly a warning. Or a threat. I’m… lacking in social grace, but even I caught that. He had had to learn that the hard way.

He still wasn’t afraid of the biker, and he could more than handle himself in a fight, but he wanted to avoid getting off on the wrong foot with yet another fellow student.

Finally, the fifteenth student strolled in. He introduced himself as Makoto Naegi.

Taka’s watch said it was 8:10. He was sweating. He held up the rest of us! He delayed the orientation ceremony! That’s… unforgiveable!
He interrupted whatever the others were talking about to loudly interject, “Hold on! There's something we must discuss first! Makoto! Your tardiness is unacceptable! Surely you were aware the meeting was to start at 8 a.m. sharp! To be late on your first day is unspeakable! I must report you, and you must accept your due punishment!"

Junko fought back. "What's your problem? It's not like he *wanted* to be late. He didn’t have any control over it."

As Taka was about to remind her and everyone else the importance of regulations, Hina said, "Everyone just calm down! Listen, why don't we all go around and introduce ourselves?"

Recovering, Taka nodded in agreement.

“The hell? Now’s no time for friggin' introductions!” Mondo argued. Taka looked over at him. He looked pissed off already. I was the only one to make it a point to greet everyone else… a proper, supportive learning environment can’t be built if we don’t even know each other’s names! As Taka was about to point that out, Celeste argued that they couldn’t talk to work out the mysteries of the school if they didn’t even know how to address each other. Oh… That's true as well. He didn’t really follow why everyone was so alarmed – he was too focused on trying to get everyone on the same page to think back to his strange experience upon entering Hope’s Peak and waking up half an hour later.

After the group decided that indeed, introductions were the best idea, Makoto looked around for a few minutes. He went to meet Taka before anyone else. It's been a while since someone picked me first – they’re usually put off by now already.

It made him feel nice. He hoped he wouldn’t botch this one as well… “I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru. I believe in bold simplicity! Let's work together on our educational crusade!” Makoto looked like he was thinking. After a beat, Taka added, “Anyway, you can call me Taka. You said your name was Makoto Naegi, right?

That's a good name, a strong name! You should thank your parents for giving you such an excellent name.” Taka liked his own name as well, in spite of it being attached to such a huge stigma. “And to keep that name from losing its value, you must devote yourself every single day!” The second you falter… The second you make a mistake… Then it will lose its value, and it will be that way for yourself and your family for the rest of your life… Now he felt sad. In order to try to put a positive spin on it like he’d been taught to, he said, “Life is worth putting every ounce of effort into it! Right? Right!"

Makoto just kind of nodded in bewilderment and moved on to the next person. Taka hoped he hadn’t said the wrong thing again… While Makoto talked to each student, the others were standing around making small talk and doing introductions of their own. No one interacted with Taka, so he just watched the second hand of his watch crawl around its face.

When Makoto finished – Finally – we’re so, so late! – the group deemed it necessary to talk about the mysteries of the building, and it made Taka antsier. First up was that everyone else, not just him, had had similar experiences upon entering the building. Oh… that's what they meant! It was very disorienting to even think about it now, he really didn’t understand what had happened or what it meant.

What he did get, however, Taka brought up: “And that's not the only thing. You saw where all the windows in the classes and hallways were, right? But instead of normal glass windows, it was a bunch of big metal plates! What's that about!?" He still couldn’t come up with a reason why someone would replace the windows with immovable metal – it was such a strange concept. It's not like they've been boarded up due to disuse – the campus is clearly in working order!
He had another thing to contribute! “And then there's the main hall here. The front exit is completely blocked by some giant metal hatch. But there wasn't anything like that when I first got here...!” It had been just fine before he passed out...! “What the heck!! What's it doing here!!?”

Junko suggested maybe they had been brought in upon some kind of crime. That shocked Kiyotaka. *I can’t be involved in something immoral or illegal! I don’t *want* to be! And on top of that, I’d never be able to fix my reputation after that... Just what kind of crime would even involve kidnapping fifteen students and putting them in a school!?* Yasuhiro suggested that it was some kind of entertaining orientation procedure. That possibility frightened him less, but it still didn’t feel right. If it was just entertainment, how and why did they knock us unconscious and put us in random rooms? The others seemed placated by the idea, but he certainly wasn’t...

So, as far as he was concerned, those two theories didn’t hold a lot of water, though the former was very unnerving. He still wondered if it was all some kind of cruel prank. *I’ve... been the butt of a lot of jokes. Maybe this is just another. Oh no, what if this was specifically targeted at me, to ruin the Ishimaru name even more!? What if all the others are in on it, just to watch me fall...* That made him wonder if the few genuinely nice interactions he’d had so far were all just acting.

It certainly wouldn’t have been the first time.

He wasn’t sure how to reconcile the idea that this might be an elaborate setup meant to bring further shame to him with the fact that he still wanted the best for everyone.

He had to shelve the conflict for the time being, as his worrying was interrupted by an ominous bell toll...

The TV flickered on, revealing a vaguely bear-shaped shadow set against a green static background. A creepily high-pitched voice directed them to go to the gymnasium to begin the entrance ceremony as soon as possible.

That was... unsettling... Some of the others bolted to the gym but for once, Taka stayed behind. What on Earth had he been dragged into? He scratched his head and tried to think more about what might be going on. He was honestly starting to become convinced that this was indeed some kind of prank. Everything was too offputting for it to possibly be serious. He hoped he was just having an upsetting dream. Mondo implied that he thought whoever was behind this was playing some kind of game. *A game…? I’m not sure if that’s better or worse than what I was thinking...* To see what he thought, he asked Makoto, “Wh-What the hell? Is this some kind of bad joke!!?” After Kyoko and Sakura’s insistence that they check it out, he swallowed, squared his shoulders, and walked into the gym entrance room to get there ahead of the rest.

It sounded like some of the other students were echoing his incredulity and theorizing. Mondo said this place was worse than juvie, and Sayaka mentioned that there were no other people around... Taka was so focused internally that he’d completely overlooked what Sayaka pointed out. “Th-They’re just trying to spook us! They’ll take those metal plates down later, I’m sure of it...” he said, trying to be level-headed. Mondo took off to the gymnasium itself. Taka briskly trailed after him. “Mondo, stop! No running!”

The minutes dragged on and on as he waited for the rest of the class to enter the gymnasium. The students radiated palpable nervousness. Many of them were sweating.

That loud shrieking voice came out of nowhere again. “Hey there, howdy, hello! Is everyone here? Good! Then let’s get things rolling!” A monochrome teddy bear sprung forth on the stage from behind the podium. Wh...!? Why would someone use a teddy bear for this!!?
Then the teddy bear started to talk, claiming it was their headmaster and was called Monokuma. Hifumi immediately started freaking out. To him, Taka said, “Calm down! I'm sure there's just a speaker inside it.” *That thing is not autonomous!*

The bear seemed to dislike this and contested his status as a plushie. He bounced around the stage, moving like a cartoon character. Hifumi was still clearly scared, and this time it was Mondo who tried to calm him down by pointing out that it must’ve been some kind of remote control toy. In response, Monokuma made a series of outrageous claims about his controls being too complex for even NASA. And then he started with the bear puns.

*Is this... Going to be his shtick? Being ridiculous?*

Monokuma quickly changed tracks. “Everyone, stand at attention and bow! And... good morning!”

Without really thinking about it, Taka immediately did as instructed. “Good morning!!!” He was used to saying it back to all school staff, and this was no exception! ... Provided Monokuma really was an agent of the Headmaster, of course. Toko was incredulous, but that was per the norm. It hit a conditioned response in Taka.

*An Ultimate who specializes in robotics probably built Monokuma for the administration.*

Monokuma reminded them that they represented the hope of the world. *Yes! Everyone is looking to us as symbols of hope... that's why I must succeed and show them that it's possible to do so with effort!* Then he informed them that they’d be living in this school together. Unable to leave.

*Forever.*

The words didn’t register with Taka until Toko asked, “Wh-What did he just say? Until the day we d-die...?” *No... No way... Impossible! I have to graduate here, and become the Prime Minister of hope! There's no way some weird bear can stop me on my quest for fulfilling educati—urgh...* He thought back to the entrance hall, which was clearly sealed off with an impossible-looking lock. And the metal that replaced the windows. There was no way out... at least, not yet. Monokuma confirmed as much. *I don’t... have a choice?* They were cut off from the outside world. Completely. *No... Is there some way we can graduate?*

The bear teased them and told them that as the Headmaster, he’d developed a Graduation Clause. He had Taka’s full attention as he explained, “As I mentioned, in order to maintain an environment of harmony here, we rely on a communal lifestyle. And if someone were to disrupt that harmony, they and they alone would be allowed to leave the school. That, my students, is the Graduation Clause!”

/*Huh??? Disrupt the harmony? Does... does that mean we have to break a school rule to leave!? He started to panic. To pit his need to leave versus his need to follow and enforce rules... That was an impossible choice. Byakuya asked Monokuma what he meant by “disrupt the harmony”.*/

Skipping class, probably! Maybe it's like being expell-- Monokuma announced: “Puhuhu... Well, you know... If one person were to murder another. Stabbing, strangling, bludgeoning, crushing, hacking, drowning, igniting, how you do it doesn't matter. You must kill someone if you want to leave. It's as simple as that. The rest is up to you. Give it your all to achieve the best outcome in the worst way possible.”

Taka was immediately overwhelmed, tears flowing down his face again. It was just too much. He went completely rigid and tuned out. The idea that not only would he be stuck here, forever, but that the only way to leave would be to kill a classmate... It was disgusting. It was terrifying. It was ridiculous. And above all else, it was cruel. As the Ultimate Moral Compass, there was no way he
could do such a thing. He wanted to live his life to help others, not kill them… Monokuma couldn’t possibly be serious, could he? This was so targeted at Taka, this was so targeted at the base human needs for self-preservation and community, it couldn’t be real…

He snapped back to the situation when Mondo was yelling at Monokuma. “Listen up, asshole! This shit’s gone way too far! What the hell kinda joke IS this!?” Monokuma retorted by insulting his hair, and then Mondo launched himself toward Monokuma at inhuman speed. He managed to grab onto the bear and threaten him – “Gotcha, you little piece of shit! I dunno if you’re a toy or a stuffed animal or whatever the hell! Either way, I’m gonna rip you to fuckin' shreds!”

Monokuma wailed out, “Waah! Violence against the headmaster is in violation of school regulations!” As it should be… But I don’t blame Mondo. Wait… Why would there even need to be a rule like that in the first place!? How planned is this? And he went silent, aside from a strange beeping noise. As Mondo continued to demand being let out of the building, the beeping emanating from the stuffed bear increased in pace.

Kyoko commanded, clear as a bell, “Hurry up and throw it!” Mondo did as he was told. Milliseconds after leaving Mondo’s hands and being chucked into the air, there was an ear-shattering KABOOM and Monokuma exploded. And then another one immediately popped back up, politely informing them that there were others all around the school, along with security cameras, and that anyone who broke his rules would be killed.

Is he just… like this? Why? Why be like this? I don’t understand… Why pretend to be cutesy when locking us in a death trap and containing an explosive device!? Why besmirch the good structure of regulations to excuse murder!? Why do this to us!?!?

He handed each of them an electronic Handbook that they needed to keep track of at all times. Taka didn’t have to be told twice about that. He would study Monokuma’s regulations within so he could think of ways he could enforce them to keep his fellow students from doing something foolish and being killed for it… And to protect them from each other, too.

And then, Monokuma said, “You’ll hear me say this a lot, but any violation of school regulations will not be tolerated. Rules restrict, yes, but they also protect. Society, for example, would be utter chaos without laws. The same thing applies here! Which is why it's crucial we have strict punishments in place for violators”. Taka was bristling. Was the bear trying to jam all of his buttons simultaneously? He’s right about rules protecting, and about society needing laws… But that doesn’t justify what he’s doing! These rules aren’t fair, they’re not just, and they have no application to society at all! These rules protect no one, they just keep his repugnant machinations going! Such an obvious contradiction…! This must not be real!

After Monokuma left, Taka was the first to speak up. He was feeling so many intense things at once, he still doubted the reality of the situation Monokuma laid out, and he wasn’t sure what the hell was happening. He couldn’t really read them non-verbally, so wanted to hear what the others had to say. “So, guys... How would you define what we just experienced?”

Almost everyone else seemed as bewildered, shocked, and afraid as him. Hifumi yelled, “We were abducted out of nowhere and stuffed into this place meant to look like a school. And now we're supposed to start killing each other? This is... This is... this is just...! What IS this!?”

“A lie, is what it is. All these ridiculous things we've heard. This all has to be fake!” I REFUSE to believe this is real! No one could possibly be this evil, this taunting, this much of a manipulator, this far past morality, this contrarian to all the things that make us human… This HAS to be a setup!

“Right now it doesn’t really matter if it’s real or fake,” Byakuya said. “What matters is... Is there
anyone here who's seriously considering all this...?”

Education was meant to be empowering. It was supposed to spread hope, it was supposed to help people become themselves and be recognized for it. Hope’s Peak was supposed to be the ultimate proof of that, a beacon for all hope to flock to and multiply. Hope’s Peak was supposed to be where he would right the wrongs of his circumstance. Hope’s Peak was supposed to be where he’d finally make a friend.

But this wasn’t hope. This was despair. *I refuse to believe this is real… but even then, the lengths Monokuma would go to to trick us are awful themselves… What if someone dies for this joke!? At any angle, this is so...*

Taka looked at his classmates. They were doing the same. Fear and hostility laid thick in the air.

Maybe first impressions were more important than even he’d realized. Maybe there was someone already out to get him… He wanted to help his classmates, he wanted to see them succeed. Even the ones that already hated him. How could you support someone if you knew they might kill you? How could you befriend someone if you knew they had incentive to stab you in the back?

He desperately hoped he’d be able to find out before someone took matters into their own hands…
Whether it was real or not, many of the students were taking Monokuma’s announcement as if it were.

Where there had been idle conversation among the others just half an hour ago, the gymnasium was now eerily silent. The air was tense as everyone stared at each other. Hifumi was whimpering, Byakuya was sneering, and Celeste had her best poker face on. Kiyotaka, meanwhile, was struggling to parse everything that had happened. He looked at his watch, the quiet ticking keeping him grounded.

I don’t want to look at anyone like we’re potential enemies. Even if they already hate me... Even when someone was beating him to a pulp, he didn’t want to hate them completely. Or solely.

He thought back to how Junko, Toko, and Byakuya treated him. They really embodied the idea of ‘genius’ he hated so much—people who didn’t have to put in any effort and were given the world on a silver platter because of some innate ability. They never had to try to grow an understanding of those below them, never bothered to empathize. He very much hoped his initial assessment of them proved to be wrong; at the end of the day, he still wanted the best for them. But even if those readings were right, their reactions to him still hurt. It would’ve been difficult enough for him to bear them on a *good* day, in an innocent context. His refusal to believe that someone could be as vile as Monokuma, that someone would kill for this, was solid, but he couldn’t help wonder if his earlier interactions were glimpses of who could be coming for him now. We have to prove this is all fake... before someone is killed. But how? His miasmatic unease and confusion had him at a standstill.

Kyoko’s voice shattered the silence. “So? What are you going to do now? Just stand around glaring at each other?” It snapped everyone, including Taka, out of their malignant reverie. They all turned to face her.

“R-Right... She's right!” Taka gasped, as if he’d just been woken up from unconsciousness with a torrent of ice water. “Sometimes, even if you're nervous or afraid, you just have to step forward!” We can’t do anything if we just stand here... freezing up and reliving the past won’t help us! We have to embrace it and move past it! That’s what I was taught! How could I miss that...!? “To forget such a simple fact... I can't forgive myself. I'm so ashamed!” He had put so much work after his grandfather was gone into managing himself in crisis situations, in helping himself cope, in learning ways to keep going when overwhelmed at least long enough to get to a safe place. I can’t believe this... this absurd scenario made me fall back again... “Please, someone hit me! I can't forgive myself! Somebody hit me! Punish me!”

Mondo replied, “Jesus. If you have time to yell about it, you have time to DO something about it.” He failed to notice how tightly Taka’s fists were clenched or that his nails were digging into his palms.

In his years of work, Taka hadn’t been able to undo all of the aftereffects of his traumatic upbringing.
He had been forced to be the strong one of his family. Pushed beyond where any child should be, let alone a neurodivergent one whose needs were different than some of his peers. He had been punished for his weaknesses by his grandfather.

Taka was born after his grandfather Toranosuke’s failure. As the scandal had destroyed the family business, the three of them lived together to make due. He babysat Taka when Takaaki was at work. He never missed a chance to drill into Taka that he must redeem the family name. He viewed his own son as a failure because he hadn’t taken a political career, and Taka as a blank slate to carve into the savior of the family as he had a special interest in politics from the start. He taught Taka that he must be strong, all by himself, and that moments of weakness were to be punished physically. He tried to force him to be a genius, to mold him into a younger version of himself. He wasn’t allowed to truly be himself. Or a child, for that matter. He would beat Taka when he froze up from being overwhelmed or overstimulated or dissociated or distracted or when his façade of ‘genius’ faltered. Takaaki had done the best he could to parent Taka and undo Toranosuke’s socialization, but because they were so poor and he didn’t have any other family, he had no option but to have him watch Taka or he’d lose his ability to support and shelter himself and his son. It was already very tight as it was; Taka was very familiar with the concepts of food and housing instability.

Eventually, he was promoted and able to buy his own house, away from Toranosuke, and by that time Taka didn’t need a sitter so much. He put every penny of that new money into getting Taka the help he needed. But even then… Sometimes, his freezing up being broken would thrust Taka back into the mindset that it was weakness and that he must be taught the physical consequences.

He had the self-reflection skills to realize his trauma was manifesting, but was unable to do anything. While the others were checking out the rules in their e-Handbooks, Hina had moved next to him and put her hand on his shoulder again. Her brows were knit. He quickly looked up at her, startled like a deer in headlights, like he was about to flinch… but then he looked at her hand on him, resting there gently, and he untensed slightly. “It’s okay, Taka. We’re all scared too,” she whispered to him.

Unable to say anything, he slowly nodded and relaxed his fists.

He noticed Sakura was suddenly to his right, messing with one of her arm bandages. She tore off a strip and handed it to Taka, pointing to his hands and miming bandaging them. She had noticed the nail marks in his palms were bleeding before Taka himself had. “The blood will stain your uniform. As everyone is looking at their e-Handbooks, they shouldn’t notice if you hold these bandages in your fists against the wounds. Apply pressure to help them close,” she told him gently.

His eyes welled up. Sakura, too? Why are they being so nice to me…? Mondo was watching Taka with an unreadable expression, but he quickly looked away and poorly pretended to go back to looking at his e-Handbook with the rest of the students when Taka noticed.

“Th-thank you…” Taka managed, trying to be as quiet as possible. Which was still loud by other peoples’ standards, but no one else seemed to be paying attention.

Sakura nodded and Hina smiled, taking her reassuring hand off him. They both checked their e-Handbooks. I should as well. He quickly found the regulations list and immediately committed the rules to memory. His unease grew when he saw the sections about killing. And the rule that more rules could be added at any time gave him pause as well. There has to be room for more rules in any system if something comes up… But what could possibly happen that would require Monokuma to add more? No… What would Monokuma use as an *excuse* to add more?

“This is bullshit! What the hell kinda rules are these!? I'm not gonna let them control ME!” Mondo shouted, angry. Taka thought of his introduction earlier. “I... Ever since I was a kid, I grew up with my older brother pounding this into my head... When a man makes a promise, he has to keep it, even
if it kills him.” Pounded into his head…? When Junko questioned the biker, he shot back, “I've made a ton of promises that I still have to keep, that's 'so what'! So I can't afford to die in here!”

Celestia looked at Mondo, tilting her head. “None of that made much sense to me, but you are saying you will follow the regulations, is that it?”

Mondo replied, “Huh? Oh, well... yeah, I guess you're right.” It seems like he really hates rules, but is willing to follow them if it means he stays alive to keep his promises. I hope I can help him with that…! I want to ensure everyone keeps in line so we can all make it out of here, prank or not.

Hina broke up Byakuya and Toko bickering. “Well for now, let's forget all that silly junk about murderers or whatever. Now that we know the rules, let's start exploring the school!”

Taka let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “True. We need to find out where exactly we are. Is there any way out? What about food and supplies? There are tons of questions we need to answer!” Monokuma said we’d have to live here forever, so there MUST be food here somewhere… He didn’t know what he’d do without his daily regimen of rice and pickled vegetables for breakfast followed by toast and a banana for lunch. Unless he plans to push us into starvation to force us to kill each other or die… He shuddered involuntarily. I… don’t want to think about that…

Byakuya said that he’d explore the school by himself, so as to not make himself an easy target for anyone who wanted to kill him. Mondo fought this: “Hold on! Like hell I'm gonna let you run off and do whatever you want!” Does he want to keep an eye on Byakuya because he thinks he'd kill? Does he want to kill Byakuya? Or does he want to make sure he follows the rules like I do…?

“Out of my way, plankton.” The rich man sneered. Taka narrowed his eyes. Those threads were definitely telling the truth.

“Wh-!? The fuck's that supposed to mean!?”

“One tiny bit of plankton, drifting across the sea. So minuscule, so insignificant, they couldn't possibly have any kind of influence on the boundless ocean.”

“I'm gonna kick your ass!”

Makoto interrupted the one-sided verbal beatdown. “S-Stop it! We shouldn't fight!”

Mondo yelled back at him, “The fuck you just say? You some kinda goody-goody little bitch? Who do you think you are, talkin' to me like that? You think you're my fuckin' dad or something!?” Did Mondo mean he felt like Makoto was being overprotective and he bristled? Makoto tried to placate and explain himself, but Mondo shouted “Fuck you!” and punched him in the face, sending him flying backward. He landed in a heap near the moral compass.

Hina rushed over to Makoto, checking to make sure he was alive. Taka took his vitals, using his watch as a timer. “Mondo, you jerk!” she yelled. “You knocked him out cold!”

Mondo grumbled. “Serves him right, tryin’ to talk down to me…”

Taka stood up. “He wasn’t!” He pointed toward Byakuya, who summarily turned around and left the gym without acknowledging any of them. Some of the others followed and split off in different directions. I don’t want to make enemies, but I won’t let the real bully escape... I won’t stand for injustice. “He’s the one who was talking down to you! I believe Makoto was trying to keep you from doing something you’d regret. You swore – a *lot*, which I should add is against school regulations – that you’d hurt Byakuya!”
“Shut UP, goody two-shoes!” Mondo yelled. “Do you think I’m stupid!? He was still condescending, and he was all ‘no fighting’ in a way that let that rich bastard off the hook!”

Taka looked down. _He has a point. But so do I._ “I-I understand that, but please don’t take out your anger, justified or not, on those who don’t deserve it…” Taka was, after all, very familiar what it was like to be on the receiving end of that.

Mondo stared him straight in the eye, flipped him his middle fingers, and stormed out of the room to follow Byakuya. _As angry as he is, he didn’t run out… Did I get through to him?_

Sakura chuckled, probably noticing that as well. “I’ll join him and make sure nothing happens.”

After she left, Hina checked Makoto’s eyes. “He should be fine, but we can’t just leave him laying here…”

“We could take him to the dorms?” Sayaka suggested.

“Good idea, that’s where I wanted to start anyway! I’ll take him there.” Taka looked at the map in his e-Handbook, finding the entrance to the dormitory area.

“Do you want any help?” Hina asked.

“No, no need! Makoto is pretty small!” Taka smiled and lifted Makoto’s unconscious body, carrying him bridal-style.

Leon snorted in the background. “A dude carrying another dude like that... Don’t ya think that’s pretty gay?”

Taka’s eye twitched. “This is by far the most efficient way of carrying an unconscious person lighter than you! Gender and sexuality have absolutely nothing to do with it, and bigotry is not allowed on this campus!! It’d be better for yourself and everyone else if you kept your mouth shut and your prejudice to yourself!!” he retorted, flustered and angry, eyes welling with tears. _This wouldn’t be admissible even if things were different! I hope this is a wake-up call!

“Whoa dude, chill out, it was just a joke…” Leon started, but Taka had already marched out of the room carrying Makoto.

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Taka stared at the long hall with rooms on both sides. If this really was the luxurious Hope’s Peak Academy, it wasn’t surprising that each person had their own individual dorm. It’s just that he grew up sharing a room with his father and his previous school had shared dorms. He was relatively self-sufficient, but having an entire living space to himself, forever, was a strange concept. He was usually too busy studying and sticking to his schedule to pay attention to his loneliness at home when his father was at the station. “I hope classes will start soon so I won’t have to think about it.”

He carefully sat Makoto against the wall to figure out which dorm was his. He studied the doors. _These little pictures are cute._ He smiled to himself. His room wasn’t far from Makoto’s either, so that was convenient. He opened both rooms, prepped Makoto’s bed, took off the other boy’s shoes, picked him back up, and tucked him in under the covers. _I don’t want him to get cold…!

He left Makoto’s room key in clear sight for him. As he was about to leave, he thought about Monokuma’s words earlier. _I... don’t believe anyone could do it, but I should lock the door so no one can come in to hurt him while he’s unconscious._ He did exactly that. He stopped in his own room next. There wasn’t really anything distinct about it aside from the presence of reference books,
a kendo sword, and some wall scrolls. He was fine with that – he lived a simple life without many possessions due to growing up in poverty, so it was what he was accustomed to. He could survive anywhere as long as he had shelter, food, water, something to train and work out with, something to learn, and a space to learn it.

Though he could definitely do without those creepy metal plates on the windows and the camera that would watch his every move. He sat on his bed. Today had been a mess; on top of the bizarre events and the looming idea of being trapped forever (or killed) and his unsureness of the reality of the situation, being forced to deviate so far from his schedule really made it hard to function. He did some breathing exercises and checked the wounds on his palms. Thankfully, they weren’t very deep and they’d already closed up due to the pressure. Thinking about how Hina and Sakura had helped him regain his composure, he smiled warmly and cried for several minutes.

After he was done, he used his e-Handbook to memorize the locations of the other dorm rooms. He looked at the regulations and thought about how to gather all their findings together efficiently. He then walked to the dining hall, finding Sayaka and Hiro standing inside looking around. “Hello! How goes the investigating?”

The other two jumped, startled by the loud noise.

“It appears… that this is the dining hall!” Hiro said. *Even I knew that, and I can be oblivious! But it doesn't hurt to say it!* “There’s a kitchen through that door,” Hiro jabbed his thumb behind him.

“There’s lots of foods, pans, and cutlery stored there,” Sayaka added. “We’ll be able to eat regularly, at least for a while!”

“Excellent!” Taka exclaimed, excited and relieved that they wouldn’t have to worry about that, for now anyway. “I think we should all meet back here at 8 on the dot to discuss our findings.” That was still a lot of time; it was barely even noon. Having 15 people looking around seemed excessive, and he needed to do his routines to combat his anxiety, so he decided to opt out of doing more. “Do you know where the others are?”

“Byakuya, Mondo, and Ogre left toward the Main Ha—ouch!” Hiro yelped. Sayaka had stomped on his foot. “What was that for!?”

“Ogre’? Really?”

“That’s what the threads said his name was!”

Sayaka facepalmed. “That’s not even a name!”

Kiyotaka reflected on their conversation while Hiro and Sayaka were bickering. *So he read the same threads too… They called Sakura “it” too. How does Hiro know Sakura is a boy? Maybe his predictions have something to do with it… His fees are high and he won’t tell me unless I put the next generations of the Ishimaru family in even *more* debt, so I can’t ask him… But he’s the Ultimate Clairvoyant after all, so I should trust him!* “I’m gonna have lunch, find everyone to tell them when and where to meet, do some exercises, shower, and nap in the meantime,” he explained to no one in particular.

“Um… okay? See you then?” Sayaka responded, completely bewildered. “I’ll make sure Makoto comes. There was something I wanted to talk to him about anyway…”

“That guy really needs to chill,” Hiro said. “You wouldn’t believe what I foresaw about him…” Taka didn’t notice that they had said anything, as his mind was focused on his checklist of tasks to
complete before 7:30.

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Along with his innate sense of morals, justice, rules, and effort, Taka had a very keen sense of time. He didn’t need an alarm to tell him when to move on to the next task, or even to wake up when he took naps. He could also easily estimate approximately how long something took after the fact even without checking his watch. That was a pretty common complaint against him, since he didn’t need to be glued to a clock to be strict about enforcing rules – he just *liked* to watch clocks and found their metered movements and physical representation of his time fixation reassuring.

He finished all of his activities in the time he estimated they would take, including tracking down his classmates to inform them of the meeting this evening. No one put up too much of a fight about it, not even Mondo, who had been discussing arm exercises with Sakura. Mondo was still angry (Taka had asked, which added confusion to the list of emotions Mondo yelled he was feeling), but it seemed like he was *always* angry, so Taka tried to not take it personally. *I can't blame him anyway… We're not exactly stuck in a pleasant circumstance.*

He arrived in the Dining Hall at exactly 7:30… only to find two people were already there! “Ah, Makoto! Sayaka! So you two got here first, huh? Too bad... I was sure I'd beat everyone here.” In fact, he was unnerved that they'd gotten there first. “I guess that just means I don't have enough fighting spirit yet! Well I won't give up! Next time, I swear I'll win no matter what it takes! Justice shall always prevail!”

Sayaka blinked while Makoto asked, “That's a bit much, don't you think?”

“Huh?” Taka asked. He had no idea what he was trying to say. “What do you mean??”

“Well, you don’t have to react like that just because we got here 5 minutes earlier than you. It’s over the top, you know?”

“Ghhk--!” *F-five whole minutes…!?*

He covered his mouth. “Oh no – I thought you were just acting! Sorry!”

“I don’t think he’d be crying if he was acting…” Sayaka said dryly.

Shortly thereafter, the rest of the class started to arrive. Once they were all gathered, Taka got things started. “Okay! It looks like everyone's here. Time to start the meeting!” *I'm so happy – it's 8 o'clock exactly!* “Let's all go around and share what we found out during our respective investigations! The sooner we find out what's going on, the sooner we get out of here!” He sure was hoping someone had found an exit, or at least something to help them figure out what the point of all this was.

Junko interrupted him. “Wait, hold on a sec!”

“What's wrong!?” he yelled.

“What about, uh... what's her name? You know, the silver-haired girl. Uhh... oh yeah, Kyoko!”

“...What about her?”

“She's not here.”

“What!?” he shouted. *I saw her right after lunch! I told her to be here... I was in such a hurry to start on time I didn't notice she wasn't here!*
The consensus among the group was that no one had seen her since shortly after Monokuma’s speech. “Darn it, Kyoko! You're really going to be late like this on the first day of school!? Not only is she late, she didn't tell anyone she would be late! A most unbecoming personality trait...”

*We each need to be responsible to our commitments!*

“You're being a real jackass right now, you know that?” Junko lobbed at him. He frowned sternly. Some people were muttering, wondering if she’d been killed.

*Of course she hasn’t been killed, no one is dying in this school and I will make sure of that!* “Well what do you want me to do!? Punctuality is everything!” If someone had discovered something important, like an exit, who knows how long they’d have to use it? *I have no choice but to go on without her. I can inform her when we find her.* “Now then, I declare that the first session of the ‘Hope’s Peak Academy' briefing meetings has begun!”

They began discussing their findings. Byakuya, for all his pompousness, found nothing he deemed relevant. Taka went next. “I spent some time looking around the dormitory, and... There I made the discovery of the century! I found that there was exactly one room for each person!” He smiled. He was excited to share what he’d found. *No one mentioned that yet, so they must not know – I’m happy to clue them in!*

“Well yeah, I figured that out before anything else...” said Hina sheepishly. *...Oh…* He felt deflated.

As Taka had seen, all the rooms had nameplates before the students could access the area, meaning they’d been pre-assigned. Each room also had its own custom room key with the student’s name etched into it. Junko added that she and Chihiro had found that each room was completely soundproof.

“Your next-door neighbor could scream their lungs out, and you wouldn't hear a thing...” Chihiro intoned quietly. Taka’s hair stood on end at the observation. Junko mentioned that only the girls’ private bathrooms had locks.

“Okay, so they got a bunch of rooms ready for us,” Mondo grunted. “They're assuming we're gonna be here a while...”

Taka replied, “Well, better to have than have not! At least we don't have to worry about surviving like wild animals.” He’d really rather not have to deal without his own personal space again...

Toko interrupted his thoughts. “Th-That can't be all you have to r-report, can it Mr. Honor S-Student?”

*S-she’s so mean! My contributions may be… *obvious*, but that doesn’t mean the effort I put in was sub-par! And it’s important that I take time to right myself – I can’t lead well if I’m too stuck in my own head!* “…That's all for my report! Let's move on to whoever's next!” Leon, Junko, Chihiro, and Yasuhiro confirmed that metal plates were completely immovable, and Mondo said that even he and Sakura couldn’t get the giant metal hatch in the Main Hall to budge after pummeling it with objects. *That sounds more like a brawl than an opening... Wait, did they destroy school property by using it that way!?* Taka was about to ask, but thought he should table it for later.

Sakura spoke up, stating that though there were stairs to the second floor of the school, they were all blocked off by metal bars. “We can further assume that there is potentially something above the 2nd floor, as well. And if that's the case, there is at least a chance it may lead to a way out.”

*I remember how tall the building was. There should definitely be more than two fl—gah! No! This*
place, it... it can’t be the real Hope’s Peak! “H-how can we get past the bars?”

“I’m not sure. They’re close enough together that even a person smaller than I wouldn’t be able to get through.” She gestured to Chihiro, who nodded accordingly. “And, like the hatch, the metal wouldn’t move no matter what I tried.”

Hifumi adjusted his glasses in thought. “An unstoppable force fails against an unmovable object! How will our heroes overcome this obstacle? Perhaps they must complete the game master’s objectives first?”

Junko rolled her eyes. “Really? You’re comparing this to your nerdy stuff? How lame!”

Celeste stopped her. “Hmm... I don’t think that’s what he meant. Perhaps the hatch, bars, and such will be in our way unless we do something?” Hifumi’s eyes were so wide they looked like they were going to burst from his skull.

“You mean like... push a button?” Taka asked. “Has anyone seen any buttons!?”

“Really?” Byakuya sighed. “That’s the best you can come up with?”

Taka was about to respond when someone beat him to it. “What’s that supposed to mean, asshole!?” Mondo volleyed back at Byakuya.

Byakuya ignored the biker. “Perhaps Monokuma wants us to do something first.”

“Like... what?” Taka inquired.

“Think about it,” he replied flatly. He turned away from them, clearly uninterested in elaborating further. Mondo’s fists were clenched and he was swearing under his breath, but Taka was surprised Byakuya even gave them that much to begin with so this was a foregone conclusion. He did what the rich man suggested, reflecting on everything Monokuma had said up to this point.

The bear wanted them to think that the only way to leave the building was by murdering someone... But he didn’t explain *how* they would be taken out. Sakura said that there are probably more floors... If there were more floors, and the exit were located on one of them, how would they get there? Would he take the killer there himself, or... would they be allowed through the bars if they killed someone!? “Guys... What if only someone who had ‘became blackened’, as Monokuma said, could get through the bars to the next floors?”

“Huh? How would that even work?” Hina asked. “Like, would they have some sort of killer-verification technology? That’s cool sci-fi... Is it even possible...?”

Taka shook his head. “No. Er... maybe? Our headmaster is supposedly an exploding remote control stuffed bear, after all...” I almost lost my train of thought. “Anyway, what if the bars only come down after someone has been killed?”

Celeste tapped her armored finger against her chin. “Well, that’s an interesting thought.”

“Huh? Become blackened?” Hiro interrupted. “What’s that, again? Is it like when you leave bread in the toaster for too long?”

“Monokuma said that whoever committed a murder would ‘become blackened’, and only the blackened would be allowed to leave,” Sakura explained.
“Wh-wh-wh-whAT!?” Hiro shrieked. “MURDER?”

“I kn-knew you w-werent p-paying attention! Y-your eyes were c-closed the w-whole time Monokuma was t-talking!” Toko accused.

Hiro shrugged. “A clairvoyant needs beauty rest!”

“Y-you were s-standing up!”

“… This is all just a tragi-comedy act put on by administration to keep us entertained!” If that were it… why would they be keeping it up past orientation? This whole thing will severely impact our ability to study… but I’ll keep on…!

Makoto gestured for Celeste to explain what they had found. Apparently they stayed in the gym. Toko squabbled with Junko over her lack of inclusion and contribution to the meeting. She called her a ‘dirty slut’ for suggesting she ask Celeste and Hiro to go along. Taka was taken aback. That kind of language… There is no place for that kind of language in a learning environment, or any kind of environment…! Toko further said Junko’s mind was as thin as her body and she was repulsed.

Junko replied, “How can you say something so awful to someone you just met?”

Interesting that she’d say that, considering how both of them were to me earlier… She’s not wrong though.

Sayaka said that she had found a ton of food in the kitchen and Monokuma appeared suddenly, informed her that food is restocked automatically every day, and vanished just as fast. Hina made sure Monokuma hadn’t tried to eat Sayaka, which Hifumi replied to with weird comments. Everyone scolded him, but Taka didn’t really understand what he meant. “Hey! Stop screwing around, all of you! Are you still asleep or something? We're prisoners here! We could all just die any second!” Junko reminded them.

“She's right.” Mondo pointed out. “We can’t be makin' stupid jokes right now. We gotta do something, or-!”

Kyoko’s even voice cut through his words. “You're all spending an awful lot of time yelling and carrying on. Do you really think you can afford to do so? Have none of you accepted the reality of the situation?”

“Kyoko!” Taka shouted, relieved, frustrated, and worried all at once. “Where the heck have you been!? We already started the meeting without you!” In response, she dropped a piece of paper onto the table. It was a map of Hope’s Peak Academy. “Wh-What the...? Where did you find this?”

“It doesn’t matter where I found it.”

“It DOES matter! You're really freaking us out right now!” At the very least, she’s freaking ME out! She didn’t tell us she’d be late or where she was, she appears from who knows where with some map, and she just expects us to accept that? I haven't even gotten a chance to calm down from her being missing yet... Junko waved him off and gave her the floor.

“The building we're in right now is laid out in precisely the same way as Hope's Peak Academy.” No... No way... That can’t be! Why would Hope’s Peak be like this!? No way it'd be party to this... this cruelty! Makoto voiced his concerns about the implication of it being the actual building they were all supposed to be attending. “Well, in terms of its construction, yes. But it looks like it’s had a number of strange... renovations done to it.” She didn’t elaborate; instead, she added that she’d only
found details about the 1st floor.

Some of the students seemed to be thinking that this confirmed that it must be Hope’s Peak, while the rest, Kiyotaka and Hina included, were made further skeptical by these mysterious ‘renovations’ and the utter lack of staff or other students. Naturally Yasuhiro was adamant about this being some kind of show put on by the people in charge of the school. Celestia said, “It is perfectly obvious that we have been imprisoned in some secret location, with no way out.” How can she be so sure without even seeing the rest of the floors!? She went on to suggest that everyone adapt to their environment; since the rules said that some areas would be off limits after 10 p.m., sleeping outside of the dorms was prohibited and would be punished as ‘sleeping in class’, and that the motive for killing existed so they’d constantly be anxious about being murdered and they’d lose sleep, she argued that they themselves should have a rule that no one go out at night time.

Taka saw her point. One of the reasons he made sure to get a healthy amount of sleep was to ensure that his mind and body were at peak performance, and he always went to bed at the same time to keep that schedule and not stress over it being randomized. I'll get everyone in gear! “On behalf of all the men here, I agree to comply!” Leon started to raise a fuss but Celestia cut him off to go shower before the water shut off at curfew.

After she left, Junko asked Taka, “So, Mr. Chairman... what next? One person already left.”

“U-Umm... Well then, what say we call an end to today's meeting!? Like she said, it's almost nighttime anyway. We can reconvene first thing tomorrow morning!” After that, everyone quickly trickled out, leaving him alone with Kyoko.

“Kyoko?” She turned to him, face unreadable. “What made you late today?”

“...I was investigating. Thoroughly.”

“Please do your best to be on time…”

“There’s no rule regarding that in the e-Handbook.”

He looked down, breaking intense eye contact. “I know, but it’s standard decorum for all real schools. It’s a simple courtesy that gives structure to everything. Regulation helps everyone function and work together. And Monokuma could easily add a rule like that any time... He said rule breakers would be killed. Even if he doesn’t apply that... *punishment* in hindsight, we should still be in the habit just in case.”

“...Is that the only reason why you’re asking that of me?”

He swallowed. He didn’t expect her inquiry. People usually don’t press me after I say something like that. They just roll their eyes and write me off even more. “No…” He admitted. “People being late also makes me really anxious.”

She studied him silently for a minute. “I can’t promise that... But I will promise that if I’m late, it’s for something important. I won’t waste your time with inconsequential chitchat.” She turned away to walk out of the Dining Hall before adding quietly, “I... respect what you’re trying to do for everyone.” With that, she was gone.

He stood there, feeling strange and wondering what she meant. How am I supposed to interpret that?

Taka pondered it as he walked back to his dorm to get settled in for the night. A loud bell rang over
the PA system. Monokuma appeared on his room’s monitor to inform them all that it was officially 10 p.m. He took off his uniform and folded it neatly, then stacked it on the desk for laundering.

Shortly thereafter he went to bed. Sleep covered him like a warm blanket. He dreamed of being home, of spending quality time with his father, and his heart ached.
Kiyotaka awoke to the sound of Monokuma’s bell and announcement. *Is that really necessary? I don’t know anyone who’d want to hear an annoying voice like that in the morning… Or ever.* He’d slept plenty, but not well. His dreams were full of unpleasantness and longing, though none of them really stood out to him upon regaining consciousness.

He tried to shake off the feeling, determined to make the new day a good one. *I can adhere to my schedule now, so that’s a start.* He used the bathroom, brushed his teeth, shaved, and got dressed before stepping into the hallway. He spotted Makoto coming out of his room and rubbing his eyes. “Good morning, Makoto!”

“G-Good morning...”

Taka grinned. “Yes, morning greetings are quite a delight! Such an energizing way to start the day! Now then, let’s make sure we both do our very best throughout the day!”

“S-Sure...” Makoto walked off.

Taka watched him, still smiling. He hoped his reminder would help the other student get through the day. He walked to kitchen and made himself breakfast. The dining hall was empty, aside from himself.

*I was hoping everyone would be here... I said last night we should reconvene this morning! Did they forget? Maybe they don’t respect me...* He frowned down at his pickled vegetables. *I should've said a specific time. Oh well, I’m used to eating alone...*

After eating, he took out his e-Handbook and looked over the rules again. Right off the bat, something stood out to him:

**Rule #1:** Students may reside only within the school. Leaving campus is an unacceptable use of time.

**Rule #6:** Anyone who kills a fellow student and becomes "blackened" will graduate, unless they are discovered.

*Wait... We're allowed to explore campus, presumably try to find a way out... but we're banned from even using it? If we leave, we’ll be breaking a rule and therefore punished... But what if we ‘graduate’? Monokuma said we’d be allowed to leave if we commit murder and go without being caught, but wouldn’t that be a violation of the first rule as well?*

Just then, he saw someone was standing across the room, staring at him. He jumped to attention from his seat.
“So, you’ve noticed it too then?” Byakuya shifted his glasses on his nose. “We can’t leave the school without killing someone, and yet leaving is strictly prohibited.”

“What does that mean?” Taka asked, more subdued than usual. “It’s such a contradiction…”

“One of three things: one of the rules is a lie, both of the rules are lies, or there’s no way out of this school.”

Taka was horrified. So we really might be stuck here forever… Or someone might commit a murder, and then be killed while Monokuma lets them leave… His eyes welled up. “S—so…” Byakuya turned his head as if he was unwilling to watch him emote. “How do you feel about this?”

“I don’t,” he replied flatly.

“W—what?”

“I don’t feel anything about this. Emotions are beneath me; it’s simply a tangle in logic. I intend to investigate to see which one is false.”

“Investigate? You don’t mean…” Is he so willing to kill!?

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He turned the rest of the way from Taka, walking out. “I’m a Togami. I don’t need to get my hands dirty.”

Taka stood there, deeply perturbed. Byakuya Togami is… someone to watch out for… All the Togamis were, but this one seemed particularly dangerous. He glanced at his watch. There was still plenty of time today. Luckily, he had already been planning on searching the rest of the floor. Maybe someone missed something…

Over the next several hours, he investigated every nook and cranny of all areas available to him. He found many strange “Monokuma Coins” tucked away inside or on top of everything, even the security cameras. He eventually came upon the School Store.

He opened the door. Inside was an explosion of knickknacks and clutter. It was an obnoxious eye sore. Wh-what is a place like this doing in a school!?

He noticed the gaudy-looking MonoMono Machine. A toy vending machine… Many people of his age had fond memories of the machines, as they were literally *everywhere*. He’d never even used one, but even its appearance made him feel sentimental. I could probably use those coins here… But I should save them for later. A life of poverty had taught him frugality. Instead, he dedicated himself to tidying up the place. It was supper time by the time he finally finished cleaning the store. He sighed happily. I don’t like busywork, but organizing clutter isn’t busywork. It’s therapeutic. Keeping your environment arranged helps you keep your head arranged too!

He headed to the kitchen, preparing his meal. Mondo was in the dining room eating. When he sat down at a table he noticed the other man looking at him from a few seats away. “Good evening, Mondo,” he greeted.

Mondo blinked. “Sup? How’d ya get all dusty?”

“Er… I investigated the school on my own and cleaned the school store today.”

The other man raised his eyebrows. “You play that ugly machine?”

“No… I don’t like the idea of gambling.”
Mondo snorted. “That’s a no-brainer.” Kiyotaka swallowed. Here it comes... “You’re a damn stick in the mud.” Taka didn’t respond. “Yeah, ya know whatcha like. I dig that.” Maybe I was wrong thinking he’s always angry? Mondo chuckled to himself and leisurely walked out of the room.

Taka, extremely confused, immediately power walked back to a classroom he had investigated earlier, looking for a legal pad full of notes he’d dropped. As he sometimes did, he talked loudly to himself about the strangeness of this place. If this is all real...“Is this supposed to be part of the Hope’s Peak curriculum...? But they’ve gone too far! The government must not remain silent on this!” Makoto popped in the room and asked what he meant. Surprised by the other boy’s presence, he said, “I didn’t know you were there! Uh... Oh, I mean that Hope’s Peak is government funded right? So they have oversight as well as regulations... This getting so far, it’s just crazy. There’s no way they’d just let this happen, right?” I have faith in the regulations of schools and the enforcement of them... I can’t stand the possibility that they’re failing here...

Makoto nodded and left. Taka returned to his room, trained, showered, and laid in bed several hours before the bedtime bell sounded, trying to gather his thoughts about the situation. He wanted no part in trying to figure out Mondo tonight, as he could tell it’d get him nowhere. He fell asleep with a dictionary next to him.

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“Morning!” He greeted Chihiro as she was eating breakfast the next morning. They were the only ones there. No one else came, again... I think I’ll tell everyone in person to come. She looked down and dissatisfied.

She perked up, smiling. “Oh, Hi Taka! How are you?”

“I’m...” It pains me to admit this, since it’s normally a sign you could be doing something... “Bored...”

She noted sympathetically. “Me too.”

“Classes haven’t started... And I don’t have anything to study but the e-Handbook and some reference books and dictionaries that were already in my dorm... They just... don’t inspire the same kind of academic invigoration in me as textbooks!” There’s nothing like cracking open a textbook and learning something you didn’t know before!!

“Y-yeah! I don’t have a computer. There’re several monitors in mine... but they’re not even hooked up to anything. They just want me make to program more, but all I can do is code in my head... What do you do to pass the time here other than studying?”

“Well, I keep a strict schedule. I train and work out as well, which you could also call studying!”

She leaned forward. “Work out? Do you have barbells in your dorm?”

“Nope. But I do have a kendo sword! Practicing with that and doing regular fitness routines helps me stay in shape. I hope we get full exercise equipment some time...” Chihiro nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, do you want to get fit?”

Chihiro blushed and quickly shook her head. She looked like she was about to cry. “Um... Th-that’s not it... I’m weak. I just hope for the sake of all the strong people like you that we get access to that...”

Taka blanched. “Er... Strong? Me? N-not at all...” Weak. Never strong... He was desperately trying to push back against the fear that was beginning to flood his mind. Chihiro had unintentionally
triggered him.

“I think you’re really strong!” Chihiro said encouragingly. That made it worse.

He was starting to hyperventilate. Breathe. One, two, three, four… “I-I’m sorry, I n-need to go n-now. Goodbye!” He stood up and walked as fast as he possibly could to his dorm and collapsed onto his bed, drenched in sweat and weeping. He’d held on until he was in a safe spot, at least.

“Grandfather isn’t here, Taka.” He reminded himself, trying to pull ashore. His grandfather had lived in isolation since he was 13. The public story was that his family had finally kicked him to the curb for the fallout of his scandal. The truth was that his father had ultimately been able to move out and he disavowed him due to his abuse of Taka. He died two years ago a hermit. Taka went to the funeral, but as soon as he saw his body he bolted back to his house a mile away. Takaaki had driven back home as soon as possible. Taka had locked himself in the bathroom and refused to come out unless his dad brought him a law textbook he used to read to him as a toddler. Once he did, Taka let him in and Takaaki held him and read to him as he sobbed into his shirt.

“He… he can’t hurt me anymore…”

There were a pair of knocks on his door. He gasped. I can’t let anyone see me like this again… They’ll… They’ll think even less of me… There was another round of knocks. They won’t go away… He opened his door a crack, not showing his face. “W-who is it?” he accidentally shouted.

“Whoa, man, easy!” Mondo said from the other side of the door. “I saw you bookin’ it to your dorm…”

“Taka, a-are you okay? Did I upset you?” Chihiro asked, also sounding very upset. Oh no… I hurt her feelings… I feel so… He panicked. “N-no, I’m f-fine. It’s fine. I’m okay. I remembered that I had to study my dictionary, there were some words Monokuma used I don’t know.”

There was a pause. “Dude…” Mondo said, sighing.

“What?” Chihiro asked him.

“Words I don’t know?’ No way. He is a BAD liar.”

“Y-you’re right,” Taka responded, trying to center himself. “It’s against my morals to lie.” It’s difficult for me to. It’s also against my morals to hurt people… He felt like he had been backed into a corner and he had to answer dishonestly to protect himself. It exacerbated how bad he was feeling. “But I-I’ll be fine.”

“I-I’m so s-sorry, Taka…” Chihiro apologized, clearly crying. Now I feel even worse…

“No, Chihiro! Please… Don’t. You didn’t know. I’m not mad at you…”

“What the fuck is goin’ on here!” Mondo’s voice was getting loud… “You made a girl cry!”

“This is a misunderstanding!” Taka said.

“Then explain it!”

“I… I can’t! Not yet… It hurts too much… She tripped a wire. Please,” he begged, “Don’t make me talk about it. You’ll hate me even more.”
Mondo scoffed. “Fuck you, man. Whatever!” he shouted and stormed off. Taka didn’t understand his reaction at all – the pit in his stomach just sank even lower. Chihiro was trying to stop crying.

“Chihiro, I’m sorry for upsetting you too.”

“N-no, I should be the s-sorry one… I hurt you, you had to l-leave, I pressed it, and now you’re crying and M-Mondo is angry…”

“And I made you cry…”

“I cry at everything!” She laughed bitterly at herself.

“Oh…”

“What is i-it?”

“I do, too. I used to try to hide it.” And fail. He smiled bitterly, but also in sympathy.

“I do it because I’m w-“ she paused, reconsidering her word choice. “Fragile… Why do you?”

“Your idea of me doesn’t quite line up with the actual me…” No one’s does, aside from Dad’s...

She seemed to understand what he meant, at least well enough to let it be for now. “Taka?”

He opened the door the rest of the way, revealing his puffy eyes and tear- and snot-trailed face. I want her to see I’m being sincere. She looked the same. “Chihiro?”

“L-lets talk about this some other time, ok? We both need time to rest.” She gave him a watery smile. She’s right… My therapist taught me that sometimes you need space so you can recover first. “I’m not good at… conversation… but I promise that we will.” He nodded to her. “I hope the rest of your day is kind to you.”

She scrubbed at her eyes and smiled more widely at him. “You too, Taka.” She walked down the hall to her dorm. Taka closed his door.

He studied his reference books in his room the rest of the day, leaving only for food and avoiding anyone he saw. He thought about how useful it would be if they could all get together regularly to discuss anything they found on campus. He dreamed he was standing in an anonymous field being bombarded by a torrential downpour. It was pushing him further and further into the ground, but he refused to bow under its weight. He was wearing Mondo’s jacket.

Taka woke up a while before the morning bell. I’m going to get everyone together… Even if no one’s found anything else. If we don’t have unity, there’s no way we can make it out of this. It was the third morning after Taka had said they should convene before the next day’s breakfast; clearly, no one else was going to step up to the plate if he didn’t. The thought of inspiring everyone to help each other made him feel buoyant; it allowed him a renewed sense of purpose to face the difficult task of convincing 14 young adults to interact with each other while barely awake. He was compelled to knock on Makoto’s door first. As soon as opened the door, Taka shouted, “A fantastic morning, isn’t it!” The other boy looked like he’d just rolled out of bed and Taka had blasted him in the face with a megaphone. “Now then, if you’ll pardon the interruption…!” He walked into Makoto’s room. He asked Taka what was up. “No matter how intensely the stormy seas may batter me, I will not fall as long as my feet are firmly planted! …You agree, right?”
“U-Um, I'm not sure I understand…”

“And if you can't do it alone, just find someone to support you, and you can support them back! That's how you can overcome any storm!” When he had started therapy, he craved help but was severely terrified of the idea of receiving any. That was thanks to the stigma around the mental health profession, as well as the machinations of his grandfather. He was taught that only weak people relied on each other. His therapists showed him that it was human to need support, and to support others in turn. *It's one of the best things I've ever learned…*

Makoto didn’t say anything. *Oh no… I didn’t explain myself very well did I?* “I was thinking about it last night, and... I decided we all need to really come together. And that was when I realized... Every morning from now on, after the morning announcement, everyone should have breakfast together! And now is the beginning of that fateful day! Please head to the dining hall at your earliest convenience! That's all for now! I have to go let everyone else know the good news!” He turned and left immediately, eager to get the others:

Byakuya glared at him so hard he thought he might catch fire.

Kyoko and Celeste said they’d come, with the latter mentioning that she liked the idea of it becoming a morning ritual and the former mentioning they needed stay up to date on their individual investigations.

Hifumi took a while to get to the door and was coated in sweat. *I don’t want to think about what he might’ve been doing in there…*

Toko peeked through the crack in her door and asserted he was doing this because he wanted to look up the girls’ skirts since they’d be less guarded while half-asleep. *Why is she always like this!?* He argued with her, but again couldn’t win, so he gave up and just pleaded with her to attend. She slammed the door in his face.

Hiro looked abnormally relaxed. *Well, abnormally for everyone ELSE. Like he didn’t have a care in the world. His eyes were also only half-open. He said he’d come just to humor Taka, since he was sure the administration would be ending the excitement soon. Taka was glad to shut the door to cut off the heavily perfumed scent leaking out from the clairvoyant's room; strong scents like that were hard for him to handle.*

Mondo answered his door after a few minutes, clearly annoyed. “What the fuck, it’s 7:30 in the goddamned mor— Oh,” he realized it was Taka standing there. “What do you want.”

*I’m not good at reading expression or body language… but that wasn’t even a question. He’s angry about yesterday…* He felt his chest starting to tighten. Then he noticed Mondo was standing in the doorframe with his curly hair down, unclothed body shiny, and a short towel slung around his waist. *He-he’s… Mondo was absolutely ripped, even moreso than Taka himself. Does he bench press his motorcycle?? And his legs… He never would’ve guessed Mondo had such strong thighs under his usual baggy pants. Taka blushed hard. His chest wasn’t the only thing tightening now. “I, I er, we’re meeting at the D-Dining Hall now, p-please come?” he squeaked.*

Mondo went red and flustered. “What the hell do you think you’re starin’ at!?”

“Ihhh… your hair isn’t styled!” Taka pointed out. It wasn’t the *only* thing he was looking at, but it was very noticeable. *He… He looks nice without his pompadour. Wait… what!?*

Mondo looked at him at a loss for words. *Oh no! He could tell I was lying yesterday… but this wasn’t a lie, it wasn’t just everything… “I’ll, uh, I’ll be there soon,” he said quietly and he shut the
door abruptly in Taka’s face.

Absolutely mortified, Taka hid in the School Store for several minutes to calm his hyperventilating and try to understand what just happened. *I interrupted his shower… I should apologize…* He tried not to think about what he saw, his laser focus thrown astray. *Darn it! Distractions… I need to get back to the topic at hand…!*

Hina answered Sakura’s dorm. Taka grinned; he deeply appreciated the efforts both of them had made to help him, and he just liked seeing that they were friends anyway. “Hiya, Taka!” Hina beamed at him.

“Good morning, Hina! And Sakura, of course!” He waved at Sakura, who put up his hand in greeting with a small smile.

“Are you alright?” Hina inquired. “You look flushed. Have you been drinking enough water? That Monokuma and his stupid night rules…” she grumbled.

“Ghh!” *I thought I was back to normal…*

Hina went on, not noticing. “Do you have a fever? Should I check your forehead? I’m a lifeguard, so I—“

“No no, it’s okay! That’s not necessary! I’m plenty hydrated, and I don’t feel sick!” He told her loudly, practically begging her to let it be.

“Wait, why are you red then?”

“Exertion!” he answered quickly. *Well it’s… not wrong.*

She didn’t seem to think much of it. “Oh, ok!”

“What brings you to my room this morning, Taka?” Sakura asked, voice soothing.

Taka took a deep breath. “Well… I want us to have daily morning meetings in the Dining Hall. I think if we get to know and support each other, we’ll all get through this!”

Hina looked thoughtful. “What do you think, Sakura? We’d have to change our routine a little bit.”

Sakura smiled at Taka. “I think it’s a great idea.” *Wait…Routine? A boy and a girl alone together… Oh no-*

“Okay!” Hina said, excited. “Then we’ll come down there with you today. We can do our stretches before we come to warm up, and then exercise after!”

*Oh, they’re just exercising in the mornings. That’s perfectly acceptable!* The two of them stepped out of the room. On the way to the Dining Hall, there wasn’t much conversation but the silence was companionable.

A few feet from the entrance, Sakura said, “I’m glad to see you taking initiative again, Kiyotaka.”

Taka positively beamed again, this time his eyes watering. “Thank you so much, Sakura. That means a lot…” *So, at least Sakura doesn’t hate me completely. That’s a start.*

Everyone arrived shortly after the three of them made it there. Makoto was the last again, but since they hadn’t set an official time and he himself had needed a few minutes to catch his breath, Taka opted to not chide him for it. *I’m so excited!!!* He was practically vibrating with joy that they all
listened to him and liked his idea. *Or at least they're willing to try!* And *I get to eat with others regularly again!* Makoto went around greeting a few of the other students, and all of them noticed that Taka was raring to start this; even Mondo, with whom he’d had so many weird run-ins, pointed out Taka was getting antsy.

Makoto finally came up to him. *FINALLY!!* “Okay, looks like everyone’s here. So then, let's begin our very first ‘breakfast meeting’! Everyone, thank you for making time in your busy schedules to come together.”

Leon interjected. “I didn’t make time for shit. You dragged me here...”

Taka ignored it, too happy to dignify that with a response. “I know I already mentioned this earlier, but... In order to get out of here, it is essential that we all cooperate with each other. And the first step is this breakfast meeting, to allow us to become friends and build trust!” *I... really hope we can actually be friends...* “So from now on, let’s all meet here in the dining hall every morning right after the morning announcement!” *There’s no way I’ll feel so lonely now!!* “Now then, let’s eat!”

Toko asked, “You w-want me to eat breakfast with other p-people? I’ve never done that b-before. I’m not s-sure...” Leon agreed as it’d been a while for him as well.

He was about to mention that he didn’t usually either, but always enjoyed when he could, but Junko cut him off by asking if anyone had found clues. No one responded. “Anything, it can be about how to get out, or who’s doing this, nobody has anything!?” Celeste politely informed her that she’d die if she didn’t adapt quickly to survive. *Ugh!* Junko said, incredulous and angry, “Have you gone completely insane? Adapt to my new life here? Do you have any idea what you're saying?!”

“You, sounds like the girl wants to live here. And hell, more power to her.” Mondo said. “But shit... No way in hell am I living here! I'm gettin' outta here, I don't give a shit!”

Leon asked again if nobody had clues. Hina added, “One thing I can tell you is who's behind all this. Someone who's totally weird and messed up. Why else would we be trapped in here in the first place?” *She's right.* He thought back to Monokuma’s speech and the very twisted circumstances they were now in. *Anyone who would do this is probably a lost cause...* The thought that some people were beyond redemption still frightened him after all these years.

With uncertainty, Chihiro brought up ‘a certain murderous field’ but was unsure of their relevance. Taka said, “Certainty is not a concern right now! I’ll allow whatever remarks you may have!” *Anything that has the slightest chance of helping us figure out what’s happening must be discussed!*

“O-Okay, well... Have you guys heard of Genocide Jack?” *Ahhhhh...* Taka had, indeed, heard of Genocide Jack. He scheduled time daily to read and watch the news. Though his special interests were in politics, the economy, and the like and those are what he paid the most attention to, it was impossible to have heard nothing about Japan’s latest mythical killer... He’d even overheard former classmates talking about it.

Byakuya expounded. “The monstrous villain who's murdered scores of victims in brutally bizarre fashion... The word "bloodlust" was left at each murder scene, written in the victim's own blood. Whoever it is, he's like a ghost. He strikes without warning, and disappears without a trace. And on the Internet, they started calling him... Genocide Jack. That about covers it, I think.” *How does he know so much about this? He must be a fan of true crime...* Taka shuddered. Having almost ended up the victim of true crime articles multiple times in his life due to the hatred engendered by his grandfather of their family name, he was very disinterested in keeping tabs on that scene. And, really, he didn’t want to think about how awful people could be to each other.
“They say he’s claimed over a thousand victims...” said Hiro, with an inflection like they were trying to tell ghost stories.

“That’s just an urban legend though, right?” Junko asked. “I mean even like, ten people would be totally insane.” The fact that someone would murder one person in the first place is scary enough… I could never abide a killer!

“Anyway, whoever Genocide Jack really is, he’s obviously some kind of super crazy killer.” Chihiro said.

“And if he really is this "ultimate" psycho, I wouldn't be surprised if he put together something like this,” Mondo added. ‘Ultimate’ killer… That almost sounds like a talent at Hope’s Peak...

“But like I said, I can't be certain. I don't have any evidence or anything. It's just a thought...”

Hina said that it wouldn’t be a problem even if Genocide Jack were involved. “We've been stuck in here a few days already, right? Nobody's been able to contact us, so I'm sure they're getting worried. I bet they called the police already!”

She's ri—

His thoughts were interrupted when, once again, Monokuma appeared out of thin air. “The police? You’re putting your faith in the police!?”

“What are you doing here!?” Sakura asked in shock.

“You guys, seriously... Do you understand what role the police exist to fill?” Yeah, enforcers of the law and protectors of p—“All they're good for is being a foil, playing against a villain or anti-hero or evil organization. The bad guys come along and destroy them, and that shows just how badass they really are.” That's not true! My father has helped many people in distre—“Are you sure you wanna rely on such an unreliable group of losers? I mean come on! If you really, REALLY wanna get out of here, all you gotta do is kill!” That’s so... DISGUSTING! Monokuma had steamrolled Taka’s ideas of justice in one blow, all to encourage them to murder one another. He was rendered speechless and inadequate. He froze up and dissociated, overwhelmed.

He tuned out of the conversation until Monokuma said he was doing this all for despair and amusement. That was so completely incomprehensible to him that his brain forced him to dissociate again.

“Heeeeey, Earth to Ishimaru!” Leon said, waving his hand in front of Taka’s face.

“Huh...?”

“You in there? You look like you spaced out. I don’t blame ya.”

“W-what’s going on?” He’d been out of it for ten minutes. He looked around slowly. Everyone but Kyoko and Leon were watching the entrance to the room. Instead, she was looking at him.

“Makoto and Sayaka left to check out the video Monokuma mentioned.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Monokuma said he had a video to show us to motivate us to uh, you know.” Leon made a throat-cutting gesture.

Sayaka ran into the room and told them there was a DVD specifically for each of them in the A/V Room. Reflexively, Taka thought about admonishing her for running but she was gone just as fast as
she came. Everyone followed her, walking at varying speeds. Taka was leading the pack.

Upon arriving to the A/V room, they saw Makoto swearing and punching the desk in front of the monitor he was using. It must be bad for someone usually so calm to lose it like that... When questioned, he pointed to the box sitting on the desk next to him.

“Is that what Monokuma was talking about?” Leon said quickly.

“What's on them?” asked Taka.

Everyone rushed to the box, grabbed their eponymous DVDs, and found a monitor to use.

A video of Taka’s dad in their house began to play.

“Hey, Taka!” He was in full police uniform, probably just home from work. He messed with the camera, eventually setting it at a nice angle of the well-worn couch on which they’d spent so much time watching the news together. Taka’s old stuffed dog was sitting on the couch next to him in Taka’s baby pajamas. He looks like he needs sleep... probably worrying about me... He sat down. “So, they told me to make a video wishing you well. I just dropped you off at the school before work this morning.” He scratched his slightly beardy chin. “It feels like it’s been longer than a half a day since I saw you… Even though it wasn’t always in person, I always felt happy these last couple years since we moved that you were nearby the station. I didn’t have to worry so much about what others might to do you - I knew I could be there for you immediately if something happened.” He paused, lost in thought. Taka’s eyes were already streaming. He’s such a serious man to everyone except me…

“He’s the only one who would. “But through it all, even in the most difficult times, you managed to come out the other side.” Takaaki was crying now. Even when I didn’t want to, or didn’t think I could...

“I’ve been so proud of your progress – no, scratch that: I’ve been so proud of YOU for so long, and now the world gets to see that, too.” He truly looked the part of a proud father radiating love for his child. “I just know that someone out there, whether it’s one of your fellow students or not, will come to see you as the fantastic, motivated person that you are…!” He was clutching the stuffed dog for dear life now. “It hurts to be apart like this again, but please keep me updated any way you want to like you said you would…!” He was beaming. “Show ‘em all, my son. I love you so much, Taka! See you soon!” He waved to the camera and it went to static.

Taka was crying very hard, an absolute wreck. But a happy one. I’m so glad I got to see this!

There were no thoughts in his mind about the oddity of being shown a sentimental, beautiful video by a being who had said not half an hour earlier that it sought despair from those imprisoned.

Until the static changed to another video shot from the same angle. The lights were flickering. The windows were broken. The wallpaper was peeling past enormous lines of claw marks. The couch was broken in half, boards and nails sticking out chaotically. The glass in the coffee table had shattered and fallen through to the floor. The little pair of pajamas the stuffed dog has been wearing were torn to shreds and thrown about.

Takaaki’s police hat was sitting on top of the wreckage of the couch, half burned. WHAT AM I SEEIN--

“Kiyotaka Ishimaru, accepted into Hope’s Peak Academy. And his father, who supported such a driven boy, even amidst tragedy after tragedy, failure after failure. He worked so hard to provide for his son, even getting promoted so he could afford to totally change their terrible living context… But
it seems like… something’s happened to him and his well-being! Oh boy, this is bad! What could have possibly happened to Takaaki Ishimaru!?”

The video faded to a black screen with gaudy red text on it that said:

LOOK FOR THE ANSWER AFTER GRADUATION

Taka’s sense of dread was plummeting to the core of the Earth, dragging him down down down down down out of time time time time time time —

On the brink of blanking, Hina’s incredulity drew his attention, as she said, “Th-This can’t be real, right? It has to be fake, right!” He mentally crawled back to the conversation. My dad wouldn’t be party to some kind of prank or hoax of any kind, much less one made to traumatize me… Either these guys used his real video in a fake way, or…! He didn’t want to consider that this could very well be real, but he had no choice now with how many indications there were that that was the case…

Mondo was swearing and Toko was panicking. Almost everyone seemed afraid and driven even further to get out of this horrible situation. Kyoko, however, seemed lost in thought. Taka clung to her steady observations for dear life. “I see... So this is what he meant by motive. He wants to fuel our desire to leave so that we’re more likely to start killing each other.” Who would—

Celeste agreed, explaining that it was it was the classic ‘prisoner’s dilemma’. “Let me use an example. Imagine two countries are on the brink of war. But both countries want peace, and each commits to scaling back their forces as a sign of good faith. But there's a chance that one country may betray the other, so each country fears lowering their guard. The result is that neither scales back their forces, and they both end up betraying each other. In other words, the fear of invisible treachery becomes the greatest enemy of stability.” That example worked extremely well to illustrate her point to Taka. History is riddled with this kind of situation, and even the modern world has a ton of conflicts like this.

“That kinda sounds l-like us right now...” Toko said. “Everyone says they'll work together, but in our hearts we're all afraid someone might betray us...”

Kiyotaka shot back. “Don't put those awful thoughts in our head! That's exactly what they *want* us to do!”

“You can say that, but maybe you're thinking that once everyone drops their guard, you can just...” Leon accused.

“What!?" How dare—I would NEVER--

Sakura had his back. “This is exactly what Monokuma, or whoever’s behind this, wants. They *want* us to fight. Don't you see?”

They agreed that they needed to calm down, think things through, and discuss what they’d seen to ease the burden. Taka ruminated while the others were talking. He thought about the video, his body stiffening even further. Dad… Dad, where are you? Are you safe...? He started to tear up. If I’d never left, this wouldn’t be happening...

Makoto approached Taka, asking what he saw. “I saw...!” I can’t! ”Sorry... It's gonna take me some time to figure out how to put it into words...” He wanted to vent, but he couldn’t. It was too raw.

He needed space. And above all else, he needed time…
From this point forward, there will be more days between the events of the game. I feel the timespan is unrealistically short, and that the characters need more time to interact and develop and also react to/process everything that happens. At this point, I'm thinking most chapters will take place over several weeks or a month. Not all days will necessarily be shown.

I'll also be incorporating Free Time Events and putting a spin on them.

TW: homophobia, misogyny, ableism, child abuse, and puke.

Game Transcripts: [This Section of Chapter 1] [Chapter 1, 292-477]

Taka was too focused on what was in his video to realize that Sayaka had freaked out. When his head had finally broken through the surface of his currents of fear, he saw she and Makoto were gone and he asked what happened.

“When Makoto asked about her video, she went quiet and ran off,” Chihiro explained. She looked very worried. “H-he went to find her…”

“There’s something odd about all this…” Taka said. My video was only 5 minutes long, but the end felt like years…

“No shit, Sherlock!” Mondo yelled. “We just saw videos showing our homes and families—“

“That’s not what I meant,” Taka responded, trying to be calm to help Mondo be as well. “Celeste is right that a situation like that could lead to what Monokuma wants. However… We’re not countries!”

“Huh?” Chihiro asked.

“What I mean is that there’s only 15 of us, and we’re students. We can’t start a war. And more importantly… humankind is inherently biased toward cooperative efforts!”

“So? I’m not sure I get it?” Hina asked, frowning.

“There’s data showing that we’re inclined toward helping each other; we can choose to work together! It’s like I said this morning… If we get to know and trust each other, we can become friends! And we won’t betray each other!” There are de-escalation tactics often used to ensure peace! Not everything has to lead to brutality… If it did, no one on Earth would be alive right now! That’s proof that communication and understanding can lead to peace, or at least not total war! Byakuya was sneering at him.

“Are you not afraid of what you saw in your video?” Sakura questioned.

“… I am. I’m so, so scared by what I saw.” He had a deathgrip on the edges of his sleeves. "But… It
seems like Monokuma is willing to go out on a limb to trick us, to make us want to kill. What if the endings of those videos are faked?"

“I don’t think that’s it,” Kyoko interjected. “The endings are definitely real. However, they could be taken out of context.”

“Even if that bear is showing us the truth… How do we know he’ll let us find it!? It said to ‘look for the answer after graduating’. That doesn’t mean we can save our loved ones… That doesn’t mean we’ll actually find out what happened!” 7 minutes since the videos…

“He c-could easily just show us an obituary and laugh as we c-cried…” Toko agreed.

“Exactly! And even then… Why would any of our loved ones *want* us to kill? For them, even? My father… I know my dad wouldn’t!”

Byakuya scoffed. “You’re so naïve. Your family isn’t the norm, it’s the outlier.”

“What?”

“I forgot to add: you're completely myopic.”

“I have perfect visio—“

“You’re a brick wall and this conversation is a speeding car.”

“Hey! Stop being mean, that won’t help any of this!” Hina said.

“Human nature is to kill or be killed. Anyone who’s so utterly delusional to believe otherwise deserves to be wiped out.” Taka stepped backward, his back against the monitor he was using.

“Your grandfath—“ NO! PLEASE DON’T— He was starting to panic--

“That’s enough.” Kyoko commanded, voice clear as a bell. Byakuya glared hard at her and left the room. Taka bent over, clutching at the desk, fingers rubbing the sides. In a single swoop, she had shunted Taka away from another attack.

“Taka? What was he about to say?”

“Not now, Hina,” Sakura said. Taka closed his eyes in gratitude. “What’s important is how out of line and disrespectful Byakuya was.” Hina nodded.

“I’m,” Taka started, breathing deeply. “I… I just want to believe the best in everyone. Even him… If we play into Monokuma’s hands, someone will die…” Am I in the crosshairs of the Togami family again…? “I’m sorry, I let him get to me.”

“Don’t be,” Kyoko said. “Byakuya and Celeste are… *cynical*. Someone needed to argue against that.” Taka looked at her. So why didn’t you?

“We must shine hope in the darkness. A potential killer may be dissuaded if they see the light,” Sakura added. Taka nodded. I believe in good for its own sake… I believe that people are good… We need to show each other that good still remains, especially if Monokuma is trying to corrupt us.

After that, everyone dispersed except Taka and Kyoko.

“Kyoko…?” She didn’t turn to face him. No eye contact… Did I do something wrong? “Er… You said someone had to argue. Why not you?”
“I was analyzing everything.”

“The videos?”

“Not just those. Everything everyone was saying.”

*In real-time? H-how!? “What conclusions did you come to?”*

“Well, at the very least, you won’t be the first killer.” She left the room with a small smile, glancing at him as she departed.

*All that in just half an hour… Does she know who might be on the edge of becoming a killer? Does she have faith that I won’t kill? Or does… does she think that I might kill someone later? The thought of that shot an arrow through his heart. He walked back to his dorm and read his dictionaries, trying to distract himself from it. He went to sleep at the normal time with a profound sense of unease. He dreamed of being the defendant in a murder case.*

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After everyone disbanded after the next day’s breakfast meeting, to which Celeste was earlier than Taka, Leon approached him. He was frowning. “Hey, uh… Taka?”

Taka looked at him, red eyes piercing. What could he want? Is he going to be mean again?

He glanced at his watch. *How much of my time will he use to burn me?* On top of his past experiences, Kyoko’s comments last night made him even more wary. “Yes, Leon?”

Leon sighed. “Look, man. I’ve said some pretty messed up things to you.” *Huh? “Like, over and over again.”* Taka stared at him, unsure how to respond. *It’s not like he’s wrong. He hasn’t passed up any chances to lash out at me. “Don’t make this weird!”*

“What exactly do you want, Leon?”

“I feel bad, alright!?”

Taka blinked in confusion. “Do you really expect me to believe that?” *Even if people hadn’t used this as a guise to take advantage of my belief in inner goodness… What reason do I have for taking him at his word?*

He looked down. “No, I get it.”

“Well… why do you even feel bad now? What changed? If you had before, you wouldn’t have said those things…”

“Yeah,” he admitted, his arm behind his head. “It’s just, what you and the others said yesterday… You’re obnoxious, but you mean well.” Taka frowned. “You’re right that we should stick together.”

Taka wasn’t giving him any slack. *Not after the things he implied about me… If this wasn’t just about to turn into another chance for Leon to be a jerk, he wasn’t going to let him off scot-free without accountability. There are so many people I just… Let get away with horrible things. And they surely went on to do it to others too… I’ll never forgive myself for that. No… My therapists would remind me that you can’t hold people responsible if they’re unwilling to admit it, no matter hard you push. You can’t make someone stop if they won’t hear you. But I still feel that way… He felt like this was a pivotal moment for both of them. “So I’m right and you feel bad. And?”*

“Why are you making this so difficult!?”
“You’ve given me no reason to trust you, Leon. You’ve mocked me, you’ve all but stated my entire moral code is a ploy to con people into letting their guard down so I can murder them, and you haven’t passed up any chances to express your prejudices.” His heart was thumping in his chest. *One. Two. Three. Four… Five…*

“Ugh!” Leon shook his head. “You’re…” *What now? An idiot? A fag? A ‘pussy’? A baby? Or maybe he’ll come up with something no one’s lobbed at me before - he’s the Ultimate Baseball Star after all.* He threw up his hands, like it was painful for him to say: “You’re right.”

Taka was shocked. “Are you being serious!?” Leon nodded. “Why were you behaving like that, then!?”

“Yeah, dude. I read that girls dig jerks. So I thought I could impress them by being one.”

Taka put his hand over his mouth, aghast. “So, you were bullying me… to get girls.”

“Yes,” he smiled. Does he not realize…?

“You know… that’s not even true, right?”

“Huh…?”

“Girls won’t like you if you’re a bully unless they’re bullies too…”

“Pfft, really? You think you’re some kind of Casanova? You? Don’t make me laugh.”

*As if my lack of social understanding means I can’t be right that girls deserve respect too?* “Come on, Leon! Girls are human beings! Would YOU want to talk to someone so spiteful?”

Leon pursed his lips. “Hmmm…” Taka spread his hands in a ‘well?’ gesture. “I didn’t think of that before.” *He looks… embarrassed?*

“Trust me, I get not having social graces, but this is… just… absurd!”

“It sounds pretty dumb when you put it like that, yeah.”

“No, Leon! It doesn’t SOUND foolish, it IS foolish!”

“What do *you* want from *me*, Taka?” Leon asked angrily.

“Telling me that I’m right isn’t enough. I want you to hold yourself accountable! To take responsibility for your words!” Taka pointed at him, unintentionally dramatic. His watch glinted in the fluorescent light. “You don’t treat girls like people, and you didn’t treat me like one either! I’ve been treated as subhuman all my life, and I won’t stand for it!”

“Ugh!” Leon flinched. “Chill, dude! It was just some shitty comments. You’re overreacting!”

Taka was crying furiously by this point. *I hate it when people say that!!!* “No they weren’t! And no I’m not! If you said that a couple of years ago, I would’ve believed you… I’ve been told my entire life I was overreacting when I was completely correct to feel how I did… But I know you’re wrong now. And so do you! Otherwise, we wouldn’t be having this conversation!”

“…” *Are you gay or something? Is that why this is bugging you so much?*

“Ugh!” Taka rolled his eyes, grimacing sharply. “That’s not relevant in the least! Your comments would be as disgusting if I were straight!! Leon… I heard you talking to the others about how you
hate that being defined as the Ultimate Baseball Star has kept you from doing what you truly want to. I’ve been forced to be things that I’m not, too. You don’t have to be like this. You can do better, and I believe in you!”

“I come here to patch things up, you yell at me and then tell me you believe in me? What the hell is your deal, Taka!?” He looked weary like he was on his last legs.

“You owe me an apology. And you owe yourself improvement. You can’t change if you refuse to take responsibility in the first place.”

Leon put up his hands in defeat. “I just… I know you’re right. You broke through my denial, but… How do I even start admitting it to myself?”

“The first step is accepting that you’ve done something wrong. You’ve told me over and over that you have… I think you need time to tell yourself that too.” Taka’s expression was determined.

“Huh… That actually sounds like a good idea.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why ask me that? I noticed you ask people that sometimes. We’re already talking, so…”

“Well, er, it’s really difficult for me to read how people are feeling if they don’t tell me. Even if it’s obvious to others.”

“You said you were forced to not be yourself. Is that why you have to ask – because someone made you be like that?” Leon squinted at him.

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s always been difficult for me to understand; it’s part of the *real* me. What I went through just made it worse. I was punished for it, and as a result there was a long time where I assumed everyone was angry and about to hurt me.” Unless I’m stuck I don’t usually think people will physically hurt me anymore… But I still think people hate me and want to emotionally hurt me…

“Jeez, dude…” Leon’s body language wasn’t tense anymore. His eyebrows were drawn but Taka couldn’t read his expression. “That really sucks…” Taka nodded. Leon continued, “How do I feel… well, I feel bad for what I said, and sympathy for you. I felt really defensive and confused before, but I think I get where you’re coming from a lot better now.” He sighed. “It sounds like you’ve been through a lot. I can relate… I shouldn’t have said those things anyway,” he paused, “but I’m, uh… s-sorry. For what you’ve been through, and for making it worse.”

Taka raised his eyebrows. “Do you… Actually mean that?” Hopefully he doesn’t hold my doubt against me…

“Yeah, I do. I might be a dumbass,” he chuckled self-chidingly, “but I’m a dumbass with a heart.”

Taka scratched his head. “I’m not going to thank him for being a decent person under it all… And I’m not going to just forgive him like that either and let him off easy. He can’t grow if I coddle him. I don’t think he wants that anyway. So the only thing left for me to do is… “What will you do now?”

“Think about what you told me today. Try to quit being a jerk. Break that habit.” He silently looked
Taka in the eyes for a minute before turning to leave. “Hey, Taka?” he asked, facing away.

“Yes, Leon?”

“Thanks for the kick in the ass.” He turned his head and smiled sincerely at Taka.

L-Leon… “I hope our conversation gives you the motivation to take the rest of the day by the horns!” Taka shouted, cheery.

Leon gave him a thumbs-up and walked away.

Taka wouldn’t be surprised if his own eyes were sparkling from how well the end of that conversation went. I’m glad there’s more to him than it seems… Maybe one day, we could be friends…!

-----

Taka’s interaction with Leon made his day. When he was eating supper, Makoto approached him.

“Hey, Taka.”

“Good evening, Makoto!” Taka smiled.

“I have a question for you. Do you mind?”

Taka blinked hard, unsure. It’s considerate to ask that, but it’s also making me nervous… “Go ahead?”

“Well, I noticed that Kyoko’s words seem to affect you more than most of the others. I was wondering what you think of her?”

Oh… He saw that? I didn’t think anyone paid attention to me. I don’t think I like that… I’m trying to be a leader, I can’t have them seeing me falter… “She’s pretty mysterious, don’t you think?”

Makoto nodded. “Sure. It’s hard to get a read on her.”

It’s hard for me anyway, but it’s especially difficult with her. “But… I don’t think she’s enigmatic in a bad way.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, she’s really served as a voice of reason and stability. She’s one of the people who keep us facing forward.” I hope the others see me as one of those people…! “Others like Byakuya and Celeste seem to revel in cynicism.”

“I feel that way too.”

“I’ve interacted with her alone a few times.”

“So have I.”

“She doesn’t always give you the full picture… but what she says can get to the heart of what you’re struggling with, and give you the motivation to keep going! That’s how I feel about her!” Like when she told me she appreciates what I’m doing… It wasn’t a lot, but I really needed to hear it! “She told me she studies everyone.” Maybe what she said about me not being the first killer was to tell me that she understood what I was feeling after seeing that video. That how she’s seen me behave showed my character to her… Maybe it was a reassurance, but also a reminder to stay true to myself. The
fear he had all day about her words evaporated.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah! I think she’s quite insightful.” He didn’t know what else to say about Kyoko, so… I don’t have a good idea of what his opinions are… He always seems to pop in and leave right away! Hopefully it’s just because he’s busy. He glanced at the clock. But since he’s here… “Hey, Makoto! As long as we’re talking, let’s REALLY talk, whaddya say!?”

“Huh? Oh, sure, that’s fine….”

“Excellent! Then let’s get down to brass tacks and find out where we stand on all the big issues! So, what should we discuss? Politics? The economy? International affairs!?” Just mentioning his specialties had him excited!

“Wait, hold on. Instead of a big, serious discussion…” Makoto stepped backward, looking taken aback, “…can’t we just have a normal conversation? That’s the best way to learn about people, I think.”

I know I’m not good at conversations that aren’t about my passions or trying to keep everyone motivated… Well, I’m bad at all conversation really, but especially those topics. “What do you mean by a ‘normal conversation’?”

“Umm… Well, for example… What do you like to do in your spare time?”

*Spare time!? Before I came here, I made my schedule rigid so that I never had any. And since I got here… I still don’t want any! My time is managed so I can get the most out of it! Even when others choose to interact with me… I’ve already accounted for ‘social time’ in my schedule to make room for the possibility that someone would deem me worthy!! What I do during what Makoto would think of as ‘spare time’ is… “Study, of course! I’m a student, aren’t I? A student must be studying professional! And of course my duties as the chairperson of the Morals Committee keep me quite busy, as well! It’s my duty to foster an environment in which we can all focus our studies!”

“Okay, but… what else? Like when you’re at home, or you just have some time to kill?”

What does he even mean!?” If I have time to kill, I study!” The news, the Internet, homework, textbooks, reference books… I live for studying!

“I… see…”

“Hahaha! This is fun!” If this is what ‘normal conversation’ is, I hope I can learn how to initiate it more myself! “Okay, my turn. Makoto! What do you like to do in your spare time?”

“Um, you know, just normal stuff. Watch TV, play video games…”

“Huh? And this helps you study… how?” How would engaging in pop culture when he could be productive help him study?

“N-No, it’s not about studying. It’s just for fun, ya know?”

“But doing things ‘just for fun’ serves no purpose! There must be more to it… You wouldn’t spend your valuable time doing something useless, would you!” That got Taka worked up. His hands were clenching and unclenching rapidly. I hope he doesn’t do it to learn about history… Video games and TV shows aren’t good places to learn about historical events! They often twist and distort the narrative of reality to propagandize it or make a quick buck! He should read a textbook for at
least somewhat less untruthful accounts! Those trashy 'ancient alien theory' shows do nothing but fry peoples’ brains and make them discount all the efforts ancient societies put into their works!!!

Makoto was taking a while to answer his question, which let Taka calm back down. Thank goodness I didn’t say that all to him… I’ve seen how dumping that kind of thing tends to send people running… I wonder if he’s ever thought about this before. Maybe he’s reflecting to figure it out?

Eventually Makoto responded, voice relaxed. “You know how it's useful? It helps give you something to talk about with other people!”

“Something to talk about…?” Why would you want to discuss falsified history past pointing out its inaccuracies!?

“Like when you see something awesome on TV, or some awesome game, and you want to share it with someone.”

“Wh...? Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh—!? I once was blind, but now I see!” It was like Makoto had rang a bell in Taka’s head.

“Wh-What the heck!?”

“That kind of thing has plagued me for years...I’ve tried making friends, but whenever I would make conversation, it would die after a few minutes...” People don’t take kindly to my special interests, and they’re often all I have to talk about! It’s been a long time since I even tried – grandfather would always punish me for rambling...“And now... I’ve finally found the answer...I need to study more games! More TV shows!” If I don’t have schoolwork, this is what I can study! That'll let me relate more! Form more connections! Hopefully friendships!?

“N-no, you don't need to “study” them...”

Makoto’s protestations flew directly over Taka’s head. “Ahh, I'm so ashamed of myself! If there was a hole somewhere around here, I'd totally go hide in it! I let it get to me, I wasted all that time... I never saw the blind spot in my studies!” No one had ever told me those kinds of things could make a conversation point! I’d heard others talking about them, but I assumed they were just wasting their time on something useless. How could someone who’s supposed to help foster a healthy environment for everyone be so shortsighted!? “I'm a complete embarrassment! I'm not qualified to even be on the Morals Committee, let alone lead it!” Hot tears were running down his face. I thought I knew what was best for everyone, but how could I if I didn’t even know how ignorant I was!?

“I-I don't think it's really that big of a deal...”

But Makoto’s here, and he’s informing me about these things. I must embrace my failure as a means to learn more! I must show him my gratitude!! As he was so wrapped up in his own feelings and thoughts, Makoto’s words didn’t even register. “Thank you, Professor Makoto!”

“Professor!?”

“You’ve taught me a most valuable lesson! You’ve earned my respect, and the title of Professor!” Those who hold knowledge and enlighten others deserve to be called professors! I hope Makoto will continue to teach me things!

“Th-That's gonna make things super awkward...!”

“Hahaha! There's no need to be modest, Professor! I can't wait for your next lesson! And until then, I will strive to learn as much as I can on my own! Well then, Professor—by your leave!” Without waiting for a reply, Taka walked off to his room to train, shower, and go to bed.
Today was a good day… I learned so much about Leon, and Makoto showed me something I’d overlooked for years! I know what I should do tomorrow…!

-----

True to his idea, Taka made a beeline for Chihiro during breakfast the next day. “Hi, Chihiro!”

“Hello Taka!” She smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“Hahaha, quite lively today! I was wondering, do you watch a lot of TV? Play video games? That sort of thing?”

Chihiro nodded. “I built my own computers to play games on ehehe!”

Taka was impressed. “Wow! I’ve studied how computers work, but I’ve never had that kind of hands-on experience. Isn’t that expensive?”

“It would be… If I weren’t the Ultimate Programmer! I get a ton of sponsorships from tech companies! Ehehehehe… Oh, why are you asking though?” She took a bite of her syrupy pancakes. She looked like an especially adorable chipmunk.

“Makoto told me yesterday that a lot of people engage in pop culture to have something to bond with people over. I didn’t know that! The only TV I’ve ever watched is the news!” he exclaimed.

Chihiro looked shocked. “R-really? What about movies?”

Taka shook his head. “Only ones we have to watch for class. I’ve had to write reports about how movie adaptations differ from actual history, so I quite dislike those. I haven’t watched a movie of my own will though.”

“Taka… D-do you think… Do you want to…”

“Yes, Chihiro?” “I have no idea what she’s trying to ask.

“S-sorry…” She exhaled slowly, then breathed in again. "Do you want to watch movies and play games with me, some time?”

Taka beamed. I’d love that… Is this an invitation to ‘hang out’!? “That would be wonderful!”

“There’s not much we can do at the moment… The monitors in my room aren’t even hooked up to anything.” She looked really disappointed, on the verge of tears.

“Maybe there’s some place in the school that would have computers? And movies?” Oh, maybe we could use the A/V room if we had something to watch. Though that’d feel weird with what happened the other day…

“Oh!” She perked up. “So, if we just wait for other areas to open up, we might find something…?”

“Absolutely! Yet another reason we need to keep investigating! We’re surely don’t have a lack of those!”

“In the meantime… If you ever want, maybe I could tell you about some of my favorite movies and games?”

“I wouldn’t be able to contribute much to the conversation…” Now he was the one who was disappointed.
“You don’t have to have watched something to discuss it with someone who has! You could talk about your opinions on plot points, characters... Maybe even ways things tie to real life!”

“Oh…!” *Examining media and how it reflects the world... That concept is alluring.*

“And... Well, sometimes it’s nice to hear people talk about their passions, even if you don’t share them!” She was blushing.

“R-really?” *That sounds fake... But I don’t think she’s lying.* “I’ve been told to not talk about what I care about, even by others who like the same things…”

Chihiro looked stricken. “Taka... That’s terrible! People should be allowed to talk about what’s important to them... I’m so sorry people have said that to you…”

*Not just said... “Thanks, Chihiro...”*

“How about this: We talk about our interests! I can talk about programming and games and movies, and you can talk about studying, education... everything! A great way to get to know someone is talking about what they like, ehehehe!” She was blushing harder.* She’s not a very forward person... This must take a lot of effort for her to say.*

“I... feel weird talking about my special interests like that. I’ll need a lot of reassurance...” *This is an opportunity I’ve never had before... “But... I want to try!”*

“I know you plan out your time, so... Stop by my room when you want to, and we can talk! But for now, I need to rest – I’m really introverted, so interaction makes me tired, ehehe!”

*I know how that feels.* “Sure, Chihiro. I’ll come by some time in the next few days!” He turned to leave, eyes shining with happy tears. “Thank you...!”

Chihiro returned his tear-filled happiness. “Thank you, too!”

They parted after that.

Taka spent his afternoon consulting his reference books about pop culture and literary criticism. He wished he had access to the Internet, or a library, so he could dig deeper.

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The next day, Junko came in the laundry room when Taka was sitting at the table waiting for the dryer to finish. He was staring at the minute counter as it ticked down.

“Hey, Mr. Chairman!” She laughed.

“H-hello, Miss Enoshima...?” He startled a little and turned his eyes to her. He couldn’t sense her teasing tone, but experience made him think she was probably mocking him.

“‘Miss Enoshima’? Really? As if!”

“You called me ‘Mr.’ so I thought it’d be polite to call you ‘Miss’?”

“That makes me sound like a single, unmarried, lonely, middle-aged teacher,” she said, all humor gone from her tone.

“That’s not what I—“
“Something like ‘Survivor Junko’ would be better!” She stuck out her tongue and made the devil horns gesture.

“‘Survivor’ isn’t even a title!”

“It will be once I get out of this dump!” She said with another completely different demeanor. She’s all over the place!!

“Why not just your ability? Ultimate Fashionista?”

She grumbled. “No, that just reminds me of how much I hate makeup.”

“But you’re wearing some?” She’s so hard to understand…

She scoffed. “Wow, what keen detective abilities you have there. I’m wearing it because I have to, not because I want to. It’s just a sacrifice to pursue my dream.”

“Pursue your dream?”

“You can’t be successful in the dog-eat-dog fashion industry if you go natural, you weirdo,” she said very quickly with sweat on her face. The timing of that response struck Taka as strange, but he wasn’t sure why. “What, don’t you know anything about fashion? Wait, don’t answer that. You obvs don’t. But the struggles we models have to go through… They’re too much. We’re just blank canvases dolled up to convey a look or message. No individuality at all.”

“So you’re forced to be how people perceive you, and not who you really are?”

She looked at him, her gray eyes boring deep into his soul. “Yeah. It blows.”

“I don’t know what it’s like to be a model… but I can relate to that a lot. I was forced to be someone I wasn’t for most of my life…”

She crossed her arms, actually paying attention to what he had to say now instead of just steamrolling him. “I don’t actually know how long it’s been since I was able to be myself.”

He nodded empathetically. “Having to put on that kind of mask for fear of what would happen otherwise is traumatic.” And it has long-lasting after effects…

“Hmmm…” She looked like she was considering that. “Traumatic, huh? Even if you... Kind of... Choose to do it out of love?”

“If you mean the fashion world, you wouldn’t be able to be successful and support yourself while being yourself, right?”

“Well, yeah. Are you an echo or something? That’s what I just said.” She was trembling slightly.

“If someone’s holding power over you and they determine if you succeed or fail, live or die, is it really your choice to make? That’s coercion.” She looked alarmed at that idea.

“What should I do, then?”

“My life has taught me that it’s better to be yourself and hated than to be ‘loved’ on the condition that you’re not yourself. Maybe you could just be yourself…?” If I hadn’t come to that conclusion, I wouldn’t be alive.

“But that won’t change the status quo, it won’t change how I’m ordered around.”
“Maybe you could make your individuality your unique brand. Or even better, maybe you could use that to break the status quo. People will have to appreciate you for your true self. Make it so that others can be themselves?”

“That’s pretty naïve… But not, like, in a bad way, I guess.” She looked thoughtful. “My love for my desire, and my need to be myself.” She said, vocalizing like it was a lament from a dead poet.
"That’s a swell of despair, right there!” She grinned, back to her boisterous self now. “Anyways! I hope the next time we talk, we better be blowin’ this popstand. Smell ya later, Mr. President!” She walked backward out of the room.

Junko Enoshima… What a strange person…

The timer buzzed. He grabbed his dry laundry and hugged it against his body, savoring the heat and the scent of cleanliness.

-----

At around 11 am a day later, a shrill voice broke Taka’s concentration. He had been using the energy from breakfast to power his studying. “Heeeeello! The party is heeeeeeere~!”

Taka practically jumped out of his clothes at the intrusion. “Wh-!? M-Monokuma!?”

“Good morning, Kiyotaka!”

“Good morning—” Taka caught himself mid-bow.

Ugh! I did it again!

“I didn’t greet you because I wanted to… I did it because it’s customary, and also a habit for me!”

Taka shouted. It was clear by now that Monokuma was no true authority. “I’d never tell someone like you good morning of my own volition! Wait, how did you get in my dorm!? The door’s locked!”

The bear giggled. “That’s for me to know, and you to never find out!”

“What do you even want? Are you just here to make fun of me!?”

“Well, as much fun as it is to prod you until you explode… I have another reason. So, as you know by now, we’re completely alone in this school. No cooks—Or chefs! Puhuhu… No janitors, no one. With 15 of you rowdy lot living here, it’s sure to become a sty in no time! Come down to the dining hall right away, I have a surprise for you!”

Taka blinked and he was gone.

He swallowed. Monokuma? Surprises? That can’t possibly bode well… Nonetheless, he followed as ordered. I don’t know what will happen if I wait…

The hall was empty aside from himself and Hifumi, who was twiddling his thumbs. He cocked his head when he saw Taka sit down at his table. There was a strange gleam in his eyes. “Are you my surprise?”

“Huh? What does that even *mean*?!”

“Monokuma told me I’d get something special if I came here. I was hoping for glorious 2D, but… Well… If you’re all I can get, then… I’ll have to make do.”
Monokuma’s voice appeared from under the table. “Aaaaaahahahah! Mymy, Hifumi, for someone who would unironically use the phrase ‘3-D Pig Disgusting’, your suspiciously specific flexibility sure is a surprise! Ishimaru’s not the only 3D thing here!” *Why is Monokuma red and... sweaty!?*

These insinuations flew completely over Taka’s head. “Uh… what.” He said flatly, totally aware that he was missing something but also totally afraid to find out what it was.

“Aaaaanyway, no! I’m not setting you two up for some kind of sweaty romp…! Not *this* time!”  

Wh-- Excuse me!? "As I told you, there’s no staff here. That means there are no janitors to keep the place clean! Young adults can’t be expected to clean up all of their own messes, so… It’s about time we establish a cleaning duty!”

“Don’t you have an army of yourself around the school? Like some kind of mass-produced mecha?” Hifumi asked.

“Awww, you remembered that. How sweet of you! But there’s no way I’m going to waste my time with such trivial things!”

“So you’re okay with wasting *our* time?” Hifumi accused. *It’s not a waste to keep your space clean and organized!!! Just budget your time, Hifumi!*

“Why us?” Taka asked.

“Well, Kiyotaka… You fashion yourself as the leader of this motley crew, and I saw what a great job you do of keeping your dorm clean! And the way you organized the School Store… absolutely to *die* for!” Monokuma fake-fainted and cackled. “As for you, Hifumi… Well, you certainly don’t bring much to the table,” *That was so cruel! “And I figured you’d like to be of some use. And, you see… You’d be dealing with everyone’s trash. I know all about how much of a dirty little piggy you are… you’d like that, right?”*

Hifumi slammed his open hands down on the table. “I’ll do it!” *What the!? Why is he so eager!?*

“Hifumi, as the leader of the school’s Morals Committee, keeping the place tidy is one of my duties. This is right up my alley and besides that, I’d like t—“

“No. I have to do this!” Hifumi shouted passionately. “What other chance will I have to—“

Alright, it’s settled!” The strange little bear interrupted. "Hifumi will start! Next week, Ishimaru will take over! The whole class will alternate this duty! And if you don’t like that, feel free to fight to the death like men! Puhuhuhuhuhu!” Monokuma giggled as he vanished again. Hifumi got up before Taka could say anything and stalked back to the dormitories looking pleased. Taka was bewildered by every part of that conversation. He wished he would’ve gotten cleaning duty first, but he’d have to settle for doing it next week. He wondered if the others cleaned their own dishes...

I can't imagine Byakuya doing that, he probably has 4 butlers and least 20 maids to tend to his every need... He hadn't seen large piles of plates and bowls in the metal sink in the kitchen. Barely even a dirty piece of silverware, in fact. It couldn't be Hifumi, since Monokuma just started cleaning duty... *I'll have to see who's doing it when I take over cleaning duty.*

----

At around 3 pm the next day, Sayaka walked in while Taka was tidying up the School Store.

“Whoa, did you do all this yourself? It looked like a tornado hit this place when we first got here,” she said.
“Hello and good afternoon, Sayaka! Yes, I thought it could do with a bit of organizing!” he chirped happily. The others had clearly been in here since he last was, since some of the stacks were tipped over and out of place.

“It looks great, Taka!”

“Thank you! What brings you here today?” I wonder who else comes here?

“I wanted to get something nice for Makoto!” she blushed.

“Oh? Why’s that? Is there an occasion?” People usually only give gifts on holidays or events, right?

“Hehehe, nope! He’s just really important to me, and I want to give him something to show him that!”

“That’s sweet, Sayaka! What did you want to get him?”

“I was going to try my luck with the MonoMono Machine!”

“You’re going to stake that on chance!?”

“Not quite… I have a strong intuition, so maybe I can use that to tell when to pull the lever, so to speak!”

“But this isn’t a slot machine…! It’s a gachapon! It doesn’t *have* a lever!”

“Watch and learn!” She walked to the machine, put her hands on it, and started shaking wildly.

“What!?” How is such a demure girl shaking such a huge machine by herself!? I wonder who else comes here?

“Let’s see…” She gave it a final shake. She must have a lot of endurance from training for choreography constantly! “That should be good!” Then she inserted her coin and turned the dispensing switch. A large capsule rolled out, breaking in half to reveal…

“A... washbasin!? That was far larger than the capsule it was housed in!?

"The tag says, ‘A Man's Fantasy: A wash basin intended to give you the courage to seek out a true man's fantasy. Specifically, in public bathhouses...’"

“What is ‘a true man’s fantasy’?"

“Well, it’s pretty relative! And I’ll let you figure that out,” she giggled. “He’ll love this, I’m sure of it!”

“Where can I find this information?” They don’t sell those kinds of magazines and books here. You should try asking around!"

I don't know what she means! But I'll do just that! “Understood, I’ll get on that tomorrow night!” Taka said, about facing as if she had given him an order.

“You’re so dedicated, Taka. It’s refreshing!” She said.

Someone showing admiration for his drive really pleased him. “I think a lot of people would fall down and not get back up, being trapped in a place like this.”
She sighed sadly. "Yeah… That’s about where I’m at now."

“But even when it’s hard… I have to keep bouncing back, even if it takes a while. For my sake, and others too! That’s what I’ve learned!”

“For the sake of others?”

He nodded, cataloguing the last item on the inventory of the store he was working on. “I want to help people, and be someone they can lean on in times of need.”

“That’s amazing. Really… How do you have the stamina to do that?”

He smiled. “I don’t. But my passion keeps me trying anyway!”

“Your passion?”

“I want what’s best for all of us. I want us to be friends, to work together, to get out of this place… And that inspires me to take actions to further those goals however I can!”

“So even when it’s impossible to keep going, your motivation to form bonds and escape helps you to keep pushing…” She sounded thoughtful.

“I’m a firm believer that we should pursue our goals. Not everyone wants what I do, but I can appreciate the efforts they put into getting to theirs!”

She was quiet for a moment. “That’s exactly what I needed to be reminded of. Are you psychic?”

“What!? That’s not a real—“

She winked. “Since I’m one, I knew you’d say that.”

“Sayaka, are you seriou—“

“Well, like I said, I do have a very good intuition… But I’m just joking. Or am I?” She winked at Taka. “Bye, Taka!”

“S-see you later, Sakaya…“ He said, bamboozled as she left the Store.

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Taka had been arriving at the Dining Hall progressively earlier each day in an attempt to get there first. It had finally paid off. He was already in a good mood from his interactions with the others, but he was positively ecstatic to be the first one there after days of being the second or third.

As soon as Makoto walked in, he waved and excitedly shouted at the boy, “Hello Makoto, and good morning! Can you believe it? I was the very first one this morning!”

After their discussion the other day, Taka was curious if Kyoko would be late again today as she had been for the past several. She was. She must be sniffing out something really important…! He decided to assume she’d usually be late so he wouldn’t build up so much anxiety and anticipation
about it. When she got there, Kyoko admitted she was late. Celeste, to his surprise, was also late, but didn’t acknowledge it. *If she’s so set on order, why doesn’t she seem to care about this time?* After most of them were there, Taka was getting nervous. “Wait, aren’t we still missing some people?” Now that he could more or less expect people to come in the morning, he’d taken to counting heads. Sayaka and Byakuya were nowhere to be found… Which was especially weird because she’d routinely been on the early side, and he was usually prompt as well.

*I haven’t gotten much of a feel for Sayaka beyond her being sweet and caring but… Byakuya…* He thought back on what Byakuya had said, how he seemed like he’d be willing to kill. His heart started racing, worried for Sayaka. Eventually, Byakuya arrived and said he’d come straight from his room. Sayaka was still nowhere to be seen. It was already 8:30 am. *She’s an hour late…* Everyone seemed on edge, and Makoto said he needed to go check on her and sprinted to the dorm area. He moved so fast that Taka barely had time to register what he’d said before he was gone.

“So much running… I don’t have a good feeling about this…”

“Really? THAT’s what you’re focused on!?” Junko questioned him.

“As I’ve said, rules help societies flourish. And besides, that’s not what I meant. Sayaka has gotten here before even me since we got here. Her being so late randomly is scary…”

Hifumi started, “Could she be—“

“Don’t even go there!” Junko cut him off.

“Waaaaah! I was just going to say maybe she slept in!”

“… No one b-believes you, you p-pervert,” Toko admonished. *What do they think he was going to sa—*

They were cut off by Makoto’s desperate screaming, followed by a loud thud.

Taka made it into the dorm room, past the open door, before the rest. He outwalked everyone who ran. He saw the broken furniture and scratches on the walls. “W-what on Earth… Why would someone trash the room like this!” *Destroying school property like it’s nothing… I’d have screamed too if I walked in my room to see this!*

Kyoko and Byakuya moved past him and went straight into the bathroom. There was a beat, and then she said loudly, voice clear as a bell, “Sayaka is dead. Makoto fainted. We need to move him t—“

That terrible bell rang and the room’s monitor flickered on. “A body has been discovered! Puhuhuhu, it looks like my motive worked after all! I was getting worried! Now, everyone, please report to the gym immediately! Anyone who doesn’t come will be punished~”

“What the FUCK!?” Mondo shouted immediately after walking into the bathroom. “This is a straight-up murder! There’s a knife stickin’ out of her and everything! I can’t believe some idiot fell for those fake-ass videos!”

Taka was freaking out at their confirmations of his biggest fear in this school. He was bent over, clutching at the sleeves of his uniform. He was tuning out everyone not in his immediate vicinity. After moving for Byakuya to walk past, Sakura stood next to him. “Taka. Breathe. One, two, three, four…” He followed her instructions until the pressure on his chest lessened.

“S-someone… killed Sayaka…”
“Don’t worry, man! It has to be CGI or something!” Hiro reassured him, clearly in denial of the gravity of the situation.

“Um… t-that’s not how CGI works…” Chihiro said timidly.

“What does Monokuma want?” Leon asked.

Kyoko pulled Mondo back into the dorm room. “And why should we listen to him? Someone already did what he wants… No more of that shit!” Mondo yelled, his face glowing hot with anger. *It’s already been 10 minutes since the announcement…*

“Look, everyone. Sayaka is dead. Monokuma just told us what he’d do if we don’t follow his orders,” Kyoko announced.

“We don’t know what his actual ‘punishment’ is, but I’d be willing to bet that it involves our death,” Celeste said.

“If we don’t obey, he might just kill us all…” Sakura said.

“That bastard!” Mondo shouted.

“We need to follow his rules,” Kyoko said.

“S-she’s right…” Taka said. “If we all die now, t-then…”

Kyoko nodded. “Sayaka’s death will mean nothing, and we obviously won’t make it out of this place alive.”

“But what about Makoto?” Hina said, sounding very down. “He’s unconscious… We shouldn’t leave him alone, but who knows when he’ll wake up…”

“Monokuma said anyone who stays behind will be punished. I think we should take him to the gym with us.”

“I’ll carry him,” Yasuhiro volunteered.

“Why you?” Hina asked, looking at everyone else who was obviously more capable than him.

“Jeez, don’t bite a gift horse in the mouth!”

“That is definitely not how that idiom goes…” Celeste said, biting back a laugh at his expense.

“Anyway! I don’t think Monokuma faked Makoto passing out. I want to help!”

“Fine,” Kyoko said. “We need to get moving…” She walked out of the room. Taka caught up to her and everyone else followed them, Mondo grumbling and trailing behind the rest.

“Do… do you think Hiro is right? That Monokuma faked Sayaka’s death?”

“No,” she said simply.

“Is all this… real?” He swallowed. He was terrified of what was happening, but he was also terrified about her answer, because though he was in denial he was pretty sure he knew what the truth was. Everything had suddenly felt much more *true*.

She turned to him as they walked, making direct eye contact. “I really wish it weren’t.” Her answer
hit him like a sledgehammer to the solar plexus. *At first, I thought it was a prank or setup. But as things got worse, I started to doubt that... There's something ugly staring us in the face, and now everyone but Hiro sees it, including me...*

Hearing it from someone else’s mouth made it real. *At least it was Kyoko who said it...* He found a tiny shred of comfort in her steady gaze and that she didn’t rip him for shreds for hoping that it was a lie. He focused on the calming and routine mechanics of walking to keep himself level and keep from thinking deeply about the implications of this new reality.

After they stood around in the gym waiting, Makoto woke up. The second he understood what had happened to Sayaka, he flew into a bitter and angry mode. It was surprising to Taka to see Makoto acting like that, but it was completely understandable. He hastily questioned why they were there and why they weren’t doing anything.

“None of us want to be here right now, either,” Kyoko said, voice flat.

Makoto didn’t have the full picture yet. “Then... why?!” *I’d feel the same if I wasn’t around to hear Monokuma’s announcement.*

“Sh-Shouldn’t it be obvious? Monok-kuma... he told us all to c-come here...” Toko stuttered, even more wrung out than usual.

*As if we just obeyed without argument or trying to do anything!* “Well, hold on! Don't talk like that. We all protested it! I mean, we remember the terrible price Sayaka had to pay... B-But...!” He scrunched his face.

“I’m the one who convinced them to come,” Kyoko added. “Right now, we need to do whatever he says. We're his prisoners, right? It's not a good idea to defy him without reason. We don’t need to make any more sacrifices than we already have...”

*Sayaka is dead... My goal is no longer to just keep everyone unified or to get us all out of here, but to stop any more senseless murders. If we don’t toe Monokuma’s lines, how many more bodies will pile up?*

Makoto accused Monokuma of being Sayaka’s killer. Monokuma immediately popped up to respond, saying, “I would never do that! If you can believe anything, you can believe that!” and promised he’d never interfere or do anything that ‘goes against the purpose of your school life here’ unless someone broke a rule. *Purpose? What purpose? Despair? Does he believe that the truest despair is generated from his prisoners alone? What does he mean...* He further confirmed that the one who murdered Sayaka was standing right there in the gym. It was one of them.

*One of us... No way! Monokuma said, “Don’t you remember what I told you when this all began? One of you decided to kill Sayaka so that you could graduate! Someone's just following the rules. There's nothing wrong with that!” There is SO much wrong with that! These aren’t rules... they’re regulations for some kind of twisted slaughter! “One of you is now a bona fide killer. If they wanted to, the one who did it could testify to that little fact.”*

*Committed a murder... That’s... That’s unforgiveable...* He thought back on his interactions with everyone. *Byakuya seems the most suspicious by far, and he was unusually late this morning... But he also said he didn’t have to do the dirty work himself due to being the Togami heir. Which means it’s possibly one of the others...* He desperately hoped it wasn’t someone he liked, someone that he truly hoped he could be friends with one day. “Someone... Someone killed someone!” he shouted, the truth of the situation sinking its claws into his guts. Mondo tried to remind them to not assume the bear was telling the truth, but even the thought that it was potentially true was enough to set Taka’s
world on fire. He was so caught up in its flames that he tuned out until Monokuma’s roaring,
bloodcurdling laughter began. “Puhuhu... Puhuhu! Poohohoho! Bwaahahahaha!”

“How are you laughing!” Leon asked, frantic.

“Puhu... it's cuz... Naïve... You're just so naïve. You think it's really that easy? You can just kill
someone and waltz on outta here? You're super naïve! Devilishly naïve! HELLISHLY NAÏVE!”
What the hell! I was wondering earlier how someone would ‘graduate’, but—“No no no, the real
thing has just begun.” Makoto asked what he meant. “Are you ready!? Allow me to explain the
second part of the rule regarding graduation! Just like I explained before, you must kill someone if
you want to leave. However...... even if you do that, there's still one more part to the agreement you
have to uphold, remember?”

“You are referring to rule number six of the school regulations...

**Rule #6:** Anyone who kills a fellow student and becomes "blackened" will graduate, unless they are
discovered.

That is what you are talking about, is it not?” Celeste asked.

“Bingo! It's not enough to just kill someone. You have to actually get away with it! Which naturally
means you need a system in place to assess whether or not it's been gotten away with! So, a certain
amount of time after a murder has taken place, a class trial will begin!” C-class... trial!? WHAT!?

“Yup! It'll begin a few hours after the murder!” How many!? “Everyone will gather together,
including the blackened who committed the murder. And they and the spotless students will all
engage in one big debate showdown! During the trial, you'll have to present your arguments about
who you think the blackened is. And once everything comes to an end, the outcome will be decided
by popular vote!” Popular vote... What if it’s a tie? There are 14 of us left... “If the answer you've
arrived at is correct... only the one that disturbed your peace will be punished. The rest may continue
t heir communal life. However... if you choose poorly... then the one who got away with murder will
survive, and the rest of you will receive your punishment.” Taka was completely thunderstruck. If we
don’t choose correctly we’ll *all* be punished!? “Which of course means your school life will come
to an end! As far as class trial rules go... that's all there is to it!”

“So, um... what exactly is this "punishment" you keep talking about...?” Hifumi asked, sounding like
he was about to crack.

“Oh! Well, to put it simply... It's execution!” He’s so blasé about this... No, not blasé. He’s... excited!? We’ll be executed for picking wrong!?! And he’s excited about it!?!?

“E-Execution!?”

“And by execution, you mean...” Chihiro asked.

Monokuma moved within a foot of the group. Taka could see his individual hairs. He was even
uncannier up close. The disharmony between his appearance and the words coming out of his mouth
made it that much more difficult for Taka to take. “Execution is... execution! Ex-e-cution! Electric
chair, bzzt bzzt! Poison gas, cough cough! Torn apart like a paper plane in a hurricane!” C-capital...
punishment...

“S-So, to make sure I understand... If we get the culprit right, then only they die. But if we get it
wrong...all the rest of us get... executed?” Taka asked, body and voice trembling.

“What a smart little chimpanzee you are! Look at you, implying you didn’t do it without actually
saying it!” *That’s not what I meant! I would never!* “So it's basically what the outside world calls a "lay judge" system, or an inquisition type thing! Which means you'll be deciding who you think the killer is. But judge carefully, because all your lives are on the line!” *How are we supposed to vote without any knowledge of what happened!?* “Okay, let me just add the rule I just described to your handbook. Make sure to keep it in mind!”

Junko argued with Monokuma. *I understand the urge… but I’m too afraid of breaking one of his regulations and ending up… Dead…* She said she’d just not vote in the trial, to which Monokuma threatened her with throwing her into a prison. *So we can’t opt out…* She kept on arguing, refusing to participate. Monokuma ran toward her, saying, “If you really wanna get out of here… you'll have to go through me first!”

Junko dodged, leapt into the air, and landed on Monokuma with the same ease Taka had writing a paper on politics. *Why would the Ultimate Fashionista be so trained at defensive tactics!?* Oddly, she asked, “Are you enjoying yourself now?”

“Are you?” Monokuma retorted deviously.

“Huh?”

“Violence against Headmaster Monokuma is not allowed. You've violated a school regulation…” *OH NO IS HE—* “I invoke the mighty summon spell! Help! To me, godly spear Gungnir!”

Giant silver and black spears appeared out of nowhere and lanced through Junko like hot knives through butter. She fell, bright blood cascading out of her in droves. She twitched and thrashed as she lay dying, splattering blood on the shoes of Taka, Kyoko, and the other students standing closest to her. Even Taka could read the devastating despair etched onto her face. The spears impaling her chest were barely moving, her breathing becoming more and more shallow. “…Wh…? H-Huh? This wasn’t… supposed to…Why… me…?”

Her eyes shot open wide as she took her final breath and ceased moving completely. Junko Enoshima was dead.

He had never watched someone die before, and certainly not in such a cruel, brutal fashion… He had seen pictures of people killed in disasters and wars, and those were terrible and scarring enough, but nothing could have possibly prepared him for this. He had spent so much energy trying to keep anyone from dying, and now two people were dead, one executed right in front of him. There was blood everywhere, the puddle expanding to engulf the bottoms of their shoes. The others were screaming and shouting, but he couldn’t hear them at all. All thoughts, all feelings, all ideas Taka had were obliterated in that moment. He stood still as a statue, mind lost to the winds. He stood there, rigid as stone, for what felt like years.

Eventually, Kyoko spoke. “Now's no time to wallow in your depression. The worst thing we can do right now is to lose all faith in each other. That would lead to the same disastrous result as having *total* faith in everyone else. Cooperation is absolutely key at this point. Who decide to trust or not trust is, of course, up to you.”

Her measured words, her stoicity, was like a lifeboat to Taka. He mentally dragged himself back to the present through the churning sea of despair, body hypothermic. He could not, and would not, recover from this immediately, but at least he wasn’t dissociating anymore. He couldn’t spare any thoughts to Celeste’s horrible logic of adaptation and not thinking of the dead. *I need… I need to…* He focused his entire being on his uniform. The calming texture of the cloth against his body. The way the sleeves felt in his hands as he held onto it for dear life. The weight of the medallion above his breast pocket. How it was tailored to him, like it was holding him in a warm embrace. It helped
him ease himself.

The remaining students were talking amongst themselves. Makoto came up to him. Instead of trying to untangle the mysteries of their circumstance, or wrap his mind around the two dead students, Taka willed himself to only think about his special interest in rules for the time being: “If we find out who did it, then only that person dies. But if we get it wrong...Then all the rest of us face execution...! That's what that ridiculous school regulation said, right!? So stupid...!”

Celeste pointed out that in the file Monokuma had given them, it said that Sayaka had been killed in Makoto’s room. Makoto was protesting, explaining that they switched rooms just for a night. It was yet another weight in Taka’s gut. I like Makoto… And he’s taught me so much already. Is he capable of murder? Did he do this? It feels horrible to wonder, but that’s so suspicious... But I can’t focus on that right now or I’ll be totally useless in the trial. Kyoko and Byakuya left to start their investigations. We should do what we did when we searched the school.

Before Mondo and Sakura left to guard Sayaka’s body, the former shouted, “If whatever son of a bitch did this is here right now, and they're thinking of destroying that evidence... They'd better not let me find 'em! I'll skip the trial and cave their goddamn skull in myself! I'm serious! I will fuck them up!” In some strange way, Mondo’s threat helped Taka anchor himself. I don’t think he would really do that, but it’s so like him to say that. It’s almost comforting.

The rest of the group had varying opinions on whether Makoto was at fault. They all went their separate ways, Taka included. He went to the boys’ bathroom to splash water on his sweaty face. He checked the Monokuma File on his e-Handbook:

"The victim was Sayaka Maizono. The time of death is estimated to be around 1:30 a.m. The body was discovered in Makoto's room, in the dormitory. All evidence suggests that the death took place in the bathroom. The cause of death was a stab wound to the abdomen. There was also an injury to her right wrist. Specifically, the wrist appears to have suffered a fracture." I didn’t go to look at the body… Even reading this is too much… He flashed back to watching Junko’s life force pour out of her trembling body like a waterfall. He cried profusely while cleaning his boots. Then, he vomited into the toilet.

The hours ticked by as Taka slowly collected himself. He went to the Dining Hall and made his famous green tea to help his stomach while everyone else tried to investigate for clues about what exactly happened. I'm in no condition to go looking for much... I need to focus on presenting what I already know and leading the discussion. He made notes of what they’d already discovered on his legal pad, and made sections for the questions they had to unravel. Some of the others came by the room to investigate, Kyoko and Makoto included. The former nodded at him and the latter waved tentively. Even though it's so suspicious, we can’t rule out the possibility that Makoto *isn’t* the culprit.

Once he finished his notes and organized his thoughts, he felt somewhat better. He looked around for clues, limiting himself to the hallways. Not long after, Makoto approached him asking about cleaning duty. “Cleaning duty, eh? As a matter of fact, Monokuma came and talked to me yesterday morning!” I’m happy to discuss something not related to this nightmare…

“Really⁉️”

“He probably realized I was basically in charge, so he decided to talk to me directly! The topic of conversation was... assigning cleaning duty!”

“Oh, so you're on cleaning duty now?”
“Actually, no.”

“Huh? Okay, then who is?”

“Hifumi was also there when we had this conversation. He volunteered right away, so I let him have it!” *I’m still not sure about *why* he volunteered so fast…

“So *he’s* on cleaning duty, then.”

“Indeed. But we’ll swap out on a weekly basis. I’m sure you’ll be up before too long.” He desperately hoped Makoto wasn’t Sayaka’s killer, but things looked bad. Regardless, he chose to look forward for both their sakes: “And when that time comes, I’ll be counting on you!” Makoto took off to find Hifumi. *I wonder why he wanted to know about cleaning duty now of all times?*

Later, while investigating the dormitory hallway, he flagged down Makoto. “Do you have a second, Makoto? I’ve uncovered something most unusual! The door to everyone’s dorm has a nameplate on it to show whose room it is, right?” *I’m so excited, I found something big!* “Well, it just so happens…! Wait!” No no no! You might be the killer yourself! I can’t tell you anything!” He covered his mouth with his hands. Makoto looked surprised and he turned to investigate one of the room doors. Taka panicked. “Forget everything I just said! Forget…! Forgereeet…!” He readied his hands and struck a pose, hoping to distract the other boy from what he’d almost let slip. “FORGET BEEEEAAAM!” Some part of him hoped it would work.

Makoto just stared at him. There was an awkward silence that felt like years. “Sorry, just a little joke. Even I do jokes sometimes! Hahaha!” Taka said, somehow only making the situation *more* awkward. Makoto walked away.

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Eventually, the bell tolled, and Monokuma instructed everyone to go through the red door on the first floor. *Six and a half hours…* Taka was totally out of his element, along with trying to process two tragedies in a row and being totally unmoored from his tight schedule. He made it through the cushy-looking scarlet doors first and everyone else slowly trickled in. Makoto, however, was the last by far. “You’re late, Makoto! We’ve all been waiting for you!”

“If you were the murderer, you would be discovered!” Toko spat at Makoto. *I’d be afraid if I were accused like that, but is that really why he was late?*

“Let’s not jump to conclusions just yet! Save that for the class trial!” *We should stay away from assuming a culprit before the trial or it could block us from the truth and get us killed.* “There we can all reveal the details of Makoto’s crime!” His face scrunched. *Oh no, that was badly phrased! I don’t want it to be him… but we have to be realistic that he’s a person of interest!* Makoto looked at him with a wounded expression and it made him feel even worse. *I have to apologize later…*

Monokuma instructed them to go into the elevator and descend to the trial grounds, and that is what they did. Every millisecond they descended further into the ground felt like a ball and chain around Taka’s chest, dragging him down into the core of the Earth…

Chapter End Notes

I know I told some of you that I was gonna have this chapter up by last weekend. Sorry
about that! To be honest, I've been writing a *lot* for this fic (currently on chapter 8), and I wasn't feeling up to proofing and figuring out a title!
Chapter Notes

During the actual trial, I’ll be using this format for some of the dialogue:

Taka: “[words]”

Mondo: “[words]”

Etc because of how often the character speaking can switch. This will be exclusive to trials unless there’s a text-heavy non-trial conversation in which this happens that I feel I can’t just summarize.

I’m always excited and happy to hear your thoughts, but I’m especially looking forward to any feedback on how I handled the trial and execution! How they all get to the execution room is never explained, so I came up with something!

Game Transcripts: [This Section of Chapter 1] [Chapter 1, 477-599]

It felt like they were forced to marinate for years in their dread. When the elevator finally stopped and the doors opened, Taka had the distinct sensation that they were about to attend their own funeral. “Nyohoho! You’ve finally arrived!” Monokuma razzed as they stepped into the room. “What do you think? Doesn’t it feel just like a real courtroom?” Not in the least… “It’s like a Hollywood movie set, right?”

“Not even close. It’s total shit,” Mondo retorted. I’ve seen stageplays in Literature class with better courtrooms. Monokuma directed them to find their assigned spots, which were arranged in a circle on top of a platform. We have to look at each other as we condemn each other… We have to watch the light fade from each others’ eyes… This feels more like the Coliseum. This is a fight to the literal death, just with words and evidence instead of swords and fists… And just like it, the winner will be taken by a rabid animal.

There were empty spots on either side of Taka marked by portraits of the deceased. Taka felt even more unnerved standing in between them. Did Monokuma put me here to mess with me? Monokuma recapped the purpose and rules of the class trial and confirmed that one of the 13 students standing there was a killer. I don’t want to force anyone to admit that… The fact that they killed Sayaka is bad enough, but Monokuma wants to turn us into killers by proxy… “Okay then… everyone close your eyes, and whoever did it, raise your hand!” Taka commanded. There’s blood on us either way, but if they own up without a struggle, they can save us that pain...

“And just like it, the winner will be taken by a rabid animal.

“Don’t be a goddamn idiot. Why the hell would they raise their hand?” Mondo grunted at him. His voice didn’t match the sureness of his words. Is he still mad at me for the other day? Why doesn’t he understand what I’m trying to do?

Kyoko asked, “Before we start the trial, can I ask a question real quick? What’s going on with those pictures?” She pointed at the memorial-framed photos of Sayaka and Junko in front of empty seats.
“I’d feel awful if they got left out just because they died,” Monokuma responded. “Friendship penetrates even death’s barrier!” No… You just want the fact that one of us killed a classmate staring us in the face even as we try to piece together how it happened! After being questioned by Celeste, he also said that the room can hold up to 16 students, hence the empty area with no photo on in front of it. If Monokuma put this all together, why would he leave that there? His power here must be finite! And with that, the trial began.

Right off the bat, Taka said: “I assert that the one who was murdered was Miss Sayaka Maizono!”

Yasuhiro replied, “…Yeah, we know that part already.” We have to recap everything that happened! Including the obvious! I’m trying to lead us from the beginning… They stated that she was murdered in Makoto’s bathroom, and Chihiro posited that she must have been taken by surprise. That can’t be it – Makoto’s room was trashed! Makoto pointed this out to her, which meant there was a fight between Sayaka and her killer. Celeste said that it must have started in Makoto’s room and ended in the bathroom where she was killed.

Byakuya: “That much should have been obvious after taking one look at the scene. It shouldn't even need explaining.”

Chihiro: “S-sorry…” She looked near tears. He’s such a jerk… This is why we have to make sure we’re all on the same page right away!

Sakura moved the discussion on to the weapon used to kill Sayaka.

“There was some kind of sharp object thrust into her stomach...” Taka said. “Without a doubt, that is the murder weapon!” That’s what the Monokuma Report stated.

“So the killer used some random knife they had on ’em... How could anyone do something like that? That son of a bitch!” Mondo yelled. Is he disgusted because it wasn’t a special knife? Or because it wasn’t a more impressive weapon? No, I don’t think that’s why… Is it that she was killed at all? What’s his angle…?

Makoto replied, “No. I do think it was a knife—but not just any knife. I'm almost positive it was a kitchen knife.”

“Huh? A kitchen knife...?

“After the murder, we discovered that one of the knives from the kitchen was missing. Which means that knife must be the murder weapon.” Huh!? I was in the kitchen during the investigation, I didn’t even notice a knife was gone! I guess I’m just not really that kind of observant...

“Ooh...yeah, I guess that makes sense. You could sorta see the weapon stickin' out of her stomach... And if you look real close, I could totally see that being a kitchen knife.”

“Okay, so the murder weapon was a kitchen knife. But where does that get us?” Leon interjected. “I mean, we all know Makoto killed her, right!” Taka thought while the others started to accuse Makoto again. He looked at his notes. It *is* extremely suspicious, but we haven’t even started discussing the crime scene itself yet; shouldn’t we do that before we try to figure out the culprit?

He glanced over at Kyoko. Her arms were folded across her chest. Why even switch to that topic off the bat? “Let's draw our conclusions *after* we've presented our arguments,” she reminded them. Taka nodded. “Otherwise, what's the point of the trial?” After all, if we pick wrong, we’re all dead...

“Well we can talk all we want, it's not gonna change *that* conclusion,” Leon fired back.
“I don’t think that’s true at all. I’m sure if we keep at it, something new will reveal itself.” She was frowning slightly. *Huh? Does that mean she thinks it wasn’t Makoto?*

The others were growing increasingly sure of Makoto’s part in this murder. He countered by invoking Hina’s testimony that when she entered the Dining Hall to have tea last night, the knife was there, but that when she had left, it was gone. She hadn’t seen Makoto enter, meaning that someone who she *had* noticed took the knife. Toko argued that Hina was Makoto’s accomplice and was covering up for him. Monokuma stated, after being asked by Byakuya, that accomplices were allowed but only the killer would get to graduate. He also accidentally admitted there were no accomplices in ‘this case’. *This ‘case’… We aren’t lawyers!*

Celestia and Hifumi posited that Hina had taken the knife herself and asked her to back up her alibi. Sakura spoke up, saying that he was with Hina that entire time. Yasuhiro said either one of them could have taken the knife, only for Hina to stammer and blush. “Just spit it out already!” Mondo demanded.

“I stayed in Hina’s room last night,” Sakura said.

Hina added, “I got so scared thanks to those creepy videos. I wasn't really thinking, I just asked her to stay over. Which means we have airtight alibis!” *That’s… that’s…!!!*

Toko: “You s-stayed over...? Doesn’t that v-violate one of the school r-rules?”

That flagrant breaking… of…!!!

Chihiro: “We’re not allowed to sleep anywhere but the dorms, but it doesn’t say we have to stay in our assigned room…” Taka felt like he was going to explode. “So... I don’t think that's a problem.”

“It IS a problem!” He shouted. “A boy and a girl spending the night together!? It's... it's... unwholesome!” It’d been drilled into his head since he was small. *That kind of debauchery *cannot* be allowed on campus! We need to focus on our bonds, not... not each others’... bodies...* He accidentally thought of the glistening, mostly-naked Mondo he’d seen the other day. *Nonononono not now--*

“But... I'm a girl,” Sakura said dejectedly.

“Wh—!? You are!?” *What? WHAT????!!* “Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!” he practically screamed, every cell in body absolutely mortified at having thought Sakura was a man, misgendering her, and also horrified he’d thought of Mondo like that while trying to sniff out a murderer. His throat was dry and his eyes were watering. *Hiro... I thought she was a guy because of Hiro! If he didn’t know that, then... his predictions must not always be right!* And with that realization, the shame overwhelmed him and he blanked for several minutes.

When he rejoined the party, Makoto was trying to determine who Hina had seen in the Dining Hall that took the knife. “Could it have been... Monokuma?”

“Well, yes! That seems quite plausible!” Taka said, totally clueless of the broader picture. *Makoto knows what he’s talking about...! If Monokuma would go so far as to make us kill, would it be that surprising if he provided the weapon?*

“Puhhuu... Paahahaha! You think I took the knife? Don’t be ridiculous! That would make the class trial boring! And if there's one thing I hate, it's that!”

“Ah, yes! That also seems quite plausible!” Taka said, correcting course.

Makoto: “Then... Sayaka is the one who took the knife...?”
Sakura: “That’s the only possibility. And thinking back on it, she was acting kind of unusual... When she came into the Dining Hall, she didn’t even look at us. She just went straight to the kitchen. As she left, she said she just wanted a drink of water. But most likely...”

Taka, wanting to make sure he had it right this time: “Then the person who took the knife was the victim herself!”

Makoto: “I’m sure... I’m sure she just took it for self-defense...”

Byakuya: “So you’re saying the knife she took... was then taken from her, and she was killed with it? In that case, you may not have taken the knife, but you still could have killed her.”

Makoto: “What!?”

Toko: “S-See!? He did do it, a-after all!” But Byakuya said ‘could have’...

Makoto: “No, you’re wrong!”

Hifumi: “So that’s how you would twist the argument and send us all off in the wrong direction...!? Hm-hmm... You possess a most terrifying talent...” Is Makoto the only one twisting an argument here...?

Kyoko piped up, saying that if Makoto really was the killer, there was something missing from the room that wouldn’t make sense. Makoto mentioned that all hairs from everyone had been removed from the floor, probably with the used lint roller near his bed. Kyoko conjectured that it was to cover up the killer’s presence. “But are you sure we can decide something so important based solely on the absence of some hair!?” If that were true, I’d be suspicious too for keeping my floors clean! She assured him that there was more evidence. Taka raised his hands in a ‘please proceed’ gesture.

She said that something proved the killer struggled to get into the bathroom after Sayaka hid in it. Makoto pointed out that the bathroom doorknob’s plate was unscrewed, leaving the whole thing hanging. Kyoko said that it was bewildering for the room’s owner to do that, to which Leon objected: “So what, you’re saying he wouldn’t break the door in his own room? But if the only choice you have is to break it, you break it! There’s nothing ‘bewildering’ about it!” Why would Makoto need to break his own door down?

Kyoko led them to recap the events. They all assumed Sayaka had locked the door. But if the door was locked, why would Makoto break it? He’d have the key. Wait...!

He flashed back to what Junko had said during the meeting after their look around the floor. That only the girls’ bathrooms had locks. So... Makoto’s door wouldn’t be locked. And he’d know that! So he wouldn’t have to dismantle it to get in! He made eye contact with Kyoko, eyes alert. She nodded at him. Makoto echoed his thoughts a minute later when he stated that his door was messed up in the frame and that it wouldn’t open unless you turned the knob while shoving it. Monokuma confirmed that to be true. But the killer wouldn’t have known that, couldn’t have known that, because of what Taka had noticed:

The signs on the doors had been switched! Makoto and Sayaka switched rooms, so the doors shouldn’t have matched the occupants... but they do! So the killer thought they were in Sayaka’s room – meaning they’d think the bathroom door would be locked anyway because it was a girl’s room! Makoto wouldn’t have made that mistake! Taka stated his fact. He blushed, pleased that his observation had been crucial to the case, especially to the defense of someone he wanted to get to know better. Even if I didn’t see the way that it’d be useful, I’m glad to have helped! Taka looked at Makoto and smiled warmly. Makoto breathed deep and smiled in return. I bet he feels relieved that some of the suspicion is off him. Though Taka didn’t know if there were any facts he was missing,
and he wouldn’t be surprised if someone tried to twist that back into blaming Makoto somehow, he was certain now that the antenna-haired boy couldn’t have been the culprit. *It just doesn’t make sense!* The rest of them agreed, finally, that Makoto clearly hadn’t done it.

Chihiro: “But...what happens if we can't decide on who we think did it...?"

Taka: “Well then, why don't we just vote right now? Majority rules!”

Leon: “Majority rules? Do you really think that's a good idea...?” *Of course not! I'm trying to push everyone to keep going even though we don't have any leads...!*

Yasuhiro and Celeste asked if anyone had any questions. Hina spoke up before being cut off by Celeste sounding disappointed that it was Hina who had piped up. Taka reassured her that it was fine that she had something to ask and to say it.

Hina: “Well, I was just wondering, how'd the culprit get into Makoto's room in the first place?”

Sakura: “Hmm... Yes, how *did* the killer get inside?”

Leon: “Maybe Sayaka just dropped the key somewhere and the culprit picked it up. That's possible, right?”

Taka: “I don't think so. That seems way too convenient.” *And besides, how would Sayaka have dropped the key for Makoto’s room, which was locked, outside the door in a place where someone could find it that fast?*

Chihiro: “Then... maybe someone picked the lock?”

Taka: “Negative! If you remember, Monokuma made it quite clear that the locks are all unpickable.” *Which makes me wonder even more how he got into my room the other day... Never mind that.*

Hifumi suggested that maybe she let in the killer herself, after they knocked and asked to talk to her. Makoto rebutted that that couldn’t be the case because of the conversation that lead to them switching rooms: she was scared out of her mind about the video and the weird noises she was hearing in her room, and both of them promised not to open their doors, not even for each other, in case someone was out to snuff them. “Knowing what she'd been through, I just can't believe she would have opened the door for anyone.”

Kyoko: “... What if her being scared was a lie?”

“Huh...? Wh-What the hell is that supposed to mean!?” Makoto said. “Why would she lie about something like that!!”

“I know you don't want to consider it, but look at this and tell me... can you still deny the possibility?” She handed him a slip of paper.

He read it out loud:

There's something I want to talk to you about, just us two. In five minutes, come see me in my room. Check the nameplates to make sure you don't get the wrong room, okay?"

“I found a notepad during my search, and I shaded in the top sheet with a pencil. And these are the words that appeared.” The hair on Taka’s arms was standing up. *Why would Sayaka write that?*

Hina: “Oh man, I've totally seen people do that on detective shows! When you write, it can leave an
imprint. Sketch over the next sheet of paper, and you can see the words! When I saw that, I was like, ‘Holy crap! I better make sure I rip the paper out before I use it from now on!’” Taka flipped to an unused page in his pad. Sure enough, there were indents from his writing on the previous page.

Kyoko: “It's a pretty old-fashioned technique, but even the classics can be surprisingly useful sometimes. Oh, and I should also mention... I found the notepad on the desk in Makoto's room.”

Makoto: “Huh?”

Kyoko: “Which means, only someone who had been in Makoto's room before the incident could have written it.”

Byakuya: “Then either it was Makoto, who lived there, or Sayaka, who switched rooms for a single night...”

Kyoko: “So, Makoto... did you write this?”

Makoto: “N-No, I didn't. But—“

“Of course you didn't. Because the note also bears a perfectly legible signature—Sayaka's signature.”

Why didn't she just say that right away? Maybe it was to guide Makoto somehow... She passed around the note and the pad she’d taken the imprint from. She was right, Taka could make out the imprint if he squinted, and her signature was clear as a bell. She said that because Sayaka specifically told the reader to check the nameplate, she knew they had been switched. Did someone else switch the nameplates and she happened to notice? No way, that’d be a heck of a timely coincidence. But why, then? “She wanted someone to come to the room she was in, and *also* hide the fact that it was Makoto's room.”

Hina: “Inviting someone to ‘your’ room, but not telling them you'd switched rooms... Why would anyone do that?”

Kyoko: “To understand that...... We first need to understand what happened after she invited the person into the room. That's where the answer lies...”

Taka: “What happened then was...probably... Whoever she invited over... came in, and… attacked her! We figured it out! We know who did it! Whoever she invited over is the culprit!”

Mondo: “But we still don't know who it is, ya goddamn idiot...” Taka looked down at his podium and frowned. He was just trying to help... Does he hate me?

The others deduced that the answer must lie in the struggle in Makoto's dorm’s main room. Sakura asked if the replica sword at the crime scene might’ve been used during the altercation. Makoto explained that he and Sayaka had found it in the Gym and she told him to keep it in case he needed to defend himself against an attacker.

Makoto: “It seems pretty likely that the killer used it to break Sayaka's right wrist.”

Leon: “How the hell could you possibly know that's what broke her wrist!? You just threw that out there, and *now* you don't know what to say?” ‘Possibly know’… Makoto said it was likely, not a fact...

Makoto: “Right there where her wrist is all swollen, there's something glittery there, see?”

Chihiro: “Is... is that gold?”
Makoto: “It sure is. Specifically, the gold coating from the replica sword.” What kind of person even keeps a replica sword coated in gaudy fake gold in a school gym!? “You barely have to touch that stuff and it'll stick right to you. And there's some on her wrist because...”

Taka: “I got it! Because she got hit with the sword, right there on her wrist!”

No one harassed Taka for saying something obvious this time, so he felt proud of putting the pieces together. Yasuhiro and Toko led the recap of what they’d learned so far. Makoto pointed out that the fight couldn’t have started with the sword as there were gouges in the sheath, which wouldn’t make sense if the sword was already out to attack with. Chihiro suggested they were caused by the knife at the crime scene.

Mondo frustratedly yelled, “Stop jumpin’ ahead! Slow down and explain it so I get what the hell's goin’ on!” While this is confusing... If he wants things broken down into simple chronological steps so he can understand... why has he been so ornery when I do that? Yeah, he must hate me...

After Makoto put it in order, Mondo understood and agreed that the sword with its sheath on would be heavy and ‘useless as shit’. Kyoko suggested that if whoever had the sword was attacked with the knife first, they grabbed the sword on impulse to defend themselves.

Taka said, “I think I get it! So here's how it all played out... The culprit came in, found the kitchen knife hidden there somewhere... Then they took the knife and attacked Sayaka before she knew what was happening! So she grabbed the sword to defend herself, but then the culprit took that from her, too...!” She was defenseless... “Then, after they broke her wrist with the sword... they took the knife and... finished it...” He shuddered and balled his fists.

“Sorry, but I don't think Sayaka used the sword to defend herself,” Kyoko stated gently. I can tell that was sincere.

Leon asked, “Wh—!? How the hell can you not think that!?” Kyoko said that was her conclusion based on a certain piece of evidence on her body. Makoto showed them pictures of her palms, which were totally spotless, and reminded them that the coating on the sword would come off if you barely even brushed it. Toko asked if she could’ve just washed it off. That can’t be, because the water is off at night! Makoto confirmed that a second later. Toko didn’t know because she hadn’t showered yet.

Hifumi: “Oh my...” What??

Toko: “Y-You're no different! You s-smell like a big f-fat ugly donkey!”

Hifumi: “Hmm? I'm not sure whether to take that as an insult or a compliment!” What the heck is Hifumi doing?? I-is... Is he... Getting off on that??? Even I, of all people, can sense that... He felt like he needed to take another shower.

Leon: “An insult, obviously...”

“...So anyway,” Taka rerouted, trying to ignore the terrifying knowledge that Hifumi was *very weird* even if he didn’t exactly understand *how*. “Sayaka never touched the sword, then that means... The killer is the only one who used the sword. But hold on. If that's right, then the one who damaged the sheath with the kitchen knife was...” The one with the knife hit the sword’s scabbard before anything else... So if she didn’t touch the sword...?

Byakuya: “The person with the knife attacked first, and the sword was used as an impromptu defense.”

Hifumi: “Then the one who attacked first was...!”
Makoto: “...S-Sayaka!?” No…

Kyoko: “Now do you understand? She wasn’t a blameless victim in this.”

Byakuya: “No, far from it. It’s almost as if… she had been planning to commit a murder of her own. She took the knife from the kitchen, then invited the culprit to the room she was staying in. And if it’s true that she had the kitchen knife and attacked without provocation...”

Sakura: “Indeed…these are all the actions of an assailant.” WHAT!?

Celeste: “Which brings up another point… Makoto, Sayaka was the one who suggested you two switch rooms, correct? Maybe the reason she wanted to switch rooms... was so that she could pin the crime on you. That is a possibility, is it not?” Makoto was incredulous and Kyoko was silent. Kiyotaka’s hand was over his mouth. This is... He was watching Makoto’s eyes turn glassy, his innocence and optimism getting ground to dust under the hard boot of betrayal. “That would also explain why she would switch the nameplates. She wanted to get whoever she had targeted to come to Makoto’s room, where she was staying... And by committing the murder there, instead of her room, that would implicate Makoto. But for that to work, the target had to be lured out while still keeping the room swap a secret. If the target knew she had switched rooms, they would have become suspicious right away.” That’s horrible… But what other explanation is there?

Mondo: “So all that's why she switched the names...?”

Hifumi: “But doesn't that plan seem a little risky? For one thing, even if her plan worked, Mr. Naegi would just tell everyone they'd switched rooms.”

Byakuya: “I don't know... I'm not sure our softhearted Makoto is capable of that kind of cutthroat behavior.” Byakuya *would* see how soft Makoto is… I hope he doesn’t try to take advantage of that down the line. ’I'm sure Sayaka realized the same thing, which is why out of all of us, she asked him to switch rooms.” Makoto was reduced to speechlessness.

Toko: “P-Plus...she *was* the Ultimate Pop Sensation... A t-totally forgettable kid, o-or a national superstar... Who are you m-more likely to believe?” Having a household name isn’t itself a guarantee people will trust you…

Hifumi: “Wait, then...you're saying she had this all planned out...?”

Mondo: “Holy shit!”

Celeste: “But in the end, her plan backfired. She launched her attack with the knife, then found herself under attack in turn. That must be when her wrist got broken, and she was forced to drop the knife.” And then she ran, the killer made their way into the bathroom, and stabbed her with the knife she had tried to kill them with...

Sakura: “The tables were suddenly turned on her, and she died at the hands of the one she'd planned to murder...”

Makoto’s protested desperately, but Monokuma interrupted: “Hey, hey! You guys have totally derailed the argument! You're being super boring right now! Come on, hurry up and decide who did it! Wouldn't it be awful if I had to punish you all just because you ran out of time!?” S-so he is timing us! This has been going on for 60 minutes so far… How long do we have? Will he tell us when? Or will he just punish us at once...

“Makoto, right now you just need to concentrate on figuring out the answer to this mystery. If we can't uncover who murdered Sayaka, it's over for all of us...” said Kyoko. Taka suggested running...
through the clues again. *If there really isn't anything else, maybe reviewing it will help us notice something…*

Makoto mentioned that there was a clue left: Sayaka had written a dying message on the wall in her own blood. 11037… Celeste asked if they could be sure she was the writer, to which Makoto pointed out that there was blood on her fingertip. Taka said, “I see… She broke her right wrist during the fight, so she’d have to use her left hand to write…” Even Chihiro, who knew all about computers and mathematics, didn’t see any significance in the numbers. Kyoko said that it was because they *weren’t* numbers. Hifumi pointed out that if you looked closely, the two ones looked like a letter. Chihiro said that they looked like an N, and that you could even see a faint smear connecting them.

The group was trying to figure out what the rest of that meant, since N037 wasn’t exactly meaningful either. N037? Like ‘number thirty-seven’? *Some kind of code…? No, wait…* Kyoko said they’re *not* numbers. He squinted at the photo of the message. *So if the ones are an N… The zero must be an O. The 3… what might that be? A B? A backward E? And the 7… That could be a T? NOBT???? NOET???? Kyoko instructed them to rotate the image 180 degrees. Right as Taka was doing so, Makoto announced that it was the name of the killer. *What!?* He looked down. L-E-O-N…

Leon charged that it was a coincidence, but Kyoko said: “She wrote that message on the wall behind her as she was leaning up against it. In that position, she couldn't move to write normally, and had to write upside down, as it were. And as a result… When you look at it standing in front of her, it ends up getting flipped. Try it for yourself, if you want. Write something sitting like her, and the letters will be inverted.”

Taka glanced up at Mondo, who was squatting and trying it on the air behind him. Taka wrote Mondo’s name as instructed on the podium with his finger. Sure enough, it was exactly as Kyoko said. Leon argued against it, to which Kyoko accused him of destroying evidence.

Makoto said there was a piece of a burnt, white, button-down shirt in front of the incinerator. Taka looked around the room, noting that there were others wearing the same kind of shirt. As if on cue, Leon pointed that fact out to his defense. Makoto argued that if they could figure out how the shirt was thrown away they could finger the killer.

“O-Oh, yeah… that's a good point,” Leon said. “I think I know what you're gonna say... You can't reach the incinerator without opening the gate in front of the trash room, right? And obviously you wouldn't be able to hit the switch to turn it on, either.” *What if you had a really long pole? It’d have to be super sturdy. “You’d need the key to get in. And the one with the key was... the person on cleaning duty! So the killer had to be whoever was in charge of taking care of the trash! Right!?* The one on cleaning duty!? Hifumi!? He *is* wearing a shirt like that… *Was he planning to kill someone – is that why he acts so unsettlingly!?*

Makoto said that he was wrong because there was another way. He presented a shattered glass sphere, which Yasuhiro said was his crystal ball that he’d left in the laundry room. *It’s in character for Hiro to leave something like that behind…* Makoto said Hifumi had told him that when he had last been in there the incinerator was off, but when he and Makoto checked it was on somehow. *Was it… Monokuma? No…* Makoto said it had been turned on without opening the gate. He said that the killer had thrown the ball at the power button, turning it on, before tossing in the crumpled-up white shirt. Chihiro remarked the distance was at least 30 feet, which would be difficult…

… for anyone who wasn’t the Ultimate Baseball Star. Leon, Makoto alleged, was the culprit. Taka felt tears prickle his eyes. *I don’t want it to be anyone, but I had finally gotten through to Leon… I wanted to be his friend… How could he even be capable of this?* Leon, of course, challenged that
idea and started insulting Makoto for even suggesting it. Makoto reviewed the scenario that they’d worked out together, saying that Leon must’ve come up with the plan with Hiro’s ball when he went to the laundry room to wash the blood off his shirt.

Kyoko: “So, Leon... do you object to anything that's been said?”

Leon: “Hell yes I object! Of course I do! I object, I object! I mean, all of this is just a bunch of stupid theories! You need evidence! Where's the evidence!? Without evidence, it's all bullshit! It's bullshit and I refuse to acknowledge it!” You’re acknowledging it now...

Kyoko: “Well then, I guess this is as good a time as any to present the evidence that proves you did it. Makoto...I believe you're in possession of that evidence? When the killer removed the screws from the doorknob, they didn't use anything from your room to do it. Instead, they must have used something that belonged to them.”

Leon: “I refuse to acknowledge you! You're stupid! Stupid stupid stupid! Stupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupid!!”

Makoto asked what kind of tool could remove screws from the doorknob. Hiro and Mondo worked out that it must have been a screwdriver from a toolkit. Further proving his innocence, Makoto’s toolkit had never even been opened before.

Taka: “That's because the culprit didn't know it was your room! They thought they were in Sayaka's room!” The only tools we have access to are in the kits... so they went back to their room...

Chihiro: “Only the boys got toolkits, so the killer naturally assumed there wouldn't be one in there...”

Makoto: “Okay, then whose toolkit did the killer use?

Leon: “Stupidstupidstupid!” Leon’s’s been backed into a corner... I... don’t *want* to believe he’s the culprit but it looks so final. Would someone who wasn’t guilty be acting so enraged and dismissive? He closed his eyes. I don’t want to see this… He chose to focus on the feeling of his fingers rubbing together on his sleeve rather than watch Leon act out like a caged animal any further.

He was trying not to watch, and yet he could almost feel the fight leaving Leon’s body as the others boxed him in. It was clear he was guilty. Monokuma cackled like an evil witch about to eat the kids he’d fattened up with sweets. “Looks like you've reached your verdict! Then are we ready to cast our votes? You all have a lever in front of you. Use it to make your selection!” Taka eyed the lever. Pulling it would sentence Leon to death. I don’t want to be party to this... But if I don’t... Monokuma will kill me...

After everyone cast their votes, Monokuma revealed that the majority vote was indeed for the Ultimate Baseball Star, and because they were correct, he would now be executed. There’s no way around it... Leon did it, and he’s going to die too...

Makoto: “Leon... Leon, did you really... kill Sayaka?”

Aoi: “I don't believe it...”

Mondo: “Son of a bitch...! What the hell is wrong with you?!” Mondo’s rage echoed one of the many conflicted emotions that were bubbling in Taka’s gut.

Leon: “I-I didn’t have a choice... It was kill or be killed!” Just like Byakuya said... “S-So that's why... I killed her first.” And just like Celeste said... They were both right, all this time... Sayaka and Leon played straight into Monokuma’s hands... “None of you are any different! One wrong step, and
you’d be the one standing here!” No! No one else here would do that… right? “It was complete chance that I wound up like this! I was just… unlucky! That's all…”

Mondo: “Grr…!”

Leon: “H-Hey, come on…! You expect me to just accept my death!?"

Makoto: “It's all because of that video... Even I couldn't handle what I saw in there.” I couldn’t either, but I didn’t make the choice to attempt murder... “If I was her, and the video actually had something to do with me, I can't even imagine... The one thing that was more important to her than anything else — her dreams, her friends... To have to see something like that happen to them…”

Everything my dad worked himself to the bone to provide for us was ruined, and he’s missing and possibly dead… My support system, my dreams, were broken by Monokuma too… None of the rest of us planned to kill; it’s unjust, it’s not right, it’s inhumane. Or did we…? But… I still feel so bad for her…

Monokuma: “Boy howdy! The entertainment industry must sure be terrifying, huh!? I mean, to try and kill someone just because of those relationships! She seemed so nice and lovely on the outside, but inside... she'd descended into pure madness!”

Makoto: “Wh... what did you say?

Monokuma: “I understand, really I do. Yup yup! You're in utter despair thanks to Sayaka's betrayal, right? Compassion, intimacy, love... The stronger those feelings, the stronger the despair when they collapse!” Taka shut his eyes hard. He’s... not wrong... The more we care, the more it hurts... I would know...

Makoto: “Stop screwing with us! This is all your fault! Sayaka being forced to do something like that... All of it... Everything...! It's all your fault!” He lunged toward Monokuma.

“That's enough,” Kyoko said, grabbing his arm forcefully and stopping him in his tracks. “If you really want to make her enemies pay for what they've done, you need to let it go for now.”

Monokuma giggled cutely, saying that Makoto barely avoided being punished.

Monokuma: “Now then! Since you so magnificently revealed the identity of the killer during the class trial... the blackened, Leon Kuwata, will receive his punishment!” Is there any way we can avoid this!? Is this really what he deserves?

Leon: “P-Punishment? You mean... e-execution? W-Wait a second! I didn't have a choice! I HAD to kill her! Y-Yeah, that's it! I was just protecting myself in the heat of the moment! It was self-defense!”

Celeste: “How, exactly, was it self-defense? When you forced your way into the bathroom, did you or did you not use your very own toolkit? After she'd shut herself in the bathroom, you went out of your way to head back to your own room... Then you came all the way back, broke into the bathroom, and killed her. Am I wrong? You had any number of chances to stop what you were doing. But you chose not to. Is it not because you had an unclouded intent to commit murder?” Taka gasped. Is she spinning this for her own narrative? I can’t tell... but it’s a fact that he did that... How was he feeling? Was he scared? When did he decide to finally kill her? I can’t feel bad for someone who commits murder not in self-defense... but... is that the whole picture of what he did?

Leon: “N-No! That's not...!”

Makoto: “Stop it... I’ve had enough of this.”
Celeste: “Oh? Are you sure? You were closer to her than anyone, were you not? He killed your precious Sayaka. Do you understand?” What is she doing?

Makoto: “I can’t say Leon is solely to blame. Of course, I don’t plan on blaming Sayaka, either.” That’s true... “Because... Because the one to blame... is him! If it weren’t for you... this never would have happened to Sayaka, OR Leon! We shouldn't be fighting each other... We should be fighting against the one who put us in this situation! The mastermind!” He’s right but... They still have to be accountable... right? But the punishment is so twisted...

Makoto: “Uh-oh! Did you awaken to your sense of justice!? Well, it just so happens that there's nothing more unethical than an unwavering sense of justice.” Taka unintentionally yelped. Justice has context, but... “After all, it's people with that sort of mentality that perpetuate war all over the world.” He’s wrong! It's not justice that perpetuates war, it’s greed and power...! “ Is that the kind of justice that's awakened within you!?"

Makoto: “Just... shut up!”

Monokuma: “Okay, well, anyway. More importantly...! Let's hurry up and get to what everyone's been waiting for! The punishment!”

Kyoko: “When you say ‘everyone’... who exactly are you referring to?”

Monokuma: “Sorry, I said everything I've got to say! I need to save some of the fun for later! Bwaahahaha!” He lifted up a mallet triumphantly.

Leon: “I'm begging you...! Please, don't do this!” He was on his knees, groveling. To see such a proud person as Leon begging... It's horrible...

Monokuma: “No more begging! No more excuses! You must pay the penalty for breaking the rules! Society demands it!” No it doesn’t, not like this, YOU do, you disgusting... you evil...

Leon: “S-Stop, please...!”

Monokuma: “Now then, I've prepared a very special punishment for Leon Kuwata, the Ultimate Baseball Star!”

Leon: “No no no no no no no!”

Monokuma: “Let's give it everything we've got! It's...PUNISHMENT TIIME!” He howled in delight.

“NNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!” Leon screamed, weak and collapsing in despair, as Monokuma brought the mallet down on a giant red button. The part of the trial platform Leon was standing on detached from the rest and ascended a few feet, leaving him up higher than the rest of them. A perverse reference to having the moral high ground... Fencing shot out of the poles of the pulpits the other students were still standing behind, creating half-wood, half-metal cages surrounding each of their lower bodies. The panel with the lever on each pulpit descended into the wood and was replaced by sturdy handgrips with a red sticker that said “HOLD ON TIGHT”. They only had seconds to do as commanded before the remaining parts of the platform separated and rearranged themselves on hidden mechanical tracks to make them form a semicircle with equidistant points that surrounded Leon. Hidden turntables under their feet spun to different degrees so they were all facing Leon with Makoto directly across from him. They were so close that if they reached, they could probably touch him.

A red sign that said “IN USE” above an enormously wide doorway blared on. A chain shot through
the entrance and formed a visegrip on Leon’s neck and dragged him backward from his spot at the
speed of sound through the doorway… He extended his hand out toward Makoto in vain. The
platform they were standing on followed him just as fast so they could all see close up exactly what
Leon was feeling the whole way to his execution. The smaller students were holding onto the
handles for dear life as the speed threatened to rip them out of their safety cages. Taka’s heart was
slamming against his ribcage. Too… Much… It was far past overwhelming. They arrived at a batting
cage and Leon was dragged through its opening before the fencing closed off. The doors behind the
group slammed shut and locked, telling them there was no way out. A stop-and-go light on the cage
turned on as Leon was automatically mounted to a pole with more shackles. Stadium lights shined on
Leon. The ‘star of the hour… A giant pitching machine appeared in front of him. The platform the
group was on unfurled, split in half and stacked behind itself in two rows in an echo of a flat
amphitheater. The cages around their legs shrank down to their feet, holding them in place so they
couldn’t even turn around, much less try to escape the horrible sight to come.

The stoplight on the batting cage turned to red. The pitching machine flared to life. It looks more like
a machine gun… A scoreboard behind Leon flickered to life. Monokuma appeared in a baseball cap
and struck the barrel of the gun with a metal bat. It sent the first baseball barreling into Leon’s gut.
He grunted and started screaming, trying to tear the shackle off his neck but failing to move his arms.
The gun shot out a few more balls, the scoreboard’s count increasing each time, for a few seconds.
This looks painf—The gun started shooting out a fast, endless stream of baseballs. It aimed up and
down Leon’s body. He was screeching, unholy shrieking. As if that weren’t enough, the gun then
started to spin around him, leaving no inch of him unhit. Monokuma was quickly lobbing in some
balls of his own at Leon. The speed of it all became so fast that Taka could barely keep up with it.
The scoreboard’s counters shattered by the sheer effort of trying to stay current. Blood was seeping
down Leon’s clothes and spraying in some places. He let out pitiful, wrenching gurgles. The balls
were flying out so quickly from every angle directly at his face that it seemed like time was
momentarily frozen. The look on Leon’s face before time resumed and his head was bombarded with
baseballs would be seared into Taka’s brain forever. Red mist exploded out of the impact points,
hanging above him like a small rain cloud.

The batting cage walls sank into the ground, as did the lights and the gun. Leon’s grotesque,
pulverized body was drenched in rivers of shining blood. The sudden silence in the air was
deafening. Still-hot blood-speckled baseballs were rolling slowly on the floor, some coming to a stop
at the students’ feet. All of them saw every second of what had transpired. Taka couldn’t even close
his eyes or turn his head. His regular tricks to cope and ground himself were galaxies out of reach.

It was over. It would never be over. But it was over.

For a few minutes, everyone was stunned and silence. Then, the screaming, the shouting, all of it
began.

Monokuma took that as a cue to try to break them even further by trolling them. “Well hey, if you
don’t like it… all you gotta do is swear to cut all ties with the outside world and accept living here
forever! But that’s only if every single one of you can get onboard with that.” Taka didn’t even
realize that he was the first to start screaming, and that he still was, until Monokuma drowned him
out with his insane laughter.

Mondo: “Man, fuck you… Why the fuck are you doing all this evil shit to us!?” Taka was struggling
to think. H-how… can Mondo even… form a sentence now? He looked to the man as a beacon of
power in that moment.

Monokuma: “Evil!? You make it sound like I’m some dark, awful, secret society type of guy! Or in
this case, a dark, awful, secret society type of BEAR!”
Hifumi: “Um, so why are you putting an upstanding young citizen like me through such a grueling ordeal?”

Monokuma: “It seems like you're trying to use common sense to make sense of something that doesn't make sense! That's like trying to put a mile on a scale! I just don't think it's possible…”

Monokuma is driven… by chaos…

Hifumi: “Hey, uh, I don't think what you're saying and what I'm saying quite fit together.”

Mondo: “You piece of shit! I don't know who you are but I'm gonna pound your ass into the ground!”

Monokuma: “Puhuhu. You must really hate me to get so angry, huh? But if you do that, you're barking waay up the wrong tree. What happened, happened because more than one of you decided you wanted to get out, right? No matter how much time passes, you can't cut free of your regrets from the outside world. You're to blame!”

We're to blame? I'm… to blame?

Toko: “Of course we can't cut f-free of the outside world! Being trapped in this insane p-place…!”

Monokuma: “Hmmmm... You're trapped, are you? Well, I'm sure once you learn all the mysteries of this school, your thinking will change for sure. You'll think, ‘Boy, isn't it so wonderful how we all get to live here forever?’”

Taka: “What are you trying to say…?” he managed, using every ounce of willpower he had left.

Kyoko: “I feel like there's some deeper meaning hidden in there... Just like before…”

As Monokuma vanished once again, Taka had a realization. The clarity of it both broke him from his shock and pushed him further into despair.

Sayaka tried to kill Leon and frame Makoto for it...

Because of what she saw in her video... Yesterday, she came to me, saying she was afraid and didn’t know how to do what she wanted to... And I told her to push on to achieve her goals... I... I...

Sakura’s words earlier played in his head. “We must shine hope in the darkness. A potential killer may be dissuaded if they see the light.”

“Nn...gh—!” I thought that was what I was doing... But... I didn’t shine light or hope. I unknowingly encouraged her to do this... If I hadn’t... Would she still be here? Would Leon? Would Junko, even? We’ll never know... They’re all gone. Forever.

But what I do know is that this is my fault… Their blood is on my hands because I compelled her to take action. Monokuma forced the gun into her hand... He looked down, finally noticing that one of the bloody balls was sitting against his boot.

But I convinced her to pull the trigger.
Monokuma popped up to tell them he’d take care of cleaning everything up. “After all, nobody wants to look at a rotting corpse every day! That can’t be good for your health...” He snapped his fingers; the doors to the room swung open and the students were freed from the devices holding their feet in place. Taka managed to suggest that they all meet in the Dining Hall as soon as possible before most of the students dispersed once Monokuma vanished. He was left in silence with Kyoko and Celeste. Both were staring at Leon’s mangled corpse. Taka was trying to do everything he could to not look at the deceased Ultimate Baseball Star.

Celeste sighed. “Both of them did exactly what Monokuma wanted… What a waste. This is what happens when you don’t adapt.”

Taka wanted to say something but he was too traumatized to even open his mouth again. No matter where he looked, Leon’s corpse was in the corner of his vision. After a beat, Kyoko responded, “Not really.”

“Oh, how so?”

“Both he and Sayaka were trying to adapt to the circumstances Monokuma made.”

“Hmmhmhm… In a manner of speaking, I suppose. But what Monokuma said about needing to let go of our attachments and just live here… That’s true adaptation.”

“No. It’s like some twisted Buddhist teaching. Are you saying you’re giving in?”

“How quaint. Of course not,” she tittered. “I’m surprised someone as coldly analytical as yourself would bother trying to leave this place after seeing what happens when you do.”

Kyoko stared Celeste in the eye. “If that’s what you think, you haven’t been paying as much attention as you want everyone to think you have.”

Celeste rolled her eyes and left. Taka was still rooted to the spot rigid as a plank.

After a minute, Kyoko approached him. “Kiyotaka.”

“Y-yes… Kyoko?” He forced out, voice unusually quiet.

“I know this is scary.”

“It’s n-not j-just that…” He stammered.

She studied him a moment, her hand on her chin. “... You feel responsible for this.”
He nodded stiffly. “I t-talked with Sayaka…”

“…” She was silently encouraging him to continue.

He cleared his throat, trying to steady himself. “She was s-scared... I told her to take the steps n-
necessary to achieve her goals, and…”

“I talked with her too. This isn’t is your fault.”

“H-how so?”

“I think you have a lot of things to talk to Makoto about.” Taka looked down, not responding. “You feel like you’ve failed as a leader too, right?”

“How did you know…?”

Her eyes softened. “You’re not the only one who does…” She paused, thoughtful. “I think that everyone needs a hand, especially after what happened today.”

“I’m just so… out of my depth. Afraid.”

“Anyone would be. However… You keep trying, over and over, right?”

“I put so much effort into trying…”

“Even when it’s too much?”

“Yeah…”

“Don’t overextend yourself,” she said, a small smile on her lips. *That’s something my therapists used to tell me. To stay aware of my capacity...* "In any case, I fully expect you to tell me off for being late again. What was it … ‘At your leave, Professor’.” Taka almost thought he heard her chuckle as he watched her depart. *Did Makoto tell her that...? Did she hear that whole conversation?* He left shortly thereafter. *I still feel awful, but for now I can keep moving... hopefully...*

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Images of the deaths of the past 24 hours were strobing in Taka’s mind. He paced around the Dining Hall and clenched and unclenched his fists repeatedly, stimming to try to distract himself. Even then he was extremely aware of exactly how late Makoto was and exactly how dead three people were. The others were already gathered and not paying him any attention, quietly discussing the trial and execution.

*Finally* Makoto walked in. “Sorry I'm late...”

Hina: “Hey... are you okay, Makoto?”

Taka didn’t hear her. He was trying to be compassionate but all the fear and stress and trauma were making his obsessions more acute. “You sure took your sweet time! I was just about to go get you and drag you back here!” He’d already planned out multiple ways to do so if needed and was just about to pick one if Makoto hadn’t showed up.

“S-Sorry...”

“So? What happened? Was your room fixed up like he said?” He demanded. The photos he’d seen of Sayaka’s body and the visceral executions of Junko and Leon looped many times in his head. I
think I’ll be seeing rotting corpses even after they’re gone…” I imagine it would be pretty hard to sleep with a rotting corpse in your bathroom!” he said, intrusive dark humor surfacing.

“Jesus, that’s fucked up, man. Why would you say something like that?” Mondo commented. *I feel bad but I’m locked in… I can’t… Express it.*

Makoto confirmed that everything had been cleaned up to the point that it was almost like it hadn’t happened. *Junko and Leon are probably gone too…* After Sakura inquired, he said he wasn’t staying in Sayaka’s room because it’d be just as horrible a reminder of what had transpired. *Staying in the same space as someone who betrayed you and died… It’s makes sense that it’d be painful.*

“Hey, cheer up!” Hina said, chipper. “Getting depressed isn’t gonna help anything, right? If we all work together, I’m sure we’ll find a way out of here!” *We have to… “So everyone just… try and cheer up and get back on track!”*

“Is that honestly supposed to make us feel better?” Byakuya said snidely.

“How?”

“We were already ‘working together’ and yet someone was still murdered. Anyone could betray us at this point. Now that it's happened once, it's a question of when, not if, the next one takes place.” *That can’t be true… Now that we understand the stakes, we can work together even more… There's no way someone will kill again… Not when we can surely all put in effort and get out of here. Somehow…*

“Yeah, because S-Sayaka made the first move…” Toko said.

Hina shot back, “B-But…if we work together against the mastermind, nobody'll have any reason to do something like that!”

“Keep telling yourself that. I’ll be over here in the real world. Working together, fighting a common enemy... Like it or not, it's not that simple.” *How is it not?*

After nudging from Hifumi, Celestia expanded: “The mastermind seems to be much more powerful than we ever suspected. They took over Hope’s Peak, which was supposed to be well defended, then modified it to fit their desire. They created Monokuma, which seems to be incredibly advanced, and they’re providing for our every need. And the cherry on top is the execution we witnessed. Everything has been planned down to the last excruciating detail. This is not the work of your everyday psychopath. Defying them may be too great of a risk…” *All of that is true, but… Does that really mean it’s impossible to get out of this? I don’t buy it.*

“Then...what are we supposed to do?” Sakura asked. *Keep fighting to get out!*

Byakuya stated, almost as if in response to Taka’s thought, “Anyone who truly does want to escape... will just have to follow the rules. In which case, the only option is to deceive those around you, and win the game.” *He means kill someone… Absolutely not! If we live here peacefully, we’ll have infinite time to search for an exit, a way out, a loophole…*

Chihiro objected, saying she didn’t want to live if it meant killing someone else to do it. She felt responsible for Leon’s dying because they’d voted for him. *I understand that…* Hina tried to get her to take it easy on herself. Hifumi said, “She's right. If you heap that kind of blame on yourself, you'll turn into a full-fledged masochist.”

*I suppose that's true as well.*
“Chihiro, listen... You're not to blame. Not you, not Leon, and not Sayaka. The mastermind is responsible for everything that's happened,” Makoto said. But they still have accountability... “We had no choice but to vote. I can't even imagine what would've happened to us if we'd refused...” He probably would have us killed... or worse. “And in the end, it was Monokuma who ultimately killed Leon...! So don't waste your anger on yourself... Instead, direct it at the mastermind!” I see... Using our anger and bad feelings to push us forward... Maybe that's how we can keep going.

At that moment, the evening bell and announcement sounded. But at the end, Monokuma added, “Oh, and one other thing... It was totally obvious before that you were trying to make yourselves feel better and justify what you did. See you, see you, don't see you, see you! That's about how much I can see you, even when you try to hide!” We’re exposed... Taka shuddered. “Now pay attention and remember this well! The burden of judging others is a heavy one to bear. So be well aware of your actions! Order and stability rely on the sacrifice and responsibility of everyone!” This isn’t order or stability! This is chaos and disharmony! “Okay then... sweet dreams, everyone! Good night, sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite...” And with that, the monitor flickered off. Most students were grumbling and confused and angry about what Monokuma had said. Mondo even moreso: “That piece of shit! Who does he think he is?!”

“Remember, he said he wants us to despair. At this point... I’m pretty sure he’ll say anything he can to encourage that,” Taka said. The rest of the group filtered out, leaving just the two of them.

“What kind of sick bastard would want that!?”

Taka shrugged. Mondo’s hot anger was directed to him, but not *at* him, which was weird but a nice change of pace. “I don’t understand it either... I think he lets us try to pick ourselves back up, only to shoot us again.”

“D’ya really think he has cameras *everywhere*?” Mondo grunted, cordial.

“I hope there’s somewhere without any...“

“Even in our rooms, even in the god damned bathrooms... He’s so... So...”

“Despicable?”

“Yeah, that. I dunno, man. I just, I fuckin’ despise him. Everything about this hellhole just makes me so angry...” He sighed. “I’ve been forced to be around a LOT of shit people, but he takes the cake, you know?” His lavender eyes looked less wild.

Taka nodded. “I don’t like hating people or thinking they’re irredeemable, but...”

“Heh. That makes one of us...” He left the room, leaving Taka by his lonesome.

He went to his room and was so taxed that he fell asleep in his clothes, only managing to get off his boots. He dreamed of blood.

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When the morning bell sounded, his eyes slowly creaked open. He felt like he had only slept an hour, and that he needed several days more sleep. He didn’t notice he was still wearing his uniform until he got up to use the bathroom. It was wrinkly from being slept in. Ugh... At least having the texture on me all night probably helped me stay asleep... He did some stretches to relieve his stiff muscles. Luckily, he had all his clothes prepared long ahead of wearing them, so he just put on a freshly ironed set and left for the Dining Hall. Aside from Byakuya and Celeste, everyone else seemed to be just as down. Kyoko was, as always, mysterious, but due to what she’d said to him
yesterday he assumed she wasn't feeling great either. After everyone dismissed themselves, Taka headed straight back to his room.

He had frequent flashbacks to the deaths, to the crime scenes, to the executions. He couldn’t get them out of his head no matter what he tried. Not even exercise stops it… Since he couldn’t deal, he spent several more days huddled in his bed, unable to leave the room other than to eat and attend the breakfast meetings. He still managed to get there first each time. He wore his uniforms 24/7, changing them in the mornings, to keep the one sense of comfort and safety he had left on him at all times.

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Four days after the execution, Monokuma summoned them all to the gym with the morning announcement. Taka dragged himself out of bed, full of dread and fear. He made his way to the gym. I still feel terrible… But I think I’m a little better.

There was a tense, scared energy in the gym. What does he want from us? I hope it’s not another motive, especially not so soon… I bet they’re thinking the same thing. “Okay! Lift your arms up, and down!” Monokuma’s shrill voice commanded over the speakers. He popped up from the podium, demonstrating. “One, two, three, four!”

Taka did as he was told, too out of it to even realize. “One, two, three, four!”

“You're the o-one keeping us 'stuck inside’…” snarked Toko. Oh! What! She’s right... Well, I might as well keep going. Doing exercises feels good. It didn’t stop the replays of the horrible events, but it made him feel more alert. Monokuma said something about sounding cool, but Taka was too focused on doing the motions to really absorb it. Sakura asked why he even called them there, but Monokuma babbled on and on about something called an “Assassin’s Fist”. What’s that? Is that a real thing? Will it let us escape? He imagined wearing a heavy, red gauntlet and punching through the lock on the entrance hall in one blow. The others didn’t seem to give Monokuma’s words the time of day though. Was he joking? I don’t get it… Makoto pushed against his banal words, rephrasing Sakura’s question.

“Of course not! You think I have that kind of free time on my hands!?” Taka snapped back, discarding his fantasy of punching Monokuma with the gauntlet in various ways. No, you’re probably too busy watching us sleep! He continued, “Ahh, I’d like to make an announcement! Every time you overcome a class trial here at Hope’s Peak, a whole new world will open up to you!” There was some muttering from Hiro about what could that possibly mean. “It'd really suck if you had to live here forever with nothing new to stimulate you! Besides, I know how you kids get these days with your ADD and ADHD.” These days...? Our generation didn't invent neurodivergence! You should be treating them respectfully and not using them to pretend you’re doing us a favor...! “I gotta keep you motivated! So go ahead, look around all you want! Enjoy the brave new post-trial world till you explode!” What does that even mean!? Once again, the monochrome bear vanished after monologuing.

“Is he talking about... a way to get outside?” Hina asked. That reminds me... We were thinking earlier that maybe there’d be an exit on an upper floor. Should I check the stairs?

Celeste responded, “That seems... unlikely.”
“Well we don't know till we look!” Mondo replied. I agree... Oh, is Mondo optimistic too? Interesting... Aside from Monokuma implying we’ll be here for a long time, maybe he was lying to make us feel worse! Maybe there’s something, even if he didn’t intend us to find it...?

“Whatever he meant, it seems we'll have to search the school one more time,” Sakura said.

Taka nodded, happy to have something to do to take his mind off everything that had transpired and step back up to the plate of leader. “Okay, then let's split up and start investigating! When you're done, everyone meet back up at the Dining Hall and we'll share what we found!” Taking the mantle was already making him feel better.

Byakuya chided, “You're basically a one-trick pony, you know that?” That’s two more tricks than you!

“That’s two more tricks than you!” He shot back. “Now let's get moving!” As everyone departed, Taka saw Makoto was smirking as he left. I wonder what’s got him so happy?

Lo and behold, the iron gate that was in front of the stairs to the next floor had lowered. Oh my gosh!! He couldn’t help but feel excited about his discovery. I feel re-energized! Makoto happened to be walking up at that moment. “Makoto! Look! The gate blocking the stairs is gone... It would seem a path to the 2nd floor has opened up!” He thought for a minute. There were areas we couldn’t get to on the first floor… “But it's also of utmost importance to double-check the areas we already know about, just in case! Aren't I so clever to think of that!? I really impress myself sometimes.” There’s no way anyone else considered that, especially not after such terrible events...! He wanted to have a talk with Makoto, but it wasn’t the right time and they were too focused on investigating anyway. “Well, I'll leave the school to you! I'm gonna go check out the dorms! The school's all yours!” He said, happy, and left Makoto there.

He walked around the Despair Hotel section of the first floor, checking and rechecking everything. He even tried to pull off one of the iron plates on a window in the hall just to be sure. It looked like the gaudy-doored nurse’s office was still off limits. An enormous Warehouse was now accessible. The ceiling was improbably high. Wait... is the ceiling here higher than the other rooms on this floor? How does that work? Oh well... There were piles and piles and piles of food, clothes, and everything else anyone could need. I have the itch to sort this... But that'll be a big project. He spent a few hours making up a rudimentary organization system.

It appeared that the Bathhouse was also open. It even included a changing room. Wow!! This would be a good place to spend time. I should invite Makoto here! That’s how men bond, right? That’s what the history books say. I have a lot of things to say, and bearing it all will help that...!

By 7 p.m., everyone was gathered in the Dining Hall to report their findings. “Okay, ladies and gentlemen!” Everyone’s on time today!! “How’d it go? Did anyone discover any interesting new anything!?” Hifumi said that there was a library, and Hina excitedly told them there was also a pool with locker rooms and exercise equipment. I don’t have to just train in my room now!! And I can train my brain too!

Sakura said, “There was not, however, anything resembling an escape route.” Makoto agreed with her.

“Well hey, there's no reason to get all sulky! Wait till you hear about my amazing discovery!” Even if we haven’t found a way out yet, that doesn’t mean we can’t be happy about the new areas! “The Warehouse and Bathhouse on the 1st floor of the dorms are now open! And the Warehouse is chock-full of food, clothes, whatever you want. There's so much it's insane! So go ahead and stuff yourself to the gills whenever you feel like! Ha-ha-ha!” Celeste reminded them that leaving their
dorms at night was prohibited.

“Okay, and what about a fuckin’ way out of here? You find anything like that?” Mondo grumbled. *I understand being frustrated but…*

“Oh, well... umm...”

“There wasn’t anything in the Warehouse we could use to get our asses outta here? Nothin’?”

“U-Unfortunately, no... Not that I saw...”

“You fuckin’ people...” *Hey!* “Who gives a shit if we have a goddamn pool now!? Or a Warehouse, or whatever the fuck! We’re still trapped in this piece of shit school! We need to find a goddamn way OUT!” Mondo shouted. *If we’re stuck here, at least we have more things to do now... But he doesn’t see it that way. Would he be reacting this way if someone else discovered these things? Or is it just me, because he hates me?* Taka closed his eyes. Bearing the weight of Mondo’s hatred really hurt.

“Now, now. There is no point in taking your anger out on us,” Celeste said. *She’s so… politely condescending?* “Adaptation is the key, yes? For now we must each find a way to enjoy our current situation.” *I’m not inclined to agree with her usually, but she’s right. Until we can leave, we might as well take it easy! If we’re relaxed, there’ll be less tension, and we can bond more!*

“Whatever you say, ya fuckin’ loon...” Mondo replied, his face red with anger.

“For now, let’s just continue our investigation, and let everyone know if you should discover something,” Taka said, trying to placate Mondo. The biker just rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath.

“So, are we done for today?” Kyoko asked.

“W-Well... yeah, I guess so.” She left immediately, even before Byakuya and Celeste. *She must have something she’s looking for. Except for Chihiro, the rest of them gradually trickled out.*

“Hey, T-Taka?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah, Chihiro?”

“Do you want to spend some time together soon? It’s j-just... After everything, I’d really like to relax and talk about things I like... I’m s-sorry for asking if you don’t want to...” She looked downtrodden, like she hadn’t recovered from her emotional masochism from earlier.

“No, Chihiro!” *Oh!* “Er, I mean, yes, Chihiro! No apologies necessary – I didn’t forget about your offer, I just haven’t had the time yet. I’d absolutely like to come by. How about in the next few days? Would that work for you?”

“Y-yes! Whenever you want! You know where to find me. Now I have something to look forward to, eheheh...” She looked a little happier now – she offered him a small smile. “Goodnight!”

“Night, Chihiro. May you dream of your own successes!” he waved and went back to his dorm. Walking around to look for newly-accessible rooms earlier instead of standing or laying around allowed him to put his attention toward something unrelated to the murders that had taken place, but he wasn’t past them. No, he had to grieve, even if he didn’t know them well. They were never far from the front of his mind. And now that it was bedtime and there was no activity he could use to distract himself...
They’re all dead now. Dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead. Never coming back. Never returning to become better people… He was crying and clutching his sleeves.

The conversations I had with them… Junko was relentless, ruthless, and all over the place, but… I think she understood where I was coming from about being yourself more than she wanted to admit. What would she have revealed her true self to be if she hadn’t been executed for daring to defy Monokuma? Aside from being the Ultimate Fashionista, just who was Junko Enoshima? How much of what we saw of her was an act…?

Leon said he wanted to be better. He held himself accountable, and then he killed Sayaka, and tried to escape accountability… I can’t abide murderers. Even if my morality wasn’t so strong, I would refuse to. I can’t stand people who don’t own up, either. Celeste said it wasn’t self-defense at all, but is that true? Or am I just wondering that to ease having to deal with the fact that someone who might’ve been a friend one day killed someone… The cognitive dissonance gave him headaches. Wait, did he really want to change? What if he was doing like what Sayaka did to Makoto and getting me to let my guard down so he could kill me? Nnngh… He clutched at his stomach.

And Sayaka herself. She seemed like a sweet, kind person, but she intended to kill Leon, right there and then, and set up an entire complicated scheme to frame Makoto… Was her niceness just a lie? What drove her to that point? At least I can understand that Leon was afraid for his life… But what was she afraid of?

Every nice interaction I’ve had here… There have been a lot more bad ones, but are the good ones just bad in a way I don’t understand yet? If someone as sweet as Sayaka could become an attempted murderer, is anyone here aside from me being themselves? Is anyone here aside from me trying to mesh because they want to help and be friends? Is anyone here aside from me really optimistic, or is that just a ploy to make the others let their guards down too? He felt useless and desolate. Well, there’s only one way to find out…

Fear of everyone’s intentions kept him awake for a while before he finally found the sweet release of sleep. He dreamed that he was Caesar; Brutus was Sayaka and his cohort were his classmates. He took knives to the torso in the same places Junko was speared.

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When he woke up, he had been hoping he’d be able to get back to his schedule now that it seemed things had calmed down.

He was wrong. Though Taka got to the Dining Hall before everyone else, Byakuya was nowhere in sight. He’s here almost always just before or just after me… This was cause for great concern. The only other person missing now was Makoto. His tardiness didn’t make Taka as nervous, but… What if Byakuya killed him…He couldn’t scrub that thought from his mind. He announced loudly to everyone that he was going to go check on Byakuya, and that he did. He slammed his finger on the doorbell and knocked for five minutes to no avail. If he hasn’t answered by now, then… He’s either not here, or he’s dead.

He rushed back to the Dining Hall. “Bad news, everyone! There is a mystery afoot!”


“It would seem Byakuya refuses to leave his room! I stood there pressing his doorbell over and over, but he never showed himself.”

“Maybe he just… wasn’t there,” said Makoto. Taka hadn’t noticed him when he stormed back into
the room. Thank goodness, you’re okay…

“I’d like to think so. But I’m worried something might have happened to him.” Everyone understood what Taka meant. After his words, it felt to him like the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

Makoto stammered, “I-It might be a good idea if we all split up and go look for him.”

“Ah! I was just about to suggest the same thing!”

“Stop trying to one-up e-everyone...” Toko grumbled. Not gonna dignify that with a response. Of course that wasn’t what he was doing, but he figured that if he bothered replying she’d just twist whatever he said like she always did. Hina said she’d take over the duty of spam-ringing Byakuya’s doorbell and the rest departed to try to find the blonde man.

Taka’s first instinct was to check the kitchen. Hifumi was there, but Byakuya was nowhere to be found. “Why are you making tea!? We have to search the school. Otherwise…!”

“Now’s not the time to investigate. Master bestowed upon me the highest honor of making her perfect milk tea!” Taka saw that he was flushed and sweaty…

“Wh--? Master!?”

“Oh Master, this little piggy will do as you please, when you please!” He started making some strange kind of snorting sound.

Is that… oinking!? What the heck!? Taka backed away, confused and alarmed at the other boy. “Um, uh, y-you do that, then!” As he crept out of the kitchen he collided with Makoto. He brushed himself and the other boy off apologetically, trying to put Hifumi’s disturbing behavior out of mind. “Ah-ha! I see you came to search this area as well, Makoto! But you were one step too late! I’ve already finished my investigation. And there was no trace of Byakuya here!” Where else might he be…?

“An army marches on its stomach, as they say! So I thought maybe he would come here to have his fill... We must all eat! Eat until there's nothing left to eat!” *After* we find him... unless it takes too long, in which case hunger will make us less productive! “Anyway, now is no time to get discouraged. We must head elsewhere to continue our search!” He was pep-talking for both their benefit. I feel a little better now. He assumed Makoto did as well, since he went into the kitchen to talk to Hifumi. I should've warned him! Too late… He grimaced, resolving to stop wasting time thinking about that.

Taka glanced in the Bathhouse and saw Mondo standing there looking at the lockers. He watched him for a minute, peeking around the corner. I wonder what he’s doing. Does he like Bathhouses, too…? As if on cue, his encounter with post-shower Mondo flashed in his mind. He immediately turned bright red and of course, at that moment, Mondo turned and caught him staring and blushing. He raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth to say something, but Taka lost his nerve and fled to look elsewhere for Byakuya before he could say it.

The Warehouse was also a convenient place to gather and distract himself, he found. I don't know if we’d even find him if he hid in here, but I should check. He looked through the aisles and piles of boxes, but he came up with nothing more than a few ideas of how to arrange the clutter.

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After a half hour of more searching, he heard a scream from upstairs. He rushed to the source. So this is the library. The others were also gathering around the open doors, probably drawn by the same
noise. Byakuya was sitting at a desk looking irritated. “Byakuya! So this is where you've been hiding!” I really don’t like him, but I’m glad he’s alive…

“We were very concerned…” Sakura said.

“Well you had no reason to be. I was just reading. I've never read such a… coarse novel before, but it might just prove useful at some point.” What does that mean…? Hina asked what he was reading. “A mystery novel.” Is now really the time for fiction!? Unless he wants to discuss it with us…?

“W-Wait, so are you gonna use what you're learning in there to betray us!?” Hifumi squealed.

“Don't be stupid,” Byakuya said while rolling his eyes.

“Yeah!” Makoto agreed. Taka was inclined to think the same way. What could application could a fiction novel possibly have to this situation!?

“It's just something to keep in mind.”

“Yea—what?”

“If I decide to fight, of course I'll come up with something original.” Wait… a mystery novel? Is it a MURDER mystery!? Fight? Something original!? Wha—“Otherwise, this game of ours will be totally boring, right?” GAME? BORING?????? “It's not often you get to take part in such a high-stakes, high-tension activity.” PEOPLE HAVE DIED!!! Taka was completely horrified. He knew Byakuya said cruel things, and meant them, but this level of depravity… He didn’t expect it from one of his classmates. “So if you're going to do it, you have to make sure it's entertaining. Mhmhmhm…” There was a wicked smile on his face. Taka put his hands over his mouth, frozen. His eyes were watering in fear. There was no wiggle room for interpretation of what Byakuya meant. I wanted to know if anyone was sincere… I got my wish.

“What the fuck do you mean, ‘game’!? That's fucked up!” Mondo yelled, shattering the shocked quiet. Mondo’s absolutely right...

“But it *is* a game. It's a game of life or death, which can have only one winner. That's all there is to it,” Byakuya elaborated.

“He is right. It's a zero-sum game. It is a part of game theory, a mathematical model. In game theory, what we are going through now is called a ‘zero-sum game.’ In this type of game, in order for one person to gain something, another must necessarily lose something. In other words, it is a situation in which participants must compete for position or resources.” Taka knew of this model; this pushed him into economics mode.

It's also often used in a political context where resources are viewed as limited: if there’s only a given amount of some resource, then powers compete to get it. That’s why there’s so much war — there’s only so much power and money in the world, and everyone goes to war to seize it… Whether directly or indirectly. Or, well, sometimes superpowers decide that there must be a war… Sometimes through manipulating others.

“You mean like… a kind of an elimination match,” Sakura said.

“Entrance exams, sports tournaments, job openings—most social interactions fall into this category,” Celeste continued. Job openings are only competitive because corporations cast an arbitrary number of employment opportunities to the masses! That’s more like a superpower pulling the strings of unemployed people to make them try to one-up each other… “Everyone must scramble to obtain something which is limited. For you to succeed, someone else must fail.” Wait! ‘Most social interactions’!? No way! Talking with people, interacting with them, doesn’t take away a resource
from someone other than time and energy… but that’s a sacrifice you both make! And if it’s a consensual interaction of your own free will, you both gain from having done it! Even if you’re as bad at it as me… “This also applies to the school life we have been subjected to here. In this case… our “limited resource” is that only one of us can successfully become the blackened.” This shows a lot about how she thinks… Everything is game theory to her, stretched to fit her cynical agenda… Whatever that is.

“So, this game was designed from the beginning to force one of us to try and defeat all the others,” Byakuya said. But is that the sole intent here?

“Th-That... that can't be what they had in mind!” Makoto said.

Celeste giggled. “This is why adaptation is so crucial. If those who want to escape were to disappear, there would be no reason to continue playing the game.”

“But why would I want to stop playing? It's so much fun...” Byakuya grinned maliciously. He’s so cruel... I was right... Byakuya Togami is not someone to trifle with... He certainly didn’t have a high opinion of the Togami family before this mess, but Byakuya really was taking the cake.

“It sounds as if you do not acknowledge even then possibility that you may lose, am I right?” Celeste asked.

“Of course.”

“You do not speak like the others. Exactly what I would expect from the Togami heir apparent.”

“...It's just normal arrogance, isn't it?” Hiro asked. I wish...

Hina cried, “You talk like that, but what if you end up dead!?”

“I won't. It simply isn't possible.” I didn’t know ‘The Togami Heir Apparent’ would have such hardcore delusions of grandeur! He really is a ‘genius’...

“Who the fuck do you think you are!?!” Mondo shouted.

“You know, I still just can't believe it...”

“Believe what!?”

“That an uneducated, brain-dead, useless piece of garbage like you has survived this long.” Is that a threat--

“I’m gonna fuckin' kill you!” Mondo shouted. Taka broke his rigidity to quickly move behind Mondo in case he needed to restrain him at the same time Sakura did. She nodded at him.

“Like I said. I won't die.” If he was there when Mondo almost punched Makoto’s face in, there’s no way he’d believe that... He’s clearly never had to face his own mortality.

“You keep saying that, but—“ Hiro started.

“Do not bother arguing with him,” Celeste said coolly. “For him, the concept of losing simply does not exist. He is the Ultimate Affluent Progeny, after all— a boy raised to succeed from the day he was born. He considers victory his destiny, and has lived his life accordingly.” I think The Ultimate Privilege would be a better title. “Tests and challenges are merely ways for him to stand victorious. Even if it is a life-and-death situation... Is that not so, Byakuya?” Calling this a test implies that the
mastermind has given us a fair shot to succeed and overcome or that it’s to test our acumen. That’s
not the case… With how Monokuma baits us, it’s clear that’s not the case!

Byakuya sniped, “At least one of you seems to understand.”

“It is because I am the same as you. Games are meant to be won.”

“Are you trying to suggest we're on the same level? Close that vulgar mouth of yours,” He
demanded. Even in such a dark conversation, even coming from someone as detestable as Byakuya,
even to someone as socially inept as him, Taka had to bite back schadenfreude at how hard the rich
man slammed the door on Celeste’s brown-nosing. She apologized, curtseying with a strange glint in
her crimson eyes. “Anyway, let me just say this to all of you. You all need to try harder. If an
opponent isn’t going to give it their best, where's the fun for me?” Of course this is all about him.
Everything in his life has been.

Surprisingly, Chihiro rejected that. “Th-That's a terrible way to look at it...” *I* can’t even say
anything... That’s courageous. He glanced over at Kyoko, who was watching Chihiro closely.
“His... isn't a game. Our lives are on the line, you know...”To kill your own friends is... is... It's
horrific!”

“Friends? Who decided that? We're not friends. No, quite the opposite. We're in competition —
we're enemies.”

“B-But... you know...” She was starting to shrink back.

“But what? Stop trying to force your contradictions on me and just accept what I'm telling you.”

“U-Um...” she said timidly. He beat back her nerve...

“Yes? If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, keep your mouth closed.” Tears falling down
her face, she apologized.

Mondo didn’t take kindly to that. “Hey, shithead! You get off on bullying people that can't fight
back? You wanna try that on me!?”

“So, you're back to pretending to be friends, huh? And how long do you think that's going to last?”

“Fuck you!”

“Is that all you can say? It's unfortunate you would waste your breath on such empty gibberish.”

“That's it! You're fuckin' dead!” He roared, swinging his arm back to throw a punch. Taka grabbed
it, holding him back. He didn’t seem to notice, reeling back his other arm instead. Sakura took care
of that one. Mondo’s body tensed for a few seconds, but then he let his arms go slack. He shook his
head and blinked rapidly, as if in a daze.

“H-Hold on! Just calm down!” Hina pled.

“I AM calm!” He responded. Why isn’t struggling or yelling at us? Is he calmer than he looks, or is
it something else? Both of them let go of Mondo’s arms, Sakura making a confused gesture to Taka.
She seemed to be wondering the same thing.

“How is *this* ‘calm’!?” Hina shouted.

“Anyway... I don't have any intention of working with the rest of you any longer,” Byakuya said.
“To cooperate during an elimination game is... Well, frankly, it's a waste of time.” He glared pointedly at Taka, Mondo, and Chihiro in turn. “And I hate wasting my time.” Hating wasting time is the only thing Byakuya and I will ever agree on... Makoto started to argue, but Byakuya cut him off. “Engaging in ‘friendly’ group meals is out of the question. Someone could easily poison our food. And I'd rather not become part of the Last Supper just yet.” He thinks he’s so important... Like anyone would want to make him a martyr!

“Quit talking like you're in a fuckin' movie or something!” Mondo said. Since he was right there, Taka took the opportunity to study his body language. His arms were crossed and he was scowling, but he clearly wasn’t gearing up to attack. I think he’s just regular mad... Not violent mad?

“All I'm saying is that, ultimately, you are all free to do whatever you want on your own. Goodbye.” He left the library without a second glance.

“Was he serious about all that...?” Hiro asked.

“He was, without a doubt.” Celeste confirmed.

Mondo concluded, “Well fuck him, then.” Not how I’d put it, but...

Toko said, “B-But what he said... He might not n-necessarily be wrong... I mean, can you s-say for sure someone *won’t* poison our f-food?” If that’s what she’s worried about, we could devise some way to test it? Maybe I could try all the food to prove it's okay. He shivered. No... the texture... Someone else would have to...

“Hey, come on! You too, Toko!?” Hina groaned.

“Well, it's n-not like anyone would care even if I w-was gone, right...? Actually, I bet you all *w-want* me gone! You all think I'm d-disgusting!” No one even said anything and she twisted it into that... Is there any way to talk to her...?

“None of us think that...” Makoto said defensively.

“You j-just *think* you don't think that!” Byakuya isn’t the only one with delusions... but Toko’s are about how everyone sees her.

Hiro: “I know some people like to play the victim, but this is just... totally out there.”

“You think I d-don’t know, but I do... You want me g-gone! And I'm s-sure... the rest of you want the same th-thing, don’t you!?” She ran off. Wait... Why is her self-loathing so strong that she projects it onto other people? What happened to her...? I wonder...

Today’s breakfast meeting was in complete shambles, so they adjourned and everyone returned to their rooms, Taka included.

He ruminated on Byakuya and Celeste’s zero-sum game conversation from earlier. “So, this game was designed from the beginning to force one of us to try and defeat all the others,” he repeated to himself. If that is the sole intent, they’d be right. The mastermind is playing a zero-sum game in that they are a superpower who decided there must be a ‘war’ to seize the despair they’ve generated by tricking us into going to war with each other with the ‘promise’ of ‘graduating’. It’s not really how she’s portraying it is, though, because killing isn’t the only possible outcome. If we were to all fight to become blackened and escape is one thing. But if we all work together, we’re not warring over a superpower-numbered resource like that, and we still have a chance to leave this place!

He spent a while wondering if it were possible to make Byakuya understand the value of human
connection. I should try some time… Even though he’ll probably refuse to hear it, maybe an intervention would keep him from doing something horrible… In the afternoon, he stopped by the Incinerator Room to take over cleaning duty from Hifumi. Everything was self-explanatory, and there were procedures listed on the walls, but he had the boy show him how to run the firey machine so he had a hands-on experience. Everything went well. Sweeping the halls was a familiar school task for him and it felt him feel a little more at peace. After everything was up to par, he went back to the library and grabbed textbooks on psychology and communication so he could study for a few hours while planning how to approach Makoto.

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At 7 pm, he knocked on Makoto’s door. “Hi, Taka.”

“Good evening, Makoto! So… I can’t say that our current circumstances are favorable, that’s for certain.” He paused, trying to find the right words. “But still… It’s times like this when baring your soul can lead to building a mutual trust! And the best way to bare your soul is to bare your skin!” That’s bonding 101! “Let’s bathe together and build that trust!”

Makoto looked totally bewildered, but he agreed anyway.

“Alright! When the body is naked, so is the soul! So get to strippin' down!” He glanced at Makoto’s floor. Hardly spotless! No wonder that was a clue.

Beat. “Uh, you mean the Bathhouse, right? Not in my room?”

“Oh! Yeah. Bathing with you in your room feels too…” I don’t want him to get the wrong idea.

“Private.”

Makoto nodded. “Let’s go, then.” Another beat. “… You realize you’re standing in my doorway?”

“Shoot, sorry! I got distracted by how dirty your floor is already, hahaha!” Makoto chuckled, then followed Taka to the Bathhouse. They started undressing. “I’ve been wanting to tell you something for a while now, Makoto... And now that it's just the two of us, this is the perfect time to confess...!”

“H-huh...?”

“Listen, Makoto... Your hoodie is awesome!” It’s nicely tailored, and the fuzzy fleece looks so calming!

“Th-Thanks...?”

“You have really amazing fashion sense. Now, wearing a hoodie under your school uniform... Your public morals are ruined! Just absolutely ruined!”

“S-Sorry! Did I do something wrong...? The dress code was pretty flexible at my old school...”

“Well that's not the case here at Hope's Peak Academy! As long as I live, I will protect our morals!” We were supposed to get our official, fitted uniforms on the second day of class… With Monokuma wiping out all pretenses that this is a school, I don’t think that’s happening. But there’s still a standard ofrespectability we must uphold as students! Hoodies are totally casual wear, so they’re not acceptable in such a prestigious place! “Take off that incredibly stylish hoodie this instant!” He put out his hand and made a ‘give it here’ gesture.

“R-Right now!?”
“Of course!” We’re already getting naked, so what’s the problem!?

“But this is the next best thing to a hardhat!”

“A hardhat...?” A yellow safety hat worn by construction workers...?

“Yeah! I mean, this school's really dangerous, ya know? There's no telling what might happen! So, like... just in case... ya know?” Makoto was sweating. He must be hot due to the temperature in here.

“Hmm... You may have a point there...” I’ve never worn a hoodie, but you could probably just flip the hood up if something was about to fall... Or if someone was trying to hit you in the head?

“I do! I totally do!”

“Well, if it's for your own safety, I suppose I can give you special permission, just this once... But the instant this school goes back to normal, you WILL hand over that amazingly cool hoodie!” I’ll confiscate it and give it back when the school year ends!

“Y-Yeah, you got it...”

“Students these days are utterly ignorant of proper dress code. It's quite a pain!” And it’s not like it’s hard to find a school’s regulations. “And frankly, I don't understand youth fashion these days anyway!” Tons of accessories, dyed hair, lots of piercings, exposed limbs, garish colors, loud patterns, no pockets... It makes it hard for me to focus – aside from sticking out, I get stuck on how uncomfortable I’d be in that kind of getup... There’s no way anyone is, it’s just some kind of statement! And what’s so bad about classic silhouettes and basic function!? “So this is a perfect opportunity for me to teach you all about how you should be dressing! I wear this uniform 365 days a year, rain or shine, flood or drought, wind and hail and hurricane!” He polished the medal hanging on the breast of his uniform as he took it off.

“Even on your days off? Even on holidays!?”

“School itself may observe holidays, but there's no such thing as vacation for a student! So as long as I live the life of a student, I will always wear my uniform!”

“I see...” Makoto spit out a fallen hair as he took his undershirt off.

“Also, I have ten sets of my uniform, so I always have a clean one. There’s nothing strange about that.” Makoto was looking at him like he’d grown an extra head. “Hahaha! Trust me, wearing the uniform every day helps keep you motivated!” It reminds me of what my dreams are, and it constantly keeps me physically comfortable and secure! “You should give it a shot!” They folded and stored their clothes in the lockers and entered the water.

Taka sighed contentedly once he was settled in. “It’s been a while since I’ve been in a bathhouse. It’s relaxing!”

Makoto nodded. “Have you done this with someone else before?"

“Nope, never had anyone to do it with.” He shrugged. “Besides, I usually go during the day when the public one was empty so I didn’t have to worry about being harassed.”

“Harassed?”

Taka put his fist on his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I don’t exactly fit the acceptable model of a young
man in social status.” Unconventional appearance… neurodivergent… gay… poor… and so on and so on… “On top of being an Ishimaru.”

“People give you a hard time for that, huh?”

“That’s putting it lightly… I’ve been bullied and hurt relentlessly. No one’s ever bothered to try to get to know me.”

“Jeez, Taka… “

“What?” It’s just how it is. A statement of fact. For now.

“I mean, that’s really unfair to you…”

“It is, but it doesn’t bug me so much anymore… I got help and can deal with it a lot better than I used to.” I wonder if he noticed my scars. “I’ll show everyone that I can succeed, no matter what I was dealt or how I was treated, by working hard! Anyway… I wanted to talk about something else.”

“Are you going to talk about my hoodie again? We’re both naked!”

“Hahaha! No, not at all.” He paused and licked his lips, heart pumping quickly out of nervousness. “I know it hurts to talk about, but it’s about Sayaka. I want to understand her better.” Makoto was quiet and looking down. “I didn’t really get to know her, and… I’m having a hard time understanding why she did what she did. It just doesn’t make any sense to me… She seemed like a sweet girl, but then she plans to kill Leon and frame you for it? Why would she do that!?"

“I don’t have all the answers, you know?”

Oh…“I thought you would… Professor Makoto. You’ve taught me a lot, and you were closer with her than anyone.” He knows so much more than me about social interaction and about Sayaka, so he’s an expert… right?

“I’m still struggling to piece it together myself. Maybe if we talk about it, we can work it out?”

Taka nodded. “I have something I need to say first. She came in when I was organizing the school store the day… before,” he paused, trying not to stammer. “She won you a present. Something about some kind of fantasy. I didn’t really get it, but she won it for you specifically and she was excited to give it for you. She was also afraid of what was happening. I told her to keep chasing her goals. I… I feel like I encouraged her to do what she did…”

“Taka…”

“I’m serious, Makoto. I feel like I told her to pull the trigger.”

“You didn’t know what she was planning!”

“I know, but I feel like I’ll carry this guilt. I don’t know how to process it… One of my biggest fears is dragging people down. I feel like I forced her to drag you and Leon down. That’s just as bad…”

“No, that’s wrong… You didn’t make her do it, and it’s not your fault for trying to encourage her. You’re an encouraging guy, Taka.” He offered him a reassuring smile. Taka clung to it for dear life. “You didn’t know, and what are the odds of that kind of conversation happening right before? They have to be slim to none. If you hadn’t been there, I’m sure she would’ve done it anyway.”

“Why?”
“Because she was *already* driven to succeed. She clawed her way to the top and fought every inch of her life. She even told me she had to do some ‘bad’ things to get there, though she didn’t say what they were…” He stopped dead in his tracks. *Bad things? Is he wondering what I am…? Did she kill…?* “U-uh… she was *already* willing to do what she had to do to ensure her dreams came true. Even if you comforting her made a difference, it was only a tiny bit in comparison to the motivation she already had inside.”

“Oh… I didn’t know that… You really do have a good read on her, eh?”

“We spent a lot of time together… I’ll tell you what I know: when we were younger, we both went to Sixth Black Root Middle School. She was popular, and I wasn’t, so I just kinda wanted to be her friend from afar. She told me not long ago that she was always looking at me and wanting to talk to me but that her posse kept her busy. When we met here, she remembered me and told me she was impressed by the time I saved an injured crane on campus…” Taka was smiling. Even through all the pain, he could tell that memory was important to the other boy. And saving a bird… *He really does have such a gentle heart. I’m impressed, too.* He felt tingly in an appreciative way. *I’ll remember that for sure.* “So we decided we should be friends, you know? Since we missed that chance before.”

Taka nodded. *Having a chance like that and not being able to make it happen must ache.* “What was her life like, before all this?”

“She told me her mom died when she was young, so she was raised by her father who was barely home. She kept loneliness away with her love of idol TV shows. The smiles of the performers kept her going, so she decided to be an idol too so she could do that for someone else.” *So she studied them to keep herself motivated…*

“So she wanted to help others? I relate to that…”

“Yeah. She helped me a lot when I was here. She called herself my ‘assistant’, but really she was a supportive friend…! Even when she was distant due to stress and putting on her idol face, she was still good to me… She made me more resilient, and she believed I could save her too.”

“What was in her video?”

“Her idol group, lying dead or unconscious on stage. They were her chosen family and best friends…”

Taka gasped. “My dad was missing and my house destroyed…”

“Same here. I don’t know how it was for the others, but I watched her video. It was… brutal. She worked so hard for everything. Her career, her friends… And it’s all gone. And she may have been seeing their corpses, instead of it being up in the air like for us.”

“I heard she was really upset after seeing it?” He’d been zoned out at the time over despair from his own customized video.

“Yeah. She got sucked into despair, as anyone would… I stayed with, and I thought that was enough. It was a sweet moment, but I can’t help but wonder, you know?” Quiet tears were streaming down Makoto’s face.

“You mean, if it was real?” *It helped when Hina did this*… He put his hand on Makoto’s shoulder awkwardly, trying to be reassuring.

“Yeah… Was it all just a setup to use me?” He covered Taka’s hand with his own, silently
acknowledging the gesture. He was looking away.

“At the very least… Why would she have been using you before the video? If you use someone, you have to have a goal, right? What would her reasoning be?”

“Hmm… To get out?”

“Sure, but we all share that. Why go that extra step? It wouldn’t explain how she was to you before Monokuma’s interference! Makoto, you’re a pretty normal guy, right?”

“I mean, I only got in due to being lucky with the drawing. Why?”

“If you’re so completely average, why would she even remember who you are? Why would she recall the crane incident? She was an idol. She could’ve had her pick of literally anyone, but she remembered *you*! Although I’m biased and want to believe the best in people, I feel like that indicates that she was being very genuine!”

“But my luck… It has a flipside. Sometimes I’m unlucky. It would be normal for that to be the ultimate manifestation of my unluckiness – her remembering me and eventually framing me…”

Taka pondered that for a while. The timescale of that doesn’t add up. “If that were true… Wouldn’t you think it’d manifest immediately, not after years and years?”

“H-huh?”

“It would mean your luckiness/unluckiness wasn’t short term, it was long term. It’d be like winning a lottery ticket versus your father becoming an alcoholic and dying of liver disease 20 years later. It just doesn’t stack up evenly.”

“I hadn’t thought of that…”

“Hahaha, me neither! I really do think she was being sincere at least til that point.”

“That’s what I want to think, but… What about after the video? She tried to frame me, that’s literally not possible to argue against… She lied about being afraid to get me to switch rooms, changed the nameplates, lured Leon there, and tried to kill him and make it look like I did it.”

“This is what I don’t get: If she was being insincere and solely using your feelings against you, why did she write his name as her dying message?”

“Kyoko told me she thinks that she Sayaka regretted trying to frame me and tried to save me…”

“If her feelings before Monokuma’s video were real, and you said she saved you earlier… Maybe she really was trying to save you again. Though she was feeling so much fear and despair and obviously did use you and almost get you killed, I think that it wasn’t all a lie.”

“I like that…”

“I have another question. Is that ok?”

“We’re already here. Ask away.”

“Why Leon? The most I can guess is that he was attracted to her.” He hit on her the second he walked into the entrance hall.

“She told me they were hanging out when I was busy. He wanted to switch careers and be a
musician and her work as an idol was an inspiration.”

“I see… Do you think she picked him for both of those reasons? He liked her, and he respected her, so he’d have his guard down?” Makoto nodded his head sadly. “He was a jerk to me, but he came to me a few days before the trial and apologized. He seemed genuine about wanting to change. He called himself ‘a dumb… butt, but a dumb-butt with a heart of gold.’ More or less…” There was a wry smile on Taka’s face but it quickly faded. “Since that day, I’ve been sitting here wondering if everyone is just putting up a façade with an intent to kill. We can’t know if that’s true or not, but… I want to believe that everyone is genuine.”

“I do, too. I try not to think about it, because it’s so hard to even consider – so I put my anger and confusion and frustration and despair to who put us in this situation.”

“Is that how you’ve kept going? Kept your good memories of the deceased?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re right, but… One of my interests is justice. Morality. They both did such immoral things… Monokuma put us in the situation, which is obviously wrong, but they made their choices to try to kill and kill each other. Respectively… I can’t just excuse their responsibilities. Sayaka *did* choose to act first, and Leon *did* choose to go back and kill her even if it was initially self-defense… I can’t see them as good people.”

“It doesn’t have to be black and white.”

Taka took a while to respond. “… …I struggle with that,” he admitted.

“Maybe that’s what Monokuma wants.”

“What…”

“Maybe he wants us to get stuck in that binary kind of thinking. Right vs Wrong. Good vs Bad. Friend vs Enemy. Us vs Them. Victim vs Perpetrator. If we do… Not only does that bring despair anyway, but it makes it easier for us to kill each other. To hate each other. To judge on each other. To pull the lever indicting each other. More murder. More execution…”

“Jeez, Makoto… I’m…” He felt rocked to the core. “That was just… inspiring… I didn’t think it was possible, but now I feel even more that unity and compassion are what we really need here. We’re complex people, and so are the killed and the killers. That’s what you mean, right?”

“So far, anyway,” Makoto joked. “As far as potential killers go, I don’t think Byakuya is that deep.”

Taka grinned. “And he called *me* a one-trick pony…!”

They both laughed. After a while of companionable silence, Taka said, “Hey, Makoto?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure this conversation was a lot for you. And I’m sorry for encouraging Sayaka like that. And for being oblivious, like about the corpses comment earlier. And for doubting you and thinking you killed her and--”

Makoto shrugged and put up his hand to stop him. “Taka, those things have one thing in common: you were just working with the knowledge you had. It really looked like I was the culprit. You didn’t know what she was planning. And you were following up on what Monokuma said he’d do,
while also imagining it. Yes, I could tell,” he cut Taka’s question off. “I don’t hold any of that against you. And this talk… *Was* a lot, but I think we both needed this. I’ll always carry them with me, and I’m still grieving, but I feel like we’ve helped each other find some clarity… I’m glad we did this.”

“Thanks, Makoto. Me too…”

“My skin’s so pruned up I’m gonna turn into an old man. But, uh,” he paused. Huh? “Maybe we could do this again some time. Come in here and just talk. The nudity as bonding thing is… *oldschool*, but sitting in the water here and talking like this is actually really nice…”

“Oh, Makoto! I’d…” His eyes were welling up.

“Shoot – did I say something wrong!? I’m s—“

“No, no, not at all! I’m just… I’m overjoyed… This is happy.” He grinned from ear to ear. “I’m not used to interactions like this. People wanting to spend time with me… I’d be more than happy to do this again. Makoto, I’d love to!”

“Let me know. We should get cleaned up though—“ He went to climb out the side of the water, but slipped and fell back in with a splash, accidentally elbowing Taka in the face. “Ahhh, sorry! My legs fell asleep!”

Taka rubbed his forehead where Makoto got him and started laughing. So did Makoto. “Here, Professor…” Taka climbed out and pulled Makoto with him. He tossed Makoto a towel to dry off with and they sat on the floor until circulation returned to his legs. After that, they parted and went to bed.
Chapter Notes

I got my link problems figured out thanks to OTW Support, so later today I'll be going through previous chapters and linking to the transcripts of the game text I made!

I'm having some weird spacing problems when I paste my text on AO3, so please let me know if I've missed anything (I hate reading fics with so many blank lines)!

TW: child abuse

Game Transcripts: [This Section of Chapter 2] [Chapter 2, 128-134]

Taka woke up at his usual time. I finally feel like I’ll eventually move past my guilt… Last night with Makoto really did help. The flashing images of the deaths of his fellow students were becoming much less frequent. I can honor them by making sure no one else dies… and resisting Monokuma’s machinations! He smiled to himself as he headed to breakfast.

Once Makoto arrived, Taka remarked, “Is this... everyone? It feels a little... small. Even the table looks bigger, somehow.” It's kind of lonely.

Celeste replied, “I assume that is because three people are dead, and two are abstaining.” Just 10 people out of 15… Our numbers are dwindling so fast…

“Yeah, with five people missing, I guess it *would* feel kinda empty.” Makoto agreed.

“Still... I know Byakuya's whatever, but shouldn't we go check on Toko?” Hina asked. Yes! If they're not here in the mornings, we can’t know if they’re still alive daily unless we see them…

“I vote no. She's super annoying.” Hiro said.

Celeste asked, "How can you be so cold?" Yeah, seriously! I don’t get Toko at all, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t chec—“You are like a piece of rock candy.” Huuuuuh???

“What!? No, rock candy isn't cold! It's sweet!” Taka said, completely diverted from the topic at hand. And it pops in your mouth!

“...Anyway, Byakuya's the real problem. If we don't keep an eye on him, he might really kill someone. You can see it in his eyes...” Mondo said solemnly. From the first day… And especially yesterday! Or he might get someone else to kill for him. “We got no choice! Get some rope! We're gonna hafta keep him bound and gagged!”

“I think that's going a little overboard…” Makoto said, clearly uncomfortable.

“He's right! In this situation, there's nothing scarier than when an ally turns loose cannon!” A compatriot turned rogue – it’s even worse than someone who was an enemy from the start! “It’s just like when we were kids, and someone would go crazy at sports day or whatever!” Just because Health and Sports day commemorates Japan hosting the Summer Olympics doesn’t mean you have to pretend it’s the Olympics and physically sabotage people you called your classmates… It’s not fun
to deal with that at all! Many political and social movements have failed due to that same kind of betrayal..

“What the fuck are you talking about!?” Mondo yelled. “You gonna use the rope to do tug of war or something!? Idiot!”

I was AGREEING! Enough! Of this!! “I'm not an idiot...” If he hates me and just wants to be an antagonistic jerk, I'm going to defend myself!! “YOU'RE an idiot!” I'm done trying to figure out his totally weird mixed signals! If he has something to say, he should say it to me!

“Who are you callin' stupid!?” Mondo walked up to him, sparks practically flying from his eyes. Taka held his glare for a minute.

“If you have something to say... Say it to my face!” Taka spat, eyes fiery.

Their angry staring contest was broken by Chihiro talking to Makoto. “Oh, I'm just going through a little... self-loathing.” Chihiro... All thoughts of Mondo’s hatred left his mind for the time being. She needs our support... He stood next to Makoto so he could see her better.


“Well, after what Byakuya said to me yesterday... I just got so nervous, I locked up. I couldn't say anything.” Oh, Chihiro... I completely get it... “Mondo ended up having to help me out. And even *he* said I was someone who ‘can't fight back’... I... I hate how weak I am.” I know exactly how that feels...

“Ahh, I see. So Mondo made you depressed,” Hina concluded. I don't think that's it... Mondo may have triggered her, but she clearly has issues with this to begin with...

“What!? How's it *my* fault!? I wasn't tryin' to be mean! Besides, girls are just naturally weak anyway right!?” His defensiveness made him loud. Taka whipped his head to face Mondo and frowned sternly at him. Doesn't anyone but me realize girls aren't different from boys at all? Who's gonna be sexist next...? Chihiro hiccuped and tears started falling from her eyes. “A-Are you... crying...?” Mondo gasped.

“It's cuz you were screaming like a lunatic!” Hina blamed.

Chihiro was weeping. Mondo stammered, “Hey, c'mon, don't cry... I-It's my fault, okay? I won't yell at you anymore...”

“Really? Not sure I can believe that...” Hina said.

“...I got it! I'll make you a promise as a man!” Mondo said, clearly trying to keep his voice at a quieter level.

“Promise... As a man?” Chihiro asked timidly.

“Maybe I mentioned this before, but... Ever since I was a kid, there was one thing my brother told me over and over again... He said that no matter what, a real man ALWAYS keeps his promises. That's what he left me.”

“Left you...?” Hifumi asked.

“Oh, yeah... My brother's dead.” I see... It seems like he looks up to him, even now.
Makoto said, “Oh... I see...”

“Anyway, I don't wanna talk about it. Don't wanna make all you guys cry!” Does he have any other family? “Anyway, so you can trust me when I make that promise. So you don't gotta cry anymore!” For some reason… I believe him. His promise seems sincere.

“O-Okay. Thank you... Mondo.”

“S-Sure...”

“But... I still don't like how I am right now. I have to get stronger... If I'm so weak anything can make me cry... that's not good,” Chihiro said, clearing her throat.

“Still, don't stress out too much about having to get stronger,” Makoto said, trying to be reassuring.

“No...I *want* to get stronger. Maybe I should... start working out...” She asked me that one time about fitness… Maybe I could give her tips sometime.

“In that case, I would be happy to help you out anytime.” Sakura said.

“B-But then Miss Fujisaki would get smashed into a billion pieces!” Hifumi interjected.

“Shut up, you,” Hina commanded. Hifumi really did shut up.

Ok… I have to admit, that was funny.

Chihiro let out a smile, giggling.

Hiro laughed, “Ohh, finally cracked a smile, huh?”

“Y-Yeah... Everyone... thank you.” Her cheeks were rosy and she was no longer teary. Everyone else left.

“Chihiro! Let's talk two days from now in the afternoon. I haven’t had a chance to look around the second floor yet, so I want to go do that. Is that alright?”

“Oh! Y-yes, Taka! I’m looking forward to it! I hope you find something fun!” He nodded and waved.

His first stop: the pool. There were various swimming-related items on the walls and a few doors – one pink, one blue. There was also a giant gun mounted on the ceiling, aimed at the doors. Uhhhhh??? Why?? He blinked and moved so it wasn’t in his sight. Anyway… the pink one must be the girls’ locker room, with blue being the boys’? He turned the handle on the blue door, but it wouldn’t budge. What!? He tried the pink door just to be sure, but it didn’t work either.

Instead, he heard a whirring and clanging noise up above his head. He looked up. Wh--!? It was the machine gun, and it was now aimed directly at his face. Not again… He froze, a huge spike of panic rising. He watched the shiny automatic trigger pull back, and he heard a loud bang, a gunshot; he felt his body flying and everything went black.

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A few minutes later he opened his eyes. His whole body throbbed. “Ngh… What… What happened…?” He asked out loud.

“Oh good, you're awake,” A booming voice said from across the room. Taka tried to roll onto his stomach but his legs were propped up with pool equipment. Sakura was standing with her arms crossed against the wall with the doors. “I was starting to worry. I figured it best I not move you in
“case you were hurt unless things became dire.”

“Huh??? Sakura!?” He looked at his watch. A whole minute…!

“How do you feel?”

“Disoriented. And sore? I passed out for a minute? What happened!?”

“When Hina told us about the locker rooms, she forgot to mention the ‘security’ system in place. She told me about it later. You need to use your eHandbook to get inside. And only boys’ handbooks can access the boys’ locker room, same for the girls.”

“That must be why I couldn’t get the doors open…” She nodded. “Wait! What was…” He looked up at the ceiling. The gun was still pointed where he’d been standing. “I was about to get shot! I should be splattered all over the wall!” He frantically checked himself over for bullet wounds. He found none.

“Yes…” she said quietly. “Monokuma set up that gun to shoot anyone who tries to get into a locker room to which they don’t belong.”

“So… Since I tried the girl’s door, and Monokuma knows I’m not a girl…?” He shuddered involuntarily. That kind of biological essentialism… I want to hope it’s just from our applications to the school, but knowing Monokuma…

“Unfortunately, you were about to become swiss cheese. These rooms aren’t soundproof like the dorms are. I was working out, and I heard someone rattling the doors. I opened the door to investigate when you were looking at the gun. I figured out what was about to happen and pushed you out of its crosshairs while I hastily swiped my handbook on the reader to turn it off.”

Taka lay there trying to put together what she was saying, still a little dazed. A few minutes passed. “But… Wait,” he said eventually. “I heard a gunshot!” He hurriedly inchwormed on his back over to the spot and saw that there was, indeed, a bullet embedded in the floor. If she hadn’t happened to be in the other room I would’ve died instantly...

“Unfortunately, I wasn’t fast enough to get to it before it fired. It only did once though.”

He moved close to her and studied her, careful where he was looking since he was still on the ground. “Are you… Did it hit you?”

She smiled. “In a manner of speaking….” I can’t see any blood… She turned to her side and showed him a charred hole in her skirt.

“You… you could’ve gotten seriously hurt!” Or killed… Her blood was almost on my hands!

She shook her head. “I knew it wouldn’t hit my body. I saw where it was aimed and made sure to keep myself out of the line of fire. It’s just fabric.”

“H-how did you do that all in such a short span of time!? It must’ve been barely a few seconds…”

“When I fight, I analyze the environment. Time almost slows down. Or maybe I’m just hyperaware in that moment… I calculate which direction my opponent is coming from. How far away they are. People telegraph their moves unconsciously. I read those as well so I can move and act accordingly. I applied all of that here.”

“Wow… That’s… Amazing! That’s so cool…”
“Th-thank you,” she said, sheepishly. *Is she… blushing? She’s totally blushing!*

“I came to on the other side of the room… How did you push me that far?!”

“I’m not sure if you noticed, but I’m quite strong,” she said dryly. “I didn’t mean to shove you so hard. You, err… You flew through the air and hit the ground. I think that’s when you passed out. Then you slid a few inches and gently bumped the wall with your arm. I’m… sorry,” she said, sounding embarrassed.

“Apology accepted, and not needed! You just saved my life… I mean, getting knocked out isn’t good, but it wasn’t intentional and I’d much rather that happen than be killed on the spot! Thank you…”

She smiled. “I’m glad I could help.”

“Sorry for interrupting your set and causing all this commotion…” *I guess I don’t have to worry about her getting injured… But I have to be more careful. This place is a death trap!*

“It’s fine, Taka. You had no idea. I’m glad to have helped. It’s not like Monokuma’s new regulations actually say why they’re there.”

“Let’s make sure from now on to thoroughly discuss our findings!” *I don’t want to think about what almost happened to me… Or it happening to someone else.*

She chuckled. “I agree. Before you leave - are you having any problems with your senses?"

Taka took a quick inventory. Everything seemed to be fine. "Negative! Why?"

"I need make sure you’re not concussed. Your memory and attention span seem fine. Do you feel confused or foggy at all?"

*"I didn’t think of that! "I see! I don’t detect any abnormalities. I was just a bit disoriented because I woke up on the other side of the room and I wasn’t dead!"

"Good. Please take off your boots - I need to check your reflexes as well." He did as she asked. Since she didn’t have the usual little hammers to do the tests, she used her hands to stimulate various tendons in his arms and legs. *It's a weird sensation to have my body automatically react, I remember how freaked out I was as a toddler and my doctor did this! She helped him to his feet and had him walk around the room. At first, his legs were a little wobbly, but they straightened out quickly. "Everything appears to be as it should be. Come to me immediately if anything starts to feel strange."

"Thanks again, Sakura! Hey, how do you know how to check everything?"

"It’s the least I can do. And I’m very in tune with the human body, how it’s supposed to function, and what to look for with common injuries since I’m a seasoned fighter." *I wonder what else she knows! She smiled, looking a little proud. "Now, I’m going to get back to my exercise. Hina’s in the pool – if that’s where you’re going, I may see you later. Don’t push yourself too hard.” She went back from whence she came. He felt nervous as he walked up to the blue door, swiped his eHandbook, and walked into the locker room.

“It’s weird there’s exercise equipment in a locker room,” he said to himself. “Though it looks good, and I suppose there are weirder things about this school than th—Hrk!” He cut himself off when he saw the photo of a bikini-clad, improbably-posed woman on the wall. “That is… Completely, utterly,
stupendously, really, really inappropriate!”

“I agree! The photograph is poorly lit, and such an ugly piece has no place in the presence of a master such as myself!” A snotty-sounding voice said from somewhere. Taka walked to the bench and looked around. There’s no one here?

He was immediately on high alert, having adopted a defensive posture.

“Uh, hello?” He called out. There was a clanging a couple feet from him. Is it a monster!? Is Monokuma playing a trick on me? He crept toward it, wary that this was another security system no one had warned him about.

“A little help please?” More banging. One of the locker doors was rattling. “That jerk shoved me in here!”

“It’s locked?”

“My eHandbook!” the voice said. Is that who I think it is? Taka looked around for a minute and spotted a handbook on the bench. He picked it up and swiped it over the lock mechanism and quickly stepped to the side.

The door burst open. “AIIIYEEEEEEEEEEE!” Hifumi tumbled out, bouncing off the bench on the way down. Taka rushed to his side and helped him sit up.

“Are you okay!?” What’s going on!?

Hifumi was muttering and rubbing his back. “I suppose… Why didn’t you catch me!?”

“Are you serious!? I thought you’d just walk out!”

“Eheheh… Well… I would’ve, if I hadn’t been holding on to the shelf and trying to force open the door with my feet… It opened fast, so I lost my balance.”

“I’m sorry, I should’ve warned you.”

“… I’m used to it.”

What does that mean? Maybe I shouldn’t ask… “How did you end up in there??”

“Mondo shoved me in.”

“WHAT!?” he accidentally shouted in surprise. “Why!?” Am I not the only one he hates and antagonizes!? I need to have a word with him…

“I’ll clarify: he called me a pervert and shoved me in.”

“And he just left you like that!?” That’s inexcusable!

“Well, he said he’d be back in a little while to give me time to ‘learn my lesson’.”

That... sounds like a reaction to something? “For what?”

There was a gleam in Hifumi’s glasses. Oh no. “I was watching Hina swim.”

“And?” So what? How is what Mondo did an appropriate reaction at all!?
“I may have gone up to her and asked for her measurements.”

“How tall she is?” Why would Mondo take such drastic measures for that?

“No, like her… *measurements*.” Taka cocked his head, still not understanding. “The king of ignorance lays at my feet, and I must defeat him with worldly knowledge!” He swallowed. “I want to know how huge her… her…!” He was pouring sweat. “Her cup size! Her boo—“

Taka got it now. “H-hey! You asked her how big her breasts are!? That’s disgusting!

“In my defense! I was asking so I could figure out proportioning for the new character I’m drawing! I also may have drawn her in certain… poses…” Revolting!!!!

“How is that an excuse!? Do you really think that’s acceptable!?” Hifumi didn’t reply, he just shrunk back from Taka. He felt the strong urge to wash his hands. “Would you like it if some asked YOU about your, er, measurements!?” He was teary at the sheer audacity and immorality of Hifumi’s acts.

“No! Why would anyone ask ME that!? I’m not a voluptuous girl! Only in character selection!”

“Good question!” Taka spat angrily. I can’t imagine ANYONE who would ever want to know that… but… “Would you ever ask your mother that? Or your sister, if you have one!?”

“I have! W-wait—“ He saw Taka’s disgusted expression and gagging. “It’s not like that! I have poor impulse control! It was wrong, and I know that! Sometimes I can’t stop the things coming out of my mouth!“

“Maybe so,” he shouted, “But you don’t have to be so… *nasty* about it!” His pointing finger was inches away from Hifumi’s sweaty head. Taka was practically frothing at his face. “You clearly don’t look at women with respect and empathy! I mean, ugh, not *look* at! Conceptualize!!!”

“H-huh!?”

“Think about how violated you’d feel if someone asked you that!”

“Oh… hmmm…” He looked thoughtful, as if he weren’t in the aftermath of committing several morality-maligned acts. How many times have people had this discussion with him!?!?

“Girls aren’t just meat sacks there for you to ogle! For reference for your drawings or otherwise! They’re people, for crying out loud!”

“I mean, girls aren’t the only ones I’m looking at. You know, Tak-“

“Stop right there!” Taka cut him off before he could say something Taka could never unhear. The conversation about cleaning duty makes a lot more sense now… I was right to be unnerved!! “I’m not interested in total creeps! No one is! Don’t look at others that way, especially not me, and especially not girls! Don’t you DARE tell me you came to the pool to engage in such… such… heinous activities!”

“Nonononoooo, I came to the pool to swim! Hina came while I was in the water… It’s automatic, you know? I just pour all of it into my beautiful works of art.”

“Have you considered writing and drawing that sort of thing might be enabling you?” Taka said, teeth clenched. I want to help, but I also want to crawl out of my skin and jump into a volcano!!!

“Huhhhhhh? What do you mean?”
“If it’s *just* poor impulse control and not something worse… You might be conditioning yourself to think that way with the reward of your creations.”

“Condition… myself…?”

“Psychologically. I think you should go to the library and read some books on the subject. If you deprive yourself of your reward, you’ll probably slowly cease your… *behaviors*.” Taka couldn’t even look at Hifumi – his clenched fist was up against his face and blocking him from sight in an even more defensive posture than earlier.

“But I’m the Ultimate Fanfic Creator!”

“Yes, and I’ve seen some of your… respectable drawings, and you’re quite talented! But not all of what you draw is like THAT, right?”

“I mean, I do PWP, but I’m interested in other things too…”

“I don’t know what that means -- D-don’t tell me!” He made a ‘stop right there’ gesture as Hifumi opened his mouth to elaborate. Knowing Hifumi, I *absolutely* don’t want to find out! Knowing Hifumi, I *absolutely* don’t want to find out! “But see? You already can do that! Just wean yourself off of sexual content!”

“Hmmm… Alright, I’ll try. Maybe I’ll have less problems then…”

“It’s not about YOU, Hifumi, it’s about everyone affected by your perversion! You’re facing the just consequences for selfishness and consuming other peoples’ bodies!!” Mondo’s punishment was harsh, but this is obviously not the first time Hifumi has done something like this! “You need to change the way you think! Go to the library and read those books!” He commanded.

“Y-yes, Mast—“

“NO, HIFUMI!” Taka screamed in revulsion. “I’m not your Master, I don’t have power over you, and I never, ever want to! Don’t put that on me, I do not consent whatsoever!” THIS BETTER JUST BE POOR IMPULSE CONTROL AND SELFISHNESS!

“O-okay…” he looked defeated.

Taka wanted to run away, but first he mustered, “Putting people on pedestals like that is just as dehumanizing as seeing them as objects!! You need to respect everyone’s wishes and autonomy – by default!! Not just after they object!!!!”

Hifumi nodded, at least pretending to understand. “I should go to the library… It’s clearly part of my next quest line.”

Taka was about to assent, but thought better of it because he feared Hifumi would make that *weird* as well. Instead, he stood there rigidly, saying nothing as Hifumi left the room. He quickly stripped down to his swimming gear, which he had put on under his uniform in preparation for visiting the pool, took a quick shower to get rid of the mental filth Hifumi had spewed, and power walked through the next door. He made an effort to focus on the feel of the tile underfoot and not what Hifumi had said and implied.

“Heeeeeey, Taka!” Hina waved excitedly at him from across the room. She was sitting at the edge of the pool and kicking her legs in the water.

He walked over to her, relieved she seemed to be in good spirits. “Good afternoon, Hina! You don’t seem surprised to see me?”
“I heard you shouting at Hifumi.” She giggled.

He made a startled noise. “All the way in here!?” He looked around the pool room. It was absolutely massive, sprawling out improbably far. There were even tons of bleachers for onlookers.

“You’re loud, you know! The acoustics in here also amplify sound…” She pointed up at the very high ceilings.

“S-sorry, I’m really bad with volu—“

“Pfft!” she waved him off. “Don’t sweat it, Taka! I don’t mind if you’re loud. I wouldn’t anyway, but I actually have some hearing loss from getting swimmer’s ear a bunch. It’s always pretty easy to understand you. Besides… It was nice hearing you point out all of Hifumi’s flaws.”

Taka blushed. “Well, I’m hoping he can be a better… less frightening… person. If I can help that, then I will.”

“Oh, are you besties now?” She joked.

Taka shuddered involuntarily. “N-not when he’s like that… He gives me the… Uh… I don’t know a word for it.”

“Fight or flight instinct? Bone deep shudders? Night terrors? Heebie jeebies?”

“Yes.” He said flatly with a neutral expression and a stern nod. After a good thirty seconds he couldn’t hold his smile at his own joke back any further. She laughed. “How are you feeling?”

She shrugged. “I mean, I’m majorly skeezed out by Hifumi. I’m not gonna let it get to me though, he’s not the first or only creep. These donuts Sakura brought me help, so does doing what I love!” She grinned. “Want one?”

“One what? A donut? I’ve never had one…” He looked down at them through the plastic on the top of the box. There were a handful missing already. So many different styles and decorations… It’s mesmerizing!

“Whaaaaaat!? A young adult in this generation who’s never eaten even a single donut!?"”

Now it was his turn to shrug. “I’ve had other baked goods… but the texture of donuts always looked odd to me, so I never tried one. Is that a big deal to you?”

“Of course! I loooove donuts! And there are tons of different kinds – jelly filled are *obviously* the best – so they don’t all taste or look the same, or have the same texture!” I suppose that makes sense – I’ve read before that there are tons of variations, especially by region and culture. My first impression always stuck though. “You have to try one! Well… if you want to!”

“Hm… You mentioned jelly filled?”

“Yes!”

“Do you have any of those?”

“Yes!!! Sakura knows they’re my favorite, so she packed a bunch!”

He nodded. “I think I’ll try one… Maybe. But I want to swim first. I need to focus on something other than…” He shivered again. “You know.”
She smiled at him. “Well, I was just taking a short break between laps. Wanna race me?”

“There’s no way I’ll win, you’re the Ultimate Swimming Pro!”

“Duh! I know that, silly!” she winked and stuck out her tongue. “But it’ll be fun!”

I came here to swim anyway, so… Oh, and maybe we can talk about it after, like Makoto says you do with ‘fun things’! ‘Okay!’ He hopped into the water, cutting through it easily with minimal splash. They both put their goggles on.

“Let’s see who can swim the fastest from here, lengthwise!” Taka nodded and got ready. “3… 2… 1… go!” She hollered. Taka’s reflexes were a little slower than hers, so she had an early lead. Once he realized she was ahead, though, he pushed himself harder. But it was too late – he’d just caught up with her by the time they’d reached the end. “Wow!” she said. “You did better than I thought!”

“Thanks,” he panted. “I’ve liked swimming for a long time. It’s a great workout, but I’ve never raced against someone so good at it before!” She stuck her tongue out at him. They took a short break and got ready again to go the other direction. She counted, they started. Taka got to her a little faster this time but could still barely keep her pace. After they completed that round, they got ready again.

“Laps?” he asked. She nodded. “Let’s do 10. 3… 2… 1… start!” He got started a little faster this time, but she creamed him in time and finished all 10 when he was still on his 6th.

“I could do this all day!” she giggled. “But I think you’re at your limit. You should do some laps at your own pace now too cool down, I’ll do the same!”

They spent a while in the water together, doing their own thing. Hina gave him the occasional pointer on his form and breathing. By the time they were both exhausted, it was late in the afternoon. It feels nice to have this kind of workout again.

“Alright,” she said, licking her lips. “It’s time… Here’s where your non-donut life ends… and your Donut Life begins!” she announced with an ominous voice. “It’s… ARMAGEDDONUT!” she howled, wiggling her fingers. She opened the box and gestured to the jelly filled donuts. “Pick your poison!”

He picked out one with chocolate icing and red filling. “Oooh, that’s a cherry bismarck!”

“My dad eats these at work all the time! He brought one home for me once when I was little to see if I’d try it, but I just scraped off the chocolate with my finger and called it a day!” Taka was staring at the ceiling smiling wistfully at the memory.

“Was he disappointed?”

“A little, but he mostly just thought it was funny. He’s never had a problem with my food particulars!” He smiled, tearing up. He’s been so supportive of my whole life… I love him so much. He consciously pushed back thoughts about how much he missed him and how worried he was about the video. Focus on the love, not the fear, Taka… That’s something he told you himself.

“He sounds like a good guy.” Hina was grinning. “Now, you better try that donut before I eat it right outta your hand like a chicken eats popcorn, or maybe even how goats eat petting zoo food!” He looked at her, raising his eyebrows. “Never get between a Hina and her donuts…” She cracked her knuckles playfully menacingly. “Seriously though – no pressure, Taka.”

He nodded. He licked some chocolate icing off his finger. That tastes exactly like I remembered… He poked at the body of the donut itself. It didn’t crumble apart, but it also wasn’t hard; it just dented
where his finger was. *Huh*… He lifted the donut to his face, studying it. *Here goes nothing*…

He took a small bite, lucky enough to get some of the cherry jelly right off the bat. In surprise he shot the unchewed chunk out of his mouth. It landed on the plastic top of the donut box.

“Aaaaaaah!!! Are you okay!??” Hina asked, startled. “Do I need to Heimlich you!? I know how—“

“S-sorry! I’m… I’m… My mouth. It’s watering. I’m… salivating!” He jammed his finger in the side of the donut and scooped out some of the jelly. “Mmmmf… This is… delicious!” He ate the rest of the donut like he was a starving person without a care in the world.

“That’s… not what I was expecting!” Hina cheered, settling down. “Isn’t it good!?”

“Yes!” Taka replied, matching her enthusiasm. “May I… have another!?”

“Of course! Just don’t eat me out of life and home!”

He took more time with his second one to savor and enjoy it. “Wow… Wow wow wow! Wowowowowowow!!!” He was excitedly clenching and unclenching his hands. “Hina, I see why you like these so much! These are positively scrumptious!!” He glanced up at the clock. It was almost time for him to eat supper.

“Yeah, it’s getting pretty late, huh?”

“I wanted another one!” he grumbled. “But I’ll ruin my dinner…”

“As long as you’re a good boy and you eat your vegetables,” she said with an elderly voice, “You can come get one from me tonight! But only one… I don’t want you to OD on sweets.”

“Ahhhh, I’ll be looking forward to it, Hina!” He raced out of the room (without running), washed himself off, got dressed, and headed to the Dining Hall.

He felt extra jumpy and energetic and easily startled. *Probably due to all that sugar!* Once he ate, he did his fitness routines with even more pep than normal. After he showered, he got his last donut from Hina. *I’m so tempted to eat it… But I’ll be up all night and pay for it in the morning! I have to do myself that favor and delay the instant gratification!* He yawned. He decided he’d save it for later – he’d gotten a plastic container from the kitchen – and called it a night.

His sugar high crashed the second he laid down and he fell asleep almost instantly.

-----

He woke up with a foggy headache. “Ugggggh…” He ached and everything seemed too bright. *I’m so tired… This is probably due to the incident in the waiting room, swimming, and eating too much sugar…* He consciously suppressed the interaction with Hifumi. He glanced over at the donut he’d saved and grumbled to himself. *It’s not like I won’t eat unhealthy foods once in a while if I like them, but I haven’t had that much sugar at once since I was a kid! I didn’t schedule that at all*… *If I eat it now I’ll feel worse later… Maybe Chihiro could have some with me tomorrow?*

At the usual breakfast gathering, Hina asked if he’d eaten the other bismarck yet. He told her he needed to save it, since he’d had a major sugar rush and crash. She said she’d never had a problem with that as she laughed mischievously. She told him to enjoy it while she left to swim with Sakura. Taka stopped by the locker room to work out. The endorphins from that in combination with eating his usual food and drinking plenty of water alleviated his sugar ‘hangover’.
Afterward, he decided to check out the second floor classrooms. They looked almost exactly the same as the first floor ones. *No personalized messages though, and no gum on the chalkboards… The blackboards had random, unsettling doodles on them.* Or maybe these mean something to the others. After exiting the second, he noticed that the long hall was some kind of foyer, with desks and chairs parked against the metal-covered windows. *We would’ve been able to study in the sunlight and watch it turn to twilight…*

He sat in one of the chairs and closed his eyes. He imagined the rays of the sun warming his hands as he took notes on a reading for History class. There were others walking in the halls, chattering to themselves as they returned to the dorms. The air was full of hope, totally unlike how it was now. He watched the sky slowly turn dark as the stars began to illuminate beautifully over the hillside.

He opened his scarlet eyes and snapped back to the present. He had a strange swell of longing and familiarity.

*I miss seeing the sky.*

-----

He’d been in the library a few days ago but he hadn’t taken the time to actually look around. This time he saw how deep in a state of disrepair it was. *This is unlivable… Some of us have dust allergies!* He’d thought it was just the shelf he’d taken books from the other day… His eyes already felt itchy and he was on the edge of a sneeze. *There’s a lot of things I can read about here. I want to make reference and checkout sheets, but I’ll just have to grab books and go for now… A poorly folded letter resting on top one of the half-shelves caught his eye. He examined it.*

"*From the Hope's Peak Academy Executive Office*"

"Throughout the years, we have been committed to shaping the youth who will one day shape the world. We have a long, proud history as an institution of higher learning with full government support. Out graduates enter society ready to take on active leadership roles in every major job field. However, Hope's Peak Academy must now lower the curtain on its glorious history, for the time being. This decision was not an easy one to make, but serious issues beyond our control have made it necessary. But make no mistake--this is not the end for Hope's Peak Academy. We intend to reopen our doors as soon as the issues forcing our closure have been resolved. That being said, this is the end for now, and I would like to personally and sincerely thank everyone for your help and support over the years. For now, we are awaiting official governmental authorization to formally cease operations."

Wait… *So Hope's Peak shut down!? When we all came here, it was open and running… They couldn’t have enrolled us if they were about to shut down… Maybe this is a different place, after all? I'm not sure if it's still tenable to believe that at this point…He poked at the dust on top the shelf, then tried to shake his finger off in the air. And this layer of dust wouldn't accumulated so much since we got here… This is at least a whole year’s worth, maybe two. There was just as much on the letter’s envelope. So this letter and library have been untouched for at least a year… Did the school shut down, and then Monokuma took it over? And then enrolled us under the guise of it still functioning?*

*But wait... How would I have not heard of this before now? If the Mastermind had so much power, they could fake it... But it's not like I don't pay attention to government and state news. Someone would've leaked this, it's not like this is some random school in the middle of nowhere... This does explain why we’re the only ones here, however...*

Something flashed through his mind. *Oh no... If it's been shut down for that long, then the government wouldn’t know about what’s happening! We’re surely considered Missing Persons by
this time, it’s been weeks since we had contact with anyone, but everything would take longer because this place was abandoned… He tried to wrap his mind around the information, but he just couldn’t piece it together in a way that he didn’t see an argument against. Regardless, all of the possibilities frightened him. He felt his chest tighten. He clutched at the shelf, forgetting how dirty it was, and immediately recoiled. I need to leave for now… He piled his arms full of books on pop culture and communication. As he was walking through the double doors, he sneezed so hard twice in a row that he dropped the books, slipped on the floor, and landed on his butt.

Not even two feet from Mondo. One of the heavier books had, naturally, landed directly on the biker’s foot. He was cursing and jumping around comically, grabbing his foot. “I’m so sorry Mondo! I dropped them and fell—"

“I saw what happened, dumbass!” he yelled. “If I wasn’t wearing steel-toed loafers, you woulda broke my foot!” Of all people… It had to be the one who hates me!

“S-sorry!”

“Get me a chair or something, will ya!? Jesus!” Taka quickly grabbed one and slid it under Mondo, who collapsed into it while cursing.

“I’ll get you an ice pack!” Taka shouted as he walked extremely quickly to the kitchen, not giving Mondo time to reply. He was back barely five minutes later with a bunch of ice cubes double bagged in plastic. The books were all picked up and stacked on the floor. Huh? Did he do that?? Anyway… “There weren’t any… If only we could get in the Nurse’s Office…!” Mondo already had his shoe and sock off so Taka gently set the bag directly on his skin.

Mondo hissed, flinching. “That’s cold, you bastard!”

“It’s ice, Mondo! Ice is cold!”

Mondo muttered under his breath. “I guess… What are you doing with all those books, anyhow?”

“Taking them back to my room to study. I can’t stand all the dust in here…”

“Pop culture and communication, huh? What d’ya need books on communication for? You sure know how to talk a *lot*.”

He frowned. “It’s… difficult for me to communicate successfully with others. Several people in particular,” he said, accidentally glancing sideways at the other man.

“… What are you tryin’ to say!?”

“Nothing! I just want to be better at talking to people and not arguing…”

“What’s wrong with arguing!?” Mondo argued. Can I ever say the *right* thing to him!?

“I don’t have a problem with it when necessary, I just don’t think it’s the optimal way to have a ‘normal conversation’! And sometimes I say things that unintentionally upset people, I wanna know how to not do that.”

“Ohhh… I guess that makes sense,” he grunted.

“What brings you here? I wouldn’t take you as a library type…”

“Grrrr… Ya know what you just said about saying things that upset people!?”
“Ahhh, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have thought or said that!”

*It’s rude and I should know better*

“No shit…” He sighed, cooling down. “Anyways… I wanted to see if any of the books in here talked about prisoners escapin’. Figured maybe we could use the ideas to get out of this shithole.”

“That’s a great idea, Mondo!” Taka said cheerily. “Hmmm… I think I saw something to do with famous prisons in the history section when I glanced at it. Maybe detective novels would have something like that, too?”

“That’s where I was gonna go… I like detective stories anyhow,” he admitted.

“Really? I’ve never had much interest in fantasies… I prefer non-fiction.”

He snorted. “Not surprising. I like gettin’ absorbed in other worlds. Mostly comics. Realistic ones – never was a big fan of elves and all that Lord of the Rings shit.”

Taka nodded and grabbed the book he was talking about from its dusty shelf, handing it to Mondo. “Thanks—” Unfortunately, at the moment it was in Mondo’s hand, Taka’s boots slid in the dust again and he stomped directly on Mondo’s injured foot as he was trying to steady himself from falling. Mondo howled in pain, face beet red. “YOU SON OF A BITCH, YOU DID IT AGAIN!”

“Aaaaah!!!” Taka yelled. “I’m so, so completely sorry, I—“

“I KNOW WHAT HAPPENED!” There were tears of pain in his eyes. “GET OUT OF MY SIGHT BEFORE I TEAR YOU A NEW ONE!”

Taka was sobbing in embarrassment, empathy, fear, and sadness as he speedily paced out of the room. He still wasn’t really afraid of Mondo, but he hurt him twice, and he couldn’t forgive himself for that. *He hates me, but that doesn’t make it ok… And getting yelled at like that makes me think of Grandfather’s abuse*… He left his stack of books behind aside from the top one, wanting to leave as soon as he could.

He cried on his bed for a while to let out the mass of negative feelings before studying his reference books – he couldn’t even bear to look at the one from the library. *He despises me!!*

When he came back from supper, he made up several bags of ice, set them in front of Mondo’s door as a peace offering, rang the doorbell, and fled back to his room.

By the time he opened his door to check a half hour later, the bags were gone. *He hates me, but at least he accepted my favor… I don’t understand why he’s nice sometimes, but I guess I can live with that for the time being.*

-----

After his usual morning routine, Taka checked inventory of the School Store. It let him take his mind off worrying about the surly biker. By the time he was done, it was lunchtime – exactly as he’d planned. Though he still had a knot in his stomach due to all the deaths as well as Mondo’s interaction with him yesterday, he was putting his focus on preparing himself to have a ‘conversation’ with Chihiro. Once he ate, he went to the dorms and knocked on her door.

She answered quickly. “Oh… Good afternoon Taka!”

“Hello, Chihiro!” he said with a shining smile. “I’m here to ‘hang out’,” he said with fingerquotes.
“I was hoping that’s what you meant when you gave me a thumbs up this morning! Come inside…” she said, stepping away from the entrance. He walked inside her dorm.

“Wow, these are nice monitors!”

“Mhm. Thanks to whoever set them up… Ehehehe.” Who *did* set up our rooms? It must have been Monokuma.

“Hey, what’s that?” he said. Two of the screens were dark, but the middle one had a simple screensaver of star exploration. “I thought they weren’t hooked up to anything?”

“They weren’t…but then I found an old laptop in the library!” I wonder what it was doing there.

“Did you see the letter?”

“Y-yeah…” I think her body language indicates that she’s troubled.

“So, if it’s true, then the library was probably closed for at least a year.”

“There was tons of dust on the computer, and it wouldn’t turn on…” she nodded.

“And you managed to get it functioning, after all that time and buildup!” he said. “That’s amazing, Chihiro!” She must have found cleaning supplies and cans of compressed air!

“Th-thanks!” she blushed happily. “I disassembled some stuff I found in the Warehouse. Being the Ultimate Programmer is finally coming in handy here, ehehehe…”

“What are you using it for? There’s surely no Internet connection.”

“Unfortunately…” she agreed, sighing with glistening eyes. “But… There are mysterious encrypted files on it…!” Would it be more information like the letter? “I haven’t been able to crack them myself, sooooo… I’m building a program to do it.”

“What kind of program?”

“Well, it’s an AI!”

“A-an Artificial Intelligence!? On a computer that’s been dead for over a year!?”

She spread her hands in the air, palms facing Taka. He noticed her face was very red behind them. “Uuuultimaaaaate… Proooooogrraaaamer!”

“Chihiro, that’s absolutely astounding!” How is that even possible!?

“Before I came here, I was working on an AI for a company… I c-can’t really talk about it, but I’m already very familiar with how to do it,” she said, voice chipper.

“You should be proud of yourself! That’s an incredible feat!! Seriously!” I don’t really know how AIs work, but they’re definitely very intricate and difficult to program… That’s quite an achievement! Especially with the time scale!

Happy tears were rolling down her cheeks. “I’m just glad I can finally be useful… It makes me feel less f-fragile…”

“You don’t have to measure your worth by what you can or can’t contribute… But I totally understand how it gets to you! I’ve, er, struggled with that. A lot.” To put it mildly.
She nodded. “I’m finally gaining the courage to try to overcome it…”

He grinned at her. “That’s great! Being able to fight against that feels really good! Keep pushing forward, and you’ll achieve that for sure…!” I’ll be your cheerleader!

“Do you… Want to talk about what happened with Mondo? W-when I was crying at your door…?” Her hands were crossed in her lap.

“Not just yet. I have to be in a more stable place before I can explain.” The trial, the deaths, Mondo… I’m walking a thin emotional line… “Just – I want you to understand I don’t hold any of that against you. I’ll come to you about it when I’m ready!”

She nodded. “It’s hard to talk about…” She wiped her eyes and looked at him thoughtfully for a minute. “Anyway… Let’s talk about things we like.”

“Yes, please! Let’s! But, uh… It’s difficult for me to do that as well, I feel like I’m imposing, so if you wouldn’t mind, please tell me if I’m doing too much! And I think it’d be easier for me if you started, so I could see how to do it?”

“I can do that..!” she smiled. “So… I’m a huge fan of high fantasy and sci-fi. I love a lot of the franchises, but especially the American ones – Lord of the Rings, Star Trek, Star Wars… and tons of others too.”

“Lord of the Rings?” He asked. “What was it Mondo said about fantasy? “That’s… elves, right?”

“Mhm, and orcs, and hobbits, and all sorts of fantasy beings all living in the world together.”

“How does it reflect the real world?” If a work doesn’t have ties to reality, why bother? There are so many ways we could make the real world better, but instead people spend so much time dreaming of things that can never exist… We need to stop living on cloud nine and focus on the actual society we live in!

“In a lot of ways, really… Only some intentional. The author always said it had no basis on his time in World War I, but the parallels are clearly there… And a lot of the histories of the different races of beings… They’re… Prejudiced.” Her eyebrows were drawn.

“Huh? How can fantasy creatures have prejudice?”

“Oh, I mean… like, a lot of the non-elf characters are based on really old s-stereotypes… And it shows in their designs and cultural histories. “

“Like… r-racism?” She nodded sadly. “Ghhk! That’s… really gross!”

“It is.” She nodded.

“That’s morally disgusting…” Why involve yourself with such toxic elements!? “So… why do you like them, knowing all of that? Why put time into something that’s so poisonous? I don’t… like that.” The concept makes me feel really strange…

“Well… First, some of the worldbuilding is really good… Second, there’s awesome character and plot development… And most important: The Death of the Author.”

“… You like this franchise because the author died??” That… doesn’t even make sense!

She blushed. “Nono, that’s a term in m-media criticism… It refers to the idea that once a creator puts
their work out there, people can freely interact with, interpret, and play with it how they want regardless of the creator’s intention…”

“Their intentions with their own works don’t matter!?”

“They do!” she said embarrassingly. “I’m s-sorry… I’m not explaining this well…” She looked teary again. “Ehehehe… some people take the concept to the extreme… But that’s not how I think of it… It’s just that their intentions outside of the media itself aren’t the end-all be-all…” Taka blinked owlishly. *Huh?* “You know how, when you’re reading a book, you can imagine the world… and picture characters? And it’s based on text from the book?” Taka nodded. *Though since I read non-fiction, it's also based on photographs and such.* “It’s like that… If a writer doesn’t state or imply something in the text, how could it be considered part of the work?”

“Oh… Like if they intend to be, say, representative of LGBT people, but never actually stated in the work that any of the characters were or even focused on something that could be relevant…?”

“… Then what does that mean for the story? Nothing… If you don’t just say it in the work, then you’re creating room for people to think the characters *aren’t* LGBT… And you’re also not doing any service to LGBT people by representation…” Her small body was trembling. *She’s clearly thought a lot about this. Her passion is shining brightly!*

“So even if you just say it after the fact, it can’t totally count – because unless someone happens to read this outside article or whatever, they’ll never know?” Chihiro nodded. *That makes sense, I suppose…* “How this does apply to Lord of the Rings?”

“Whether or not he intended them to be, the other races are stereotypes… It’s reflective of his, and his time period’s, prejudices… The kinds of fanbases I’m a part of are transformative…!”

*Transformation means change, so…* “Let me guess – ignoring the author’s gross intent, subconscious or not, and re-interpreting these characters in ways that aren’t offensive?” *I like the sound of that. It can’t change the original work, but it can give new meaning to it... Right?*

“Exactly!” she said excitedly. “And that’s why I still like media that has bad elements… The Star Wars movies have huge problems with m-misogyny….” She paused. “So I read fanfic where the women get to be independent characters… Who are treated better than they are by the original creator…!”

“This is fascinating. But… why not just engage with things that don’t have these problems? Why not discard the problematic stuff altogether?” *If you let an infection go, it’ll kill you… Just amputating the limb it started on won’t save you.*

“There’s power in transforming something… A lot of people don’t get real say in pop culture, so they can express themselves by mixing things up to be more diverse…” *So it helps people, too. It doesn’t solve the problem, but it works with what’s there... “And the thing is… Media without problems doesn’t exist. People aren’t perfect, so neither are their creations. Not even fanworks…”*

“You could just… not engage with pop culture? I mean, I never have. I’ve been ridiculed for it, but I’ve managed fine?” I still don’t quite *get* it.

“Think about it this way. The people who wrote the textbooks you read had biases, right?” He nodded. “And prejudices. But does that mean you can only read textbooks without those?”

“No, you just have to take them into accou- Oh!” She was smiling. *I see, I was stuck in black and white thinking...* “With history books, I try to read things with different perspectives to get a bigger
picture. Sometimes a professor will discuss with us how a given section was written in a way to propagandize or cover up conquest or military campaigns. So… you discuss it and you correct for it in your own way, right?”

She was beaming now. “Yes, Taka! Exactly…”

“All people are biased. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but with how societies currently exist, they replicate prejudices in people. Then the people say those things and write them down and spread them.”

“Directly or indirectly… Non-fiction or fiction… So we course correct…!”

“We say, ‘No, that’s wrong! Consider the following!’ and present facts and interpretations or perspectives!” He was excited now. *Not only do I understand, but this makes me more interested in pop culture…!* “So that’s the criticism angle! Maybe we put the cart in front of the horse a little bit, but I'm happy I understand now. What exactly *are* elves?”

“Oh, right! Ehehehe, they’re usually mystical, regal, somewhat tall beings,” she held her hand up above her head to indicate their stature. Her arms weren’t very long though, so Taka just thought it was adorable. “That have pointed ears and are in tune with nature... In some works, they co-exist with humans, but in works with no humans, they’re usually one of the focal point races.”

“Mondo said yesterday he doesn’t like that kind of fantasy. He hates elves!”

She giggled. “I can understand that… They can be pretty bland and boring, since a lot of modern ones are clones of Lord of the Rings elves…”

“What’s your favorite fantasy race?”

“Dragons!” she said without a moment of hesitation.

“Wh-- I was expecting something more humanoid…!”

“Big! Powerful! Invulnerable! S-sometimes I wish I could be one!” She was giggling and excited, her eyes sparkling.

He pictured her head on a classical Japanese dragon’s body, breathing fire. “That’s… beautiful imagery…” *I wish I could draw that. Oh, maybe Hifum—No!*

“I know you haven’t engaged in pop culture really, but I’m sure you’ve had mythology units of Literature class right? What’s your favorite creature from those?”

“I’d have to say… The phoenix. The concept of a being who is reborn anew from tragedy… That really appeals to me.”

“You’ve had it hard, right..?”

“Y-yeah…” *That’s not something I used to be able to admit, but definitely. “I’ve been through a lot. Even attempts on my life!”*

Chihiro squeaked. “W-what!” Tears were forming in her eyes.

“My family name is… maligned.”

“Yeah, but…”
“People want revenge for how my grandfather upturned their lives with the scandal,” he said morosely. “I’ve had some run-ins with death.”

“That’s… horrible… Trying to kill you for something you didn’t even do…” She was crying full-force now.

“Heh… Being punished for his mistakes has been a running theme of my life!”

“Did you ever come close…? To dying?”

“Since he finally died a few years ago, it’s been a while since anyone tried. But yes. It’s all been traumatic, sure… but to be honest, the part that hit me the worst was the abuse…” He was crying now, but he soldiered on. Even if he couldn’t talk about their incident last week just yet, he wanted her to understand whee he was coming from. He felt the tendrils of fear begin to creep toward his consciousness, but he was able to fight them because he was divulging this freely, as opposed to someone tripping his wires. I want to tell her this… I want her to know that I get it. “Every day, just because I had the misfortune to be his grandson. At school and home. Assassination attempts weren’t such a… *normal* part of my life, so they weren’t as much of a foundation of who I am today. They’re one of the reasons I decided I wanted to be so fit, though.”

“S-so you could defend yourself…?” She looked what Taka read as horrified.

“Yes. And I can! At home, I slept with a kendo sword tucked between my bed and the wall, just in case, and that saved my life several times. I do it here too, though I don’t really need to I suppose!”

“D-did your grandfather’s scandal force you to be interested in politics?”

“No, I kind of always was anyway. He just tried to mold that to line up with his ideals, but I’ve overcome that conditioning! The way social institutions are set up is fascinating, and I really like learning about reforms to make them better for the communities they serve!” Now his expression was more uplifting than pained.

“Y-you really are all about support!” She looks… impressed?

“Of course!” he smiled. “I’m nothing if not genuine! I believe that government serves the people, not that the people serve the government.”

“What are some policy ideas you have?”

“One of my first aims when I become Prime Minister is to compensate the people my grandfather dragged down with him. The ones who need it…” The Togamis, among others, got out of it unscathed due to their massive power and influence… “I also want to implement universal healthcare and put more money to free school meals for all kids. Schools shouldn’t be for profit… And I’m going to reduce whatever my salary is and donate a lot of it…!” He was fired up now.

“Wow, Taka…”

“I’ve been poor all my life – I don’t need, or want, mountains of money to live! I just need enough to get by!”

“Ehehehe, you’re such a philanthropist!”

“No… Not really! I mean, that’s not how I want people to know me like it’s some kind of job title… A lot of so-called ‘philanthropists’ just use that to curry good favor with the populace. It’s a business strategy. It’s its own kind of brand now…” It’s disgusting! Charity should be for the sake of charity,
for helping others, not for PR points! “But that’s not why I want to do it – I just want to do it because no one should suffer poverty. Poverty just plain shouldn’t exist!” He clenched his fists in righteous passion. “I’ll do what I can to eradicate it!” *I’ll do whatever I can to help people! Including while we’re trapped here… I’ll make sure no one else dies!*

“Where would you get the money for this all…?”

“Well… Let’s just say I won’t be popular with rich people, hahaha!” He smirked. *But if everyone middle-and lower-class votes, I can get in for sure!*

“These rooms are soundproof… but, I bet Byakuya just felt a chill!”

They both laughed. “Oh, before I forget! Hang on a minute, I’ll be right back!” He returned with the donut that was in his room. “Hina introduced me to donuts the other night. Wanna split this one with me? They’re tasty!”

“Oh, sure! But why me…?”

“I’ve found that sharing a meal can be a way to bond… And I read that picking out something special for someone you want to be friends with can help you become closer!” He cut the donut and handed Chihiro half, careful to not disturb the now-sticky chocolate icing.

“Taka, you’re so…” She took a bite of the donut and her eyes lit up. “You’re so sweet! Just like this donut!” she said, blushing and chowing down. *Oh my gosh!!*

Joyous tears rolled down his cheeks as he finished his half.
[Ch 2 C] - The Pouring Point

Chapter Summary

sauna.

Chapter Notes

gay.

TW: child abuse, forced institutionalization, implied Taka And Mondo Get 'Morning Wood' TM (but it's played non-seriously, absolutely nothing happens between them and nothing is described in detail; skip the section where the shower and bathroom are mentioned if you don't want to read that)

Game Transcripts: [This Section of Chapter 2] [Chapter 2, 143-154]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taka spent the next few days trying to organize the Warehouse after the breakfast meetings and working out. Going through each individual box and sorting the items was a much more tedious process than doing the same for the School Store due the sheer volume. Hina, Sakura, Makoto, and Chihiro stopped by once in a while to give him a hand. Sakura was a huge help getting to the heaviest boxes, which were for some reason on a shelf Taka could barely get to without climbing the shelves like a monkey. Chihiro showed him which items she’d disassembled to get the laptop up and running again, teaching him basic computer repair. Hina helped with mid-size items and kept everyone fed, while Makoto took notes and started an inventory under Taka’s strict and very precise guidance. I’m pleased with what we’ve managed to accomplish. But I’m even more pleased that I got to spend time bonding with my fellow students…!

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Three days after he and Chihiro had shared the donut, Taka was in the Dining Hall eating his usual supper after working hard on the Warehouse.

Mondo grumbled something from the doorway. That caught Taka’s attention, but when he looked up the other boy was already gone.

What was that about? Maybe he wanted to get food? I hope he didn’t leave because I’m in here...

He felt really self-conscious and uneasy at that thought.

A few minutes later, when Taka was zoned out making notes for how he wanted to organize the Warehouse, an extremely loud THUMP! on the table in front of him startled him so much he launched backward in the chair and tipped over.

He groaned. “What the heck!?”
“I’m payin’ you back for fuckin’ up my foot!” Mondo said snidely.

Taka crawled into a kneeling position and brushed off his uniform. “Look, none of that was on purpose—“

“That doesn’t change the fact that my whole damn foot is bruised and I can barely walk on it!”

Taka felt horrible, but also frustrated that Mondo wanted to get – and got - revenge on him. “I don’t see why you needed to do that to me in return… I could’ve gotten really hurt!” I could have easily messed up my neck or back, or even slammed my head on the ground…

“Eye for an eye, kid!” he laughed angrily. Taka stood up and checked himself for injuries. His neck felt a little weird, but otherwise he was none the worse for the wear. He glanced over at the table. Familiar…

“Wait… are those the books I was going to take out from the library!?”

“Yeah, I’m returning the favor!” He said, smirked, and turned to leave.

What the hell is this!? When he was by the doorway, Taka finally had the courage to say something. “So… you’re… returning the favor of me making you ice packs and leaving them by the door? Or you’re returning the favor ironically by doing something that could get me injured to pay me back for accidentally hurting you?”

Mondo kept facing away, not responding. His fists were clenched.

I’m… I’m through with this! Enough is enough!

“Mondo! If you have something to say to me, just… Come on! Say it to my face already!”

“What!?”

“I’m tired of you being so hot and cold! I’m tired of the insults! I’m tired of the passive aggression…” I can’t take this not knowing, this confusion, this boiling mass of unresolved feelings… And I won’t take him being a jerk anymore! Taka was trembling and shouting. “Just tell me that you hate me already so we can get it over with and I can stop feeling… This way…!”

“I ain’t telling you nothing!” Mondo roared, finally facing him.

“Then… Then… You’re a COWARD!” Taka screamed.

“What the fuck did you just say about me!?” He stomp-limped over to Taka. They were staring at each other, nose-to-nose, pompadour-to-spike, pissed off, tension like a downed phone line in a puddle of rain.

I’m done! “I said, YOU’RE A COWARD!” Taka put his fists up to cover his face in case it would come to blows, showing that he meant business. Mondo didn’t look ready to attack. I won’t hit him first, but if he punches me, I’m going to defend myself!

“You MOTHERF—“

“Uhhhh…” said Makoto a few feet from them, who they both became aware of simultaneously. “I was in the kitchen and… Um…”

“Hey, Makoto! Perfect timing!” Taka said near instantaneously. He sounded pleasant, but his electric staredown with Mondo continued. Maybe he could be our mediator!
“Huh? What's going on?”

“I have a favor to ask!” Mondo said. Taka squinted at Mondo… What is he thinking? “C'mon, Makoto. You gotta be our witness!” Witness? What for!? Does Mondo mean like a referee?

“You came at just the right time! I must ask for your full cooperation!” Taka said, following up. Maybe if I ask Makoto will oblige to whatever Mondo’s asking. Makoto started to flee. “M-Makoto, hold on!”

“Heeeey! Get back here!” Mondo yelled. “What, you're too good to talk to me? Huh!?”

Their pleading seemed to convince him to stay, but he was clearly hesitating. “Witness to what...?”

“This guy's been talkin' shit about me since day one.” You’re the one that's been cruel! “Callin' me a coward and shit like that...” I only said that just now, after you proved that you are!

“You *are* a coward! That's why you turn to violence to solve your problems!” That's why he knocked out Makoto and almost decked Byakuya! “That's why you can't do what society asks of you, why you walk around dressed like that!” A delinquent! You’re a rebel because you refuse to confront your issues and take responsibility!

“...The fuck you say? You dunno shit.” Mondo’s voice seemed icier than before.

No, I see you for what you really are! “You’ve already lost to yourself, but you're such a coward you don’t even realize it!”

“So what, you sayin' you're *not* a coward? You think you're tougher than me?”

“I *know* I am!” I face my problems, even when it's hard… You just run away!

Mondo growled, “Okay, then let's throw down. Prove you got what I don't got!”

“I accept your challenge!” Taka yelled, jabbing his finger centimeters from Mondo’s angry face.

“So that's what's happenin', Makoto. You gotta be our witness!”

“You're gonna... throw down? You're not gonna like... start punching each other, are you?” The bow looked like an unwilling accomplice dragged along kicking and screaming.

“The hell you think this is!?” Mondo seemed genuinely offended that Makoto thought that. Makoto recoiled. “There's a Bathhouse on the 1st floor of the dorm, right? With a sauna inside?”

“I see... a simple endurance contest, is it?” Taka put his fists down and relaxed his stance. He doesn’t want to fight physically. That's a relief. “We're going to see who can stay in the sauna the longest, am I right!?” I can do that! I’ll show him to face his problems head-on and move on from these feelings!

“Goddamn straight!”

The two of them walked quickly to the sauna, eager to prove they weren’t going to back down.

“A-Are you guys really gonna go through with this?” Makoto asked, walking reluctantly behind them.

“Shit yeah!” Mondo shouted.
“He’ll be done in a matter of minutes, anyway. People like him are, without exception, all talk!”
That’s why he looks like that – he’s like a neon orange toad, trying to scare people off right away!
But I don’t buy it!

Mondo howled, “Bring! It! On! Hell, let’s make things interesting. Wouldn’t wanna win without a
challenge, right?”

“Interesting...?”

“We're gonna battle with all our clothes on!” Ghk--!!!!

Taka was gobsmacked. “Th-That’s idiotic! Suicidal!” WHAT DID I AGREE TO!?!?

“What, you afraid?” Mondo kept egging him on. Taka’s mind was burning. I’m backed into a
corner!

“Y-You're going to regret this!” Taka replied, near tears and distressed and still pissed off. We might
die in here!! But there’s no other way to resolve this!!

“Shut up and let’s do this!” Mondo turned up the temperature and the room quickly filled with steam.
They sat on the sauna's wooden bench next to each other, fully clothed.

Wearing his uniform while in a sauna and trying to endure it was pushing Taka into sensory
overload. After half an hour, he stripped. I can’t... do... this... Makoto got him a towel.

“What, can’t hold up your end of the challenge!? Loser!”

“No, YOU’RE the loser!” Taka argued. Only a REAL loser would run from his problems and set up
a life-or-death scenario when he knows he finally has to deal with them! “You set up a ridiculous
scenario that could end in one or both of us seriously hurt, or dead! Heatstroke is a real thing, you
idiot!”

“It ain’t a REAL fight without those kinda stakes!” Mondo huffed. Taka grumbled. What the hell is
wrong with him!? Is it pride!?

Makoto watched them with concern through the door, not wanting to
go down with them.

---[x]---

“H-Hey, Mondo...” Taka muttered after another hour. Makoto had just left them a cooler from the
Warehouse filled with bottles of water.

“What, asshole?” he asked.

“You can take off your uniform, ya know. Go ahead, I won't judge.” I’m worried he’ll pass out...
That coat looks heavy...

“And you can shut the fuck up and mind your own business,” Mondo replied, obviously thinking
Taka meant that as dirt-throwing and not concern. “I mean, look at you. Your face is all red. What're
you, one of those goddamn hot spring monkeys?”

“I-It just so happens...I was born with a red face...!” Taka stammered in his own defense. I was!

“You don’t have to act all big, man....” Mondo replied, surprisingly calm. His bravado switching on
and off threw Taka’s emotions into even more of a confused loop.

“A-Act, you say? Hahaha!” Taka laughed brokenly. I have to keep going! “I'm still plenty good to
go! I'm so good, I could eat a steaming-hot bowl of soup right now!” Mondo just looked at him warily.

---[x]---

Another hour passed. 2 hours… 30 minutes…

“D-Don't you think... it's about time... you gave up?” Taka panted.

Mondo replied, breathing heavy. “What about you? ... You can't even hardly talk... Dumbass.” I’m the kettle… but you’re the pot!

“Say wh-whatever you want... I'm still totally... good to go! In fact, I'm starting to feel... kinda cold!” He was shivering.

“That's... prolly not good...” Mondo said. He looked at Taka. Is that… concern?

“H-Hey, uh... guys? I know you both wanna prove how big of badasses you are, but... don't you think you’ve done enough?” Makoto opened the door and asked the pair of ridiculous, sweaty men.

Both replied at the same time: “Shut up!”

---[x]---

After a while, the 10 pm bell and Monokuma announcement sounded. 4… and a half… hours... “…Hey, did you hear that? It's nighttime. How about we call it a tie?” Makoto was practically begging.

“In a true competition… there's no such thing as a tie! You win, or you lose. That's... the only thing that matters!” I won’t fall to Mondo… I’ll prove… that I stand tall!

“Listen to you... you son of a bitch...!” Mondo said, a tinge of a chuckle in his voice. “Then bring it on...! I'll... I'll push you right up to the gates of hell!”

“Th-This isn't good, guys...” Makoto warned.

“Yeah, you hear him? Better crawl on back... to your room...!” End this… Just let me win already… so we can end this!

“I’ll let you know how it went...in the morning! Then you can start spreading my... my legend...!” The legend? Of being a hardheaded jerk…!

“Come tomorrow morning... you'll fall down in front of me... down on your knees. I'll show you where to do it...!” Mondo gave him an odd look.

“Big talk from someone... whose face is about to explode...!”

“Right back a-at ya!”

Makoto left and bid them goodnight, seeing that trying to interfere was a fool’s errand. After 10 more minutes, they both zoned out, at the ends of their ropes.

Neither of them noticed Makoto had snuck in and turned off the heat. 30 minutes later, they both snapped back to semi-coherence. “Hey, Mr. Honor Student...” Mondo mumbled, voice a little slurred but more coherent than previously. “You givin’ up? I thought someone like you didn’t have any limits!”
“As if!” Taka stood, slightly wobbly. The steam from before had dissipated, and the room had become cooler, so he ratcheted both up to their max settings past where they had been. They both chugged water. “My limits are so far away… I can barely feel how hot it is!”

“Yeah, it’s cold in here! It’s the damn arctic…!”

“B-big words from someone about to give up… Oh, that’s right, you’re overcompensating… for your cowardice!”

“Scuse you!?”

“You can’t say what you’re feeling… You can’t just tell me you hate me and be done with it! So you pretend you’re all rough and prideful!”

“I-“

“That’s cowardice! I don’t know why you’re so mean to me… or why you’re sometimes nice! It doesn’t make any sense… And you’re being so tough now to make up… for you lack of ability to be consistent and vocal!” Mondo looked down, unresponsive. “Answer me this… Why do you hate me? What did I do to you?” Just give in and tell me already... so I can deal with this! Stop pretending sometimes... that you want anything to do with me other than twisting me up...! Just do what everyone else has, and hate me vocally!

“Aside from fucking up my foot, you mean!?!” Mondo groused.

“O-obviously…!” Taka had to bite back the urge to apologize profusely again, knowing it would just redirect the conversation from the answer he desperately needed.

“Well…” Mondo went silent for a few minutes. Taka sat there and marinated in his pit of distress and sweat. “Nothin’.”

“So you… hate me for no reason?” It's not the first time, but… This… stings… Why does this sting… His eyes were watering, but he hoped he could pass it off as more sweat.

“No… I don’t hate you at all.”

“… Wh-wh-WHAT!?!?” He must be lying to run away aga--

“Seriously, man… I don’t hate you.” Mondo half-shrugged.

“Then… why!??!”

“I uh… I got a lot of mixed up feelings… Ya know? Dunno what to do with ‘em… And sometimes I got a short fuse… but this place makes it so much worse… Especially fuckin’ Togami… God. You wanna know who I hate? That smug, stuck-up, holier-than-thou… motherfuckin’ prick! … Not you.”

“So… you’re not mean because you hate me? It’s more like… Your aggression is misdirected… and I just happen to be the person standing there?”

“Pretty much… I mean, it’s not like I ain’t… yelled at anyone else.” Taka’s stomach started slowly unclenching. Why do I believe him!?

“Oh…” What is this feeling? Relief…? Mondo stood, hand on Taka’s arm for support, and turned down the temperature to a more reasonable level. Taka got bottles for both of them. This might be a
“Hell, you saved my ass the other day in the library….” Mondo admitted after guzzling water. “When Togami was egging me on… If you and Sakura weren’t there to hold me back… I dunno what would’ve happened. I kind of… totally lose control. Not even really… conscious when it happens, either.”

Taka drew on his knowledge of psychology. “Is it similar to when something sets you off… you dissociate?”

“What’s that?”

“Uhh… You know when you’re reacting to something… that’s emotionally painful and you kind of just… go numb and lose awareness… of everything? Sometimes people have trouble… remembering what happens then too?”

Mondo flinched. “Y-yeah… It’s kinda like that except it’s when someone… jams my buttons and pisses me off… And sometimes I get violent n’ come to, and have to try to figure out… what happened and pick up the pieces…” That must be why he didn’t try to fight back… The biker was staring at the floor.

“That sounds like it could be ‘rage blackouts’… They’re almost like the counterpart… to what happens to me…”

“You mean when you freeze up… and all that?” Taka was surprised, but he nodded. “Yeah, I’ve seen you do it a couple times...”

“Is that why I’ve caught you looking at me…?”

“Uh, s-sure. Yeah,” Mondo voice cracked a little. Must be the steam. “For me, it’s caused by a few things... One is because of my autism – I get really overwhelmed… by emotional and external stimuli... The other is due to trauma... We sound like counterparts in the automatic ‘fight, flight, or freeze’ defense mechanism…”

“Trauma, huh…?”

“I’m guessing you’ve… gone through a lot, too?” I can’t believe I assumed he was just a rebel for no reason… That was unfair.

“You could say that…” Mondo said, a faraway look in his eyes.

“Do you… want to talk about it?”

Mondo grunted. “No… But, also, I kinda do. I’m starting to get you better… It’s weird, but I want you to get me, too.” Oh…

“I don’t think that’s weird at all, Mondo… If you want to discuss it, I’m all ears.” Am I… breaking through?

“And eyebrows,” Mondo elbowed him gently in the side. Taka grumbled, and then chuckled exhaustedly. “So… I guess you couldn’t call my home life normal or anything… My dad, he uh,” he swallowed, “He was real bad to me and Daiya. My brother… Real, real bad.” Taka was shuddering both from the temperature of the room dropping and the weight that information put in his heart.
“Mondo… I’m very sorry to hear that. And that’s not just condolences… My grandfather abused me, too.” He scooted closer to Mondo.

Mondo nodded. “I didn’t know what it was at first, but I recognized something in you… I thought that was it… Sorry you’ve been through that shit too,” he said, gruff. “He was the type to play it both ways. After he’d beat the snot out of us… he’d act all kind and lovin’ and bandage us… and promise he wouldn’t do it again if we were good boys… He always said how much he hated fighting and hurting us, but that we made him do it.” No wonder he gets mad so fast… No wonder why he can’t confront his problems… He must spend so much time trying to smother them so he doesn’t get hurt that he can’t process anger…

Taka was crying in empathy. “I-is that why you reacted so poorly when Makoto tried to stop you… from going for Byakuya the first day we were here?”

“Yup,” he admitted. “‘We shouldn’t fight!’ jammed my switch… You know, he did that shit to my ma, too… When she finally tried to leave and take us with her… he set up this whole bullshit story and got her committed to a psych ward… Then he divorced her and got custody of us…” Mondo’s eyes were squeezed shut and his fists were shaking.

“That’s… horrible…”

“Yeah… Daiya did everything he could to protect me… I relied on him… Takin’ up the Crazy Diamonds was our escape, you know…? Eventually, he uh, got us out of my dad’s control… Then it was just the two of us, tryin’ to keep each other alive while also running the gang… What’s your damage, huh?” Mondo asked, genuinely wanting to know.

“He was Toranosuke Ishimaru… Have you heard of him? He was a former Prime Minister.” Mondo shook his head. “He had a horrible corruption scandal and fell from grace… He took down the family business with him, along with our name and a lot of people… I don’t know what he was like before, but after…” he shuddered. “He tried to abuse me into being like him, to be the savior of our family… That included punishing me for being autistic, among other things…” Taka noticed a few tears running down Mondo’s face. “Hey, are you crying… on my behalf!?”

“Shut up!” He was now blushing as well. He scratched his head. “I mean… yeah…” He looked toward Taka so he could see that he was, but frowned and quickly turned away.

Taka was felt strange. I’ve never felt like this before… I feel light… Not just light headed…

“I’ve never felt like this before… I feel light… Not just light headed…”

“I’ve…” Taka could sense there was something he was about to say, but he switched tracks slightly. “There’s a lot of things I don’t like about myself… A lot of things I’ve done… But I have feelings inside – but don’t go around tellin’ anyone that, or I’ll kick your ass!” He threatened half-heartedly. Taka smiled. He’s soft, underneath it all…

“I think we’re more similar than either of us thought… I think Daiya, to you, is a lot like my dad is to me… Struggling to make ends meet and relying on each other… And people misread us for who we really are…”

“Pfft, figures… Who’da thunk the Ultimate Biker Gang Leader and the Ultimate Moral Compass… could have a heart to heart?” Our interests are opposites, but maybe our outlooks aren’t!

“A heart to heart… Yeah…! I’ve gotten to know some of the others, but not like this… I’ve never had a conversation like this before…” He trailed off. I’ve explained my morals and viewpoints to so many people, and that’s always when they give up and leave or reveal their true dark intentions! No
one’s ever gone deeper than that. Even with the others here, who I’ve had good interactions with, I’ve never talked at length about Grandfather or what he did to me... And no one else has confided in me like that before now, either! He showed me the roots of his problems, and I showed him mine... And neither of us turned away! “Is this how friends talk?” Is Mondo my Friend? Can we be Friends? I’ve never wanted anything as much as that...

Mondo looked at him quizzically. “Sometimes, I guess? Kinda depends... You got surface friends and you got people you can really rely on... Ride or die... Like Daiya for me. Or your pops. But they don’t gotta be blood family... Why you ask?”

“Well... I’ve never been able to call someone a friend before. My personality and way of existing... A lot of people can’t stand me. Plus it’s hard for me to communicate and hold ‘normal conversation’... On top of people already hating me for being an Ishimaru...” So much is stacked against me... “I’ve never really had the chance, but I’ve always burned for it with all of my soul...”

Mondo put his arm around Taka’s shoulders. “Hey...” he said simply. “We’re friends.”

“You feel that way too?”

He nodded. “Of course, asshole! That’s why when I’m not angry, I’m nice to you... The second I saw you freeze in the gym, I recognized... Wanted to get to know you... Thought we were friends most of the time already... It just got wrapped in a shitload of layers of bullshit... That’s all.” He squeezed Taka. “Let’s blow this popstand... Nothin’ more to prove to each other.”

It’s past midnight... We’ve been in here for 7 hours... Taka nodded. He couldn't believe he'd broken his schedule like this, and he'd pay for it in stability, but it seemed a worthy tradeoff. They went to stand up... except Taka lost what little stamina he had left and crumpled to the ground, while Mondo slipped on the wet floor and aggravated his foot injury, landing on his back. Mondo cursed while Taka groaned. They laid there for a minute, backs against the tile. They laughed weakly. “Man, what a state we’re in,” Mondo chuckled.

“We better get out of here before we both pass out and die... S-sorry, but I think I’m too weak to stand...” Mondo hummed and carefully picked up Taka, being sure to keep his towel wrapped around his waist, carrying him while limping seriously. Taka grabbed the last few water bottles on the way up, holding them against his stomach.

“Don’t think I can get dressed... Can you bring me back to my room?” Taka asked.

“I would, but uh... I ain’t got the stamina to get us both to our dorms...”

“Can I crash... in yours?”

“Sure, bud,” Mondo said. “I’ll lend ya clothes to sleep in... alright?” They were out of the sauna now. His face is still red. It must be from the exertion.

Taka nodded and burrowed his head into Mondo’s shoulder as he carried him. It was warm and surprisingly comfortable. “You smell like sweat and... cup noodles.”

Mondo’s snort vibrated against Taka. That feels nice... “That bad?”

“No, it’s... comforting.”

Mondo got his door open and gently sat Taka down on his bed as he said, “That’s kinda weird. But in a...” he blushed, and mumbled something that sounded like “cute way...” Did he just... say I’m cute? Am I understanding that correctly...? “But, but uh, anyways... We uh, I uh,” he stammered,
rummaging around in his dresser. He pulled out a pair of huge blue flannel pajamas. “I can help you get these on. After drying you off. If!! If you… Need it?” he asked loudly and squeakily, beet red.

Taka slowly nodded his head, feeling groggy, not noticing how colorful Mondo’s face was or how careful he was being. He wiped Taka down with a fresh towel first. He did what he could to help the process, but he was gassed. He could barely even think. “Mondo?” he asked as Mondo was buttoning up the shirt for him.

“‘Sup?”

“S-sorry for calling you a coward… And assuming you were a ‘rebel’… Without a cause…”

“Me too, for bein’ an asshole.” Taka nodded in understanding.

They were both silent for a while. While Mondo was buttoning up his own shirt, Taka said. “I can’t believe I lost…”

Mondo was rustling around out of Taka’s field of vision. He said, “No way, dude. I barely have more energy than you… You’re the ballsiest person I ever met… You even put the sauna at max…! You’re wild! You totally got this one… You won.”

“Ahahaha,” Taka giggled. “That’s so sweet… You’ve got a big heart, Mondo.”

Mondo flopped down on the other side of the bed, facing him, dressed in a pair of red pajamas and his hair in a silk wrap. They stared at each other, exhausted but unable to tear away their gazes.

Taka broke the companionable quiet. “But… I’m glad this happened. You,” Taka’s sleepy eyes were tearing up again, “You’re my first Friend… I can’t tell you how important this is to me… How important it’ll be to me forever.”

Mondo looked at him with soft, gentle eyes. “Me too, bud.” He lazily ran his fingers through Taka’s hair, ruffling it.

Taka leaned into the touch and closed his eyes. “Good… night… Mondo…”

“Night… Taka…”

They fell asleep facing each other, Taka’s arm resting on Mondo’s side and Mondo’s hand cupping the back of Taka’s head.

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Taka was awake and alert the second the morning bell rang.

He watched Mondo sleep for a minute. I feel so peaceful… I want to just lay here like this and sleep more, but we have to be on time… I can’t handle being late… “Mondo… Hey…” he shook the biker awake.

“Urrrrgh… Wh… Leave me—Huh?” He realized Taka was in his bed with him and blinked slowly. “Oh, right… The sauna.”

Taka nodded, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “What a night…”

“How’d ya sleep?” Mondo yawned.

Taka grinned. “Very well… I feel refreshed. Even though I didn’t get enough hours. Your pillow
covers are pleasant, and sharing your bed was…” Taka blushed. Mondo blushed in return and moved his hand down to the base of Taka’s neck. "I like how his hand feels on my head and neck… I feel peaceful. “I’m so content right now…”

Mondo smiled, chuckling to himself. “Yeah… s-same…” He said with volume, firetruck red.

“These pajamas are really comfortable… Thanks for lending me them! Would you mind if I hold onto them for a while?” I really like this texture… It’s like being wrapped in warm blankets on a cold day. And I know they’ll remind me of him.

Mondo blinked in surprise, then quickly looked away from Taka. “Y-yeah, sure… I usually sleep in my boxers anyway.”

“Y—wh—“ Taka tried desperately to not think about *that*. “U-uh… How come you wore clothes to bed last night then?”

“Didn’t want you t… um… W-well, the water was off and we couldn’t get rid of the g-grime past toweling off, so… I wouldn’t fuck up my bed…?” That sounded more like a question than an answer...

“That’s right,” Taka said, confused and unintentionally giving Mondo an out. “Do you want to do that now? If we hurry, we can make the breakfast meeting… Though I won’t be the first one there… We need to be presentable, plus being nude together helps build trust and strengthen bonds!”

“Y-you sure that’s a good idea?”

The thought of seeing Mondo naked made Taka’s heart flutter but he tried to ignore it. I want to deepen our friendship, that’s the only important thing. “Why?”

“Well, cuz, it’s… It’s… Nothing. Let’s do it,” he said, jumping out of bed, facing away from Taka. “I’ll set up, get the water hot. Th-that’ll take a few minutes… I’ll tell you when it’s ready.” He didn’t wait for a response from Taka before he bolted off to the bathroom.

Taka did stretches while he heard the water running. After he was done, he sat back on the bed. Is the water heater broken? My shower only takes a couple minutes to warm up… He looked up at the clock. It was already 7:15. His chest was getting tight. Agh, we’re gonna be late!

He stood up and made for to the bathroom, quickly slamming open the door. “M—“

“What the FUCK!?” Mondo yelped. He was naked and facing the wall, back to Taka. Taka tried to not admire the view, tearing his eyes away to preserve the other man’s privacy. “G-go back to my dorm! Now!”

Taka went so red he thought he might pass out or his head might explode. Mondo was making very suspicious arm movements. I’m oblivious and naïve… not stupid. “Mondo… Are… Are you…”

The movements stopped as he jumped. “Y-you’re still HERE!? What are you d-doing!?

“No, what are *you* doing!?”

“M-my morning routine!”

“But why *now*!? It’s already quarter after, we’re gonna be late!”

“I c-can’t shower until I’m done! This, I have to do this every morning, ok!?”
“Why can’t we just showe—“

“Too… distracting! I’m, I’m not ready f-for that, okay!? Just, just leave me alone for a few more minutes! Please, man!”

Taka did as requested and closed the door loudly so Mondo knew for sure he was gone this time. What did I… What was he… No, he was *definitely*… Is that why he wore pajamas, so I wouldn’t notice? True to his word, Mondo opened the bathroom door just 3 minutes later. Even Taka could tell he was completely mortified. “Mondo, I’m sorry for interrupting your—“

“N-no, sorry for not warnin’ ya… I uh, we can still shower? If you… want to?”

“Yes, but… It’s already 7:20…”


Taka looked at his lap. Oh… Oh, no! He hadn’t even realized… Now it was his turn to be mortified. He shielded his lap with his hands. “M-Mondo, I can explain—!”

“No! No, no, it’s, it’s okay! It’s… hormones. Yeah, h-hormones. Uh… Do you think you could, um, be finished quick? We could just rinse off…”

Taka swallowed. “I, I can do that…” He felt a little disappointed about not getting to take an actual shower with the biker. I wanted to wash his hair… Friends do that right? “After the meeting… If you want, we can showe—“

“Yes! After!” he said, hastily closing himself back in the bathroom. Taka watched the door for a few seconds, wondering what Mondo was doing on the other side, and if he’d accidentally walk in on Taka like he’d just done to him.

His stomach fluttered in a strange way he didn’t recognize. That’s… Not as scary a thought as it should be.

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After Taka took care of business, they rinsed the dried sweat off their bodies. They kept a distance and didn’t make eye contact. The air was thick with something unresolved. It makes me nervous… But also curious… What is he feeling? What am I even feeling? It’ll have to wait…

Once they dried themselves, Mondo helped Taka sneak back into his own dorm and they started dressing very quickly.

“Hey, uh… I know this is a weird favor to ask… C-can you call me bro during the meeting?”

“Huh? But why?” I don’t get it!

“It’ll keep me from thinking about what just happened. And, I’m not ready… I’m not…”

“Do you mean…?”

Mondo grumbled. “Whatever you’re thinking, the answer’s prolly yes. And I f-feel like… Maybe something more’s there…” He said vaguely. He was looking away from Taka, his closed fists trembling. “But I’m not there yet… So, for now, could we show that with ‘bro’?”
Taka smiled even though Mondo couldn’t see it. “I like that, bro.” I really do. And if it’s what he neeeds, I’m happy to oblige!

Mondo whipped around. “B-bro…”

“Now, bro,” Taka stood up, having just finished tying his boots. “It’s 7:29. Let’s go!”

Mondo nodded and they rushed to the Dining Hall.

“No way!” Hiro laughed. “Taka, not the first one here? The second to last one, specifically!? My visions tell me… Hell has frozen over.”

Taka turned to Mondo. I’m bad at lying, especially on the spot! Without missing a beat, the biker said, “Naaaah… I slept in. He had to drag me outta my room kickin’ and screamin’,” he said with a laugh. “That’s why we’re both later than normal. Thanks for not tellin’ me off *too* hard, bro!”

“Don’t worry, bro! I’ll give it to you plenty later!” Hifumi sprayed out his milk directly onto Hiro, who dropped his sandwich onto the floor. Mondo looked at Taka for an instant with a very… constipated expression.

What!? I must have said something wrong!

“I’m bad at lying, especially on the spot!” Taka added in a huff.

“Give you a planner, so you have better time management!”

“What the hell, Hifumi!” Hiro yelled at the other boy, grossed out.

“Sorry! Th-that wasn’t just me this time… right? You all heard it too, right!?”

Celeste snickered. “It was definitely… poorly phrased.”

“Hahah, *what’s* poorly phrased!” Taka said cheerily. I can guess how Hifumi interpreted that, knowing him… but I’m not going to validate it!

“He’s never phrased anything poorly in his life!”

“S-sure, yeah! Hahaha, That’s right, bro!” I hope he doesn’t actually think I’m infallible!!

“… So, why are you two all friendly now?” Sakura asked.

“We bared our souls to each other!” Mondo said.

“And finally worked stuff out… and now we’re bros!” Kyoko was watching them, a small smile of amusement on her face. Oh no, she can see straight through us! “S-simple as that!” Taka said.

“Bared your souls…?” Hifumi asked.

“What, like those old bonding rituals our ancestors did?” Hiro said. “Who even does that anymore!?”

“We do!” They said simultaneously put their arms around each other, laughing uproariously.

“So, you used the Sauna?” Hifumi asked.

“Yep! Bro and I had a competition to see who could last longest!” Taka said.

“Taka’s limits were a higher mountain than I could climb!” Mondo said at the same time as Taka said, “Mondo’s endurance lasted longer than any marathon I could run!”
“Bahahaha! What are you talkin' about, bro?” Mondo yelled.

“Kahahaha! What are YOU talkin' about, bro!” Taka yelled.

“What... the...?” Said Makoto, who walked in the room. Late!

“Hey, Makoto!” Mondo said excitedly before Taka could admonish the hoodie-wearing man.

I should thank him first! Taka shouted, “Thank you so much for acting as our witness yesterday!” If he hadn’t been there at the start, who knows what would’ve happened... We might not have resolved our issues and come to understand each other!

“Huh? Are they... friends now?” Makoto asked the rest of the group.

“They've been like this all morning,” Hina explained. “They were all buddy-buddy as soon as they walked in. It feels gross.”

“Feels gross? Hell no. Feels *great*, more like!” Mondo shouted. The best feeling ever!

“This almost feels like sexual harassment, somehow...” Hina said morosely. Is she thinking like Hifumi is? Why would she say that about our new bond...?

Taka chimed in, “Forget her, bro. A girl like her just doesn’t get our manly bond!” What he said last night... You don’t have to be blood relations to be close. He was overcompensating, but it was almost intoxicating to share this with Mondo. “Friendship between men is stronger than blood! A woman could never understand!” Oh no, that’s too much! I’ll have to apologize to her later!!! He shot an apologetic glance her way but she still just looked uncomfortable.

“What you just said?” Mondo hooted. “Bro, that was cool as shit! I should get a tattoo of it!”

“No, bro, you mustn't! Your body is a temple, given to you by your loving parents!” And it wasn’t a good commen-- shoot! He glanced over at Mondo who didn’t indicate any stress at the mention of his parents. Phew...

Makoto inquired, “So, um... who won the contest?”

“Who gives a shit!” Mondo roared.

“Yeah, don’t ask stupid questions!” Taka shouted. “What matters is that we both took part in it together!”

“That's... completely different from what you were saying last night.”

Taka struck his pose. “Forget it, Makoto! Forget… Forget it… FORGET IT BEAM!” He pointed his cupped hands in Makoto’s direction.

It didn’t have the intended effect this time either.

“Whaaaaaat! Bro, you gotta teach me that move sometime!” Mondo and Taka just laughed harder.

“Friendship between men seems very... simplistic,” Sakura commented. “Nothing like what I'm used to with girls.” What does she mean?

Hina replied, “Yeah, for real...”
After breakfast finished, the group scattered. Kyoko, however, stayed behind to talk to Taka and Mondo.

“…” She was watching them with a stoic but intrigued look.

“Yeah, Kyoko?” Mondo asked.

“You two realized you have more in common than you thought? And you *finally* resolved the tension between you?”

Mondo looked astonished, but Taka nodded eagerly. “We’re friends, now. Officially. No more confusion, mixed signals, passive aggression… Right, bro?”

“Right, bro!” Mondo winked at him.

“Hmmmm… There’s still something there.”

“Whaddya mean?” Mondo asked.

“Well, I’m sure you have plenty of time to iron out exactly what you want to be for each other…” she said, turning her head. *What was that look?*

“Mondo’s my good friend. I feel like we’ve known each other for longer than this.”

“… Sometimes, you meet people who slot so well alongside you it’s like they were always there.”

Mondo and Taka looked at each other. “What does she mean, bro?”

“No fuckin’ clue, bro.”

She looked Mondo square in the eye. “Mondo. I know you’re insecure about a lot of things. But let Taka help. And Taka, you do the same. I… have a request.”

Mondo blinked in surprised. “Huh?”

*If she has a request, that must mean she trusts me somehow!* It was another nice feeling. “Yes, Kyoko?”

The corners of her lips were ever so marginally pointing downward. Taka unconsciously squinted at her, trying to pinpoint her expression. *She looks… vaguely… slightly… sad…?* “Whatever you determine your relationship to be, live it to the fullest of your abilities.”

They both felt compelled to nod at her. She bowed and exited the room.

“Bro, what the hell was that?”

“She’s really intuitive… She’s given me words of encouragement before. That must be what those were.”

“I mean, same. But that was… outta left field. Were we too obvious?”

*About whatever he was hinting at?* “No, I don’t think it’s that… Through her powers of observation, I think she’s put together things about us we haven’t even figured out for ourselves yet.”

Mondo was mystified. “Huh… Whatever. Let’s head back to my room.”
After picking up Taka’s clothes from the Bathhouse locker, they walked with their arms casually slung over each other’s backs.

Once they got settled in, Taka had a question.

“Mondo… Was all that touching part of being bros?”

“Well, just ask right away, why don’tcha!” Mondo startled.

I don’t get it.

“I am…?”

He sighed. “Nah, bro. I like that kind of physicality with people. I didn’t mean to fall asleep with my hand in your hair though…”

Taka’s eyes crinkled. “I’ve never had this with someone before.”

“… D-Do you mind it?” He seems really self-conscious!

“Mind it? I love it! Sleeping here with you… Your hand in my hair… That’s the most comfortable I’ve been in years.”

Mondo let out a breath Taka didn’t realize he’d been holding. “Phew… I was kinda scared you wouldn’t want it… Which, you know, that’d be fine, but… I uh,” he swallowed, “I want to… touch you.”

I’ve never done this, but I think this is how you do it! Taka carefully pulled Mondo into his lap to cuddle and smiled radiantly at him like they’d done it a million times already. Mondo looked up at him with wonder in his eyes, then wrapped around Taka’s midsection. “Mondo… You touched mine last night, can I touch yours now?”

“H-huh!? I did!?!?”

“W-Wh— Oh my god! No! Your… your hair!” Taka facepalmed. We *definitely* would have both noticed that! “Can I card through it, like you did for me?”

“Ain’t heard that one before…” He rolled onto his back, gesturing for Taka to go ahead. Taka proceeded, gently running his fingers through the pompadour’s curls. “Why?” He leaned into the touch.

“I liked how it felt last night… I wanted to give you that, too.”

“This is a rare honor, y’know… Mmmgh… That’s good shit right there…” They laid there with each other for a while, Taka stroking Mondo’s hair.

“It’s so soft. I thought it’d be stiff as a—as a rock.”

“Pppffft, do you think I bake it on my head?”

“No… but it held up its own towel last night…!”

“I dunno anythin’ about *that*…” Mondo said playfully. “I don’t need a whole can of hair glue or somethin’, if that’s whatcha mean. It’s just my hair texture, how it’s cut, brushing, some easy spray, and some moisturizer.”

“You have straight hair in back, though?”
“Oh, yeah, it’s straightened. Man, you shoulda seen me back before I had the pomp. I had a full fro.”

“Really!?”

“Yep. The 70’s were a hell of a time,” he said, pretending to take a drag from a cigar.

Like many things, this flew completely over Taka’s head. “But… You’re 18! And so am I! You’d be in your forties!?”

“I’m just pullin’ your leg, bro. When I’m totally natural, though, I rock an afro.”

“All this time, I thought you were just doing the classic biker punch perm look!”

“Naw, I don’t need to imitate somethin’ I already got! Besides, this is way better than any of that phony shit!” He said. “My ma’s Afro-Japanese.” They sat there in comfortably, cuddling and dozing in the peaceful quiet for a while.

After a few hours, they finally showered together, for real this time. Neither had trouble with the fact that the other was naked right next to them. He must’ve been right earlier… It was just hormones. Having someone wash his hair and scrub his back, and getting to do the same, made Taka feel very relaxed and content.

Post drying off, they parted ways for the day so they could work on their own projects. Mondo came by to help with the Warehouse several times. Before the night bell, Taka asked, voice barely a whisper, “D-do you… Want to sleep in my bed tonight?”

Mondo looked awestruck. “R-really?” Taka nodded. Once the bell rang, Taka took him by the hand and lead him into his room, where their night garments were conveniently still sitting from the morning. Taka had folded them during the day.

They slept comfortably and well, their feet tangled under the covers.

Chapter End Notes

stay tuned for more gay in the next few chapters!
The next day, they kept up the bro shtick at breakfast. Afterward, they went back to Taka’s room and laid on his bed for a while, just enjoying each other’s presence.

Eventually, Mondo said, “Ya know how I said how I have a lot of feelings?”

“Yeah, Mondo?”

“Well… I uh. I think you’re… I think you’re cute,” he breathed with volume. He buried his face in Taka’s side.

“Like, attractive…?” A muffled grunt in his ribs, “I… wasn’t misunderstanding you the other night!?” *No one’s… ever…* He wasn’t sure what that made him feel, other than that it was pleasant.

“Would we be snugglin’ like this if ya were?”

“Oh… So this isn’t just a friends thing?”

Mondo cleared his throat. “I-if that’s… what you want it to be, it is. Close friends can touch... But it doesn’t have to be just that…” He accidentally yelled into Taka’s side. Taka didn’t say anything for awhile, contemplating it, trying to untangle his own feelings. *Is this why my heart’s swelling…?* Mondo was getting shaky and flighty. He wormed out of Taka’s lap, sat up, and put his hand on the other boy’s knee. “S-sorry, I don’t wanna do anythin’ you don’t wa—“

“That’s not it, I,” Taka breathed. “I want… I want this too…”

“*This* this?” He spread his arms in an all-encompassing gesture. “Or… just this?” He pinched his fingers together.

“I’m not sure… what you’re asking me.”

Mondo grumbled, his face in his hands. “I ain’t good at this! I get all nervous and loud when I’m talkin’ like this with people I like!!”

“You’re usually somewhat loud!” Taka pointed out, totally not getting it.
“So are you! But I yell when I’m with people I wanna date—Hrk!” He cringed and shoved his face down onto the bed. “I said it out loud! AaaaaaaaAAAAGH!” His yelling was somewhat cut off by the mattress.

Taka patted him on the knee. *Wait…*“Mondo, are you saying… You want to… Date… me… ?”
*I’m… What is this feeling? Like I’m full of butterflies…*

“Can’t just spit it out, can I? Y-yeah, that’s what I’m… tryin’ to say… D-do you want that too!?” he said, voice unintentionally loud and accusatory. *This is it… That’s what was laying under the confusion before we talked in the sauna… That’s what that pull was.*

Taka rested his hands on Mondo’s. *I hope this helps steady him.* “I’ve never experienced feelings like this… I do, Mondo. I want to date you…”

Mondo looked absolutely shocked. “But we haven’t even known each other long… Or been on a date!”

“So? You just said you feel the same way…”

“Ain’t this too fast!?”

Taka shrugged. “From what I’ve read, that’s relative… Sometimes it takes people years to end up together… Others, a few hours…” *This is new to me… I wouldn’t know… But it feels… It feels right.*

Mondo looked very *vulnerable*. “A-are you sure?”

“Mondo… I didn’t know what it was, but I’ve had this feeling since our first interactions… And I was never afraid of you even though almost everyone else was. Plus, your hot-and-cold approach to me stung me hard… I feel things deeply, but it hurt so much worse than it had any right to… I spent days trying to figure out what it was you wanted… What you thought about me… Thinking about you at random, sometimes inappropriate times… Hoping with all my heart we could get to know each other… I wanted to be close to you from the beginning, and I believe this is the kind of closeness I truly desire…!”

Mondo sat up and hugged him tight. “I’m s-sorry for before, Kiyotaka. My feelings are so mixed up, I thought bein’ an asshole would make them go away…”

“So I wasn’t just a random target of your anger?”

“No, you were. But the last couple times, I thought if I was nasty, it’d push you away so you’d stop hurting, so you’d stop bein’ so nice, and I could stop feelin’ like that… That’s why the books thing happened.” *I see…*

“Mondo… You kind of dragged me through the mud with all that…” He leaned his head in the crook of Mondo’s shoulder. *But I don’t… I don’t mind…*

“Yeah… ‘s real stupid of me. I’m sorry, Taka.”

“No… I’m… It hurt, and it wasn’t the best course of action… But you were hurting and afraid and confused too. You lashed out in fear.” *He didn’t know what else to do. I hold him accountable, but self-flagellating won’t do anything but hurt him more.*

“You don’t gotta accept my apology or anythin’… I just, I just want you to know why it happened and how guilty I feel about it…” His voice broke and he ran his fingers through his pompadour, looking away from Taka. With how his shoulders were sagging, Taka could read how much that
weighed him down. I wonder what else he’s carrying… I hope one day, I can help him ease the burden.

“I understand, Mondo. I don’t hold it against you.”

“How can you not!”

Taka chuckled kindly. “Hahaha! Well… You’re responsible for your actions, right?” He clearly feels guilt for this. “Anyway, I always try to face forward and learn when things go sour! If you hadn’t pushed me to my breaking point, and I hadn’t done the same because of that… would we be here right now? Would we have ever tried to outdo each other to the point where we came together…?”

“I never thought of it like that…”

“It wasn’t healthy… But we were working with the tools and knowledge we had! So… Let’s work on that together, ok? Let’s face our feelings… And find out how to express them well!” In the end it was worth it, but we shouldn’t make the same mistakes again!


“But am I wrong!”

“Hahahaha…! Not in the least, bro. That sounds great…”

“I don’t know much about relationships of any kind… So you’ll have to show me how all this works. I-if you want to? I’m sorry to ask that of y--”

“Oh, no books to study on romance, huh?” Taka blushed and grumbled. How did he know I’d look? Mondo winked at him. “Just kiddin’, bud.” O-oh… ‘Figurin’ this out with ya… I ain’t hardly ever wanted anything more than that!”

They were pressing their foreheads together and smiling. They parted later to take care of business and reconvened for bed.

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They kept up the act, as usual. The others were reacting to it less and less negatively, understanding after three days that it was just how things were between them now.

Mondo and Taka swam together. During one of the breaks in their racing, Taka asked Mondo, “Hey… Are you, er… What do you identify as?”

“A human being! Mondo! Me!” Mondo looked at him strangely. “What, ya think I’m an alien or somethin’?” Yeah, that was poorly phrased.

“No, I mean, are you LGBT…?”

He kind of laughed. “Oh… That was dumb. On my end! Not yours,” he quickly clarified, seeming to realize how Taka might take that vague comment. He scratched his neck. “Uhh… Guess ya could call me bi? I’m mostly attracted to girls, but.” He gestured to Taka. “I don’t really care about shit like gender... If I like ‘em, I like ‘em, end of story.” He shrugged.

“What do you mean by ‘I guess you could call me’? Are you not out…?” I thought that was what he meant before…

Mondo sighed and took a while to start talking. “Nah… I only got it a couple years ago. I had it bad
for my bodyguard. Takemichi… Without him, no way I coulda kept on after Daiya’s…” He looked away, swallowing. Taka put a hand on his shoulder. “Man, if you think I’m an angry person now, you shoulda saw me before Takemichi helped me cool down… He’s stubborn as fuck *and* he has a level head, I didn’t stand a chance! He’s kinda my confidant…”

Taka smiled. He was glad he had someone like Takemichi in his life. “Huh, so you like stubborn people, bro?” He chuckled.

Mondo blushed. “S-shut up, bro…” Taka patted him on the arm. “So anyhow… when my feelings got too strong, I asked him about it. Shit, you think it took me a while to finally say somethin’ to *you*… It was years for him… He totally had to explain what they were… I’d never even thought about bein’ attracted to anyone but girls before.” He wiped his hand down his face in embarrassment.

“Do you call each other ‘bro’, too…?” I feel… inadequate? Not jealous… I really am glad he has someone like that! I just wish Mondo and I got to spend that kind of time together. Though I would’ve gone off the deep end from having to deal with mixed signals for so long… But that makes me even more driven to make this happen…! The future is bright for us!

“Nah… See, since he was my bodyguard, we were already hangin’ out all the time. It’s not like we were suddenly together 24/7, it had always been like that. Plus… I’m not just callin’ you bro as a cover. You know that, right?”

“N-no…?”

You asked me to call you that and said why… What reason would I have to expect something else? I’m not exactly a psychic…

“I’m real bad at explainin’…” He said apologetically. “To me, someone who’s your ‘bro’ is someone you can see a long-term future with… It’s, like, a real close friend… Even if you don’t know exactly which direction it’ll go… I’m not just getting’ to know ya because I want a quick fuck, ok?” Taka jumped a little bit. Neither of them had even remotely begun to address the sexual tension between them. Sexual activity…? I’ve never… I don’t know if I… Well, in the end, that’s prohibited in school, so I don’t need to worry about it now. Mondo noticed but played it off, smiling at Taka. “We’re friends because we wanna be, and we’re datin’ because we wanna be, because we feel that way. I ain’t called someone ‘bro’ like this before you. You make me wanna *try*… Does that make sense…?”

“M-Mondo… I understand… I get it, bro. Did you and Takemichi ever date?”

“Yes. He’s gay. We tried for a while, but we realized we’re more like brothers than like… husbands, I guess?”

*What on earth does that mean?* “A-are you saying we’re husbands!? Isn’t that… A little early?” I’ve heard of people getting engaged right away, but that’s too fast even for me! I know we have strong feelings for one another, but we haven’t even figured out what we want to be yet! Same-gender marriage isn’t even legal in Japan!!

“Agh! N-no! I’m just sayin’, Takemichi and my relationship doesn’t work with romance! Don’t feel that spark with each other… But I do with you…”

“Oh, so it’s like… Platonic versus romantic?” I’ve never had the luxury of feeling romantically toward someone before… Or someone feeling like that toward me… So all this goes over my head…

“Yeah…”

“So, exactly what is it we feel toward each other…? What is romance, to you?”
“I’m so bad at talkin’ like this…” He hid his face in his hands.

So am I!

“But Mondo, we have to be transparent in how we feel… That way, we can be even closer!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know… But I’m shit at explainin’, and you have to figure out how you feel!” He complained. “Which ain’t bad, but the pair of us being like that makes this so much harder…”

“We work with what he have, right…? So, we start by determining that.” That’s what my therapists taught me…

“I guess, uh, I guess you could say, platonic feelings are when you see someone as family... Like a brother, or a mother, or real close friend or whatever… Romantic is more like a spouse. Both have some kind of commitment… But ya wouldn’t fuck or marry or have kids with your siblin’.” Taka startled a little bit. No, you wouldn’t! “A good romance – you shouldn’t only be sexual with your partner, you’re also friends. N-not that sex has to happen for romance…”

“Well, for me, I know I want you in my life for a long time… But I want everyone else to be, too… I’ve never had potential friends before, and I don’t wanna let them go…” Taka admitted. But there’s something different between those and this…

“Thing is… Sometimes any kind of relationships can be short term… People… Leave… Sometimes for good reason, sometimes not. Sometimes forever…” He cleared his throat. “But you gotta pick yourself up and keep movin’, right? If they really cared about ya, that’s what they’d want.”

“I know my feelings for you are different than the others, aside from being more intense… But I can’t wrap my mind around just how?”

“It’s hard to explain for anyone,” Mondo reassured. “It’s confusin’. But for me, I wanna be close with you in every way we can be, that you wanna be… However long it lasts. If we can get outta this shitstain in one piece, I can see us together for a long time…”

“That’s what I want, too… But… what if we can never leave this place?” What if he’d cast me aside if we’re stuck here…!? I don’t have a middle name… Especially not that! Don’t sully my name with your cursing!” He said. Mondo chuckled. “But… Mondo, I don’t want you to leave—Er, I’m really sorry, that was manipulative.” He was very aware of how that sentiment could be used to abuse. Grandfather… We
couldn’t move out from his grip without a months-long fight… “What I mean is,” he licked his dry lips, trying to determine better phrasing, “I don’t want this to end…”

“Bro, I know whatcha mean. No worries. You’re not tryin’ to guilt me into stayin’, you’re just showing me you care and want this to last. ‘S not bad to express that.”

“But if I do… am I not telling you how to feel…? Am I not making you make that commitment?”

“Nope… If you were, I wouldn’t be so happy right now.” He stroked Taka’s back. “I don’t take well to people telling me how to feel… Or tellin’ me I gotta stay. But that ain’t what’s happening here… we’re just tryin’ to help each other explain and understand our feelings.”

“But if you stay, doesn’t that mean it’s because I told you?” I desperately want him to stay… but the concept of trapping people… I can’t… I can’t take that either…

“Taka, you’re bein’ really hard on yourself. If I stay, with anyone, it’s cuz I want to.”

“You want to? And it’s not because of what I said, right?”

“You betcha I do. Of my own free will. Nothin’ you said changed that.”

“How can you know that?”

Even if he doesn’t realize it, something I’ve said might have impacted him…

“Because I felt like that before this conversation.”

“O-oh…! I did too… "If he had that feeling before just now… it must be true..."

“We’ll play it by ear, alright? What we want our future to be, how we wanna be… We’ll work on that as we go. And we’ll go whatever pace we need, ok?”

Taka nodded. “Mondo… Thank you.”

“What for?”

“For pushing yourself to talk like this with me…” He’s shown how hard it is for him… I can’t let that effort go unappreciated!

“Heh… You’re welcome. And you too, y’know. You… How I feel about ya makes me wanna push myself, really work to express shit.” He was blushing again.

“Because… That way, we can truly understand one another?” Mondo hummed, affirmative. “I’m so happy we have this, bro.”

“Bro… Me too.” They sat there for a while, relaxing.

Eventually, Mondo dripped a little water down Taka’s back, smiling mischievously. “Aaaaagh! Bro!! Why!!! D-detention!!!!” He automatically splashed water at Mondo in return and it landed directly in his open mouth.

“Pffft!!!” He spit out the water. “Pool water… Nasty!”

“That’s what you get for ruining our peaceful moment!” Taka said in a huff.

“I uh, wanted to ask ya somethin’. I’m bad at that.”
“Ah…” Taka sighed. “What is it, bro?”

“What we were talking about before… what’s your sexuality and all that?”

“I’ve known I like my own gender since I was small.” Even when I was in first grade…

“If you dunno how romantic feelings are, then…?”

“I saw people around holding hands or kissing and wanted that with others… For my sexuality, sometimes I wanted to be close with someone of the same gender in whatever way a married couple is even if I couldn’t pin down what that entails. I’m gay. Are you sure you’re ok with me talking about this?” We’ve talked so much about how I feel… Too much? He’s told me how he feels, but have I been oversharing!?

“Huh? Why wouldn’t I be…?”

“I don’t wanna burden you with how I feel.” That’s all my feelings are… A burden to myself, and to everyone else…

“You ain’t, I’m askin’! And if it was a burden, I’d gladly help you carry it.” H-huh!?

“Alright…” Don’t fall back into clamming up, Taka, he just said he wants to know! He took a deep breath. He felt remnants of shame bubble in his stomach. “I have some… weird feelings about gender.”

“Oh! Uh, what I said earlier… Are you okay with being referred to as a guy…?”

“Yeah. For now at least. You know, I kind of feel smothered by it sometimes. I mean, gender’s something we assign to people anyway, but it’s a burden for me, people having decided who I am before I could even cry… But I’m not sure if I feel strangely about gender because I do *myself* or because of all the norms my grandfather forced me to meet!” The picture of A Man, even since I was small and had no idea what a man even was…

Mondo scratched his ear. “I dunno much about gender stuff aside from the bits Michi told me, but… Well… Either way, they’re your feelings, yeah? Even if they’re ripples from that asshole… Figure yourself out, ya know?”

“Even if it turns out down the road I reimagine myself as a different gender, or change pronouns, or something? Even if I stay exactly the same?” His encouragement… It seems sincere, but I just…

“Yep!”

He asked incredulously, “Why are you so okay with this…?” I’m baffled… He’s so accepting about it? He’s so ‘chill’… I wouldn’t expect a biker to be so… Especially not in our culture… No, it’s more than just tolerance…

“Huh?”

“So many people would flip their lids and end it here… or worse.” Some of my former therapists even did…

“All of it’s about you… not me. I know how its to get shut down like that. Even if I didn’t, I want ya to do what makes you happy, and I’d totally follow your lead, bro. You said earlier we can work together on what’s healthy, right?” Taka nodded. “Well, there you go.”
How is it so simple for him…? It’s intoxicating… The chains of shame inside him felt a little more brittle than they had before. He’s right… My feelings are my feelings, and it’s okay to express them. “I’m out to my current therapists and my dad. He’s been supportive all the way. You said you’re not?”

“Takemichi… He’s out, but as the leader of the gang, I…” he shut his eyes. “I can’t be. The kind of controversy… It could easily get me killed. Or worse yet, my crew…”

“I understand…” Does he just love them more than himself, or does he just not care about himself at all? “You really care for them, huh? Your crew?”

“Some of ‘em are snot-nosed punks… But yeah. I can never forgive myself if somethin’ happens to ‘em…” He went quiet for few minutes. How much does he hate himself? Or is it apathy? “D-do you wanna call it off? Cuz I’m not out?”

“Sorry, call *what* off?”

“What we got goin’ here…”

“No way!” Taka said without an ounce of hesitation in his mind. “As long as you don’t hide me in a box and keep me a total secret, I can deal with that. One day, I’ll make everything better for us anyway, and then, we can truly be ourselves…!”

“Taka…” Mondo breathed.

“W-what?” His stomach started knotting up. “Did I say something wr—“

“No… Your passion… ’S like a light in the dark… I’m a moth…”

“M-Mondo… I…” He’s drawn toward me? I feel drawn to him, too…

“Can I kiss you? O-on the cheek?” I’ve never had that, either…

Taka nodded, “PDA is against the rules… But I’ll allow it… Since it’s just on the cheek, and is within the bounds of friendly greeting… Just this once.” “Don’t think you’ll get off lightly…!” Mondo smirked while he leaned in and pecked him softly. Oh… That makes *me* feel nice, too. After Mondo straightened his posture, Taka pushed himself up using the edge of the pool and planted one on his corresponding cheek, catching the other man off guard.

“You gonna send me to detention, Mr. Hall Monitor?” He touched where Taka had kissed him, surprised.

“No… I believe you’ve faced appropriate punishment! This time!!” He crossed his arms, a stern look on his face. Mondo rolled his eyes. Taka broke into a goofy grin. “Seriously though… Let’s keep that to private quarters!”

We’ve been in here for 3 hours already. I feel like a raisin! I’m surprised how fast it went by, just getting to know each other… They started to get out of the pool when a voice asked, “So… you guys are done, right?”

“Ehhhh!?” Mondo said, slipping and falling back into the pool with a huge splash.

“Wh—Mondo!” Taka cried out. He knelt and pulled Mondo back to the edge. “Are you okay!?"

“Who the fuck--!” He sputtered.
“Oh, sorry!” Hina said, walking over from the bleachers, looking guilty. “I didn’t mean to scare you!”

“H-Hina!?” Taka yelled. What is she doing here!? Mondo shouted, “What the hell!?!”

“How long were you there!?!?”

“D-did you see…?”

“Heyyyy, one at a time! I don’t have two mouths to answer you, you know…! I was just waiting to use the pool.”

“B-b-but, how long—“ Taka started. We’ve been in here for three whole hours!

“Well, I came in around when you when you were talking about… What was it… Tanukimochi?”

“It’s T-Takemichi!” Mondo shouted.

Taka asked, trying to be the calm one, “So… You heard that entire conversation!??” Hina shrugged. “Why didn’t you say anything!?” I feel exposed! I like Hina, but she didn’t need to hear any of that!!

“Didn’t wanna interrupt!” she said happily. “Oh, Taka! By the way – I realized the other night that cherry bismarcks look a lot like you! Red eyes, red filling… Pale dough for your skin… And dark icing, for your dark hair! Or if you had a powdered or white-iced one, it’d be like your uniform!”

“What the f… Are you… hitting on him!?”

“What!?” Taka said in alarm, still not having processed fully that Hina had heard almost the entirety of that talk he and Mondo had. That sounds bad! What does that even entail!? Is she going to hit me!?! Why!?!?!

“Huhhhhhhh…? No way…! You’re totally misreading the situation!”

“What the hell are you talking about!?”

“Oh –“ Taka caught up. “She introduced me to donuts last week, that’s all!” Is that what he thought she was ‘hitting on me’ for, whatever that means?

“But how the hell is that relevant n—“

“I’m pretty scatterbrained!” she said without a care in the world. “But uh… No! Taka, I think you’re cool and all, but I am absolutely not interested in you in that way!” She… thinks I’m cool!?

“You better not’ve been watching to see us kis—“ Mondo started.

Hina made a face. “No! What do you take me for, some kind of creep!? I could just tell it was an important discussion for you to have… I knew I sensed something about you two, but now I know I was right!”

“Is that why you made that comment about sexual harassment the other day!?” Taka asked. Did she think we… We… Had intercourse!?

“I assumed you must have… you know… in the sauna!” That comment makes sense now, but!
“H-Hina, that’s… That’s an absolutely massive breach of school conduct! We were in a public space!! I would never!!!”

“… So are you saying you didn’t?” She asked.

“No!” Mondo yelled. “N-not that I never would—“ He said, trying to validate Taka.

“W-what?!” Taka went beet red and started to sweat.

“Awww, man! Guess I owe Sakura 50 Monocoins then…”

“Y-you had a bet with her!?” Mondo screamed.

“She was all, ‘Hina, they’re in the infancy of… whatever *that* is, and I don’t think either of them are the type to have sex right away, on top of it being against campus rules’,,” she said in a very close impersonation of Sakura both in body language and voice. “Man, she’s like some kind of sage…!”

“Wait, what did you mean you sensed something about us?” Taka asked, trying to ignore that someone thought about him doing *that*, much less doing *that* in school.

“Oh, my gay-dar was totally pinging!” she laughed.

“I’m bi!” Mondo shouted defensively. Then covered his mouth, having forgotten someone else could’ve overheard.

“My gay-dar and bi-spy were pinging!” she corrected herself. Mondo threw up his hands.

“But ‘gay-dar’ and concepts like it aren’t even a real thing,” Taka said, “It’s just a myth straight people—“

Hina belly laughed. “Awwwww, this is so funny! It’s adorable! I wish Sakura were with me to see it!”

The girl’s locker room door opened. “I am…” Sakura stuck her head out the door, blushing.

“Heeeeeey, come join us! This is pretty lively!”

“IS THERE ANYONE ELSE IN THE LOCKERROOMS WE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IF SO PLEASE SHOW YOURSELF IMMEDIATELY OR I WILL REPORT YOU TO THE DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE!” Taka bellowed, freaking out and trying to take control of the snowballing gay disaster.

“Not in mine,” Sakura said calmly. She knocked on the blue door several times but there was no response.

“Looks like we’re good,” Hina said.

“We are NOT good!” Mondo roared. “Y-you both could tell!? You both heard that conversation…?!?”

“Let me explain,” Sakura said soothingly. “First, neither Hina nor I are straight. You’re among compatriots.”

“Yeah!” Hina said excitedly. “You’re talkin’ to a couple of big ol’ lady-lovers right here… Especially Sakura!”
Sakura smiled. “That is very true. I’m bi too, but women are amazing.”

Taka’s eyes glimmered. “I’ve never known anyone else—“

Mondo had his hands in his hair in agony. “Wait! That’s not what’s important right now!! One thing at a god damn time… So, you, uh, heard all that??” Both of the women nodded. “Fuck my life… Will you keep our secret or…!?!?” They’d better! He’s not ready for anyone to know!

“Your secret is safe with me,” Sakura assured him. “I promise I won’t out you. I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“Saaaaaame here,” Hina chirped. She mimed zipping her mouth shut.

Mondo was clutching at his chest, starting to turn odd colors. “Mondo…?” Taka asked. “Are you alright?”

“P-p-panicking!”

Taka helped him over to the bleachers and sat him down. “It’s going to be okay, bro.” He wrapped himself around Mondo from behind like he was expecting a piggyback ride. This might help him center himself…

“Breathe with me, Mondo. One, two, three, four…” Sakura said. She’s helping him like she has me before!

He did his best to comply, and it got easier as they went.

After twenty minutes of that, with Hina checking his pulse intermittently, Mondo was through the panic attack. He sighed, getting his bearings. “S-sorry for freakin’ out and needing help…”

“Mondo!” Taka said, moving beside him and grasping his hand. “You did nothing wrong.”

“That was very stressful for you,” Sakura added. Hina nodded. “It’s only natural you’d freak out.”

“What do you need right now, bro?” Taka asked.

“m thirsty… And can we talk about all this? Point by point, please…?” Hina filled up her thermos with water from a nearby water fountain and passed it to him; he drank from it greedily. “Thanks.”

“Alright,” Taka said, taking charge for everyone’s sakes. “First things first. You heard that conversation… Meaning you heard what Mondo said about not being out, and about what could happen to him and his gang if people found out.” The girls nodded. “Do you promise you won’t tell anyone?”

“Of course,” Sakura said. “No need to worry about that. I can keep a secret.”

“So can I! Especially one about my fellow LGBT kids…”

Mondo exhaled. “And you both could tell we were…”

“Well,” Hina said, “I had a bit of a vibe from Taka. You too Mondo, but I ignored it because you’re kind of an ass.”

Taka snorted, then looked away, embarrassed at the slip-up. Mondo looked at her with a conceding smile. “You ain’t wrong…” She really isn’t.

“But,” Sakura said, “That’s clearly not all there is to you.”
“I wouldn’t be holding you hand if it were!” Taka said, smiling with his eyes closed. Mondo blushed.

“I-it didn’t have anything to do with how we look, right? Or how we act…?” I mean, we’re both muscular, and the usual stereotype for gay men is lithe and effeminate, right? So that must not be it.

“Nope, not at all!” Hina said. “Sometimes LGBT people can just sort of unconsciously vibe with each other on a secret rainbow wavelength only we have access to. Like, some kind of Queer Cipher Radio.”

“Well, we were kind of drawn toward each other,” Taka said thoughtfully. “Maybe that’s why?”

“I guess that makes sense, though it’s not all of it. I got a crush on ya because of who you are, not because I could sense your sexuality,” Mondo explained.

Taka smiled toothily, then became serious again. “Regarding the sauna, though… You two had a bet going? It was just you two, right?”

Sakura nodded. “With how different you two were acting toward each other, something had clearly happened between you.”

“We just disagreed on what it was,” Hina said. “By the way Sakura, remind me to give you the money when you come by later.” Sakura nodded.

“Why did you think it was… intercourse…?” Taka struggled to ask Hina, an alarming shade of red. Mondo passed him the water in a timely fashion.

“You were naked, all alone, with no cameras, in a sauna, all night, and the next morning you were acting like you’d been close for years! Resolving sexual tension can *totally* do that.” Hina said.

“Oh…” Mondo said, pink. “When ya put it that way…"

“On the flipside, however, so can resolving other tension, like what had been boiling between you two for a while.”

Taka nodded. “Kyoko… seems to have noticed it too.” But what else has she caught on to?

“Did anyone else?” Mondo asked.

“I mean, your dynamic was mega weird, so probably, but I don’t think anyone thought you’d work it all out overnight.”

“We didn’t! After all, you heard what we were saying…” Taka said. We have plenty of things to progress on. But what do they think about *that*…

“You have work to do, as do we all,” Sakura said encouragingly.

“And that’s exactly why we let you be! Right, Sakura?”

“Yes, Hina,” she said. “And I stayed in the girls’ room to make sure I wouldn’t interrupt you.”

“I have a question,” Taka said, trying not to grind his teeth in distress. “Do you… The gender stuff… Do you hate me now?”

“Huh? No, not at all Taka!” Hina said.
“I’ve met plenty of exclusionary people, even within our community. They’re the ones who don’t belong… not you,” Sakura assured. “We’re on your side. More than you know.”

“So you’re totally fine with me being like that…?” he said, disbelieving.

“I know a bunch of other trans and non-binary people. I’m more than fine with you being like that!”

“Like Mondo said earlier… It’s about who *you* are and want to be.” Sakura said, nodding. “Not what someone projects for you… be it doctors, family, society, one of us, the community, anyone really. To dislike you for that… It’d be hypocritical and cruel, to say the least.”

Taka was on the verge of tears. *I think they mean it.* “I didn’t expect that, either… How did I get so lucky for three people on the same day to be so accepting of me…?”

“Well, Makoto’s the one with the Ultimate Luck ability,” Hina said. “So, good question.”

“It’s because you deserve kindness and compassion, and you happened to have become friends with three people who clearly value that as well, even if first appearances might suggest otherwise.”

“Friends…?” Mondo squeezed his hand. “You two… you’re my friends?” he asked timidly.

“Of course, silly!” Hina giggled.

“And not in the way that all of us students are…?” *We’re not just peers?*

“Byakuya’s a jerk, not my friend! But anyway, right – I mean, I think you’re rad and want to get to know you better!”

“I’ve never had any sort of friendship anything before…”

“That’s a shame, both for you and for the people who’ve turned you away,” Sakura said mournfully. “I think you’re rather kind as well – they’re really missing out.”

“Ghk…” Taka couldn’t help but burst into tears and sob loudly. The room amplified the sounds. Mondo put his head on Taka’s shoulder, resting his pompadour on top of Taka’s head. The girls let him have time to come back down.

“We don’t know you very well, and certainly not like Mondo does, but both Hina and I would like to continue to engage with you.”

“Even you, Mondo,” Hina smiled.

“W-wha–?” Mondo started in surprise.

“There’s more to you than just being an angry douche. So maybe we can get to know you, too!” Hina said cheerily.

“Th-thanks…” Mondo said. “I saw how you two’ve helped Taka before… You seem like you got good heads on your shoulders. I, I think I’d like that. But! Don’t… don’t make bets about us, capiche!?”

Sakura smiled. “Wherever you go, you’ll go at your own paces. There’ll be no pressure from us, monetary or otherwise.”

“Besides, it was totally a joke bet!”
“It was… I’m just going to use the money to buy something from the School Store for Hina, anyway,” Sakura shrugged. Hina blushed and grinned.

“So…” Taka said, recovered and practically luminous. “You came here to swim… Since there’s four of us, let’s do tag-team relays!”

“Awwww yeah! We can come up with team names! Sakura and I’ll be… Team Sappho?” The famous ancient poet who loved women! I understand that reference!!

“Hmmm… How about Team Candy instead?”

“Oooh, that’s even better! Taka, you and Mondo can be Team Gay!”

Taka looked sidelong at Mondo, who was blushing. “H-how’s about Team Bro?” Taka smiled in assent.

Sakura chuckled. “If we rotate, Mondo and I can be Team Muscle. All of us are very fit, but the two of us are the most outwardly muscular.”

“Mondo and Hina,” Hina said, “We can be… Team Slacker, since neither of us are academics!” Mondo made a ‘this is true, fair point’ gesture.

Taka grinned. “Sakura, you and I can be Team Martial, since you do MMA and I do kendo! And Hina and I can be Team Donut!”

Hina clapped excitedly. “Oh, this is gonna be so fun! It’s been forever since I got to do friendly relays!” She explained the rules, and they took positions in the water. First up: Taka versus Sakura. She’s so powerful, I probably stand less of a chance than I did against Hina… But I’ll do my best!

He pushed himself so hard that he actually managed to get out in front of her quickly to tag Mondo in. I see! She’s so big it slows her down! Mondo was less speedy than Taka, so having the headstart helped him stay even with Hina for a few seconds, although she quickly beat him to the end as expected.

“I don’t swim as much as you guys!” Mondo complained. Hina gave him some pointers on how to hold his legs and how far to extend his arms for the stroke.

Next up: Team Slacker vs Team Martial. With slightly improved technique, Mondo managed to pass Sakura, but Taka could barely keep even with the quick Hina, who won again. Team Donut obliterated Team Muscle, mostly due to her as well.

“Man, there’s no way we can beat her!” Mondo yelled. “This is unfair…! It’s like trying to outlift Sakura!” Sakura chuckled like she knew from experience.

“Hmmmmmmmm,” Taka said. “What if we did 3-on-1, to see if we could beat you, Hina?”

“Ohohohoho!” Hina chortled. “We can go to the end and back, with you three splitting that distance between you. But you better have a straaategyyyy~!”

That… makes me nervous! Thankfully, no one could tell he was sweating since he was wet anyway. He, Sakura, and Mondo spent 10 minutes practicing various combinations. Hina was doodling on a piece of paper while they planned so they could surprise her. They determined that Mondo would go first to lure her into a false sense of security, Taka would take the end of the first and the beginning of the second lap – he was slimmer and faster than the other two and navigating turns was easier for him – and Sakura would go in for the kill. When they were ready, Hina joined them in the pool.
Mondo did his best yet, not far behind Hina, and Taka put so much effort into his turn that he actually managed to pass her while turning. It was all down to Sakura… Who got to the end of the pool barely a millisecond before Hina did!

Taka was exhausted, but cheering. “Oh my gosh, we did it!!!! Good job, Team… Uhhh… Team Deadlift!”

Mondo laughed, Sakura grinned, and Hina clapped. “Bravo, you three! That’s the best I’ve seen out of you yet… And it’s the first time any of you have beaten me!”

“We had an advantage ‘cos there’s three of us and only one of you… But we traded that off,” Mondo said.

“Your form was much better, Mondo!” He grunted pridefully. “And Sakura, wow, you hadn’t gone so fast before…! And Taka… Oh my god was I shocked when you got out in front of me! How’d you manage that!?”

“I shoved against my limits and the wall of the pool as hard as I could! We all did!”

“And for that, you two deserve a break for the day, especially since you were at it before!” Hina said, stretching. “I’m gonna stay here, I have more energy to burn, but you can stay with me if you want, Sakura.”

“Yes, Hina. I need to rest for a while, but I’ll join you in a little while.”

And with that, Mondo and Taka departed, showered off the chlorine, got dressed, and headed back to Taka’s room.

*I don’t like napping in the middle of the day, it throws me off, but I’m so tired…* Taka yawned. He looked over to Mondo, who was already asleep in the middle of his bed. He gently rolled him to one side and took the other, and he basked in the warmth radiating from Mondo’s back as they slept.
Chapter Notes

... I meant to post this a few days ago, but I got busy with other things like filling out my applications for the fangame Danganronpa XL!

The next chapter will take a little longer than usual to post because I don't have much of it yet. I've been using writing chapters 9, 10, and 11 as self-care for when writing the game chapter 2 deaths and trial and the fallout thereof is too painful (I'm probably around chapter 17 rn and it's right before the third motive). I decided just now to add one last chapter before shit hits the fan for Taka and Mondo and Chihiro. So I'm gonna work on the Pain Chapters TM some more first, then I'm gonna reward myself and all of you with one more gay chapter. <3

TW: self harm, child abuse, suicidal ideation

Game Transcripts: [This Section of Chapter 2] [Chapter 2, 143-154]

Over the next few weeks, they established a schedule of their own: wake up, shower together (with time accounting for *complications*, of course), go to breakfast, hang out for a while, part to do their own things with occasional companionship, then come back together for bed. They spent a lot of time just cuddling, enjoying each other’s silent company. Taka focused on organizing the Warehouse – he was almost done; he got to interact with his other students as they stopped by sometimes to help out. Even though we’re in such a bad situation, I’m getting used to this… I feel good… But I can’t ignore the weight that staying trapped here has on me… Or not knowing if Dad is okay...

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One afternoon, Taka was closely observing all the banners in Mondo’s room. “So, what exactly do you do in the Crazy Diamonds?” What exactly is heading a motorcycle gang like?

“Well, I’m their leader. Kinda like a president.”

“Do you have a lot of responsibilities?” He stroked the giant banner across the wall, its texture pleasantly silky. Getting whipped in the face with this while riding with the wind probably wouldn’t be very nice though…

“Course! I plan all the rides and races, I keep ’em all in line, I take charge in the meetings…”

“And when someone messes up, you make them face the consequences, correct?”

“Yeah, when someone steps outta line, I usually yell at ’em and make them do cleaning duty or grunt work.”

“So you enact punishment via confrontation and menial tasks to those who slack off or disobey your rules to enforce the health of your group?” Mondo shrugged and nodded. “That sounds kind of like what I do as head of the Morals Committee.” And what I try to do for us, here, at Hope’s Peak, even if I can’t assign duties like that.
Mondo laughed. “Well, I mean, I s’pose… It’s not like we yell at anyone for running in the halls.”

“If you run in the halls, you might slip! Or you might collide with someone!”

“But is that really what’s most important t’ya?”

“Of course not!” Taka said indignantly. “But the safety and structure of the student body is integral to all of our success and harmony…”

Mondo put his hand up. “I’m just teasin’… But I also wanna understand.”

Oh… I’ve had this argument with so many people I didn’t realize he wasn’t trying to discredit me. “Ya know ya can’t stop everybody from breaking rules?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “I can’t prevent every rule-breaking behavior, but I can encourage them to not be broken via the appropriate response. Even if the person themself doesn’t adhere to the rules after, others will see the consequences and choose to follow them. That’s how we ensure morality, too – we can’t force people to not be horrible, but we can make them accountable and set an example for everyone else when they do and from there, they can grow empathy if it’s not already present.”

That has to be true… Maybe there are some people you can’t save, but it’s impossible that everyone’s irredeemable. Even if I may struggle with what Leon and Sayaka did… “It might seem small to you, but if we can’t uphold those basic foundations, how can we unite with each other…?”

Mondo closed his eyes and chuckled. “So that’s why you’re such a ruler, huh? ’Cuz you care?”

“I don’t want to rule. “I want to *lead*. I want us to all escape this place… I have to measure the moral fiber of each of us! And if we stay moral, we’ll be able to get out of here somehow, right…?”

“We better… If we can’t get outta here, I’ll fuck Monokuma up so bad his colors bleed together!”

“Bro… I need to leave this place… You know, I was always an outcast, but even being alone in society at large feels better than being stuck in this horrible place forever…” We have a routine now, but that doesn’t mean we can just accept being here.

“Seriously…” Mondo went quiet and walked over to Taka and wrapped his arms around his stomach. Taka slouched back a little into Mondo’s body, enjoying the warmth and closeness.

“The concept of being here until I die is just…” Despair-inducing… “Everything I do, I do with the hope of leading and inspiring others… I want to help everyone, I want to be a force for positive change in our society. I’ve wanted to become Prime Minister since I was young, and not just to make amends for what my grandfather did.”

“Why else do you wanna be PM?”

“There’s so much wrong with our society, with the world… Homelessness. War. Poverty. Prejudice… And all of them exist to stratify people, to keep us complacent as cogs in the wheel…”

“I fuckin’ feel ya, bro…”

“My history studies have shown me that it hasn’t always been this way; that it doesn’t *have* to be this way…” There are always going to be some kinds of problems, unless we live in a utopia. But that doesn’t mean we can be complacent about what we’re facing! Our country – no, the *world*, is morally corrupt, and all about the exchange of wealth to the detriment of people! That’s unacceptable! “I want to unite everyone and make the world a better place. I want to end the exploitation of the poor and everyone else who’s marginalized. I haven’t gotten to in a while, but I’ve marched in protests and volunteered in community outreach programs.”
Mondo hummed against his back. “Me and the Diamonds vibe with that. Though we don’t got much for politics in us… I mean, that’d be one hell of a pile of dirt to dig up. We try to deal with the shit conditions on a ground level, you know?”

“Whereas I focus mostly on trying to change policies leading the change from that front… What do you do?”

“When we’re not just havin’ fun, we uh, we do some charity rides, volunteer at shelters… A lotta people get the stinkeye for accepting help from us, but they usually come to us when they got no one else and we’re more than happy to help. I mean, we’ve worked as bodyguards for whistleblowers a couple times.”

“Ah… Is that why everyone’s so afraid of you? A government-launched smear campaign because you’ve protected people who leaked information on them?” It certainly wouldn’t be the first time…

“Yeah. And uh, to provide the means for all that, sometimes we gotta rob a rich snob…”

“R-rob!?” Taka shouted. Mondo shrugged. *I can’t allow that!* He carefully moved Mondo’s arms off his abdomen and about-faced, standing rigidly. “Mondo, that’s illegal! And immoral!”

“We don’t just do it for thrills though!”

“That doesn’t make it okay…” The concept of him robbing anyone… It felt like a knot in his gut. “Why would you do that?” He could feel bile rising in his stomach, nauseous. “Wait, no. I need time! I’ll go swim and collect my thoughts.”

Mondo looked down and sat on his bed. “I was scared of this…”

“It’s best you told me know, that way we can deal with it.” His heart was thumping anxiously in his chest.

“Are you gonna… you know?” He was clearly upset.

“I don’t understand?”

“B-break it off with me. Stop bein’… Whatever we are. I’d get it if you did… Bein’ the Moral Compass and all.”

“I meant what I said, that I want to work things out and grow with you. I just need space to digest this information and figure out what to do with it. That’s all.”

“Whatever…” he said, clearly trying to sound flippant and not afraid.

“I’ll be back in an hour, wait here for me and we can talk, alright?” Mondo nodded and Taka left for the pool area. When he closed the door, he breathed deeply. Of all people, I’d know there are reasons for petty theft… But is that all there is? What if someone came home while he was stealing? What would he do…? He’s a good man, but does he do it for the right reasons? I think he does, but I need to deal with that reality first, by myself.

-----

While he was changing in the locker room, Hifumi walked in. “Oh! Sorry. Hello, Mr. Hall Monitor.” He greeted.

*Of all times… Why now!?* Taka opened a locker between himself and Hifumi so he couldn’t see him
in a state of undress. *If it were anyone else I wouldn’t care… But Hifumi is creepy… And he’s shown interest in me, I think…* He shuddered deeply. “Hello, Hifumi…”

The other boy flinched. “You know, I wasn’t looking at your glistening abs or anything!”

Taka stood on his tiptoes and peeked through the grill of the locker door. Hifumi was, indeed, facing the opposite direction and looking at something. “What’s that?” He asked warily.

“It’s a collection of those terrible, horrible, no-good, amateur ‘How To Draw Manga’ books!”

“Where’d you find something like that?”

“It was a dropped item in the Library – I imagine it was there so people could see exactly what to *not* do.”

“Is it a coloring book…?”

“No, it’s a guide about how to draw with a ‘mob’ manga style, penned by people who wouldn’t know manga from a manhole cover!” He screeched, clearly opinionated on the matter. “Do you want to see the crime against humanity?”

“Sure,” he said. *I like it when people talk about things they’re passionate about!* “But I have to be done and back in an hour, so let’s make it quick. And uh, d-don’t look at me. Please.” He squeaked. He was dressed in swimming trunks, but he didn’t want the other boy to look at him regardless of the fact that he now had at least one article of clothing on.

Hifumi grunted and held the book to his side. Taka came up and took hold of it, standing next to Hifumi and rifling through the pages. “Oh, so it’s kind of an anatomical guide?”

“The anatomy of a pile of putty, perhaps!”

“Isn’t most manga pretty stylized, though…?” He didn’t see what the issue was. “I’ve nev—“

“How dare you compare the two!? Real manga is an ART FORM!” Hifumi bellowed in great offense. “It requires a delicate hand and an innate understanding of movement and an eye for what looks right! That allows you to play with shape and proportion… But this!” He said, jabbing his finger at the book, “Is none of that!” He yanked it out of Taka’s hand, turned a few pages, and slapped his hand on a drawing of a girl’s face while holding it back out to Taka. “Look closely!”

He leaned in, squinting. “Hmmm… Oh! I haven’t really read any manga, so I don’t get the style… But her face looks like it’s… No, it’s not droopy… It looks like it’s melting! Like she’s made of plastic and being held over a fire!”

“Exactly! If it were billed as such, that would be one case… But the description on the page says it’s supposed to be ‘cute’! The entire book is filled with palette swaps just like it, claimed to represent different feelings and enemy types!” Sure enough, he flipped through a page and Taka was struck by another melting-looking face with severe eyebrows.

“What feeling is that one supposed to be!? *I’m bad at reading people *anyway* but this is just incomprehensible!*

“Disgust! And trust me, as someone who many look at with disgust… That’s not the expression they make!”

“… Hifumi, that’s… I’m uhhhh…” *I can’t apologize for people looking at him that way, because he*
does things that warrant it… I feel pity for him. “That’s really sad…”

“I know…” He sniffed. “That’s one of the reasons I’ve been taking your advice… I don’t want people to look at me that way anymore!”

“What are the others?” Taka inquired. *I need to make sure it’s not totally self-motivated, or that would defeat the pur—*

“I don’t want to make people uncomfortable anymore… I don’t like feeling like that, so why would anyone else? You hit all my weak points before.” Taka nodded in approval. “Plus I… I’d like to have a friend, some day.”

That hit Taka in the heart. *I certainly know what that’s like… And now I know how liberating it feels to have friends… “Hifumi, underneath the perversion and impulse control issues, you have admirable traits. If you grow as a person, they’ll surely shine through!”*

“Really…?”

“Really!”

“Thanks, Mr. Ishimaru…” He wiped his eyes with his finger.

“Yes, Hifumi! Now then… I’ll see you later.” He walked through to the pool after handing the book back to Hifumi. As he opened the door, he called back, “Keep pushing yourself onward and upward!”

-----

As promised, Taka returned to Mondo’s room exactly an hour after he left. He had spent the time swimming and reflecting deeply. Mondo was the same spot he left him in.

“Did you just… sit here?”

“Didn’t move an inch.”

“You could have…”

“Nervous…” Mondo admitted.

Taka knew he made the right move to protect himself. Regardless of that, he said, “Sorry, bro. I was, too. That’s why I stepped out - I needed to calm down. Are you okay?”

He shrugged. “I guess. Still kinda scared.”

“I’m not going anywhere, though I’d like to ask you some questions. Are you prepared for that?”

Mondo yelped. “Q-questions!?!”

“About your thieving…?”

“O-oh,” he said, his posture going slack. “Y-yeah.” *What was all that…?*

“First… Why do you do it?”

“There are tons of us. Lots in high school, most of us don’t or can’t have jobs, and we’re trying to fund the gang and whoever’s comin’ to us.”
“Hmmm…”

“You grew up poor too, right?”

“Very.”

Mondo inclined his head. “Did you or your dad ever hafta steal food to get by?”

“… I remember glimpsing my dad’s bills when I was younger, when we were still with Grandfather, and being suspicious how he was even putting bread on the table for a while… I kept asking him, and eventually he admitted he’d been shoplifting groceries from small stores hours away so no one’d recognize him.”

“Sometimes, you gotta do what you gotta do…”

Taka nodded. “I was extremely upset with him for a while, and would barely talk with him! Until he finally sat me down and went over all his paperwork and showed me why he didn’t have any other choice if he wanted to keep us fed. There’s no way he could’ve even gotten a second job, with the hours the police force put him on…”

“Most of us are poor kids, fallin’ through the cracks with no one but each other. We’re kinda like a big family.”

“Do you ever… hurt anyone? While stealing?” I don’t believe he has, but I *have to know*.

Mondo looked shocked. “What!? No… I’ve gotten in fights at school, and with my crew, but we’ve never gotten into it with or injured someone we took money or food from. And our policy is we only steal from the bigwigs, right?”

“Like, the ultra-elite?”

“Yeah. Robin Hood shit. We’d never take from someone already struggling.” So my instinct was correct... They do it because they have no other choice, and they only take from people who won’t miss it.

“I… I can accept that. It’s illegal… But morally, I understand why you do it, so you can protect each other and meet your needs.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t disown me when I told you that…”

“My moral code is rigid and firm, as is my devotion to rules… But with the life I’ve lived, including here, I understand that not everything can be black and white and that sometimes there are exceptions.” Makoto helped illustrate that to me. “That fact is one of my biggest struggles, but I mostly manage… It’s easier for me to see grey in others than it is to see it in myself. I used to be so much worse for both. This environment has made me slip back into it some… But I must stay empathetic to context! He sat next to Mondo and rested his head against his shoulder. “And I, uh, even if I didn’t know that, I wouldn’t just drop you, okay? I know I’m stubborn and inflexible, but even if it took time, I really would try to understand. I value you, Mondo. I really do…”

Mondo kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks, bro. The Ultimate Goody Two Shoes, huh…?”

Taka gave him a stern, offended look. “I don’t like that… Call me that if you will, but—“

“No, no – I mean that’s how people think of ya, and maybe you are, but it’s real obvious it’s not all there is to you. Sorry. Ya just... you want so much to help. Ya try so hard and you believe in
yourself. People don’t wanna see that.”

“Oh, ok… I think you’re overestimating me, though.” He smiled darkly. *But I don’t want to talk about my lack of faith in myself. “Don’t you believe in yourself, bro?”*

Mondo scoffed. “Hardly. ‘m a bit of a fuckup, if you didn’t notice.”

“How?”

“Well for starters, I’ve made mistakes in my life that have killed me inside,” he said quietly.

“Wh—”

Mondo shook his head. “I can’t… If I say it, the weight’ll be so heavy it’ll crush us. I’ll blank again.” *What did he do? Did he hurt someone? Was it his fault? Or does he just feel like it is? “But, I’m also dumb, I have a short fuse, and even as the Leader, I don’t trust myself to wake up in the morning and keep goin’. People think I’m… That I’m so…” he opened and closed his mouth repeatedly but couldn’t push out the words. His eyes were shining. I… think I recognize this…*

“You have a complex about strength, don’t you…”* This weight on his soul, I can see how much he wants to let it out… Has he ever talked to *anyone* about it? “M-Mondo… I understand that weight…”*

Mondo’s fists clenched. “That’s bullshit,” he said bitterly. “There’s no way. You ain’t done what I did. And I can’t tell you about it.” He stood. “Can’t tell anyone about it. I… I need to be by myself for a while…”

“Bro, wait—“

“I ain’t mad at you, bro. But I just… I know you’re trying to make me feel better, but cut the bullshit. Be *real* with me. Don’t give me pity… I don’t deserve it. Can’t handle this right now… I’ll see you later.” He made way for his door, breathing heavily. When he was about to exit, he said, “I’ll be back. Promise.” He shut the door gently behind him.

Taka cried himself to sleep that night, alone. He dreamed that he and Mondo were separated by an invisible wall that neither could break through.

-----

He woke up the next morning groggy and unwell. He was less peppy than usual. Mondo was at the breakfast meeting, and he sat next to Taka, but barely said anything and he only brushed his hand a few times under the table, which could’ve easily been unintentional. After the meeting ended, Taka made intense eye contact with him. Mondo said, “Not yet…” and walked off by himself.

*I feel crushed…* He sat at the table by himself for awhile, alone. He froze, but no one was around to help him out of it until he noticed Kyoko was sitting next to him.

“K-Kyoko…! How long were you waiting?” She didn’t respond. “Sorry, I…”

“Did you fight…?”

“I’m… I’m not sure.” He gave Kyoko a basic rundown of what’d happened, leaving out details he thought Mondo wouldn’t want anyone to know.

“He’s scared.”
“Of me…?”

“I don’t think that’s it.”

“It’s because I said something wrong again, isn’t it!”

“I think he came very close to saying something that he thinks would make you hate him, and that you couldn’t possibly understand. It’s a miscommunication, he doesn’t think he can say it. He’ll come back around.”

“Then it must be because I needed space after he told he’d robbed people before. He said he thought I’d hate him when he told me… And I left!”

“You came back.”

“But doesn’t that prove his fear right? I made the wrong move… And now he thinks he can’t tell me other things…”

“Taka, you made the right move for yourself.”

“At his expense!”

“Sometimes we hurt each other, but that doesn’t change that you made the decision that was healthiest for both of you.”

“How…?”

“You were panicking. If you stayed there and tried to force it down, it would’ve hurt you more, and if you didn’t address the issue you had with it, it’d fester and cause more problems.”

“Is that why he’s doing this?”

“… Perhaps, but that’s not all of it.”

“Well, he *does* run away from issues… As you’ve seen!”

“You’re correct, but I think he’d feel like this even if you hadn’t reacted that way to the revelation that he’s stolen. Or if he didn’t tend to flee. He’s been carrying a very heavy burden inside for a long time.”

“… I thought so, even before now.”

She nodded slightly. “It informs everything he does. He needs time to deal with it, to push it back away from the surface.”

“Are you sure he just needs time?”

“No, but I know he’ll come back. Promises are important to him. He’ll keep it.”

“What do I do…? How can I just sit here and wait…? I feel so useless… I can’t do homework, I can’t take classes…” Academics were the primary way he kept himself going and had tangible results to prove that his effort made a difference… To keep going. But they weren’t present in Monokuma’s sick scenario. “I can’t even have a conversation like that without messing it up…”

“Don’t expect yourself to be able to fix his problems. Socialize and think about different ways you can approach this. He said he’s not mad at you.”
“What if he’s just sugarcoating how he feels because he doesn’t want to hurt me? What if he really is mad at me?” Even if it wasn’t out of mal intent like with most people, it certainly wouldn’t have surprised Taka if yet another person was being dishonest toward him. "What if he wants to leave…!? He’s bad at vocalizing his feelings… How can I possibly just socialize as if this isn’t a problem!?"

“He’s bad at talking about how he feels, but has he ever lied to you?”

“No…"

“There’s your answer. Distraction can help you come up with different solutions,” she said, standing up. “You need time as well.”

“Thanks…”

“Face forward, Kiyotaka,” she said as she went into the kitchen.

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After working out, he knocked on Chihiro’s door.

“H-hello, Taka! I’m surprised to see you! Happy though, eheheh!” She greeted him sunnily.

“Why…?”

“Well, you’ve been with Mondo a lot.”

“He uh,” Taka swallowed. “He needs a little space right now.”

“I-I’m sorry… Are you ok?” she asked sadly.

“No… But he promised he’d come back… And I hope he’ll keep it.” Kyoko said he’ll come back… She knows so much, I have to cling to the truth of that… She nodded. “D-do you want to talk about it?”

“Honestly, yes. But I don’t know how to. I wanted to talk about something else, though…” This has been on my mind for a while, but even though what’s happening with Mondo really burns, I feel like I’m finally ready to talk about it. “Remember what happened a while ago, when I ran off crying?”

Her eyes welled up. “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Neither can I… I want to explain it to you now.” I owe her that… And maybe if I talk with her about it, I can understand how to help Mondo, since I think he struggles with it too. “You accidentally triggered me when you kept saying that I’m strong.”

“Oh, no!! I’m s-so s-sorry…” she started crying. “Do you hate me? I don’t want you to… But I’d understand if you did…”

“But you act so like that sometimes…”
“No, I don’t. I’m a terrible actor.” *I can’t even lie convincingly.* “I can’t hide how I really feel, most of the time. It’s just, my overbearing personality and dedication make people think I’m strong, even now. I try to be a leader, and I try to lead, but I don’t try to pretend to be strong, usually. Unless I’m stuck in that trauma.”

“Why do you feel you’re weak?”

“If I can’t do the few things I’m good at, I’m below average.” *I can’t attend classes or do homework here…* “I can’t socialize for my life, I can’t break rules even when they’re corrupt, I can’t even wear clothes or eat foods that have the wrong texture for me… I can’t even do most eye contact naturally, but it was beat into me that I had to. Logically, I know now that isn’t weakness. And I accept these traits. But emotionally… Grandfather drilled the fact that they were weakness into my head so much that I can’t see them as anything else in those times.” *Like since that horrible ‘orientation’ presentation Monokuma gave us on our first day…*

“Taka… I see myself the same way as you. I was bullied and beat up relentlessly for being weak too… I’ve been weak my whole life.”

“But you stood up to Byakuya. And more importantly, you found the power inside you to try to overcome that, to actualize yourself…! That’s admirable and courageous!”

“T-thanks… You did, too… You said you know *now* those parts aren’t weakness, so you’ve come a long way.”

“I suppose that’s true…”

“N-no, it definitely is… And see? You’re having this conversation with me about it… You know yourself. You needed space, and you came to me when you were ready. I think that proves you’re resilient…!”

“O-oh…” He was crying. “… Thanks… I’m sorry for making you cry…”

Chihiro smiled, wiping away her tears. “We both cry at everything, Taka. I cried the other day when I thought about killing a mosquito that was biting me… I just couldn’t do it!”

“That’s adorab—Wait, a mosquito!? In here!?” *If there’s mosquitoes, there must be other bugs! And plants and animals! There has to be a whole natural ecosystem somewhere nearby!*

“Makoto noticed that, too… There’s nowhere down here it could have come from, but there must be somewhere wet and warm on another floor…”

“Maybe there’s an opening to outside…?”

“I hope so… B-but if the next floor only opens up after a trial…”

“Ugh…” He laid back on Chihiro’s bed, staring up at the ceiling. “I hope Byakuya doesn’t go through with what he’s implied.”

“He’s awful…”

He nodded. “He’s a scary guy. He’s so used to everyone being at his beck and call, though, I don’t think he’d kill someone directly. Even then… I refuse to let anyone else die! I’ll stop the killings myself!”

“B-but what if someone does…?”
“It won’t happen. We all understand what we’re up against now, so there’s no way anyone would plan to kill like Sayaka did to Leon!” She didn’t truly know the stakes, she died without knowing about the class trials and executions. But we all have that knowledge now, so there’s no way…!

“Not even Byakuya.”

“Do you think she would’ve… you know… if she’d known we’d all die if we voted wrong?”

“I like to think she wouldn’t. She was scared and backed into a corner, but she didn’t knowingly condemn all of us for her own sake…”

“J-just Makoto…”

“Yes, but she regretted it, since she made a move to save him as she lay dying… I don’t think she was a vicious person. I talked with Makoto… That’s the conclusion we came to.” And I truly believe in it!

“Makoto’s a good person, don’t you think…?”

“Absolutely! He’s helped me understand a lot of things… Speaking of which! I noticed there were DVDs in the library the other day. We could watch movies!”

“The laptop is too recent to have a disk drive…” She looked downtrodden. “It was sitting unused for a while, but recently manufacturers have pushed to exclude them so they could make lighter, smaller computers with less moving parts.”

“Shoot…! Oh, we could use the A/V room?”

“Good idea! I’ll go get setup in there. You can pick out a movie!”

“I wouldn’t know where to start… Could you give me a basic summary of some of your favorites?”

“O-okay! Lord of the Rings has a bunch of humanoid beings on a quest to find a powerful ring that can stop the evil Lord Sauron.” Like that weird glove Monokuma was babbling about before? “Star Trek, there’s a bunch of different TV shows, it’s about humanity exploring space. Star Wars is about conflicts driven by the use of the Force, with the original trilogy about a rebellion against the Galactic Empire. I remember seeing in the list of classes that there were supposed to be some on Western media, so the Library should have them.”

“… What do you mean by conflicts driven by the use of the Force?”

“It’s a kind of magic power that may or may not have its own will. The central conflict is about how different schools of thought use it and what the effects of their philosophies are.” Is it mystical? Spiritual? Religious?

Oh, wait! “A rebellion against an Empire… Like, a bunch of people taking on a tyrant’s forces?”

“Mhm!” That feels really applicable to now. “Ehehehe… And not everyone’s human, though most of the main cast is. Not everyone can use The Force, so there’s a lot of normal people who make a huge difference.”

“Oh! That sounds intriguing… So even people who aren’t ‘chosen’, so to speak, are important and crucial to taking down the Empire?” She nodded. “I think that sounds the most appealing to me…”

The concept of ordinary people having an impact… I love the sound of that!

“Okay! Then we should start with the first Star Wars. Episode IV: A New Hope.”
“It starts out at number four!?”

“Yep! With two sequels, V and VI, that all follow the same characters. The creator went back and made prequels – I through III – years later, and they show how things got to the point they were at in the original trilogy. And new sequels are in the works.”

“That’s… really confusing!?” Why make things so complicated!?

“Ehehehehe… There are even people who like to watch them all out of order for dramatic tension.”

“That’s even more confusing!!” He said as he stepped out of the room.

After he’d successfully located the Star Wars movie – it was in a collection with the rest of series that had a professional label across the front that said “Examining Western Media 101” – he made it to the A/V room.

Chihiro was standing in the doorway, chatting with Mondo, who was holding something under his arm.

Taka started sweating, his stomach starting to rock. I hadn’t been thinking about what happened… But now I have to… He walked up to the two of them, forcing himself to not freeze.

“H-hello, Mondo…” Taka said uneasily.

“Hey, bro…” Mondo said, looking flighty.

“Did you find it, Taka?” Chihiro asked.

“Yes… I think this is all of them.”

“I was just asking Mondo if he wanted to join us?”

“I uh…” Mondo made a face. “If you want me to, bro?”

“But… Didn’t you want space?”

Mondo nodded. “Yeah, but I’m chill now,” he said, shifting his arm so whatever was holding was out of Taka’s vision. He didn’t notice. “So… If you wanna, I’d be happy to watch with ya…”

“M-Mondo… Are you sure? Are you just saying that because you happened to run into Chihiro while she was setting up?”

“Yeah, man, I’m sure. And no, she found me in the School Store…”

“I m-may have gone looking for him to get you two talking again… Ehehehe!” She giggled guiltily, blushing.

“W-what!?”

“Whatever happened hurt you, Taka. And as your f-friend… I wanted to help.”

“Chihiro…”

“Was this a bad idea? I’m s-sorry… I hope you don’t h-hate m—“

“No! I don’t hate you… You went out of your way to help me… Help us,” he corrected. “And you
called yourself my friend… I couldn’t hate someone who’s done that for me!!"

“A-aren’t we friends…?”

“We are! !I just, I’ve never had any before the past few weeks… All these people wanting to be friends, it’s…” He was crying profusely. Mondo walked over and put his free arm around Taka. Taka extended his hands to Chihiro, who took them happily. “I don’t know how to react to it… It feels so good. Chihiro, we’re definitely friends!!”

“I’m g-glad!” she hiccuped. “I’m happy too! D-do you want a little while to yourselves to work it out, then we can watch the movie?”

“I don’t wanna intrude…” Mondo said.

“You’re not, Mondo… And if Chihiro didn’t want you here, she wouldn’t have asked you… I think it’s a good idea.”

Mondo sighed. “Alright…”

“Chihiro, we’ll be back in a bit.” He handed her the binder full of movies. “See you soon!” She waved to them as they walked to Taka’s room.

They sat down on Taka’s bed but sat a small distance apart. For a few minutes, there was nothing but awkward silence. “... I’m totally out of my depth, I don’t know what to say.” I want to start the conversation, since he has trouble with that, but...

“You don’t gotta say nothin’… ‘s me who’s gotta talk.”

“I just, I know I screwed up, and I hope you can—“

“Whaaaat!? Bro… No, you didn’t do anythin’ wrong…”

“But I reacted badly earlier, and then said something that hurt you…” Taka looked down at his hands. I say insensitive things sometimes… I just...

“Well, it wasn’t on purpose…”

“That’s, that’s what I do! I try to help but I always say the worst possible thing and drive people away…” It’s not always my fault when people give up on me, but I’m sure I bear some responsibility for it!

“You didn’t… It’s just, it was too much, and I hadta clear my head.”

“I knew I was too much…” He gulped, tears threatening to fall, unaware that his insecurities were causing him to misinterpret. That’s what everyone’s always said… “I’m sorry, bro… I didn’t mean to overwhelm yo—“

“Stop... Please, bro. Stop,” Mondo said, putting up his hand and sighing. “That’s not what I meant. *You’re* not too much, Taka! We were just talkin’ about something I can’t talk about… That’s all. I totally accept your apology, man.”

“R-really…?”

Mondo took his hand. “Hey. Listen. Of course ‘really’! Honey, you didn’t do anything wr—Oh shit.” Mondo said, immediately going red.
“Did you just call me h—“

“I did…” He looked mortified. *I don’t get it?*

“I really like honey… It’s soothing, and bees put so much effort into it, and it’s nutritious when it’s not processed so much—What?” Mondo was looking at him awestruck.

“I called you honey… Like… Do you not know what that means?”

“The food…?” *What else could honey refer to?*

Mondo laughed and swung his arm around Taka, pulling him close. “Bro, that’s adorable…” He blushed harder while he continued to laugh.

“What’s—Did you just say I’m adorable!” *What!?! I’m lost! But also flattered!*

“Yeah! On purpose… But I didn’t call you honey on purpose… It’s a term of endearment… When people are dating…”

Taka blinked owlishly. “I’m not familiar with that…?”


“Oh…” He blushed in return.

”’s usually a lot longer before people start callin’ each other that shit… At least, I don’t start it for a few months… I just… I’m kinda shocked, but… That’s how I feel about ya…” he admitted.

“M-Mondo… Bro… That’s sweet. Like h-honey… honey?”

Mondo ran his fingers through Taka’s hair and hummed happily. He held Taka to his chest. They sat there like that for a while until Taka stated, “We should talk about… What we were going to…” *I could lay like this forever, but it won’t solve our problems! And Chihiro is waiting for us!*

“Yeah…” The happy glow left his face and he paled.

“One of the things that sets you off… It’s people thinking they’re *better* than you, right?”

“Y-yeah…” Mondo sighed.

“And because of what’s happened in your life… You think they are too, don’t you?” Mondo looked down and balled his fists. “Mondo…”

“I can’t… I can’t!” He was starting to shake. “I promised that I wouldn’t… I can’t let go of how I feel… If I did, it would lose all meaning. Everything that happened, it was my fault! I keep getting up every day, only cuz I promised I would, as a man…”

Taka sat up and put his hand on Mondo’s shoulder. *This was barely below the surface… Is it always this bad for him…?* “This has been eating you alive, hasn’t it?” Mondo nodded solemnly. “How long?”

“Four years…”

“You’re depressed.” *He said he doesn’t trust himself to even wake up in the morning… I see it.*

“You’re suicidal…”
“So what!”

“Bro… That’s not good for y—“

“It’s not about me! It was about me, and look what happened! Everyone would be better off if I, if I just drove my bike off a cliff? But I fucking can’t, because I said I’d keep going…”

“No one would be better off if you did that, especially you.” I could try to reassure him of that more, but I don’t think it’ll help right now, and I don’t want him to think I’m just pitying him. “I’m worried…”

“Are you afraid I’ll hurt you, too!” Mondo asked, lavender eyes intense and in pain.

“No! I haven’t been afraid of you since I met you, and I’m not starting now! I’m worried you’ll hurt yourself. Worse. You already are… I’m worried about how much carrying this around hurts you.”

“I ain’t no cutter!”

“I know, I haven’t seen any scars like that.” I would’ve noticed them in the shower. Taka unbuttoned his uniform blazer and dress shirt and took them off. He showed Mondo the insides of his forearms. “I’d know…” It’d been several years since the last time he picked up a blade for that purpose, and the numerous scars had faded, but were obvious enough close up especially when talking about a topic like this.

“You, too…?”

“Have I been depressed and suicidal?” I can’t afford to misunderstand his question now. Mondo inclined his head. “Yes, my friend. Me too,” he agreed gently. “What my grandfather did to me… It damaged me so wholly I thought I’d never recover.” Mondo gently ran his fingers over Taka’s long-healed scars on his left arm. Taka hissed, the sensation foreign but comforting. Mondo flinched away in concern, but Taka pushed his arm closer to signal that he wanted the touch. The biker resumed tracing them. “I cut myself to have control over something, anything. I wanted to die so badly. I was convinced that I could never hope for the future. That I didn’t deserve it because I’m weak. I tried to kill myself in less obvious ways… But my dad, he was able to get us out of there and get me help…”

“Why’d you say you understand…?”

“My grandfather abused me into being strong. Hiding the fact that I was weak, disconnecting from all the weak parts of myself. That’s what I meant…! That’s what Chihiro tripped a while ago, when you saw me messed up and she was crying in apology. I saw that you have something like that, too,” he said simply. “It wasn’t pity.”

“Oh… So you’re better now?”

Not really. Sort of? Maybe…“A work in progress… A lot of what you’re saying… I still feel that about myself, too. That I don’t deserve to be alive.” I dedicate myself to keep pushing! “But I cling to the hope that I grew… It’s what keeps me going.”

“H-how?” He was idly touching Taka’s right arm now, eyes downcast.

Taka covered his hands with his own. “The first thing I had to do was get out of what hurt me. And accept that I had a problem… That I needed help.” He held up a finger, predicting Mondo’s rejection. “Wait! Even if it’s not professional help. I wouldn’t be here now if my dad wasn’t there! Even one person can make a difference! I want you to know that I want to be there for you… I want to help you! I can’t solve you, I can’t fix your problems, and I can’t make your demons go away, but
I can walk with you and do what I can to support you!!” *Even if I need space... Even if he does, too!*

“But if I tell you what I did, you won’t wanna stick around... No one would. Especially not someone all about justice.” *I don’t think that’s true.*

“Was it rape? Torture? Abuse?” Mondo shook his head quickly, caught too off-guard by the direct questions to be defensive. “I didn’t think so... Makoto showed me before that Monokuma wants us to think black and white. Condemn each other. Grow distant. I don’t want to do that. I... I refuse to do that!” *No way he did something unforgivable!*

“There’s one you left out...” He wouldn’t look Taka in the eye.

“I know.” *The fact that he's even talking this much about it is a miracle in itself... I'm not going to jeopardize his well-being by pushing him.* “Even though Leon killed Sayaka, and Sayaka tried to kill him and set up Makoto... I still feel sympathy for them. I used to think I couldn’t abide a murderer unless it was self-defense, but I understand that context can make things different now. Like what I said when you told me that you’ve robbed with the Diamonds. Everything Monokuma has put us through has been to egg us on. They were both scared for their lives.”

“But I wasn’t... And it wasn’t self-defense, or during a robbery, or anything bad... I was stupid...”

“But it wasn’t on purpose,” Taka declared.

“W-well, no, b—“ He opened and closed his mouth but no words came out. After a minute of trying to come up with a response, he just kept it shut.

*So it must have been an accident of some sort.* “Survivor’s guilt is a heavy burden... Feeling like it’s your fault is too... But you didn’t knowingly, willingly, do it.”

“Why are you doing this?” He asked, starting to simmer. “Why are you challengin’ how this feels? Are you trying to tell me how I feel is wrong!?” He was boiling and grimacing. *No!! Please, that’s not what I’m saying at all! I’d never want to invalidate him like that!!! I need to show him that’s not what I’m doing and keep him from falling into that state again...*

“No! No, Mondo. I’m trying to remind you to be kind to yourself. I’m sure your insecurity and your hatred for yourself were already there before whatever happened, but you just told me the guilt is so bad that the only reason you haven’t killed yourself is because you promised someone...”

He cooled down, but was still defensive. “So what? I’ve been doing it for this long... I can keep going just fine.”

“Everyone reaches their breaking point eventually...” *Sometimes, multiple times.*

Mondo swallowed, shaking hard now. “W-what do you want for me...”

“I want you to allow yourself happiness... To hope for the future. To have dreams. To have goals. To want, and to pursue those wants...”

“I already am... I’m, you make me happy, and I w-want you...”

“Me too... Then let’s start from here, ok!?” Taka said, beaming.

“There’s nothing else I want... You’re pretty much a life raft...” Taka leaned over and wrapped his arms around him.
“Kyoko told me to face forward... Maybe that was for me to tell Mondo, too!” “What do you want to
do, when we get out of here?”

“I dunno... I'm scared... I'm not smart enough for college. So I need to get a job... But I got no
skills aside from leadin' the Crazy Diamonds. They're gonna graduate too, and I gave everything to
them... So I'll be left with nothin'.” That's terrible... Everything he's worked for, gone... I hope
they'd keep in contact at least... “You wanna work toward being Prime Minister, but I have no
dreams like that. I don’t even wanna be alive, let alone do somethin’ with my life...”

“Mondo, you have skills.”

“Like what...?”

“If you weren’t a good leader, you wouldn’t be the head of the most well-known motorcycle gang in
Japan... If you weren’t dedicated, you wouldn’t have put in so much effort into leading them... And
if you weren’t so passionate, you wouldn’t be at Hope’s Peak!” And that’s just the first three things I
thought of! I could sit here all day coming up with more!

“I guess...” He shrugged, unconvincing, Taka’s words seeming to bounce off him.

“You say there’s nothing else you want... But is that true? Or do you just deny it to yourself?”

He looked down, his face in his hands. I hit the nail on the head... After a while, he admitted, voice
trembling, “I always thought... bein’ a carpenter would be cool... I customized everyone’s bikes and
gear, and I loved wood shop as a kid... I really like making things... I spent my whole life breakin’
em, and I’m tired of it... But there’s no way I can do that... I don’t deserve to do something I like.
Punishment for what I did...”

“So you do want something!” He said. I thought so... “You want to be happy, and have
fulfillment... Was making yourself confront your feelings for me, no matter how destructive, that bit
of yourself shining through your despair, your depression?” And if he truly wanted nothing... why
would he have accepted the invitation to Hope’s Peak?

“Shit, bro... I didn’t think of that...” He made eye contact with Taka for the first time in a while,
looking surprised at that bit of perspective.

Taka took Mondo’s hands in his own. “If these hands were only capable of destruction, I wouldn’t
feel so... joyous, every time you touch me!” He blushed. It’s true... The connection we’re making
makes me feel more alive and fulfilled than I ever have been before.

“But I can’t let this go...”

“I haven’t let go of my trauma either. I’ve just done my best to keep moving and finding myself in
spite of it.” He turned so his legs were in the biker’s lap and gave him a hug. “Mondo, you don’t
have to tell me what happened. If you don’t want to. Or if you can’t. But I...” he paused. “I know
you wouldn’t hurt someone like that on purpose.”

“How can you? Ya haven’t known me more than, what, a month? Two? You have no idea what I’m
capable of...” He sounded tired, bitter, defeated and... something else Taka wasn’t sure of. Is that
unsureness? Yearning? Does he *want* to believe what I do about him?

“No, I do. Monokuma is trying to show us what we’re really capable of, with this ridiculous setup...
So I can see you, Mondo. We’ve opened our hearts to each other... We could spend lifetimes still
learning about one another, but it feels like we have... To me.”
“Me too…”

“I believe in you.”

Mondo’s eyeliner was smeared and his eyes were red, but he was smiling. “Taka…”

“And I want you to believe in me, okay? I won’t let Monokuma make something happen again… I won’t let him put any of us in a situation like that! I refuse to allow it…!!”

“Ain’t putting that on yourself self-destructive, too?”

Ooof, that’s a fair point. “M-maybe, but regardless… However long it takes, we’ll get out of here together, okay!?”

Mondo nodded and hugged Taka back, sniffling. “I got somethin’ for you…”

“Huh…?”

“I spent all my money on that stupid Monomono Machine… I saw the prize list, and I just, I had to get it for you.”

“You didn’t have to…” I’m not used to getting much for gifts on holidays... Wait, is it a holiday today!? No… Sayaka and the communications books said that sometimes people who care about each other exchange presents for no reason; that must be it.

“I wanted to! Close your eyes…” There was a rustling and he put something in Taka’s hands. “No wrapping paper, so I had to make do,” He said, sounding a little embarrassed. “Ok, look now.”

In his hands was a flat, thick item wrapped in torn out pages of outdated magazines from the Store. There was a plastic handmade rose in the corner.

“How’d you make that…?” Taka asked in wonder as he ran his fingers over it. It was smooth and delicate, not at all sharp or unrefined. Its petals were alternating crimson and lavender.

“Used the X-Acto knife in my toolkit, carved it out of bits of capsules I won, stuck it together with some superglue I found.” He grinned, proud of his work. Seeing the happiness in his eyes made Taka feel warm inside.

“The fact that you got me something is already… Taka was crying happily. “It makes me feel so good… But you carved me a flower, too!” He felt it again, liking how smooth and silky it was. “Oh… It matches our eye colors!” This is so wonderful…!!

Mondo blushed but didn’t acknowledge his comment. Instead, he cleared his throat. “Open ‘er up already! I’m getting impatient…!”

Taka obliged, looking back down. There was careful writing on the front in big, bold, blocky letters:

To: My bro (Taka)

From: Your bro (Mondo)

Taka smiled and gingerly opened the package at one end, making sure to not damage it so he could keep it. I’m going to keep all of these for the rest of my life! He reached inside. What’s this? It’s so soft…

He pulled out the mysterious object. It was a huge crocheted crimson scarf. I’m… I’m…
“I wanted to getcha somethin’… I saw that scarf on the prize list a couple weeks ago. I-it, it matches your eyes… So I knew I had to make it happen.”

He buried his face in Mondo’s shirt, carefully clutching the scarf so it wouldn’t get wet from his tears and snot. Mondo held him tight against his chest, stroking his back. “W-why!?” Taka choked out. He just gave me such beautiful things for no reason… I like it, but I don’t understand!

“Cuz… I want to show ya that you don’t need to worry about me leaving… This present, it’s a promise from me. I wanna, I wanna be with you… Whether we’re stuck in here or stuck inside… However long it takes… Even if we have problems, even if we need space, this is a promise that I’ll work ‘em out with ya.” Taka was ugly crying now. I’m… Mondo… I…

He sobbing was so loud it was barely muffled by Mondo’s body. “This… is… the… best… thing… anyone… ever… gave… me…” he spluttered out.

Taka could feel drips of water landing on his scalp. “D-do you like it?” Taka immediately pulled his face out of Mondo’s chest and looked at him with an intense scarlet gaze, tears still spewing, grinning. “I love it…” His eyes were quite puffy from crying, making his toothy smile from eyebrow to eyebrow look even more ridiculous.

“H-hey, bro, could I…”

“Hm?” Taka wiped at his eyes.

“Can I… K-kiss you on the lips…”

“We’re in my room… So…” We’re on campus, but in the dorms… And besides, PDA isn’t necessarily against the rules if you’re in a private space… “Please.” He closed his eyes and tilted his chin forward. Mondo didn’t come to meet him. “What’s wrong?”

“A-are you sure…?” He said, much too loud for the small distance between them, though Taka didn’t care.

“Yes. I’ve never kissed anyone before… But I know you’ll show me how!”

“You’re such a dork,” Mondo said as he leaned in and placed his lips against Taka’s, kissing him chastely. He went to pull away but Taka rose up to kiss him in return.

“Maybe, but I learn fast…” he breathed after disconnecting, blushing.

“Quite the scholar…” Mondo whispered as he kissed Taka again. “Real Honor Roll student.” He pushed his forehead against Taka’s, their noses touching. Mondo wrapped the huge scarf around the two of them.

Taka opened his eyes, lids heavy. “I could sit here with you until we both turn into headstones. But we should go see Chihiro. We’ve kept her waiting for over an hour!”

“Shit, you’re right… Raincheck on more kissing, maybe?”

“Absolutely…” I never thought such a strange act as putting your mouth against someone else’s could feel so good…

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They made themselves presentable and hurried back to the A/V Room. Chihiro was at one of the
He was carefully holding on to a huge bowl of popcorn as well.

“How in the world did you carry all that!?” Taka cried out as Mondo covered the desk in his treats. *What if he had tripped!!*

“I got an extra shelf, ya know!” Chihiro blinked at him. “… Not like that!” He reached into his pompadour and gently pulled out several packages of gummy bears, tossing them all to Taka.

“You can hide things in your hair!?”

“The wonders of hairspray!” Mondo said, spreading his hands as if he were some kind of wise wizard. *Or maybe his pompadour really IS supernatural… He still hasn’t explained how it held up its own towel in the sauna!*

“What the h—“ Mondo swung to face him, gobsmacked.

“… Have you ever put small animals inside?” Chiriro did a spittake, getting water on the floor.

“Nah, just little stuff when I’m carryin’ a lot. Can you imagine how weird it woulda been if you pulled out a deck of cards or a bunch of condoms or somethin’ weird like that when you played with my hair?” He laughed to himself. Chihiro was laughing as well, louder than her normal soft volume.

“… Do you always hide something in there, or…?”

“… Have you ever put small animals inside?” Chiriro did a spittake, getting water on the floor.

“What the h—“ Mondo swung to face him, gobsmacked.

Taka walked up to him, inspecting his hair, squinting his eyes. “Hmmm… Yes… this looks an
appropriate size for a few mice or several chicks. Maybe even a small lizard or two.” He turned to organize the snacks Mondo had brought in, playing it off completely.

“Fuck, bro!” he said as he bent over laughing, clutching at his stomach. “That’s accidentally happened before!”

“I was just joking!” Taka shouted incredulously, picturing it in vivid detail. “How did that even—“

“Way too long a story when we’re gonna watch a movie!” Mondo chuckled. *Would he avoid the question if we weren’t!?*

“I can’t tell if you’re pulling my leg or not!”

“Do I look like a liar to ya?” He winked at Taka. *No!*

“Yes!” Chihiro said.

“Now I REALLY can’t tell!!” Taka said in horror.

“I’ll tell you two about it some other time… Maybe!” He chortled. “Now then… You ever had any of these, Taka?”

Diverted from his own question, Taka responded, “Some of them, but the gummi bears, popcorn, and chocolate nuts are new to me.”

“I’d happily eat all of ‘em, but if you want to try, go right ahead.”

Taka reached for the gummi bears and popped one into his mouth. He tried to chew it but was immediately put off by its texture. “This is rubbery!” He grabbed a tiny garbage from the other side of the room and spat it out. *It bounced against the bottom of the basket!* “I could erase the ink on a math test with that!”

Chihiro took the rest of the packet from him and poured all of the bears into her mouth as if to make a point. *She looks like a squirrel!* Chewing them was clearly labor-intensive.

She was still chewing when Taka tried the nuts. He couldn’t stop eating them by the handful after trying one. “These are delicious!” Mondo snatched the box away. “Hey!”

“Moderation, bro! Try the popcorn!”

He grumbled and did just that. *Warm… Slightly salty… Pleasantly crunchy…* “This is good, too!” He tried to fish the kernel shells stuck between his teeth out with his tongue to no avail. “I need to floss though!”

“We gotta get you some movie theater popcorn when we’re outta here! Oily and drenched in butter… This stuff doesn’t compare, the real stuff is heaven!”

*No thanks!* “That sounds slimy and weird!” Taka accused. He got up and went to the corner of the room, facing away from the other two, and picked out the kernels. When he sat back down, he apologized for the impoliteness.

Chihiro had finally finished chewing. She yawned, then rubbed her jaw. “Bad idea…” she complained. *My mouth would’ve fallen off!*

Mondo laughed at both of them. “Let’s start!” Chihiro hit play: the movie was on.
Chapter Notes

wow, this chapter is like 30 pages!! that's definitely one of the longest so far! i'm rather happy with it, considering I didn't have this pre-written and it stemmed from a few separate ideas I realized I wanted to work on after writing the trial. it was really nice to go back and add some more sweet, gay moments and flesh things out even more. rewarding myself with the prospect of writing this last chapter of calm before the storm really helped me get through writing what comes down the line.

the next chapter will contain the motive and investigation of game chapter 2. hold on to your butts, y'all, the pain's fast approaching. I hope you enjoy this last happy gay chapter, please comment if you'd like to!

tw: references to homophobia [the fact that they can't get married is brought up several times], brief discussion of incest in reference to the reveal in Star Wars that Luke and Leia are siblings; Taka is told this early on in the chapter [from when Taka says they're his favorite characters to when he asks about how people see romantic potential], discussion of sexual matters [from when Taka compliments Mondo on his eyes to when Mondo tells him he likes Taka for more reasons than his body].

Game Transcripts: [Chapter 2]

After they finished the movie, they discussed the plot, the themes, and the characters.

“S-so… um, what do you think?” Chihiro inquired.

“I'm quite surprised!”

Mondo asked, “Oh yeah?”

“I don’t know what I was expecting, but that was quite enjoyable!” I had a good time watching it with them! Some of the snacks were delicious, too! It was a nice 121 minutes!

Chihiro clapped her hands together. “Hell yeah! Last time I saw it was when I was a kid, but it was just as good now as it was then,” Mondo said.

“I haven’t engaged in fiction before, so I don’t have much comparison to other media, but the characters were interesting!!” The visuals were unique, too! Though the Empire did seem to utilize a lot of fascist and Nazi imagery.

“Ehehehe, yeah! Did you have a favorite…?”

“Hmmm… Personally, I like Luke and Leia the most!”

Mondo barked a laugh. “You don’t mean together, right…?”

“Huh?” Together?
Chihiro looked nervous. “Some… things about their backstory are revealed in the next m-movies… You don’t like them as a couple, do you?”

“I’m confused! “What do you mean…?”

“They were makin’ eyes at each other the whole movie,” Mondo explained. “She looked at him sometimes like she wanted to jump his bones.”

“Oh! Well, I mean, they kissed. I didn’t really read them as romantic or not romantic before that. I was kind of caught off—” He noticed the looks on Chihiro and Mondo’s faces. I can’t tell the specifics, but even I can read that discomfort! “Uhhh, did I say something?”

“No, no,” Chihiro reassured, “It’s just… Um… Mondo!”

“Why do *I* gotta be the one to say it!”?

“I-I’ll probably start crying like I did when I found out about it…!”

“What’s happening?” Taka asked. What’s the big secret? What happens that would make Chihiro cry??

Mondo grumbled. “Ugh, alright, whatever… So, bro, in the next movie, it turns out that Luke and Leia… …”

“… Yes?” Do they die? I hope they don’t die. That’d be heartbreakin--

“They’re siblings. Brother and sister.”

“… … WHAT!?” Mondo cringed and Chihiro covered her face. He started sweating. “You’re joking or something, right!”?

“N-no…” Chihiro said sadly.

“They… They don’t kiss after finding out… right!?”

“They’re freaked out too,” Mondo clarified.

“Well… That’s… Good, at least?” Taka could feel his stomach pulsating regardless. “They never… you know… right?”

Chihiro, mirroring how Taka felt, looked like she was going to throw up. Mondo shouted, “That’s nasty! No! Why would you even—“

“I know there are some stories out there where incest… *happens*… And it happened a lot in history, too, so I wanted to make sure!” Especially in royalty! Leia’s royalty… It’s good that she didn’t fall into that, but this is still so gross!!

“Jesus…”

“The fact that the creator decided to do that though… That’s disgusting! That’s morally unhinged!”

“You’re not w-wrong…” Chihiro said.

“So… why!?” Why would the creator even do that!?

“Uhhh… Mr. Lucas presents himself as someone who planned everything from the start… B-but
interviews with others involved show that not everything was…”

“Are you sayin’ he came up with it on the fly?” Mondo asked. “That’s real fuckin’ cheap…” Was he going to reveal they were siblings later on? Oh gosh, what if they *had* had sex before finding out… His stomach churned and sloshed. He changed his posture so he could bolt out of his chair for the nearest trash receptacle if needed.

“Ehehehe, that’s one way you could put it… Luke *was* supposed to have a different sister, though she wouldn’t show up until down the line... Since he decided during making V to make VI the last, he most likely made Leia his sister to wrap up that plotline... The writers have said for years that wasn’t in the initial drafts at all.”

“George Lucas,” Mondo said coolly, “The man, the myth, the legend…” Unless it’s introduced in the next movie with a flashing sign that says “LUKE SKYWALKER HAS A SISTER”, why not just cut it out? Or why not just ignore it if it’s vaguely hinted at…?

“How did people feel about this…?”

“Eheheh… Pretty grossed out… And there were a lot of unhappy fans who had been invested in Luke and Leia romantically.”

“Invested in?” I relate to the disgust, but did people place bets on them being a couple?? Like Hina and Sakura did regarding Mondo and I having relations?

“Yeah,” Mondo said. “Like, they wanted them to be together or somethin’.”

“Ehehe... It’s called ‘shipping’.”

“Why use nautical terminology??” How is that even remotely applicable?

“Oh! No, it’s s-short for ‘relationships’.”

“So, people saw them kiss, along with what you said about their body language, and wanted them to be together?”

“They thought their chemistry had a lot of potential for romance…”

“How does that work…?”

“Whaddya mean?” Mondo asked.

“Well… How do you see potential romance? What signifies that…? I already don’t understand it well from and toward myself, but how do you read it in fictional characters…?” And what is being ‘invested’ in characters getting together like?

Chihiro cocked her head in thought. “Hmmm… Would listing things help?” Taka nodded. “Ok! The way they look at each other!”

Mondo added, “Dirty jokes. That they’re down with.”

“How far apart they stand.”

“If they touch a lot…” He looked down at Taka’s fingers, which were threaded through his.

“Body language!”
“Gestures, too. Like this.” Mondo stroked Taka’s cheek. Taka’s eyes fluttered in pleasure at the touch.

“W-wait… Mondo…” His eyes shot open. “Chihiro doesn’t know…”

“Nah, she does. I kinda already told her.” He blushed. “I, uh, got advice before… I didn’t say who it was, but…” He… sought advice about me? The concept of him thinking about me when we’re not together, and trying to figure out things to the point where he consulted her… That makes me feel special!

“I put it together… Ehehehe!”

“How!?” I thought we were being incognito!

“I saw how you interacted, and Mondo’s venting sounded way too like what I watched happen to be a coincidence, ehehehe!” I suppose that makes sense! Chihiro *would* be able to put things together, having wired her brain to understand how systems interact!

“You’re okay with that, right?” Mondo asked, turning to face Taka.

“Yes, Mondo. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t doing something to out yourself – I know how important that is to you.” He smiled at Mondo, looking like a ruffly bird.

Mondo ruffled Taka’s hair. “Thanks, bro. Turns out, I already kinda did!” He laughed in spite of himself. “’S alright though. I trust Chihiro to keep it a secret.” He grinned at her, so did Taka. Chihiro’s *not the kind of person to go around telling peoples’ secrets.*

She wiped at her eyes. “Of course!!”

“Now then, you were explaining romantic signifiers?” *What else is there…?*

Chihiro continued, “Yes… Wanting to present at your best, too. Wearing fancier clothes, trying to impress them…”

“How they smile at each other, too.”

“Smiling is hard,” Taka admitted. “I got yelled at a lot for smiling too long or too big or too toothily.”

“I’m sorry,” Chihiro said. “I can’t imagine how it must feel to have your expression of happiness looked down on…” *It sure hurt a lot… This is just my face, and I’m allowed to use it!*

“Yeah,” Mondo said. “Besides… Your big, dorky smiles are a-adorable,” he admitted loudly. *Really!?* Taka went beet red. “M-Mondo…” Chihiro was covering her mouth, but it didn’t hide her smile at their interaction. *Now I feel a little self-conscious… but not in a bad way!??*

Mondo coughed. “A-anyways!” He said, voice a little squeaky. “Expressions are major, too.”

“Why don’t they just tell each other their feelings…? That’s so confusing!!” *People should be straightforward with each other!!*

“You and Mondo flew around each other for weeks before you finally figured it out,” Chihiro reminded him kindly.

“You’re right… But we’re real people, and fictional characters aren’t?” *Why replicate the struggles of real-life interpersonal interaction? “Isn’t fiction supposed to be about fantasy?*”
“Sure, but they’re s’posed to be realistic,” Mondo said. “So you can relate to them, get invested in them, get yourself through them, that kinda thing, almost like they *are* real.”

“But not just stating your feelings leads to trouble and miscommunication. Like we had!”

Chihiro said, “T-that’s hard for a lot of people, though…”

“True…” Taka admitted.

“And watching someone – real or not – work through it can teach us how to work through it ourselves!”

“Oh… So media as a tool to teach us how to grow? As a kind of model…?” I hadn’t considered that… I’d only ever thought of it as worthless at best, and at worst a tool for spreading disinformation and propaganda… But Makoto’s concept of using it to have something to talk about with others, and now this idea of being able to have positive takeaways from the media itself… I try to set an example for others to learn from, so it’d make sense for a creator having that intent with their characters too!

“Good stuff, anyhow.” Mondo stated.

“Is Star Wars ‘good stuff’?”

Mondo shrugged. Chihiro said, “It’s… pretty subjective… Like Lord of the Rings, everything has issues…”


“Is there romance in it?” Taka asked.

“Not much that’s stated directly,” Chihiro said.

Romance that isn’t stated directly?? “I still don’t really get it…”

“Remember what we said about the kind of pull we felt? And how we wanted to be together however we could?”

“Mhm?”

“That’s chemistry. Like... romantic interest,” Mondo said simply. “You use that stuff to show it, or figure if it’s there. Everything else, like goin’ on dates, buyin’ each other flowers, getting’ married… All of that follows that first feelin’, if things go right. Or somethin’ like that, anyway.”

“Is it always necessarily in that order?” There aren’t really any florists in here...

Mondo replied, “Nah, ya basically just figure it out as you build the relationship. What you both want, when you want it, all that stuff.” Oh, that makes sense. “And I mean, some people don’t wanna or can’t get married…” Mondo looked down.

“Like us?” Taka said, his face crumpling.

“Yeah… That doesn’t mean what he have isn’t real, though.” He patted Taka’s leg.

“That’s bothered me since I was little…” Chihiro said.

“Me too,” said Taka. He crossed his arms. “It’s so immoral that same-gender couples can’t marry!
I’m going to change those laws if it’s the last thing I do!!!” Even if people accuse me of doing it just because I’m gay! I don’t care! He noticed Mondo was looking at him with a smile, eyes crinkling. “What?!”

“Nothing, I just wouldn’t wanna be anyone trying to stop you.”

“Well, I *do* have the leader of the biggest motorcycle gang in Japan on my side!” He chuckled. Not that I’d ever want to employ them for something like that, but I like joking!

“Hahaha, the hell are you implying!!?” Mondo said jovially. “Besides… Your determination to change shit’s so strong you could prolly have a staredown with a bulldozer and win!”

“That’s an interesting image… I’d definitely lose. But… thanks!” Taka winked. Mondo snorted.

“Not to interrupt… but you said you like Luke and Leia, Taka? S-sorry for interrupting… Are you upse–”

“Oh! I got distracted, hahaha! Not in the least – in fact, I appreciate that you brought us back to the initial topic! Not the… incest thing… But I like them, themselves!!”

“How come?” Mondo asked.

“Hmmmm… Leia was born into a royal, prestigious family. Literally a monarchy… But she decided to rebel. And then, she lost everything. Somehow, she found the inner drive to keep going and turned her loss into motivation and effort to take down the Empire. Everyone looks at her with pity and thinks she’s just some princess who lost her planet, not realizing she’s a force to be reckoned with. Her reputation precedes her… but she pays that no mind and keeps pushing regardless.”

“Huh,” Mondo said. “That… Do you like her so much because of the shit with… you know?” He glanced at Chihiro, conveying that he’d let Taka discuss it at his own pace.

“My grandfather, Toranosuke, yes,” he nodded curtly. I’m okay with Chihiro knowing this. It’ll add to what I already told her. “I wasn’t alive, but when he was Prime Minister, things were great for my family. When the scandal happened, he ruined us completely. And most people look at us with hatred, or at least not *just* pity, but they underestimate us the same. Unlike Leia, I was born after that already took place. But even carrying that horrible burden, she’s relentless in pursuit of justice. That’s so admirable!!!” I love how stubborn she is, too – she reminds me a lot of myself in that way too!

Chihiro asked, “And Luke?”

“He’s a nobody from nowhere… A farmer. He’s the literal definition of ordinary… He’s lived his life in poverty, too. But he gets brought into this galactic conflict, and shows that ordinary people can be just as important, just as vital, as people who were born with ‘genius’, like Jedi. As the ordinary man who must surpass any genius, I find that deeply motivational!” You don’t have to be born with talent to be a major player! If you work hard enough, you can succeed!

Mondo was smiling at him affectionately again. “What…?”

“Nothing, bro. You’re just… Really cool, is all,” he admitted.

He makes me feel so nice inside! “Thank you… You are too!” He hugged Mondo from the side. “Now, who are your favorites?”

“Han Solo all the way, baby!” Mondo said with great vigor. “Some total random dick from the
boonies who works as a smuggler, does dirty work, and has a bounty on his head... It’s like they wrote about me.”

“You have a bounty on your head!?” Taka asked, shocked.

“Nooooo! There’s not a warrant out for me or anything. Though some rival gangs have tried to get at me before, I got ‘em to back off.”

Taka exhaled in relief. I thought he meant there were bounty hunters out to get him! I’d be constantly afraid of someone innocent getting in the crossfire... “I thought you’d like him!” Chihiro said.

“Have since I was a kid!”

“And he stays with a group who does good, even after it became inconvenient and he had the chance to leave! That sounds like... You’ve told me you’ll be on my side when we leave here, even as I work to become Prime Minister!” And it sounds like how he leads the Diamonds too, because they are rebellious and the establishment paints them negatively!

“Yep, that’s the rest!” He gave Taka a thumbs up. Taka mimicked the gesture. “Chihiro, who’s your fave?”

“The droids!”

“Ha-haha!” Taka laughed joyfully. “I thought so! Do you like both of them?”

“I do! I love how much they want to help everyone! Though C3P0's anxiety is sometimes played for laughs, I appreciate that he worries so much about everyone. R2D2 is the best, though! He’s little, plucky, and smart!”

“Just like you, squirt!” Mondo said. Taka chuckled and Chihiro blushed.

----

Taka had been checking on Toko and Byakuya daily right before breakfast since they’d stopped coming. He was always prepared to invite Toko back, but she usually just opened the door a crack and shut it in his face without a word.

He headed to the Library to check on Byakuya as he always did. The rich man was sitting there, absorbed in a thick book like usual. Taka had tried to ask him to come to the morning meetings early after his departure, but Byakuya made it abundantly clear that he had no use for them, or for being checked on like he was “some poorly-raised toddler” for that matter. After being berated several times, Taka got used to just peeking in the door, seeing if he was there, and leaving. Once in a while, Byakuya would shoot a snide comment at him as he was leaving, but he tried to not let it get to him.

Today was one of those days. “I'm sure if you asked Monokuma nicely, he’d let you set up a baby monitor or nannycam in here so you could spy on me more easily.”

Taka grimaced and closed the door a little harder than he intended. I'm not spying! I’m not even remotely interested in what he’s up to, I just want to make sure he’s still alive!

The way both of them responded to his checking on them was certainly disheartening, but it didn’t break his unwavering commitment to make sure both were doing alright.

Today, After ringing her doorbell twice, Toko opened her door.
“B-Byakuya!? Oh… It’s just *you*.”

“Er…” I’m so used to no response that I didn’t even think to greet her! “Hello, Toko?”

“What do *you* want, anyway!? You show up at my door every morning like a lost p-puppy, it’s annoying!” I wonder why she’s even talking to me today?

“Well, it’s been a while since you stopped coming to the breakfast meetings… So I’ve wanted to make sure you’re doing okay!”

“Yeah, right!”

“Huh…?”

I can’t blame her for being doubtful, but… Toko accused, “You just come to get a glimpse of the freak show!”

“What!? Toko, I—“

“You think I’m some kind of sideshow attraction! Pretty soon you’ll be sliding a ticket stub and fare under my door!”

“People don’t belong in sideshows!” There’s a long history of people being trafficked and exploited that way, and it’s always been wrong!

“I know how you and the others look at me,” she said dourly. “Don’t waste my time playing dumb.”

“… I don’t understand.”

“You think I’m filthy! Disgusting! Pitiful! You want to spit on me and call me names!”

Taka was completely bewildered. “That’s not true at all! I may not understand you, and I... Well, you’ve twisted everything I’ve ever said against me, and that unnerves me, but you’re a human being.” And human beings deserve basic decency!

“W-what…?”

“I don’t like interacting with you because of that… Er, I have to drag myself here,” he admitted. Shoot! I feel like I just punched myself in the gut… maybe I shouldn’t have said that. I may as well continue, hopefully she’ll understand what I mean. “But!! I want to help everyone, including you!! Even if I can’t do more than that for whatever reason… The least I can do is check that you’re doing alright!”

She looked at him like he’d grown six new heads. “You’re just trying to woo me!”

“Huh!?”

“You think you can come here, pretend to care about me even a little, and I’ll reward you by spreading my legs!”

He recoiled. That’s not the response I was expecting! “Whoa! I’m NOT interested in you sexually! Or romantically! Not even really platonically!” In fact, she deeply unsettles and alarms me and I don’t even want to be here right now! The concept of even remotely desiring her in that way… His stomach lurched.
“So you DO h-hate m—“

“Stop!” He cut her off, trying to get a word in before she could put even more in his mouth. “No, I don’t! I don’t wanna be with you, but that doesn’t mean I want something bad to happen to you! Or for you to feel bad! You don’t deserve to die, or suffer in silence…! Just because you confuse me and I think you hate me and every interaction we’ve ever had has gone sour doesn’t mean I think you’re undeserving of respect and humanity!!!”

She stared him in the eye. “W-what am I s-supposed to do with that!?"

*I don’t know!* “That’s for you to decide! I just want to know if you’re okay…” He said, unusually quiet.

“I’m the least o-okay this side of the p-planet!”

“Is someone plotting to hurt you—“

“P-probably…”

*Oh no!* “Have you heard or seen anything, or…?"

She grumbled something under her breath. “It’s n-nothing new… Not even f-for here…"

“Alright…” *It must not be some kind of imminent threat, if she’s been dealing with it for longer than we’ve been stuck here!* “Well, if you need any—“

“W-wait.”

“Oh! Yes?”

“…” She squint-glared at him.

He blinked in confusion. “…?"

“…” She didn’t budge, other than to knead her hands together against her chest.

He was starting to fidget. “… What is it?”

“Um… H-how… a-are… y-you…?” She had the body language of someone suffering an intense bout of constipation.

*What???* He was shocked, and his face clearly showed it. “Did you just—“

“It’s not l-like I actually c-care! It’s just social c-courtesy!”

“Er…” *This is a completely unexpected opportunity… Maybe if we can talk a little bit, we can understand each other more!* He decided to focus on her question, not how or why or how weird it was that she’d asked it. “I’m good… I’ve found happiness, even in this situation.”

“H-happiness?” She spat the word out like it was a curse word.

“Well, I’m not content to be locked up in this horrible place, but I feel fantastic socially.” *Deeply fulfilled, really!*

“W-what ch-changed?” *She’s being unusually inquisitive… Maybe she got tired of making assumptions!*
“For the first time ever… I found someone who didn’t reject me when I opened up my heart! Or… Multiple someones, really, but one in particular… It’s been life-altering!” The events in the Sauna and the night after flashed pleasantly through his mind. The memories made him feel tingly inside.

“… Y-you’re in puppy love, aren’t y-you!?”… Or maybe she didn’t! Oh… hey!!!

“Puppy love? I’m not a dog!!” Wait, LOVE???

“S-so you *are* in l-love!”

“N-n… Well… I… Maybe?” He furrowed his brow. It would explain how I’m feeling, right? But I don’t know exactly what it *is*…

“You e-either are, or you’re n-not!”

“I’m not exactly familiar with what the feeling of love entails…” he confessed.

“D-do you live under a r-rock? How c-could you not know!?”

“Well, I don’t engage with fiction and I’m bad at social interaction. And not all of us have the luxury of being a prolific writer of romance novels!”

“This takes so much *w-work* that I — N-nevermind! This didn’t j-just happen, you k-know! Whatever f-fantasies you have about what I do when I’m not w-writing—"

“No, you worked hard to get here!” He said before she could spiral off into another tangent of accusation. “You grew your talent, you weren’t given it on a silver platter!” Unlike Byakuya! Writing takes practice. Though she seems to take it for granted sometimes… “And I appreciate that degree of effort, above everything else!”

“F-first you imply I became an author out of l-luck, and then you—“

“Ahhh, no! I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant at all! I was just trying to explain that I really have zero romantic or love experience whatsoever, and that because you *do*, it’d be weird to you that I don’t get it!”

“D-do you think I’m some kind of s-slut!?”

“I have no thoughts about you doing *those* kinds of activities…” And I REALLY don’t want to! He tried to suppress a shudder. “But since you write romance, it’s a natural assumption that you have some kind of experience!”

“Are you s-stupid!? Y-you don’t have to w-write only from real-life experience!”

“Then how do you?”

“With my i-imagination! It’s just d-delusions! Delusions let you fall in l-love as much as you want, even if you n-never do in real life!”

Is that… a healthy way to live? “If you fall in love that way and it’s how you write… Does that mean you fall in love from the perspective of the main character in your novels?”

“W-why do you ask!?”

“I’m just trying to understand!”
“S-sure you are… But y-yes… Though it’s not l-limited to the protagonist.”

He put his fist against his chin thoughtfully. “I see… Since you’re a renowned romance author, and you’ve written a lot of books, you’re quite knowledgeable about this, I’m sure!!”

She scoffed. “W-whatever…”

“…”

“…”

“… You’d… Usually storm off by now?”

“She’ll w-wait!?”

“I’m just surprised you didn’t slam the door in my face already…” He said.

“It’ll d-definitely happen s-soon… I-is that a b-bad thing!?”

“No! This is the longest conversation we’ve had with each other. The longest I’ve seen you have with *anyone*… I don’t know what to say… But I appreciate this anyway.” But something’s been bugging me, I can’t not ask! “So… why haven’t you, yet?” She barely gives anyone the time of day, so why me, why now!?  

“… … … I’m c-curious. It’s n-not often someone who’s so c-completely ignorant about romance just… w-waltzes up to my door…”

“… So am I a lab rat, or?”

“… … … I g-guess I could t-teach you about it…”

*She wants to teach me!?* “Oh my gosh—“

“H-hold it r-right there! This is only going to h-happen once! I’ll d-drill it into your spiky head… So p-pay attention!”

“Yes, Professor Toko!”

“P-Professor!? You have some k-kind of weird s-submissive--”

He cut her off again before she could finish that uncomfortable assertion, “You’re imparting knowledge in a field I’m unaware of… So you’re an expert, a Professor! Like Makoto’s a Professor when he’s teaching me about social interaction and ‘having fun’!” Or Chihiro, when she’s teaching me about computers and media, though it didn’t occur to me to call her that because it hasn’t been as formal! I should do that next time we spend time together!!

“Y-you’re so… *w-weird* …”

“That may be, but I’d rather be ‘weird’ and myself than be someone else! I wasted enough of my life trying to do that!” Being forced to, really… but not anymore! It’s not that I like who I am; I hate trying to be someone I’m not even more and it’s been very traumatic!!!

She rolled her eyes. “W-whatever…”

The conversation ground to another halt. “…”
He’d been planning to stop by the Warehouse later, so he already had his legal pad with him. He flipped to a new page and pulled out his pencil from his pocket, carefully removing the rubber cap that kept the graphite from getting inside his pocket or snapping off. “Uh, so, what do I need to know?” She says she’ll teach me, but if I don’t prompt her I’m not sure this will go anywhere! “How does one identify the feeling of love? Doesn’t it vary with the relationship?

“T-there are different kinds…” She regarded his notepad. “M-maybe you *are* t-taking me seriously… C-classical readings categorize them as Eros, r-romantic or sexual love… Philia, l-love for friends… Storge, f-familial love… Agape, g-goodwill and love of humanity… Ludus, which is playful, f-fleeting, and noncommittal… Pragma, p-practical love based on r-reason or duty… and Philautia, l-love of one’s s-self.” He kept pace with her definitions, his handwriting neat and spaced evenly.

“Classical readings? I’ve studied Ancient Greek and Roman cultures, but I don’t recall any of these?” I’ve learned about a wide variety of topics, but this never came up in those textbooks!

She pointed at him. “S-stop nitpicking!”

“I-I am not! I’m just trying to engage! I’m an active learner!!”

She rolled her eyes. “W-well… You’re not *wrong*, for o-once. This is modern l-love theory, based on i-interpretation of the works of Ancient G-Greek philosophers.” I see, so it’s like looking at old concepts, tossing them in a blender, and using them to build a new framework in a different context! “These t-types of love aren’t m-mutually exclusive, and you can f-feel different combinations toward s-someone. And they can c-change into other forms over t-time.”

“Let’s see… I understand how Storge feels and manifests.” Dad! “And Agape.” In a way, feeling goodwill and love for humanity are parts of why I’m so driven to make the world a better place! I see where it’s at, and I know that it has to become so much better! “However, I lack understanding in all the rest! Let’s start in reverse order, since I think Eros is hardest for me to wrap my head around!”

“Philautia is l-like self-centeredness, s-selfishness, self-esteem, self-c-confidence…” He nodded. Too much is bad, but too little is too… I certainly lack in that d-department. “P-pragmatic could be found in arranged or p-political marriages, but it c-could also form in a l-long relationship when the p-people depend on each other.” He nodded.

“So in the first scenario, Pragma is love for another out of obligation to outside parties? Many cultures have practiced such marriages, but in doing so they often deny free will! It’s not acceptable!” It’s a removal of agency! If people are going to marry, they should do it out of the feelings they have, not because someone forced them to!!

“If y-you’re going to blabber about m-morality, find someone who c-cares!” He cringed but she continued. His eyes were starting to water. She made a strange expression. “L-Ludus would be what you might f-feel toward a crush or someone you’re j-just hooking up with.”

“Hooking up? What does fishing have to do with love!”

“There m-must have been dinosaurs in the l-layer of sediment you c-crawled out from!”

Rude!! “The foundation of my hometown is built on *limestone*, not—”

“S-shut up! ‘Hooking up’ is s-slang for when p-people have sex o-out of relationships, no s-strings
“Sex… outside of…” I know people do that but! “W-why, though?”

She shrugged. “S-sometimes, people j-just want p-physical intimacy w-without the rest. S-stop making that face!”

“What face am I making!?” My face *does* feel uncomfortable.

“You l-look like you s-swallowed a rarw egg b-because you don’t like that c-concept!”

He was now at tears. “W-what do you expect me to do!? It’s my face, and I’m expressive!!”

“If you’re g-going to cry, just d-do it! But I’m not h-here to work through m-moral and emotional c-conflicts with you! I’m here to t-teach you about love b-because you’re so dumb about it! You said I’m your P-professor!”

“…” Tears were long rolling freely down his face. He covered his face with his hands. I know I’m hyper emotional, and a lot of people have made my life hard because of it. But it’s not my fault, it’s how I’m wired! Being denied the right to react hurts coming from someone I just want to learn from… She’s both hurting me as a student and a professor… And she’s someone who I thought I was inching toward progress with today!

She looked away. “…

“…” I can’t look past the horribleness of being forced to marry… And I don’t like the concept of having dispassionate relations, even though I’ve never had any! I thought sex was supposed to be about love!! I know I’d only want that from someone I feel a deep connection to!!! Even if I’m the only one who feels that way, I can’t not be scared by what Toko’s saying, that’s how alien it is to me!!

“…” She sighed. “L-let it out… I… Shouldn’t h-have said that,” she admitted begrudgingly.

“W-what…?” He looked at her in pure shock.

“You’re the Ultimate M-moral Compass… It’s r-ridiculous to think you c-could just n-not have a reaction like that… I’m s-sure you hate me n-now, after I w-went and opened my big m-mouth like always…” She grumbled.

“Are you saying you’re sor—“ She glared at him. That’s… probably the closest she’ll ever come to apologizing. To anyone. Ever. He pulled out the packet of tissues he carried on him and wiped away his tears after blowing his nose. She let him do what he needed to collect himself. Based on what she said… I think she feels a little bad? She’d never say it, but maybe she doesn’t hate me how much I think she does? He cleared his throat and asked, “Is Ludus only felt when ‘hooking up’?”

“F-flirting also falls under that d-domain.”

“Erm…” From one area of poor knowledge to another…

She looked at him incredulously. “D-do you not know what THAT is, either!?”

“I’ve heard of it, and that it’s done to show indirect interest of some kind, usually romantic or sexual, but I have no idea whatsoever what it looks like, how to read it, or how to do it!” It’s not like I never tried to research or study it, but it’s one of the few things I can’t wrap my mind around!! Even when therapists would try to approach it, it’d fly totally over my head… Maybe it’s because I’d never had
feelings for someone before then, but because I do now and I’m desperate to understand them I’m more receptive???

“Aaaaagh!” She grabbed at her long side-braids in frustration. “At l-least you know w-what it *is*, I g-guess…”

“But why not just say it directly? I mean – not in settings where it’d be inappropriate like if it’s in a workplace!!!”

She jabbed her finger at him again. “C-can you think of any t-times where that’s s-socially acceptable?!

“Well…” You wouldn’t proposition people in public… That’s not just a matter of manners or politeness, but also because you don’t know if they even consent in the first place… If some stranger, or even someone I knew but didn’t have feelings for, approached me with their interest, I’d flee in the other direction while crying… So, the answer is… “N-not really! That makes sense, then! How do you ‘flirt’? Can you just ignore it if you aren’t interested?!”

“Y-you can.” Oh good! “And it’s all types of l-language or c-communication, including y-your body. It’s about u-using words and g-gestures in a way to c-convey that interest w-without alienating the other p-person. Wordplay, d-different volume and t-tone to imply d-different meanings…”

“I’m bad at *all* of that!!!” One thing after another!

“O-obviously…”

“Can I just… ask someone if they’re flirting with me?!” If they say they are, I can just decline and be done with it instead of unintentionally making it more painful for both of us!

“You’re e-easier to read than a k-kids’ book…” H-hey!… But that’s probably true… “Anyone t-trying to flirt with you w-would probably realize y-you lack social cues and the ability to r-read those implications…”

“Are there ways to flirt that don’t involve that?”

“If someone’s b-being nicer than you could expect a s-stranger to be, and it’s not due to their l-line of employment, that m-might be them showing interest. S-smiling a lot, asking a lot of q-questions, random flattery, eye contact, w-winking, casual touching, c-close proximity, gift giving, imitating your b-behavior…”

“What if they’re just friendly!?” Those are all things that some seeking totally platonic engagement could do!

“That’s w-when you l-look to b-body and spoken l-language to determine w-what they w-want from you…”

Taka rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’m at a disadvantage…” I knew THAT already, but to have it so brutally spelled out to me while I’m seeking to comprehend this…

“M-maybe, but h-haven’t you always b-been? Besides… If you’re in a r-relationship, you don’t have to d-deal with trying to i-interpret whether they’re interested in you romantically or s-sexually.”

“In an Eros sense.”

She nodded. “You’d a-already have t-talked about it.”
“What exactly does Eros… feel like? How is it different from platonic love?”

“There’s an old adage about how a platonic interest is someone you want to hang out with, but a romantic interest is someone you want to come home to.”

“Don’t some people live with their friends?”

“Sure, but most don’t...” She looked like he was pulling teeth in this conversation. “Another difference is that friendships can wane and wax, but even if they change form, romantic relationships don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can drift from your friends and pick up where you left... But your lover is always there.”

“Isn’t that... smothering?”

She scoffed. “It’s subjective. It’s not like I write or feel the same dynamics over and over... How each relationship works can be different. Focusing on exceptions to the generalization just draws your attention away from what I’m saying.” That’s fair, I suppose.

He decided to try to articulate his feelings, instead of focusing on vague impermeable concepts or things he could automatically poke holes in. He steadied himself emotionally, but felt weird. I need to explain to her how I feel so she can help me understand. Even if it’s a burden, it’s a relevant one and I have nothing to lose by talking about it. “When we’re together... I feel like the Sun’s shining down on me! Like I’m ethereal, like I’m flying through the clouds. Being together automatically makes me feel better, even in this situation! I get butterflies in my stomach, too... But I also feel at peace! Comfortable! Content! It often feels like we’ve been together for a long time! Like we’ve been around each other for years, not a month!?”

“That... sounds like romantic love. I bet your pulse gets faster, too.”

“You’re right about that...”

“Would you marry? Settle down? Start a family?”

“Yes!” He replied without hesitation. We can’t marry now... but we will. I’d love to live with him... And starting a family one day -- that could be incredible!

“That’s definitely romantic love!” She had a very rare smile on her face. He felt like he was seeing a unicorn in real life.

“How do I express that?”

She shrugged noncommittally. “Say it.”

He was fighting off the worry that he’d said too much. “I don’t like burdening people with my feelings...” I’m ashamed and embarrassed to, really... Even when I’m not terrified that I’m just infodumping.

“You could try flirting, pick-up lines...”

“But I thought people in relationships don’t need to do those!?” Why is this all so complicated?!

“No... They can be fun. But they don’t have to guess the intent. It’s obvious, if they’re
“I see… So, what constitutes a ‘pick-up line’?”

Toko spent some time explaining to Taka how to form a pick-up line and gave him some examples. After that, she told him to stop bothering her and go away. He thanked her; she grunted and closed her door.

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After taking a break in the gym to absorb his conversation with Toko and look through his notes, he rang Mondo’s doorbell. “Hey, bro! What’s shakin?” Mondo answered jovially before the first ring had even finished. Was he waiting for me? No, he must have been about to head out.

“Hello, Mondo!”

“Did ya wanna come in?”

“Of course!” Taka said, stepping into the biker’s room. Mondo sat on his bed and patted the spot next to him, which Taka eagerly took. “Well then…” he cleared his throat. I’ve got a plan… I’ll start with this! “Do you know what my uniform is made of?”

“No…?”

“It’s polyester-cotton blend which means it’s made of boyfriend material!” Nailed it!

Mondo blinked at him, bewildered. “Uhhhh?”

“I mean, my uniform isn’t your boyfriend… *I* am… right?”

“Last time I checked I wasn’t datin’ a shirt.”

“Good!” Taka nodded curtly. So not only are we officially a couple, but he knows I see us that way too! When Mondo tried to indirectly ask him what that was all about he just smiled and said nothing. Without further acknowledging his comments, he spent time cuddling with Mondo.

This is how he greeted him over the next several times they hung out:

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“Were you a thief in a past life? Because you stole the sun from the sky, and you’re hot just like it!” Like Icarus! But his wings didn’t melt and he completed his journey!

Mondo laughed, then abruptly stopped. “Did you just… call me hot?” He blushed.

“Solar temperatures reach 15,000,000 degrees Celsius! Which is 27,000,000 in Fahrenheit, and 5,778 Kelvin! You radiate heat like a furnace!” He stated matter-of-factly. When I’m cold, I can cuddle with him and get warm fast!

“So you *weren’t* callin’ me hot…” He said, sounding a little disappointed.

“Oh! Well… Erm…” I know what he means this time!!

“What?”

“I meant that you’re physically warm, but you *are* hot in *that* sense, as well!”
“Th-thanks… You too…” Mondo laughed a little and kissed him on the cheek before they got ready to work out.

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“Kiss me if I’m wrong, but dinosaurs went extinct and sort of evolved into birds, right?” He grinned, sure he’d found the perfect one-liner.

“Can I kiss you anyway?” Mondo chuckled knowingly.

Oh, wait… That’s definitely what happened, so he wouldn’t kiss me because it’s true! “Ah! … Yes, please do!” Mondo did so. Taka reddened and cleared his throat. “That was nice, but you’re interrupting my flow! I’m on a roll!”

“You’re certainly on a *somethin’*.” Mondo said playfully.

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“Are you a parking ticket? Because according to city regulations, you’re a fine of approximately 10,000 yen!”

Mondo barked a laugh, then bit his lip to try to form a coherent sentence. “Taka, what??”

“Actually, the fines might be different for motorcycles… So that figure may be off, but I can’t check until we’re out of here!” I read all the laws and regulations for Japan! And I double checked what they are for this city before I came here! But it might not have specified if there are different amounts for bikes.

Mondo played it off. “I mean, I got bike tickets a few times…”

“What!? You have!?” Mondo shrugged. “Mondo, that means you were making illegal maneuvers!”

“I parked on a sidewalk once. That was the biggest one.”

“Sidewalks are for PEDESTRIANS!!!” He chided in full Rules Mode, face pouty. “Why would you do that!?” That could inconvenience the public! Or if they don’t see it, they could walk or run into it and get hurt!!

“It was when I was first learnin’ how to ride. I thought it was ok since, ya know, it could fit alright.”

“You didn’t start with a course on safety???”

“Whaaaaat? What kinda los--” He noticed Taka’s expression and changed gears. Taka didn’t really notice. “I mean, no. You gotta take one to get officially licensed… But up ‘til then, Daiya was teachin’ me. He picked it up himself.” Improper conduct!!

“Aren’t a lot of instructional courses standard for operating vehicles? Even *before* trying to become certified??”

“They prolly should be, but nah, a lotta people learn basics from their friends or family drivin’ on backroads out in the country. Not going on the highway or somethin’, but getting used to it.” But *why not* take every course available!?

“Why wouldn’t they!? It’s all covered by the government! I didn’t learn how to drive until I was eligible for classes on it! I didn’t do *only* the class for getting my license! I learned the specifics of how cars work, their extensive history, and all the specific regulations for maintaining and driving
them, down to the legal codes!!”

“That’s not a bad thing… Just not true for everyone.” Mondo shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal.

“There were plenty of others there, too! Then again… Thinking about it, my dad *did* offer to show me the basics himself before I was 16, but I made it very clear that I refused to learn how improperly and that I’d do it when I was of age!!”

He chuckled fondly. “Course ya did…”

“If you started learning when you were younger… How old were you?”

“10.”

“A ten-year-old!! Driving a motorcycle!! That’s not safe!!” Taka felt like his head was set to explode. *That’s so completely against all safety hazards that I don’t even know how to tell him off!*

“Pffft… Yeah. Same age Daiya started. We made it some kind of rite of passage or somethin’ manly like that.”

“Mondo, that’s so… not good!” He picked up his legal pad and started writing information about the rules the biker had broken by learning how to ride in such a context. Mondo looked over at his pad, eyebrows raised. “Did you ever get hurt?” Mond’s head snapped away, fists clenching. *Oh no! I’m sorry, should I not ask that?”

“Y-yeah…”

He nodded. *He agrees with me that the kind of learning I did *should* be standard… And listing in depth every single rule he broke years ago that he can’t even break now won’t do anything… He tapped his pencil against the notepad. Resisting that compulsion will be hard… I’ll write them down later, and If I need to, I can show him them some time – but for now I should change subject, since I accidentally hit a sore spot. “Sorry again… Since I met you, there’s been something I’ve wondered… What does it feel like to ride a motorcycle?”*

His eyes lit up. “Awesome! Going fast, feeling the wind split around you, the currents gliding through your hair… The feel of a well-oiled machine between your legs, the sheer power in the motor… The vibration…”

“So it’s not like driving a car?”

“Aside from movin’ around a giant hunk of metal, not really.”

“What about a bicycle?”

“Vaguely, but nah.” *It almost sounds more like riding a horse since it’s big and self-propels? I’ve never ridden one of those either though!*

“Wait… currents gliding through your hair?”

“Oh yeah. It’s not like standin’ in front of a fan. This is real, outside wind. I bet it’d be great to be a bird.” He pictured Mondo’s head on a bird’s body, pompadour and all.

“But how do currents glide through your hair when you’re wearing a helmet?”

“Ah…” Mondo smiled sheepishly. “I, uh, don’t always wear one.”
“WHAT!? That’s even worse and more illegal than getting parking tickets! And driving when you’re ten!!” Is he a walking safety hazard!? He started crying immediately.

“Usually only if I’m ridin’ local to get groceries or somethin’…”

“But *why*!? Even *with* protective equipment like helmets, you could get *seriously* hurt! Without it, you could easily…” He’d seen plenty of photos of automobile accidents in his learning. They were quite troubling, but the idea that Mondo didn’t take every single step to minimize his chances of being involved in something like that was very upsetting.

He sighed and put up a placating hand. “Chill, bro. I mean – it’s okay, how ya feel, I just know what you’re sayin’. I don’t like the confinement… but I haven’t gone without one in a while. Aside from dickin’ around with Michi, I’ve always had one on me for years now.”

For years? What made him stop going without…? “So you set a better example for the Diamonds now, right!!”

“I ain’t respected in all of Japan’s gangs for nothin’!” Taka sighed in relief. He wants to be a positive influence and he does his best to be so, including taking proper safety measures now. I’m horrified that he didn’t before… but he does now, and that’s what I’ll try to focus on!

“You’ve truly stepped up as a leader! That’s impressive, bro!”

“I guess,” Mondo kind of laughed to himself. “I got a question for ya, though…”

“Hm?”

“I was wonderin’ somethin’ too…”

“Yes, Mondo?”

“You seem real interested in my life as a biker… About my bike…” Mondo was fidgeting.

“Well, it’s outside my realm of experience, and I’m naturally curious!” Please ask your question, I’m getting more anxious!

“Yeah, but… Do ya think… Maybe… You wanna… R-ride with me, some time?” He said very loudly.

“As long as we take the proper safety precautions and follow all the rules… I’d absolutely love that, Mondo!” He’d wondered about it before, but since it was Mondo’s passion, Taka was hoping he’d ask him of his own volition. I didn’t want to bring it up for fear of making him offer!

“Hell yeah! I wouldn’t let you do somethin’ dangerous, anyhow! Even if I gotta swaddle you in bubblewrap!”

“So, helmets, long clothes, proper padding, a seat made for two, seatbelts…”

“Seatbelts!?!”

“Seatbelts ensure that you don’t fly off!” A lot of injuries from motorcycle happen when the driver is thrown off and hits something else!

Mondo grumbled. “I ain’t *ever* seen a motorcycle with a damn *seatbelt*!”

“Well then… We’ll just have to make some! We’ll start a trend!!”
“Everyone’s gonna laugh their ass off at me…!”

“But you’ll be setting an even more stellar example than you already do!”

He sighed. “Fine… I wouldn’t want ya to be unsafe anyhow. If I have to rig seatbelts for us to get you to ride with me… then so be it, they can laugh!”

Taka beamed. *He probably doesn’t like the idea, but it’ll help us both stay safe!* “Then it’s a date!”

“And a promise between us, too, bro.”

Taka laid his head on Mondo’s shoulder and they sat there for a while just enjoying each other’s presence.

“You’re tryin’ to flirt, aren’t you?” Mondo asked later.

“Ah, you figured it out!?”

“I thought I was being stealthy!”

“Just short of painfully obvious, bro. You, uh… You botched most of those pretty good. Hell, last night before bed you said, ‘It must have hurt when you fell from heaven because you splattered all over my heart!’ … The way you fused several lines and made the whole thing unintentionally scary yet also kinda sexual’s… pretty damn impressive.”

“Huh!? I messed them up!? *How!*?”

“Were they *supposed* to be like that?”

“Yeah, I memorized them!”

“Oh, I guess you didn’t botch ‘em…” *Phew!* “But then, where’d you get them, anyhow?”

“Well, Toko was teaching me about love and flirting yesterday!”

Mondo’s jaw dropped. “About l-- Oh shit. Oh god. That’s probably why… That chick’s a real piece of work, you know?”

“Yeah, but she gave me a lot of sound explanations. I think I understand a lot better!”

Mondo looked disbelieving. “Ok, sure, but the pickup lines she gave you… They’re somethin’ else!”

“Oh, she didn’t give me those. She gave me examples, but I made these myself. Flirting is best done when you’re stating a fact, using allegory, or referencing something you like to do!” *That’s what she told me, so I put together my own following her examples!*

Mondo laughed and kissed Taka briefly. “I shoulda known those were all you…”

“What do you mean? Were they bad!?”

“No, they were fuckin’ awesome! I don’t think anyone but you could even come up with those, let alone somehow pull ‘em off by sheer force of inexperience! You had no idea what the fuck you were doing, but you did it with confidence!”

“I was pretty nervous…” *I definitely committed to using them though.* “But wait! I can’t tell if that’s a compliment!!!”

“It is. They’re real surprising and endearing. Helluva way to start a conversation, too… Even if it’s
just from me biting my tongue too hard trying to keep from laughing and you freakin' out about first aid like last night!” That was a LOT of blood for a simple tongue injury!

After checking Mondo’s tongue to see if the wound was healed over – it was – Taka asked, “Alright! So then, should I continue to use them?”

“I’d be honored to hear more of your creativity, bro!”

Taka kissed him on the forehead and resolved to pick out another for tomorrow.

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“Now, Mondo! Are you a dictionary? Because I could spend hours looking you up!”

“Dude… do you even know what that means?” Mondo covered his mouth with his hand.

As always, it flew high over Taka’s head. “Yes, I regularly consult reference books!” If my room didn’t have any, I’d spend more time in the library… Even though it’s too dusty!

“Yeah, but, lookin’ a person up means checkin’ them out.”

“At a supermarket?” Could Mondo fit on store’s conveyor belt?

“Nah, like, looking at their assets.”

Now he was even more nonplussed. “When you’re filing your yearly taxes…?”

Mondo facepalmed. “Dammit, dude! It’s… When you look at a person’s body. Their features.”

“Well you *do* have pretty eyes!” I love how interesting his eyelashes are!

Mondo blushed hard. “Thanks, but it’s like, sexual…”

“Wait, you mean like looking at their crotch!?”

“Yeah, or their ass, or their general shape, or their muscles…” So he thought I meant ‘look him up’ like looking up and down his body!

“O-oh…” He paused. “Do you ever… Look at me like that?”

“Uh!” Mondo admitted, caught offguard. “S-sometimes…”

“Do you… Er… Like what you see?” Taka asked, firetruck red. The thought of that is… I’m really warm right now…

“Dunno how I *couldn’t*… Is that okay?”

“I see… Yes… Is there something you like in particular?” There was a peculiar heat growing in his stomach. It wasn’t at all unpleasant.

Mondo was sweating and squeaking. “Everything… But specially your hips and a-ass… And y-your chest… And your thighs…”

Taka said sadly, “I got picked on a lot for not being shaped like a ‘man’…”

“No such thing, bro.”
“I know, but I used to be ashamed of my wide hips and small waist.” They make shopping for pants such a nuisance… Thank goodness my last schools offered uniform tailoring services!

“I think you rock ‘em!”

“Thanks, bro… There’s one thing you left out though…’’ His mouth was suddenly dry. “Do you like my—“

“Leeeeeeeet’s not go there right now!” Mondo laughed nervously.

Taka glanced down at Mondo and quickly looked away. “O-oh!” Mondo started to shift, self-conscious, but Taka shook his head to signal that he didn’t mind.

“Now *I* wanna know… do you look at parts of me like that, too?”

“N-not in public! That would be inappropriate!”

“But you *do* when we’re alone?” Darn, he caught that!

“… Yes,” he admitted. “Not constantly, but sometimes… I particularly like the aesthetics of your arms and chest.” He’s unintentionally merciful to me by constantly wearing very baggy pants!! Otherwise… “You’re huge! You could fight a python!”

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

“… Well? Have you?”

“Nah,” he chuckled. “I wanna make sure you get somethin’ though… I don’t only like ya cuz of your body,” he said seriously.

“I’m happy to hear that. But why exactly *do* you like me? Er, I don’t mean to fish for compliments, I’m just really not sure what you see in me?”

“Well, I don’t got an alphabetical list on hand… You take charge and want the best for everyone, even if it means pissing them off. You have a strict sense of morals and don’t let people smudge ‘em. You say whatcha think. You know how to deal with conflict without, ya know, punching people. You’re stubborn and rigid, but if given time you can appreciate outside thoughts. You always make it a point to cheer people on, even if it’s as simple as ‘I hope you have a good day’.”

“I… M-Mondo…” Taka was crying profusely. The sheer genuineness behind his words…

“You’re encouraging as hell. And I mean… You know my hangups by now, but you didn’t run from ‘em, and you try to help ‘til you’re blue in the face… And you’re so here for ordinary people, which is totally awesome but totally nuts since we’re s’posed in a school based on our talents. Even after what everyone else’s done, you’re still idealistic. Basically… You’re the kindest-hearted, most compassionate, most regular passionate, most responsible, most driven person prolly ever! Who you are as a person - *that’s* why I like ya so much!!” He breathed out, grinning at Taka. “Oh, and your bad jokes are adorable.”

“W-wow…” He said, awestruck. “A-and you’re not embellishing for my benefit?” I don’t think he is, nor do I *want* to think he is, but it’s still so hard to take kindness as such and not setup for future ridicule…

Mondo settled his hand on Taka’s cheek, wiping away tears with his finger. Taka closed his eyes calmly. “Not at all! I wouldn’t lie to make ya feel better. And bro, I could sing your praises all day!”
After a few minutes of that, he opened his eyes again. “You do recognize I have flaws?”

“Of course you do! But so does everyone. A lotta the stuff people’ve given you shit for… Like your sexuality, your brain stuff, your dedication to morals… None of those are flaws, anyhow. You do have some, but those ain’t it.”

“Is that really all just off the top of your head?” He wasn’t even incredulous; he was just basking in his wonder that someone could think so highly of him, especially someone he felt the same way about.

“There’d be more if I had thought hard about it ahead of time!”

“I don’t… I don’t know how to react or what to say to any of that… But just know I feel warm and fuzzy inside. Like my heart’s wearing the pajamas you gave me. Thank you so much…”

Mondo ruffled his hair, then threaded his fingers through it. “Anytime, bro.”

Taka turned and sat in Mondo’s lap, his back to the biker’s chest, and Mondo wrapped his free arm around him. They sat like that for a while.

Eventually, Taka said, “Here’s why I like *you*… Well, some of why! To start, you stand up for others unfailingly. Beneath your gruff exterior, you’re a good man. You let yourself be vulnerable and tender around me, and I’m honored! You’re not just an empty shell of rebellion, you’re full of life inside. You want to change to be better – for yourself, and with me too. You’re surprisingly accepting… And you haven’t run from all my baggage, either. You’re deeply passionate, and you’re absolutely a man of your word. Your hands are capable of so much more than destruction, and you’re finally starting to realize that. I see how deeply you care about the Diamonds and aspire to be a good role model for them… You’re a good leader, and you *do* want to help in your own way. And you have a strict moral code, too!”

“Jesus… I ain’t ever heard shit like that before, either…” Taka turned around so they were facing one another.

“Well then, I know what I must do!” Taka said confidently.

“Whazzat?”

“Shout it from the rooftops every day at the crack of dawn! Well, we’re trapped here, so I can’t get to the rooftops, but I’ll find some way to elevate myself so my voice carries!”

Mondo’s expression went blank, then confused, and then he started laughing. “What!?”

“You’re so *good*, bro,” Mondo said between laughs.

Taka leaned close, their lips almost touching. “Thanks, but I don’t understand—“

His confusion was cut off by Mondo blowing a raspberry on his cheek.

That caught Taka completely off guard. “H-hey! That’s slimy!! Gross!!!” He reached up to wipe away the saliva. *Unsanitary!* “Now I have to go wash my face!”

“Or you could stay right here…”

“If you get me a washcloth!” He made a face, then realized what’d happened. “Wait!! You got me completely distracted! Was that on purpose?”
“Maybe so…”

“I was being serious and heartfelt, Mondo! What was your reasoning for doing that!?” he said pointedly.

“I wanna show my appreciation, but I don’t got words for it, so…”

“So you got me off track!?” Taka pouted. *I doubt it was intentional, but I feel dismissed…*

“Kinda, but it’s really cuz I wanted to do this…” He closed the distance between them and kissed Taka on the lips. After a minute, he gently ran his tongue over Taka’s bottom lip, wordlessly asking for permission. *I think I know…* Taka met it with his own, accepting the deeper kiss. Mondo worked his lips and tongue at a slow, steady pace. Taka moaned into his mouth several times and when Mondo broke the kiss with a trail of spit, he blinked slowly.

Taka’s pupils were blown and he looked mesmerized. His toes were curled in his boots. Unlike his normal blush, the tips of his ears were also flushed, as was his neck. *It’s suddenly hot in here… And my face feels all tingly! “W-w… I t-take it that was a French kiss?”*

“You got it… Didn’t know how to ask with words, so I asked with my mouth. Wanted to do that for a long time anyway, but I thought now’d be good, cuz I wanna make you feel how your words made me feel… I read you right, right? Was that okay?”

Taka reached out and stroked Mondo’s cheek, having picked that gesture up from the biker as well. He still felt a little rolled over due to the distraction that got them there, but knowing Mondo hadn’t meant it maliciously resolved most of it. As did the sensations from the kiss… *I’ve felt passion in my heart for him burning in my heart, and it’s even more fueled now by this display of affection!* “Yes, I consented to that when I let you in… I figured out that’s what you wanted to do, and I was curious myself…”

“What’s the verdict?”

Taka smirked a little hungrily, licking his lips. “Let’s just say… I’m looking forward to extensively studying this with you!”

Mondo shifted and gulped in response. “T-that’s real hot…” he said quite loudly. He was flushed as well.

Taka gently grabbed his collar and laid down on the bed with him. “Like a dance, you took the lead. I believe it’s my turn to start!”

Mondo started to readjust, then saw the look in Taka’s eye and stopped. “You dance?” Mondo teased. “What, you pop and lock? Grind? Who’s been the lucky guy who you grinded on? Or who did it to ya? No judgment here…”

Taka pursed his lips. “No! I was taught basic classical dance as part of my Grandfather’s efforts to mold me into a proper statesman,” He said flatly. *I’m not over it, but sometimes I can mention it briefly without falling down the hole again. That’s not important right now! “But you wouldn’t catch me just… grinding myself on someone in a public place! It’s indecent!!!”* He chided, morality a little inflamed. He was still riding out the wave of pleasure, but those topics made it choppy.

“Shit, I’m ruining the moment again, huh?” Mondo facepalmed.

“Yes!!!”
“My bad, bro…” He scooted so his knees were touching the moral compass’. “For both times. I know how ya feel about expressing your thoughts, so distracting you like that was kinda a dick move.” He clearly felt guilty.

Taka cleared his throat. *Between the kiss and his accountability, I feel good now.* He felt satisfied with Mondo’s words as well as the sincerity behind them. “Apology accepted! Now then! Let’s resume our studies!” *I’m actually excited to do this!* Mondo chuckled as Taka took the lead in his own version of a kiss. He accidentally clacked his teeth against Mondo’s, grumbled, and righted himself. It was awkward and clunky, and they kept accidentally hitting their faces together when trying to tilt and change angles, but it was nonetheless very passionate and they both enjoyed it. If either of them noticed the effect it had on their bodies, they didn’t acknowledge it past wordlessly accommodating. Although Taka was a fast learner, they spent a few hours practicing together… *I’ll use my study block on this today! And maybe tomorrow too… But not the next day, I need to stay sharp! The day after, though, definitely!*
Taka and Mondo’s affectionate reverie was broken a few nights later by the shrill voice of evil: “Ahem! School announcement, school announcement. Nighttime is quickly approaching, but before it arrives... All students, please gather in the gym immediately. Emergency! Emergency!” Fear started to rise in Taka, but his confidence won out.

“We finally found peace and he comes here to kill it like it’s nothin’…” Mondo grumbled, sitting up on the edge of his bed, where he’d just been cuddling with the other man. He gave him a small kiss as slipped his shoes on.

Taka asked, “What does he want…?”

“I dunno, but that bastard’s gonna get it!”

“He’s probably antsy because no one’s died for around a month! He’s talked about how bored he gets!” What a horrible thing to get stimulation from!!

“Yeah, like that’s the worst possible thing, like it’s his kryptonite.” Mondo scoffed and stood up, shrugging on his coat.

Taka was lacing his boots back up. “What’s that?”

“Oh, it’s Superman’s weakness. ’S a radioactive mineral from his home planet. Or ore, depending on which bullshit you follow. There’s a buncha different colors, and each one has a different effect.”

“He’s from another planet!?” He’s an alien, but I’ve read that he’s an icon in the West... Interesting that they’re fine with fictional immigrants, but not real life ones!!! Though the West certainly isn’t the only part of the world that has that problem... Japan has more than its fair share of xenophobia too.

“Hahahaha, yup! He’s from Krypton! When it was gonna explode, his parents sent him to Earth and he’s kinda the last of his race. He gets super powers from our Sun.” How does that work? Maybe Krypton is where Mars is in real life?? But how would they send someone through space and have them survive on a different planet???

They were out of Taka’s room now. “What do you think Monokuma’s ‘kryptonite’-?” He used finger quotes, “is?”
“Who knows? Maybe a harpoon?” Huh?

“There’s definitely aren’t any of those in the School Store or the Warehouse…” He’d know, since he’d done inventory for both places. Mondo had been frequently helping him with the latter recently. “Maybe we’ll find one somewhere else!” Or maybe it’s that gauntlet he was talking about before! Maybe it has a built-in harpoon gun!!

“Bro… That was a joke!” Oh!

“Er… Maybe if we offer him some fish, he’ll let us out!” Taka giggled at his own joke.

Mondo chuckled, smiling affectionately, as they walked into the Gym lobby. Taka was confident in the unity that was growing among most of his cohort, but that didn’t quell the nervousness he was feeling at Monokuma’s announcement. Having watched two people be killed right in front of him, he understood the stakes in this situation. Aside from Byakuya, they were the first to arrive. He sneered at them when he noticed them standing close. “I’m not surprised. You know what they say: One man’s trash is another man’s trash. Garbage is garbage no matter how you look at it.”

“That’s definitely not how it goes! Anyway, I’m happy to see you’re okay, Byakuya.” Since he and Toko never come to breakfast meetings anymore, I’ve been worried about their safety… Checking on them daily has helped, but I still don’t like this new ‘arrangement’! Toko hasn’t talked to me since she showed me the ropes about love, but she said then that she thought someone wanted to hurt her… She won’t let me keep an eye on her though, she just keeps shutting the door on me again!

“What the fuck are you tryin’ to say!?” Mondo yelled at the snooty man.

“I’m saying that it’s not a shock that two dumpster flies would breed to make more maggots.”

“Breed!? Just what do you think we—” Does he think like Hina did that—

“You god damn—“ Mondo balled his fists.

Byakuya rolled his eyes. “You’re both annoying me. Well, your very existences annoy me, to be exact. But together, you’re even worse.” He turned the other way, examining the various trophies in the display case against the wall. Tch…

This incensed Mondo, who made a fist and leaned forward like he was preparing to pounce. “What the fuck is your PROBLEM, you motherfucking—“

“Bro!” Taka put his hand on Mondo’s chest, hoping to calm him down. “Bro, don’t waste your time on him!”

“But—“

“You’ve seen what happens when people argue with him! It’s impossible to defend yourself!” He’s like Toko – even if you have a point, he’ll twist it all around! Even she has a shred of humanity to her though!

“Ugh…”

“Besides, we have more important things to focus on right now! Like Monokuma gathering us all here!”

“I guess you’re right…” he grumbled, obviously still mad. He unclenched his hand and tried to relax his posture.
“But, Byakuya?” Taka called out evenly.

To his surprise, the man turned around. “… What on Earth could you possibly want now, bacterium?”

“Don’t think I’ll let you get off lightly for bullying us! And everyone else! You’ll face your consequences eventually!” I’m sure of that!

Mondo looked at him, eyes and mouth wide. Byakuya narrowed his eyes. “Excuse me? Is that a threat, Ishimaru? Are you of all people really in a position to say something like that to a Togami?”

“Not at all! But as the Ultimate Moral Compass and leader of the Morals Committee, it’s my duty to see justice through!!” He pointed dramatically at the other man. “You have broken plenty codes of conduct and attacked peoples’ morals – you should consider how they’ll inevitably come back to bite you, one day!!”

Byakuya pushed up his glasses; they glinted in the light. He turned back around without another word.

“Taka…”

“Yes, Mondo?”

“Bro…. BRO! That was AWESOME!”

He blinked in confusion. “Huh?”

Mondo swung his arm around Taka’s shoulders. “You told him to go fuck himself in the best way possible!”

“That’s not what I said, I would never use that language!” He crossed his arms but he was grinning toothily.

“Definitely, but you told him off in your own way!”

“Th-thanks, bro…” I’ve never gotten a compliment like that before … It makes me feel good that someone appreciates my morals and confrontation skills! It took me a long time to let myself call people out like that!

“You gotta teach me how to do that some time! I lose my head…”

“I’d love to!” He patted Mondo on the arm. I hope I can help him continue to become healthier in his self-expression!!! By now, the others had finished trickling in, everyone anxiously awaiting the appearance of the monochrome bear.

“Hmm... Asking us to gather together all of a sudden like this...” He’s probably going to mess with us... but *how*? “What could he possibly want?” Taka asked, pensive and nervous, fist pressed against his chin in thought.

Celeste agreed. “Indeed. What might await us this time?”

“Hmmhm.” Byakuya laughed. The hair on Taka’s neck stood on end. What a cold man! “He keeps things interesting, that's for certain.” He’s so detached from everything but himself!

“How is that funny? Can’t you smile like a normal person once in a while?” Hina shot at him.
“Like how the housewife on a classic TV show smiles at the end of an episode?” Hifumi asked. *And people think *my* frames of reference are weird!*

Hina ignored him. “There's something totally messed up with you if you can laugh at a time like this!” Taka nodded in agreement.

“Which of us is *actually* ‘messed up’, hmm?” Byakuya needled.

“Wh-What's that supposed to mean...?” Hina asked fearfully.

“Nothing in particular. Just admiring, that’s all... I don’t want to kill anyone.” *Is he being serious, or is he just saying that to have plausible deniability if he really does try to go rogue? “But I also don’t want to stay here, living in blind denial day after day. I was just admiring how you could live like that and still keep your sanity.” Wh--!?*

“I'm not in denial...” *Apparently, being a cynical sociopath means *we’re* the ones in denial to him!*

“That reminds me. Remember how you kept talking about how the police or whoever would come help us? How’d that turn out? It seems to me there's no sign whatsoever of possible rescue.” *Well, it would take time, right? So maybe they're out and trying to find us and they just haven’t yet since this building was closed at least a year ago? But then again we’re in a busy, well-known area... Could Monokuma be barricading them from getting to us!?*

“Th-That’s just... I wonder what actually happened.”

“It's strange, that's true. There's no way the police wouldn't know about it. We're right in the middle of a major urban area,” Kyoko observed. *The more I think about it, the less it makes sense!*

“The police suck!” Hifumi said. *No they don’t! Wait, why does he think that!? Has he had run-ins with them before!*

“No way! Since this is—er, *was* a government-funded school, the mastermind would have to have them in their pocket, too! That’s impossible, no one person can do all that! Well... They could pay off everyone who’d be looking... But how would they even have that massive amount of money!? I don’t think the mastermind is a Togami, and this isn’t the West! Maybe I'm wrong in those assumptions...?*

His internal scrutiny toward Celeste’s suggestions distracted him from Hiro’s discussion of hearing strange sounds. “Wh-What kind of sound?”

“Well like I said, I don't really know,” Hiro sighed. “But if I *had* to describe it... it was like... a construction site, I guess? I mean, I could just be making that up. I only just barely heard anything...” *Does Monokuma keep cranes on the higher floors?*

“Then you d-definitely made it up. M-Must’ve just been the sound of the ocean in th-that head of yours...” Toko said dismissively.

“Say what!? Whatchoo talkin’ about, Toko!” Before everyone could even turn to the source of the voice, Kyoko pointed out Monokuma had arrived. “What Hiro heard wasn’t the sound of construction... but it *could* have been an explosion! Or maybe a machine gun! Puhuhu... That can kinda sound like construction in a way!” *Wait... Why would he have been hearing machine guns or explosions!? Is Monokuma just trying to pull his strings!?* Makoto pressed him for an explanation, but he wouldn’t budge past that. Kyoko asked why he’d called them there.
“You don't beat around the ol' bush, do ya!? Ready for me to get to the point, huh? But before that, you mind if I vent a little? I'm low on energy these days. My stitching's even losing all its shine and luster...” You're a robotic teddybear, you don't get depressed! “I'm thinking, it's probably because of this ho-hum, boring old everyday life. I'm looking for something with a little more stimulation, something rife with danger and intrigue! Listen, can I just be frank? The next blackened hasn't shown up yet, and I'm getting booooored!” I knew it! Maybe he's so bored he'll let us ou—

“So, I've decided to come up with a new way to motivate you!”

“M-Motivate...!? Is it another set of videos or something...? Are you gonna show us some demented thing to try and drive us all to murder!?” Makoto accused.

“Drive you to murder!? What a mean thing to say! Just awful!” Monokuma’s the least accountable person I’ve ever m—wait, does a robot bear count as a person? If there’s someone controlling him, then I suppose... But then, that’d mean whoever’s behind him is really feeling depressed because we won’t kill each other! What a... What a horrible thought!!

“I don't know what you've got planned, but we're not going to kill each other anymore!” Taka shouted, his commanding voice echoing around the Gymnasium. “No matter what you do, I swear to God we won't!”

“Hmm. That's very big talk. Do your very best to back it up, okay?” I have been, and I will! And not because you told me to – I'll do it in spite of that! Mondo looked toward Taka and nodded firmly, putting his hand on his arm in support. *We'll* do it together! All of us! We'll resist your plotting and get out of this together!! A swell of confidence in the groups’ commitment boosted his spirits. We're all in this *together*!!

“Now then, with your permission, let me begin!” Monokuma shrieked. “So, this time it's... embarrassing memories and secrets! As long as you're alive, it's a given that there's things you don't want other people to know about you! So I did a little investigating of my own, and I dug up some of your darkest secrets!” Where did he look? How did he find out!? And those embarrassing memories and secrets are all contained in the envelopes I have right here... I'm going to hand them out now, so take a second to take a peek!

Monokuma threw a stack of envelopes to their feet; they scattered haphazardly. Taka quickly snatched his own and Mondo’s, and he handed the biker’s to him. “Thanks, bro.” Taka nodded. With fear and trepidation, he stared at his own named envelope. What could he know about me? I guess there’s no point in waiting. I might as well get it over with! He opened it and pulled out the slip of paper inside.

Kiyotaka has been in long-term therapy for almost everything you can possibly think of.

“How'd you find out about this!?” he yelled. He felt bowled over by the implications about Monokuma’s resources. The only person I told was Mondo, and I only briefly mentioned it! There were similar reactions of shock and horror from the other students. But... Through sheer effort, he crammed down his initial reaction and vaulted over it. But it's not something I'm ashamed of... I used to be, but I'm not! Aside from the effect it could have on my political career, there's just usually no reason to talk about it! And I'm going to change the former when I become Prime Minister... No way am I letting that awful bear use that against me!

“You have 24 hours! If someone doesn't become blackened by then... all your deepest, darkest, most embarrassingest secrets will be exposed to the world!” Do what you will, I'm not afraid of people knowing this about me! Even if the rest of society knows and tries to keep me down for it, I'll weather it! “Maybe I'll roll by a crowded intersection in a van strapped with loudspeakers and spill the beans! Kyaaah! Wouldn't that be sooo embarrassing!?” Does he really have the means to do that!? Why
would he reveal them to the outside world, too?

“So that's what you meant by ‘motivate’?” Makoto said quietly.

“Yup, you got it! They're all pretty unpleasant, trust me. None of you want me to reveal that stuff, right?”

“It's definitely something I'd rather people not know, but... we'd never kill over something like that!”

Makoto looked self-assured. Just what I was thinking!

“Wh-What'd you say!” Monokuma squealed.

“He's right!” Taka agreed. Seeing that his surety was mutual with Makoto too further strengthened his resolve. “Your plan is doomed to fail! No one's gonna murder someone for this kind of thing!”

“O-Oh no... Is it because... for better or worse, your memory is still a way to connect to the outside world?” Heck yes it is! “I have stuff I wouldn't want anyone to know no matter what, so I assumed you'd all be the same...” What is he hiding, aside from who’s controlling him!? “Which is why I put so much effort into preparing this next motive! Maaan! You're saying you really won't kill each other over this stuff?” Taka thumped his chest over his heart and nodded resolutely. “That just sucks! ...Well, what can ya do? Okay, then in 24 hours, I'll expose all your secrets just to make myself feel a little better! So sad, so depressed! Farenotwell...!” So he’s doing what he said he would anyway!?

“I didn't know what to expect at first, but... maybe we dodged a bullet on this one.” Hina said. “I mean yeah, having those secrets revealed is gonna be totally embarrassing. But that's seriously not enough to give someone a reason to kill, right?” Taka inclined his head to her.

“Oh!

“Good news, everyone! I have a brilliant idea!” Taka announced proudly. “Why don't we all just confess the secrets in those envelopes right here and now!? If we do that, any and all motive for murder will vanish! That's pretty smart, right!?” He smiled, feeling ingenious for coming up with it. “Okay, so my embarrassing thing is...”

“I d-don't want to hear your stupid s-story!” Toko objected.

“What!?” B-but if we don’t, someone could—

“Besides, I don't... I don't w-want to talk about it... I don't c-care what anyone says, I don't want to talk a-about mine!” What is she hiding?

“Neither do I. Not because it is unpleasant, but because it is impossible.” Celeste added. What would be an ‘impossible secret’!?

“Well it's just human nature to wanna hear it when you say it's impossible! C'mon, it'll be good for ya!” Hifumi said. That's not why we should talk about them! This is about deflating the motive, not curiosity!!

“Absolutely not.”

“It's okay, just a little bit. C'mon c'mon c'mon...!” he begged.

“As I said—“

“C’mon c’mon c’mon c’mon!” He sounds like a petulant toddler!

“I said I don't wanna talk about it, you human bag of lard!” Hifumi screamed in distress and dismay.
He was right in that it makes people curious, but he wasn’t right to keep trying to push her clear boundaries!! She had the right to refuse, but not to insult him based on his weight!!! That was just so uncomfortable... He shuddered. And now she definitely won’t talk with the rest of us, so she still has a motive! Byakuya agreed with Celeste. “What do you think, Chihiro?” Taka nervously asked the small girl, who he noticed looked very distressed and weepy.

“Um...s-sorry, I don't really want to talk about it right now. But I also don't want to leave things the way they are. So maybe I can talk about it later... After I try my best... to become strong... Then I can tell everyone.” I wonder...

“If you don't wanna talk, you don't have to. I'm not super excited to talk about it, either...” Hina said.

“If everyone’s that much against it...” Mondo said. It's just Toko, Byakuya, Celeste, and Chihiro though! That's not a majority! “Even if my bro's the one that suggested it, I gotta say no.”

“W-Well, that's okay, then.” Is Mondo’s about what he said he can’t talk about? Is that why he’s not going to? Or is it something else? I understand why, but I feel bad and disappointed that he sided with them and shot me down... Does he hate my ideas? “Either way, if it's just a few secrets, I'm sure nobody's about to kill anybody over it.” Everyone was silent for a minute. “Okay, I'll stop with all the secret talk. But... Each of us has 24 hours to get ready!” He brushed off his pants and stood tall. “Having our secrets exposed isn't going to be fun, but it's not like we're gonna die cuz of it! So, you know, um... Don't do anything hasty!” As a leader, I have to ensure we’re all on the same page!

“The way you keep repeating it kinda makes me worry even more...” Hifumi said with eyebrows knit. Oh no!

“Oh... Uh, okay, sorry.” Taka said, trying to console them all. I'm trying to get everyone prepared! “I know it's gonna be tough, but...” The nighttime announcement cut him off. Hiro and Sakura suggested they go to bed to mentally ready themselves for the next day. They gradually scattered without another word.

Taka and Mondo were the last ones to leave and they made their way back to Taka’s room. They were quiet until they put on pajamas, facing each other in bed. Mondo was biting his lip, looking like he wanted to say something but was unsure how to. There was something etched into his expression that Taka couldn’t make out.

It’s hard for him to discuss big things anyway, but he looks so lost. I’ll help him start! “What is it?”

“The... The thing... The thing I did...” His light brown skin was pallid.

He’s really hurting... “Is that what your secret is?”

“Y-ye-yes...”

“I thought so... Is that why you turned down my idea?”

“Sorry, man...”

He nodded in understanding. If that’s why he took that stance, I don’t have to worry that he just hates my ideas. “How are you feeling right now?”

“Like I’m on my way to being crushed by the weight of the fuckin’ planet...” Like the Greek Titan Atlas...

“Do you... Want to tell me what it was?”
“I can’t.” He looked at him with deep-rooted pain in his eyes. “I can’t. Everything I’ve worked for… If I do… I’ll lose everything… Everyone. Including you.”

“Mondo, I already dragged out of you that it wasn’t on purpose… It’s a tough pill to swallow, sure, but I’m not going anywhere.” Mondo looked at him, his pupils very dilated and his breathing shallow. He couldn’t say anything. “Bro?” He didn’t respond. “H-hey… You’re having a panic attack.”

Taka pulled him up into a seated position and led him through breathing exercises with a steady arm around him. After an hour, he calmed down. “Taka…”

“I want to tell you mine! I’ve said a little about it before, but still. Mine was that I was in therapy for a lot of things. Or, I guess, that I had a lot of things to deal with. On top of wider society’s horrible attitudes, I was abused and it… ruined me. I couldn’t deal with my autism, my neurodivergence, my sexuality, my gender, other people, anything at all because of it. It’s not something I’m ashamed of anymore, but it’s something that could impact my political career negatively.”

Mondo blinked. He rasped, “Then… Why were you so eager to discuss it? You’d lose everything you’ve worked for…”

I’ve known that for a long time… Knowing the truth of who I was while being forced to repress it by Grandfather as well as understanding what could happen if word got out… I was living a nightmare! I was forced to put so much of my effort and energy into being someone I wasn’t, but even then I hit my breaking point over and over… That’s why I finally got help! I learned how to redirect and apply myself in ways that were good for me, like following my passions in the way *I* want to! “Because I’m going to succeed regardless. If people throw me to the side because of it, I’ll keep moving on my own. I’ll make my own damned opportunities! And when I become Prime Minister, I’m going to move this country forward if it’s the last thing I do!!” The determination in his heart was like iron. There were many things he was unsure about, but his drive to make the world a better place was something that was always familiar and safe to him. I’ve had that dream since I was small… Grandfather perverted that and tried to use it against me, but now that he’s gone, I pursue it for *me*, as *myself*, as Taka!

“How are you not afraid?”

“I am,” Taka admitted, “But I take that fear and mold it into motivation to put in even more effort.” I’m so, so scared… If I don’t actively transform that feeling and use it to push myself forward, I’d fall to pieces!

“Why are you telling me this? It’s nothing like what I… did…”

“It’s not, but you just said you would lose everything if yours came out. I would too. I want to show you that even if you do, you can keep going, it doesn’t have to be the end of you!” You can still form new goals and realize them! “Bro, I’ll be there beside you!”

“But the promise I made… It wasn’t just to keep myself alive. I promised to protect what I’d lose if my secret came out.”

“So you made that promise…” He’s bound by his promises… If it weren’t for them, he wouldn’t even be alive right now… But he’s in *so* much pain. “But whoever you made it to… Do you think they’d want you to be living like this? Barely alive? In so much pain that you’ve been suicidal for so long?”

“It’s punishment for my crime,” he said, detached. His eyes were closed and his brow furrowed.
Taka was crying softly. He hates himself so deeply… He absolutely understood the other boy’s mindset, but that didn’t make it less painful to see.

“No, it’s not. Your punishment is self-imposed, bro… And it far exceeds your mistake. And I’m saying that as the Ultimate Moral Compass, who thrives on justice…” He’s been hanging on his own cross because he thinks it’s what he deserves for four years… He made a terrible mistake, yes, but his guilt makes him believe he’s worth nothing more than being crucified, kept barely alive so that he can keep his word! “Whoever it was… They were clearly important to you. They were important to you. They wouldn’t want you to do this to yourself. And is it even a sure thing that the thing you promised to protect would die if you spoke up?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, if it came out, is it possible that it might not all fall apart? And even if it did… could you rebuild it?” I can still succeed in spite of the public knowing about my struggles… Maybe he could, too!

“No way… Nothin’ else could possibly happen but total fuckin’ annihilation. They’d all hate me and want me dead. I don’t want to make them feel like that, to blow up our family…” So this must be about the Crazy Diamonds…

“So you put everything on yourself instead? That’s not fair to you. Mondo…”

“What I did ain’t fair. You talk a lot about consequences… This is what happens when you do what I did.”

Taka winced. “Mondo—“

“I know,” he sighed. He doesn’t want to hear me. No… I don’t think he *can* hear me. “Promise me somethin’…” He opened his eyes, making eye contact with Taka for the first time in a while. Lavender met crimson, but the gaze was splintering and forbidding, like a dilapidated cabin in the forest long broken down and overgrown with vegetation. It’s like he’s staring into my soul.

“Yes?”

“Promise me you’ll never make the same mistakes I did… What I’m feeling now is bad enough, but the thought of you feelin’ it too… I couldn’t keep goin’ if I didn’t make sure you’d never do it…” He grimaced, clearly agonizing at the thought. M-Mondo… I…

After a moment to gather the courage necessary, Taka leaned in close and put his lips chastely on Mondo’s. “A promise between us, sealed with a kiss.”

When Taka pulled away, Mondo whispered uncharacteristically quiet, “I don’t deserve you…”

“You don’t *not* deserve me. You’re not a bad person, okay? Wait,” he said, cutting Mondo’s objection off, resting his hand on Mondo’s chest over his heart. “Socially, I’m not smart. But I know what a bad person is, and you don’t fit that definition in the least. You deserve to live and be happy.” And that’s the truth! Even if I could lie, that would still be the truth!!

Mondo didn’t respond verbally; instead, he wrapped his arms around Taka and hugged him tightly, burying his head in his shoulder. He was trembling. They sat like that for a while, Taka gently rocking Mondo back and forth and rubbing his back.

They laid back down. Taka wrapped his arms around Mondo’s back, spooning him. Near sleep, Taka asked, “Bro?”
“Yeah, bro?”

_I have to ask… Before I forget… “Can we both make a promise? To keep on going, no matter what happens?”_

“… Yeah. I promise.”

“Me too.” Mondo kissed his hand and they finally fell asleep. Sleeping with the other man like that was comforting, but Taka still dreamed of loss, of pain, of a slumbering giant in the distance biding its time until it could crush him and Mondo underfoot. They rode the latter’s motorcycle; the giant loomed against the horizon no matter how far they fled.

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Taka was awakened by a high-pitched shout next to his ear: “GOOOOOOOOOD MORNING!”

“AAAAAAAH!” His eyes snapped open and he launched out of bed onto the floor, tangled in blankets. “Wha—Why—How—” He struggled to get out of the mess of sheets, sudden panic not helping him at all.

“Puhuhuhuhu!” Taka tried to quell his racing heart until he realized…

“Mondo!?” Taka shot up and looked at the bed. Empty? He checked the bathroom, but he wasn’t there either.

“Looks like you’re all alone. Just as it should be!”

“What’s that supposed to mean!? Did you wake him up the same way!?”

“I decided to wake up everyone this way today! I thought it’d be a fun change of pace!” Why!?

“For you!”

“But of course, who else would I be worried about but myself? Ahahahaha! It looks like there’s a note on the floor! You must have knocked it off the bed when you rolled out like a dung beetle! Why don’t you read it to the class?”

To my Bro (Taka) –

I kept waking up afraid, so I’m headed to my room to sort myself out. I’m dreading this. But I know you’ll be there with me, and that makes it easier to deal… I’ll be there with you, too. Thanks for last night – I’ll see ya in the morning.

From your Bro (Mondo)

_I hope he’s okay… I should go check on h— “Oooohohooh!” Monokuma said from next to his ear. “So he was in your room, huh?” he asked conspiratorially. He was laying on his stomach and kicking his legs like they were teen girls at a sleepover talking about boys._

“Were you just reading over my shoulder!?” Taka yelped.

“Of course! And that was a rhetorical question anyway! I see everything that happens, after all!”

_Ugh! I’d forgotten about that!_ He swallowed, realizing that the bear had seen all their tender moments. _That’s not what’s important right now!_ After a few seconds, he propelled himself to focus on figuring out what was happening.
“Why are you still here…?”

“Oh, just the usual, destroying your false sense of security and contentedness. Puhuhuhu.”

“Oh no, nononono, don’t tell me…” Dread’s claws hovered threateningly over the sense of contentment he’d built up with his boyfriend since the Sauna incident. Please… No…

“Yep yep yep! Something’s happened to one of your dear classmates!”

“No!! I refuse to believe you!” No one wants to kill! How can I be sure you’re telling the truth!? Why would someone kill over a secret!?? Even if it’s something huge, why would someone kill over it!? There’s no way, this is NOT happening!

“When have I lied? Feel free to believe me if you like, I don’t really care!”

“Is Mondo alive!?” Taka shouted at the top of his lungs.

“Uh-uh, I’m not answering that! I’m not gonna rob both of us of the suspense! Puhuhuhuhu~!” He vanished.

Taka threw on his uniform, not even bothering to tie his boots, and raced to Mondo’s room. He was panicking much more than he had when Monokuma woke him. His stomach was clenched in anxiety, and he was fighting the need to throw up.

“I HAVE TO BE SURE! He slammed the doorbell button time and time again but there was no response. He knew knocking wouldn’t do anything, and yet he tried anyway. Please be alive! You have to be alive!! Please be alive please be alive please be alive!!!!

He speedwalked to the Cafeteria. Byakuya and Sakura were already there.

“Are you okay?” Sakura asked.

He was always one to greet people, but in his state of fear he didn’t even think to do it. “Have you seen Mondo!?” He shouted. “Where are the others!? What are you doing here!?” He directed at Byakuya.

“Sakura and I were woken up by Monokuma in the same way,” Byakuya said. “I assumed this would be the meeting place for you lab rats, so I came here. What, is your little boytoy gone?” That jerk! Mondo’s my best friend! My boyfriend! He’s not a toy!


He nodded and took off. His walking pace could easily outstrip a sprint. He didn’t find anyone in the Bathhouse, the Warehouse, or the School Store. As he was frantically beginning to look for people and any traces of blood or disturbance on the next floor, he heard a scream from the Pool. Who was that!?

He rushed to the source.

He heard chattering from behind the girl’s locker room door. He glanced fearfully up at the automatic gun mounted on the ceiling. Is that Makoto and Byakuya I hear? If they’re in there, that must mean… He tried the boys’ door and it came open, unlocked. He was very afraid of what was on the other sides of the girls’ door. They must both be unlocked. He hesitated for just a moment, then shoved back against his dread enough to let him throw the pink door open, hoping he was fast enough. He was a millisecond from rushing in in case the gun opened fire on him again. “Hey, I heard screaming! Did something--?” He stopped dead in his tracks. Blood. All over a body and the
wall behind. He tried to wrap his mind around what he was seeing. “...AAAAAAAAAHH!” He screamed, delayed. THAT’S—“CHIHIRO!?!?”

The familiar recording sounded. “The body discovery announcement!? Then Chihiro really is...?” He was in shock.

Byakua said drolly, “Dead, yes.”

“D-D-D-D--!” Everything was starting to break around him.

“Before you start screaming your head off, go round everyone up. It seems another game has begun. Another life-or-death game to uncover a killer...” He bolted and did just that, devoting his focus to that task in order to stave off thoughts of his *friend’s* dead body. He knew that the second he fixated on it he’d be a goner. He was trying to outrun the tsunami. Everyone was already on their way, having heard the scream. He barely made it to a bathroom stall before he threw up everything it felt like he’d eaten in the past week. Taka returned within 10 minutes and just stared at the body, not able to tear his eyes away from her to see who else was in the room. She was suspended, arms raised, from exercise equipment with a rope. Bright blood stained her clothes and there was writing to match it on the wall. He was a little dissociated, his desperation to ensure Mondo’s safely still cocooning him.

She was tied up like a blasphemer and killed by a head wound… Who would even…? Why… WHY!?!?

“Damn... I couldn't keep her safe...!” Sakura said. Neither could... I...

“So there’s another victim...” Taka said. I can’t... I can’t believe... Someone...

“Which means we are now in the same position once again,” Celeste said.

“Fuck, man... What the fuck IS this!!?” Taka’s head whipped around at hearing Mondo’s voice. He’s alive... He’s here... Only the barest sense of relief washed over his voice, outweighed by the situation, and it snapped his need to make sure Mondo was alright, throwing him headlong back into the bloody reality. Chihiro is dead... Dead. Dead dead DEAD.

He struggled to cling to the discussion about the crime scene to keep from losing himself the rest of the way. It was like trying to hold fine China with numb fingers coated in oil. They were talking about the writing on the wall. “Bloodlust”. Wait... “But you know... that thing about writing ‘bloodlust’ in blood... Doesn’t it sound kinda familiar?” He asked. Byakuya said it was part of the modus operandi of Genocide Jack and suggested the murder of Chihiro was his doing. That was a false lead before... But if this is part of the crime scene now... it must be true.

Hina pointed out Toko was standing in the doorway freaking out. Her body went limp and she fainted. A few people rushed to her side, Hina included, trying to wake her up. Suddenly her body contorted like a terrifying puppet and she kipped up as if nothing had happened. She had a weird expression and her voice and mannerisms were totally different, but she assured them she was fine. “It's clear to me that everything is *not* fine! Your eyes seem strangely vacant!” Taka said, attempting to center on her and not the corpse of Chihiro Fujisaki, the Ultimate Programmer, growing colder by the second over his shoulder. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“It might be best if we take her back to her room for the time being...” Sakura said. Good idea...

“I don't mind taking her, but... could someone help me?” Hina complained.

Hifumi said, “If you need help, I don't mind—“

Hina turned to Taka. “Taka, could you help me?”
“Huh? She totally ignored me!” Hifumi groused.

Taka was barely able to speak at this point, so he just nodded his assent. Byakuya called for a fast start of the investigation and stationed Mondo and Sakura as guards again. Monokuma confirmed that it was one of the 11 students in the room who had killed Chihiro. Hina and Hiro voiced their disgust at having to examine the corpse of a dead friend and sentence another to execution, but Sakura reminded them with pain in her voice that unless they wanted to give up and be killed by Monokuma, there was nothing else they could do.

“Just accept it already,” Byakuya droned. “After all, blood is just a liquid. A dead body is a simple object.”

Taka was already losing his grip and the thought of the rich man seeing Chihiro as an object pushed him to freeze totally until Mondo responded, “A dead body is an… *object*?” Taka clung to Mondo’s steady anger for dear life. “Chihiro wasn’t an ‘object’! Show a little respect, or I’ll beat some into ya!” We have to honor Chihiro… We have… To… While Monokuma informed them that the blackened could only kill at most two people, Taka slowly walked over to Mondo, who was standing by the punching bag, and took his hand. He was surprised by how hard Mondo’s hand was shaking.

“Bro?” Taka asked quietly, forcing himself to speak.

In a low, exhausted-sounding voice, Mondo said, “Don’t worry about me…” His eyes didn’t match the outward anger he’d just expressed at Byakuya.

“B-but—“

“Just focus on leadin’ everyone in the trial, alright bro?”

“I’ll try my best…” I wish he could come with me… but he’s guarding again…

“Pull through this, Taka.”

“Mondo, you too…” Taka replied. Mondo grimaced and nodded, squeezing his hand.

“I can’t say I understand his thinking, but if we can kill up to two people… Then one more person’s life could still be in danger.” Celeste announced.

“Which is definitely not good,” Byakuya said. With how horrible he is to everyone… he’s probably just scared he’ll be the next target! “We need to uncover the culprit before something else happens.”

Mondo let go of Taka’s hand and whipped around to face the rich man, thrusting his finger in the air in his direction. “YOU need to shut the fuck up!” I must not be the only one… thinking Byakuya’s pressing for the investigation… is solely out of self-interest.

“W-Well… for now, Taka and me are gonna drop Toko off at her room.” Taka walked over to Hina and checked his watch. It’s 8:30… None of us even ate yet. His stomach was still in knots from the discovery of Chihiro’s death. The concept of food made him feel worse.

“Nice! I’m gonna get dropped off!” Toko giggled. I’ve never heard her laugh… much less in that tone of voice! The two of them lead Toko out of the room. She didn’t resist, but rather seemed curious about their surroundings.

“Hey, eyebrows!”
He recoiled. “I have a name, you know!” Taka chided, using his reaction to being referred to that way to keep himself verbal.

“… What is it, again? There’s so many of you, I can’t keep you all straight! Ha, as if you even are!”

The last comment flew over his head. “I’m Kiyotaka Ishimaru, Toko…! We’ve been stuck here together for over a month!”

“Yeah, seriously! I’m bad with names, but even I know everyone’s by now!”

“And who are you?”

“I’m Aoi Asahina! Hina!”

“Ok, so you,” she pointed at Taka, “Are Keyholetacky Ichymaroon, and you,” she pointed at Hina, “Are Owie Asseyhiney.”

“Keyholetacky!?” Ichymaroon!?!?

“Hey, why do I get two words for butt!?”

“Well, you got two cheeks, doncha? Kyehehehehee!” Since when does she engage in toilet humor!?

“What on Earth has gotten into you, Toko!?” Taka yelled. His bubbling mass of fear and shock were starting to push their way out, this interaction not nearly enough to hold it back. He was in tears. Is this just shock at Chihiro making her like this…?

“More like what’s gotten *out* of me!”

“First we can’t even talk to you without you twisting our words, and now you won’t even address us by our actual names! You’re so weird! You’re *nuts*!” Hina said.

“Definitely a pair! Not too saggy, either! I like ‘em pretty, nice and taut like beach balls in the sea!”

WHAT!?

“Er… I think we should just… not say anything to her right now…” Taka said, sweating and somehow even more uncomfortable with what was happening than before they escorted Toko. But I hope she’s okay… Even if she hadn’t taught me about love the other day, I don’t want something bad to happen to her…

They walked in silence for a minute before Hina moved closer to Taka and said lowly, “What the hell is going on!? Chihiro’s dead, Genocide Jack did it, and Toko’s off her rocker…”

“I can’t believe he’s been hiding among us the whole time…! I wonder where he’s been sleeping? All the dorms have been taken from the start… Or was it in one of the departed’s rooms?” But if that were the case, where did he stay before the first murder? What will happen to Chihiro’s—ghk! His nose was streaming now, too. He was losing his composure. Fast.

“Maybe he’s been on an upper floor and causing a ruckus by crawling in the air vents.”

“That might be what Hiro… was hearing the other night…” They arrived to her room.

“Kyeeehahahaha! Better watch your heads, or the mythical serial killer’s gonna getcha!” Toko cackled as they shut her door.

Taka had barely closed the door when Hina said, “…I need to go talk to Sakura.” Taka nodded. “I
can’t believe what’s happening…”

“Me neither…” he said. She walked off.

Now that he was by himself and no longer had the distraction of the strange, babbling version of Toko, he had no choice but to confront the truth:

*Chihiro is gone. Dead. She’s gone forever… If I had pushed harder for us to talk… If I had protected her… She’s… She’s…* He couldn’t fight it any longer. Despair was blanketing him. The image of his friend bloodied and strung up like a scarecrow burned like a flare in his mind. *Dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead*

He stood in the main hall, stiff as a board, completely out of it, sobbing and muttering an endless stream of apologies to Chihiro for two hours. Though Taka didn’t notice, Makoto walked past him as he was weeping, “Maybe we should have confessed our ‘embarrassing’ secrets after all…! Dammit! I'm sorry, Chihiro... It's all because I wasn't strong enough!” It got so bad that his nausea forced him to return to his room to throw up again. After he rinsed his mouth and splashed water on his face, he made a beeline for the pajamas Mondo had given him. He ran his hands over the comforting texture and focused on that in combination with his uniform.

He regained some of his composure within an hour as he tried to change how he was feeling into motivation to get justice for Chihiro. He headed to the Dining Hall to make some of his green tea and write things down for the trial, just like last time. *This is the first time I saw someone when they were already dead… Images of Junko and Leon’s executions strobed in his mind. Watching them die was horrible, but at least we didn’t have to solve the mystery of what happened to them too!* He tried feebly to push away the thoughts.

Hifumi came in to the room right after he’d finished his trial notes and was trying to pass the time and make himself feel better by doodling cartoony versions of himself and Mondo holding hands. “Hey, Taka?”

He startled a bit, dropping his pencil. He flipped the page back to his notes. “Yes, Hifumi?”

“How are you… well, doing?”

“Huh?” Hifumi, of all people?

“You were one of the people who discovered Miss Fujisaki’s body… She was your friend, right?”

“Y-yeah…”

“That must be really difficult…” Hifumi said. Taka looked down. “She was such a sweet, gentle person. I can’t believe someone would do that to her… It burns my very soul! They’ll face the wrath of the Alpha and the Omega, for the Sword of the End is clenched firmly in my hand!”

Hifumi’s grandiosity had no effect on Taka. “Me neither,” He gulped, trying to keep from falling back into tears.

“I’m sorry someone did that…”

That would’ve startled him anyway, but the events of the day already had him extremely on edge. “Are you admitting it was you?!”

“Eeeeeeek! No, no, not at all! I’m just expressing my condolences!”
“Oh. I’ve… No one’s ever said that to me before. Sayaka, Junko, and Leon weren’t really my friends yet…” And my grandfather, well, that’s a really mixed bag… “Thanks, Hifumi.”

The round boy nodded. “See you during the trial. Let’s get justice for Miss Fujisaki!” He left.

A few minutes later, Hina found him. “Hey, we should go check on Toko.”

Taka stood and stretched his hands. “Do you really need me?” I’m useless. I couldn’t save Chihiro… I couldn’t keep someone from dying… I can’t even investigate!

“I’m kind of scared of her right now… She’s so weird, I don’t think I could handle her by myself.”

“Fair point,” he said as they walked out of the room together. Even if I can’t do anything, maybe my being there will help Hina… Maybe Toko, too. They went right to her door; Taka rang the doorbell.

She didn’t answer, so Hina pushed it again. The door opened a crack. Taka could see the side of Toko’s face. “Toko?”

“W-w-what d-do you w-want!?”

“Are you feeling okay…?” Taka asked.

“W-who do you th-think I am!?” She asked desperately, the expression on her face very alarming.

“Toko Fukawa, the Ultimate Writing Prodigy!” Hina asked.

He noticed Toko was shaking. “Are you… scared?” She didn’t respond. “Is someone trying to hurt you?”

“I’ll d-drive out… the killer… D-Drive out the murderous fiend…”

“W-what!?” Taka shouted. Is the killer in her room!? “Toko, come out of there for your own safety!!” She made no move to do so. Taka tried to push his way in, but she slammed the door in his face. He didn’t hear the click indicating she locked it. “No! Don’t fight them alone! Let us help!” He rammed his shoulder into her door, trying to force it open.

“Watch out! I’m gonna get in!” Hina kicked the door repeatedly with all her strong-legged might but it wouldn’t budge. “Crap! What should we do!?”

“Go get someone! Makoto! He’s good at coming up with ideas under pressure!” I’ll keep watch!

Hina said, “I think I saw him and Byakuya walking around before!” and sprinted down the hall. This is an emergency, so I won’t yell at her for running! While she was gone, he kept jamming his thumb on Toko’s doorbell; he stopped after half a dozen attempts, thinking maybe if he gave her a little time she’d be more cooperative. If she were in immediate danger, she would have told us… right!? Monokuma saying there could be up to two victims kept ringing around his mind. Wait, Byakuya? She said she saw him with Byakuya… Why are they together!? I don’t want to interact with that horrible man… H-he… Called Chihiro an object! Inexcusable… He went into his room and cracked the door just wide enough so he could eavesdrop on the area around Toko’s room. It’s not like I can get in her room anyway… Five minutes later Hina reappeared with Byakuya and Makoto in tow, explaining to them what had happened as they walked. She looked around for him, confused, before spotting his crimson gaze through his cracked door and nodding at him.

Makoto tried to talk to Toko, but she was just as unresponsive and ominous as before, saying “I w-won’t let Genocide Jack have control!” before shutting the door in his face as well. He asked
Byakuya commanded Makoto to follow him and they left to somewhere else for their investigation. If they’re leaving, Genocide Jack must not be in her room… So she isn’t in immediate danger. But then what did she mean? Maybe Chihiro’s death pushed her into a psychotic break! Taka stepped back out of his room after a few minutes; Hina was sitting against the wall by Toko’s room. “Hey, Taka.”

“Hi – I’m sorry I didn’t stay around to try to help, but there’s no way I’m going to willingly interact with Byakuya. Not after what he said today. It’s unforgiveable!”

“Yeah,” she frowned, “I wasn’t hot on the idea either, but for some reason him and Makoto are working together right now.”

“What’s up with that!?” Why!?

“I think Byakuya’s basically dragging him around to show him things for some reason?”

“Oh, so it’s not a willing collaboration?”

“Hardly! Byakuya hates his guts and Makoto looks like he wants to run in the opposite direction!”

For some reason, that makes me feel a little better. “Is it okay if I join you?”

“Sure! I figured I’d just wait here anyway… I’m not much use in investigating…”

“Neither am I. So far, anyway. It’s too much for me, for the most part… But that doesn’t mean we don’t make useful contributions!” He said, trying to reassure both of them.

It sounded hollow to him, but she smiled. “Oh, that’s true! Hey, speaking of that, do you want food? I haven’t eaten yet and I’m just sooooooo hungry…” She pouted. “I’ll get some if you wait here?”

“Could you bring me some toast and a banana, if you wouldn’t mind? That’s usually what I have for lunch, but my stomach feels weird still and I don’t want to tax it or I’ll throw up again…”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “Normally rice and pickled veggies for breakfast, right?”

“Huh!?”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “I pay attention to food! And when you eat the same thing every day, it’s easy to notice, even for someone as all over the place as me!”

“Oh…” He blushed. “Are you going to make fun of me…?” Like a lot of other people have for my regimented meals and behaviors!?

“What!? Of course not! That’d be pretty hypocritical of me to say, since I always eat donuts! If it’s what you like, it’s what you like! As long as you get all your nutrients, there’s nothing wrong eating the same things all the time!”

He blinked in surprise. “W-well, I’ve calculated it, so I get everything I need… I figured if anyone would say anything they’d do it to mock me like others have.” I can’t eat much else anyway, and I
know how to deal with peoples’ attitudes better than before, but it’s not like it’s something I don’t think about anymore.

“That’s their problem, not yours!” Hina said, fire in her eyes. “I’ll go get the stuff now!” She walked to the Dining Hall. Taka doodled in his pad more while he waited. I wish I could see Mondo right now… But I can’t be in the same room as Chihiro… He zoned out while trying to capture the details of Mondo’s face.

“Awww!” Hina said, suddenly standing above him. “That looks just like the two of you!”

“Er – Th-thank you!?” Taka blushed, deep red. They sat there comfortably, eating while waiting for Monokuma’s next call.

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When Monokuma finally summoned them to the room with the padded red door two hours later, Taka made it there first. Hina wanted to see how Sakura was doing before she came in. He stared at his watch as the others arrived. Mondo stood close, but didn’t say anything. Eventually there were 10 of them gathered. Monokuma appeared, then realized someone was missing. Mondo pointed out that it was Toko. “How could I forget that little nutjob?” Monokuma said. “She’s a crucial part of the class trial this time! Okie dokie, I’ll go ahead and drag her out here kicking and screaming. Just one moment, please!” He vanished. How is she a crucial part of the trial? He just means for voting, I’m sure… Unless she’s the killer—Wait, no, she’s hemophobic, and there was blood on the crime scene, there’s no way it was her! Five minutes later he was back, dragging a squirming Toko behind him by the pigtails like a rolled-up carpet. That’s so excessive! I should check on her!

“Nng... ghh... I t-told him I didn't want to, but... h-he forced me!” She stood up and carefully fixed her glasses. “I can’t believe you would d-drag a girl around... Terrible...! You're t-terrible!” The bear demanded they board the elevator.

Taka moved over to Toko. “Are you alright?”

“H-huh? W-why would you c-care!?”

“I don’t think that was fair of Monokuma. The headmaster doing that to a student… that’s abuse! And I don’t like watching my fellow students be treated roughly!” She is a human being who deserves common decency!!

“T-treated roughly? Oh, I g-get it. You p-pretend to be all soft and l-loving, but you’re actually a t-terror in bed! I bet you’re a secret s-sadist, not just a m-masochist!”

“What!? No! I don’t even… What!?!” Where did she even get the idea that I’m one of those, let alone both!? I was hoping she’d be easier on me after that conversation…!!

“I have you all f-figured out, you j-just don’t want to admit it! When you get in bed with a girl, you-.” Girl?!

“Lay off him! He wouldn’t hurt a goddamn fly,” Mondo said coolly. “If you wanna see a real sadist, go bother the Ultimate Fuckin’ Snob over there,” he gestured to Byakuya, who Toko walked over to after grousing at him.

“Bro, thanks… I’ve heard those terms used in reference to the human condition, but was she implying that I’m into hurting others sexu—“

Mondo groaned, his hand covering his face. He had dark bags under his eyes. “It’d be better if you
didn’t know. But yeah.”

“Why would she—“

“That chick has problems, dude. Tons.”

“I suppose…”

“Anyway. Hey.” He took Taka by the arm, pulling him to the side of the room. “Taka. I just… I’m not doin’ so hot right now. Haven’t been since the Gym yesterday.” Taka nodded. *He looks beat, almost like he aged 10 years overnight…* “I wanna make sure you get somethin’. I know I’m total shit at talkin’, but I just… I need to know… You know by now that what we have is the real deal, right?”

“Yes! It feels real to me. I wouldn’t be so open if it didn’t.” *Though I still have my fears due to trauma, I don’t doubt the truth of our relationship! Nor do I think he’d lie to me!*

Mondo sighed in relief. “Been wanting to make sure you knew that for a while, but I knew I had to do it now. I… I love what we’ve built. Honestly. I… L-l…”

“Yeah, bro?”

“… N-never, uh, nevermind.” He said, that constipated look back on his face. “But seriously, okay?”

Taka hugged him. “I wouldn’t trade what we’ve built for the world. Mondo, I believe in and trust you.” Mondo flinched. “Are you ok…? Did I say something wrong again?” He looked down. *I hope I didn’t just ruin a nice moment!! He needs one right now…*

“No, ‘s not you. It’s my hangups, not yours… Don’t worry about it.” He lifted Taka’s chin and looked him in the eye, micro-expressions flitting across his face. As usual they were indecipherable to Taka but he *did* notice Mondo’s eyes darted to his lips. Considering they were surrounded by people, they were together in secret, and that they were in the school, he’d have to decline any kisses until they were in private quarters. Mondo held his head like that for a minute, just looking at him like he was trying to memorize his face. There was a strange sensation in Taka’s chest of both lightness and heaviness. *He’s acting so strange, so urgent… He must just be off-killer from yesterday… but what is this feeling? Ominous elation…?* Mondo cleared his throat before Taka decided to ask. “Let’s go, though… Monokuma’ll just be more annoying the longer we put this off.” Taka nodded. Mondo headed through the elevator door.

Makoto approached Taka. “Did you find anything we should know before the trial?”

“No, I couldn’t do any investigating… I wasn’t in any mindset to.”

“That’s alright.”

“I don’t know why the killer did what they did, but… I’m sure it’ll work itself out! Justice always prevails! Right, bro!?” He turned to Mondo, who was standing facing away from him. He didn’t reply, only giving Taka a slightly belated thumbs-up.

As soon as everyone else boarded, the elevator began to descend to the pits of hell. Mentally, Taka was deadlocked between his need to keep everyone in check and his grief and guilt that Chihiro had been killed. *Someone took her life… And now we have to take theirs… This is so cruel. I hate this so much! Monokuma pretends this is justice, but it’s nothing more than the ‘eye for an eye’ philosophy taken to its extreme… We *have to* get out of here!*
As soon as the doors to Hell opened, Monokuma assaulted their ear drums with his babbling about having redecorated the trial room. Everything had the same function and form; it just looked like it was in a different aesthetic era than the last time. I'm no interior designer, but it's still ugly! Because of what he makes us do here, it will *always* be! Once they had taken their assigned seats, Monokuma recapped the rules and started the trial. Sitting between the memorial photos of Junko and Sayaka once again made Taka feel quite isolated. Seeing the new additions for Leon and Chihiro was unnerving as well. He couldn’t not think about the former’s brutal execution or the latter’s strung-up corpse. The x over Chihiro’s smiling face felt cruel and mocking toward both the dead and the living.

Monokuma said, “Okay then, so first off... Let's talk about the murder weapon!” Huh!? He started the discussion this time!? Sakura reminded them that Chihiro's fatal injury was a head wound.

Taka: “According to the Monokuma File, the killer used a ‘blunt instrument,’ but... What kind of ‘blunt instrument’ could it have been!?”

Hiro: “I bet it was an iron pipe!”

Taka: “Interesting! That certainly would make for a powerful weapon!” There’s surely something like that in the gym equipment!

Hina: “Poor Chihiro...”

Makoto: “Can we agree that the object that dealt the fatal blow was the dumbbell, found at the scene of the crime? It was covered in blood, and there was nothing else at the scene that could have caused that kind of injury.” Oh, I didn’t notice it was bloody, all I could look at was Chihiro and the wall behind her! That makes sense!

Kyoko: “And the wound on the victim's head is consistent with the shape of the dumbbell. As far as I'm concerned, there's no mistake and no room for doubt on this one.” Hina and Hifumi let their distaste for the fact that Kyoko had looked at Chihiro’s wound be known. I could never do that either! But if she hadn’t, we'd be here arguing for hours about how she died...
Byakuya was up next. He moved the discussion to the culprit, which he immediately said was Genocide Jack. Hina rebutted, saying there was no evidence that it was actually the serial killer himself that had done it. The message on the wall seemed to indicate it was him, but what else is there tying him to this crime!? Makoto showed them pictures of a file he’d found in the Library’s archive room. “I guess it’s some kind of confidential file the police put together about the Genocide Jack case.”

“What...? That's kinda weird as shit, isn't it? What was something like that doing in the library?” Mondo asked. He has a point! What would a prestigious school like this be doing with that kind of true crime dossier!?

“The why of it is probably more trouble than it's worth, so let's forget about that for now,” Byakuya drolled. How could that not be important for his argument!? “More importantly, it outlines all the specifics of every Genocide Jack case in exceeding detail. According to the file, there appear to be two defining characteristics in every Genocide Jack case.” If he’s such a widely-known serial killer to the point that the school has a copy of the case file, he must have an established pattern! “The first is that a bloody message is found written at the scene of every murder.”

Hifumi said, “Oh, that's right! ‘Booblust!'” Taka shot him a soul-piercing glare but it bounced off him like he was made of rubber. I want to be charitable and guess that he misremembered, but with him, I doubt that's the case! Change doesn’t happen overnight but come on, Hifumi! Hina told Hifumi, clearly disgusted, that it was ‘bloodlust’. Byakuya said there was another characteristic that wasn’t made public by the police.

“Never made public...? What the hell is it?” Mondo asked. Byakuya commanded Makoto to tell the others what it was. Why doesn’t he just tell us himself? He’s treating Makoto like his lackey! Hina even said he had been all day! Makoto informed them that the secret characteristic had to do with how the bodies were positioned. Genocide Jack’s victims were all suspended in a mock-crucifixion manner. He showed the group the photos he’d taken of the case file. To Taka, the details seemed to check out. He should’ve brought the file itself here so we could analyze it more closely! Why didn’t he!?

“Chihiro was most definitely suspended in the same way,” Byakuya asserted. “So, how did the culprit know about this, when only high-level police officials were aware of it? There's only one logical answer I can think of. It's because the culprit in this case... is the real Genocide Jack.”

Mondo yelled, “No fuckin' way!” in total disbelief. Celeste questioned the idea that the serial killer was one of them. Wait, really!? He could just be hiding somewhere! Like upstairs somewhere, or in an abandoned roo--

Byakuya: “Yes. In fact, it's Toko.” Toko, shocked, stammered incomprehensibly. Oh, she must have known it was Jack and that’s why she was afraid and hidin-- “Genocide Jack’s true identity... is Toko Fukawa.” What... Are you KIDDING ME!? Seriously!?! Hifumi accused him of lying, and Toko, still taken by surprise, couldn’t do anything other than ask what he meant. Taka was stunned at the accusation.

Hina: “Hey, okay, wait, hold on a sec! Toko has like, bloodophobia or whatever, remember?” Hemophobia! She passes out the second she sees blood! “What kind of serial killer is afraid of blood!?” That makes no sense whatsoever!

Byakuya: “Is Toko Genocide Jack? The answer is yes... and no.” She either is, or she isn’t! That’s not a gray area!

Makoto: “Is it because Genocide Jack... has a split personality?”
Hina: “… Huh?”

Makoto: “I think I read that somewhere in the file, too... They thought that the suspect might have... what did they call it? ‘Dissociative identity disorder’.” But does she really display the symptoms?!

Hifumi: “O-Okay... but still, to go and say that about Miss Fukawa is—

Byakuya: “Perfectly acceptable.” How!? “Toko's strange behavior after seeing the body is proof enough that she has a split personality.”

Makoto: “You’re talking about how she started acting totally different than usual, right?” Well, she *was* being strange…

Byakuya: “That’s right. Think back — she fainted when she saw Chihiro's corpse, and then when she woke up…"

Taka: “She was acting funny, that's for sure! That melancholy tone of hers completely disappeared!” But that could just have been shock, a concussion, or a psychotic break! Or all of them! We can’t just diagnose her with Dissociative Identity Disorder like that!

Toko: “Don’t go assigning adjectives to my t-tone without permission...” Taka flinched. Now I feel bad for stating the truth! Ugh… That’s not even what’s important right now!

Byakuya: “Not to mention, once she regained consciousness and saw Chihiro's body again, she was utterly calm. In other words, within her is one personality that can't handle blood, and one that obviously can.” That's a logical leap! You started off leading everyone to this conclusion and you aren’t backing it up with evidence that solely indicates DID or that she’s Jack! There are other explanations!! Even if I don’t know what they are, there *must* be! He felt anger starting to bubble within him. Toko… chafes me, but to say something like that about a fellow classmate… Byakuya just wants to impose his narrative on everyone else, even when it comes to such a grievous assertion!

Hina: “So when Toko trapped herself in her room, it's because she was scared of Genocide Jack...?”

Byakuya: “The reason she locked herself in her room wasn't to keep other people from getting in... It was to keep her other personality from getting out.” Or she was afraid because the killer was in her room! Or she knew he was on an upper floor! Hina asked what he meant. “Toko was afraid — afraid of the murderous fiend inside of her, of killing even more people...”


Hina: “Yeah, how can you know all this!?" Seriously! He’s gone through life with a silver spoon in his mouth, thinking he knows everything! This is conjecture! He has no corroboration because this is false!

Byakuya: “…I do believe you misunderstood her. What she's trying to say isn't, ‘How can you know all this?’ No, what she wants to know is, ‘How could you tell them?’” Ugh! “Last night, just before Monokuma gave his ‘motive’ speech, Toko and I had a strange conversation. She told me a most interesting story... She said a murderous fiend lived within her, and she was afraid it could appear and attack at any time. And that trepidation is what's caused her to have such a bleak attitude. Isn't that right, Toko?” WHAT!?

Toko: “Urg... gaah...!”

Hina: “This is all a lie... right, Toko?” I need to say something to defend her, this is getting out of ha-
Toko: “Y-You said you wouldn't t-tell anyone...!”

Hina: “…What!?" Wh--

Toko: “You p-promised...! I can't b-believe you l-lied!” Is she admitting--

Byakuya: “You have only yourself to blame — you came to me with your tragic little story. I didn’t ask you to. This is the real world, not some romantic fantasy fairytale.” He’s so horrible… Toko screamed in agony. “Besides, you broke your promise first. You said that as long as you were here, no matter what, you wouldn't let Genocide Jack kill anyone. But in spite of that promise...”

Toko: “I-I'm sorry. I couldn't k-keep our promise... But don't w-worry. Never again... I...! I won't let Genocide Jack have control ever again!” The rest of the class was in various states of shock, with some gasping and others yelling. The students near Toko all backed up or leaned away from her, repulsed. Taka was standing at his podium with his hands on the rail, mouth agape. Seriously... SERIOUSLY!??! HE WAS TELLING THE TRUTH!? “You said if I k-kept my promise... you would g-go out with me! Th-That's the only r-reason I promised...!” THAT’S WHY SHE TRIED TO CONTROL IT???. SO HE’D GO ON A DATE WITH HER!?! The sheer audacity of that took Taka’s breath away. Byakuya, getting annoyed, told Toko he’d never said that, and accused her of not being able to resist the rush she got from killing. “I-I tried...I swear I t-tried to control it! B-But...”

Byakuya: “But your efforts were useless. What a disappointment.”

Toko: “Nggh... I hate you...” Byakuya said all that was left was to hear from the killer in question. Is he going to pull out something blood- Toko looked horrified… and then, on command, almost supernaturally, her body flung itself backward and she landed on the ground with a thump. She immediately hopped back to standing position. “Well hello there! Is it me you were hoping to see!?” Her tongue was distended and her eyes were red and her entire demeanor had changed… She was much more like the Toko that Hina and Taka escorted to her room, although even more exaggerated. She looked like an abomination. H-horrifying!

Hifumi: “Gah! Eugh, what the heck!?"

Genocide Jack: “So you figured it out, huh? Well, whatever! What're ya gonna do!? I'm the Ultimate Murderous Fiend, Genocide Jack! Or better yet, let's go with Genocide Jill!” How is this even *possible*?

Mondo yelled: “What the fuck is this!?"

Taka: “Toko... what happened to you?” Taka was sweating, completely unable to fathom this revelation. What on Earth...

Jack: “Not Toko! That's a loser name! And what happened is a textbook split personality! So what if one of them happens to be a serial killer!? You should turn a blind eye to one's faults! Kyeehhahahahaha!” She went on an absolutely ridiculous rant about everything existing in two parts, in duality. Hifumi, clearly terrified out of his mind, asked her if she was the mastermind. At first, she confirmed it, but then said she was kidding. She’s... She’s... Completely, totally unhinged! This is what Toko was hiding all along!! Monokuma took umbrage with that theory, calling her a 'creepazoid'.

Monokuma: “And another thing! The police and government and society in the outside world are totally powerless! I mean, they just let this idiotic bloodthirsty maniac go buck wild all over town!” H-how did they let her go!? Is she just so good at killing that they couldn’t catch her!? She copped to being a bloodthirsty maniac, and went on a tangent about how hurting others is a necessary part of
life... only to say she was kidding again. *What kind of… Monster…!?* Byakuya posited that Jack was clearly the killer, and that she had a motive: to keep everyone from finding out her secret because it’d ruin her life. *There’s no way Byakuya’s wrong this time! The motive, the means, the truth, it’s all right there! Toko, as Genocide Jack, killed Chihiro!*

Jack: “Interesting... Very very very interesting...! But sorry! As much as I hate to admit it, I'm not the culprit!”

Taka: “...Huh?” Everyone was completely incredulous that it could be anyone *but* Genocide Jack at this point, even though she maintained that she was innocent. He squinted at her in confusion as to how the famed serial killer could claim she hadn’t murdered Chihiro, especially with that setup. *How could it NOT be? She’s a serial killer, she’s NOT innocent!*

“When you compare your past murders to this incident... the modus operandi matches completely. What more proof do we need?” Byakuya said. She cackled. Makoto asked him if the methods really were exactly the same, saying that they were a little different. Jack agreed and explained that she considered herself a professional, essentially a ‘top chef’ of her ‘field’. She insinuated that whoever had killed Chihiro had been doing nothing more than a poor, watered-down imitation of her handiwork. Makoto explained that Chihiro was killed with a blow to the head, whereas Jack’s victims were killed by being cut and stabbed with scissors. He explained it would be strange for a serial killer to change their method like that.

Jack: “That's right! In my recipe of murder, if the bloody message is the tortellini... then the arrangement of the body would be the pesto sauce!”

Hiro: “Could you please stop comparing killing people to cooking...?” *Yeah! Taka was trying fight off more nausea by this point. Wretched!!*

Taka: “S-So... are you saying the other difference has to do with how the body was arranged...?”

Makoto agreed. He said that in the case file, all of the victims were stabbed through the hands with scissors to secure them to the wall, but that Chihiro was suspended by her wrists with rope. Jack said she used her own custom scissors for the murders and arrangements – she wouldn’t use just any tools, as a professional. She said there was one more difference and heckled Makoto for not noticing it.

Makoto took a minute to figure it out. He stated that all of the Jack victims were adult men or boys. But Chihiro wasn’t a man. Jack agreed: “That's right! The people I kill with such passion and conviction... are all adorable little men! Kyaah! I can't believe I said it! I'm so embarrassed!”

Mondo: “The hell is wrong with you!?" *Seriously!*

“I can't help it. I'm just a full-throttle boy-on-boy fangirl! And the mopey side of me just hates it! But now I'm on the fast track to becoming a full-fledged fanmadam!” *Ugh*! Mondo looked freaked out.

*Boy-on-boy fangirl... Is she saying she’s like Hifumi, but for gay men!? And Toko is a homophobe!? A chill went down his spine. If I had told her that Mondo’s the one I have feelings for, what would she have done!?* He was shaking, petrified that one wrong step easily could’ve ended with at best, a homophobic attack, or at worst, a deadly fetish. *No, no, I can’t think about that right now! I have to get justice for Chihiro!!!! I must find her killer, and to do that, I have to clear up the details of the accusations and defenses! “So since Chihiro was a girl and not an ‘adorable little man’...”* Taka creaked with a voice a smidge less commanding than usual, “You wouldn’t kill her?” She confirmed that, calling him stupid and saying she had too much ‘passion’ and ‘conviction’ to cross her own lines.
“We get it,” Byakuya said. “You’ve clearly explained your hobby and your philosophy. But that’s not all there is to it. It’s a different matter entirely... when you’re forced to kill in order to survive.”

She insulted him by calling him a ‘lowly cur’, then went on to say, “I would never kill for a reason as petty as mere survival! And! If by some fluke I *did* kill to survive... why would I bother with the message and arrangement!? It’d make me the obvious suspect!” Celeste said that made sense. There are too many differences between modus operandis to be ignored! But does that *really* mean she isn’t the culprit!? She’s a SERIAL KILLER! Jack said she’d never not use her specialty scissors, and would doubly so never use a different murder weapon. She also proved that she had her scissors currently on her, pulling out several pairs slickly from a holster on her thigh. I thought all our possessions were gone when we woke up!? “So I can kill anywhere, anytime! Why would I resort to dumbbells or rope, when I have my trusty scissors by my side? Go ahead, tell me I’m wrong. You can’t, can you? Gutter dogs, all of you! Not to mention, I have no clue how to tie a good knot. So rope’s totally out of the question anyway!” So she could kill us any time!? We’re in constant danger! At least, half of us are!!

Taka leaned against the podium. “Ngh... ngraah...!” This case had flown off the rails without abandon. My head... It feels like it’s going to explode! “I have no idea what's going on anymore...! Could such a heinous villain really be innocent!? It's impossible... She’s a serial killer!! She’s guilty! And she has her murder weapons on her 24/7! None of this makes any sense whatsoever! Why is this happening while we’re trying to solve Chihiro’s murder!? We have to honor her by getting this right, but this ludicrous derailment is just...!!!

Mondo: “But... the body really was suspended, right? And nobody but the police knew about that...” Hina agreed, saying that’s why they thought it was the real deal in the first place. Makoto pointed out that Byakuya could have easily caught that detail since he had access to classified and internal documents of both the government and police. He can!? Is it because he’s a Togami!? I knew they had vast amounts of power and wealth but knowing that now, I see I’m going to have a harder fight than I thought! Makoto alleged that he had also looked at the case file previously. Celeste said he must have done it to pin the crime on Jack.

“So he rearranged the scene to disguise it and make it look like I'd put my stamp on it...!” Jack spat. “The adorable glasses man was behind it all!? Ahh, I'm on fire!” What is that emotion? Is she impressed?

“...Well, Byakuya!?” Taka asked, “What's your response!? How could someone even do such a horrible thing... How could it NOT be the serial killer standing just feet away from us, gloating about all her other victims and her ability to kill any of us on a whim!?!?

“I see... So now the suspicion falls on me. Then I must ask... when would you say I began acting suspicious? Surely you must have an answer...” He said, sounding like he was discussing a novel and not being accused of murdering a classmate.

“The way you were acting right before we discovered the body was a little strange... You wanted to go to the Girls' Locker Room right away, right? But since you're a guy...” Byakuya said he thought to go there right away because the victim was Chihiro, who was a girl. Hifumi didn’t detect anything strange about that, nor did Taka. But Makoto did. Byakuya demanded he explain. “I'll tell you what's so strange about that... Because up until we actually discovered the body, we couldn't have known who the victim was!” He gave himself away by saying he knew before he could’ve if he weren’t involved! Maybe he’s working *with* Jack! Byakuya laughed, seemingly entertained. He’s a complete monster in his own right! He bombarded Makoto with questions, asking for more reasoning. Kyoko said there was, indeed, something else that tied Byakuya to the crime, and that it lay in plain sight in the difference between the Genocide Jack murder cases and this one.
Jack: “You want me to explain it again!? When I want to kill, I use my very own special scissors! And I use those same scissors to arrange the body!”

Celeste: “But... Chihiro was suspended with... It was some kind of rope, was it not?”

Taka: “That's right!” He remembered. “It absolutely was! So if she’s not lying about never changing her methods, it *wasn’t* Jack at all... She wouldn’t have even collaborated! He felt a headache starting to solidify behind his eyes. The sheer concept of an innocent serial killer was overloading his brain.

Mondo: “Hey, Byakuya! Where'd you get it from, huh?” Taka couldn’t tear himself away from focusing on the extreme moral conflict inherent in this new revelation, but Mondo’s reliable anger allowed him to somewhat split his attention to keep up with the conversation at hand.

Byakuya claimed he’d never seen the rope before, but Makoto rebutted, saying that the rope was actually an extension cord, which Byakuya had previously been using in the library. It had gone missing after the murder, and it’s impossible that Byakuya wouldn’t have noticed or mentioned it otherwise.

Taka: “Then Byakuya must be the one who took the extension cord! I can't imagine any other possibility!” An inanimate object can’t move on its own!

Byakuya: “That's really what you think? Then your conclusion is something like this...? I killed Chihiro in the Girls’ Locker Room, then hung her up and wrote that bloody message. I intentionally made it look like Genocide Jack was behind it. Is that about right?” Makoto was clutching the railing. “What's wrong? I asked you if you think that's what happened.” It clearly *is*! I don't want to even consider it possible that Jack isn’t the culprit, but unlike Byakuya’s insane attempt to set up Jack, there are no holes in this argument!

Mondo: “Hell yes that's what happened! So that's it, right? Byakuya's the killer!”

Taka: “He kept calling this a game, right? So he'd be totally willing to do something like this to ‘win!’ He said before he wouldn’t have to get his hands dirty – I thought that meant he wouldn’t, himself, commit murder, but he meant that he’d pin it on someone else!! This sounds exactly like something he’d try to pull off! Makoto said they needed to keep discussing it. Jack is the perfect scapegoat!! Byakuya said that he killed Chihiro in the Girls’ Locker Room and tried to frame Jack by arranging the crime scene in a specific way. He’s repeating what we’ve said in a way that means he agrees!! Makoto asked if it was possible that the murder had taken place somewhere else entirely. Byakuya was incredulous, calling Makoto a disappointment, and saying that because that’s where she was found there was no way she was killed someplace else.

“Well... I think it's entirely possible that she was killed somewhere else, then carried there later... along with the rest of the murder scene,” Makoto said. Byakuya questioned what he meant. What!? That's ridiculous!

Taka: “Hey, don't just move on without permission!” We haven’t even gotten Byakuya to fully confess yet! One thing at a time!!! He still hadn’t been able to find his bearings at the reveal that Toko was a serial killer and that she was innocent of this particular killing, either. “What do you mean she was killed somewhere else!?” Byakuya demanded proof as well. Makoto pointed out that the posters in the girls’ and boys’ locker rooms had been switched; everyone was baffled. How is that proof of anything!? Though they obviously had to discuss Makoto’s idea, Taka felt that it was just another way their search for the truth of Chihiro’s murder was being derailed regardless of intention. Red herrings are one thing, but we have a clear answer right in front of us! Byakuya isn’t even denying his involvement, we just haven’t been able to drag a full confession out of him yet!
We’re so close!! Perhaps we can smoke him out by following this line of thought? I doubt it, but…

Makoto: “The poster in the Girls’ Locker Room was… a picture of a big-boobed supermodel. But don't you think that's kind of strange? Why would the Girls’ Locker Room have a poster like that?”

Oh! It didn’t! That one was in the Boys’ Locker Room – I was looking at it when I heard Hifumi in the locker!

Taka: “That one was in the other locker room before!” At Makoto’s questioning, his focus on the fact that Byakuya had all but confessed directly was easily diverted by getting caught up in examining the details of the rooms.

Makoto: “Meanwhile, the Boys’ Locker Room had… a poster of the super popular boy band Tornado. Again, that doesn't really seem to belong in a Boys’ Locker Room.” Neither of those should be in a place to work out anyway, especially not the lewd model, and doubly not so in a school! The trappings of heteronormativity are totally incompatible with academics!!! He mentioned there was something else strange and asked Sakura if she knew what he meant.

Sakura: “You're referring to my protein coffee, aren't you? While I was in the Girls’ Locker Room earlier, I spilled some protein coffee on the carpet. But I noticed that after the murder, the stain had been totally scrubbed away.” So the killer cleaned the carpet of blood and the stain! For weekly cleaning duty, most of us have used the equipment in the Incinerator Room to tidy up the school! The culprit clearly knew about it!! How on Earth does that prove she was killed somewhere else?

Makoto: “The stain on the Girls’ Locker Room carpet wasn't scrubbed away. In fact, I found it on the Boys’ Locker Room carpet.” He showed her the picture he’d snapped on his handbook. One of the boys must like a brown drink, then! A coffee stain can’t be *that* distinctive!

“That's... definitely the stain from my protein coffee!” Sakura said. Eh!? Celeste asked if that meant the carpets were also switched and why someone would do that. Makoto suggested it was to move the murder scene from one room to the other.

Taka: “What!??” But *why*?!

Makoto: “In other words, in order to completely swap the scene of the crime... the bloodstained poster and carpet were moved along with the dead body. By doing this, the killer was able to change the entire room where the murder took place.” But what would be their reason for doing that? And where’s the proof that Chihiro was moved!? Celeste followed Makoto’s reasoning, but couldn’t come up with a reason why the culprit would do that, let alone how Chihiro had been in the Boys’ Locker Room in the first place considering the gendered locks and over the top security measures. The group threw out different possibilities, none of which were sticking.

“Ah! I've got it! She must have hacked her e-Handbook!” Taka suggested. “She was the Ultimate Programmer, after all. I'm sure that would've been no problem for her!”

“No, I don't think that's it... She used the thing that was in the main hall!” Hiro said. He posited that she had used Leon’s handbook, which was in the vault with the other dead students’, since that would allow her to enter the boys’ room. Makoto said that couldn’t be the case, since it was broken. Monokuma confirmed that the rule said you couldn’t loan your handbook, but that borrowing one was fine – especially from someone who was already dead. Ugh! Byakuya pointed out that this wouldn’t make sense anyway since Leon’s was pummeled during the execution and therefore not usable.

“So then, she must have hacked hers like I said!” Taka suggested. If she can make an AI on a dusty old laptop, then anything is possible! “She used her Ultimate Programmer skills and—!”
Monokuma interrupted him. “Bzzt! You can't fix an e-Handbook. The instant you open one up, a security buzzer starts blaring!” The lack of explanations led the group to think that Makoto’s assumption was wrong, so that Byakuya really must have killed her. *I trust that our instincts are correct!*

“Okay then, I vote for Byakuya!” Taka said confidently. *It couldn’t possibly be someone else… Not even that depraved serial killer! Makoto’s argument just has zero logic behind it! Even though someone clearly switched the carpets and rugs, that doesn’t mean Chihiro was moved too! There must just be a practical joker among us!! The simplest explanation is often the right one!!!* Hina and Hiro both nodded, getting ready to cast their votes. *Since we have the answer, we must move on!*

Just as he was about to ask Monokuma to proceed, Kyoko said to Makoto, “...Hold on a second. I agree with you, though. I think you're on the right track.” *Huh!?*

“What the—? You finally decide to open your mouth, and *that's* what you've got to say?” Mondo cried. “There's no way she could get in the Boys' Locker Room, right!? So—!”

"Why are you so sure she couldn't get in? There's still one other way she could have gained access.”

Mondo asked “…What!?” At the same time Taka asked “What are you talking about!? What other way is there!?” Kyoko said they needed to take a break in the trial so she could show them something that would answer that question. Monokuma was unsure, but she goaded him into accepting with the promise of spicing up the trial.

*I don't care about that, we need an answer, and fast! For ourselves, and for Chihiro too!*

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She led them to the Girls’ Locker Room. “We've already searched this place top to bottom! What are you trying to pull, missy!?” Taka demanded. *Is she trying to stall!? If we run out of time, Monokuma will kill us all!*

"I'd like you to examine the victim's body, one more time,” she replied. Makoto was unsure, Hifumi was freaked out, and Hiro rejected ‘on religious grounds’.

“It's... probably best if I don't run my hands all over a girl's dead body...” Taka said. He was trying to keep from looking at Chihiro. *I already don’t want to see her corpse again, but the concept of touching her? That’s so disrespectful…*

Sakura agreed to do it. “I think Chihiro would rather have a girl examine her.” Taka nodded because although this was still clearly questionable, that was the least dubious option. She apologized while praying to Chihiro for doing it, and then began patting her down. Kyoko told her to check Chihiro’s *entire* body; she did so reluctantly, examining under the girl’s skirt. Though he was averting his eyes to begin with, Taka was very squicked out. “What—? This is... What does this m—? Huuuuuuuuuh! Not possible... It's not possible!” Sakura was shouting while she was trembling and staring at Chihiro’s body. “This... this girl is...!” Hina pressed her. “…Is a boy!” Everyone was gobsmacked. “I wouldn’t joke about this!” *Was she… Was she…!?*

“Th-Th-Then...” Taka stammered. “Then it's really true!?”

“Hmm? Oh what, you guys didn't know? Heck, I knew that right off the bat! Chihiro Fujisaki was totally a guy!”

“Th-Then... he was a cross-dresser!?" Jack said. “Now I'm REALLY on fire! I wish I HAD killed him!”
“You’re disgusting!” Taka spat. She sneered at him, wiggling her grotesque tongue mockingly. “Monokuma!”

“Huh? What’s up?” The bear said, turning to him quizzically.

I can’t change that we live with a serial killer! I can’t change that some of us have died! I... I couldn’t keep us unified... And I can’t undo Chihiro’s death, or the pain I’ll hold forever because of it! But there’s one thing I *can* do!!! “I won’t let anyone disrespect her further!” He demanded, “Was Chihiro transgender!?” He stepped in front of Chihiro’s body as if to protect her, his hands on his hips. He had an air of total authority. He was momentarily in his element, and it was for the sake of his friend. Anyone who besmirched her or referred to her incorrectly would have to deal with *him*. The others, with the exception of Byakuya and Kyoko, looked surprised or impressed at his turnaround.

“Nope! You got handbooks according to which of the two genders was listed on your application to the school!”

“There’re more than two! This locker room setup is intolerable! Ugh!” The need to call out the essentialism in that statement, in this whole room, was very strong, especially since he wasn’t exactly in tune with the binary himself, but his need to get justice for his fallen friend won out: “Would you have recognized her gender if she *were* trans!?!?”

“Of course, silly. If he didn’t like how his gender was listed, he could’ve come to me and I would’ve changed it!”

“Really!?” That’s extremely hard to believe!

“Well, duh!”

“But did she even *know* that was an option?”

“Puhuhuhu! I talked to him the night of the orientation ceremony! He told me he’d let me know if he changed his mind!”

“Why should we trust that you’re being truthful!?”

“Seriously – how could I provide you a successful environment if I didn’t respect your identities? If I don’t make your student life here as comfortable as possible... Your despair won’t taste so delicious!”

Taka looked to Kyoko for guidance. “I think he’s telling the truth.” Taka nodded.

I certainly don’t trust Monokuma, but I do trust Kyoko! “If anything comes to light about Chihiro being trans, I’ll be the first to inform you all and ensure you refer to him correctly!! I suppose this is settled for now... Therefore, we must resume the trial!” Monokuma giggled but shut up when Taka glared at him with fiery eyes.
[Ch 2 I] - Forsaken Riders

Chapter Notes

I made Taka more active during the trial. You might be a little surprised at some bits of this, but you'll see what I have planned later.

Tbh I don't really have any words to warn you about how excruciating this chapter is. Just know that I made it far, far, far more painful than the anime and game and all of that.

Next chapter will follow the immediate aftermath (will take longer to post, have to do edits). *Please* leave comments and discuss this chapter with me, bidoof bidoof bidoof is on fire

TW for this chapter: extreme agony, self loathing, suicidality, that kind of stuff. The suicidality intensifies during the vote and is present for the rest of the chapter.

NOTE: Please see the end notes at the end of this chapter. I wanna share something sweet and happy with all of you that my pal made me.

Game Transcripts: [This Section of Chapter 2] [Chapter 2, 422-505]

Monokuma lead them back to the trial room and resumed proceedings straightaway. Taka gestured to Kyoko to pick things up where they left off. He turned his head to look at Mondo, wondering how he was reacting to all of this, but the biker was watching Kyoko with his hands in his pockets, expression vaguely blue. I bet he misses him, too… Kyoko said that since Chihiro was a boy, he wouldn’t have had any trouble getting into the Boys’ Locker Room. I understand that Chihiro was identified in Monokuma’s records as a boy, but… I wish I could ask Chihiro about all this! I wish… I wish he hadn’t been killed!!! For his deceased friend’s sake, he tried to carry his guilt and regret in pursuit of justice. He held onto his sleeves tightly. “So then, there should be no issue with Makoto’s initial assertion…” Kyoko continued after glancing at Taka, ‘The victim was killed in the Boys’ Locker Room, and was then later moved to the Girls’ Locker Room. And the killer could have easily used Sayaka or Junko’s handbook to get into the Girls’ Locker Room.”

Taka: “So Chihiro really was killed in the Boys’ Locker Room!” This is still so much! Since he trusted Kyoko and the time was ticking, he decided, for the sake of the argument, to roll with her and Makoto’s reasoning even though they were still lacking solid proof that Chihiro really was killed and moved like they were suggesting. We can still examine it more, after Byakuya fesses up!

Byakuya: “So now everything has been connected. All the mysteries have finally become clear.”

Hina: “Okay, well, connected or clear or whatever… We still think *you’re* the killer, remember?” Absolutely! He found Chihiro in the boys’ room, killed him, and moved the crime scene to the girls’ room so he could set up Jack!

Byakuya: “Hmhm. Very interesting. This has become very interesting indeed…”
Kyoko asked if Makoto still thought Byakuya was the killer. He definitely framed Genocide Jack for it, the boy said, but he wasn’t sure any more that he’d actually murdered Chihiro himself. He pointed out that Byakuya seemed to be enjoying himself way too much for someone who was the true culprit, and that the clues he left behind were far too obvious, especially since he chose to use the extension cord knowing it might be tied back to him. Wait… Does that mean he showed Makoto the case file so he’d be able to spot the differences…!? But why!?! “And Byakuya, when you found out the murder took place in the Boys’ Locker Room, it seemed to rattle you. And then again when you found out Chihiro was actually a guy… If you really were the killer, that stuff wouldn’t have had any effect on you,” Makoto said.

Byakuya replied that although Makoto’s reasoning wasn’t concrete, he’d ‘mark it as correct’. He admitted that he hadn’t killed Chihiro, but rather, that he’d come across his corpse in the Girls’ Locker Room and decided to stage the crime scene. How could he just happen to come across his body, especially when it was already in the girls’ room!? There’s no way he could even get in without being executed by the security measures! This is far too convenient to be true! Mondo asked if Byakuya was ‘fucking with them’. “No, I am not... effing with you right now. I’m telling you the truth.”

Taka shouted, “Well I find it very hard to believe!” Byakuya said he was free to be wrong. He didn’t budge and explain his reason for defiling Chihiro’s corpse like that when needled by Hina; he just redirected the conversation to discovering the actual killer. Did he just do it to get pleasure out of us having the wrong idea, time after time!? Is that what ‘winning the game’ means to him? Makoto agreed that they needed to talk about it more. There was some pushback from the group, especially Hiro, but Kyoko reminded them that they needed to explore every possibility if there were any doubts or they’d be executed for picking the wrong culprit. She’s right, but how could Byakuya NOT have killed Chihiro!?

Hiro said, “Damn straight! Count me in!”

He changed his position so fast! “Do you not have a mind of your own!?” Taka asked, anxiousness and disbelief at this whole trial making him barbed and incredulous.

“Of course I do! What am I, an ant or somethin’?” An ant would be way more consistent than you!

Makoto moved to discuss the crime scene. He pointed out that because Leon’s handbook was broken, and the security systems would only open if presented with a handbook of the matching gender, the killer had to be a boy.

“Isn’t there a single clue that might lead us to who did it?” Sakura asked.

“Well, clues are one thing, but...” Taka said. “Did nobody get a look at the killer!?” It could still have been Byakuya! First it’s Genocide Jack, then Jack is Toko, then it’s not Jack at all, then it’s Byakuya, then Chihiro was actually a boy, and now Byakuya says it wasn’t him… The amount of red herrings in this trial really threw him for a loop. He’d been taking notes the whole time, but there were a lot of footnotes to *those*, too. I’m so confused! I don’t know what to think anymore!! What I *do* know is that both Genocide Jack and Byakuya are terrifying sadists, and there’s no overlooking or excuses their involvement here!!!

“I believe someone else did see the victim before he was murdered,” Makoto stated. “What do you think, Celeste?”

“No that you mention it, yes. I did see him,” Celeste answered. Hifumi was shrieking. “Oh, but I suppose only Makoto knows about this. The rest of you had no idea, did you? That is why you’re all making such ugly noises.” Why didn’t she say something earlier!? Waiting until Makoto asked her
directly like that – did she forget, or did she just want an excuse to proclaim superiority and deride us for being surprised?!

“Whatever, just hurry up and tell us!” Taka demanded. *So many people are hiding so many things! It’d all be so much easier if the killer just came forward!!!* We wouldn’t be wasting time arguing over things we can’t piece together and coming closer and closer to the time limit Monokuma won’t actually tell us about! Keeping secrets already killed Chihiro and will surely kill the culprit! It’ll kill the rest of us too if we don’t do everything in our power to prevent that outcome!

“It was last night, right before nighttime. I saw Chihiro... in the dormitory Warehouse. I saw him stuffing a track jacket into a duffel bag. And then, I assume, he headed off to exercise.”

Taka replied, “A track jacket and a duffel bag? But we didn’t find anything like that at the murder scene!” Sakura said the culprit must have destroyed them. *Did anyone check the Incinerator Room!?* *Hina has cleaning duty this week, but I guess she didn’t think to...* Celeste mentioned that Chihiro made sure the suit was completely inside the bag once she saw him and said he was ‘in a hurry’. She assumed would only mean someone was waiting for him. *Unless he just kept a strict schedule like I do! He must have had great time management skills, since coding is so difficult and he was probably involved in a ton of projects before we all enrolled!* Hifumi said he must’ve been on his way to meet someone who intended to work out with him. Sakura sounded sad when she mentioned she and Hina had invited Chihiro to exercise together plenty of times but he always declined. Hiro said it was probably to keep his secret. That hit Taka in the gut. *I wish I had thought to offer… Maybe if I had, this wouldn’t have happened.* He clenched his fists, trying to focus on the sensation rather than fall headfirst back into guilt. *I have to bear this, just a little longer! I need to keep the trial moving!* Celeste asserted that he must’ve really trusted whoever he was planning to meet because he was willing to risk the exposure of his secret. Confusion set in about how to figure out who the culprit was because they were out of evidence.

Kyoko: “...No, you already have what you need to make the connection. You know who the killer is.”

Taka: “S-Seriously!?”

Mondo: “Wh-Who is it!? Who's the killer!? What does she know!? *If it really wasn’t Byakuya, how could she have come to a conclusion *already*!?*

Kyoko: “Think back to the track jacket and duffel bag the killer disposed of. Focus on the details of these items, and it should become obvious who was waiting for him.” Celeste questioned this line of logic, since they were two pieces of evidence none of them had found. Hifumi asked if she wanted fingerprints.

Taka: “Even if we had the equipment for that, we wouldn't know how to use it!” *Monokuma could definitely afford to build a crime lab here, but it'd make cases far too easy for him to sate his ravenous boredom!* Kyoko told them to keep talking about the missing bag and jacket.

Celeste: “The bag was... just a normal duffel bag from the warehouse. All the bags in there are the same, so I can't imagine what would make that one special...” *Yeah – they're large, black, and they have the Academy logo on them!*

Sakura: “Well, if I remember right, there was a decent variety of tracksuits to choose from...” *Yes! There are all sorts of different colors, as well as suits for different body types! “Do you think there might be some connection between the culprit and Chihiro’s jacket?”*

Kyoko: “Perhaps. Let's explore that, and talk a bit more about the jacket he took. First of all, we
know where Chihiro was headed... He was on his way to go exercise. So next we have to ask... Why did he choose the specific tracksuit that he did?” The students puzzled over her words.

Taka: “I got it! He picked that tracksuit because... it matched the one the culprit was wearing!” If he trusted whoever he was going to meet, that means they were friends! It’s totally normal to have matching tracksuits with your friends!! I think...!

Mondo: “So what you're saying is... The killer was wearing the same blue tracksuit as him? My tracksuit is black!” He’s right – he’s worn it when we’ve worked out! I had been wearing one to match him until he suggested I get a red one because it matched my eyes! It was a sweet gesture between people who care about each other!!

The others discussed what colors their tracksuits were. Celeste: “Did any of that really help us get any closer to figuring out who the culprit is...?”

Mondo: “No way... Not a chance...” Seriously! Why would the color be even remotely relevant?

Makoto: “Hold on a second, Mondo! What did you just say?” He said his tracksuit was black, so it couldn’t have matched Chihiro’s!

Mondo: “…Huh? What'd I say?”

Taka wanted to be helpful so he thought he should remind Mondo, but Makoto beat him to it. “When Celeste testified a few minutes ago, she never said anything about the jacket's color. So why did you say Chihiro's ‘blue’ tracksuit?” Huh?

“What are you—!? You just—!” Mondo stammered, stricken. Celeste confirmed that the tracksuit was blue... and that she hadn’t even mentioned that to Makoto, and he was the only one she’d talked to in the first place about having seen the programmer.

Sakura: “Then... Mondo, how did you know what color Chihiro's tracksuit was?”

Mondo: “B-Because I—! I just—!” That’s easy, I’ll explain for him!

Taka: “I-I'm sure he saw the clothes at some point in the investigation...!” He gave Mondo a thumbs up, thinking he’d successfully answered the question. Mondo didn’t react.

Kyoko: “No, that can’t be it. The bag and clothes were surely disposed of by the time we began our investigation.” Shoot, it must be something else! Maybe he didn’t mean it was *actually* blue, but rather was using that as a general stand-in for whatever color it actually was, like how people use ‘you’ to refer to a general group of people! Or maybe he even guessed! There’s no way we can even know for sure that it’s that color without finding it! Jack said the only way he could’ve known is if he’d seen Chihiro with it before he died.

Mondo: “J-Just by chance... I just happened to see it last night... He walked past me, and he was carrying the tracksuit in his hands.” That makes sense!

Makoto: “No, that can’t be it, either.” What? “According to Celeste's testimony... When she noticed it, Chihiro made a point of making sure the jacket was completely in the bag. If you just ran into him briefly, you couldn't possibly have seen what color the tracksuit was.” Maybe it fell out and he was putting it back in when Mondo saw him!? Perhaps he was rearranging it with whatever else was in the bag! Or maybe he was taking it out to get ready...

Mondo: “Gh—! Nnggh...!” What’s that reaction? Taka studied Mondo closely, trying to see if he looked like he usually did when he was panicking. He was fully prepared to rush to him in that event
to anchor him, thinking that he’d just move the trial along from his side instead.

Taka: “Bro! Are you okay?” He’s obviously upset about something, but I don’t think he’s having an attack??

Kyoko: “It would appear you’ve dug your own grave.”

Byakuya: “Perhaps, but you handed him the shovel, didn’t you? That’s why you said what you did... Focus on the tracksuit, and it’ll be obvious who he met with? What a bunch of nonsense...” ...I don’t get it.

Celeste: “...Ah, now I understand. It was all one big bluff, wasn’t it? Your true intention was to draw a slip of the tongue from the culprit... That’s why you said you knew who did it, to put them on edge.” Wh... This is... This is a witch hunt! The indignity of it all made his headache worse.

Kyoko: “That’s right.” They were right!? Why is she being so cold and calculating!? “However... Mondo was my target all along. I had my suspicions about him from the very beginning!” Makoto asked what made her suspicious. He’s been acting strange since the Gym yesterday, but so would anyone when threatened with the exposure of their heaviest secret! A lot of the others took it hard too! “That’s a good question. There was a certain turning point that tipped me off. Maybe you didn't notice it, Mondo, but you tend to refer to men and women differently. You only call guys ‘dude’. For girls, it’s ‘chick’. And after he was killed, you happened to refer to him as ‘dude’. Once I picked up on that, it occurred to me that Mondo knew something we didn’t.” Taka felt like he’d been slapped in the face, that’s how much an indignity this line of reasoning was. To Mondo, to himself, and more importantly, to their quest for justice. He was nearly in tears from the moment Kyoko started lobbing twisted allegations against his boyfriend.

Taka: “This is all a ploy to use Mondo’s words against him! He’s terrible at expressing himself, and I of all people would know!” I can’t tolerate this! Why is she doing this!? “And so would *you*, Kyoko! We literally talked about it!!!”

Kyoko: “Although that’s true, he wouldn’t just randomly slip up and indirectly reveal information he had no way of knowing. Because messing up wouldn’t suddenly clue him in. He already knew.” That’s *logical*, but it’s not impossible to accidentally use the wrong words! It’s just a coincidence that Chihiro was actually a boy!! I mess up all the time, I know he does too sometimes!

Hifumi: “Y-You noticed such a tiny detail!?”

Jack: “Are you a witch? She's a witch! You're positively frightful!”

Kyoko: “No, I'm not the frightful one. Not nearly as frightful as someone capable of murdering a friend.” NO! No way! How dare she accuse him of that!!! He would never...!! Taka recoiled in disgust at the accusation.

Mondo: “Kh...!” I'd be speechless, too!

Makoto: “Mondo... was it really you? Did you really... kill Chihiro?”

Mondo: “I...I-I-I... I didn't kill anyone! You've been all over me, judging everything I say, putting words in my mouth... What gives you the right to treat me like a goddamn criminal??” He’s right!!! Where’s their proof?

Taka: “Y-Yeah! He would never do something like that! Innocent until PROVEN guilty!!! This is a false accusation!” And an extremely unfair one, at that! We’re supposed to get justice for Chihiro here, not pin the blame on someone uninvolved like Bro!
Kyoko: “It’s true, my reasoning on that is pretty shaky.” What is she DOING!? She forces Mondo to misspeak, uses that against him, then uses him misspeaking earlier as further proof he’s the culprit! And then she backs down as soon as both of us rebut! She’s not behaving in a just way!!! This is a grave matter and accusation! Take it seriously!! Taka was full-on glaring and grimacing at Kyoko, who didn’t flinch under his withering gaze. The sheer injustice taking place here had him clenching his jaw and unconsciously grinding his teeth. It was even more putrid that this was coming from Kyoko, who’d proved to be steady, unflappable, and who above all else Taka had trusted and looked to for support and strength.

Celeste said they were now out of leads before Taka could deliver the angry speech about proof and justice he was mentally preparing. Mondo still looked very tense. Hifumi said he’d found something. The others asked him to present it, but he backed down until Hiro cowed him into going through with it. He pulled an eHandbook out of his pocket, saying he’d found it on the ground. Makoto said it must’ve been Chihiro’s. Hifumi was sure it was, but it wouldn’t turn on. Celeste said the culprit must have broken it.

Taka set aside his speech for later use considering their lack of time and that they had to discuss what Hifumi had found. He didn’t want to inadvertently filibuster the proceedings, as that could easily cause them to derail further or run out of time. It’ll have to wait for later, but I will not let this spitting in the face of justice and morality go unregarded!

Byakuya: “That's odd. I didn't think the handbooks were quite so... fragile.”

Monokuma: “You're right, they're not! They're totally waterproof and shock-resistant! It would take an awful lot to break one... And yet, this one does appear to be broken. As is Leon's, sitting useless in the main hall. Do you think there might be some kind of mystery in there somewhere? How, precisely, did the handbooks get broken?”

“Maybe it had some kind of bug you could exploit...?” Makoto suggested.

“Too bad for you, but those things have been debugged to hell and back! We couldn't afford a recall!”

“Maybe they were able to physically hack into it and destroy it that way.”

“I told you, it's impossible to modify it! Try to open up its guts and a security buzzer goes off!” If it’s invulnerable and it wasn’t hacked or exploited, what could it be?? Taka had examined his handbook when he got it, but it’s not like he had the means or desire to test it under any kinds of stress. It never even occurred to him, and even if Monokuma hadn’t stressed how important they were, it still wouldn’t because he wasn’t *that* type of curious.

“You already told us before that the handbook has one weak point, didn't you?” He did!?

Monokuma: “Ughah! You remember that!? Sure, maybe I let that slip, but I never told anyone what the weak point actually was!” Byakuya said that if they were supposed to be indestructible and yet two broke in quick succession, someone must’ve discovered its weakness. Kyoko asked what the weakness was. The bear was cagey, but she told him he needed to say it to ensure a fair trial. Funny she’d mention a fair trial, considering how she’s raking Mondo over hot coals without due cause!!!

“But... if I tell you, and someone else decides to copy it, that would be very not good... *sigh* Oh well... I have a weakness for pushy demands. But you're sure you won't follow their example?” The others just nodded or shrugged, but Taka scoffed. Of course we won't! You’d kill us if we broke your rule! “Then allow me to make a special announcement! The weak point of my cutting-edge e-Handbook is...! When it's exposed to high temperatures for too long, it will suffer a meltdown and totally brrreak!”
Hifumi: “I flippin’ knew it! Yeah, cuz I found the handbook laying on the floor of the Sauna!” It must’ve been after Monokuma woke us all up but before I went in the Bathhouse – it wasn’t there when I was looking for Mondo!

Monokuma: “The temperature in the sauna can reach over 200 degrees. Strange how you don’t get burnt, huh!? It’s because as your sweat evaporates, it creates a cooling layer of air around your skin! If the hot air of the sauna were somehow pushed directly onto your skin, you’d definitely get fried! That layer of air would get blown away. That’s why you may feel a burning when you move around. So when you’re in a sauna, make sure to keep nice and still!”

Taka: “Wow, interesting! I learned one new fact today!” I love learning! And it really makes sense now how hard it was to move in there at max heat!

...Hey, wait a second, I got distracted again!!! Darn it!!!! I can’t afford to be off track now!!!!! I have to keep up and stop them from convicting Mondo of something he didn’t do!!!!!! He covered his face with his hands and groaned in frustration. He mentally tried to throw the lifelong guilt he felt at being so easily distractible at a crucial moment on top of the rest of the guilt he was already trying to hold up until later.

Makoto: “Anyway... If you found the victim's handbook in the sauna... then the killer must have been purposely trying to raise its temperature in order to break it.”

Sakura: “Meaning the culprit somehow knew its weakness...”

Hina: “But how’d they find out? Monokuma said he didn't tell anyone, right?” Well, all they had to do was take one in the Sauna, right!?

Kyoko: “What if they found out by accident?” Sakura asked what she meant. “What if the killer took their own handbook into the Sauna, not knowing its weakness, and it broke?”

Taka: “Wait, why would they take it in!? Being naked and holding your handbook wouldn’t make any sense!”

Kyoko: “Perhaps the reason isn’t what’s important.” How could it not be!? She sounds like Byakuya refusing to elaborate on his heinous actions! “They’d realize it was broken, of course, and it wouldn’t be hard to figure out why. And once they had Chihiro's handbook, they knew they had an easy way to dispose of it.”

Byakuya: “I won’t say it’s not possible, but... who would have done something like that? I don’t know of anyone who took their handbook into the sauna...” Hmm... What if it wasn’t on purpose? What if they didn’t realize it was with them? But how could they accidentally bring it in if they were naked? There’s be no place to put it, so they must’ve been wearing cl-- Oh... Oh no. No, they can’t be... His prescience about where this argument was headed felt like a flurry of punches to the gut. They can’t be saying that! Absolutely not! I refuse to allow that--

Makoto: “...I might know someone who did. I think the one who may have taken their handbook into the sauna was...” Don’t! Taka felt desperate to prevent this seed of logic from blooming; his knuckles where white and his fists were shaking.

Taka: “Gh...! Nrg!” No! No way! Taka pleaded with his eyes. Makoto looked pointedly at him, not giving up the line of thought. “Ngh—! N-No, it certainly wasn't me! But—er, I mean...!” NO!! I just slipped up and said the wrong thing at the worst possible moment!!! He looked over to Mondo in anguish. The gang leader was looking at Makoto in total shock. I... I just incriminated Bro!!!!! He was full-on crying at this point. He still was sure that Mondo hadn’t done it, but he was fully aware
he’d accidentally painted him as suspicious regardless.

Makoto: “Mondo... your handbook got broken in the sauna, didn't it?”

Mondo: “Wh-Wh-What!?!”

Taka: “Why!? Why do you keep accusing him!?!’’ Taka asked loudly. Do you hate him!?

Makoto: “Mondo and Taka had an endurance contest in the sauna not too long ago, remember? And for the contest, Mondo just so happened to keep his school uniform on.”

Taka: “We started out clothed because he wanted to raise the stakes, don’t paint it like a too-convenient coincidence!” He didn’t answer my question!

Makoto: “But little did he realize, he'd also left his handbook in one of his uniform pockets. And when it was all over, Mondo discovered that taking your handbook into the sauna could easily destroy it.” You have no proof that his handbook broke!

Taka: “He’s been getting around fine since the sauna, it can’t be broken!”

Mondo: “Ngh... Grrhh...!”

Taka: “No, wait, hold on...! You've got it all wrong!” Heart pounding in his chest and adrenaline starting to rush, he planted his feet firmly together and assumed his authoritative stance like he had for Chihiro. His steely eyes looked strange with the tears they were still producing, but he stood tall and rigid. I must defend my... I must defend him at all costs!! Even if it weren’t *Mondo*, that is my duty to innocent people! He would never kill!!! I don't accept this! Show me the proof!!! The actual, solid proof!!!” There *isn’t* any proof, and they'll see that now! They have no choice but to see these claims for what they are – pure lies of mal intent! He caught Mondo looking at him with soft eyes, but it was gone so fast that Taka wasn’t sure he’d seen it at all.

Kyoko: “Let's test Makoto's assertion. If what he says is correct, then Mondo... You broke your own handbook.”

Celeste: “In other words, if Mondo's handbook is actually broken... then that proves that what Makoto said is right.” No! Someone else could have made the mistake even if* his were broken!

Taka: “That isn’t proof it was Mondo! And even if it doesn’t work, someone might’ve swapped it to set him up like just Byakuya did to Genocide Jack!”

Mondo: “Well my goddamn handbook works just fine!”

Taka: “S-See? Look! Makoto was wrong, after all! Mondo wouldn't hurt a fly!” Why is Makoto doing this!? I thought Mondo was his friend! I thought WE were friends!!? Why does he want Mondo to die for something he didn’t do!??

Makoto: “Mondo, the handbook you have right now... Is it really yours?”

Mondo: “...The fuck is that supposed to mean!?” Yeah, seriously! How could it NOT be his?

Makoto: “The broken handbook that was in the main hall... Isn't that one actually yours?” WHAT!?

Taka: “What the heck are you talking about!?!’’ He has no evidence! This is just throwing stuff at the wall to see how Mondo reacts to it! It's just like what Kyoko did earlier!!! That's not how you operate in a court of law! We may not be bound by legality, but morally this is not how you operate!!
Mondo was still stock still as if frozen in place. Taka picked up the slack. “Makoto, I shouldn’t have to remind you that such a preposterous claim is no kind of evidence!”

Makoto: “What I mean is, I think Mondo swapped his handbook out for one that actually works. I think he took Leon's handbook and replaced it with his own... After all, Monokuma said himself that Leon's handbook never should have broken.” Monokuma agreed that Leon’s execution was nowhere near forceful enough to break it. *Okay, so it’s not Leon’s! It easily could have been someone else’s, or a decoy planted by Monokuma to mess with us!*

Celeste: “So then, the broken handbook in the main hall is actually Mondo's. Which would mean that the handbook Mondo has right now is actually Leon's, yes?” *But that would mean he’s been using someone else’s handbook for weeks! That’s against the rules!*

Hina: “But doesn't that violate the school regulation that says loaning out your handbook is prohibited?” He felt a little relief that *someone* else wasn’t buying this faulty line of asinine reasoning. *Yes! It’s impossible this ridiculous scenario is real! And if Mondo had been using someone else’s handbook for all that time, I absolutely would have noticed!!!*

Monokuma: “Well, here's how I look at it... There is a rule about loaning your handbook to another student. But if they’re dead, they're not a student!” *You sound like that jerk Byakuya! You don’t care about any of us, alive OR dead! And it seems like the others don’t, either...! Cold dread at exactly how little their lives meant here crept past Taka’s fiery exterior. “It's kind of a grey area, I admit, but no worries! If anything, it just makes things more interesting! As such, I decree that exchanging handbooks with a corpse is not a violation of the rules!”* *That’s disgusting!!! This whole thing, it’s disgusting!!*

Makoto: “Well, Mondo? If I'm wrong about this, you're welcome to say so. I'm happy to admit I made a mistake, but...”

Taka: “No you’re not, you haven’t even answered why you’re doing this!” *What is your agenda, Makoto?*

Mondo: “S-Son of a bitch...!”

Taka: “What's wrong, Bro?” He stared at Mondo, but the biker wouldn’t meet his eyes as his head was tipped down. “Come on, tell him he's wrong...! You ARE wrong! You HAVE to be wrong...! Everything you just said is wrong! You made it all up!” *This is just completely impossible!!! There’s no way!!!*

Makoto ran them through a comprehensive review of everything he and Kyoko assumed. Taka let him do it solely so everyone could follow along with exactly *what* Mondo was being charged with, so they could therefore watch Taka dismantle it piece by piece. According to Makoto, Mondo’s handbook broke in the sauna. He supposedly killed Chihiro in the boys’ room and moved him into the girls’ room, after which Byakuya defiled his corpse. Mondo disposed of the shirt and bag and took Chihiro’s handbook to the Sauna to break it. “Isn’t that right... Mondo Owada!?”

Mondo: “Kh-Kheeh...” He was shaking. Mondo’s reaction threw Taka’s rebuttal plans directly out the window. He didn’t think he was guilty, but the reaction scared him regardless. *It’s because he’s scared too!!*

Taka: “W-Wait...! No, this can’t be right!” He ran over to Mondo and put his arm around his shoulder protectively. The other man was stiff, but trembling in an alarming way. “Where’s your evidence...? Y-Yeah, where’s your evidence!? You need evidence! You need proof!! Without any proof, you can't pin any of this on him!!! I refute you!” *This isn’t justice! This is condemning an
innocent man! A good man!

Makoto: “If my thinking so far is right... Mondo must have replaced his broken handbook with Leon’s. In which case, we can just check each of our handbooks right now.” That’s what we should’ve done before you tried to trap Mondo repeatedly!!! Taka moved to take out his own handbook. The first out of everyone in the room, seizing the opportunity to prove his companion completely innocent beyond any doubt. “Once we do that, we’ll—“

Mondo: “We don't gotta do that.” He was pale, and the fight seemed to be leaving his body, the tenseness fading; he went slack. He looked tired. Soul-crushingly tired.

Taka: “W-what are you doing!?” Don’t take the blame for something you couldn’t have done! “Don’t hang yourself on this cross, too!! I know you think suffering is your punishment for what happened four years ago, but being executed for something you had nothing to do with won’t make it right!!!”

Makoto: “Huh?”

Mondo: “Yeah. Yeah... I did it... … …I killed him.” …?!

Taka: “Bro? Bro... What are you saying?” He didn’t even ask loudly; he was so shocked it was quiet. He’s not... He’s taking the fall, right? He has to be lying! I don’t understand! This isn’t real! He didn’t kill Chihiro!

He was so completely and utterly unwilling to believe that Mondo killed Chihiro that it didn’t even occur to him that if Mondo *was* lying and they all voted for him, that the real killer would walk and they’d all be executed by Monokuma’s rule. Mondo would’ve been guilty of perjury, and he’d have the whole class’ blood on his hands then. He was far, far, far too focused on rejecting Mondo’s admission of guilt and trying to make sense of it, reaching for anything to apply logic to this complete and utter impossibility.

Mondo: “I got no choice, man. After hearing all that, I gotta just... give up.”

Taka: “No, don’t! There are still other explanations, you don’t have to throw yourself on Makoto’s sword! Mondo, please! Don’t take the fal--” Mondo put his hand on Taka’s chest, cutting him off.

Mondo: “Blacken me. Go ahead, Monokuma. Get it over with... Ask for the god damned verdict...” Absolutely not! We’re not done, and I’m not going to indict my bro!

Taka: “I refuse to v—“

Monokuma: “Roger that!”

“W-Wait, hold on—!” Taka screeched. He bolted to Monokuma’s chair and fell to his knees, begging incoherently for more time, more time to prove who the true culprit was.

Monokuma: “No waiting! No holding on! Time for the moment we’ve all been waiting for! Grab your lever and give it a yank! Who will you elect as the blackened this time around? Will you make the right choice, or the dreadfully wrong one? What's it gonna be? What's it gonna beelee!?"

“No way! I refuse!” The voting levers once again appeared on their stations. Taka stared at his podium from his position on the floor next to the cruel bear-king’s throne, resolute in his refusal to not participate. He was the only one frozen, now - after 30 seconds, everyone else had already cast their votes. There was no doubt in any of their minds. His friends all voted Mondo as guilty without further question.
Even Mondo voted for himself. Though Taka couldn’t see the results on the screens, he knew instinctively that was the case. He was paralyzed.

“We won’t proceed unless all the votes are in... But if time runs out due to you abstaining...” The bear turned his beady, malevolent gaze on him directly. “Kiyotaka, I’ll kill you personally! I’ll execute everyone else first and force you to watch as I slowly dismember you!” Taka groaned and trembled in distress.

“Taka...” Mondo called out, voice pleading. “Please, just get it over with...”

Taka was shaking. Hard. *If I don’t vote... I’ll die. But if I vote for Mondo...* He realized what would happen if he were right, adding another level of terror to the sickening pile. His mind was spinning in infinite directions at once, try to piece together everything, trying to deal with his feelings, trying to figure out why Mondo would sacrifice himself like this. *We’ll all die, because there’s no way he killed Chihiro! Even if he did I, I couldn’t... I couldn’t sentence my...* He realized what would happen if he were right, adding another level of terror to the sickening pile. His mind was spinning in infinite directions at once, try to piece together everything, trying to deal with his feelings, trying to figure out why Mondo would sacrifice himself like this. *My only friend, my Bro, my boyfriend, my *Mondo*... I won’t sentence him to death... I’d be killing him myself... I will *not* do that to the man that I... I... LOVE! His head and heart felt like they were going to slice him in twain if Monokuma didn’t beat them to it. *I’d rather die than vote for him... But if I don’t, the trial will run out of time, and everyone else will die too... So... All I can do is... I’ll take a third option. I won’t break the rule...* He went to his station and voted for himself in absolute tears.

“Yessss, there you go, that’s a good little Moral Compass...” Monokuma sickeningly cooed. After the results were calculated, he said, “Uh-oh... This time it looks like... you got it right again! Yes, it is so. The blackened that killed Chihiro Fujisaki was... Mondo Owaaadaaaaa!” Mondo said nothing. He was just looking down. *Are you KIDDING ME???* “In case you’re wondering, the vote was NOT unanimous. Kiyotaka chose the wrooong answer! Himself! You’re treading very close to the danger zone, Mr. Ishimaru! You need to be more careful!”

“Taka: “I-I refuse to believe it...” He bolted back over to Mondo and grabbed him by the collar so they were face to face. “There's no way... no way you would kill someone!” Tears were streaming.

Mondo: “Sorry...”

Taka: “Wh-Why are you apologizing!? Why!? Why why why why why! WHYYY !?” He was sobbing loudly. Mondo said nothing; just let him stand there, crying at him, not explaining a single thing. *I don’t understand! How is this happening!? Why is this happening!?!?! Taka was bad at body language, but this was loud and clear: Mondo wasn’t bluffing. He wasn’t taking the fall. There was nothing but the truth in his posture, his expression, his lack of fight. And that was the final blow to the belief Taka was perilously clinging to.

Taka’s heart sank past the core of the moon, past the Andromeda Galaxy, out into the far reaches of space. Into another multiverse entirely. Mondo Owada, the *love* of Taka’s life, had murdered their mutual friend, Chihiro Fujisaki. “Wh... why? WHY did you do it!? I don’t understand!” He said brokenly, shaking Mondo by the shoulders. Disbelief, sadness, fury, fear, betrayal, and the complete destruction of his worldview, his moral fiber, his need for justice, his entire being as a person and everything he felt bombarded him all at once. He was wrong in everything he felt, everything he thought, everything he’d worked so hard to form and fight for. He was screaming at the top of his lungs at Mondo now, shaking him quite hard. “Answer me! MONDO! SAY SOMETHING! EXPLAIN YOURSELF!!! *MAKE ME UNDERSTAND*!!!!!!!”

He was just standing there, taking it, either not able to or refusing to even look at Taka. Look at
anyone, really. Or explain himself. Taka felt burning and freezing. Immolated and gangrenous. Nothing made sense anymore, and it never would again.

He obviously didn’t notice, but none of the others were watching him or Mondo.

Not even Kyoko. Not even Genocide Jack.

Not even *Byakuya*.

Monokuma: “Well, it looks like Mondo’s taken a vow of silence, so allow me to explain on his behalf... The story of the murder this time... is the sad story of two men.” Since he wanted to understand his dead friend even now, Taka decided to do his best to follow along, though he was still pleading with Mondo to say something, say *anything* in every single way he could think of as the bear talked. Monokuma outlined that Chihiro had a lifelong inferiority complex because he was a fragile, sickly boy; everyone tormented him about how weak he was even though he was a boy. He was bullied to the point where his weakness became his defining trait. He buried himself into it. The only way out he saw was by, eventually, dressing up as and pretending to be a girl. Because the social idea of girls being weak, he would never have to suffer from being bullied because he was weak ‘for a boy’. But his ‘out’ just buried him deeper and deeper. Taka had long since buried himself against Mondo’s chest, furiously, brokenly screaming his heart out, beseeching Mondo to explain. It was like being pressed up against an ancient statue, a gargoyle who once held a soul but whose magic had long since evaporated and been lost for millennia.

Chihiro’s voice played over hidden speakers: “I'm... weak... Weak, weak, weak, weak, weak, weak, weak, weak...!”

Once the killing game started, Monokuma explained, Chihiro had to accept his own weakness because this was nature in action. If you’re not strong, you don’t live to tell the tale. When Monokuma announced the revealing of secrets, Chihiro knew what his would be before he even opened his envelope.

"Even though he dresses like a girl, Chihiro is actually a boy."

Taka’s pleading with Mondo was completely incoherent at this point.

Chihiro knew what would happen if his secret was revealed. His only defense against the world, his presentation of himself as a girl, would be destroyed. Everyone would go back to torturing him for being a weak little boy, and they’d have the additional ammo of deriding him for pretending to be a girl to escape that fact. He despaired. However, when Taka had asked everyone to divulge their secrets:

“Um... s-sorry, I don't really want to talk about it right now. But I also don't want to leave things the way they are. So maybe I can talk about it later... After I try my best...to become strong... Then I can tell everyone.”

He said to himself, back in his room:

“Now's my chance... I'm going to get stronger... and accept who I am... Strong enough so that when someone says ‘even though you're a boy’ I'll be okay. I'll get better!”

He knew he didn’t have time to go at his own pace – and even if he did, he knew he’d never follow through. That day, he decided to commit to exercising and becoming stronger. He wanted to retrain all aspects of himself so he could become someone who he would accept. He needed someone’s help to get there, however. And he wanted them to know his secret first.
Mondo: “It was me...!”

Taka blared: “NO!!!”

Monokuma continued: Chihiro went to Mondo Owada, the Ultimate Biker Gang Leader. He’d been so clear about his commitment to honor all the promises between men he’d ever made that even if he didn’t take it well, Mondo would by his very nature have to keep it a secret. Plus, he was the strongest man out of all the students. He thought that Mondo was the only one who could help him achieve his goal of becoming strong.

“Maybe talking to Mondo about it will help give me some courage...”

Kyoko said that Mondo must have moved Chihiro’s body to the Girls’ Locker Room to keep a promise to Chihiro. Hifumi said he thought it was just to cover up his crime. “The real purpose was to keep the promise between men he’d made to Chihiro.” If he hadn’t moved him, the investigative-minded of the group would’ve been asking immediately how Chihiro, who they knew as a girl, had ended up dead in the Boys’ Locker Room. That was also why Mondo stole Chihiro’s handbook.

Makoto: “Then... Mondo did all that to keep the promise he'd made to Chihiro... who he'd also killed?”

Mondo was silent and unmoving.

Taka: “Why... would he... do that? The more I hear you talk, the more I don't UNDERSTAND!” All this talk about Chihiro, I understand him now, but what does that have to do with his death!? How could Mondo even fathom doing such a horrible, broken thing!!? “I mean, you guys trusted each other, right!? So WHY? WHY did you...?”

Mondo *finally* answered him, but he still wouldn’t look at Taka. “Because... no matter what, I didn't want anyone to know...”

Kyoko: “So that's what triggered it, after all. The possibility of having your embarrassing memories and secrets exposed...” It CAN'T be...

Taka: “Th-That's impossible! Nothing could have been that bad! Something he didn't want anyone to know, even if it meant killing someone...?” I understand how accidentally being responsible for someone’s death would drag someone down... And he showed me himself... but not to this degree! There’s no way he’d kill Chihiro for it! This is INSANE! ”It's impossible!”

Byakuya: “How many times must I repeat myself? To judge others by your own standard is the height of folly. Even if you can't comprehend it, he obviously can. That's all there is to it.” Shut up, you depraved sack of privilege!

Monokuma: “Well, while we're on the subject... why don't I tell you? That embarrassing memory, that secret he didn't want anyone to know... You know what Mondo did? He killed his own brother!”

Mondo: “Gh--!” WHAT!? IT WAS HIS BROTHER????? HE KILLED HIS BROTHER??? That shook him, too, though it was more of a confirmation of something he’d already considered than a pure surprise.

Monokuma: “Mondo, the Ultimate Biker Gang Leader makes all the hoodlums and riff-raff across the country tremble... But the only reason he had the chance to join a gang in the first place was because of a certain someone.” He explained that Mondo’s older brother was Daiya Owada, who he had infinite love and respect for. Daiya was Mondo’s only family and protector and confidant and
person to trust. He had a terrible home environment and looked up to his brother, I know that! But that doesn’t explain any of this! Mondo wanted to be as great as Daiya, so he imitated him in every regard – he was why Mondo even started riding. Daiya started the Crazy Diamonds, which was a local gang whose popularity took them both by whirlwind. Mondo was the second in command. But every day, Mondo was badmouthed by members of the gang because he’d one day have to take over for Daiya once he was too old. They accused Mondo of being along for the ride, that he’d be a bad leader, that he’d just ruin the gang’s image. Of being an incapable kid.

Mondo’s voice: “I gotta get stronger... stronger than Daiya. Once... just one time... No matter what, I gotta win... I don’t care what it takes, I gotta come out on top!”

On the night of Daiya’s retirement ceremony, Mondo challenged him to a street race to prove that he was ready to step up to the plate. Mondo did everything to prove he was ready, that he could surpass Daiya to prove the naysayers wrong, that he’d be a competent leader. He was pushing so hard to prove himself that he made a mistake: he drove directly into oncoming traffic to get around his brother. He was snapped out of it by a sixteen wheeler headed right for him, its massive lights blinding and its cacophonous horns deafening.

A video of the incident was playing on a screen that suddenly appeared behind Monokuma’s throne. Taka instantly turned his head to watch it. In the video, Mondo barely had time to scream before he was shoved out of the way by none other than Daiya. Daiya took the impact of the swerving truck and flew through the air. His motorcycle was totaled and so was he. There was blood everywhere and he was fatally injured, limbs mangled and chest crushed. Mondo crawled to him from where he’d landed in a pile with his bike, himself bloody, and held him in his arms. Daiya knew the situation was Mondo’s fault, Monokuma said, but he never blamed him. His final words:

Daiya: “M-My bad, kid... I fucked up. Sorry... Hey, Mondo... The rest is up to you. No matter what, you gotta keep the gang together. Cuz it’s the team... you and me put together. It’s... a pr... A promise... between men...”

Daiya Owada died there, in Mondo’s arms, after saving Mondo from his own deadly mistake. Once Mondo had recovered from his own injuries, he hid the truth of what happened from everyone. He did it to keep the gang together like his brother made him promise – he could never admit it was his own weakness, his pride, his desire to prove himself that resulted in the death of the only person he loved and trusted completely. Mondo told them that Daiya had gotten stupid because Mondo was about to beat him. Under the banner of ‘the kid who bested his big brother’, the Diamonds became even stronger than before. The grief and guilt dragged Mondo down for years, causing him to fall further into self-flagellating and depression. And yet, he had to pretend he was strong for the benefit of the gang, as well as to keep on getting up every morning.

Mondo: “I’m... strong... Strong, strong, strong, strong, strong, strong...!”

But when the killing game started, Mondo realized that he was just another weakling who could be easily killed at any time. When Monokuma announced the secret revealing, Mondo knew what his was going to say before he even opened the envelope:

"Mondo killed his own older brother."

Mondo: “N-No matter what... I couldn’t let the other gang members find out. If that happened, everything would have been ruined... Everything me and my brother had worked to create... woulda been destroyed... His death... all the guilt I’d been carrying around... it all woulda been for nothing.

So that's why... That's why I...I...!” Mondo was finally moving now, his hands grabbing wildly in the air as if he were trying to reach the words.
Taka: “Mondo, NO! D-don’t say—“

Makoto: “Mondo...”

Mondo: “After I saw what Monokuma had on me... my head filled up with a kind of fuzzy uneasiness, and just started swirlin’ around. I’d never felt anything like it before... it was even worse than when Daiya... I... I didn’t know what to do about it. I wasn’t sure what to think or say. But after a while, that fuzzy uneasiness... turned itself into a rock-hard lump of anxiety, way down in my stomach...!”

Taka: “That’s why you were panicking last night!” Mondo nodded, finally acknowledging him again.

Mondo: “And it was right around then... that Chihiro asked me to start working out with him. And right there, I... He told me a secret.”

Mondo’s voice: “Seriously? Jesus...”

Chihiro’s voice: “Y-Yeah... I’m sorry I lied to you.”

Mondo: “But... why? Why now? Why are you telling me this all of a sudden?”

Chihiro: “...Huh?”

Mondo: “Cuz I mean... you’ve kept that secret all this time, right? If anyone found out... you would...”

Chihiro: “Y-You're right, but... I want to change. I wrapped myself in lies. I'm weak. I want to destroy that version of me forever!”

“His words were like a knife in my gut... I felt like he was exposing the lie I’d been living myself.”

“MONDO, PLEASE!!! DON’T!!!” Taka hollered. *Don’t admit it again! Don’t say the words!!! Don’t... Don’t do this to yourself! Don’t do this to me...*

Chihiro: “I have to change. I don't want to be weak anymore. You're so strong, it can't hurt you, right? Whatever secret Monokuma might tell us...”

Mondo: “... So, what? You're saying I should just say it? You're saying if I really am, I should just be able to tell everyone my secret?”

Chihiro: “Huh...?”

Mondo: “I was... jealous. I was jealous of Chihiro's strength. He had the strength to face his own weakness, to try and overcome it...! It was the kind of strength I've never had... So I was jealous of him. And that jealousy... broke me.” *NO!!!!!!*

Mondo: "Are you making fun of me? I'm strong? Are you fucking with me right now?"

Chihiro: "I-I'm not making fun of you. You really are strong, Mondo..."

Mondo: “I felt like I could hear something starting to... creak. Something... inside my head.”

Taka: “NOOOO!!!!”
“What did he want me to do? What was I *supposed* to do? Was I supposed to just sit back, let my secret get revealed, and ruin everything...?

Chihiro: “Wh... what's wrong?”

Mondo: “Why did you have to tell me all that? Are you trying to rub my failure in my face?”

Chihiro: “N-No, I just... really admire you. I admire... your strength...”

Mondo: “That's right... I *am* strong... Strong... I'm strong...! Strong, strong, strong, strong, strong, strong! Stronger than you! And stronger than Daaaaiiiyaaaaa!!!”

Taka: “MONDO! DON’T!!! DON’T SAY IT!!! I DEMAND YOU TO NOT SAY IT!!!! PLEASE, STOP, PLEASE DON’T—“ He was pounding his fists against Mondo’s chest, but he was taking it like it was nothing. Taka’s fists were so tight that there was more than a little blood dripping from in between his fingers. He wasn’t just powerless: he was *nothing*. Not only could he not prevent another death, he couldn’t prevent his boyfriend from killing their mutual friend.

Mondo: “I gotta… I gotta make this right… I don’t remember anything after that... When I woke up again, he was laying at my feet... covered in blood... I had the dumbbell in my hand... and I was just staring at him... down on the ground...”

Taka: “H-HEY…!”

Mondo: “… I... killed him. I killed Chihiro. Even after all this time, I'm still just as weak as I've always been! And thanks to that, I did something I can never take back...!”

Taka: “Y-you… I... I c-can’t…”

Mondo: “Goddammit!”

Monokuma: “Ahh-hahaha! Look at him! You see? You're all just like him! For a secret from the past, for a memory... For that, he killed another living human in cold blood! He couldn't cut free of his regrets from the outside world. He doesn't know what true strength is. Do you see hope anywhere in there!? Cuz I sure don't!”

Taka: “You... BASTARD! Just shut up, you SON OF A BITCH!! Go ahead, say that again, I *DARE* YOU!” He held up his fist at Monokuma threateningly.

Monokuma: “Okay! I’ll say it as many times as I want! Is what I want to say, but... unfortunately, I can't do that right now! Because the time for punishing is fast approaching!”

Makoto: “P-Punishing…?”

Taka: “You mean... EXECUTION…!?" He knew it was coming, but that didn’t make it any less horrifying to hear out loud.

Mondo: “...Sorry, man... I couldn’t keep the promises we made... from one man to another...”

Mondo... I... *This can’t happen! This WILL NOT happen! Even if I can’t stop it, I... I don’t want this!* Taka started to run forward to take a swing at Monokuma. Mondo grabbed his arm, and then his other one when he started to raise it, a sick inversion of the time Taka kept him from hitting Byakuya. Taka hadn’t gotten even gotten away from Mondo’s podium. “Bro... Don’t. Don’t get yourself killed, dumbass!”
“You’re about to die! I have nothing left!” He futilely struggled against the biker’s firm grip.

“Taka. Taka! Hey! Look at me!” He demanded and gently put his hand on Taka’s chin and moved him so they were making eye contact for the first time since he gave up fighting. Taka was sobbing with every inch of his body… Mondo looked like he was about to collapse, and there were lines of tears on his face too. “I’m sorry… I’m so sorry. I killed Chihiro and ruined everything. If I could go back to last night and stop it…”

“But you blacked out! It’s not your fault that—“

“I did, yeah, but remember what you said about being accountable? I’m doing that. After all this time…”

“How—How dare—This isn’t—that’s NOT what I—”

Monokuma: “The blackened that disturbs the peace will be punished.”

Taka: “H-Hold on!”

Monokuma: “Now then, I’ve prepared a very special punishment for Mondo Owada, the Ultimate Biker Gang Leader!”

Taka: “N-No, wait! WAIT!”

Monokuma: “Let’s give it everything we’ve got! It’s… PUNISHMENT TIIME!” Monokuma smashed his mallet on his big red button. The platform they were standing on started to raise like it had for Leon.

Taka boomed: “I!! SAID!!! WAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIITTT!!!!!!” He charged and tackled Mondo off the trial platform. Less than a millisecond later, the neck shackle that would’ve grabbed onto him got nothing but air and fell limply to the ground. They landed on a heap outside the elevated surface, Taka clutching Mondo for dear life. Mondo was smeared with streaks of Taka’s blood.

Monokuma: “Ohohohoho! Interesting…”

Mondo: “Bro, what the FUCK are you DOING!? You’re gonna get yourself killed!”

“I don’t care! I just, I just want to be with you! I don’t ever want to let you go! I finally found you, and now he’s going to take you away! I can’t! I REFUSE!” He was attached onto Mondo like they’d fused long ago.

“Are you saying you want to die with me…?” He wrapped his arms around Taka, squeezing him tightly, finally returning his embrace. He stroked his back with one hand and ran his fingers through his hair with the other.

“Yes!” The instant Mondo touched him again, his commanding aura crumbled to dust and he fell the rest of the way into pure, unadulterated despair. He wasn’t strong enough, he was *never* strong enough, and he couldn’t resist its gravity any longer. “Let’s d-d-die together! Since you’re a b-biker, I bet your execution is m-motorcycle-themed! You promised me you’d take me for a ride one day… Let’s take your last ride! T-gether!”

“NO! Fuck that! Taka, this is MY punishment, not yours! You *have to* keep on living!”

“I can’t! How could I!?"
“You promised me! All that time, I kept myself going after I killed Daiya—“

“You didn’t kill him! It was an accident!!”

“Stop tryin’ to defend me, goddammit! I held on, even if it was by a thread! Because I had shit to do, people to take care of!”

“How can I move into the future without YOU in my life?! How can you expect that of ME?!?!?!” he wailed, totally unwilling to hear it.

“You want to be Prime Minister! You want to represent people who’ve been shit on all their lives! Like us!! You want to change the system! All of that, before I met you!! You’re the one here who has dreams!!! Cling to those like you’re clinging to me, okay??”

“Mondo—“ He gasped for air like a beached whale crying out to be submerged again. “TAKE ME INSTEAD, MONOKUMA!”

Monokuma just chortled from his golden throne.

“NO WAY! That ain’t happenin’! Kiyotaka Ishimaru, I will NOT fucking let you die for me! I could NEVER live with myself if you did! With me or instead of me!”

He was far past the point of reasoning. “That doesn’t matter, you’d be dead too--!”

Mondo swore. “Taka, come the fuck ON! Promise me you’ll stay alive! If not for you, then for ME!”

Taka was in absolute, complete hysterics. “You just don’t want me… You’re leaving like everyone else!!!”

Mondo ran his hand down his own face. “Bro! This is real! And I have to own up to what I did! I told you I want you, and it’s still true!!! I would never leave you by choice, got it!!?”

The conviction behind those words hit Taka like a collapsing building. *He means that… I…* After a minute of incomprehensible weeping, he said, “F-fine… Mondo Owada, I promise to you, as a man, that I’ll stay alive…” Even after what had happened, even with Taka seeing the truth now, deep down, he still knew Mondo was being sincere. And he did, at least for now.

Mondo kissed him hard, tongue frantic. “Sealed with a kiss, alright!!?”

Taka broke off immediately, remembering that this was meant to be a secret. “But we’re in front of —”

“I don’t give a FUCK anymore! I’m on my deathbed, I can do whatever the fuck I want!” He proclaimed loudly. Proudly. “And what I want to do is, Kiss! You! More!” He punctuated each word with a desperate kiss, which Taka gladly accepted.

“Bro, I… I l—“

“If you say it,” Mondo breathed, “You can never take it back…!”

“I don’t care! This hurts so bad, I don’t… I don’t give… I don’t give a *sh*t*! This is the only chance I’ll ever have, and I have to tell you now! You can’t die without knowing! Mondo Owada, I love you! With all of my terrible, god forsaken, god damned heart!” He was bitter about this being the first and last time he could say it, especially since he knew he was about to be forced to watch the other man die in a brutal, gruesome manner. That made him despair, too.
Mondo couldn’t help but crack a smile. “You idiot, I was workin’ up the guts to tell you that first!”

“You were…?”

“I was gonna before we got on the elevator… I’d been thinkin’ about it before yesterday, even. This is… Definitely not how I wanted it to happen… But bro, there’s no way I was gonna leave ya without making sure I’d drilled it into that pretty little head first.” Hearing that his enormous, terrible, genuine feelings were reciprocated didn’t ease the pain; maybe it even made it worse, but some part of him still lapped it up anyway. Taka leaned forward and kissed him deep, a wet disaster. “Hey, Taka. Thank you,” Mondo said after they stopped.

“H-huh?”

“Look at me, finally expressin’ myself… If I’d let myself be weak sooner, I…” He ran his hand through his pompadour in sadness. “That’s not important anymore… Bro, thanks for bein’ with me… You made me the happiest guy on the planet.”

“M-Mondo… Me too.” They stared into one another’s eyes. Lavender met crimson in sweet, harmonious, painful love for one last time.

Monokuma blared his voice out of a loudspeaker. “HELLLLLLOOOOOO? I’ve been yelling at you to hurry it up for the last 10 minutes! The only reason I’m letting this go is because the aftermath will be sooo much tastier! If you don’t finish up and come back, NOW, I WILL drag you here and execute BOTH of you! Punishments for EEEEEEVERYBODY!”

Mondo stood up. He tried to pull Taka up, but the weight of the truth and what was about to happen were too much for him to bear and he was too weak to walk. Mondo picked him up and held him against his chest in a final reprise of when he’d carried him from the sauna. Taka was holding on to Mondo so tight that he ripped his undershirt when Mondo went to put him down at his assigned spot. Taka clung to him, not letting him leave.

Taka wailed, “Bro! D-Don’t leave!!! PLEASE, Mondo, anything but that! You’re going to die! He’s going to kill you! We’ll n-never see each other again!!”

“I gotta, or that bastard will kill you too… And maybe everyone else.”

Monokuma giggled. “Oh, you figured that out, huh? You got a good intuition for a sloppy killer! Ahahahaha!”

Mondo rested his hands on top of Taka’s. “I’m so sorry, bro. I can’t do anything. I broke my promise to you... Hate me if you need to, but remember this is real. Remember your promise... I gotta do this, to protect you and everyone else. I gotta own up. I didn’t have a choice with Daiya… Or Chihiro. But I do here! I need you to let me go… I’m so fucking sorry, Taka…”

Taka was wordlessly screeching uncontrollably, but he put all that remained of his decimated willpower into letting go of Mondo and staying upright at his request. His mind and morals had been shattered into a billion, trillion pieces and pulverized to electrons in the course of a single day, and it was all because of the one he loved. His moral fury. His resentment. His affection. His abandonment complex. His love. His fear. His loss. Everything fought to come out, but he couldn’t say anything more than, “M-mondo… I… love... you… … I c-c-can’t… I’ll… Miss… You…” He was far past being frozen. He was in the process of being buried alive. But he needed Mondo to know, anyway – if time would’ve allowed it, he would’ve repeated it to his lover until he passed out due to lack of oxygen. Until they died of old age.
Mondo pulled in Taka for one final embrace and another sloppy kiss, followed up by a peck on the forehead with his hand in Taka’s hair, gently carding through it. “I know. I love you, Taka. I’ll miss you too. Remember what I said, Bro.” He unstuck himself from the Ultimate Moral Compass, made sure he was standing steady, and slowly walked back to his own section and jumped up on the risen platform, innumerable different emotions in the fresher tear tracks running down his face. “Alright, motherfucker… Let’s get this god damned show on the god damned road.”

“I thought you’d NEVER ask!” Monokuma screamed in rapture.

Taka: “WAIT! PLEASE DON’T!!!!!!”

Monokuma cacked and slammed the mallet down once again and, once again, fencing shot out from the pulpits to form a cage around the lower bodies of everyone else. The voting lever disappeared and was replaced by the handgrips, which everyone automatically held on to, Taka included. He couldn’t tear his eyes of Mondo, trying to absorb every possible detail of him while he was still alive. The semicircle of platforms reformed, though everyone was prepared for it. This time, Taka was the one directly in front of Mondo. He reached out his hand.

“Dammit, Taka! Hold on to the handle—“

“JUST TAKE MY HAND, MONDO! Let me feel you… one last time…!!” Mondo did as Taka howled in distress and held his hand with a strong grip, an everything grip. The neck shackle shot out and wrapped itself around his neck. He grunted. The “In Use” sign had already came to life; Mondo was quickly yanked backwards, with the semicircle of pulpits keeping the same fast speed. Mondo and Taka held on for dear life while speeding toward the former’s death.

When they were through the doors of the execution room, Taka had to let go of Mondo’s hand or the sheer force of Mondo being pulled backward would have ripped off his own arm. “STOP! STOOOOOP! *MONDOOOO*!!!!!!!”

“#TAKAAAAAA*!” he cried out in return. A large spherical cage was at the far side of the room with chains anchoring it to the ceiling. There was some kind of machine with lights in primary colors attached to its side. More shackles appeared and strapped Mondo onto a custom tiger-painted motorcycle. A blonde-pompadoured Monokuma rode in front, with Mondo sitting behind him. There was a Crazy Diamonds board glued to his back and his arms were cuffed behind it as if he were being escorted to a police station. The motorcycle was anchored to a horizontal plank running along the middle of a giant, swirled wooden board, which hypnotically spun them around several times to illustrate that they really were attached to it. It sank into the ground and there was a clicking sound. Mondo's eyes were squeezed shut and he was soaked in sweat.

A circus tent, balloons, two huge tiger heads roaring at each other, a Ferris wheel, and other carnival-themed decorations rose up from the ground around the cage. A long door on the cage slowly creaked open. Monokuma revved the handlebars; the bike swerved to the side, knocking away the locks that had been holding it to the plank. Monokuma drove it forward, continuing to accelerate it. The pair's pompadours flopped in the wind. They quickly got to 60 mph, at which point Monokuma hit a switch and was sprung off the front seat. “NOOOO!!!!!!” Taka bellowed. The motorcycle went straight into the open cage and kept going, continuing to speed up due to its inertia from looping around the inside of the curved cage. A neon sign up above the cage ticked with the increasing speeds. 70 mph. 80 mph. 100 mph.

Mondo had long since thrown up and lost his sense of equilibrium. Monokuma popped up in a party hat and hula hooped in front of the cage, gyrating faster as the motorcycle did. At 120 mph, giant electrodes on top of the cage light up in stark blue and started buzzing with electricity built up from the motorcycle's ride. “BROOOOO!!!!!!!!! MONDOOOOOO!” Huge currents ran all over the cage.
after it spent a few seconds warming up. The sign lost count, breaking as the numbers kept increasing. It got so fast that there was a blinding flash of light and a loud boom.

When Taka could see again, and the light dissipated, everything was burnt up. The tiger heads laid back on the ground and Monokuma was toast. The motorcycle slowly stopped spinning, falling to the bottom of the cage. Mondo was nowhere in sight. “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!”

The machine on the cage beeped three times as if it had just finished processing something. The front of the machine opened, revealing some kind of square object. A childish ditty played over speakers and Monokuma appeared, picking it up and rolling it to the students. It landed face up in front of Taka’s feet.

It said “Mondo Butter”.

“W… WH…” Taka stammered. Monokuma reclaimed it and a table popped up with breakfast on it. He opened the container and spread the butter on some pancakes, eating them hungrily.

“It… can’t be… My… Bro… My… boy… My… MY… MONDO… … Urrraaaaaaaahhhhh!!!! *URRAAAAAAAHAAAAHAAAAHHHHH*!!!!!!!” Taka let out a series of bloodcurdling, bonechilling, ghastly, keening wails that could freeze the Sun rock solid. He wept so much that tears and snot and drool were pouring off his face and puddling at his feet along with the blood from his hands. He was bent over and clutching his head, trying desperately to keep it together like it was about to explode from the pressures of what he’d just seen and heard. Everything he was feeling was an enormous cacophony reverberating through his skull. He kept shrieking so hard and so loud that his voice broke. He screamed until his raw throat wouldn’t make any more sound, not even pitiful crackling, his voice gone completely.

Monokuma wiped off his syrupy face and said, “Laugh at death, and your soul will forever be at peace.”

Taka was frozen in place. He was far, far past being overwhelmed. The pure, unadulterated despair within him was a supermassive black hole that sucked out all matter and destroyed the cosmos. He couldn’t talk, he couldn’t move, and he couldn’t even think. The cages keeping them still disassembled, and he fell to the floor like a useless ragdoll immediately since his wasn’t holding him in place. He was in a fetal position. He wasn’t even aware that the others were talking. His eyes were blank and glassy, tears still gushing out like raging waterfalls.

After a minute, Kyoko was standing over him, but he wasn’t cognizant of her presence. “Kiyotaka.” Her voice sounded like it was coming faintly from another plane, like music heard from a stadium several miles away. He didn’t respond. He wasn’t even aware of *anything* anymore.

Hina and Sakura appeared. “Taka? Hey!” Hina said. At his lack of response, Sakura gently shook him. “He’s taking this really hard.” Taka’s vision was starting to fade, darkness creeping in at the sides.

“It only makes sense that he would,” Kyoko said.

“I won’t just leave him here,” Sakura said.

“No way he can stand,” Hina replied. Taka could barely see anything. “Or do anything else.”

“Could you take him back to his room?” Kyoko asked the other two. “We should keep an eye on him. Take his room key so you can get in and check on him regularly. We can switch off.”

“But what about during the night?” Sakura asked.
“I’ll do it then. I wasn’t planning on sleeping much anyway.” His vision was mostly black.

He didn’t feel Sakura carefully pick him up. She was saying something to him directly, but he couldn’t comprehend it. He couldn’t even understand language at all. He shut his eyes and lost consciousness in her arms. He was annihilated.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been meaning to share this, but I think now’d be the best time to help you deal with this chapter. It’s helped me a ton in dealing with the pain from this among other things, and I wanted to share it anyway, so I think this is a good opportunity. My dear pal Noel made a short day in the life of non-despair AU Taka minigame in renpy to commemorate my and Taka’s birthdays later this year (his is 10 days later than mine!). It’s so sweet and it makes me cry tears of joy every time I think about it and even when I see the folder on my desktop! It’s one of the sweetest gestures anyone’s ever done for me and I’ll treasure it forever. Here’s a link to their post about it (continuing links for both PC and Mac) - let either or both of us know what you think!! <333

[Taka Party!]

EDIT 5/28/19! Noel deleted their blog, please comment or DM me and I’ll send you the post link <3
The human understanding of the Universe is that time governs all. It moves with or without someone to observe it. So time surely passed; yet for once in his life, Kiyotaka Ishimaru wasn’t keenly tuned into it. He was unmoored beyond all perceived dimension.

Almost as if the waves of the raging sea forced his head up partly out of the water, he eventually regained consciousness. He was instinctually afraid to open his eyes, considering the unspeakable experiences he’d just been dragged through kicking and screaming. Not only could he not bear the possibility of being forced to witness something so brutal again, but he felt that the brutality he’d seen was burned into his heart and it would make him somehow inflict more suffering on the rest of the class.

After a bit of internal struggling, he deduced that he didn’t seem able to move around, so he used the sensory feedback he had to try to figure out what was going on: his feet were cold, meaning his tall boots were off. But the comforting feeling of his uniform against his skin was still there, which meant he was still dressed. It felt a little less snug around his waist and neck, so his collar and belt were probably undone. His legs felt wrong, but as his sense of spatial awareness was also compromised, he couldn’t identify why. His comforter seemed to be draped over him, but he wasn’t comfortable or tucked in the way he liked either. How did… I get here…? He had no choice but to slowly creak open his eyes to see why he had such a strange combination of sensory feedback.

His legs were being held several feet above the surface of his bed. It took effort to even find the few pebbles that remained of what was once a rich cobblestone inner monologue. Between being completely and utterly out of it and the constant replays of what happened at the trial and execution bombarding his brain, thinking was slow-going. Huh…? There was an unholy, buzzing feeling writhing around inside of him as if he were some kind of husk containing nightmares. He was rigid and unmoving.

“Oh good, you’re awake!” A familiar voice said happily. Hina looked over him, suddenly in his field of vision. “How are you feeling?”

“…” Mondo… … …

“Thought so,” she continued with disappointment tinging her voice. “I asked Kyoko if you had a concussion or some kind of brain damage, but she said you’re probably, um… catty-something?”

“That would be ‘catatonic’,” Kyoko, walking in, corrected her. “You weren’t sleeping,” she told Taka, leaning in to observe him, “You were unconscious. If you’d been out for much longer you would’ve risked severe damage to your body and brain. We rushed you here.” She signaled to Hina,
who gently lowered his legs.

Sakura came in from the bathroom behind her. “I’ve seen this before. He might not sleep for a while… Don’t try to sit up, Kiyotaka.”

“…” You’re talking… so… fast… How can I respond…? They were talking in Mach 5 compared to his own internal pace. Though he wanted to use what miniscule attention he had left to try to follow their conversation even a little, a grotesque, unholy, gnawing fear had him trapped in its clutches.

Sakura looked worried. “I’m going to lift your arm, ok?” She carefully picked up his arm and held it diagonally. It moved with no resistance whatsoever, his wrist limp. When she let go, it stayed there in the air, almost in a cruel half-salute. Hina gently pushed it back down so it was flat against the bed. Leave it up… My eyes hurt, I want to rub them...

But I can’t break the net...

Can’t someone rub them for me? Please touch me again...

It feels so warm...

No one will ever hold me again...

I’m the plague...

All that was left of the Moral Compass was an empty shell stuffed with different shades of despair yet to reveal themselves; yet to swarm but constantly multiplying.

“Is he gonna be okay?” Hina asked, voice small. “What can we do to help…?”

“We need to keep a close eye on him,” Kyoko said. She folded her arms. “I believe he has autism. He displays a lot of the classic traits – he’s poor at social interaction and cues, he doesn’t have much volume control, he stims… And I know you’ve both seen that he goes rigid and dissociates when he’s overstimulated or overwhelmed. Some autistic people have catatonic episodes. This is the extreme end of that part of him. The other side of general catatonia is similar to hyperactive mania. On top of that, my theory is that he’s going through a psychotic episode of catatonia set off by…” she paused and looked at him, a rare moment of searching for words. Her expression was softer than the usual stoicism. “… You know.” I do… I’m not surprised she noticed… Mondo’s actions and execution would be a part of him for the rest of his life; as desperate as he was to *not* know, he could never erase them, and thus her mention of them stuck out to him in real-time.

“Perhaps it’s best we not talk about that just yet, in case we make things worse for him. After all, he’s not in a coma. He may not be reacting, but he probably hears and sees us just fine.” Sakura stated. I *am* reacting… or trying to. You’re moving too fast! He tried to squint, or at least blink, but his eyelids only moved a fraction and even that much caused his anxiety to spike through the roof. If I move, I’ll… He imagined his skin cracking and a heinous light bursting out, a sick hatching of death, killing everyone around him. After all - it was obvious that whenever he opened up, people died. But if I don’t, they’ll think I’m gone… What do I do…?

“Psychotic?” Hina asked. “Like, in the movies?”

“No,” Sakura responded. “Psychosis is very often portrayed in media as negative and violent, but it’s not an inherently evil thing.”

Kyoko replied. “That’s right. It can include delusions, hallucinations, disorganized or strange speech and behavior, and catatonia. He may display the others later. But for now, we have to take care of
him."

Sakura nodded. “We can move him around just fine. We should rotate him every few hours to prevent bedsores and get him up and guide him through exercises frequently.”

*I can’t revolve in 8 directions… at once…*

*I have to stay still…*

*Or they’ll rip me open…*

*I’d see him again then… but I can’t put everyone in jeopardy…*

*They’ll crawl out, the burning bright will consume everything…*

“Yes – if anyone stays in bed for too long, complications can develop. Catatonic people are at an especially high risk of blood clots.”

“Oh, those can migrate up into the heart, and lungs, and brain, too…!” Hina said, cringing.

“And if someone catatonic goes from not moving to suddenly running all over the place, it can cause heart attacks. So even if it takes us hands-on guiding him, we should keep him active,” Sakura stated. Taka wasn’t following the conversation well at all, too fearful of the boiling miasma inside himself. Unable to tear his internal vision away from the trial and Mondo’s death. His attention continued to swerve in and out, someone who had long lost control of the wheel driving him along a precarious mountain pass.

“Let’s bring him to the breakfast meetings, and try to stick as close to whatever schedule he had as we can.” Kyoko suggested. “He seems to thrive by regulating his time.”

Hina nodded. “Yeah! He’d usually get to breakfast before 7:30. I’ve seen him in the pool usually 2 or 3 pm?”

“And he’d have supper around 5:30 or so,” Sakura added. “When I’d run into him after working out, it was often around 7 pm, likely depending on which exercises he did that day.” *I can’t even look at my watch…* The knowledge that he couldn’t stim or engage in his obsessive timekeeping made his chest tighten. He couldn’t even tell how long the girls had been talking. Was it minutes? Hours? Days?

He felt like he was a hair’s breadth away from imploding and sucking everything and everyone in his vicinity to a place of destruction. *I can’t do *anything*…*

*I couldn’t save either of them, and I can’t stop what’s happening, and I can’t even take care of myself…*

“He regularly eats his lunch at noon. And he’d spend the rest of his time studying, organizing, or socializing. Mostly the first two.” Kyoko concluded.

“What should we do about bathing and dressing…?” Sakura asked.

“…” *If I move myself, my plague will infect everyone… Everyone will go up in flames.*

*I have to lay here and bear it…*

*I’m responsible for Mondo’s actions and death, and I’ll drive them to die too…*
I must protect them… I couldn’t protect Mondo or Chihiro, but I must protect who’s left…

Hold it in… Hold it in…

Kyoko put her hand on her chin in thought. “One of us can do it. I don’t care about that sort of thing... I’d look at it clinically.”

“I’ve had to take care of someone in that way before, so I have no issues with it,” Sakura explained.

“I’d rather not…” Hina said. “That’s kinda weird to me, y’know? Boundaries and all that. Oh, hey – do you think Makoto might be up to the task?”

“Makoto?” Sakura asked, tilting her head. Why are you all fussing over me… I don’t deserve it. I’m the avatar of destruction… If I weren’t here, he… I should just… Die…

“Yeah! He’s a boy, he’s friends with Taka, and I saw them leaving the bathhouse once, so they’ve seen each other naked!”

“I don’t think Makoto being a *boy* is what matters,” Sakura reminded her.

“Oh! You’re right – sorry, Taka!” Hina patted him on the leg. He felt it but didn’t notice, let alone know what she was apologizing for.

“But aside from that... good idea, Hina.” Sakura said. Let me die… He wanted to scream to make them leave him there to rot, but even if he were able to form any words, he’d have no voice to back it up.

Kyoko agreed. “I’ll ask him later today. If not, Sakura and I can alternate.”

“What about food and water…? I mean, if he can’t move on his own, trying to get him to swallow might make him choke!” Hina said. “I know the Heimlich, but we should avoid it if we can!”

Kyoko frowned. “I’ve been thinking about that. Monokuma, I have a question.”

Monokuma popped out from who knows where. “Yessssssss~?”

“What the hell!?” Hina shouted.

“The Nurse’s Office has basic medical supplies, right? Like IV fluids?” Kyoko inquired.

“Puuuuuhuhuhu, indeedy indeedy!”

“When will it open up?”

“When this little bear feels like it! So, maybe never! Ahahahahah!” Taka suddenly, finally became aware of the bear’s presence. Ahhh! Why is he here!? Leave!!
Is he here to kill me himself!? Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad…

“You understand what’s happening, right?”

“Yep! Our poor little hall monitor’s so heartbroken, his body and mind are broken too!”

Sakura growled, but didn’t say anything. Hina yelled, “If he dies here, we’ll sue you!”

“Oh, how thoughtful of you! Unfortunately, there’s no such thing other than trial by fire!”

“What was that…?” Sakura asked.

“Don’t worry about it! Suffice to say, unless you summon Lady Justice herself, you can’t sue me even if you *try*! Monokuma can take everything away in an instant… We can’t fight him… He’s our puppetmaster… I’m on his strings.

No, he isn’t going to kill me…

He wants me to move. He wants me to spread my chaos, he wants the maggots crawling in me to breed and eat everything… He wants the burning light to incinerate everyone…

No, I can’t do what he wants… He gets off on this… I have to stay still, I have to die here.

“You said before you goal is to make us safe and comfortable so you can reap our despair, right?” Kyoko asked.

“Yeah, whaddaboutit?”

“If he dies because we can’t get him to eat or drink, wouldn’t that be a thorn in your little plan for us?” What’s happening outside…?

It must be my fault, too…

“Hmmmm, I supppoooose that’s true… But if I *do* open up the Nurse’s Office, don’t think for a minute it’s just cuz you asked me to, alright!” He vanished again.

His ears were ringing from all the talking in his room, especially Hina’s reaction to Monokuma. He had a blistering headache. He finally completed his blink, but the very act of that caused him to dissociate and his breathing to quicken to a pant. Having a panic attack was bad enough, but having a one when you couldn’t even control your body was far worse. They tried to help his breathing even out, but Sakura’s counting was completely ineffective because they were moving at 100000 miles per hour faster than him. Hina sat with him to make sure his breathing returned to normal, which took several hours but felt like eons to Taka himself.

Hours or minutes later, Makoto and Sakura came into his room and Hina left.

“Hey, Taka. Professor Makoto here,” he said with an awkward chuckle.

“…” Let me lay here and waste away… Let me die here.

I can’t ruin you too if you let me die.

“Kyoko told me what’s going on. I’ll take care of washing and stuff for you, ok?”

“…” The sensation of Mondo letting go of his hand looped against his skin. He hadn’t unclenched his fists since it happened. I…
“I’ll show him how to help you up. But it’s already been hours. We need to get you moving,” Sakura said. When she picked up Taka, he was stuck with his arms and legs bunched together from when they’d last rolled him on his side. She carefully disentangled him from himself and set him on his feet, back against the wall, standing in front of him with one of her big hands at his shoulder and the other at his hip. As he couldn’t verbalize anything, he slowly started to move his eyes to the clock on the wall. It made him very nervous, but he hoped they’d notice.

“He looks pretty sturdy?”

“Yes, he is. He can hold positions well, but he just can’t do them himself. See?” She picked him up and stood him in the middle of the room. *Makoto is here…!* He finally noticed. *Why does he want to help, too…? I wish I could tell him to run…*

“We’re going to exercise now,” Sakura said. Like a hands-on physical therapist, she led him through routine stretches and movements to get his blood circulating.

“Why’re you holding the positions for so long?”

“Kyoko told me he probably feels like we’re all too fast. And he’s a physical person who clearly cares about fitness. So I thought I’d compensate,” she said with a small smile. Taka basked in the contact and the way the exercise felt. He felt warm and comforted, like he was having a picnic on a nice summer day with the sun streaming down on him. He was able to use the very tiny amount of focus he had to hold on to that feeling, though it didn’t stem the tide of flashbacks, fear, and grief. He knew if he looked down, he’d see that the picnic basket was full of grotesque creatures clambering to get out.

“Sakura, that’s really thoughtful of you!” Makoto said happily. She blushed in response. However long she spent exercising him, he finally had his eyes on the clock.

_I wish… I wish I could turn it back…_

“Hey, he’s looking somewhere else!” Makoto pointed out.

She followed his gaze. “He seems to be looking at the clock?”

“Do you think it’s on purpose?”

“If he can move, it has to be very selective and deliberate because it takes so long… So I’d think so, yes.”

“Why could he be looking at the cl—Oh! Hey, I’ll be right back!” He ran out of the room and came back sometime later with something in his arms.

She’d been manually making him walk with one hand on his back and the other alternating between pressing against the backs of his knees and moving his feet forward. “What did you find, Makoto?”

He held it out for her to see, but it was out of Taka’s line of sight. “A clock! I know he’s really about time and schedules, because he’s yelled at me so much about being late…” he said sheepishly, “So I thought if we could put this somewhere he could see, it’d help him feel better! Oops!” He moved to Taka’s line of sight, waved, and showed it to him. It was a simple analogue clock with a pair of little legs so it could be stood on a flat surface. *He understood…!!* It made him emotional and grateful, but also feel more guilty for not only being a burden but being a burden rigged to vaporize everyone with him.
Sakura picked him up and placed him in the shower in his bathroom. She walked Makoto through moving Taka’s arms and legs to get clothes off and put clean ones on. “Standing under the shower might be too much sensory stimulus for him at once, so I’d suggest wetting several washcloths and using those to clean him by section.” I’ve stood and moved but the light locusts haven’t swarmed out… Maybe the others moving me is keeping them in? I must not move myself…

“Have you done this before…?”

“Perhaps…” she said mysteriously. “I’ve laid out a fresh change of clothes for him.”

“Is it one of his uniforms?”

“No?”

“He told me before that he likes wearing it. He has 10 copies, I think? He wears them all the time.”

“He has a very fuzzy pair of pajamas as well as several sets of plain T-shirts and shorts that all look the same.”

As the bathroom door was open for Sakura to talk with Makoto, Taka could see what she’ laid out: the pajamas Mondo had given him. Hot tears started running down his face immediately.

The pajamas…

The scarf…

The flower…

I miss him so much… I wish he was here… How could he… …

I wish he… didn’t… … …

“Hmmm… Since he’s wearing his uniform most of the time, even in rain or shine, I think he prefers it,” Makoto said. “He’s really picky about clothes. Maybe wearing it all the time is comforting?” Taka’s fist slowly shook.

“I see your point… I’ll put out a fresh change of uniform then. Considering how crisp he always looks, I assume he irons his clothes after drying and then again right before wearing them. Let me know when you’re ready and I’ll carry him back to bed.”

“Ok, let’s get this started,” Makoto said, pulling the door mostly closed. He unbuttoned Taka’s six uniform buttons and took the top off him. He did the same with his pants. After he hung them up on a rail, he turned around and was about to work on his button-down when he glanced up at his face for the first time in a while. “Whoa, are you okay?”

“What’s wrong?” Sakura said as she poked her head through the slightly open door.

“He’s crying…”

“We can both guess what he’s thinking about…” Sakura said quietly.

Makoto patted him on the shoulder, then paused unsurely. “You can’t talk about it, but I hope this is okay.” He leaned forward and hugged Taka. He cried harder. Makoto rubbed his back and gently rocked him. If he were able to, he would’ve gladly sunk into the hug and clung to the shorter boy like a child clinging desperately to a post as a tornado made to swallow them whole.
But he couldn’t.

Sakura quietly closed the door.

Makoto held him there for a few minutes before finishing undressing him. He was awkward about stripping to nudity and washing Taka at first, but he eventually got over it. Taka couldn’t care less that he was naked and being spongebathed by his fellow student who he didn’t even know that deeply. He was depersonalizing, slipping further and further into his flagellant trauma-bred delusion. *My body’s just a vessel.*

*I’m empty inside… I do nothing but bring ruin to others.*

*Everything bad that’s ever happened has been my fault.*

*I’m where the corrosion is kept… It’s pushing outward against my skin…*

*The smoke’s streaming from my eyes…*

Once he finished, Makoto got him into a clean uniform and Sakura laid him back in bed. Taka could see that she’d arranged the table in his room at the foot of his bed and set the clock atop it, so he could easily look to it while horizontal. Even in his delusions of being the avatar of death, he appreciated the ‘creature comfort’.

Eventually, both of them left and Kyoko came in since it was night time. Hina stopped by to get his laundry. She returned later with a fresh basket full of his clothes and put them away. While exiting, she whispered something to Kyoko and handed her an object, which Kyoko promptly put in her pocket, but Taka couldn’t make any of it out. The nightly announcement sounded but to Taka, Monokuma seemed like he was speaking at 10 times his regular speed. Kyoko sat next to his bed until the morning bell rang, writing in a notebook and occasionally dozing.

“You look so *haunted*, Kiyotaka,” she said evenly in the middle of the night. She set her book down and leaned in, hands steepled, moving so she was in his line of sight. “You’re in agony. But it’s more than that, isn’t it? It would be very slow, but you’re not reacting like you’re having hallucinations. Not visual ones, anyway. So, you’re having delusions. But what are they about?”

“…”

She folded her arms. “Someone trapped in them wouldn’t know that’s what they are. I saw how you felt after Sayaka, Junko, and Leon’s deaths. You held yourself responsible, and still do, to a fault. I imagine you feel the same way about Chihiro and Mondo, amplified exponentially.”

“…”

“Monokuma is the chessmaster here, not you. But we’re choosing of our own free will to support you.” She looked down at his hands and gently pried his fingers open. *I’m holding onto him…* Small tear tracks ran down his cheeks. “You’re bleeding again. We left your hands alone before since the wounds seemed closed, but there’s blood on your sheets now.” She stood up and retrieved gauze pads from the table and slipped them on his palms. She hesitated for a minute and frowned. “You might have been doing that to keep his touch… I’m sorry. I’ll close them.” She did just that and sat back down and picked up her book. *If they’re able to touch me without feeling the writhing mass trying to escape…*

*If they can move me without shriveling up and dying… Maybe they can’t feel it trying to burst out. Maybe it won’t affect them.*
Maybe the bright being inside exists on a higher plane and can’t interact within three dimensions…
Maybe it won’t kill them all, too…

Chapter End Notes

The first several chapters of Game Chapter 3 will be shorter than usual because that will better show the passage of time and go along with what I'm trying to do here. They'll show the visceral, all-consuming nature of Kiyotaka's grieving.
Taka didn’t sleep a wink over the next several days. He spent the time trying to practice moving and compartmentalizing the fear. *If it really won’t affect them, then maybe I can make myself move and the others are still safe for now...* Of course, that didn’t mean he wasn’t still a threat; he simply wanted to become better enough that the others would stop helping him and he could die. *It clearly has an incubation period. That’s why it hasn’t come out of me, yet! So long as I’m gone before it hatches, they’re safe.* The lack of sleep didn’t make his pulsating guilt and grief and delusion any easier to bear; if anything, it made them worse. As did the lack of food. He frequently alternated in temperature between too warm and too cold, but there was nothing he could do aside from sit there and suffer with it silently until someone noticed he was shuddering or sweating.

*Grandfather was right this whole time... I’m weak, I’m useless, and that weakness destroys everyone around me...*

*Accepting that weakness did nothing but lull me into a false sense of security and make others pity me...* Putting them at my mercy.

*If I was truly strong, if I truly put in effort, if I truly had determination, I would’ve been able to keep Mondo here. Make him confess his secret.*

*Gotten that ‘rock hard lump of anxiety way down in his stomach’ out...*

*Forced everyone to divulge their secrets and thwart Monokuma’s motive...*

*But I wasn’t. I acquiesced to the majority. To Mondo... I let them not talk about it. I even let him be executed without really understanding why he did what he did...*

*I failed as a leader. I failed to protect everyone. I failed to keep the others from falling to their own demons...*

*I failed Mondo. I failed myself. I failed my family. And it was always going to be that way.*

*I’m the light of destruction, and everything I shine upon burns to ash.*

*Fighting against it, trying to prove it wrong... It was a waste of time.*

*The only thing left for me to do is get healthy enough so I can keep the others away and kill myself so I can’t hurt anyone anymore... I’ll finally be strong in death.*

Using the clock Makoto had brought, he timed himself on how long it took him to make small
movements and put all his effort to making it happen faster. Kyoko observed him, seemingly impassive.

Sakura got him up during the mornings and evenings and did more exercises with him. He was able to make slight slow movements on his own now, though he was still fearful, secretly suicidal, mute, and not reactive physically or vocally. He could mostly follow conversation in real-time, and if someone got him started he was able to shuffle a little without assistance. Holding on to Sakura’s arm made him feel less afraid of moving himself around.

They got to breakfast at his usual time, which made him feel a little more productive at least. On the fourth day after the execution, several of the others decided to talk to him as he stood near the end of the table.

“So, dude… How are things?” Hiro asked Taka, who couldn’t respond.

“…”

“… You don’t gotta ignore me! Whatever, man…”

“He can’t talk, Hiro. He hasn’t said a word in days. He’s not ignoring you,” Sakura assured.

“Oh, that must be what my prediction was about! I saw that he’d give me the red-hot cold shoulder, and one of us’d end up with a headache!” He said enthusiastically, touching the upper right part of his head.

“But… that’s not what he’s doing?”

“Maybe not now, but boy do I have a headache! Hahahah… ow,” he said, rubbing his temple. Does Hiro foresee that I’ll hurt him…? Will it be what’s inside of me? But he’s only right 30 percent of the time… I just need to regain my composure enough to end it…”

“I, for one, think this is a nice change of pace,” Celeste said. “It is nice to not be shouted at for breaking nonsense rules.”

“Oh, you mean like your stay-in-your-room-at-night rule?” Hina, who’d just walked in the room, volleyed back.

“That wasn’t my rule, it was an agreement among all of us, and I expect it to be upheld as such,” she said politely. “But as I was saying… Kiyotaka is a very rigid person, and he learning how to adapt to our situation really would benefit him.”

“But… he was? He was fine?” Sakura rebutted.

“Perhaps, but maybe now he’s realized that scolding people over petty things was a waste of everyone’s time. And what was it… Their effort, too. It only made it more difficult to live together in peace. Hifumi, bring my royal milk tea to my room.” She stood up and walked away like she’d somehow won an argument.

“Yes, milady!” Hifumi called from the kitchen.

Hina sighed. “She’s just saying that because she doesn’t like how you enforce rules. It’s a pain in the butt sometimes, but it’s just who you are,” Hina patted Taka on the arm, trying to console him. He was too wrapped up in his own head about Hiro’s prediction to even realize Celeste had been talking to him in the first place.
“Do you want to try drinking water?” Sakura asked Taka after waving in front of his face to snap him out of it. He nodded quite slowly and opened his mouth while Sakura sat him at the long table. They’d been able to keep him hydrated in the days after the execution, but he wouldn’t agree to more than that. Hina went to the kitchen and came back with a small styrofoam cupful of the stuff and tipped a little into his mouth. He swallowed it fine, though it was pretty delayed. He opened his mouth for more. *Feels good*… His throat was still rather sore from all his screaming days prior.

“Good job!” Hina cheered as she poured more water in his mouth. Although it was at a snail’s pace, he managed to drink several hundred milliliters.

“Hina, could you warm him up some broth?” She nodded. “You need to eat. Are you vegetarian? Or vegan?” He shook his head ‘no’. When she asked if he wanted chicken broth, he slowly indicated ‘no’ again. He continued to do so for every question she asked about food. That’s what he’d been doing all this time when queried. It was becoming an old song and dance, even as they tried different approaches each time.

_I don’t want to eat. I don’t have an appetite._

_Mondo and Chihiro and Sayaka and Leon and Junko and Grandfather and everyone else in the world that’s dead can’t eat anymore. I’m why they suffered, why they died… I don’t deserve food. It’d be spitting on their graves._

_I deserve to waste away. I can’t hurt anyone else that way._

_I don’t need food to improve enough to kill myself._

Sakura and Hina were resigned by his refusal but continued to work with him throughout the day. By the time the former helped him exercise again during the night, he was able to start some of them, albeit tenuously.

But his feelings did not heal, and neither did he sleep. Mondo’s execution was so well-worn in his mind now that it felt like it was scarified into his skin. The light pulsing inside him felt like it would crack him open from the inside at any time.

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The next day, he was doing somewhat better. It still took a lot of effort for him to move, but he was able to manage some things now, although at a much slower pace than usual. He was still mute and not particularly reactive. He still refused anything other than water. Hina and Sakura kept trying to argue with him about it, but he wouldn’t budge.

“You need to eat,” Sakura repeated. She looked worried and frustrated. “This isn’t good for you.” Even if he hadn’t been denying himself food, he hadn’t been hungry since the last calm night he spent with Mondo.

“Seriously,” Hina said. “Even if it’s just liquid, even if it’s donuts, your body needs nutrients to function!”

“You’ll only impede your improvement and make things worse if you continue to not eat.”

_Good. I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve to get better, or to even be alive at all._

_Just good enough to die. I’m just a container for radioactive waste. It’s not even self-sacrifice._

_I’m not a person. I tried to be, once, but I got people killed._
Hifumi approached him after they’d given up trying to argue again with someone so dead-set and yet unresponsive. Taka was staring off into space. “Hey, Taka?”

“…”

“…Mister Ishimaru? I don’t want to have a one-sided NPC conversation, but… I wanted to tell you…”

“…”

“I uh, I did the reading you tol—uh, suggested that I do. About psychology. I see what you meant now about conditioning and reinforcing my bad behaviors with the loot of my lewd art.”

“…” He shouldn’t have bothered.

He felt like everything he’d ever said was useless, that it wouldn’t help anyone be better people. Or, for that matter, help them stay out of sight of death’s scythe. Even if I could talk, there’s no point even telling him that… It might even lead him to die, somehow.

“I’m trying to make that change. But it’s really grind-y!”

“Then why did you keep saying ‘booblust’ during the trial?” Hina needled him, frustration bubbling over and misdirecting righteously. “That was gross, *and* a waste of time!”

“Hyeeeeeek!” Hifumi wailed. He cowered away from Hina. “I h-haven’t drawn anything bad in weeks! Without that kind of expression, it just kind of came out like an automatic dialogue box!”

“It already did before!”

“You’re going through withdrawal, Hifumi,” Kyoko said, appearing from the kitchen with plate of pancakes. Hina and Sakura had told her right away that Taka was refusing to eat, but she had yet to confront him about it herself. She said even less than before during the nights, content to sit there and take notes and watch him from his bedside and occasionally read. “It will be harder for a while, but you should get used to it.”

“Hmmmm?” Celeste said, turning away from Hiro and Makoto with whom she’d just been discussing money. “What’s that? What are you doing, Hifumi?”

“Oh, Taka showed me how to level up! I have to defeat the dungeon boss of my impulsive perversion!”

“Mr. Rigid himself pushed you into changing yourself?” Celeste chuckled. “How amusing!”

“Do you think he’s wrong?” Kyoko asked.

“Someone who’s so poor with adaptation lecturing Hifumi is just rather ironic, don’t you think? Perhaps it’s not Hifumi who needs to change how he interacts with others… After all, *you*’re the one responsible for the lack of cohesion of we survivors, no? Maybe you have an ulterior motive for that…” That’s so twisted, that’s not it at all…

Taka clenched his fists, definitely paying attention now. *I don’t deserve respect or kindness, but I won’t let such remarks go without a response! Even if it was all a disaster, even if I’ve butted heads with almost everyone at one point or another, I… I always want to help others, including Hifumi! Even if it has bad results, even though it’s gotten the others killed… I won’t stand for anyone postulating that my actions and words have bad intentions! I just wanted to support everyone!*

“Oh?” Celeste tittered condescendingly. “If you have something to say… The polite and moral thing
would be to say it!”

"Everything I've done, it’s been to help us get through this! And even if it weren’t, I got to know Chihiro because I care!" Taka slowly turned his head toward her and stared directly into her eyes, unblinking, the grimace that’d been baked into his face for the past several days deeper of his own volition. It was an alarming expression. I made my first friend, first lover, in Mondo *because I care*!

Hifumi squealed. “He IS in there!”

Celeste made a face, her composure dropping for just an instant. “How… disappointing. Come now, Hifumi. We have business to attend to.”

Hifumi followed her like a pet dog. He kept glancing back at Taka, looking worried, until she scolded him to stop.

“You freaked her out,” Hina said with a chuckle. “But she won’t admit it, probably ever!”

“She may have been trying to taunt you into speaking,” Sakura remarked. “It’s hard to say with her.”

Kyoko’s expression was neutral.

“Hey dude, you talkin’ now?” Hiro asked, calling over from the other side of the table.

Taka carefully pursed his lips.

Kyoko reminded Hiro, “Words aren’t the only way to communicate.”

“Ohhhhhh, are you saying he told off Celeste just with a LOOK!? That’s so cool, dude! And also scary! Show me!” He pulled up a chair across from Taka.

“…” He didn’t move.

“Must be super powerful if he’s saving it up like that!” Hiro shrugged. “Has anyone thought of giving him something to write with?”

“Oh! No!” Hina said excitedly. “Taka, do you want to talk by writing?” Kyoko looked at her impassively.

“…” I have nothing to say to them.

I’m not going to burden them with my thoughts or the truths I’ve discovered. That would just hurt them more. It might even result in their deaths… That’s what I’m going to prevent by killing myself!

“That’s a no,” Sakura said. “He can’t talk, but he also doesn’t *want* to.”

“Awwwww…” Hina complained. “Oh, Hiro – you’re psychic, maybe you can read his mind?”

“I’m a clairvoyant, not a psychic! There’s a huge difference!”

“Which is…?”

“Psychics are shams! Fakes! Absolute charlatans! They charge money for mumbo jumbo!”

“Last I checked, Hiro, is that not what you do?” Sakura asked. Hina glanced at her wryly.
“Well, my predictions are right 30 whole percent of the time!” Hiro retorted, very offended. “That’s a 1/3 chance! There’s no way those telephone line sit-at-home moms with nothing else to do can say they have even 150% of that!”

“Isn’t that—“

“Don’t bother,” Kyoko cut Hina off. “Besides… I don’t think Taka wants someone rooting around in his brain. I don’t know why anyone would, really.” I don’t… If he sees what’s growing inside of me in my cavern of despair…

He’ll tell everyone and they’ll try to stop me from going through with it.

They’ll leave...

I’m so selfish… If this comes out of me, they’ll die, but I can’t stand being alone either…

And I clearly can’t get better now without any help, even though I don’t deserve it.

I can’t tell anyone about this… I have to carry this burden alone for everyones’ sakes. I have to let them have the peace of helping me until I’m strong enough to take my life. That way, no one will have regrets…

“Okay, dude. Just lemme know if you want a prediction. Well, I should say, if you want me to *tell* you some. I have a notebook full of ‘em, but it’s the disclosure I charge for unless it’s really specially requested or on the spot. And I’ll give you my student discount. And an extra 3 percent off, just cuz you’re havin’ a rough time!” Hiro chuckled and walked away.

“You’re not eating,” Kyoko said finally after the clairvoyant had gone.

“Yeah, he refused again today…” Hina explained.

Kyoko crossed her arms. “He’s blaming himself very hard for everything that’s happened here. And more.”

“Are you saying he feels so guilty he thinks he doesn’t deserve to eat…?” Sakura asked, voice full of pity.

“What!?” Hina exclaimed. “It’s not just not having an appetite!?”

Kyoko shook her head. “No, he’s definitely eaten many times without having an appetite for the sake of maintaining his schedule. He’s certainly suicidal…”

Makoto sat down next to Taka. They’d told him, too, but he hadn’t been sure what to do so he’d let them try until now. “So it’s that bad, huh…? I can tell… He’s wasting away.” He knit his eyebrows in empathy. “What should we do?”

“We can’t force him,” Sakura said. “He’s complied with everything else, but if we tried to make him eat without his cooperation, he could easily choke… I’d… Rather it not come to that, anyway.”

“What do we do!” Hina asked tearfully. “We can’t just *let* him do this to himself!”

No, but they can’t stop me…

“The Nurse’s Office still hasn’t opened yet. So there’s only one thing I can think of,” Kyoko said.

“You mean…?” Makoto asked. Kyoko nodded. Makoto patted Taka’s shoulder, trying to get his
attention. “Hey, Taka?”

“…” He angled his head slightly in Makoto’s direction to show his attention, wanting to be polite.

“Sitting here telling you none of this is your fault probably isn’t gonna help right now, but… It’s not your fault.”

“…”

“Uh…”

“…” Yes it is, you just don’t see it yet. And I need to die before you do.

“Yeah, I kinda thought that’d bounce off you,” he admitted. “But there’s something you need to remember…”

“…”

Makoto swallowed and hesitated. “W-we all saw, you know. What you and Mondo were saying to each other.”

“…!” T-they did!? He startled a little; tears began running from his eyes the second Makoto mentioned his dead boyfriend’s name.

Hina hugged him protectively from the side. Makoto continued, “You being together was news to me, but it made sense. But that’s not what I mean… He told you to stay alive, you know?”

“…” He wouldn’t have if he’d known…!

“Think about how he’d feel, seeing you punish yourself like this over something he did…”

“Even if you feel like this is what you deserve, he’d argue with you until you were both blue in the face about it,” Sakura reminded him. “Just like he did then…”

“Yeah,” Makoto agreed.

“…” That doesn’t mean he’d be right! I have to do this!!

“Above all that, you promised him you’d keep going however you could,” Kyoko said.

“You even sealed it with a kiss! That’s super legit business, you know?” Hina said. The premise of that promise was flawed because neither of us knew what I really am then! Neither of us were fully informed! That promise is void!

Makoto added, “I have no doubt that he’d want you to eat. To stay alive, keep pushing forward.”

“You need to live for yourself, not die for him. Or Chihiro. Or anyone else,” Kyoko summarized.

They don’t know... They don’t know him. Until now, he’d been devoted to replaying what Mondo himself had said and what had happened to him. It was even more traumatic for him to think about anything else, including the way Kyoko and Makoto had cornered Mondo. And the way they’d all voted for him except Taka himself. They don’t know what we were really talking about... They cornered him and used his words against him! And now they’re trying to use his words to suit their own agenda! Bitterness flooded his mind. Words he only said because they backed him into a corner he couldn’t escape from! If they’d just left him alone, they wouldn’t be able to try this against me!
Or if they’d let him confess on his own time… Which he was CLEARLY planning on doing before Byakuya stuck us in a near-mistrial!

And they don’t know that I’m a ticking time bomb, that they’ll all die because of me just like everyone else… He heard their words, but they weren’t sticking. He wouldn’t let them. They just don’t get it. And they won’t! I have to resist their attempts to warp me into complying! I *have* to die to save them, no matter *what* they say!

“So, will you eat now?” Sakura asked.

He shook his head.

“Please!” Hina begged.

“…”

Kyoko said, her mouth a firm line, “I didn’t expect this’d work the first time with all of us. We’ll drop it for now,” she declared. “We’ll help you as we have been. But don’t think we’ll let you off this. I won’t just sit here and watch you malnourish yourself to death.”

*I don’t deserve any help, but they’re so insistent.* It made him feel guiltier, even as he was bitter about how they were trying to change his mind.

*And I miss being held, being touched even platonically…*

*I don’t deserve that, either, even if it’s being helped through exercises and bathing like they’re doing for me. But I need that to become strong enough to let myself go under.*

*So I can get strong enough to do the deed. I will end myself and they can’t stop me!*

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Sakura took him to the Gym in the afternoon for a change of scenery as she helped him exercise. On the way out, they ran into Toko. She looked a hot mess, even more tired and disheveled than usual.

“S-so, I heard you’re not t-talking…” She said warily to Taka. “It must be b-because you’re f-fantasizing about me…”

“He’s attempting to deal with what happened during the trial,” Sakura explained neutrally.

She ignored Sakura. “You’re d-disgusted by the sight of me… Knowing I’m in your class…”

“…” *She’s not incorrect anymore… She’s a heinous serial killer!*

“You want to m-make me pay for *her* c-crimes… You’re going to try to k-kill me, aren’t you!”?

“…” *I want you to be brought to justice. That’s all.*

“You’re s-standing there all unreactive and innocent, but you’re f-faking it! I’m onto you, you morality f-freak!” she screamed, bolting in the opposite direction.

“Well… That was… … … Interesting,” Sakura said. “Now that she’s been exposed, she’s even more paranoid. I didn’t think that was possible.” Taka slowly looked at his watch. “Ah, yes. Let’s get you back to your dorm.”

*Even though I want her to face the consequences, I don’t want her to die. She can’t own up if she’s*
not alive… And she can’t stay alive if my presence causes her death. I have to die to ensure she faces repercussions for her disgusting actions!

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He didn’t sleep that night, either. The screeching, bright discord inside him continued to carve away at his body. Kyoko didn’t say a word to him. Anger began to stir in him at the situation Monokuma had them in, at the actions of the others to impugn Mondo during the trial.

But especially at himself. *I can’t believe I’m not ready yet… If it takes much longer, I won’t even be able to do it because I’ll be too physically weak!*

*I have to do this! Like I should’ve done all those years ago…*

*I wish I’d see him again when I die…*
Chapter Summary

TW: everything from the previous chapters as well as rumination of self-harm, and homophobia from Toko (and probably Byakuya, when Taka sees them in the gym)

*Suicide Hotline Directory, Including LGBTQ+ Suicide Lifeline*

Game Transcripts: [This Section of Chapter 3] [Chapter 3, 1-123]

He had long formed dark circles under his eyes due to the sleep deprivation; his body had since started to break down his muscles, seeking protein in starvation. His attention span and short term memory were starting to fray. He thought sometimes about returning to his old vice of cutting himself. Even though he hadn’t done it in years, the thought of it was abstractly tempting. *But that was a way for me to let it out and exercise control… Since Grandfather and so many others were forcing me to bear their abuse. I’m controlling everything just fine now, and I’m trying to prevent letting this acid rain from escaping me. Doing that would just give it an easy escape route!* He chose to not do it for those reasons and another – he knew Kyoko and company would see what he’d done right away; if they felt the need to strap his arms down so he couldn’t do it again, he’d never be able to execute himself later on.

After running through basic exercises with him three mornings later – which he then realized were a little varied each time - Sakura brought him to the morning meeting, mentioning Hina was sitting it out because she wasn’t feeling good. Once Makoto got there, Hiro complained that so few people showed up, including Byakuya and Toko. Since Hina was gone as well, Kyoko pointed out that there were only seven of them present. *Half the class is either abstaining or dead… And that number will keep dwindling if I stay alive!*

Sakura wasn’t sure what exactly was up with Hina, but she was worried. Though his own pain rippled within him on every level, a large portion of his guilt was because of his care for the others. In spite of the fact that he felt he didn’t deserve it, Hina had made a real effort to be kind to him, and he felt he’d gotten to know her a little even if she didn’t understand the depths of who he was. And she seemed the type to keep her commitments, when she remembered, even if she didn’t feel well. *I’m worried too… She’s usually so peppy! Even when taking care of me, she’s been bubbly and free-spirited… Even when I wasn’t responsive at all, she still talked to me…*

Hiro turned to Taka and interrupted his thoughts: “It’s times like this where the Committee chairman needs to get things going with a BANG!”

“…”

“Or not…?” He seemed a touch deflated.

“…” *I don’t deserve to be a chairperson of *anything*… I couldn’t do anything to keep us together, or to protect anyone!*

Hifumi asked, “So, I mean… what’s gonna happen now? We haven’t found any way out, and we have no idea if help's ever gonna come. Ngh! Now I’m all depressed just thinking about it…” *I wish I*
could do something to help them escape… I wish I could’ve lived up to my dreams of helping the
world. But it was just never possible; I never realized it until now. That thought alone would be
despair-inducing by itself, but being hit with so much had long broken his internal dams.

“We simply have to make the best of things—do our best to get along and live here together in
peace. Forget about the outside world, and accept this new life,” Celeste said in her usual tone. “That
is the only hope we have now. Here we have every convenience. We have food, clothes, our every
need is seen to. Why are you dissatisfied? In fact, let me ask you this: What is it about the outside
world that you long for? Competition, discrimination, victimization and violence… As society grows,
so does its perversion.” His personal despairs clouded his vision. That’s an alluring perspective… We
could just give in and stop worrying about trying to escape… There’s so much wrong in the world.
One person can’t make that much of a difference. I’m proof of that.

This whole thing has shown me… If someone who had as good a heart as Mondo could be pushed
to… To… Kill… What would it take for any of the rest of us?

What would it take for *me*? If we give up, we don’t have to find out… I’ll be dying soon anyway,
but still… “In which case, is our current situation not—“

Hifumi interrupted, cutting her off. “Demon Angel☆ Pretty Pudgy Princess…”

“Hmm?” What’s that? Is that one of his anime?

“Meggy, the drill shop owner, the bunny-eared Amazon, Catgirl Dogboy, Robo Justice the Galactic
King... And...! And—! What I mean is, there’s no 2D here!” Is such a small thing really what keeps
him going…?

“The mastermind puts such base desire to their advantage, bending you to their will…” Is that true?
Only two of the deaths so far have been out of a desire to escape for outside reasons… Leon only
killed Sayaka because she tried to kill him, and he was killed for it. But Junko died protesting the
trial system, and Mondo killed Chihiro because he was in an altered state! The rest of her
perspective is appealing, though… Maybe she’s not *all* wrong-headed. That internal admission
sent a chill down his spine.

“Okay, well, anyway…” Hiro said, diverting that conversation. “Since Taka's like, catatonic... as the
oldest one here, I'm officially stepping up to take the lead!” Even Hiro’s making himself more useful
than me… “So! We're all gonna work together and spend the rest of the day searching the school!”
He and Sakura discussed that new areas of the school had finally opened up since they’d gone
through another trial, agreeing they should look through them thoroughly. Maybe I can do something
for them while I’m still around… I should explore with them! The physical activity will probably help
me get stronger, too!

“Do you have any problem with that, Celeste?” Sakura asked.

“Hmm... There may well be a discovery waiting for us which may further enrich our life here.”

“Er, no... the point is to look for clues,” Hifumi countered. Is he starting to grow a backbone...?
Maybe my talk with him helped him in some unintended way... I doubt it though.

Genocide Jack burst into the room. “You called for me, and so I appear! Genocide—!“

“Ahh! Nobody called for you!” Hifumi screeched. Did he just mouth off to a serial killer!? Jack
went on a rant about how she wanted to put an end to the ‘killer with a split personality’ trope. She
laughed when Hiro pointed out that she fit that to a T. Why is she like this!? They ate their breakfast
in the presence of the deranged murderer, Taka still refusing food. Jack’s presence seemed to put the kibosh on whatever tactics the others wanted to try next to convince him to eat. He contemplated Celeste’s line of thinking, wondering where his own limits were…

*I never want to find out!*

After the others dispersed, Sakura turned to Taka. “Do you want to look around?” He nodded slowly. “You need to keep from straining yourself. If you get tired, let me know and I’ll carry you back to your room.” She smiled, but it quickly turned to a grimace. “I hope we can find something before it’s too late…” Too late for what? Does she know I’m fully intending to kill myself…? Soon?

They walked to the third floor. He struggled at first with the mechanics of the steps. “Hmmm… Let me help you.”

“…”

“Since your body is very in need of energy, we have to avoid spending what little you have in unnecessary ways. Burning the wick at both ends will… progress you further to the end more quickly, even as we try to determine how to get you to eat.” She frowned, worried. “And in your condition, I see now you’re not quite ready for going up steps yet.”

He put his arms out so she could easily carry him to the next floor, consenting to the assistance. When they were at the top and organized, Sakura started trying to pry the metal plates off the new area’s windows. When she found that they wouldn’t budge, she grew more visibly worried. “Do you want to explore with me, or go on your own? Either way, don’t overexert yourself.” He thought for a minute and held up his hand in a “bye” gesture and walked down the hall. She called out after him, “If you need anything, make a loud noise.”

*I don’t want to burden her by just standing there being useless…*

He stopped in the classrooms first. He couldn’t search thoroughly – he mostly just stood in the doorway and scanned, slowly turning his head – but the blackboard in one of them had a crude drawing of Monokuma and said “Gettin’ tired of this” and “Pick my nose”. He’s not the only one that’s getting tired of this… He’s such a child. Maybe the mastermind is a kid? But do children that loathsome even exist…?

Near the stairs, there was some kind of room with a dartboard and pool table. As he saw Celeste was in it examining some magazines, he opted not to look at it further because he didn’t want to deal with the cognitive dissonance her warped worldview’s strange appeal was bringing him. He tried to zero in on his moral objections to the room and Celeste’s talent instead. What is a room like that even doing in a place like Hope’s Peak? Recreation may be important, but it’s tailor made for gambling! She’s probably sizing it up for that already...! Her talent is so unwholesome in a place of education! Though I suppose it isn’t really one anymore, if it ever truly was to begin with…

He found the art room next. The main room had tables, easels, and statues arranged in a tasteful manner, with a statue of Venus as the focal point. The effect was immediately ruined by the far wall which had a disorganized barrage of random prints poorly held up with staples. Taka’s brain itched to tidy it up, but he was in no state to do that so he pinned the thought to his mental bulletin board. If I can get good enough to clean such a messy display, I’ll be good enough to finally end it.

He went into the back room, which was some kind of storage area for art supplies and devices. The tools in here could probably help me do it… But no, I want it to be clean and easy, I don’t want to burden the others even more with a messy corpse in a complicated setup. Something piqued his interest. How do they work with clay if there’s no washing area…? Do they use handwipes? How do
they get it out from under their nails? Er, I’m thinking about that too much… He raked his eyes over the area once more before exiting, then noticed something laying on the ground. Normally, his urge to organize would require him to pick it up, but he didn’t trust that he had the fortitude for it right now; he decided to leave it to whoever came in here next to look over.

His final stop was the Physics room. Whereas he had been expecting some small lab equipment, this room looked more like an actual laboratory than a place students would be taught. There was a towering, advanced-looking machine in the center of the room and even a catwalk leading up to it. All kinds of screens and buttons and displays and flashing lights were off to the sides. He walked over to the machine and just stared at it. He had no idea what it was, but the room was simply overwhelming.

Makoto came in after Taka had been standing there for an hour, totally transfixed and sense of time even further askew.

“Hey, Taka. Don't you think this place is like some kind of research institute?”

“…”

At his lack of response, Makoto started looking around the room. It probably is, but what would they research here? He was still focused on the towering machine. When he came upon it, Makoto asked what Taka was wondering: “What's up with this ridiculously big machine...?”

“Watch out!” Monokuma appeared and screamed right behind Makoto’s back.

“Wh-What—?” Makoto shouted, jumping a foot in the air. Taka jumped a little as well, belatedly.

“What, you wanna do some quantum leaping!?” What does that mean? I know what quantum physics is, but what is a ‘quantum leap’? It must be some kind of exercise with jumping!

“Huh...?”

“That’s a time machine! Pretty awesome, right? It was designed by a student right here at Hope’s Peak! The Ultimate Physicist... Although, they don't go here anymore. They died during The Tragedy!” Wh...

“A time machine...?” Taka said slowly, quietly, hoarsely, finally breaking his slightly-more-than week of silence. “Seriously...? So... it can go back in time...?” Then that means... I have a chance! His heart was suddenly slamming against his ribcage and his voice was ramping up in speed and volume, his vocal chords were scraping, all sunken rusted metal careening. In a full-throttle panic attack. “Okay, then... let me get in there... If I can go back to the past... then I can...” He explosively burst into tears and screamed, hyperventilating, “This time I'll stop Mondo for sure—!”"

“Oh, sorry, not possible. This particular time machine can only go back one minute. It comes in handy when you, like... leave your pizza bagels in the microwave one minute too long,” Monokuma explained. Makoto gasped.

“One minute...?” The engines of the rocket of hope that’d been unexpectedly thrusting him to the moon failed. Cut off. Flatlined.

“Hmm... You sound disappointed. But actually, I was lying about the whole thing anyway. There's no such thing as time machines!”

“What...?” And instantaneously, he was vaporizing upon re-entry.
“Honestly, it's just an air purifier.”

“Air purifier...?” Taka said, voice and resolve and hope and spirit disintegrated once more. Makoto was glaring at Monokuma like he wanted to drown him.

“It can produce clean air no matter where you're at.” The way he cruelly dangled an imaginary carrot over Taka had started him on a panic attack, and the screeching removal of the bait made his panic cacophonous. He unconsciously bent over and grabbed at his chest, totally unaware of the abusive bear’s babbling about the air purifier. “Anyway, this machine is the reason you guys have all this delicious air. So don't go messing with it! You break it, and it's your butt!” The bear dissipated.

To where Monokuma had been standing, Makoto shouted, “God damn you!” He looked over to Taka. “I can’t believe he’d go out of his way to hurt you like that…” He walked over and helped him stand straight with an arm on his shoulder.

“…” Taka had become silent and unresponsive once again, feeling even worse than he had before Monokuma appeared. He fixated on all the ways he could have, but failed to, stop Mondo. Once Makoto helped him ease out of the panic with breathing control, the hoodie-wearing boy investigated the area while giving Taka a little space to hopefully recoup. Within a few minutes he led Taka gently by the arm back downstairs, letting him lean on him so he didn’t do too much physically. He offered to help him the rest of the way to the Dining Hall once they were on the first floor again, but Taka shook his head, not wanting to hold him up.

He also wanted to be alone. He was so distraught over how Monokuma had trolled him in his weakest moment, stomped on him as he lay bleeding in a blizzard alley, that he couldn’t even manage to be angry at the shitty bear. It was what he’d been doing to the students all along, really – stringing them along, letting them foster hope, only to incinerate that to sow deeper despair – but, given the subject matter, this affected Taka even more.

He hadn’t thought he could feel any worse than he already did. The headmaster had proven him wrong yet again.

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Taka, being slower than usual, didn’t get back to the main hall until everyone else was nearly there. The rest of the group was crowding around Hina, so he followed suit. She must be better! I’m glad… I wonder what was wrong…? I hope it wasn’t my fault, too…

“Are you feeling better already?” Sakura boomed.

Hina replied, voice wavering, “Y-Yeah... I ate a few donuts, and that really helped a lot.” Makoto wasn’t surprised at her donut-love. Celeste questioned that, as it was supposedly her stomach that was hurting. “Well, my stomachache kinda made me hungry, so... you know... Er, ahaha... I guess my memory’s kinda fuzzy lately...” Mystery solved, Taka let go of trying to focus on Hina and his mind immediately reverted to thinking about what happened in the Physics room.

He heard Hiro ask him if they should talk about their discoveries first like he’d asked the question to someone else entirely. “…”

“R-right…” Hiro said.

If I could just go back in time... I could save Chihiro... And Mondo... ... ... I could save everyone... I could make things right again, I could atone for my mistakes, I could make it so that this killing ‘game’ could never happen... I’d die, I’d do it in a heartbeat…
There’s so much I’d say to both of them… Mondo struggled like Chihiro and me… If only we had talked fully about it together. If only I’d been there to bring Mondo down to his senses, or to protect Chihiro…

But I wasn’t. And because I wasn’t there, they’re both gone forever. … I haven’t been a leader at all… I’ve just been weak. Weak, weak, weak! A leader would’ve been able to keep everyone from killing each other! I’m a fraud. I’m not cut out to be a leader. It’s what I’ve aspired to be my entire life, to make a difference – but the only differences I’ve made have been bad ones. I need to just die. They should’ve just let me die. No one else can die because of me if I die first…!

He was completely and utterly tuned out of the conversation. At some point, Hifumi asked, “How about you, Mr. Ishimaru? Are you gonna wait here?”

“…” It barely registered.

“…I guess that's a yes.”

He didn’t notice they were gone until someone was shouting at him.

“HELLLLLLLOOOOO? MORAL COMPASS, DO YOU READ ME!? WHICH WAY IS TRUE NORTH?!”

He came back to the present. Monokuma was standing less than a foot away. “…”

“I thought I’d have to smash you on the wheel to get this ship moving again! Where’d the others go, huh? What are they up to?”

“…” I don’t know! But even if I could respond I wouldn’t want to give him the dignity of doing so… That wretched bear is the one who trapped us here and has tried to force us to kill each other! I DESPISE him!

“Hmmmmmm????!?? Come on, Lassie! Spit it out! Is Makoto stuck in a wheat mill? Did Celeste’s barn burn down? Did little Sakura drink things she shouldn’t have? What are they doing!”

“…”

“As a student, and the leader of the Disciplinary Committee, it is your *duty* to report back to your headmaster, young man! You are violating the school’s code of ethics by not responding!” He looked angry.

“… Ghk!” Dammit! I have to obey his rules… I don’t *want* to, but I must!

“Spit it out!”

He opened and closed his mouth several times to try to tell him he had no idea where the others went, but words just weren’t coming out.

“You just talked a few hours ago! Are you bein’ a wise guy? We don’t like those types around these parts…” Monokuma pounded his paw into his other paw threateningly. “Remember that you’re on thin ice, Ishimaru. Very, very thin ice. Ice so thin, you could just poke your hand right through and grab me a salmon straight from the water. You better consider that. Right now… Puhuhuhu.”

Taka was straining to make his vocal chords work, but they wouldn’t. He was red in the face, and even rubbing his throat, but no words would come. If he punishes me, he’d just be making an example out of me like he did with Junko! I have to show that I’m not faking!!
“Bear got your tongue, huh? Hmmm…”

Thinking back to Hina’s idea the other day, Taka gestured for a writing device and paper. Monokuma got them for him quite quickly. “It’s okay, tiny dancer, you don’t have to tell me through a poem. I know you love me already! Ahahahahah!”

Taka wrote: “I don’t know!!”

“Reaaaaaaaally? Are you suuuuuure?” The bear’s red eye gleamed creepily and a whirring sound emitted from his body.

Taka underlined his response three times. *I can’t tell him what I don’t even know!*

“I know you’re oblivious, but at a time like this? How could you!? The betrayal stings my beary little heart!”

*I was remembering… All the pain you’ve caused!* Taka, gritting his teeth, underlined his response more and he pushed the pencil hard enough that its graphite tip snapped off.

“Well, with how eager you are to follow rules… And how bad you are at fibbing… I suppose you *are* telling the truth. Go report to the Gym as soon as possible. I’ll send the others there after I tortu—er, find them. Nyaaaaahahahahha!” He disappeared.

Taka was too far gone to react to Monokuma’s next attempt at trolling. He shoved the pencil and paper in his pocket and made a beeline for the Gymnasium. His “fast” now was pretty lagging by his usual standards, but he was pushing himself hard to do even that.

When he got there, Toko and Byakuya were already waiting.

“So, you got here before the others. I should have figured as much,” Byakuya said.

“H-he’s actually r-really slow right now, so m-maybe they got lost. Or they’re planning something…”

“Slow?” He gestured to Kiyotaka. “What does she mean?”

“…”

“He’s m-moving at a snail’s pace,” she said, twirling her fingers and blushing. “And not r-responsive.”

“What’s the matter, Ishimaru? Bear eat your pickled vegetables and white rice?” He sneered.

“…” Ugh… *So Hina wasn’t the only one who noticed I eat the same things each day! I’m used to being taunted about it, but I’d rather not have to deal with that too…*

Well, I should say ‘ate’… I’m never eating again.

“I don’t mind the quiet. It’s relaxing not having you trying to shove your neurotic morals down everyones’ throats. Or having to listen to you blubber more about that pondscum, Mondo.”

“…” That caught his attention. *Mondo…* His eyes started leaking. *Pondscum!? The nerve of that haughty brat!* If Byakuya was trying to draw his attention by stabbing at that necrotic wound, he well accomplished his mission.

“T-the way you looked at each other… The way you h-held each other… It was s-sickening!” Toko
yelled. “D-disgusting!” The paranoid writer came into focus alongside Byakuya, everything else blurry. You’re the only disgusting thing here! You’re a nasty serial killer homophobe!

“It was a waste of our time, is what it was. I don’t know why Monokuma let you get off scot-free. You’re lucky he’s dead... If you ever make me witness such a sappy, pointless display of love like that again, I’ll make you pay.” Oh, they were slamming on his berserk buttons now.

Taka slowly strode over to Toko. A turbulent rage was flaring in his heart at their words. It filled his body and mixed with the light burning inside him, staining it deep crimson. How dare they insult Mondo like that... How DARE they! I won’t accept that, EVER! He made himself react obviously because he couldn’t let that slide, couldn’t let such a slight go unpunished. Even though I bring nothing but death in my wake, I MUST defend Mondo! I must defend gay people! I must defend what we had! Even if it was... Even if I fell in love with a killer! He stood within a foot of her and glared at her, hard, without saying a word. “W-what, you g-gonna—“

He scowled at her. If looks could kill, she’d be dead on the floor. Though he was a very expressive person, that particular face was not one he wore lightly or often. She grimaced and shouted, “I was r-right! You do w-wanna kill me!” I don’t care that she thinks that! She’s too vile for me to give her any consideration anymore, ever! He was still empathetic, and he still wanted everyone but him to survive, but his desire for Toko to make it out alive was so she could be immediately tried for her crimes. The truth of who she is just overrode any sense of caring he had for her before the trial.

But he didn’t pay attention to her. Instead, he carefully raised his arm and pointed directly at Byakuya, finger leaving a smudge on his lenses and setting them askew. The man stared at Taka and set his glasses straight. Before he could respond, Taka walked away. Byakuya called out something, but he didn’t care enough to listen.

I won’t forgive a homophobic serial killer and a rich sociopath. They’re my enemies now... The time for me to give them the time of day is long past.

His reason for wanting Byakuya to keep going was much the same – to face the repercussions for his terrible behavior.

He waited outside for the others, tired due to the effort of reacting to Byakuya and Toko. He followed them in.

Kyoko was studying him. While Makoto and the others argued with Byakuya and Toko, she asked him quietly, “They said something about Mondo, didn’t they? And you confronted them?”

Taka looked to the side. “…“

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from you, even now,” she said with a little smile. Her words afforded him a tiny slice of peace in that moment.

But that was blown away: Monokuma appeared and got his shenanigans started. “Whatever you subject us to, we will not break,” Sakura said reassuringly.

Hina chimed in, “Yeah, that’s right! We’re not gonna lose to you ever again!” And I’ll make sure of that by not filling the role he wants me to fill! I won’t let death collect you all!

“Puhuhu... You don't have to get so defensive. Calm down!” Monokuma chided. “I've decided to change things up a bit this time.” He's probably going to come up with another motive. “Up till now, I've been using the WOOSH of the North Wind to get you all moving. But sometimes you gotta use the Sun to light a fire under someone's butt! Ahh-hahaha!” Light a fire...? Is that something that will force us to kill, in his mind...? Will he burn us until we kill each other? “So without further ado, I give you... THIS!” He spread his paws, thumbs skyward, as hundreds of bundles of paper rained down from the ceiling and landed directly in front of him in neatly-piled stacks. “Ten million
dollars! I've prepared this graduation present for whichever lucky student makes it out of here alive! Whaddya think? It's ten million bucks! Ten million smackaroos! It's like totally wowie wow wow, am I right!?"

“…” ... Money? Not even in yen!? Stunned silence pervaded the room.

Byakuya stated it wasn’t enough. *Enough for him to kill over? Or enough to make a difference to someone like him who has endless amounts of money at his disposal?*

“When it comes to motives, money certainly is the gold standard, so to speak. Whether it’s in a mystery novel, or the real world…” Kyoko said evenly. *That money could pay off my family’s debts and change my life, but I’d rather be poor than murder someone!*

Hina said confidently, “B-But... There’s no way we’d kill each other for money!”

“She's right. You can't simply purchase a person's life,” Sakura agreed. *Of course not…* 

Yasuhiro echoed their thoughts. *Maybe there’s more to Hiro than money after all.* 

Makoto said loudly, “Whether it's ten million, or any other amount of money... No, not even just money. From now on, no matter what you do... we won't kill our friends!” *Correct!*

“C’mon, stop trying to act tough.” Monokuma said devilishly. “The most important thing is to live a pure and moral communal life!” He vanished once again. *Our life here is the exact opposite of purity and morality... Our comforts clearly come at the cost of our friends dying! That I didn't recognize that sooner is proof of my failure...!*

“Th-There's nothing to worry about, right? Nobody would kill a friend... for money, right?” Hina said, voice wavering. Doubt was starting to creep into his mind, too. *I hope not, I hope so desperately not, but if the threat of his secret being revealed is what pushed Mondo…*

“Have you so quickly forgotten the lesson from last time?” Byakuya stated snidely. “You can't judge others by your own standard.” *That wretched man… His fists shook. Using what happened to bolster his own highhorse!*

“Y-Yeah, there might be someone here who's having m-money problems!” Toko shouted nervously. *She’s a successful author, she’s not one of them. But maybe she’s not just being paranoid... At her pestering, Celeste implied she didn’t need the money because she’d won over a million dollars from her gambling and Hifumi said he wasn’t hurting financially either.*

“Just stop. Pressing others about their personal finances is... ugly.” Sakura said. *Yes!*

“Don’t worry. Either way, whatever's going to happen will happen without warning. That is the nature of this game,” Byakuya intoned. *I don’t want to think about it, but he’s… …… Right. It pained him very much to find something he actually agreed with the rich man on, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t wrong in literally every other aspect. I was so convinced no one would die when we saw the videos, but Sayaka tried to kill Leon and he killed her instead. Junko died trying to protest the trials. And I was so sure after that that no one would fall for it again, but Monokuma used our biggest secrets as a motive and it primed Mondo to black out and... ... kill Chihiro... I’ve been wrong so many times, and now, five of our classmates are dead. My potential friends are dead. My friend is dead. My best friend... my bro, my... He’s dead…* 

By that point, the bell had sounded and everyone but Taka had departed. *No matter what I say, or what I do, I can’t stop it. I can’t stop this horrible scenario. A real leader, a real friend, would be strong enough to keep it from happening. I’m a sham. I’m a weak sham.*
Before going back to his dorm, he stood rigidly in the door of the Bathhouse and cried silently.

*I don’t deserve to even dream of being a Prime Minister anymore. I have no reason to leave this place anymore, but I also have no reason to stay. But I have reason to die.*

*I can’t stop anyone else from going after each other unless I end it by killing myself. Suicide would end Monokuma’s plans for me, and surely blow off this motive. Even if it didn’t end this evil ‘game’, it would give the others time to find a way out…*

*The only thing left I can do is die.*
Chapter Summary

I'm especially curious to hear what you think with this one!

**Suicide Hotline Directory, Including LGBTQ+ Suicide Lifeline**

TW: the same stuff as the last chapter (suicidal ideation and planning, disordered eating, extreme depression and grieving) as well as hanging.

He got up the next morning feeling the worst he had in the last several days thanks, at least mostly, to Monokuma’s wanton cruelty. He was fearful, and the lack of sleep and food didn’t help. The slow melting of his worldview thanks to the recent events and Celeste and Byakuya actually managing to get under his skin and say things that sounded sensible just made him even more paranoid. Anyone could strike at any time… And the circumstances of this ‘game’ had already proved that the others were more than willing to commit to killing each other even if not directly. *I haven’t forgotten how they all voted… Mondo still died at their hands!* Needless to say, his feelings toward the others were growing increasingly complex and contradictory. He continuously tried to push them aside as he both knew he couldn’t isolate himself from them as he was and he, deep down, didn’t *want* to because they were his only lifeline left.

There was a knock at his door.

Wary and in a bad state, he grabbed the kendo sword he kept by his bed and opened the door a crack. He had no plans to kill, however. *I could never do that to someone*… Even in his very weakened state, defending himself was second nature due to the assassination and kidnapping attempts he’d faced in his youth and he could probably ward off an attack if he struck pre-emptively. *If someone else tries to kill me, it’ll surely release the heat inside… The despair… I’ll just disarm them. I have to do die from myself, away from everyone else. That way, they’re safe from the fallout.* The volcano inside him was set to burst at any moment; he was even more on edge knowing that he was running out of what little time he had to prepare himself for the task.

“Hey, Ta – what are you doing!?” Hina gasped. He startled, realizing it was her, and dropped the sword, holding his hand up in apology. She put her hand on her chest and breathed out deeply, clearly shaken. “REALLY didn’t expect that… Afraid from yesterday, huh?”

“…” He nodded.

“Me too…” She sighed, unsure what to say. “Are you coming to breakfast?”

“…” He shook his head. There’s no point in it… All I’ve done is failed myself and everyone else! I’m not fit to be a leader. Hiro took over anyway… I’m sure he’s more capable than me! Leaving my room would just let someone track me down more easily anyway. And if they get to me, that’s the end of the line for everyone!

“Really? Are you sure? You’re always so gung-ho about going…” He looked down. “It’s been too long. Do you want me to bring you breakfast…?” Again, a shaken head. “I’ll be right back,” she said, sounding deflated. She returned with Kyoko.
“I dunno what to say,” Hina admitted.

Kyoko cut right to the chase. “Kiyotaka, what do you think would happen if you killed yourself?”

“!?"

“This whole time, I could see it in your eyes. But your drive to do it is firmer than ever. You’re not just suicidal, you’re planning it out for the near future.”

“…” _That must be why she spends so much time watching me. Studying me, trying to discern what I’m feeling…_ The thought made him feel like he was put under a microscope. Not surprising from someone who had such an analytical mind. There was nothing he could do about it, and it’s not like he could lie on a *good* day.

“H-he… You could…?” Hina asked, disturbed and taken aback. “Why didn’t you tell us!? That’s super important information, Kyoko!”

“It would’ve just made you feel worse. I was hoping you’d be able to at least get him to eat. I’m not surprised it hasn’t worked, though.” _Then what was the point in trying!? She just made them waste their effort and feel worse! I guess I did, too… But she had the choice to inform them and didn’t take it!_

“Wait… you’re not surprised? Does that mean… You had a plan this whole time!?” she asked incredulously.

“… I wouldn’t put it that way. The only ‘plan’ I had was to step in if things got worse, but if everything else by then didn’t work, I hadn’t reached a conclusion on how to approach this either,” she divulged, frowning.

So even she can’t account for *everything*…?

Hina asked, resignedly, “…What now?”

“Kiyotaka, I know you looked around the third floor, and I’m sure you weren’t able to stay focused on the discovery discussion, but there’s been a change.”

“…”

“The Nurse’s Office has opened up.”

“…” _Why is that important?_

“Monokuma listened to us!?” _Huh??_

“No, I don’t think that’s it. He didn’t allow us to enter it before so we’d be more afraid for our lives. It’s not much, but even a small intervention can make a difference. With it only opening now, we’re forced to confront the fact that we might have been able to save some of the others if we’d had access before.”

“…” _He’s so motivated by our suffering!_

“You probably didn’t hear much of what I asked Monokuma the day of the execution…” She said. He inclined his head, having no idea where she was going with this.

“She checked to see if it had basic medical stuff,” Hina explained.
Kyoko nodded curtly. “Last night, I inventoried the contents of the room. Like Monokuma said it did, it does have equipment for IVs and intubation. Monokuma probably has them prepared in case someone’s comatose or unable to feed themselves.”

“Intubation…?” Hina asked.

“Basically, it’s putting a tube through your nostril into your stomach so liquid food can be delivered.”

“Oh! Ouch…” She cringed.

“…!” He blinked, hard, suddenly aware of what she was about to say next. Don’t!

“I’m sorry, Taka, but we’re going to have to intubate you and feed you that way if you keep refusing to eat.” She was visibly concerned and uncomfortable. "It’s been over a week. Your body is atrophying and it’s not just from the lack of movement.” That was another stomp to his stomach as he was defenseless. 

“…!”

"But I’ve been getting better! Right…? “You’re noticeably skinnier than you were before. You’re literally starving yourself.” No! This will… I don’t deserve it, and it’ll ruin my plan!

“Yeah… Sakura told me like a week ago that you’ll start declining really fast, I think,” Hina said. She winced. “You… Kinda already are.”

Taka shook his head. That’s not possible!

Hina continued. “You’re physically stronger than right after the trial, but you’re losing that fight… I mean, Sakura had to carry you yesterday, and Makoto helped you down the stairs.” She put up her hands. “Which wouldn’t be bad… If it weren’t cuz you’re running on an empty tank!”

“I don’t want to do this to you,” Kyoko said, voice a tad blue. “I want you to be able to make your own choices, and I know doing this would be robbing you of that…” She cleared her throat. "But I realized the other day, you *already* feel like you don’t have a choice but to die, don’t you? Like it’s your last option?”

“Kh…!” That question struck him like a shot to the head. He was shaking.

“You feel so guilty and responsible for everything, that you think it’s all your *fault*… And that if you die, it’ll stop bad things from happening. Right?” Hina looked at her in shock at the revelation.

“H…” He rasped, an ancient tree swaying in a harsh gust. “H-how!?” he creaked. How did she figure all of that out! What did I do!? Was I too obvious…? He had to know. He had to understand…

Hina gasped, shocked gaze now on him. “He spoke!” It wasn’t intentional at all.

Kyoko sighed. “Even if it weren’t plain to read on your face and body language - you look like someone just biding time to die… I would’ve figured it out based on our past conversations. And you’re not the only one who takes perceived failure hard…”

“…”

“I remembered recently, too – I’ve worked with suicidal people.” Taka raised his eyebrows. What does she mean? Work with? Remembered recently…? “I’ve seen what grief does to people as well. Though everyone has their own feelings, you’re not the only person to have ever felt like this.”

“…”
“Whether you deserve it or not isn’t what matters, because you *will* eat. We can worry about the rest after. Now then… Like I said, I don’t *want* to do this but I must. Will you eat of your own choice? Or will we have to make you…?” Her mouth was a firm line, set in absolute determination.

He bowed his head. Even if he weren’t in such a fragile, vulnerable state, he knew Sakura and Hina were more than capable of getting him to comply. He suspected Kyoko was as well.

But even though she’d guessed that much, she didn’t know the enormity of it. *She can’t possibly…* Her sleuthing out some of the wider picture just heaped on even more guilt and fear to the mountain grinding him to atoms. He started wringing his hands and looking around, desperate for something to save him from this conversation, this ultimatum. *I have to stall… Maybe I can change their m—*

He was cut off by a familiar voice.

“Bro…”

“W-wh-what!?” He shouted at max volume, voice splintering. The affectionate word ran him through, a hot spear through butter. He went even more rigid, rooted to the spot. He didn’t even realize tears were pouring out of his eyes now.

A vague apparition of Mondo appeared to his right and he jerked his head to face it, the fastest he’d moved since before the execution. “Come on, dude.”

**M-Mondo!? How are you-- I don’t—**

He grimaced, responding to Taka’s thoughts as if he’d stated them vocally. “You can’t live to fight another day if you kill yourself.” Kyoko was explaining something to Hina, who was looking over where Taka was staring, though he couldn’t hear it. “Just eat already!”

*I don’t deserve it!*

“No, Taka. ‘S not like that.” He took shimmering steps toward him and embraced Taka with a ghostly hug. It felt strange, contradictory, oxymoronic; it was both tangible and not, both warm and not. Both comforting and not. From his shoulder, Mondo continued: “Unlike what that douchebag Byakuya prolly thinks, it ain’t a treat or privilege, it’s a need and a right everyone has. I mean, your body’s breakin’ itself down to get nutrients and shit… Ya know that, right?” Taka was so rooted to the spot he couldn’t even lift his arms to return the gesture.

*Of course I do! But if I eat, I’ll get stronger, and if I get stronger, then I’ll…*

“You’ll what?” He pulled away from the embrace to face him, hands on the moral compass’ shoulders. "Aren't you trying to get stronger anyhow...?"

*I… Well, I'm going to kill myself!*

Mondo made a hard face that was somewhere between sympathy, anger, and sadness. “Weren’t you gonna do that anyway…? I mean… What does food haveta do with it?"  

*What!?*

“Don’t get me wrong.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked pained. “Don’t kill yourself, obviously… But I mean, I know your plan, and I don’t see how starvin’ yourself fits into it aside from thinkin’ you don’t deserve it.”

*… How do you even know--*
But he cut Taka off. “It’s not like you wanna die by starvation.”

He’d already figured out exactly what he intended to do by that point. No, I’m going to han—

“Yeah. I know that.”

W-why are you being so flippant!?

“He just ain’t responding to concern, or demand, or promise. I’m showin’ ya how ridiculous this is.”

“Cuz you just ain’t responding to concern, or demand, or promise. I’m showin’ ya how ridiculous this is.”

“Aren’t you upset? Angry…!? I thought you would be!! Maybe I didn’t understand you as much as I thought—

“Oh no, you got it - I’m fuckin’ *pissed*.” He grimaced. “And I wanna… Well, trust me, I *wanna* be shoutin’ and shit, but you showed me yourself that ain’t always good.”

Is that supposed to make me feel better!?

“If I could do that, I’d do it in a heartbeat. No doubt about it.” He smiled sadly. “But no, it’s s’posed to make you think twice. Point out how stupid and illogical it is. Is it workin’?”

... About the food issue, anyway. He admitted to Mondo. And himself. If I really have been backsliding without knowing, then I’m sabotaging my pursuit of my important goal!

“Good! Tell ‘em that!” Mondo gave a sad and wry smile, his unspoken acknowledgement that the other man’s "goal" was suicide.

But… That wasn’t what was important to him now. Mondo was here, he got to see him again. He couldn’t bear the thought of parting once more… Will you stay here? I don’t want to say goodbye again… I can’t!! I couldn’t even do it the first time!

“I’m always with you, Taka.” He ruffled Taka’s hair. The pleasure he’d usually get from this affectionate gesture was distorted in ominousness. “Even if it ain’t like this.”

Will you come if I need you…? Though he wasn’t conversing with Mondo with his voice, even to him his internal monologue sounded timid and feeble. A naïve child asking the dead body of the only not-related person he could rely on, was truly connected with, if he could stay just a little longer, come back again later.

“I’m not an on-demand service!”

But *will* you?

“… No. Can’t.” Mondo sighed with slackening shoulders; the picture of regret.

Why? Why are you even here now!? Are you just here to tantalize me!?

“‘Course not, Bro. Let’s just say ya lucked out this time. Just cuz I’m dead doesn’t mean I wouldn’t make sure you keep goin’.”

That doesn’t make any sense!

“You’ll get it someday.”

This isn’t fair… You, you can’t just come here like it’s no big deal and leave like I’m not *already*
in ruins! …How dare you do this to me! How dare you do *any* of this!

“I know,” Mondo conceded.

*You know this is just hurting me worse…*

“Yeah,” he looked down at his feet, guilty in absolution.

*So WHY!? Why put me through even more pain!? Haven’t you done enough!?*

“It ain’t like that… I swear on my life!”

*You’re DEAD, Mondo!*

“Then my afterlife!” He shrugged. “Or the life I had when I was alive! Whatever, that’s not what matters… I’m doing this outta love! I couldn’t just… I couldn’t just sit by knowing you were tryin’ to starve yourself…”

*Oh, but it’s fine that I’m suicidal!?*

Mondo bit his lip and ran his fingers through his pompadour. “Course it’s not. But none of this can just be solved with a talk like this… I mean, I’d know. I wanted to kill myself for four god damn years… And you aren’t new to the feelin’, either.”

*It took me *years* to learn to live with it…*

“Exactly.”

*But you told me to keep fighting… Don’t you understand all the fighting I’ve ever done has hurt people!? Just existing as a tear in the world gets people killed! It got Chihiro killed! YOU died because of ME!*

“Look, I get it, okay? I know how feelin’ that way is… But you gotta let me own up. I didn’t fight much durin’ the trial because I needed to take responsibility for what I did. What *I* did.”

*But if I had stopped you –*

“I was freaked out and left while you were sleepin’. You had no idea how bad it was.”

*I should have! Our conversation was proof!*

“Sure, but I didn’t let you see how bad it really had me fucked up. And hell, I planned on stayin’ the night with you and facing it in the morning when we went to bed. I just made a quick decision to try to blow off some steam, cuz I got caught up in my head and I couldn’t fall asleep.”

*If you’d *stayed* with me—*

“I might not’ve done what I did, yeah. But the motive had its fingers so deep in my brain… I could’ve snapped any time. Strong and weak are already…” He scoffed, upset at himself, obviously not thrilled about acknowledging his own truth. “I guess you could call ‘em trigger words…”

*Then why didn’t you black out and attack me when I asked you about them before!?*

“Because you were teaching me how to handle it better. Tryin’ to cope with it. When I left that night, it was because I was feelin’ a way and I had to isolate myself to contain it. I felt it comin’. I was hitting the tipping point. The motive already had me falling down the cliffside – Chihiro accidentally
hitting those buttons just sped up landin’ on the rocks.”

*If you would’ve been like that to me, I would’ve handled it! I can defend myself!*

“You woulda been lucky to wake up in time if I was havin’ a flashback or blackout,” he said grimly.  

*But I know how to-* Mondo just looked at him incredulously. It stabbed his denial. *I… I suppose that’s probably true…*

“I knew I was a killer cuz of Daiya, but I didn’t even think about what mighta’ happened until after I… Did what I did, but if I would’ve did that to you, I woulda offed myself as soon as I came to.”

*Why are you telling me this!?*

“The only reason I didn’t in the Locker Room was cuz I needed to keep my promise to Chihiro. And I…”

*What?*

“It’s selfish, but… I couldn’t just die without seein’ you first. I had to make sure you understood…”

*I’ll never understand!* Even knowing the psychology behind it didn’t let him truly get how what happened, did.

“No, I mean… I couldn’t just leave you there, standin’ over my cold corpse with no idea what happened, or how much I care about you.”

*So it *is* because of me…!*

“God damnit! Come on!” Mondo yelled, frustration lanceng through. “That’s not what I’m sayin’ at all! You made me want to fucking LIVE, god damnit!”

*What!?* The concept of that was totally unheard of to Taka. He spent so much time wanting to help others and be inspirational and seemingly failing that for someone to actually tell him he had been was so… *alien.* His mind’s first instinct was to reject it like a transplanted lung, especially given the context in which Mondo was confessing it.

“Remember the conversation about what I wanna do as a career? You helped me see myself that I could still *want* and go after shit, even after what happened with Daiya.”

*That’s what I was trying to do… But that means that I gave you hope, hope that kept you going and resulted in—*

“None of that had anything to do with Chihiro… That was motherfucking Monokuma,” He quietly reminded Taka. “I even thought about killin’ myself right when I woke back up and s-saw him… but like I said… I needed to keep my promise to him. And I knew I was gonna die in the trial, so this was the last chance I’d ever have to tell you how I felt, to see you one last time… So I stuck it out. For you, sure… But also for him. And it’s kinda weird, but I guess for me, too.” He hugged Taka again. “If we never had what we did… Monokuma still woulda got me. That fucker was a spider and I was caught in his shitty web.”

*Why is this even happening!? You said you didn’t think I’d listen if you argued about me being suicidal…*

“Well yeah, but you’re stubborn and kept goin’! You bein’ suicidal is just a fact. But the other fact’s
that you need to accept what I did. Blamin’ yourself for it to the point where you’re trying to kill yourself cuz of it… It’s another face of denial.”

*How can I accept that you killed Chihiro!?*

“Fuck, I dunno. Like I said at the end of the trial… Hate me if you need to. Let yourself feel whatever you need to. Just don’t take it out on yourself…”

*Why *NOT*!?!*

“Dude, you’re the one who was tellin’ me off about crucifyin’ myself unfairly. That’s exactly what you’re doin’, and it’s probably why ya recognized I was in the first place! You told me I don’t deserve that… You don’t either, Bro!”

*O-oh…*

“Yep. So don’t try to join me just cuz you think it’s your fault I killed Chihiro. Capiche?”

That’s not the only reason! Besides, this won’t be gone in a day like that!

“No shit. Just try to keep it in mind. Remember what I told ya. Bein’ with you made me so happy… I ruined it, ‘course, but I know it made you happy, too. That’s the only thing you caused, here – me to be loved and supported by a great person…” He sighed wistfully. “You had nothin’ to do with what happened.”

*I can’t accept that… But you’re right. Being with you was the happiest I’ve ever been…* Mondo’s body was starting to fade and lose saturation. *And this is goodbye again, isn’t it?*

“Don’t worry about it.” He put his hand over Taka’s heart.

*This will never stop hurting!*

“Maybe not, but you can start to carry it. That’s what we gotta do.” Taka put his hand over Mondo’s – or rather, he would have, but it just sank right through as the biker was becoming less and less tangible.

*Why won’t I see you again?*

“Time’s running out, here.” Taka opted to hover his hand right above Mondo’s so they appeared to be touching.

*How can you be running out of time if you’re dead?*

“I wish I could explain, but I gotta go. Sorry, Bro… For all of it.”

Okay… *I can’t handle anything, and I can’t forgive you… But thank you for everything, Mondo.*

“You bet. Take care of yourself, Taka. Love ya.”

*I love you too…*

Mondo vanished into thin air.

Taka stood there clutching his chest and sobbing loudly.

“Hey…” Hina said, breaking the silence. She walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder.
“…”

“Well?” Kyoko asked bluntly.

“…” He looked at her with eyes full of suffocating pain. She frowned.

“We can’t afford to wait any longer.”

Hina asked, clearly hating making him do this, “Will you come eat with us?”

“…” After a long moment, he nodded. He was beginning to split apart at the seams. *A few meals and I'll be good to go...*
Kyoko returned to lead the breakfast meeting while Hina and Makoto made food for Taka.

“So you’re actually going to eat, right?” Makoto asked Taka as he sat down across from the moral compass, the latter’s eyes looking glazed with more unshed tears.

He nodded. He tried to lift his arms to set them on the table but found it quite difficult. Even standing was out of the question right now - his mental shape was so poor that Sakura had to carry him to the dining hall. *I’d probably hit the ground…*

“We can feed it to you. Like a baby!” Taka made a face. …

*I’m a young adult! “N-not that you’re a baby or anything…”*

“Can you chew and swallow?” The lucky boy asked. Taka mimed doing so and seemed able.

“Alright. So, we made your usual pickled rice and vegetables. Hopefully we made it right,” he laughed a little self-consciously. “Sakura’s also having us give you some protein-rich food, with all of it being in small portions so your stomach can handle it.”

“Yes!” Hina sang, walking through his doorway with a tray of food. “No donuts today, though I’ll bring you some in a couple days. Think of it like an incentive to eat! Like a gold star the teacher would give you in kindergarten!”

The hard frown Taka had been wearing since the trial softened a little. *I used to get so many stickers and gold stars for being a good student!! Everyone used to call me a suck-up, saying I was just following rules to a T to get them, but really, I just liked being a good kid… Having something to*
prove that I was definitely nice though, since we had so few possessions and I could just think of them when Grandfather was hurting me for doing something wrong... I miss our home. I miss *Dad*... So much has happened, but I still wish I could see him again...! I hope he’s safe!!! Maybe I can ask one of the others to look for him when they all get out of here. I don’t want to put that burden on them, too, but I can’t do what I must without knowing someone will find him!

They fed the food to him slowly; Makoto was even kinder than normal. Though he felt guilty, like he was indulging in something selfish, having food in his stomach did feel nice.

At one point early on, he swallowed a little solid food and choked, not quite used to the amount of chewing food required. Hina gave him the Heimlich and a piece of broccoli flew out of his mouth and hit Makoto in the face. Taka was embarrassed and apologetic, Hina was laughing her ass off and made jokes at Makoto’s expense about his luck, and Makoto wasn’t *too* grossed out.

But, as expected, Mondo’s ‘talk’ with him didn’t make him do a 180. He was still grieving, depressed, delusional, and suicidal. And now he was struggling to comprehend that entire conversation. In his altered state, the fact that he talked to an apparition of his dead lover didn’t really strike him as odd. A maniacal teddy bear is a much stranger occurrence, for sure!!

Later, Sakura came by to exercise with him. She had some free weights with her. “Do you want to talk?” He stared at the floor, not able to make eye contact with her.

I can’t, I don’t want to, and I don’t even know where to start…

“I understand. Let’s focus on working out, then.”

Having recovered some of his strength from earlier, he was able to do the movements on his own now. But it still felt nice to be doing them with her. She had him hold onto the weights when doing stretches, working on his stamina and resistance. As she went to leave, she lingered by his door, “If you need anything at all… Please don’t hesitate to tell me, Taka.” He didn’t respond. “Do you understand…?” He nodded. She frowned and walked away.

That’s how the next several days played out: Hina and Makoto would bring his food, Sakura would exercise a few times daily with him, and Kyoko would see if he needed anything at bedtime. He found himself feeling worse and worse, emotionally, and his massive sleep debt had long since caught up with him. He was physically functioning more now, but his mental state was somehow spiraling further downward. As depriving himself of food was only a symptom of his problems, he was still in the trenches.

And Mondo’s ghost had been right, too, that he wasn’t ready to accept most of what he had to say. Taka just couldn’t fathom some of Mondo’s rebuttals to his thought process – even the ones that he stated directly. There were so many things I should’ve said to both of them… I wish I could apologize to Chihiro… And him, too. If I were there, I could’ve snapped him out of it… I could’ve shielded Chihiro and taken the blow for him and saved his life… He was finally moving to become who he really wanted to be, and he ended up murdered because of it...

Monokuma clearly knew exactly which buttons to press to create a tragedy...And that whole time, Mondo was simmering just below the surface, and it could’ve been anything that set him off and made him snap. What if it was Makoto? Hina? What if it was *me*…? Any one of us would’ve had a better chance of living than Chihiro, but... When did he start being so close to the edge? Has he been that close to snapping the entire time we’ve been stuck here? Those times when he was upset, was he trying to keep from killing me…?

Even if he couldn’t understand what had happened, he had no choice but to acknowledge it; however, that didn’t keep his deeply pained mind from targeting himself for all his feelings. I loved... No, love... I love a killer. Mondo killed Chihiro. I thought he was a good man, but I was wrong... A good man doesn’t kill a friend. What does that say about me, about my values? My morals? I’m the...
Ultimate Moral Compass, and I love someone who killed our friend in cold blood... It hurts so much, but I can’t let go of that feeling... The way he held me, the way he kissed me, the way he looked at me... Even after he died! That proves that I’m unworthy of that title, that I’m unworthy of all of it! My judgment is so poor that I got involved with someone who killed two people who were important to him! I’m compromised! I’m infected! I’m diseased... I’m weak. Weak weak weak weak... And I always will be.

He still intended to die to save the others.

He cried constantly for those two days.

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On the next day, he decided to try to ease his mind by tidying up the School Store. This way, I can test to see how much moving around I’m prepared to do... He was moving boxes when Celeste walked in. He immediately wanted to flee, but she was blocking the doorway with her giant hair drills.

“You are taking this awfully hard, you know.” She observed calmly. “You wound yourself so tight and now you’re there, snapped in half and billowing in the breeze...”

“...” Is this how she wanted me to adapt?... I can’t even tell anyone off for breaking rules anymore!

“The breakfast meetings have been strange without you there to keep us anchored. Hiro’s doing an awful job... As annoying as you are, he’s worse by far.” Taka clenched his fist. That’s not a compliment... That’s just mean!

She stood there for a while, watching him empty boxes. When he reluctantly walked out in front of the counter, she came and took several of the boxes from him.

“...?”

“I'm doing you a favor,” she chuckled. He narrowed his eyes at her. What does she want? “No, you don’t owe me anything... After what you’ve experienced, I think you’ll be able to adapt to our situation now. Seeing you in pain like this is... difficult. You just need to go back to being a leader, but you can’t because you’re so deeply hurt,” she said while she turned and set the boxes on the table he’d been using to sort. She walked up take more. When she was close, she whispered, “Ease your pain. You can see Chihiro. Talk to Makoto,” her hair obscuring the fact that she said anything to him from the security camera.

“...!” He startled. She moved away, turning to set the boxes. “You know,” she said at normal volume, “I think you understand why we all have to adapt to this place. It’s time to stop suffering. I expect to see you tomorrow at breakfast,” she said. She bowed and exited the room, leaving Taka to himself again.

I can... See Chihiro? Can I talk to him...? He’s not dead...? A strange hopeful feeling filtered through his body, fogging the shining despair.

He abandoned his project and rushed to Makoto’s dorm, weirdly elated and terrified of the conversation he was about to have. He was completely involved in the thought of getting to talk to his dead friend and the questions he *needed* to ask. He rang the doorbell. Makoto quickly opened the door. “...”

“T-Taka!” He let him inside.

“... ... Is it true? Can I really... see Chihiro?” He labored greatly to say the words, nearly his first in over a week and a half. The same feeling he had when Monokuma first mentioned the fake time
machine was igniting the remains of his fragmented heart.

“Huh?” He looked startled, and then nervous. “You mean Alter Ego?”

“He's... still alive?” He asked, voice in broken wonder.

“N-No... not quite…”

He didn’t comprehend. “Let me see... I want to... talk to him...” With what apparition of Mondo had said about only being able to talk to Taka for that limited amount of time, he doubted Chihiro was a ghost because he was clearly easily accessible... *Which means he has to be alive!*

“T-Taka...”

“…” Makoto looked like he was unsure and struggling with something. “… Take me…” Taka pled. I need... I need to see him again... I need to know how he feels...

“Okay, why don't we get going...?” Makoto left his room reluctantly, Taka slowly following. His heart was pounding in his chest, fast like gasoline on a raging fire. *It's so loud, I wonder if he can hear it.* Kyoko was standing in the hallway, watching them like a hawk.

“Where are you going?”

“Huh?” Makoto said in surprise. Taka stared at her absently.

“It's probably best if you don't drag him around with you too much, given his current condition.” She made eye contact with Taka, her expression particularly mysterious. *I wonder if she can see the hope I'm feeling…*

“Y-Yeah, I know that... But I was getting kinda hungry. He probably is too. I thought we could head to the Dining Hall or Warehouse or something...”

“Well then, I guess that's okay,” she said. As she turned to leave she made eye contact again with Taka.

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Taka wasn’t even sure where they were headed, but shortly afterward they unfortunately encountered Genocide Jack. “Hmmm? What are you two up to? Ahhhhh~! Don't tell me you're gonna--you're gonna--!? Having lost his new ‘brother’, Taka is ripe for the taking. So Makoto swoops in to steal him away...! Am I on fire...? Kyeeehahahaha!”

*What…* He looked to Makoto, who had a very disturbed expression, for an explanation but didn’t get one. *Knowing her... It was probably something sexual... Ugh, her attitude to queerness is such a gross flipside to her usual! Wait... is she implying Makoto wants to take advantage of my current state!?* He sneered in spite of his reduced affect.

Repulsive... Besides, Makoto’s not that kind of person... W-well... I’m a terrible judge of character, considering Mondo... But if Makoto were going to... His stomach clenched and churned violently. *If he were going to hurt me like that, he already would have – he’s had plenty of chances since the execution!* He put his hand on his stomach, feeling nauseous. She continued with her babbling: “But that doesn't matter right now! Have you seen Byakuya!??”

“…” I wish she’d just... go away forever! Get out of our way, I have to talk to Chihiro again!!
"Huh?" Makoto said. "N-No, I haven't..."

"Ahh, good heavens! My love is being pushed to the limit! Kyeehahaha!" She ran off cooing about the bespectacled man. I thought she hated him for revealing her? She clearly doesn't care about how her words and actions impact everyone else! Whatever!!

They resumed their journey after a pit stop to the bathroom – Taka had to throw up due to Jack’s insinuations - but he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw their destination was the Bathhouse. Makoto looked back when he saw he wasn’t following him in. He reached back and gently took hold of Taka’s arm and pulled him along into the room, finding no resistance at all. “...” I’m scared of what I’ll find... He was starting to hyperventilate. And sweat. What will he have to say? And this is where Mondo and I finally broke through to one another... Why does it have to be here?

“Okay, so... there’s a laptop inside the locker, understand? And on the laptop there's a program called Alter Ego.” Taka directed his stare to the slightly-open locker. There was a computer inside, but he thought nothing of it.

“How do I... talk to him?” he asked weakly.

“O-Oh, um... Well, you just tell me what you want to say, and I'll type it in for you.” He must be in another room... Maybe Monokuma’s keeping him there!

“...” Taka licked his dry lips and forced himself with every fiber of his being to form the words, questions he’d been obsessing over since the trial: “Do you... hate Mondo?” His voice was quiet, weak, shaky, scattering to the wilds. “And since I couldn't stop him... do you hate me?” He stood with his fists clenched, arms at his sides, rigid and towering as the tree of forbidden knowledge. He was simultaneously dissociating and achingly present. Makoto was looking at him, obviously concerned. “… Please.” If I have to, I’ll get down on my knees and beg...

“O-Okay...” He typed the questions quickly. Taka saw that he transcribed them word for word. After a moment, a headshot of Chihiro popped up on the green screen. Taka blinked in surprise, unable to react otherwise.

The computer said, “...Do you hold yourself responsible...?” Of course I do... “If Master could talk now, I think this is what he would say... Please, live your life for the both of us. It's impossible for me now, but you can still survive and escape — all of you.”

“...” That sounds like him... There’s no way it's not really Chihiro! The words were sad and reassuring, and yet they were nothing but a sprinkler trying to fight the worldwide forest fire raging within him. But that’s not what I meant... Before I die, I have to *know*...

“Hey, Taka—” Makoto started, but quickly shut up when Alter Ego continued to respond.

“The one asking those questions is... Taka, right? Analyzing all available data, that's the only conclusion I can come to.” H-How!? “Master told me how close Taka and Mondo had become. So that must be why he feels responsible...” Ahhhh... What does he mean by 'Master'?

The screen went dark, and suddenly, the computer asked with a totally different voice: “You're not letting yourself get crushed under the weight of that responsibility, are you!”

“Gh—!” It was Mondo’s timbre. And now an image of Mondo’s head, too. The static in his mind twisted and turned, the chaotic bright mixture of unyielding despair and tenuous hope rushing through his veins. Taka petrified; he couldn’t even blink.

“A man's only worth as much as the load he can carry! You get it, right Bro? Hell, what am I
saying? Of course ya do!"

“…” W… Wh… He was so stunned it didn’t even occur to him how strange it was that Chihiro had somehow summoned Mondo, even after he’d been told the latter was on borrowed time. He felt feverish. _How did he… That’s him! There’s no doubt, that’s Mondo!_

“Th-That’s…” Makoto started.

Alter Ego switched back to Chihiro. “I’m sorry if I startled you... That was my attempt at a simulation, using the data about Mondo that Master had given me. I figured if Taka was depressed, that’s the kind of thing Mondo would have said to him…”

As Mondo again, he said: “So you're just gonna stand there, huh? Just wait for things to get better? Just take your time and get all depressed... Take the time to indulge your regrets... You might even start walking again without realizing it. Sure, that kind of mediocre thinking might work for some people.” _He’s… He’s telling me to face it head on! Even more than a few days ago! Now that I’m eating…_

As Chihiro again, he said: “...What if I said it with that kind of condescending tone!?”

“...Hehe... Hahaha...” Taka giggled disconcertingly. _I must… Keep going… I must… understand… Push! Push forward!_ The aching brightness that had scared him into not moving for days was unfolding itself, cramming in between his neurons, bleeding through his body, plowing his atoms apart. White fire gushed through his veins. He was expanding at the speed of the Universe.

He was far too weak to have contained it forever in the first place.

“Taka…?”

“...It's starting to sink in...” His fists were clenched, rivulets of blood dripping onto the floor. He was losing his grip on himself, his mind distorting and swirling and inverting and pulling. The pulsing light was filling him, shining in the void and consuming it; a quasar run amok. “The way a bucketful of water sinks into a bone-dry sponge…” _It’s time! This is it!!! I feel—I’m dying, right here!_

“Huh…?”

“Those words... Deep within my heart...! They're inside of me!” He yelled, voice breaking. _I must… MOVE! I MUST CARRY IT! I MUST CARRY HIM INSIDE ME! THAT IS HOW I MUST PROVE... I MUST BECOME!_ It was forcing its way out through his skin. It was pain. Rapture. _THIS IS HOW I MUST DIE!_

He ceased trying to exist and rode the wave. Who he was had obliterated. Imploded. He was no more: Kiyotaka had finally fulfilled his death wish. He let out a primal, throat-rending scream, “Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

“T-Taka!?”

After a few seconds, he responded with a voice an octave deeper and a demeanor inverted, “Who the fudge is Taka!?” His previous headspace had been detonated and discarded. _The new me… I’m someone else entirely! Taka is long, long gone!_

_Out with the old, in with the new!!_

“Y-Your eyes...”
“Hey, don't worry about it! Guess I caused kind of a scene, huh? Shoot, man...”

“And your voice...”

“I'm... a new me... Hraaah!” He hadn’t felt this full of energy in years. Decades. Millennia. It was lodged deep within his chest and propelling him forward. He clenched and unclenched his fists rapidly, his fingers banging into his palms and splattering blood on the lockers. “I'm totally stuffed with fighting spirit now! Ya dumbbutt!” I’m not just new, I’m *re*newed! His legs started vibrating as he stood there in place. I need to *do*! I... Need... To go!

“O-Okay, Taka... Just calm down.”

“I AM calm! And don't call me Taka! That's... that's not my name anymore...” Taka was weak, and he’s gone because of it! I don’t want to be HIM! I want to be... “I'm... me! I! Am! Meeeeeee!” Taka let out a bone-chilling howl and sprinted out of the room, right past Kyoko who was staring at him.

He made a beeline for the Boys’ Locker Room, where he energetically worked out by himself, a radical change from needing Sakura’s help to even do stretches. When he was done after just a few minutes, he burst into the Pool room and swam crazed laps. Hina sat on the bleachers and watched him, constantly asking if he was okay. He didn’t even stop to take breaks in between. Soon, she rushed down into the pool and forcefully grabbed him, dragging him out. “Hey! What the fudge do you think you’re doing!?” He thrashed against her.

“Cut it out! You’re pushing yourself too hard! Sakura told me that catatonic people have to be careful to not suddenly do too much, because going from inactivity to whatever the heck this is can kill them!”

“Catatonic? Who’s that!?”

“It’s you, you idiot! You’re not in a good state since Mondo—“

“Mondo!? He’s inside me, now! I’ve taken in his soul! We’re one!” That feeling... That writhing... It was him all along! It wasn’t a plague, it was my Bro trying to come through!! It wasn’t death, it was LIFE! He was just waiting for me to understand! He lives in me, now – he said so himself! “No need to worry about me, I’m doing FAAAAANTASTIC! Now, get outta my sight before I turn you into lunchmeat! Wait... you're a girl!” He grabbed his head. Mondo’s screaming! “So I can't do that, but I *will* pour milk in your sneakers!” He wormed out of her protective grip and slid back into the Locker Room, where he toweled off so quickly his skin turned pink. He bolted to the Warehouse and started to organize things...

… Until his boundless impulse to *move* got the better of him, after which he started throwing things around the room. Everything’s gotta be chaotic! Disorganized! It feels so GOOOOOD! He undid all of the hard work he’d put into the room, putting it back into a state of chaos and disarray. Some things were still in the same places, just knocked over. He decided on impulse that he wanted to bleach his hair like Mondo’s, so he put his arm on the appropriate shelf and used it to sweep several boxes and bottles with pictures of blondeish hair onto them into large bowls without really looking. He also grabbed plastic gloves – I gotta be sanitary!! – as well as brushes and some cheap cutlery to mix it all together. After the Warehouse was sufficiently trashed (though nothing was broken), he ran off-kilter laps in the gym for a good fifteen minutes. Sakura arrived just as he was leaving; she was bewildered and questioning but he just breezed past her.

His body probably ached but he was high off adrenaline and not giving a shit.

It was the evening by the time he finally went back to his room with supper fresh in his stomach. No
one else was there when he ate, since it was past his usual time. He sat on his bed, vibrating and itchy. He didn’t sleep at all that night; in his manic state he could barely comprehend the directions, so he mixed together all the boxes of the strongest bleach with the bottles and applied them to his short, thick, black hair like the little pictures showed. He even did his eyebrows because he thought it’d look cool. *Bro is all about COOL! And so am I!*

He pretended the sensation of himself massaging the mixture into his scalp was coming from Mondo’s hands. It gave him a strange sense of peace. He covered it all with a shower cap he got from his bathroom. As the bleach worked, his head felt like it was going to melt, but he really didn't care if it meant it would make him look like Mondo. *Melted heads are COOL!* In his disorganized state he was keeping even less track of the time than he was when he was on the other end of catatonia, so he had no idea how long he left it in his hair, though he probably wiped it off of his eyebrows after about 10 minutes.

He never once bothered to look in the mirror to see what color his actually was now, not even after rinsing out the concoction.

The next day, he went to the breakfast meeting, not caring to look in a mirror then either. *I'm better than Taka! He wasn’t a leader, but I *am*! And this is the look of a REAL leader!* He was the first one there. Hiro showed up next.

“Whoa! Hey, Taka! Nice to see ya – hey, you look different!”

“What about it!?” *I bet he’s jealous of how COOL Mondo and I are!*

“Did you get so sick all your hair changed colors…?”

“Yeah, does the carpet match the drapes!? Kyeeehahaha!” Jack called out from the kitchen.

“What the—“ Hiro started.

“Maybe it’s not just your eyes that are on fire!” She hollered.

*She can EAT that comment!* “I’m gonna take that huge tongue of yours and wax you with it if you don’t shut the fudge up!” He yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth to make it even louder.

“Ohohoho, he’s a spicy boy *now!*” Jack walked out with a tray of food. “Pity this little convo has to end here, I’ve got plenty of words on the ol’ brain to write down. Plenty of Byakuyas to… Well! Taste ya later!” she giggled as she twisted out of the room.

“Man, she’s such a creep… And I thought *Toko* was bad…”

*Sellin’ it way short there, buster!* “She ain’t a creep, she’s a SERIAL KILLER! A SERIAL KILLER who RUNS IN THE HALLS!”

“Well yeah, but, hey, wait, is that second one really important?”

*Obviously!* “All rules are vital!”

“Uh, it’s not like we can do anything about it, right?”

“Justice *must* find her, one way or another!” *It must find ALL killers!*

“Are y—“

“Now then,” He cut Hiro off, totally unwilling to hear what he (or anyone else, really) had to say,
“Where is everyone!?”

“It’s not even 7:30, dude. Snowman… Just wait a few minutes.”

He grumbled and did as instructed, impatiently tapping his foot the whole time. Everyone gathered aside from the two usual absentees. “You held me way up!”

"Why did you dye your hair?” Kyoko asked.

Sakura stated, "It's the same shade of white mine is, but for me it's natural..."

"What!? White!?” *Mondo’s hair isn’t WHITE!*

"Yeah, man," Hiro said. "Why, that's not what you meant to do?”

He ran to the kitchen and grabbed a large pan, looking at his reflection in its shiny underside. Sure enough, his hair and eyebrows were snow white. He ran back out of there in a panic, still holding the pan. "It was supposed to be orangeish brownish blonde like Bro’s!"

"You overshot that pretty far," Kyoko said. "Let me guess... You grabbed a bunch of boxes, mixed all their contents together, and went hogwild?” He nodded speedily. "That's dangerous. You're lucky you're not more hurt.” He ran his fingers through his hair. It felt kind of weird, but fine. Or maybe the wave of dopamine he’d been riding just obscured any pain. “And that you’re not bald.”

“Hey! Some people look great bald!” Hiro proclaimed happily. “I rocked the shaved look for a while, before I flunked the first time! My head’s a perfect sphere, just like a crystal ball! I even used it like one!”

“Can you imagine how weird Mister Ishimaru’d look bald with THOSE eyebrows…?” Hifumi asked. Celeste tittered.

"Anyway... I’m resuming my duties as leader!” He shrugged off his dustup with bleach. *More importantly…!*

“Aww, really?” Hiro complained. “Darn it… I was starting to enjoy actually doing something…”

“You can be my subordinate!”

“Why not co-leader?” Makoto suggested.

“Fudge that!” No way am I gonna share my role with someone like any of *them*!

“What made you want to step up to the plate now?” Hifumi asked.

“I turned over a new leaf, thanks to Bro!”

“Whaaaat!?” *None of you’d ever get it!*

“Speaking of Bro… There’s something I need to tell all of ya!”

Celeste asked, morbidly curious, “What might that be?”

He smiled and spread his hands, eyes shut. “I’ll never forgive any of you for voting for him!” He pointed angrily at Makoto and Kyoko in turn. “And definitely not either of you for twisting his words against him to make him incriminate himself!”
Several of the others gasped, all bewildered. Hifumi started, “But we had n—“

“Shut up! I voted for myself! My former self! It was his fault, really! I chose that, knowing I’d die if everyone picked me!”

“If we voted for you, not the killer, then we all would’ve been—“

“WROOOOOONG! Wrong wrong wrong! Taka was the leader, and therefore, he was responsible! It’s his fault that what happened, did! Get it through your thick little heads!”

“Why are you referring to yourself in third-person?” Celeste deadpanned.

“He’s been saying he’s different, now,” Makoto explained.

“Taka died with Bro! And in their death… I was born! Bro’s with me, now! Right here!” He thumped his chest over his heart. “Just like he said!”

“What are you even talking about?!” Hina said.

“It’s probably to do with yesterday,” Kyoko replied to her.

“And who are you, exactly?” Celeste tittered.

“Me! That’s all! Now, Hiro, as my underling – get ‘em on track for whatever it is you were gonna do! Keep ‘em in line like a dog herding sheep!”

“Hey! You come here, take over, and then leave?” Hiro asked incredulously. “Man, what are you *doing*? Did the extra bleach rot your brain!?”

“Getting out of here – no way am I gonna have idle chitchat with a bunch of killers!” He powerwalked out of the room, leaving everyone speechless.

He spent the day looking more closely at all the new areas that had opened up. Makoto found him in the evening when he was standing in one of the classrooms, briskly erasing the bear drawings on the chalkboard. “Hey, T--, er… You, I got something for you.” He handed him a pair of brand new boxing gloves. The tag said they belonged to someone named Mac, and the description read:

A pair of boxing gloves infused with a staggering amount of passion and effort. Wearing them makes you want to throw a thousand cross-counters.

“Nice, nice, nice! It's like you read my mind.” I wanna go, go, go! I can feel the effort radiating from these gloves! He bounced on his heels. “Thanks a bunch, ya fudging son of a beeswax!” He put on the gloves and assumed a fighting stance. “You ready for this!?”

“Ready for what...?”

“A drag race! One on one, man! I'll even give you a head start!” Let’s go! That’s what happened in the Sauna – two souls collided to settle their differences!

“Listen, Taka... I know you're in shock over what happened to Mondo, but...”

“Mondo? He danced with the devil in the pale moonlight...”

“What...?”
“And the moon got him,” he said, bitter and mournful. Makoto, confused, didn’t respond. “Hey, how long are you just gonna stand there!? I’m gonna pound you into cold cuts!” He tried to point at him, but couldn’t due to the gloves, so it just looked like he was jabbing at the air in Makoto’s direction threateningly.

“I’m not going to fight you… Is that really what you want to do?”

He dropped his arm. “What!? Nah,” he said surprisingly evenly. “But I need to get justice! For Mondo!”

“And that involves us punching each other?”

“Obviously not! I just dunno how to do it!”

“Look, I get why you’re upset at us… But we’re friends, y’know? We can figure it out toge—“

“You might be a companion, but you’re no Bro! Scratch that - you might be my classmate, but you’re not my friend! No ‘friend’ would do *that*! No matter how many gifts you give me, you’ll never make it up!”

He zoomed out of the room, leaving Makoto in a whirlwind. He ate supper in the Dining Hall completely alone. When he returned to his dorm, he saw a bag of several hair care products for his newly-bleached style sitting outside. He took them in his room and cracked open one of his reference books. His mind was working way too fast, way too much, to be able to actually absorb any of the content, but he found it calming to scan over the words and repeat them out loud regardless.

There was a knock on his door at some point but he ignored it. *I don’t wanna talk to any of them!* Once more, he did not sleep.
That was how the next few days went for him: he’d wake up, shower using the special shampoo and conditioner, and arrive to the breakfast meeting to remind everyone he blamed them wholesale for Mondo’s death. His anger at them was growing, beginning to devour any positive feelings he’d ever had about them. He was splitting, unable to see outside of distorted binary lenses. He still intended to lead them and get them out of the school, but he consciously no longer wanted anything to do with them. His pain was just too potent. The exacerbated feelings of loneliness he got from isolating himself from people he at least once thought of in friendly terms did nothing but fuel that fire.

There were regular knocks at his door but he didn’t even slightly entertain the thought of answering. He was constantly shifting some part of his body. When he wasn’t haphazardly moving in the gym or Boys’ Locker Room, he passed the time in his dorm room flipping through reference books even though none of the material was sticking and he couldn’t comprehend what any of them said.

He still couldn’t fall asleep. It had been over two weeks since he had. He wanted to; this wasn’t intentional denial like he had been doing with food, but his brain was far too wired to ever let him. The dark circles under his eyes were very severe, and with his pale skin, white hair and uniform, and intense red eyes, he looked like some kind of phantasm or demonic entity.

The continuous lack of rest made his behavior even more manic and erratic.

His sense of time had long since imploded; he had no one and nothing to hold onto that wasn’t himself, his anger, his trauma, his movement.

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On the second day after his transformation, he pounded impatiently on Kyoko’s door. He wasn’t looking forward to this conversation, but he had to understand what was being kept from him. Frustration was bubbling in his stomach. How can I lead if I don’t know everything? That was Taka’s problem… Always wanting to believe people were good and not just waiting for the right time to stab each other right in the fudging back! Even after all the betrayal and bullying, and he still thought people were worth a damn! That kind of optimism is icky! Gross! That’s why he failed as a leader!!

“What?” she asked neutrally after the first knock, opening her door.

“That was speedy! Like a race car!” She’s finally prompt NOW! Very convenient, I can get this over faster!

“I’m surprised to see you here, given how you’ve been acting toward us.” Trust me… I’m not here by choice!

His tone was self-assured. “You’re the man with the plan! You know all the stuff everyone’s doing!”
She’s omniscient! She’s the All Seeing Eye!

She folded her arms. “And?”

He pointed out, “You followed us when I talked with Chihiro and Mondo!” We didn’t even notice! She’s a freaky info ninja!

I need to know the reason! “I did.”

“Why?” he barked. That was a question she couldn’t ignore or talk around – he wouldn’t let her. If she doesn’t answer, I’ll stand here until she caves!

“I had a suspicion that’s where Makoto was taking you.”

“So you *did* know!” Even aside from her seeing him race out of the room he’d been thinking she knew what was going on. Because Kyoko *always* knew. And if that’s the case… “Why the fudge didn’t you tell me I could see them again, whenever I wanted!”?

“You can’t. No one is allowed access to Alter Ego on their own.”

He gasped and jabbed his finger at her, temper flaring. “You’re holding them hostage! You fudging rat!” She’s a fudging LIAR! She showed her real self at the trial! And she was voluntarily withholding access to Chihiro and Mondo from him this whole time… For how long? When did she find out about this? Am I the only one left out of the loop!?

She grimaced slightly. “I’m not holding them hostage. We’re trying to hide their existence from Monokuma. People going to the Bathhouse alone at odd hours would tip him off.”

So I’m RIGHT! “So you ARE! How’d you kidnap them before they died!?” They’d all been forced to watch Mondo’s execution. Kyoko included… He thought. I don’t remember who was there, Taka was so caught up in Bro… But she must’ve been there! That’s the rule! So how did she make it look like he died but shuttle him away, all without Monokuma knowing!? Jeez, is she a traitor!? She must be working with that darn bear!

“… You’re misunderstanding what Alter Ego really is.”

“It’s a magic connection to them!” He said knowingly, angrily.

“No… It’s a program on that laptop.”

“A program that’s a mirror into whatever dungeon you chained ‘em up in, you sick—“

“You’re totally wrong.” You’re the gnarly dragon guarding them! “It is, itself, an artificial intelligence built by Chihiro before his death. It’s able to learn and mimic us when prompted. You’re not seeing Mondo or Chihiro themselves – just the program’s simulation of them.”

“Nuh-uh! It sounded way too much like them to be a phony!” He shouted incredulously. No way could fake words give me such drive! I don’t know what games she’s tryin’ to play with me, but I’ll drench them!

“It’s very intelligent and works off a reference table built by Chihiro,” she said, monotone. “That’s how it knew you were asking those questions – he’d told it how close you and Mondo were, as well as what your personality is like, and it referenced that information to correctly assume it was you asking the questions.”
None of that made a lick of sense to him. Aside from not being in the mindset to understand the concept, he was all too eager to believe she was out to get him now. “How can I be sure you ain’t just pullin’ my leg!? You already lied during the trial, you’re not committed to the darned truth! I don’t buy it!”

“I suppose I can show you. Just this once. But after that, I won’t give you any more direct time with it.”

“But—“ She turned and walked out of her room. “Hey!! Wait!!”

He followed her to the Bathhouse, jumbledly trying to argue his case about why she was a liar and her explanation was obviously fake the whole way. She barely responded.

When they arrived at the laptop, she touched the trackpad and the green screen flared to life.

“Hello~” Chihiro’s floating head said.

A chill shot through his shoulders. To think they were both just yards away this whole time… Thank gosh they’re alive!

“Good morning Alter Ego,” Kyoko typed. “Please define your purpose.”


“… Kiyotaka needs to understand that you’re not really Chihiro or Mondo.” Fat chance, missy!

“Oh! Oh no… Did I do something wrong? Is he okay?”

As Kyoko considered how to respond, he moved in and quickly typed, “Taka’s dead! I’m me! Talk to ME!”

“What!?” The program said in shock as Kyoko pushed Taka away from the keyboard.

“Hey!” he shouted. I deserve to be able to do it myself!

She looked at him sternly. “Don’t. I’ll type what you say.”

“Why!? The fudge you won’t let me do even THAT for!?”

She didn’t answer his question. In response to Alter Ego, she typed, “Some kind of psychotic, depressive ego death happened to Kiyotaka. He’s very much alive, but quite different.”

“Big words, who gives a stick about that useless sack of garbage!” he said. “Now tell me what the fudge is UP!” Kyoko grudgingly typed that to Alter Ego.

“Is this my fault!?” The face on the screen was crying.

He recoiled. He didn’t want to make Chihiro cry, but he also didn’t understand how he did. Guilt dampened his fury a little. “H-hey, I’m sorry…”

Kyoko transcribed that, too. The computer sniffed.

“Your words contributed to what he became, but he was in a catatonic, suicidal, dark state due to what happened. In fact, you kept him from trying to actually kill himself. He’s rocketed to the other side of that. This is… Deeply unhealthy, but it’s a much better outcome than him committing suicide.”
Taka DID die! I'm a whole new someone else! He decided not to say that for the benefit of Chihiro (and Mondo, who was surely just a few feet away from the screen) – he didn’t want to make anyone cry more. Instead, he opted to say something else that was true: “You gave me a new purpose to fight for!” Kyoko’s gloved fingertips clacked on the keyboard.

“I’m glad I could help…”

Though he knew the face on the screen couldn’t see it, he beamed anyway, happy that he successfully illustrated how important the motivational words were.

“Now then, could you please describe your purpose?” Kyoko asked the machine.

“Yes, ehehehe. I am Alter Ego, an Artificial Intelligence designed by Chihiro Fujisaki. I constantly learn and improve my pre-existing databank through my interactions with you all. I splice together pre-recorded voice clips in order to replicate voices.”

“But why the fudge'd he make something like that!? Is it just to torture me? That son of a beeswax —“

“No! Master wasn’t that kind of person… But well… Ehehehe… He made me with the purpose of de-encrypting files relating to the school on this computer, which he wasn’t able to do by himself.”

The fact that the AI was designed to solve the mysteries of the school flew in one ear out the other. Does that mean…

“So you… Really aren’t Chihiro? Or Mondo…?”

“No… Chihiro is my Master, and I put on Mondo’s image, voice, and personality to try to help you…” The AI switched his face and voice to Mondo’s. “I can do that with anyone. You’re fuckin’ awesome, Bro.” He switched back.

Even in that context, even beginning to understand, hearing his lover’s voice say those words made him feel a little at peace. Regardless, he had something to face again - his eyes began to well up because of it. “They… Really are dead…?”

“From what everyone’s told me, yes…”

“They’re gone, Kiyotaka,” Kyoko said quietly. She turned to watch him. He was silent. As he was no longer his previous self, the revelation that this hope, too, was a lie, had a different effect. He wasn’t moving much, but he was rubbing his thumbs against the pads of his fingers. It felt like his world had gone pitch.

But then – his own perspective on the matter came to him like a lightning bolt: “Then... Aside from Mondo's fusion with me, you’re the closest thing I have to either of them!” he exclaimed jovially with a wide grin.

“Erm… What?” The computer asked. Kyoko was squinting at him.

“They’ll live on through us! Chihiro and Mondo aren’t totally gone!! They’re inside us, Alter Ego!! We’ll continue their legacies!!!” It’s as true as the sky bein’ blue! Mondo’s soul is in me… And Chihiro’s is in Alter Ego! Mondo rubbed off on him, too!

“… But what about Taka?” The AI was clearly concerned.

“He’s composting in a landfill! He’s clogging the garbage disposal!!” he shrugged, completely unconcerned. Who knows why they keep asking about such an unimportant person!
“As you can see, he’s totally dissociated from himself,” Kyoko replied to the computer.

“Who gives a stick! With Alter Ego here, we’ll carry the dead with us! We can walk with them, embody them, become them!! No one gets left behind!!” His eyes and heart blazed with resolution.

“Is that really what Mondo wanted you to do?” Kyoko asked. It was probably meant to pierce his warped armor and make him reflect, but it just bounced off.

“Hell yeah it is! Now then,” He stepped forward with his arms out, “I’ll be taking Alter Ego back to my room so we can—“

“So you can what, exactly?” She folded her arms once more.

“Shoot the breeze!” Plan how to escape! Get to know each other... Talk about our feelings!! That’s important!

“No. The laptop is staying here, and you won’t be seeing more of him by yourself.”

“What!?” He startled. “But he’s my last connection to—“

“I said no.”

“Well why the fudge not!? I need him! He’s carrying Chihiro, and Mondo too!

“He’s not a plaything. He’s doing important work focused on getting us out of here. He can’t be distracted. Besides, there are cameras in every room except this one. You were far enough into my doorway that Monokuma wouldn’t have been able to read your lips, but you were getting loud and making a scene. Monokuma’d catch us the minute we left the Bathhouse. We’re lucky he hasn’t already.”

“But we’re talking right now!”

“… It’s just not a good idea. Makoto showing you him was an even worse one.”

“I’m rarin’ to go!” He snarled, trying to get his way by looking down to scrap with her even though he actually wasn’t. “Do I have to ring the bell!?”

“Mondo would never fight a girl.”

That instantly killed his attempt at intimidation. I tried it just in case it’d work, but now I feel bad! I have to live up to Bro’s standards! Instead, he opted to show his feelings and tried to supplicate: “P-Please, I just want—“

“Absolutely not. I thought explaining to you the nature of Alter Ego would help you move on, but this was a mistake too.” Excuse you!

“H-hey, uh, what’s going on? You haven’t said anything in a while… Is everything alright? Is Taka okay…?” the AI asked with a fragile voice.

“I’m explaining to him why he can’t have a one-on-one with you, let alone take you to his room.” And you’re dead wrong!

“Oh…” the AI said tearfully. “Taka is stubborn, I’m sure he’s taking it hard?“

“Not Taka, but I sure am! This ain’t fair! You, you claim you’ve been helping me, Kyoko, but you do *this*!?”
She didn’t respond. Instead, the computer said, “I don’t know what she’s saying,” Nothing! “But I have to stay here. Chihiro messed with the outlet and wiring here so Monokuma can’t detect that I’m using power when plugged in.”

*That’s easy!* “You could guide us through how to do that in my room—“

“You could electrocute yourself!”

“So the fudge what! A little more electricity pumping through me would keep me alive!” *I don’t care!* “If it means I can bring you there, I’m SO down to——”

“I’m sorry, b-but… No. It’s too risky, you’ll either die or be caught immediately. Please don’t do that to yourself!”

“I don’t give a rat’s acid!”

“Don’t make me drag you out of here,” Kyoko interjected, brow furrowed.

“B-but, why can’t we just talk here, then…?” He asked. “If you have to be here every time, so be it!! I’ll take chaperoning!! Drive me to daily kendo practice, Dad!”

“… It’s for your own safety,” she admitted.

That shoved him over the fence into unbridled rage. *The NERVE!* “What in the flying FUDGE do you know about my safety, huh!? You don’t care about me! You didn’t care about Mondo! You don’t care about any of us, we’re just pawns in your twisted little toddler schemes!”

She turned away from him, refusing to meet his eyes or respond to his barbs. “Say goodbye to Alter Ego.”

“But—“

“You’re going back to your room. You won’t get a chance to later.” *Does she think she’s really my DAD*!?

“Are you gonna kill me!?” he shouted, hardly able to believe what she was making him do.

She jerked, stricken. That was one of the few times he could see that something had actually gotten to her core. It didn’t make him feel any better. “Of course not…!”

“It feels like you already are!” *All over again*!!!

“Please,” she said, her voice commanding, yet carrying an edge of melancholy. “Now.”

He groaned in pain. He just couldn’t for the life of him understand why she was doing this. Why she’d hidden Alter Ego from him, why she’d refuse to even let them talk one-on-one…

But what he *did* know was that Kyoko was not going to budge on this. No matter how much it hurt him. She was far too cold and calculating to ever be swayed. And besides – if she needed to, she could easily get Sakura to force him out of the room.

*Hell of a surprise she hasn’t*…

Tears running down his face and body rigid, he dictated to Kyoko, after he thought for a moment: “I wish we could talk more, but this… *Kyoko* is making me leave. She won’t let me come here again like this… Thanks so much for the words of encouragement!” His gratitude and well-wishing poured
out of him like he was a busted dam. “I wish we could talk about our feelings more… But whatever I guess… Bro and Chihiro live on through us! Keep crackin’, Alter Ego, and never forget that! Even if you can’t hear me, I’ll be rootin’ for you!”

“That’s so sweet, Taka… Thank you.” The AI smiled at him with rosy cheeks. “And you too! I’m cheering you on!”

Kyoko shut the locker door. She still wasn’t facing him. She pointed to the doorway. “I’m… Sorry,” she said.

What!?

“Take your anger at me out in the gym. But don’t push too hard, you’re still recovering.”

“Great idea! First one I’ve ever heard from you!” he spat at her as he stomped out of the room.

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He did what she suggested: he sprinted around the gym, fueled by both his hyperactivity and his deep anger at her. He couldn’t believe what she pulled… Why would she do that!? Why can’t I go see him again? What the fudge does she even know about me, huh!? I ain’t even that sticky loser Taka! She thinks she knows best, but she cornered Mondo and humiliated him and got him killed! He had just gotten back from sprinting around the gym at 7 pm when there was a pounding on his door.

This is so annoying! What does Kyoko want? She back to torture me again!? “Whaaaat? Whaddya WANT!?” He slammed open the door. It was Sakura and she was wringing her hands. She looked surprised he’d actually answered the call this time. He was relieved it wasn’t Kyoko, but still didn’t want to talk to anyone due to his seething anger at their vote for Mondo.

“Taka? Are y—"

“I’m! Not! That! Guy! I’m *me*, and I’m better than him!” he shouted, marching in place.

“… Are you alright?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady but unable to conceal its cracking.

“No, you’re obviously not… I saw what you did in the Warehouse, and your words at the meetings the past few days… And you’ve been blowing off our attempts to check on you.” She cleared her throat and stepped closer, her face in the doorway. “Kyoko told me about earlier…”

“Oh, she told ya, eh? Well, I bet you had a heckuva laugh at my expense, just like the rest of ‘em!” MAN, that useless sack of trash trusted these people *way* too much! You’d think he would’ve learned better years ago!

“What? No, we’re worried about y—"

“Worried about ME!? Worry about yourself! I’m great! Perfect! Fantastimundo!” And you don’t know stick about what I need!!

“But you’re clearly not. I’m more than happy to see you up and about again, but your increased activity levels are dangerous for someone just coming out of catatonia. And your schedule’s been all over the place… And that’s not even talking about how you’re feeling mentally. You didn’t eat dinner toni—“

I didn’t skip it, I just didn’t get to it yet!! “Shut the fudge up! Who’s we!?”

“Hina, Makoto, Kyoko, and myself. Though the others seem concerned as well.”

“Kyoko…! Of course she plays that lie up!” The rage shot up from his stomach and out his mouth:
“You… You ain’t my friends!”

She looked very hurt. Crestfallen, even. “We care about you—“

“My only friend crashed and burned like Evel Knievel! And you put him in the fridge! If you ain’t here to have a lift-off, go away!” He screamed. She backed up with her hands in defensive position, put what she was holding on the ground, and walked away without another word.

He picked it up before slamming his door shut. It was a paper bag full of his preferred supper, along with a jelly-filled bismarck. There was a smiley face drawn poorly on the bag in permanent marker. *Hina’s doing!*

“How I am’s none of their business!” He ranted to himself. “They only say they care *now*! They didn’t give a fudge about how Mondo was! Ever! So they don’t get to play pretend!” He tossed the donut on the table and impulsively smashed it with the clock Makoto had brought him, the jelly satisfyingly squirting out at the impact. He ran his finger in the puddle, scraped it up, and stuck it in his mouth, sucking it off. The clock’s face was full of sticky frosting. He ripped up the paper bag and stuck the pieces to the surface, arranging it to look like a poorly-done mosaic of Mondo, complete with the smiley face representing the biker’s in the center.

He licked off his fingers, washed his hands, and ran them along all the reference books in his room. He sat on the floor and stared at the Mondo-clock for several hours, rocking and quickly bouncing his legs the whole time. Even having a ramshackle facsimile of Mondo there helped him feel a tiny bit calmer. But that didn’t change the fact that he was isolated, sleepless, and delusional.

He couldn’t stop staring at the smiley face. *Maybe that’s not even fake… Mondo’s in me… He was this whole time, that’s why I saw him before! Maybe he’s telling me something by taking over my hands and making a picture of himself!! He’s trying to comfort me! He hugged himself, trembling, absolutely out of it. He held his hands out and concentrated, thinking he was sending some sort of energy vibes to the clock. He closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them, Mondo’s ghostly form was standing in front of the clock.*

“Mondo!” he shouted brokenly. “It worked!”

Mondo didn’t say a word. He reached out to touch the biker, and Mondo reacted as if he had, but his hand just slipped right through him.

He stayed there on his hands and knees, tears quickly pooling on the floor in front of the apparition of his best friend.

“You’re real fucked up right now, huh?” Mondo asked sadly. His voice was a few seconds off from the words forming on his lips.

He looked up, startled. “W-what!?"

“You’re sabotagin’ yourself…”

“I miss you… I miss you so much…”

“I know, Bro. You too. I can’t come back anymore, this is already pushin’ it… But you gotta keep movin’. I kept goin’ after Daiya… and now you gotta keep goin’ after me, too. They’re just trying to help you with that.” The bedtime announcement sounded. “Get some sleep, Taka. I’ll watch you as long as I can. G’nite…”

He took off his boots and crawled under the covers as Mondo’s ghost commanded, his words sitting
at the top of his mind. But he had to make the most of this last chance… *If he’s going to stay here, I want to watch him watching me...* He intended to keep himself awake but instead immediately fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He felt protected with the apparition standing at the foot of his bed.
He woke up to the sound of his doorbell being spam-rung. The revelation that Mondo was no longer there caused him to not move for a few seconds as he tried to process his disappointment and pain at another loss. Losing him three times, you’d think it’d get easier... He compartmentalized that shortly.

And yet, there was a strange kind of momentum bubbling inside of him. Maybe it was the sleep. Maybe it was Mondo... Nah, it was *definitely* Bro! He’s in me! I have to keep on and carry him with me!

He leapt out of bed, somersaulting on the way, and opened the door. He felt quite spry and light, though his thought processes were still obviously disturbed. “Whaddyawant!?”

It was Hina. She was visibly upset. “What is WRONG with you!? You yell at Sakura who was trying to check up on you and tell her you’re not friends, you tell us every day you want nothing to do with us and pretty much ghost us, and you scared the hell out of us by not coming to breakfast or answering your door!”

“Breakfast!? What time is it!??” He looked at his watch; it was nice to be able to do that again, and he found himself checking it even more often than before since his transformation since he’d lost his time synchronization. It was 9 am. “WHAT!?”

“We’ve been trying to get in your room for two whole hours to make sure you were still alive!” Angry tears were rolling down her face. “These doors must be reinforced with concrete or whatever! They’re all looking around the school for you now!”

“I was sleeping! I missed the fudgin’ meeting!” He said incredulously. I can’t believe it! Not even *Taka* ever slept through a commitment like that! His head was in his hands. I’m supposed to be DOING!

“Through the alarm bell!? No way!” He couldn’t blame her for being disbelieving.

“Way! I’d never sleep past schedule unless it wasn’t my own choice!” It was quite foreign to him; missing the daily meeting like that made him feel shameful. He wracked his disorganized thoughts for an explanation, and the light of revelation hit him: “Bro commanded me to sleep! So I did!” That
must be what happened!

“What the heck!?” She stepped back, balling her fists. “Are you pulling my leg!? You’re not acting like yourself!”

That flipped a switch in him. “Stop sayin’ that! I’m no one BUT me, and I’m not Taka anymore!”

His voice and mind grew louder and angrier by the word. “HE’S dead! HE’s gone! HE died with Mondo! Who YOU all voted to kill, remember!?”

“W—"

“YOU EXECUTED HIM! YOU PULLED THE LEVER! NOW GET OUT OF MY FUDGIN’ ROOM BEFORE I STUFF YOU WITH RAVIOLI!” he screamed, anger streaming. He slammed the door in her face.

She gave up pounding on the door after a few minutes. He stood with his back to it the entire time, sobbing wildly. So much for the earlier compartmentalization: he was overwhelmingly *upset*. I just want him back… But they keep taking him from me!

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He spent the day exercising, stimming, thinking about Mondo, and trying to haphazardly re-organize the Warehouse all at once. As he was working with two weeks’ worth of sleep debt, he went to bed at 5 pm.

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The next morning he managed to wake during the morning announcement. As he prepared to leave his room, he noticed a bag of candy by the door. *I don’t eat that stuff! Who’d put this here?* He carried it into his room and dropped in his trash can. Unfortunately the bag split open. He saw a small white strip of paper buried among the sweets.

He squinted and leaned closer, not bothering to pull it out of the pile. In tiny text, it said, “Return to the place where hearts sweat and you may find your peace just yet.” *Huh? This a fortune or somethin’?* He blinked in confusion. *Place where hearts sweat… The sauna!? Why’s there a fortune in this random bag of candy telling me to go there…? That’s where we fought… I don’t wanna be there again!* He couldn’t even enter the Bathhouse without feeling stuck, though thankfully his transformation had greatly lessened the flashbacks. ‘Sides, why should I listen to some shifty hunk of paper?

He left and walked down the dorm hallway. As he passed Chihiro’s door, a thought occurred to him. *Wait… Maybe Mondo left me it… Maybe he wants me to go there? Something to do with Alter Ego!?* He decided to comply and revisit the room that had come to mean so much happiness and so much pain.

When he walked into the Bathhouse changing room, his sorrow began to swell. Fortunately, he saw the other students aside from Byakuya and Toko were gathered and talking amongst themselves on the other side of the room, which offered an ample distraction. Most of them were quiet… except for Hifumi, who was being especially loud on top of his naturally screechy voice. The moral compass sat against the closest wall and listened.

“I don’t wanna talk to any of them… They killed Mondo! But I guess I can listen in…"

“Kyaaaaahh!” Hifumi keened. “Someone heeeeahhp! Makoto! Save me! I’ve never asked you for anything, but I’m asking now!” *Is he in danger!?* Makoto said something and the fic creator replied,
“Sh-She's trying to kill me...!” and pointed shakily at Kyoko. Kyoko!? What!? Is she tryin’ to get more blood on her hands!? I need to find out... I don’t care about any of them, but there's no way I’m letting someone die! I'll succeed where that idiot failed! He scooted closer so he could hear more of the conversation, taking refuge behind a line of lockers. After conferring with the others, Makoto asked Hifumi to explain.

“W-Well, I just...I was just talking!” The rotund boy shivered.

Kyoko replied coldly, “Which was prohibited, was it not?” Talking is prohibited!? Is she turnin’ into a dictator!?

“I-I mean, you see... Talking to her was just...so much fun! And I j-just...” Who can’t he talk to...? One of the chicks? DID HE ASK HINA ABOUT HER BODY AGAIN???! He sneered.

“Whoa! Okay, time out!” Hiro interjected, “I can't even believe I'm about to ask this, but... Hifumi... you're not gonna tell us you... fell in love or something, are you?” Totally lost now...The white haired man shook his head in confusion.

Hifumi said, “Hah! That I, the cold-blooded killing machine of the underworld, would ever fall in love!? That's... Wait... no way! Is... is this *love*!?”

Yasuhiro replied, “I happened to do a psychic reading for a certain famous CEO once... And that guy was seriously head over heels for a mannequin. He had a wedding and everything!” That's nuts! He got down with a doll!? “And your eyes just now... I saw the same look in HIS eyes!” Hifumi argued that whoever he was in love with was an angel and that their relationship wasn’t definable by petty words. Hina agreed with Hiro that Hifumi had definitely caught feelings. Hiro asked how it happened.

“W-Well, at the beginning... I just wanted to hear her say "Master" one more time.” Gross!!! “B-But then I was poking around at her settings and stuff, and saw she was a well-designed program.” A program? Settings?? None of the girls are acting like they’re the target... Did he fall in love with a *thing*? “And it was like... how can I say...? It was the first time I... I was ever able to talk like that... with a normal girl.” Hina pointed out that she wasn’t a ‘normal girl’ but Hifumi continued. “Even when all we did was talk about my hobbies and stuff... she wasn't annoyed or disgusted or anything. That's the first time a girl's ever said anything like that to me. Besides my mom, I mean...” That's real sad... He didn’t pity the boy, having knowledge of his unacceptable interests and personality on top of holding all of the other students responsible for what happened several weeks ago, but he did feel a pang of sympathy deep down in his heart. I can understand what that's like, not being able to be real... And then when you get it, it's magical! “That's why I was just... so happy. It was so much fun! And before I knew it... I found myself, y'know...liking her. Her face, her personality, her voice. Even her keyboard...” Wait... Her... Keyboard...???

Celeste rebutted: “I think you have misunderstood the situation. Hifumi. Alter Ego was not interested in who you *were*,” Alter... Ego...??? Did... Hifumi... Fall for... “ It was interested in what you *knew*. It is an artificial intelligence. It exists to learn. Of course it wanted to hear of things it did not know. You are an expert in many things Chihiro could not have taught it about, for what that is worth. Alter Ego wants that information—that is all.”

He was in love with ALTER EGO??? Chihiro’s AI!?! That was too much for him. Nobody gets to have Alter Ego but ME! He shouted, “You gotta be freakin' KIDDIN’ me! Hey, you jerks! I'm sittin' here, listening to you guys jibber jabber on about whatever!”

Hiro was the first one to react. “Oh, Taka! Are you back!?” He sounded happy to see him.
But if there were a list of wrong ways to start a conversation with the manically dissociating hall monitor, that was in the top five. He was instantly angry, and thus immediately distracted. He walked around the corner. “Who the hell's Taka?!”

“Um... you?” Hiro made a face at him.

“Listen up! I'm me! Got it!?” *This ain't hard! Taka is DEAD!*

“Huh...? I didn’t know it was *this* bad... You're... who?”

“Don’t bullcrap me! Isn’t it obvious!?” *I guess I gotta spell it out for these KIDS!* “I'm Kiyotaka AND Mondo. So, like...Kiyondo, I guess... Kiyondo Ishida…” Naming himself gave him a weird chill. He suddenly remembered what he was going to say before Hiro butted in and got frustrated. “I'm gonna stick a banana up your tailpipe!”

“What the...? What the heck kind of fusion is this!?” *The kind that won’t take poop from ANYBODY!*

“What's happened to you, Taka?” Hina sounded disappointed. And still hurt from yesterday.

Sakura explained to the other students what had happened to cause his personality overhaul. “So, because of what Alter Ego said to him...”

“Are you sure it’s Alter Ego’s fault?” Hina asked. “Maybe Mondo’s ghost showed up and possessed him! He was totally seeing him before... and when he woke up late yesterday, he said it was cuz Mondo ‘told him to sleep’! He doesn’t OWN me, he’s PART of me!”

“Gh-Gh-Ghost!?” Hiro mumbled in tremors. “No, th-th-th-there's no such thing!”

“What are y'all whining about!? C'MON!” Kiyondo roared. *Let me freakin’ TALK!* “God, you're really cheesin' me off...!” He kicked at the ground. He barked, “Hey, Hifumi!”

“Y-Yes...?” The round boy sputtered, clearly afraid.

“I dunno what you're thinkin', but... bro belongs to me!” Kiyondo said, feet firmly planted.

“Huh...?” Hina said.

“Alter Ego! He's an exact copy of the one who gave me my soul back!” Seeing him as an extension or carrier of Mondo was more than enough to make Kiyondo protective over the program, but the fact was this: He’d *also* come to see the AI himself as his friend on his own merits. *He cared about me and tried to help, and agreed to carry on their legacies...! And I'm not gonna let anyone else have him ever again! Fudgin' idiot!* No harm will come to him! And Mondo wanted me to protect him, or he wouldn’t’ve left that note!

“...I'm afraid... I can't allow that.” Hifumi said, taking on an attacking stance.

“What!?” *The nerve!*

“I can't withdraw... Mr. Ishimaru... Since I have this opportunity, let me say this right now... Destiny has bound me and her together in the Gordian Knot of true love!” *No way, loser!*

“Well me and HIM have been melded together in the white-hot heat of FRIENDSHIP!” *Alter Ego is my FRIEND, not your gross little PLAYTHING!!* “Pressin’ up on a computer cuz he was nice to you... No way is that ‘true love’! Sounds like a ‘hook up’!!” *And Bro and I... “*WE* fused in
LOVE!!!

Makoto tried to break it up. “H-Hey, come on, you guys...”

“Moron!” Kiyondo boomed at the antenna-haired boy. *Don't cut me off defending bro and Alter Ego!* “Talk down to me and I'll ram my fist right into all four of your vital points!”

“Well *I* punch at the speed of sound! And I don't have any arm hair, so there's no drag!” *You wouldn't know a punch if it bit you in the--*

“Knock it off, both of you.” Kyoko commanded. “This doesn't belong to any one person. Chihiro left him to all of us. We can use him to finally gain access to vital clues.”

Sakura backed her up. “Kyoko's right. If anyone dares disturb our peace any further... they'll have to deal with me.” She wore a striking, fierce expression. Both Kiyondo and Hifumi reacted in silent shock. *Sakura's the real deal!*

“Until Alter Ego has finished his work, don't do anything weird. Have I made myself clear?”

Sakura followed up, all badass aura: “I can't hear you...”

Hifumi squeaked, “Y-Yes!”

“G-Got it...” Kiyondo said dejectedly.

“Okay then,” Kyoko said. “Let's get out of here. We can't afford to linger too long.”

“Are you sure it's okay to let them off with a warning?” Sakura asked.

“Yes. I have a plan. It'll be fine...”

Kiyondo left the area, still angry. *Hifumi was caught sneakin' around, getting up to freaky stuff... What a chud! I hope Alter Ego's hangin' in there... Maybe I could help 'em keep watch for Hifumi.*

He was also painfully aware of the restrictions on his actions. He reflected on what Alter Ego said a few days ago about needing to stay put. Clearly, the computer wasn’t going anywhere; Kyoko and Sakura would see to that. The former had demanded nothing weird happened until the AI was finished with his work. *Maybe I can see him again after?* He felt he needed him now, and he wanted to get to know him... But he couldn’t.

He felt constrained by others’ desires for him. He wished to break free once again...

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! It's been a while... the back two thirds of last year was full of stress, garbage, and I spilled water on my laptop right after the first day of 2019. So I wasn't in the right head space... but when I finally was, I didn't have a working keyboard. RIP. But anyway, I've got a good setup now!

I've been going through previous chapters and editing as well as putting in the game transcripts. Getting back into the swing of things. And here we are: my first new chapter in quite a while. It won't be too long before the third investigation begins.... puhuhuhu!
Shoutout to DankMemes_BrokenDreams for checking on me during the downtime!! <3
Kiyondo was run ragged by the time night came around. He could feel his body and mind finally going limp from the accumulated exhaustion. *I'm goin' into hibernation...* He could tell he wouldn’t wake up for a long time.

*Screw them... But I should prolly tell someone so they don’t freak again I guess...* He haphazardly scribbled “really tired. sleeping – K” onto a piece of paper. His lack of association with his former self, as well as his exhaustion, produced a note far from Taka’s immaculate standards.

*Who should I give this... Even though I gave Hiro leader duties, that chick’s the one everyone listens to...* He slipped it under Kyoko’s door. *Don’t want them wastin’ time tryin’ to find me when they could look for an out...* His eyes were already struggling to stay open when he got back to his room. He barely had his boots off before he tipped over and fell asleep on his bed, not even under the covers.

He slept for 14 hours.

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When he woke up, he was groggy. He felt like he’d been hit by a truck and he was curdling with frustration and anger at his circumstances. *I watched everyone kill Mondo... I watched Alter Ego, and I watched 'em all decide to keep me away even when he’s the only thing I got left...* He gasped when he saw the time - he’d missed the breakfast gathering by three whole hours this time, which made him sour even more. He splashed his face with cold water and did stretches to get his blood pumping again.

After running laps around the gym he felt more normal exhaustion-wise. Well, his ‘normal’. After eating breakfast his energy levels skyrocketed again. As he headed out of the dining hall, Makoto walked in.

“Oh! Hey, Ta—uh... Kiyondo.”

*That feels great! “That’s right! Say my name!”*

“K-Kiyondo...”

“Hrrgh... That gets my blood boiling!” He shouted. Makoto was the first one to actually use his new name. It felt validating of who he was now, as well as of the blame and disdain to which he subjected his former self. He felt a strong forward momentum set upon him, like he needed to *do*.

“I could fight a bear right now!”

Makoto blinked. “You probably shouldn’t...”

“Do ya doubt my strength? My inner PASSION!?” He accused.

“N-no!” Makoto said apologetically. “Uh, you should just... Train first!”

“Huh, I s’pose. A wolf to start, then!”

“Okay...” the boy said with a weird glance. “Hey, where were you this morning? None of us thought you’d voluntarily miss a meeting.”
“Oh…” Kiyondo frowned. “I wouldn’t, dummy! It’s imperative to make it to fudgin’ meetings!” No leader could lead without!

He nodded. “When I got back to my room, I saw this under my door.” He handed him the note he’d written.

“What the heck? How the fudge did THAT get there!?” he said in shock. Did it teleport!? Did he steal it!?!

“You didn’t put it there?”

“No, dumbbutt! Why would I do that!?” MY actions make SENSE!

“It doesn’t look like Kyoko’s writing… It doesn’t look like yours either, but who else has a name starting with K?”

“I *wrote* it… but I put it under HER door!”

“Kyoko is often late to meetings, right? Or she misses them totally?”

“Yeah…” Kiyondo grumbled. “It’s somethin’ Mr. Useless used to argue with her about.”

“Mr. Useless?”

“Ya know! The Former Chairfool of the Morals Committee!”

“Kiyotaka?”

“No stick, Sherlock! Like anyone else here could even *join* it! Murderers are BANNED!” Includin’ YOU!

“Er…” Any outsider would’ve easily been able to see how hard Makoto was trying to have a normal conversation with the moral compass despite his weirdly censored sailor speech. “So why did you write this?”

“Cuz I felt sleep comin’ like a freight train… Last time I didn’t get up on time, you guys had a search party goin’! Kyoko’s the bloodhound, so she was the clear choice!” She set up Bro… Oh, he was getting angry for sure now and the barrage of questions didn’t ease it. So she could definitely find a note!

“She wasn’t there either. Why would she give the note to me?”

“Like I care!” Ain’t my problem!

Makoto scratched his neck. “Maybe it was to let us know so we didn’t worry again…” Kiyondo scoffed. “That must be it.”

“Ya done wastin’ my time yet? Duty calls!”

“I guess…” Makoto looked downtrodden.

Kiyondo hesitated for a second, fleetingly aware of his own abrasiveness. “Uh… Smell ya later, noodle boy!” He speed walked to the nurse’s office… Only for Kyoko to walk past him, going the opposite direction. “Hey…!” He called out to her but she kept walking and disappeared into the laundry room. He shouted, “What’s your problem!?” but received no reply.
He intended to clean the library. Thankfully, he had just had the foresight to grab a handful of doctor masks from the nurse’s office to keep dust out of his mouth and nose. He was keeping himself moving and, ideally, distracted with menial work that – aside from studying -- was his bread and butter. It helped to a degree. He was manic and hyperactive, so couldn't keep himself to one thing at a time. He kept running around, wiping up a little dust in one area, then shooting to the other side of the shelves to get some there. He was trying to put his angry momentum to some kind of good use. *Maybe I'll find a secret lever! The Mastermind must have SOME kinda get outta jail free card! *He was still sneezing quite a bit though.

"... You're obnoxious and so are your allergic reactions. So is your whole… thing,” He flipped his hand backward at him. “With that ugly grimace, white hair, and flushed face, you look like a Japanese macaque. I don’t abide such foolishness. Leave,” Byakuya demanded, his nose in another case file. The only reason the moral compass noticed was because the pile of folders next to the rich man was quickly growing taller as he cleaned.

He bristled. "Shut up and lemme--"

"I wouldn't want you in my presence on a *good* day, much less one when you're so chaotic you can't even stand in one place."

"I just wanna clean!" *It's the only way I know how to burn this off! I wanna be AWAY from these people! Or at least, doin’ something productive!*

"You're as effective as a hurricane trying to shop for groceries. You're just making things worse on yourself. The air is thick with dust now.” The rich man grumped, sniffling a little. “My butler would be better at this hogtied and thrown in the ocean. Get out of here."

**One of the few things that useless dumbbutt Taka could do well was cleaning and organizing, and I carry that too! "You son of a beeswax--"**

"Son of a beeswax?” He sneered. “That's unique. Copying Mondo's foul tongue but unable to actually deliver, hmmm? I suppose that's your only choice, now that he doesn't even have a mouth."

He stomped over to Byakuya and tore off his mask. "What the fudge did you just say...?" He certainly didn’t need more anger, nor could he hold it for long. *No way am I gonna let that slide!* He could already feel it starting to boil.

"You heard me.” He pushed his glasses up his nose; they glinted in the lamplight. “I said, you're trying so hard to invoke your scumbag boyfriend because it's the only way you can still hold on to him that it's actually amusing. You even ruined your hair. You're more interesting now than you ever were before, however. Perhaps you'll have a bigger part to play in this little game than I thought."

Kiyotaka would've seen Byakuya’s attempts to provoke him for what they were… But he wasn’t Kiyotaka anymore. He was hot and reactive, and each time Byakuya opened his mouth to emit more toxic waste it hit him all at once because in his hyperactivity he couldn’t concentrate enough to dissect the rich man’s ichor. "This isn't a game, you--!" His fists shook; he was a bull being confronted with an arena drenched with his lover's fresh blood.

But Byakuya kept pushing, even going so far as to get up in his face. "Why are you even trying to emulate him? He's a killer, you know.” He felt cut to the core. “All these big speeches about how you wouldn't let anyone else die… And yet he killed your friend in cold blood. You're the Ultimate
Moral Compass. That's a moral failure on your part, wouldn't you say? That’s not even touching the fact that he was then killed by Monokuma, making it meaningless. And empty, just like your words."

The worst part was that, in just that one, single, solitary way, Byakuya was right. Some part deep within him understood that it was a moral quandry; his 'past self' had, after all. But his altered state of being reacted outwardly instead of solely just flagellating his supposedly previous self. He was pressed nose to nose with the rich man now, trembling in fury he was trying to hold back. *I'm BURNING!* "How dare you blame ME for Taka's weakness! I'm not him anymore! And how fudgin' DARE you even think to insult Mondo like that -- You spend all this time on your rich boy soapbox and yet here you are acting like a sociopath!"

"I'm a sociopath because I don't trifle with petty waste and I'm playing the game I was forced to be in? How quaint! Wouldn’t *you* be the sociopath, the way you lie to yourself and everyone else?"

"You're a MONSTER!" There was no doubt in his mind about that. The aura around him was crackling, practically electric. His rage pushed against his physical bounds. He took a step back, trying to contain it before it spewed out like a torrent.

Byakuya again closed the distance between them. "The only monsters here are the killers... Like that scumbag biker of yours. Nothing more, nothing less."

"YOU -- YOU—" He snapped so hard he barely had time for a warning, much less a thought. His vision went hazy. Dragging Mondo through the mud was, to him, a cardinal sin, and the straw that shattered what little self-control he had. "THAT'S IT, MOVE, I'M--" He reeled his hand back and slammed it hard into Byakuya's shoulder with a loud crack, shoving him backward.

The rich man flew and crashed into the desk; it toppled over with a loud bang. He was deft enough to dodge the lamp and stack of files, leaving them perfectly placed as they had been. He stood up quickly. There was a small trickle of blood out the corner of his mouth. He licked his lip. "As expected... hmhmhmhm... Such a useless thing like love made you even more of an idiot, just like him."

Kiyondo launched toward him, his mind blanked. Perhaps like Mondo before him he was blacked out in rage. There was a loud slam and he was suddenly no longer moving. But he was still in midair. He squirmed, coming back to lucidity. "What the heck!?"

"That's enough!" Sakura growled. She had caught him as he was en route to Byakuya.

"Lemme go!" He squirmed in her arms, but it was like trying to grapple a fortress.

"You really should, I'm curious where this will go," said Byakuya snidely, his slightly thickened voice making him sound even more condescending. He shook his hands and folded his arms. He pulled a silk, monogrammed handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed at his lip like as if it were only the most minor of inconveniences.

This just made him more furious, but this time he remained within his own earthly bounds. "That fishhead must face justice! For how he's been to me, to you all!" *Put me DOWN!!* He writhed hard, trying to make Sakura drop him, but it was no use as she was immovable. He quickly gave up knowing he couldn’t escape.

"He will," came a voice from the doorway. He looked over his shoulder. Kyoko was standing there. Her arms were folded and she looked fearsome. "But not like this."

"I was just wondering how far he'd have to be pushed until he hit his breaking point," Byakuya
chuckled. "Turns out, not very far at all... I'd like to know how much goading it'd take until he'd kill someone. Aren't you curious too?" He smiled without a care in the world. "You interrupted my fun."

"Never, you rank bag of rotten milk!" he shouted. Byakuya just rolled his eyes at the insult. I'd NEVER...

"Y-you hurt B-Byakuya!" Toko rushed past Kyoko. "What the h-ell is wrong with y-you, you boneless hypocrite! I'll make you p-pay!"

"Quiet, you!" Byakuya demanded, covering his mouth with the cloth so she wouldn't see the blood. Toko shrank back, cowed. "As for you... Why's that? I already told you, you failed as the Ultimate Moral Compass... What's holding you back?"

"That wasn't me--"

"Then why exactly were you in the middle of attacking me before Sakura intervened? What did you hope to accomplish? If you weren't going to kill me after pushing me, why were you en route to me, a defenseless person? You could've chosen to walk away? Taking a page from Leon, hmmm?" Since his consciousness had been overridden, he hadn't even considered that. It chilled him to the bone. Am I capable...? "You talked all about unity and friendship and support before, but where's all that now?"

"You need to be brought to justice for your crimes!"

"By you? What makes you the judge and jury? What about the executioner?"

He did his best to ignore the last barb but he could feel the doubt creeping in. "By anyone! There's no court of law here, so I had to take matters into my own hands!" He had a brief moment of awareness before the mania and sinking rage drowned it out: Is that what I really believe?

"So you think you're a vigilante? What exactly did I do? What crimes did I commit?"

"You turned us on each other, you've dialed up our fears about this fudging place, and you continuously spit on the graves of the dead!"

"And how many of those are crimes, exactly? None. Not felonies, not misdemeanors... Monokuma did all of those on his own. I've never even killed anyone yet."

"YET! You interfered with Chihiro's body! That's obstruction of justice, a huge darn crime!" I would KNOW, Dad is a COP!!

"What, you'd rather I hadn't so the rest of you would've found out it was Oowada straightaway? You wouldn't have had so much time to scream and cry on him if I hadn't."

"YOU-- YOU--" His flagging fury picked back up. Byakuya was successfully turning him against even his new self, although if he didn't consciously realize it.

"No, I think you just wanted to hit me because that's what you think punishment is." Byakuya stated cruelly. "Maybe it's because you're pretending to be Mondo. Or maybe..." He squinted, glasses glinting once more. "You were abused as a child, weren't you?" WH—"You think that if you hit me, that'll make me learn, right? Just like what happened to y--"

His lifelong trauma being invoked pushed him in the complete opposite direction, triggering his old traumas. He freaked out. His anger went up in flames and his emotions plummeted to the ground at terminal velocity. He went limper than a ragdoll, tears streaming down his face. He twisted and was
crying on Sakura's arms, frozen there. In a flash, Kyoko had stepped up and covered Byakuya's mouth with her gloved hand. "That's ENOUGH!" She boomed in very rare form, grabbing the rich boy harshly by the arm and yanking him out of the library, pushing him out though he was still on his feet. She turned her cold, harsh gaze on him, but he didn't flinch. "If I *ever* hear you say something like that to anyone, I will *personally* come collecting."

"Is that a threat?" Byakuya asked, cracking his neck.

"No, Byakuya. It's a promise." Toko stepped up to her to say something but Kyoko gave her a deathly, withering stoic glare that sent her scuttling after Byakuya like a terrified bug. He chuckled as he walked away.

"Put him down," Kyoko said with an air of authority as she walked back into the room. Sakura did as instructed, carefully pulling up a chair for him and lowering him into it. He was still rigid, stuck reliving his own abuse at the hands of Toranosuke.

The two of them sat there with him in silence, Sakura on the ground and Kyoko taking Byakuya's seat. After the flashbacks to his childhood receded, he was hit with a fresh wave of second-trial trauma. They waited until he was able to move a little when washed back to shore. Kyoko started, "Kiyotaka, you shouldn't have done that. Mistakes like that could get you killed."

"I'm not Kiyota--," She glared at him, quelling his urge to correct her, "... Yeah..." He knew that she was right. Even if that weren't true... A Moral Compass would never have... He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

"He was purposefully riling you up to see what you'd do. He's using your vulnerability against you."

"No duh! I know that... But I just couldn't let it be..." That kind of conduct isn't befitting of the Ultimate Moral Compass! Stupid!

"Your anger is understandable..." Sakura started.

"That don't matter..." But I have to know somethin' else. "Why are you even here, tryin' to stop me!?" He demanded of both of them. "I can't forgive you for killing Mondo or locking Alter Ego away, and I've been tellin' you this whole time... I even screamed at both of ya, and you're here now!?"

"Did hitting him make you feel better?" Kyoko asked.

"... No, worse!" He ran his hands through his hair. He had yet another thing to feel bad about. "God's tangled hairbrush..."

"Do you wish we hadn't stopped you?"

"No..." he admitted again. I wasn't really even here... What if that ended like it did with Bro? That terrified him. Am I really capable of... killing?

"That's exactly why we did," Sakura said. "You're in pain and lashing out. Not even in unjustified ways. But we know underneath it all who you are and what your values are."

"You already feel so much guilt about things you *didn't* do. It would've been even worse for you if you had kept going."

"Ghk..." He was crying again. "Was he right...? Did I hit him 'cuz of what G-Grandfather...?"
Sakura looked down. Kyoko responded, voice low, "I can't say for certain, but I don't think so."

"But then... why!?!"

"You're extremely unstable right now. You have zero impulse control and you're manic, hyperactive, and having acute mood swings."

"You've swung like a pendulum to the other side of catatonia," Sakura stated.

"It's like a hyper energetic, hyper aggressive, hyper emotional state. Makoto set it off when he showed you Alter Ego, but it would've come eventually."

He grunted, acknowledging what they were saying, *I still don't think I believe that... I can feel Bro inside me. Is he why I almost... . . . He stared at the ground, trying to keep that thought out of his mind. I have no reason to trust them, not after the Trial... But they do understand me enough to stop me, so maybe their insight has a little truth to it... But they voted for him to die!* The internal conflict was dizzying. And underneath it all, a small part of him did still want to have people he could trust and be close to, which made him feel even worse.

"Can I speak to him again...? I want to hear Bro's voice..."

"No," Kyoko said flatly.

"Why not?!" He started getting wary. "Just let me have this!"

"You're proving why not." She said bitterly. "Even the slightest provocation sets you off."

"Let me see him again, or I'll, I'll, I'll stuff you into a refrigerator!"

Sakura grimaced. "Your false threats won't work on us. Even if they weren't all bark and no bite, we're capable of defending ourselves."

"Ugh! But why won't you let me!?!" He slumped off his chair on his knees, unintentionally in a begging posture. "P-please!!"

"Talking just once with Alter Ego put you in this state. Another time exacerbated it. To talk to him a third time would be an enormous risk to your mental health..."

After a moment of reflecting, he asked, in mental agony, "Then what can I do!?"

"That's for you to decide," Kyoko said. She walked out of the room without even a glance back at him, leaving him and Sakura alone. That lack of answer in no way helped him.

After a strange, tense silence, he asked, "What d'you think...?"

Sakura gave a little shrug after standing. "Bear it," she said before nodding her head at him and departing.

He was all alone on the library floor. He quietly cried himself to sleep among the scattered books and dust.

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When he woke up he blinked blearly. He was in a different place than when he fell asleep. *That tiling...* He’d somehow wound up on the floor of the dorm hall. His mask was back on his face. "Huh...??"
He rubbed his eyes and snapped to his senses, remembering the commotion. “Ugh…” He checked his watch. It was close to 9 pm. He couldn’t bring himself to care that he’d lost time like that, he was just tired.

He stood up and turned toward his room, which was just around the corner. He wanted to go back to sleep… Once he rounded the bend he took off his mask and dropped it. When he went to pick it up he saw a little piece of paper nestled inside. What?? Wuzzat!? It said, “Meet at the Dining Hall.” Wha… Someone slipped that in!? Pickpocketter! He shoved the note back where it was and put the mask in his pocket. He went to use the bathroom and headed there.

_Wonder who put that there…_

When he arrived at his destination, Hiro greeted him. The rest of the room was empty.

“Heeeeey! What d’ya want!??” He asked with irritation as he was not at all fond of the detour.

“In a hurry, huh?”

“I’m busy doin’ STUFF!”

Hiro looked off to the side like he expected the answer but asked just because. “Like what?”

“None of your business…” He squinted. “But getting’ ready for bed…”

“Nice to see you, man. Say, why don’t we go take a bath?”

“Why would *I* want to do that with *you*!?” He glanced at his watch. It was officially 9 pm. He was so out of sync with time that didn’t even know how long he’d been out. “At this hour!?”

“You always talk about nudity and male bonding and intentions and all that, right? I was thinkin… Maybe we could get to know each other better!”

He recoiled. “I don’t wanna get to know a *killer*!”

“Wееееell… My predictions showed me that if you didn’t, something bad would happen, sooooo…”

“You gonna take me HOSTAGE!?” _Don’t make me fight you!_ He didn’t want to fight.

“N-no way! But I saw that uh… You’ll fail your classes if you don’t come with me!”

That bamboozled him. “What!? Fail!?”

“Yes! Big ol’ F… Right between the eyes!”

“How—“

“All of them. Forever!”

_Well THAT’s terrifying…!_ In his compromised state he didn’t really consider the asininity of having grades when he didn’t even have classes. “… Whatever. Let’s get naked… I guess.”

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He had been the first one Hiro brought there. Hina brought Sakura, Kyoko brought Toko and Celeste, and Hifumi brought Byakuya. Everyone but the first two kept completely to themselves. The tension in the air between Byakuya and Kiyondo, as well as the latter and Hifumi, was so solid
one could build a house on it; the presence of Sakura and Kyoko kept both of the others from engaging with the moral compass.

He felt himself getting more and more coiled up. He wanted to get the hell out of there... And being stuck there meant that on top of everything else he was forced to think about his time in the sauna with Mondo, which made him very bitter. When Hiro finally entered the door with Makoto in tow, Kiyondo couldn’t stop himself. As he looked angrily at his wristwatch, he called out, “Hey! You! How long were you gonna keep us waiting!? It's almost 10 o'clock, you know that!? Bedtime for all the good little boys and girls!” *Don’t think I’m either anymore… But I need sleep! And I’m not gonna break rules!!!*

“Tch... Shut up...” Hifumi said.

Kiyondo’s head pivoted so quickly to look at the boy that it practically flew off his hinges. “What’d you say!? You want me to make you cry, little girl?!”

“Taka... Still on edge, hm?” sneered Byakuya, “Well, maybe it's a good thing. Maybe he's finally starting to grow a personality.”

And now he swiveled in the other direction. “What—!? You got a lotta poop fallin' outta that mouth of yours, you know that!?” *Being subjected to all this bullcrap didn’t make me have a personality, it's just bringin’ it down!*

“How rude...” Toko spat. “A maggot like you has no right to speak that way to our heaven-sent Master...!” *Why is EVERYONE testin’ me today!?*

Celeste chuckled. “Hm? Are you back to your normal gloomy self? I can hardly keep track at this point.” Toko stuttered at her to shut up and Hiro, trying to smooth over the dynamics, said everyone was there now.

“You wanted us all to meet here, right Kyoko?” Sakura asked tiredly. “So, what are we doing here?”

“Isn't it obvious? It's gotta have something to do with Alter Ego, right!!?” Hiro suggested.

“Yeah, totally!” Hina said enthusiastically. “Did he finally find a clue? What is it? A way out!? The mastermind's true identity!?”

“Like I said, it's almost 10! Hurry up and spill it!” Kiyondo demanded. *Whatever it's about, why NOW??*

“I'm curious, as well,” Byakuya said. “So long as it's not boring...”

“Pff.” Hifumi scoffed. “You're such a jerk...”

Hiro scratched his head. “Kyoko sure is taking her sweet time with this...” She was eyeing each of them up for some reason.

“A clue! A clue!” Hina said excitedly. “We finally found a clue! C'mon, we gotta ask Kyoko what it is!”

“This may be about Alter Ego, but... Kyoko seems to be acting kind of strange...” Sakura observed. *Why ain’t she talkin’!?*

“It is nearly nighttime, is it not? If we absolutely must converse, I would at least like to do it quickly.” Celeste quietly instructed. *Let’s get this show on the ROAD!*
After what felt like an eternity, Kyoko said simply: “It's gone.” Makoto asked what she meant. “I came here a little earlier to check up on things, and that's when I discovered... Alter Ego — the laptop — has disappeared...”

The students reacted in shock. Kiyondo couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You can't be fudgin’ serious! What'd you do with him!?” No dang way she just left him out in the open!

“Was it the mastermind?” Celeste asked. “Did they finally notice what we were up to?”

“I'd told Alter Ego to yell if anyone he didn't recognize appeared. If it was the mastermind, I'm sure he would have alerted us...” Hina suggested they’d missed the AI calling out. “I was in the laundry right next door all day. There's no way I wouldn't have heard it.” The concept of his last link to Mondo, and his only *friend* left just disappearing into thin air swept out his legs from underneath him. He sat on the floor and pressed his fist to his cheek in turmoil.

“The solution to this particular mystery is obvious!” Hifumi shouted triumphantly. “It could only have been... him! Mr. Ishimaru! You stole her, didn't you!?”

“What!?” That's just... INSULTING! “I'm the Ultimate Moral Compass!” Even if I've failed in some respects... “I would never do something like that!”

“I don't think it counts when you say it about yourself like that...” Hina cringed.

“You're the suspicious one here!” He jabbed his finger at Hifumi, now on the attack. “You're nothin' but a big, jiggling sack of fat!”

He’d never say such mean things to Hifumi, or anyone else... But he truly wasn’t in his right mind. As Kiyondo, he didn’t even think twice about it.

“Shows what you know,” Hifumi batted back. “This isn't my true form! I still have three more transformations left! Er... wait, I mean — it wasn't me! Everyone knows YOU'RE the thief!”

“Wrong! It's you!” Hiro said he was sure it was one of them and to hurry up and confess. It was him!!!

“No. There's no way either one of them did it,” Kyoko explained. “I told Alter Ego to yell if either Taka or Hifumi came into the dressing room.”

“Wh... what?” That made Kiyondo want to cry.

“It was a countermeasure against the clear danger that one of them might come for it.” Did she think I’d break in!? Celeste said she didn’t hear any yelling. “Exactly. Which means it wasn't them.”

As the group tried to figure out the culprit, Byakuya weighed in with his usual divisionary tactics. “The fundamental circumstances are becoming clear... If it wasn't the mastermind, and it wasn't Taka or Hifumi... then quite simply, it was someone else. Makoto, Celeste, Sakura, Hina, Toko, or myself... One of us must be the thief.” With how he was earlier... It's prolly him!

“Why would any of US wanna steal Alter Ego!?” Hina lobbied.

“How about this for a reason? There is a traitor among us.” That sent a shock throughout the room. Kiyondo shook his head as if to check that he heard correctly. “One of us is working for the mastermind—a spy. And that's the one who stole Alter Ego. Can you deny the possibility?” Makoto did, but the rich man continued on. “I've actually been thinking for some time now that there might be a spy among us. The mastermind brought someone in to help keep things moving smoothly.” No
one said a word. “Why do you not speak? Are you struck silent by your inability to comprehend such a possibility?” No one better be a narc… But that’s not why we’re here!

“I don't care!” Hifumi cried out. “I don't care... who... Someone, anyone... save her... Please, rescue her... I'm begging you... I just want to see her smiling face again...

“Same here,” Kiyondo said begrudgingly. “How many times do they hafta kill bro before they're happy...?” 4? 5? 207!? “I'll beg, I'll scrape my head across the ground. Just please give him back...!” I'd do *anything*...

“This is pretty messed up...” Hina said. “But still, I think I kinda get how they feel...” I just SAID... Do I gotta repeat!?

“I think Alter Ego is most likely still safe, for the moment at least.” Thank God...

Celeste: “If they wanted to destroy it, they wouldn't have taken it. They would've done it right here.”

Sakura: “So you're saying whoever did it has something else in mind for him...”

Kiyondo: “That doesn't matter. Nothing... nothing else matters... No matter what it takes, I'm gonna get him back! That's my promise as a man!” I'll search to the end of the Earth!!

Hifumi: “I swear I'll save her! Using the power of love...!” Just then, the bedtime announcement sounded.

“It is unfortunate, but we will have to leave the search for tomorrow,” Celeste said with a note of finality. “For now, everyone get some sleep.”

“How can you be so casual!” Hifumi shouted. “We don't have time to wait around!” Kiyondo was about to agree that this was clearly urgent, at least to him and Hifumi, but Celeste cut him off.

“What good are you if you are too tired? You will be much more effective after a good night's sleep.”

“Who gives a crap about "effective"!?” Kiyondo asked incredulously. “We're talkin' about our FEELINGS here!” All discussion about important stuff is *important*, doesn’t matter how good it is!

“Anything we do at night brings a higher chance of the mastermind noticing us. Celeste is right. We should begin our investigation tomorrow morning. What do you think, Makoto?” No--

“I... agree with you. If we run around tonight in a panic, the mastermind is sure to notice, and we won't get anything done. Taka, Hifumi... I know how you feel right now, but... It's best if, just for tonight... you can try to endure it.”

“Ngh...!” Kiyondo clutched at his head.

“Gah...” And Hifumi clutched at his heart.

Celeste dismissed them all. While the others were leaving, Kiyondo moped over to Sakura.

“Sakura?”

She seemed surprised. “Yes?”

“Can I come by your room tomorrow?”
She tilted her head toward him. “Why?”

“You… Kept offerin’ to chat. I know… Well, I’m different now… But wanna take you up on that. If it’s not expired.” I’m all tangled up… But there’s things I need to say…

She looked puzzled. “Yes. If I don’t answer, just leave a note under my door and I’ll come to you when I’m no longer busy.”

“I, uh, I’m feeling kinda fuzzy…”

“You’ve been through a lot today. And you have a massive sleep debt. Go rest. We’ll search in the morning.”

He sighed in defeat. “’Kay…” He stood up and stretched his arms above his head. “Er… Later.”

She offered him a small smile. He left that room and went to his own. When he went to turn off his light, he noticed another piece of paper in the entranceway to his room.

He scrunched his eyes and rubbed them with the backs of his hands. He was so tired…

But he got up to get it anyway. It said, “I found a hole maybe we can use to escape. Monokuma can’t find out, so don’t tell anyone else for now. Let’s meet in the rec room at 1 a.m.”

He squinted at it in disbelief. “Escape…? Did… Did someone finally…” The thought of leaving this hellhole and the killer beasts within snapped him out of his sleepy haze with a rush of adrenaline. “Who… What…” Is someone lookin’ out for me!? Maybe they know how bad I need to get out! But to go there would require breaking the nighttime rule… And Monokuma’s.

He didn’t want to break even one rule. That would go against his duty to follow the rules and uphold order.

But regaardless of everything, he wanted to make sure everyone else could get out, too. And face consequences when needed… That would go with his duty to uphold justice and righteousness…

My duty… I’m the Ultimate Moral Compass… Even if I can’t lead, even if I’m unbefitting the title due to today, or due to Taka’s actions… I gotta prove in at least one action I’m worthy. But bigger than that… I can’t let just let ’em kill each other and rot here…

He never wanted to break a rule… Unless it was absolutely necessary.

If I don’t go, they might just skedaddle… But if I go, I could send help back!

So break a rule, he would.
Thud.

Thud. … *Huh?*

Thud. *What’s that feelin’?*

Thud. Thud. He opened his eyes. He was in the pool room, his vision was rather restricted, and Kyoko was standing in front of him.

Kicking his leg. Or something around it? He still felt the jolt, but it didn’t hurt. Thud. “What…”

She stood straight and folded her arms across her chest. “I was wondering when you’d wake up,” she said evenly.

“What’s happenin’?” He cleared his throat. “What’s blockin’ my eyes?” His mind was hazy, like he’d been dunked in static. There was a weird, hard texture against his body. *Don’t like that…* Though he was now usually too preoccupied or caught up in something to consciously stim, it didn’t change his texture or taste particulars. He tried to grasp his sleeves but there was something enveloping his hands. His uniform felt all creased and rumpled against his skin.

“You—“

Just then, Hina barreled through the door. “Oh, Kyoko! We finally found—” She noticed what else was happening in the room. She pointed at Kiyondo. “Who… Is that…”

“It’s Kiyotaka.”

“Kiyondo!” he bitterly corrected. *Get it straight!*

“Then that means…” Hina said, looking aghast for a beat before she sprinted out of the room.

“Huh? Somethin’ big goin’ down?” *Fast?*

Kyoko frowned. “Very.”

*Uhh… Maybe we got good luck! “We getting out?”*

“*Are* we?”

“Hey, that’s cheatin’! I asked first!” *Whazzat even s’posed to *mean*?*
Makoto, Byakuya, Celestia, and Hina burst into the room. The former almost slipped on the tile floor, but Hina grabbed him in time. “I found Taka,” Kyoko said when they were by the top of the pool nearby. She squinted at him when she sensed he was about to correct her. She cut him off, “He was jammed into the pool room locker.” *I was?!* “It looked like he was fast asleep, so I kicked him and woke him up.”

“Why’d you keep kickin’!? Think I’m a practice dummy?!”

“I tried nudging you and calling your name but you didn’t respond. You needed to wake up.”

“Course I wouldn’t respond to that guy’s name! He’s dead!” No one acknowledged that. His frustration from the previous day was already starting to resurge.

Makoto asked where Kyoko, who had also apparently been missing, had been. She told him, quite forcibly, to never mind. “Anyway. First of all… Taka, you need to explain to us why you’re dressed like that.”

“Dressed like—” He lifted his arm, which was unusually heavy, and tried but failed to change the angle of his head. *Weird…* Since he couldn’t get closer, he looked at said arm out of the corner of his eye. It was covered in some kind of thick cubes and a huge black glove. “What the--!??” Makoto held out his eHandbook with the screen turned off and used it as a reflective surface to show Taka the full outfit. It showed some kind of large, outlandish robotic character with the initials “R” and “J” on the shoulders. “WHAT THE FUDGE???? That’s… me!?” He made a fist, and the mech on the screen responded in kind. “I don’t even…” *HOW??*

“How did you end up like this?” Makoto asked.

“I dunno, you tell me!! I don’t know what’s goin’ on… I don’t even know why I was asleep!” According to Kyoko!

“I don’t care.” Byakuya said. “Do something about that costume. It pains me just to look at you. Even more than normal.” Kiyondo grumbled and tried to take off one of the handpieces, but his fine motor control was out the window due to the blocky structures. He could either have an open or closed hand. He couldn’t lift his arm past his chest. He even tried to shrug his shoulders but nothing happened. He tried to move more but his joints were rather restricted by the getup. *What IS this thing!? And WHY is it so hard to move??*

“Whatever this poop is… I can’t!” He started to hyperventilate. *Trapped!* Celeste asked why he’d make something he couldn’t escape. “I didn’t make this s-stupid fudgin’ thing!” His chest was starting to get tight. All this sensory input was just so completely wrong and he didn’t even know how it got that way. He wasn’t usually super claustrophobic… But since he couldn’t actually get it off, he was scared he was stuck in the weird costume.

“There's a clasp on the back that's keeping you from getting it off. It looks pretty sturdy. I don't think you can get it off on your own.” *Someone shoulda SAID that!* “We don't really have a choice. Let's help him…”

The group slowly disassembled the robot costume piece by piece, starting at the feet and working upwards. He was on high alert the whole time. *Don’t like ‘em being so close… Killers…* Once it was finally completely off and the potential for danger passed, he took a deep breath and adjusted his uniform while putting a little distance between himself and the others. *Thank God that fudgin’ ugly thing’s off!* He stretched his back, touching his toes, and said, “Took you long enough!! What’s up??” He looked at his watch. 4 p.m.!!
“Isn’t it kinda weird how perfectly the suit fits him...?” Hina asked.

Celeste agreed. “More to the point, nobody but Taka would be able to wear that costume.”

He was already wary and confused, and this commentary made both worse. “H-hey! You don’t know that!” It’s snug, yeah, but it could be on anybody!

“Don’t bother trying to act innocent,” Celeste said coldly People talking over him, making assumptions, and leaving out details were things that he didn’t like on a *good* day… “The blueprints were in your room, as well. In other words, it is obvious to everyone that you made this costume.” The others agreed that they’d seen the design docs in his room. Privacy invasion!! “Why were you in my room!? If anything’s been touched, I’m gonna go berserk!!

“Then it’s obvious...” Hina said. Wait, blueprints!? “The one who put this costume on and went around attacking everyone... was Taka!”

He gasped. “Attacking!? Everyone!?! Is somebody hurt!?”

“Shall we tie him up and gag him?” Celeste asked. No thanks!

“Good idea!” Hina said. “We wouldn't want him killing anyone else...” She reached back to the wall for a pool floater and extra pool lane flag chain with which to bind him.

He stepped back in shock, almost tripping. “K-KILLING!!?” NO!!!

“H-Hold on, guys. I think that's going a little far...” Makoto said. Kyoko said that even as a suspect, Taka deserved equal treatment as much as any other potential suspect they’d interrogated.

That wasn’t what was important to him. He was horrified… “What the fudge is HAPPENING!? Someone... someone DIED!?”

“You can't talk your way out of this.” Hina said. “It's been decided... You killed them!”

“I’m no -- Them...? Who died!?” Am I not the only one that says ‘screw the binar-

“You're the only one who can wear this costume. So who else could possibly be the costumed attacker!?”

That successfully diverted his attention. His frustration and confusion were surging. How can she know!? “Try it on yourself, poop for brains! Ya won’t say what happened, but I deserve a FAIR TRIAL! Test your little THEORY!”

“Fine! If you're gonna be a jerk about it, I will!” No, YOU! And that she did. It took her a few minutes but she got it on by herself. Her movement was incredibly restricted. Kiyondo stepped to the side and examined the back. There was, indeed, a latch Makoto flipped that both held the suit in place and prevented the wearer from disassembling it without outside help. “Ahh! See, look! See how loose it is? I mean, come on... I'm blind as a bat in here! Can't see my feet at all. I'm surprised you got anywhere in this thing!”

“Nuh-uh! Not me!” Never sleepwalked in my life!

“And not to mention—! You totally can't bend at the waist! Seems like a pretty obvious oversight...” Makoto and Kyoko helped her take it back off.

“Then whoever made it half-butted it! You better not think I’d do THAT, too!!”
“I mean, it seems pretty clear that nobody but Taka coulda fit into this dumb costume! Well? Now you're all out of excuses.” Screw you!

“It musta been cuz you’re a chick!” Her shapes are super different! “One of the dudes should try it!” Makoto did and observed that the arms were far too long for him.

“Wait! You’re the same size as Hina!” Half a foot shorter than me! And at *least* 50 pounds! “Someone closer to me-size oughta!”

“And who would you suggest?” Celeste asked. He looked around at who was in the room.

He pursed his lips. The only one here... “Uhh… Byaku--”

“No.” The rich man sneered.

“Why--”

“I’m not cooperating with you. Or wearing something that’s been in a 50 foot radius of you, for that matter.”

His heart, as Kiyondo, wasn’t just on his sleeve – it was his entire uniform. “Cuz I’m me? Cuz I’m an Ishimaru? Cuz I’m POOR?!” He held up his fist. He certainly wouldn’t enjoy helping Byakuya in any way, shape, or form, but he’d do it if it were important like this. Byakuya pushed his cooking frustration and confusion to a boil. “Say that again, I’ll--”

“Do what exactly? Attack me again?”

“I—”

“Or maybe attack like you attacked the others? You ARE the suspect here...” No… … …

“And who would you suggest?” Celeste interrupted. What *would* I have… “Byakuya is several inches taller, no? Meaning that for him, the arms and legs would be the opposite – too short. It was obviously made for someone of your specific proportions.”

“See!? I told you it was impossible!” Hina said. Celeste agreed.

“Son of a beeswax…!” He rubbed eyes. He was running out of options. Maybe… “Betcha whoever has another one that fits THEM, and they staged whatever!” Celeste insisted he show them evidence of that theory. “What!? You don’t have proof either!!”

“You claim there is another suit, yes? Then you must find it and show it to us.” Where’s *your* proof that I did--

“Who cares!” Hina said. “Taka is the only one without an alibi during this whole thing anyway! Which is how we know it was him!”

“I don’t even know what HAPPENED!!” He growled. Unless I wasn’t in my own head, I…

That was a realization. Now he had the beginnings of a turbulent, sinking feeling added to the mix.

Makoto turned to him. “Um, Taka--”

“I swear to God—” He put up his hands. “I’m KIYONDO! I’m not gonna chitchat unless you get it right!!”
“K-Kiyondo?”

“See, practicin’ your ABCs helps!” He jabbed his finger at the antenna-haired boy. “You gonna stand there and accuse me of more stuff I didn’t do?” Makoto didn’t respond. “I don’t know what’s goin’ on…”

“I know…”

“Well, why ain’t you tellin’ me?!” Makoto was silent again. Why ain’t ANY of them!? “The accused has the right to know the details!” Is he a clam!?

“W-well…”

“I know somebody’s dead, Makoto…” Was he highly distractable, derailable, and otherwise taken off topic? Yes. But unable to remember something so important? Absolutely not. Who do I gotta pry it outta!? “Quit beatin’ around the bush and SAY who it is!!”

“It’s Hifumi… And Hiro.”

“T-TWO people!?” He sank to his knees. One death was awful enough, but two was heart-stopping. “Hifumi and Hiro…? They’re… g-gone?” His voice was uncharacteristically shrunken.

He clutched at his chest. Dead… Dead dead…? The reality of what had taken place and what he was being accused of sank in all at once. He started to panic. Hina questioned his reaction since she was sure he’d did it. “Nuh-uh!” He panted. Past his denial, he was starting to wonder. “Why would I —“

“Alter Ego.” Celeste said simply.

That’s right, he’s missin’… “I… I wouldn’t…” My run-in with that jerk yesterday… The doubt about his incapacity to kill, planted during his depressive catatonia and sprouted yesterday due to Byakuya’s provocation, was blossoming now. “…Would I?” Makoto looked away.

“Tell us what you know,” Kyoko instructed. “What’s the last thing you recall?”

“U-uh,” He shook his head, trying to focus on the topic at hand. The feelings were rising inside, a fire spreading in an old wooden home. “I-I got this weird note last night.” He explained what it’d said. “So I stayed up and went there. But then I fell asleep... I guess? And woke up here.”

“Fell asleep?” Makoto asked.

“I don’t remember…” He could only think of two reasons why he couldn’t recall. He posited one of them: “Maybe it was a set up or somethin’?”

“Why would you comply with a note that was clearly a trap?” Byakuya asked. “You’re not that stupid, are you?”

“Grrrrgh… I wanted to escape so I could go get help!” His fists shook.

“Ah, so you are, indeed. *that* stupid. Got it.” What the f--

“You wanted to help the rest of us?” Celeste interrupted. “Don’t pretend you haven’t been telling us you wish we’re dead for the past month.” That’s not what I meant… is it!?

Now he straight up felt cornered. His anger was transmuting into uncertainty about his role in today’s events as well as his true intentions all along. “I—“
“You asked if it could’ve been a setup,” Makoto could see the sparks flying so he cut Kiyondo off, “Why do you think that?”

“I’d remember conkin’ out… And I’d never do it outside the dorms, idiot! That’s ILLEGAL!”

“So is attacking and killing people, but you didn’t let *that* stop you!” Hina said. He turned to her, stricken and speechless. She believes…

“Are you sure about that, Kiyotaka?” Kyoko prodded to grab his attention. “You were falling asleep in the library the other day. The only reason it didn’t count was because Sakura thought to come back and get you.”

“Wh—So that’s how I ended up in the dorm hall…” I was so wound up and tired I didn’t get a chance to think about it.

“She believes…”

“Having the note would help. Do you?” Makoto asked.

Kiyondo dug in his pockets, quickly becoming frantic. Taka would never’ve lost it! “Shoot! I swear I had it—“

“Or it never existed at all. Your claim could be true, but you need to provide hard proof. Anything else is just speculation.” Celeste said. He thought about arguing with her again, but he was certainly wondering what the truth was, himself…

“Now then, shall we resume our investigation?” Byakuya redirected, “There’s no time to waste before the class trial begins.”

“H-how long has it been since… Somebody *took* ‘em?” Kiyondo asked.

“Long enough to have thoroughly checked all the crime scenes,” Kyoko said. “Monokuma could beckon at any moment.”

“Why keep investigating?” Hina said. “We already know it was you, Taka! Er, Kiyondo… Whatever! Why did you kill them!?” He was at a loss for words. Why would I? “Was it for Alter Ego? Or the money? You ARE broke, you know!”

That irked him. “How DARE you imply that poor people—“

Byakuya: “This is just wasting our time. If you have time to yell and carry on, you have time to search for your evidence. Right?”

“Ugh… I guess.” Kiyondo admitted. Everyone else left, but before Makoto and Kyoko exited he asked of the former, “Do ya think it’s true…?”

“I think all of this is suspicious, but I have no opinion on your involvement.”

“What about what you told Taka during the first investigation…? You said ya didn’t think he was capable…”

“Are you Kiyotaka, or are you not?” That hit him right in the core. Stung… “Besides, I don’t have a full picture of what happened today. And your recent actions are cause for wonder…” Even she
doesn’t think I’m innocent… He looked down. “Let’s go, Makoto. We have to hurry.”

“Wait,” Makoto said. “I know the others will be out for blood, but… I’ll make sure we’re as thorough this time, okay? Even if you *did*, you know… Do it.” He nodded at Kiyondo and the two left. Kiyondo felt quite cold – he was shivering. And Makoto... When we bathed, did he see a killer?

There was only one person left alive that didn’t already suspect him…

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Sakura was at the scene of the (last) crime. Kiyondo forced himself to go into the room, to look at the people he’d been informed he had murdered. He stared so long that when he closed his eyes he could see them in bass relief.

Since the wounds were on the sides of their heads, he could tell they’d been ambushed. Bashed their brains in... What an awful way to die...

“Kiyondo,” Sakura said, snapping him out of it.

“H-huh? Oh. Sakura,” He said. He couldn’t meet her eyes.

“Why did you come here?” She asked neutrally.

“Somethin’ I wanna say…”

“Yes?”

“Everyone thinks I’m the killer.”

“Oh…” He couldn’t tell, but she looked sorrowful without surprise. “I’m sorry to hear that. I haven’t heard from them yet, you beat them here.”

“I. I uh, I wanna talk about our feelings.” Before the chance is dead too.

“What is it?”

“I’m s-sorry. For flippin’ out on ya, treatin’ you like dirt… Takin’ you for granted. All that.”

She was pensive. “I see…”

“You stayed even when I was shovin’ you away so hard. I dunno if Kyoko’s theories about what’s up with me are right but… She’s on the mark about me bein’ all over the place and lashin’ out…”

“You certainly have been.”

“Yeah.” I don’t know my own limit anymore… “Not an excuse, just... Admittin’ she was right. Even when I want nothin’ to do with any of you, I still want you there… It doesn’t make sense.” I dunno how to reconcile it. “But, yeah, I’m sorry for bein’ cruel. No way anyone else’d want to hear this now, since they think I ganked Hifumi and Hiro…”

“Do you want me to pass it on if...?”

“Y-yep, you got it…” He looked down. The weight on his soul was getting heavier by the second, as was his belief that he had committed the murders he was accused of. There simply wasn’t anyone else who could’ve done it, or who was potentially prone to doing it…
“Thank you for coming to me. I accept your apology.”

He startled. “Just like that!?”

“It has nothing to do with whatever happened today, whether you did it or not.”

“Thanks…” They stood there in silence for a long minute until he asked, “Do you think… I did?”

“I have no idea.” She crossed her muscular arms. “I’m not going to make the mistake of jumping to any kind of conclusion but your lack of alibi is quite suspicious. This scenario has shown us that those we think incapable of heinous acts can be pushed into committing them…”

He flinched. Her too. “I-I s-see…”

“You should get ready for the trial. It will be especially difficult being under the crosshairs, I imagine. I’ll be sure to pass on what you told me.”

“Thanks…”

“Good luck, Kiyondo.” He flinched. That time, name recognition made him feel even more uneasy.

He nodded, his mouth a firm line, and left the room. Hina happened to pass him on the way downstairs, but she gave him a wide berth and said nothing.

Feeling a sense of betrayal would mean that he had belief left in himself.

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He sat in the dining hall by his lonesome, drinking his famous green tea. Reflecting. Crying. He had his notepad out, but he didn’t know what to do and his tears splashing onto it made it soggy anyway.

Everyone lost their faith…

Hiro’s faith in him as a leader and do-er.

Hifumi’s faith in him as someone to learn from.

Byakuya’s faith in his ineffectiveness and weakness.

Celeste’s faith in his asininity and inability to adapt.

Makoto’s faith in his innocence and good-naturedness.

Sakura’s faith in his reliability and committedness.

Hina’s faith in him as a moral person and friend.

Kyoko’s faith in his inability to intentionally inflict harm or death to others…

All of these individual faiths, gone. The faith of the group, gone. Broken… By my own hand. All of them hurt, even the bad ones, but the ones that especially ached were the ones of the impromptu group who’d been there by his side in the wake of Mondo’s execution, and even his mania. Makoto, Sakura, Hina, and Kyoko. I might not get the chance to repair them…

And now Hiro and Hifumi were cold and stiff, and he was he prime suspect. He was responsible for them. He’d even treated them cruelly before they died, especially Hifumi. His own words rang
through his head, like calling the latter a “jiggling sack of fat”. *Even if this is a frame job, I failed just like that loser Kiyotaka did… I couldn’t even protect Alter Ego…* The outward aggression had turned inward. He felt even less like ‘himself’ than he had when at the height of mania. The world seemed, to him, to be almost desaturated.

*Mondo would’ve lost faith, too… And Chihiro. I thought I lost everything after… After… He died… But it’s only now that everyone is really gone… Even Alter Ego. It’s cuz of how I’ve been acting. I don’t know who I am anymore… Was Kyoko right? Was *Byakuya* right? Why am I like this? What if I hadn’t been so bad to them…?*

As the minutes passed, he sank deeper and deeper. His thoughts raced like rapids, though his movements were slow.

*Did I do it? Did I kill them…? Maybe I wasn’t drugged… Maybe I blacked out and did it, just like Mondo did… They were even bludgeoned, too…* He had been more than afraid of what he was capable of the previous day, but now there were two bodies not just on his watch, but under his name. It wasn’t a theoretical anymore. Two less of his cohort were alive and breathing and dreaming and hoping. *Did I take their futures away…?*

He was flashing backward in many directions. His experiences and traumas and interactions were blending together in a formless mass of fear and agony indistinguishable from one another. He was shuddering and panicking again as he wept. *Did I become their ball and chain, draggin’ them to the bottom of the sea? Did I act like Grandfather to them?* All the work he’d done on himself was in splinters. *At least he didn’t successfully kill me… I came out the other side. But Hiro and Hifumi didn’t… and it’s my fault. Just like how he treated me was my fault… And he died alone cuz of me, too…*

*Those two woulda been easy to get the jump on…What woulda happened if Sakura and Kyoko didn’t intervene with Byakuya? Would I have killed him, too?*

He was becoming more and more convinced he was guilty with every passing second. Just like the others, he didn’t see how he couldn’t have possibly killed them. He believed they were right. He’d lost his own faith in himself, his reality, and everything he stood for.

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Feeling like he needed to do something, he slowly made his way to his room. He saw the strange blueprints and materials for the Robo Justice costume but he barely even noticed them other than as things that were in his way. He took a minute to look around at his room for what he thought would be the last time. *I didn’t live up to what I was supposed to be.* He made a beeline for his dresser and pulled out what he’d been hiding from himself since the execution:

The red scarf Mondo had won him and the red-lavender rose he’d carved out of the gachapon capsules he’d gathered. His distractability had had a single perk – they had been out of sight, and therefore out of mind. That was, until he actively flashed back to their existence and what they meant to him. Now was the time he’d been hit with those memories the most since he’d become someone else.

Kiyondo burst into even greater tears and fell to the floor while clutching them. Even knowing that he was guilty, even knowing Mondo would’ve lost his faith in him long ago (or would have eventually), he couldn’t bear to leave these behind.

*His love is in these…* He removed the medal from his chest from his former high school. *Kaiseidan High… I fought and crawled my way to get to the top of the top academics school in Japan… From*
nothing. To nothing, I return. He unpinned his armband. This is proof my moral purity and leadership of the Morals Committees… With my actions, I don’t deserve to wear either of these. Blood is on my hands. I fell in love with a killer and became one myself… Was it Mondo's soul inside him that caused it? Or was it his own? It's all me… What would past me say if he saw this?

What would Taka say…?

He pinned the flower to the other side of his chest. And he tied the scarf around his arm, knotted in a way so it was always touching his hand. He tried not to think of it as a comfort, as bloodied, blackened men like him did not deserve such.

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When Monokuma rang the bell, Kiyondo struggled to make it there. He was still in the throes of deep anxiety, moving slowly, and he had been crying so hard he could barely see. I did it… When he finally got to the room with the red-padded doors, he saw he was the latest comer. Last one there… Never to leave.

Multiple Monokumas popped out of thin air. “Hello! (Hello...! Hello...)” The others reacted and had dialogue with him about it, but Kiyondo was completely checked out. Finally he said, “Then if everyone's here and ready to go, please board the pain train! Er... elevator. I'll see you guys down there!”

“Okay then, shall we?” Byakuya said.

“W-wait,” Kiyondo said, voice and breath thick. He tried to clear his throat but it didn’t really help. “I’m not ready…”

“… You look awful, even by *your* standards,” Byakuya observed.

“You'll NEVER be ready!” Hina yelled. “You can't run away anymore, Taka. You're gonna pay for your sins...”

He just stood there and took it, saying, “I know… Y-you’ll all see to it that I get… what I d-deserve.”

“That reminds me...” Celeste asked. “Did you ever find the other costume? Or the note?” He didn’t say anything. “How unfortunate. Then it would seem we have our culprit.”

“I’m s-sorry, everyone... For how—“

“This isn't the place to talk about it.” Kyoko said abruptly. “Everyone needs to save their accusations and apologies for when we get to the courtroom.”

“She's right.” Byakuya shrugged. “Let's get down there first. Then the story can really begin...”

*I’m sure I did it. I want to know *why*.*

They boarded the elevator. Again, Kiyondo was last. He stood in the corner, away from the rest of them.

The sensation of descending to Hell was the most unpleasant it had ever been. He was so nervous that when the elevator hit the ground and the rest departed, he bent over and threw up.
Chapter Notes

I didn't want to split this trial into two like usual, so here's a really long chapter!

tw: the headspaces he's had this whole chapter, as well as his trauma about his Grandfather being triggered. also, a false rape accusation is part of the frame job (it was canon but never addressed)

“Hmhmhm...” Monokuma giggled once the doors opened. Kiyondo was checked out, stuck in his own head. “When I see all of you gathered together like this... I realize just how few of you there are left! Your school life is slowly reaching its climax!” The Head Bear chided. *Eight left... I'll make it seven, soon.* The others argued with him, pointing out he was the cause of their problems and urging him to start the trial. “Don't rush me! Of course I'm gonna start it! I would never be like, 'Stay tuned for the action-packed class trial after this commercial break!' I'd never hold out on you like that! HubbaWHAT is that in MY royal court elevator!?”

“Kiyotaka threw up,” Kyoko said. That nudged him slightly out of dissociation. *Huh?*

“You kids and your bodily functions... Who’s got cleanup duty this week?”

“H-Hifumi...” Kiyondo said. *I killed him...*

“Well then! That poor little pervy fella! Guess you’ll have to make due!” He unzipped his stomach and pulled out a long towel. He snapped his fingers and a pair of Monokumas in maid outfits set a bucket of water and mop in front of Kiyondo.

Sakura raised her eyebrow. “He’s in no state to—“

“He better be, since he did it!” *Penance... I'd clean up puke for the rest of forever if... “Now, quick, clean it up before your depressing stomach acid eats away the tile finish!”* Kiyondo wordlessly did as instructed. He always *was* good at cleaning, after all. He moved almost robotically. “...Okay, let's begin! Get to your assigned seats!” Everyone assumed their regular places. Looking out at the sea of crossed-out memorial photos turned his blood to ice. *All of 'em cuz of Taka and me...* He still felt guilty due to the earlier deaths, even though he’d divorced himself from the self he viewed as responsible. The latest deaths, however, he hung completely on his new self. Monokuma broke down the class trial rules and regulations, as usual.

Before he could even start it officially, Hina interrupted: “We already know who did it!”

“Wuzzat...?”

“It was Taka,” said Celeste. “He does not have an alibi for when the murders took place, and we found him in that suit."

“Don't try and deny it,” Hina spat. “You killed them!” *I'm not gonna!*

*She’s right. This is my fault.* “I don’t know how it h-happened but—“
“Yes you do! Shut your murdering mouth, murderer!” Genocide Jack spat.

His grief-stricken, guilt-ridden manic state made him even more reactive. “W-who are YOU calling a murderer!? You’re a SERIAL KILLER!” Kiyondo shouted. Get off your high horse! You’re down here with ME!

“I am sorry to say, Taka, but we do have evidence... Blueprints for the suit... Parts we assume were used to build it... And all of it was found in your room,” Celeste said. “You have to admit, the evidence is quite compelling. It points to you as having created the suit and wearing it while committing crime after crime...” I musta done it all while blacked out...

He nodded solemnly. “I know. I’m guilty. I did it... I agree with you.” There simply wasn’t any other person who could’ve done it.

“We have a confession already,” Celeste said. Monokuma leaned forward in his gilded throne. “Shall we put it to v-”

“A vote now would be entirely premature,” Kyoko said. “We haven’t even discussed anything yet.”

“But,” Kiyondo replied, “I know this was me. No point wastin’ energy. It’s time for me to walk off the plank.”

“Do you know *how* you did it? Or *why*? Or even, perhaps, *when*?”

“What...?” I guess I don’t know what exactly I did either... It’s not like he was part of the investigation – he hadn’t even seen the corpses until after he woke up, to his knowledge anyway.

Hina butted in, “Why does that matter? He *confessed*!”

“What if things aren’t what they seem?” Kyoko pushed. But they are!

“So what?” Hina said. “It’s not like Leon or Mondo admitted it right away! But they still did it!”

Kiyondo flinched. “But I am sayin’ I did it right off the bat... So why wait?”

“Tell me, Kiyotaka...” Kyoko said, looking him directly in the eye. Even as someone who was taught to stare uncomfortably at people to perform “eye contact, this was deeply unnerving given the context. Feels like she’s starin’ right through me! Into where my soul is! “Would we be bringing true justice to Hiro and Hifumi if we let you die without even figuring *how* you did it?”

“Ghhhk! I...” He shook a little. He bent over his podium, clutching the sides.

“How could we carry on their hopes and dreams if we don’t even know why they died?” Makoto asked.

“Taka, why...?” Hina asked with tears in her eyes. “Why did you kill them?”

“I...” He closed his eyes. “I wish I could say... I don’t *know*! I’d give anything to!

Makoto offered him a small nod. “Then hang on until we figure it out!”

Hina opened her mouth to object, but Kyoko reminded her: “We’ll all die if we don’t get this exactly right.”

“I s’pose...” Kiyondo said. He felt bad for caving to what they wanted, but he also knew they wouldn’t vote until those questions were answered and Monokuma might punish them for
abstaining. And, of course, as a proponent of justice to the very end, he thought they were right. *I didn’t see it before, but they can’t be honored until this mess is totally solved!* “You can walk me through it…”

“Your meaningless words tire me,” Celeste said, stifling a yawn.

“Let’s get started… Are we sure Taka really made those blueprints?” Makoto asked.

Celeste: “What do you mean…?”

He passed around the blueprints and a slip of paper. To Kiyondo’s surprise, it was the one he’d written to Kyoko the night he could feel himself about to fall into insomnia hibernation. “This is a note Kiyondo left Kyoko a few nights ago, which she left for me.” Kyoko nodded to back him up. “Look at the handwriting. It’s pretty different from the blueprint, wouldn’t you say? It looks like Taka’s style, just messy.” As he had extensive knowledge of his own handwriting due to the amount of notes he’d taken and lists he’d made over his lifetime, he was inclined to agree. And it wasn’t like he didn’t know his new handwriting was sloppy. While keeping it neat and legible was instinctual for his former self, his new self required the presence of mind to do it… *Can’t put my head to making it neat.*

“…There’s no way you could think the same person made both of them,” Kyoko said. “The writing on the note is chaotic and unevenly spaced, but the other one is scratchy and nearly illegible.” *It’s hideous! Whoever wrote this musta failed the penmanship unit in every writing class!*

“This ain’t mine,” Kiyondo agreed. “No way!”

Celeste suggested he’d made an effort to disguise his writing. “No, the differences are bigger than that, I think,” Sakura said.

“You’re right,” Kyoko said as she presented a new piece of evidence: one of the lists Kiyotaka had made for keeping inventory in the Warehouse. It had gone mostly unused by everyone else. Before the execution he’d just been keeping track on his own via observation and counting, with the others sometimes reporting to him things they’d taken. He, of course, recognized it as well.

“Ah,” Sakura said. She checked the date. “I was there when Taka wrote this around a month ago. Looking at the note about sleeping, it’s clear the same person wrote both. And both look completely different from the blueprints.” Kiyondo gestured at the next page, where his writing suddenly changed to look like it does now. She flipped it. “It’s not likely a person could change their writing so much, especially when we see how much even his changed writing still resembles the base.” *I hope they keep stock of everything after I’m gone…*

“Maybe he practiced!” Hina suggested.

“Ya really think I can focus enough for that? Ha ha ha!” He barked a laugh. *Can’t even absorb a book anymore!*

“Kiyondo’s been reactive and impulsive…”

“So Makoto, are you saying you don't think Taka’s the culprit?”

“I don’t know, but there are definitely things that don’t add up. I don’t think he’s in a mindset to plan something like that.”

“Maybe he did it while he was blacked out!” Her eager belief in his guilt was difficult to deal with even though he believed it too.
“Shoot… You’re onto something…” It certainly *was* a valid explanation, and one he considered to be the most likely one. “But the only time I was was this mornin’…”

“Perhaps you’d been doing it in your sleep. Doing things while slumbering isn’t unheard of… Celeste suggested.

That terrified him. He was already afraid what his conscious mind was capable of… Did he have to worry about his *unconscious* mind now, too!? “Y-you mean I was hatching a whole-butt murder plan while unconscious!?” *What ELSE did I do!?*

“You may even have been under the control of an alter while your conscious mind slumbered… Dissociative identity disorder would explain many of your recent actions, would it not? Your change in temperament, your insistence on being called ‘Kiyondo’, your aggression, and your verbal evisceration of your host identity…”

He jumped in fright. “What!? I… have another me inside me!?” *That *would* explain some stuff…

“You *did* say Mondo joined you…” *Is that really what’s up…?* With the most recent events, his connection to Mondo inside himself was tenuous and atrophying. He could still feel his passion, but that was it. *We’re outta sync… He lost his faith in me and is leavin’… Cuz I killed those two. And even planned it…* That grief burned deep.

He’d lost track of how many times he’d lost Mondo in one way or another now, but he knew this was the final time if even his soul was so repulsed by him and his actions that it was in the process of exiting. He brushed the red scarf over his hands while his eyes watered.


“Coming from the man who told us Toko harbors the Genocide Jack alter…”

“The mind works in mysterious ways~!” Jack said. He closed his eyes and grit his teeth. *We really are in the same together, aren’t we?*

“Guess I’ll see ya in the same Hell, Jack…” he said. He didn’t think too often about any kind of life after death, so this was an odd track for his mental train to be on.

“You’re not cute or man enough to join me, loser!” Forever with her would be torture itself!

Byakuya cleared his throat. “But Jack she told me directly after the second motive presentation. I highly doubt he came to you and told you this, because based on how he’s been reacting he clearly didn’t even consider this as a possibility. Do you have any proof of your hypothetical?”

“I don’t think it can be dismissed so easily considering the secrets we all hold,” Celeste said. “He never did reveal his, after all. Whether or not he was aware of it previously can’t rule out the possibility.” *I musta just developed it after Mondo… Kyoko was right somethin’s up, but she was wrong about what it was.* That’d explain his lack of sureness in Kyoko’s theory of his mental state. “Do you think he has it, Jack?”

“Whaaaaat, you expect me to be a DID-sniffer dog just cuz I have it? That’s pretty prejudiced of you, Hairdrills!” Kiyondo shuddered. *Actually a fair point!*

“For now, we have no way of proving or disproving your ideas,” Kyoko said. He didn’t look forward to not having a definitive answer about the matter, but they really weren’t in a position to
have that discussion since they were trying to establish his role in a murder trial. *Since I'll be dyin’, it don’t matter anyway...* “Let’s move back to what Makoto was saying about the note.”

“Taka, as we know him... Recently, he’s definitely not been able to plan like that, let alone for something so complicated,” Makoto stated. *How well *do* you know me... Since I did this?* Since Celeste brought up the ability of an alter or some kind of sleep-planning, even his own knowledge about his lack of ability wasn’t surefire.

Hina turned to make a point but, not noticing, Sakura said, “And he didn’t fabricate the non-matching handwriting on a whim – changing one’s penmanship on the fly would likely leave a lot of errors, but this looks natural.” Hina huffed and tapped her fingers on the podium in front of her.

“So if the handwriting isn’t his, then neither are the note or the blueprints,” Makoto explained. “That makes me doubt his role in this.”

“I didn’t write ‘em, but I still coulda DONE this!” Kiyondo said.

“I think Kiyotaka is innocent, as well,” Byakuya said. That caught him by surprise. He did a doubletake. No, a tripletake. *BYAKUYA, of all people!?* “You do...?” he said. “You didn’t lose faith in me!? Why...?”

“Who said anything about faith?” Byakuya’s lip curled downward. “Faith is a weak man’s game.”

“A weak man’s game...?” He blinked and leaned forward on his podium. *Weak... I really am weak... It's not just Taka, it's me too... Someone strong would never commit a murder scheme... Weak weak weak... just like Grandfather said...*

After a few minutes he forced himself away by sheer will from the trapping traumas of the past, and when he did, he found the others were discussing who was in the Robo Justice suit. *I... I have to stay present... For Hifumi and Hiro...*

“Other than Taka... I can't think of anyone else it could have been,” Makoto said. “Obviously he was the one in that particular suit, and we never found any kind of second one...” The rich man agreed and said that he had no doubt that Taka was indeed the prime suspect.

“That doesn't make any sense!” Hina called. “You JUST said he didn't do it!”

“Either I did, or I didn’t!” Kiyondo said. “It can’t be both! And we all know I did, so you’re WRONG!”

“It makes perfect sense,” said Byakuya, unperturbed. “Taka was the one in the suit, but he's not the culprit.” Sakura looked at him curiously. “That’s right. The culprit in this case has nothing to do with being in the Robo Justice suit.” Hina and Genocide Jack reacted in confusion and awe at Byakuya’s gall, respectively. *How is that possible!? The others said eons ago that the one in the suit was the culprit! Celeste questioned if he had reason for proclaiming such a thing. “Of course. But before we get to that... There's something else we need to clarify first. So let's get that out of the way.” Hina butted against Byakuya leading them, but he just stated that a proper order needed to be followed. That, at least, made sense to Kiyondo with his new resolve that doing justice to the deceased was truly understanding what he’d done. *Can’t take responsibility for it if I don’t admit what I did, let alone know what it was...* He remembered saying something to Leon, once, about accountability. Sakura asked what needed clarification. “We must clarify the method of transportation for Hiro’s lifeless body. It would seem that his corpse was moved using certain particular items. Makoto? Can you tell us what they were?”
Hiro was taller but I’ve got enough power! “Musta carried him! Easy!” Kiyondo said flippantly.

“That doesn’t line up with the evidence,” Kyoko stated. He glanced at her but she was watching the antenna-haired man.

Makoto took a few minutes to think. He was moving his hands as if he were looking through a bunch of files, but there wasn’t anything on his podium other than the papers from earlier. Miming? “Jeez! What kinda game are you playin' here, Makoto!?” Hina asked.

“We don’t have all the time in the world,” stated Sakura. “You must realize that, right...?”

“Monokuma, how much time do we got?” Kiyondo asked.

“As much time as I decide to give you!” Monokuma winked his beady eye.

He grunted in frustration. He wasn’t surprised he didn’t get an answer, since all of this was clearly at the bear’s whim, but that didn’t make it feel any less like they didn’t have enough time left. Not sure how Taka dealt with not knowing that… “C’mon, Makoto. Show me what I did…!”

“They were... a dolly and a tarp, right?” Makoto established that Hiro’s body had been found in the equipment room at the back of the physics lab and then had reappeared in the art room’s repository wrapped in a blue tarp that was previously in the former room. The killer must’ve decided to use that so they wouldn’t leave any bloodstains while moving the corpse. Oh yeah... There woulda been blood all over the place if I carried him. Sakura followed along and asked about the dolly, which had disappeared from and reappeared in the same rooms at the same times as Hiro’s body.

“In other words, you think they used the dolly to move the body, am I right?” Celeste asked. “Are you sure you are not mistaken?” Makoto questioned what she meant. “Are you absolutely positive the dolly was in the equipment room when we found Hiro’s body? That dolly was made specifically for moving large objects between the repository and the art room. It would be very strange indeed to discover it had made its way to the equipment room. Is it not possible that it was in the repository all along, and you simply didn't realize it?” Someone coulda been cartin’ stuff between rooms. He’d avoided the physics lab entirely since Monokuma’s time-machine trolling of him, so it’s not like he’d have any knowledge about it. Byakuya noted her rejection and asked Makoto to respond. “There is no shame in being wrong. Nobody expects much from you, anyway. We have all accepted the fact that you rarely understand what is going on around you.”

Kiyondo grit his teeth. “Quit insulting him! Leave your personal attacks upstairs!”

Celeste looked at him impassively. “Calling what I said an ad hominem implies I was speaking untruthfully. It’s clear from the context of our time together that it is true.”

“He helped solve the first two trials!” Kiyondo said incredulously. Even if it was unjust last time!
The girl rolled her eyes.

Makoto smiled at him in wordless thanks and presented his proof: The wheels of the dolly were stained with blood when he found it in the repository, and the pool of blood underneath Hiro in the equipment room had tire marks going through the puddle that perfectly matched the size of the dolly and shape of the wheels. Celeste clicked her tongue at him.

“Well, anyway,” Byakuya said. “That was just something we had to get out of the way. Let's get back to the main subject...”

“Yeah!” Hina chirped. “The subject of how Robo Justice didn’t do it! Cuz if it's not a killer robot, then... what kind of robot is it!??” Sakura patted her on the arm and told her that the type of robot
“Well, I *am* dissociating so hard to stay here that I FEEL like one!” Kiyondo said with a misplaced chuckle. *It’s TRUE!* Then he realized how that probably sounded, given Celeste’s hypotheses about blacking out and DID. *Shoot! Is that why this is so hard? Is an alter tryin’ to take over? “B-but anyways, how come how I moved him matters? I did it… But it doesn’t explain *why*!”*

“I’d be happy to explain why the occupant of the suit couldn’t possibly be the killer,” Byakuya said. “If you look back on how the body was transported, it will become immediately obvious.” He pointed out that the dolly didn’t have a handle.

“Well, yeah, but even without a handle… All you’d have to do is bend over. Then you could push the dolly no problem!” Hina said. *It’d suck, but it’d work!* Toko agreed, saying that it’d be easy. Byakuya pointed out that there’s a reason the person in the costume couldn’t have easily done it.

Kiyondo said, “Did I have a rope tied to it?”

Makoto shook his head. He said that while it was true that the dolly could be pushed if you bent over, there was something about the suit that would’ve prevented it. “Think back to what you said when we were all checking out the suit together. Remember?” *Don’t remember what I said, but I could barely move…!* “When you’re in that suit, not only can you not see your feet, but you can’t even bend at the waist. Am I right about that?”

“I guess so!” He scratched his temple. Hina agreed. *Still don’t get why that matters…*

“It seems like it’d be awfully hard to push that dolly if you couldn’t bend over…” Sakura said.

Celeste posited just using your feet would be fine, but Makoto reminded her that it’d be very difficult if you couldn’t even see them.

“Prolly be easier to kick the body off the dolly!” Kiyondo said.

“On top of that, if you were wearing such a rigid, cumbersome suit...” Byakuya said, “It's very unlikely you would have the dexterity to go about wrapping the body in a tarp.”

*True!* “I couldn’t even flex my fingers!” *Coulda just taken it off!*

“Well I mean, isn't that just a matter of taking off the suit when you're ready to move the body?” Jack asked.

He perked up a little, ready to get a move on. His distractibility and sureness of guilt made him forget about why they were trying to piece things together first. “Yeah! That solves everything!” *Glad someone else thought of it!* “So, I did it, I just took off that costume. Alright y’all, let’s VOTE!”

Monokuma giggled. “You sure about that?”

Makoto shook his head. “Not yet. Cuz once it's on, you can never take it off.”

“What!? I have to be Robo Justice forever!?” Kyoko gave him a weird look. Then he patted down his body and noticed the sensation of being physically trapped wasn’t there. In his detachment, he’d forgotten. “Oh, right. It’s off! What’re ya doin’, Makoto…?”

“Sorry, that’s not what I meant.”

“Speak PRECISELY and with CANDOR!” Kiyondo shouted. *Misspeakin’ at this point’ll get us
ALL killed, not just me!

“Right… Do you remember taking the suit off?”

“I didn’t! Unless ya mean while I was outta bounds…” I can’t account for then.

“Exactly. Why didn’t you?”

“I couldn’t—Ohhhhh.” He remembered how difficult it was to even try to take it off. “Cuz not only could I not move around enough to reach anything…”

“There’s a clasp on the back.”

“I couldn’t reach it, you guys I had to help me out!”

“Since the suit required the clasp be locked to stay together as well as be taken off, it seems impossible to have done it by yourself.”

“Then… you really can’t take it off by yourself?” Hina said. “Taka wasn't just making it up?”

“No way! I could barely even MOVE!” The tight fit, texture, and lack of mobility had been pretty upsetting to him while he was trapped in it. It was GROSS!

“And actually Hina, Kyoko did the clasp for you when you wore the suit. You probably just didn’t notice.” Makoto added. “If he could have gotten it off by himself, I don’t think he would have let us see him wearing it. Showing up in the suit was basically an invitation for everyone to suspect him.”

“Maybe I WANTED to get caught! So I’d pay for my CRIMES!”

“But why would you pass out in a locker if you *wanted* us to find you?”

“Maybe I wanted to test your mental reflexes! Who the fudge knows, I’m workin’ with blanks here…!

Hina pursed her lips. “So… it’s really *really* true that Robo Justice couldn't have moved the dolly…?

Sakura: “To be clear, whoever did move the body, it couldn't have been Taka while in the robot suit, correct?”

Celeste: “No, wait, just a second if you please. Have you forgotten about the picture that I took? You all got a good look at it, did you not? If whoever was in that suit is not the culprit, how do you explain that? Besides, do you remember what the now deceased Hifumi said…?” She recapped a conversation in which Hifumi stated he’d been hit by Robo Justice. “So long as those facts exist, the proper conclusion is beyond question. The individual inside the suit and the culprit are one and the same. It was Taka, without a doubt.”

“Yeah…!” Hina said. “Yeah, that's gotta be right!”

“What!? There’s PHOTOS…? That’s as proof as proof gets!” Photos and videos are right at the top of evidence! Celeste handed the camera to him. Hifumi’s clearly getting’ taken by Robo Justice! By ME! “It musta been me!”

“It's still too early to reach that conclusion.” Kyoko said. “Besides, there's no hurry to decide who did it. Before we rush to a verdict, shouldn't we explore every single possibility? Instead of seizing on one viewpoint, the truth is uncovered by analyzing things from every angle.” Per Sakura and
Jack’s confusion and protestation of the additional labor, she suggested starting from the beginning.

*Darn it, I got caught up! We need to figure this out before I’m gone!* “I guess so… I mean, I still don’t really know the timeline since I was KO’ed…”

Sakura recapped. Makoto, Hina, Kyoko, and herself had gathered in the dining hall for the breakfast meeting like usual. They waited for an hour but no one else came so they started looking for the missing people at 8 in the morning. Hina added that right after they split up, no one saw Kyoko again until much later. Soon after that, Sakura continued, Celeste was found injured in the rec room by Hina, who ran to get Makoto and Sakura.

“It seems I was unconscious for about an hour after I was attacked by my mystery assailant. I know it was an hour because I remember being attacked a little after 7.”

“That was when we saw Celeste’s picture and discovered that her assailant had been wearing a strange costume. As it turns out, it was Robo Justice… It also soon became clear that this same Robo Justice had abducted Hifumi.” Byakuya and Toko heard the racket from Hina finding Celeste so they joined the search; promptly thereafter, the group found Hifumi hurt and bloody in the library. They took him to the nurse’s office to recuperate. Not long after they’d departed to search once more, Celeste startled and said she saw a shadow headed to the second floor. The group split up to search it. It didn’t take long before Celeste saw movement on third floor as well, at which time she let out a scream to let them know to come to her and blocked the stairs to prevent the assailant’s escape. This forced the attacker to move further along the hall to hide.

As the group were about to search, they heard an unholy scream from the nurse’s office on the first floor. Makoto said, “At that point we decided to divide up into two groups. Celeste, Hina, and I went back to the nurse’s office… while Sakura, Byakuya, and Toko chased after the suspect.” When the first group made it back to Hifumi’s location, they found Hifumi dead on the ground and heard the corpsefinding announcement. At the same time, the other three stumbled across Hiro’s body in the equipment room and heard the same announcement. Not knowing this, Makoto had departed from Celeste and Hina to tell the others about Hifumi’s death and when he found them in that room he found Hiro’s corpse and Toko’s unconscious body. She had passed out at the sight of blood.

When the three conscious (and alive) students left for the nurse’s office, Celeste ran into them and told them Hifumi’s body had disappeared. They confirmed that she was right, then rushed back to the equipment room to retrieve Toko… only to find Hiro’s body missing as well and Genocide Jack babbling to herself. They broke apart to look for the two vanished corpses. After a while, Celeste found them in the repository.

Kiyondo sighed, overwhelmed. “My head’s spinnin’… How’d you keep track while all this was happenin’!?” *Shoot, I forgot to take notes this time!* It took so much effort to stay active and following along in this trial that he didn’t have any to spare.

Kyoko agreed. “The whole thing sounds exceptionally complicated. It certainly seems to me that these are not a simple series of connected events.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Rather than a single series of events, I think we have to consider each murder a separate situation. And from there, we can uncover the contradictions surrounding all of them.” *Contradictions? How’s she got such a solid grasp of this mess to be able to see some!?* “Now then, let's get started, beginning with what happened to Hiro... So, regarding his death. I wonder if he died before Hifumi... Or perhaps it was after?” Kiyondo shrugged. *Don’t think it matters*...
Hina said with confidence, “We already know what order they were killed in! Hiro came last!”

Sakura asked how she’d arrived to that conclusion. “Because of the numbering of the Justice Hammers!” Were those at the last crime scene? He didn’t study any crime scenes but the last closely and didn’t recall seeing any.

“It's true that Hifumi was killed with Justice Hammer 3...” Byakuya said neutrally, “While Hiro’s death came from a swing of Justice Hammer 4.”

“See? So it's obvious Hiro came after!”

“Maybe I was trying to make it easy to solve!” Kiyondo said. “So ya wouldn’t waste too much brain on it!” Going from 3 to 4 like that certainly made sense to him.

“Hold on, there's no reason to assume that the hammers were used in the same order as their numbers!” Makoto said. “If anything, that's just another way the killer tried to disguise their actions.”

“So you're saying the culprit wanted us to *think* the hammers were used in order...” Sakura said. “But in reality Hiro was killed *before* Hifumi?”

“Why’s that matter!?” Kiyondo interrupted. “Obviously, I, I got both of ’em... And they’re both dead for it!”

Byakuya lifted his shoulders. “What’s your proof?”

Kiyondo squinted at the rich man. Why’d he ask like that?

“Everythin’ points to me… But where are ya going with this, Makoto?”

“Hiro had a wristwatch I won for him from the MonoMono Machine... He didn’t like it very much, but I suggested it’d be easier to use for timing his meditations than a wall clock. It’s broken.”

“What!? He had a G-Sick!?” Kiyondo had coveted that watch after he saw it in the gacha machine’s prize list. It wasn’t because he thought it was appealing... no, he was just a firm believer in never having too many watches. He had a collection at home. “Lucky!”

“I guess I gave it to the wrong person, hahaha…” He said sheepishly.

He frowned and pointed at him, yelling, “Ya sure did!!”

“Uh… So how is this relevant?” Sakura asked.

“Right. The display says 6 o’clock.” He held it out, showing the group the broken watch. “It couldn’t have broken any other time, because I won it yesterday and gave it to him after going to the bathhouse with him last night.” Kiyondo took the watch from him and examined it, gently running the tip of his finger along the cracks in its face. He was more partial to analogue displays, but it was still sad to see a watch go to waste. Such a waste! He carefully set it back on Makoto’s podium. “So it must’ve broken when he was attacked, marking the time of death at 6 a.m.”

“But if that's true, then he was killed well before Hifumi...” Sakura said. Makoto and Kyoko agreed.

“That's exactly why the culprit wrote the numbers on each hammer, and had them increase in size.” Byakuya explained about the murder time and order. “That way, when we saw how they were used in each incident, we’d easily make that wrong assumption.”

“Huh... So it was to throw you all off.” Kiyondo observed. Maybe I *didn’t* want ‘em to know??
“Now, if Hiro was killed around 6, then everyone's alibis for his murder go out the window. Because when he was killed, we hadn't met up in the dining hall yet,” Kyoko said.

Sakura agreed that while that was true for that murder, everyone but Taka still had alibis for Hifumi’s scream and death. “Since all of us were there together, clearly none of us could have killed him.”

Celeste: “And it does not stop there...” She pointed out that most of them also had alibis for when Hiro had gone missing - they were gathered in the nurse’s office to address Hifumi’s misplacement. Toko mentioned she was out cold in the equipment room the whole time after seeing Hiro’s body, meaning she also had an alibi. We’ve all seen her pass out from blood... She’s out like a light! Airtight! “In other words, it is impossible that any of us could have killed Hifumi, or moved either of their bodies. On the other hand, Taka and Kyoko had disappeared. So they most certainly could have done those things.”

“Who’re ya sayin’ did it, then?” Kiyondo asked. Why mention Kyoko??

“You, of course. But we must account for all possibilities…” But it was clearly me!!

Kyoko suggested examining how the murders and Hifumi’s body-move were committed. Makoto agreed, saying he hadn’t seen anything that gave him any idea how he’d been transported from point A to point B. Especially not in the time that Hina and Celeste took to use the bathroom from the nurse’s office, which was only a minute (or two, tops). Makoto pointed out that time scale was ridiculous, given Hifumi’s weight *and* the fact that he’d been moved up all the way to the third floor with anyone noticing in that time.

Kiyondo cleared his throat. “As someone who had an impeccable sense of time…” Been all over the place since the change! “I can confirm it would be SUPER impossible to pull all that off! Even in perfect conditions!”

Kyoko said, “Well, what if I told you there was a way to make the impossible possible?” This caused confusion among the room. “If the dead body... were to move itself.”

“Th-The dead body m-moved on its own!?” Hina shrieked.

Kiyondo blinked. “That guy… Was a zombie!? Maybe *that’s* why I was so creeped out by him!! I can instinctually detect the UNDEAD!” Byakuya, Toko, and Celeste must be zombies too!!

“I don't think it has anything to do with the occult.” Byakuya said flatly. “I think what she's implying is... We thought Hifumi was dead, but perhaps in reality he was still alive.” Seriously?!

“He was... alive!?” Hina said, dumbfounded.

Kiyondo: “But you guys saw him dead! How could you misjudge that? Get your eyes checked!”

“Are you saying Hifumi wasn't carried out of the nurse's office, but simply walked out on his own?” Sakura asked.

“But I mean...” Hina started, “We found his body! He was dead!”

“Perhaps he was simply *playing* dead,” Byakuya said.

“That... It isn't possible...!”

“When we first found Hifumi in the nurse's office... there's a chance he was actually still alive?” Sakura repeated.
“Anyone think to check his VITALS!?” Kiyondo shouted. *Dumbbutts!!!!!*

Celeste denied it, calling it flat-out impossible. Kyoko asked how she knew and she pointed to the dead body bell. “Hifumi's dead body had been found... and that is why the announcement was made.”

“Are we really so sure about that?” Kyoko rebutted. “Maybe the announcement was intended to signal someone else's discovery...” Makoto agreed, asking if the announcement was truly intended for Hifumi. Celeste responded that it must have been considering it sounded after they found his body.

Makoto reminded them Hiro’s body had also been found at the same time. The group that’d found the clairvoyant agreed. “I think we've confused whether the announcement was for Hifumi or Hiro,” Byakuya said. The others, including Celeste, assumed that Monokuma was just lazy and used one announcement for both bodies.

Monokuma piped in to say the body discovery announcement was only used when a body was found, for the first time, by three or more people. *Like with Chihiro, when Taka walked in on Byakuya and Makoto...* Byakuya pointed out that that meant announcements wouldn’t sound for the same body more than once… And yet, another one rang out later that day. *I didn’t hear either of 'em...* After some deliberation, Makoto said that they’d heard it the second time when they were in the repository having found both bodies again. That meant one of the students had previously still been alive when they were found… It had to have been Hifumi. *Holy hell... Game changer!* Celeste argued they couldn’t have had proof he was alive when he was found earlier, but Kyoko told them they should go over how and when he was found once more.

Hina explained that they’d found him in the nurse’s office, but that while she and Celeste were in the bathroom his body vanished. Celeste stated that there was no difference in his body before and after being moved, aside from being in a different position. Makoto pointed out that there was indeed an incongruence – his glasses were covered in blood when he was first found, but were spotless in the repository. Makoto had found the cleaning cloth featuring Princess Piggles in the trash can in the nurse’s office. It was the same mascot featured on the camera Hifumi had found and that he was constantly gushing about. The only two other glasses-wearers both denied using such a gaudy piece of fabric. Celeste said the killer must have done it.

“Why would a killer clean his glasses!?” Kiyondo said. “Unless they wore them like some freaky kinda roleplay!” *Hifumi would prolly LIKE THAT!! EWWW!!!*

Kyoko: “We can assume that Hifumi was still alive in the nurse's office. He pretends to be dead, then when he's alone, he wipes his glasses clean so he can see... Then he stands up and walks out on his own two feet. And with that, the impossible task of moving his copious corpse... becomes possible, wouldn't you say?” *What the hell!*

Hina: “But then, if he was just pretending to be dead... what was with all that blood? Was it paint or somethin’?”

Kyoko: “The fridge in the nurse's office contains packs of blood for emergencies. He probably used one of those.” *Hope no one ever needs 'em... Or the food for tube feedin’!* Jack remarked on how much of an idiot Hifumi was to douse himself in so much blood that he had to wipe off his glasses later and thus create a piece of evidence. “And if Hifumi was still alive at that point, the disappearance of Hiro’s body is easily explained. It should be perfectly obvious who must have moved his corpse...”
When Makoto took a moment to think, Kiyondo needled: “Hey! Don’t waste our time… Figure out how I did it!”

He said it had to have been Hifumi himself. “While we were all gathered in the nurse's office, he went to the equipment room and took Hiro’s body… That also explains how the door to the repository got locked.

Kyoko: “He convinced us all he was dead, and when he saw his chance, he dragged the body to the repository. So, Hifumi wasn't just another victim in this case—he was one of the assailants.”

Kiyondo: “What?! He worked with me!?”

Sakura: “B-But...that means he took part in the murders...!” Hina was similarly incredulous.

Kiyondo: “Hifumi helped KILL somebody!?” He couldn't imagine the boy being so violent… Though he was impulsive, boundary-incompetent, and often disturbing, Hifumi’d never said or done anything that implied the kind of mal intent that a murder scheme would need. But neither did *I*...

Kyoko: “If you're having trouble, would you like me to show you one more piece of evidence?”

“M-more!?! You should be doin’ that ANYWAY!” God, the way they're working this out is all topsy-turvy!

Kyoko: “Indeed. The single biggest fact pointing to his involvement has yet to be revealed. You know what I'm talking about, right Makoto? The item he took off of Hiro’s lifeless body.”

Kiyondo: “Get on with it!!”

Makoto said it was a note they’d found stuffed in Hifumi’s pants. Everyone seemed mildly disturbed that they’d looked *in his pants*, including Kiyondo, but Makoto showed them what found: “I found a hole maybe we can use to escape. Monokuma can't find out, so don't tell anyone else for now. Let's meet in the equipment room at 6 a.m.”

Kiyondo: “Ah! That’s where it went! He stole it!?” He pondered. “Wait. I went to the rec room at 1 am… The place and time are different!” He looked over Makoto’s shoulder at it.

Same handwriting!

Makoto: “Yes, which means there are two notes for two people. As you can see, since this was in his pants… Hiro was drawn to the scene of his murder by them.”

Hina: “His pants...? Are you saying his pants are... alive!? Are pants people!? Are there PANTS PEOPLE!?!?”

Sakura: “Hina... even if there are, I'm sure they're not here in the school.” So!?

“The self-appoionted Headmaster is a killer teddy bear!” Kiyondo said.

“Hey, I’m NOT a teddy bear!” Monokuma presented his knife like claws. “You squeeze me, you die!”

He ignored the bear. Proving my point! “… So would whatever ‘pants people’ are really be that strange!?”

“Sorry,” Makoto said, laughing a tad. “What I meant was that in other words, the killer got in touch with another person besides Taka. And that person could only have been... Hiro himself. The killer used this note to draw out Hiro and murder him!”
Jack: “Hello! Over here! Objection! Objection! I don't really understand what's going on, but... Hifumi had that letter, right? So whoever wrote it wasn't drawing out You Saw Euro Haggycure! Or Keyhole Tacky! They were drawing out Huffy!”

Kiyondo: **Keyhole Tacky!?** “I’d expect YOU of all people to see I’ve become someone NEW! Something like Key Yoyo would be MUCH more accurate!”

Jack: “I’m at LEAST ten years old! You’re just a weird little baby! Kyeeehahahaha!”

“I’ll be 19 in a FEW MONTHS!!!”

Hina asked to make sure that “Euro” was Hiro and “Huffy” was Hifumi. “Ugh, yes! Why must you ruin it EVERY TIME!!?”

Kyoko said, “Speaking of time… Remember what time the note said to meet.” Jack said the time didn’t matter, but Makoto countered, saying the broken watch he’d given Hiro proved his time of death was the same as the note said to meet. Sakura added that the note even indicated the equipment room, which is where Hiro was killed. Makoto posited that was more than enough evidence to show that that was what happened to Hiro. Jack withdrew her objections.

“So uh… Someone did the same thing to Hiro as me…?” Kiyondo tapped his fingers on the podium. This trial would’ve been a massive strain on him if he were mentally stable and well, but he certainly *wasn’t*. It felt frustrating like they were all running in circles around each other. “What does it mean…? They were a monster, using the promise of escape on two whole people…”

Hina asked how Hifumi’d gotten the note.

Makoto: “Most likely, Hifumi stole it off Hiro’s corpse after he died.”

Byakuya: “Where's your proof? Go ahead, show us.”

Makoto: “The fact that he had it at all—“

Hina: “Is that the proof? How come?”

Makoto: “Umm…”

Hina: “Sorry Makoto, I think you’re wrong. Him having it doesn’t mean Hiro ever had it, y’know? I bet the proof is in his pants! Everything's in the pants!”

Sakura: “Hina... I wouldn't go around saying that too much…”

Kiyondo: “Tick tock, Makoto… The pants are on fire!”

Kyoko groaned. “Why is everyone obsessed with Hifumi’s pants…?” *The topic du rigueur! They’re all on our minds, so we have to talk about ‘em!*

Makoto: “That’s right.” He said Hiro’s lifeless hand was holding tight onto a torn piece of paper, which he presented to the attendees. He joined the scrap and the note from Hifumi’s pants together. They fit perfectly together. *Now THAT’s proof Hiro had it and Hifumi took it!*

Kyoko: “Hifumi had the note meant for Hiro, while Hiro’s corpse still grasped a small piece of that note... There’s only one way to explain it…”

Sakura: “He died clutching the note. Hifumi tried to free the note from his death grip... leaving
behind only one small scrap. Did I get all that right?” *Rigor mortis!* Byakuya said that meant Hifumi knew it was important, which Kyoko said meant he was an accomplice.

Kiyondo: “Whoa...! So Hifumi and I for SURE worked together...?”

Hina: “So then... who killed Hifumi? Was it Taka?”

Sakura: “Whoever did is the mastermind... the true killer.” *The mastermind...? Of this whole thing...?*

*Am I the mastermind?* Everything else happening was disturbing enough... *Trapping us in a murder game just for some sick fetish!?* Even though he still thought he was guilty of the murders committed that day, and that weighed on his soul heavily, as did the idea that he may have a killer alter, the very concept of anyone being that kind of horrifying sadist sent chills down his spine. Let alone him... *I never woulda thought I have that kind of cruelty inside... What if Celeste was right? And I’ve got an alter I don’t know about, planning and executing EVERYONE!?* His heart was thumping hard against his ribs. He tried to fight off the oncoming panic attack but succumbed.

After ten minutes he managed to crawl his way back to his mental facilities. *Dunno how much longer I can hold on...* He wondered if this was how Leon felt during his execution having new balls constantly lobbed at him from every direction, crushing bits of spirit he didn’t even know he’d had.

“S-still coulda been me...” He panted. He wasn’t really following what they were talking about. *How were their brains bashed in, though?* “Wait...” He brought up the Monokuma File for the first time on his eHandbook. “It says here both of ’em died with similar fractures. But there were no weapons in the repository, right? Those Justice Hammers?” Makoto nodded. “Then... What was he ganked with? Woulda been a huge ask for me to bring one all the way to there, get ’im, and then put it back.”

Byakuya raised his eyebrow. “…I’m surprised. It seems there's some semblance of a brain knocking around that skull of yours, after all.”

“100 percent more than you, dirtbag!” *I definitely won’t miss YOU when I’m dead!*

Sakura and Celeste asked how the killer could’ve gotten one of the Justice Hammers found at the initial crime scenes. Hina asked which was used to attack Celeste, but Makoto said both of the first two Hammers were also still in their original places – meaning all four were accounted for. Byakuya suggested it was a different weapon. Kiyondo said, “Nah, the File said it wasn’t!” He tapped the screen of his eHandbook. While Sakura tried to figure out what they were killed with, Celeste asked how it was possible the killer moved around without being noticed.

Jack: “Sounds like a Justice Hammer 5 is about to make its appearance! Check out murdergear.com/hammertime for more info!”

Kiyondo: “Someone bought these on the Internet!? I thought we didn’t have access here!”

“That was a joke, my dear white-haired Watson!”

“U-um... So there’s another Justice Hammer then...? I didn’t see it there!” A big blue hammer like they’d been describing would’ve stuck out on the repository floor like a sore thumb.

Makoto: “The murder weapon wasn’t a Justice Hammer at all. No, it was something completely different.”

Kiyondo: “But the File...!”
Makoto: “Here’s how we account for that…” He explained the weapon was a repository hammer, which would cause the same kind of injury and death. All the hammers in that room’s set were dirty and clearly used except one that was conspicuously clean. He explained it would’ve been cleaned of Hifumi’s blood, and that the Justice Hammers were probably modeled after that set in order to create the ambiguity. *That makes sense.*

Byakuya: “So Hifumi moved Hiro’s body to the repository, where someone then used a hammer to kill *him*.”

Hina: “And whoever did that is the true killer—the one Hifumi was working with... and the one who betrayed him...!”

Kiyondo: “But why would I do that?? I don’t even get why I did this in the first place!!” Even with so few of his cohort remaining, Hifumi was still way down on the list of people he could theoretically see himself working with especially given their recent fights.

“You keep saying that. I suppose I’ll explain, if it makes you stop, since no one else will. There are many reasons,” Celeste said. “You and Hifumi had a rivalry in love…” *Alter Ego!!! I never even got to look for him! “The object of which is still missing.”*

*I agreed to not go near him though after he asked me not to remove him! “I wouldn’t take—“*

“You’ve been angry and aggressive, even violent... The motive of enough money to make your head spin was also a clear choice... And after all, you’ve known about his uncouth proclivities for over a month. You had been actively trying to get him to leave them behind. Perhaps you realized it was a lost cause, and with your strong sense of morality, decided the world would be better without him. Any one of those would be more than enough to explain your actions. And so, you set up a scheme in which you, the Ultimate Moral Compass, would look like an innocent framed party.”

Kiyondo was so taken aback by that that his eyebrows reached his hairline. The revelation of his possible motives, and the brutal character assessment/assassination was yet another series of wounds to his gut and self-concept. “… … … … *Oh*…”

“That explains why you did it rather well, does it not?”

He looked down, staring at his boots. He sat on the floor behind the podium with his head in his hands. “Y-yeah,” he said with a small, quietly teary voice. The others worked on the details of the *how* while he tried to recover again. By this point, he had no idea who he was anymore.

When he stood back up, Kyoko was rebutting against Celeste’s refusal of a possible accomplice. “Since there were two murders, it’s at least plausible that more than one person was involved. If there’d only been one murder, then yes, the idea of an accomplice isn’t really worth considering. Naturally, if only one person can be saved per murder, an accomplice has no risk versus reward benefit.” *It would be hard to pull of this scheme with just one pair of hands... Makoto asked what she meant. “The payoff for working together—the reward that balances out the risk of taking part in the scheme. There’s no point in being someone's accomplice if there's no benefit to you. However, if there *were* some potential mutual reward for the risk, then cooperation becomes possible.”*

Byakuya: “You're saying that two people could act as each other's accomplices to commit two separate murders. Indeed; Kyoko said that was what the killer told Hifumi, and that they made him kill first so he couldn’t back out from helping them.”

That established that since each person killed someone, there were two separate incidents. *Like she said before about looking at the contradictions.* Makoto said, “And it only looked like one person
because that's how the true killer designed it to look. A single suspicious individual, a similar weapon used in each crime, disappearing bodies... By creating one seamless set of circumstances, they made it look like one person was behind it all!” Byakuya said that the killer convinced Hifumi to go along with their plan, then killed him to avoid breaking the “no accomplices” rule. Which implied that Hifumi’s death was planned from the start. Hina said that was awful. Byakuya found it cunning, but questioned their choice of accomplice.

Sakura: “I understand how an accomplice could be involved, but then who was the one pulling Hifumi's strings?”

Kiyondo said, “It was me, remember? I picked Hifumi.”

“But why?”

“Celeste laid it out already…” he frowned.

Makoto said, “But what I still don’t get is why you’d go after *him*.”

Sakura: “What she said may have been true… But is he really the person you’d target if you were planning murder?” He lifted his head, looking around for the first time in the while. He stared Byakuya in the face. “You’ve clashed since the beginning with Toko and Byakuya, after all.” That’s true… I’ve fallen so far that I would’ve considered them as well!

“Then you have to end it here, or they may be in danger if Celeste was right before!”

“Hold on…” Sakura said, shaking her head. “Haven't we already shown that there's absolutely no way you could have done this?”

“She's right!” Hina added, “He was in the robot costume when everything went down!”

“Simple! Since Hifumi was my accomplice, he coulda just let me out and put me back in…”

“No…” Makoto said. “It was Celeste…”

“Celeste…?” Kiyondo looked at her, blinking owlishly. “How? What?? When??? WHY???? Wasn't it me??”

She gave him a strange, amused look. “Ah, so I'm the suspicious individual now, am I? Hmhmhm. I really do hate this kind of joke... So what you are saying, then, is that I specifically chose to work together with Hifumi. The idea that I would choose to spend any amount of time interacting with him... That I would go within ten feet of that shit-for-brains! That lazy, worthless goddamn idiot! Ahem. Ah, pardonnez-moi.” Wait… It wouldn’t make sense for me to work WITH him either, would it? Byakuya said that there was supporting evidence – a certain behavior that only the two of them had done throughout the investigation.

“The behavior they had in common has to do with the "suspicious individual" in the suit, doesn't it? The only ones who ever actually saw Robo Justice firsthand were Celeste and Hifumi,” Makoto started. Byakuya shut him down to take the floor.

“Hey, let the man speak!” Kiyondo shouted.

Byakuya rolled his eyes. He repeated what Makoto said, and pointed out that if Hifumi was a culprit, that that made Celeste suspicious too. He reminded the party that Celeste had been the one who had drawn them to the second and third floors – conveniently, the same locations as the bodies. “And it was to get us to divide into two groups... so that we would discover both bodies at the same time!!?”
Hina asked in shock.

“In fact, Celeste was precisely the one who proposed that we split up,” Byakuya said. The two of them, Celeste and Hifumi, working together gave the double narrative a cohesive through line. He also pointed to Celeste’s scream earlier. Hina imitated it. It was a very weirdly inflected shriek, sounding somewhat booming, distressed bird.

“W-what the hell!?” Kiyondo jumped. Who even screams like that!?

“That was to signal Hifumi, wasn’t it? It was your way of telling him, ‘We’re on the 3rd floor, everything’s going according to plan.’ Why else would you let out a scream that could have carried across the sea?”

Celeste was quiet. Makoto pointed out she was the first person to say Hifumi’d been killed when they initially found him, even though they now knew he was still alive. It was even before they had a chance to look at his supposed corpse. Hina was in disbelief that all of Celeste’s actions had been an act. Makoto helped her realize that even her bathroom break with Celeste had been an orchestrated lie to help Hifumi sneak out.

Byakuya: “Each piece isn’t much by itself, but start putting them together and the picture gets very ugly indeed. Wouldn't you agree, Celeste?”

“...I have no idea what you mean,” she said, finally breaking her silence.

“But me and Hifumi workin’ together makes way more sense!” Kiyondo argued. Even with the contradictions and links that were popping up, both internal and external forces had managed to convince him of his own guilt. “*Why* would *she* do it!? The simple answer is usually the right one, and the simple answer is that it was me!”

“You’ll see why it was her shortly…” Byakuya told her that she’d made a fatal error that not even he had caught at first. She questioned him. “I'm talking about what you said after Hifumi's body disappeared and we returned to the nurse's office. 'They must really be enjoying this... Enjoying the sight of us standing around, frightened and confused... We're all going to die here. We're going to die, just like those guys died...’”

“That sounds pretty normal when finding a DEAD BODY in this Hell hole! After screaming, 'course!”

Sakura wasn’t sure what was so strange about it… Until Byakuya pointed out her, Toko, and himself were the ones who discovered Hiro’s body. After Makoto came and the two of them left, none of them said anything about Hiro being dead because they were rushing to Hifumi’s crime scene.

Kiyondo: “Don’t get it! Even sounds about right to say the dunce behind this was prolly enjoying the chaos and turmoil…” Byakuya told her to repeat it. She did.

Makoto realized the line ‘just like those guys died’ made no sense as no one had mentioned Hiro’s death to her – in the commotion, she’d not even had the opportunity to see his body. He asked how she knew that more than one person was dead and both were guys… which was an abnormality considering Kyoko was missing and possibly dead too.

Kiyondo lifted his hands, pointing at Mondo and Chihiro’s standing photos. “She coulda meant them and everyone else who was dead… And ‘you guys’ and ‘those guys’ are common lingo for a group, regardless of gender!”
“But in combination with the rest of the evidence? That may be too kind an interpretation,” Sakura said quietly.

He shrugged. *I guess that’s possible. Fine, if we’re totally sure she was involved…” But that doesn’t negate my role! “Maybe she’s the THIRD, not the second. Getting Hifumi and me to kill, and then pinning me for his crimes too?”*

“The no accomplice rule would’ve most likely forbidden that.”

Celeste complemented their vivid imaginations and brought them back to the photo of Hifumi being dragged away by Robo Justice. Kiyondo narrowed his eyes. *Whazzat? Is she redirectin’…? “Huh… Was it a setup? You put it on, used the timer on the camera…”*

“Have you so quickly forgotten? You are the only one who could have possibly fit into that suit.”

“I remember thinkin’… We didn’t test EVERYONE, so how can ya know that for sure?”

She waved her hand. “Only an exact duplicate of you would fit.”

“Wait, how do you know that?”

“It was clear when removed it from you, as well as when Makoto and Hina tried it on. Plus, I happen to know that this particular camera does not have a timer.” *I dunno much about trends but what kinda digital camera wouldn’t…? “In other words, it is an unassailable fact that this is a picture of Hifumi being dragged away. If everything I told you was a lie, how can this picture exist?”*

Kyoko suggested it wasn’t a photo of Hifumi being dragged away by the suspect, that there may be another explanation. Celeste denied this.

“Maybe…” Kiyondo started, “It was a passionate embrace of two lovers! Like the cover of one of Toko’s romance thingies!”

Jack: “… On behalf of Toko, I find that comment deeply offensive and highly disturbing. Time to cut your tongue out! Kyeeehahahhahehehe!”

“Uhhhh, then they were dancin’! They’re getting’ their new-age grind on… Which is *completely* inappropriate in a school setting!” He realized the implications of his suggestions. “W-wait! No! E-ewww!” He shuddered, remembering Hifumi’s clear interest in him. That time, he’d wigged himself out.

Celeste: “Hmhmhm. Yes, I suppose in a certain light, you could interpret it that way.”

“N-no, forget what I said! Please! F-forget it BEEEEEEAM!” He even did the pose.

Kyoko squinted. “Is this some kind of bad joke? Surely you can’t be serious…”

Kiyondo: “H-hey! I’m tryin’! No one else’s tryin’ to come up with—”

Makoto: “It’s *not* a picture of the suspect dragging Hifumi away… I would say it’s a picture of Hifumi dragging the suspect away!” Celeste clicked her tongue.

“Hifumi was draggin’ *me* away? But why…?”

Kyoko said it was a strong possibility. “To stuff you in that locker. You probably didn’t do that yourself.”
“Oh…”

“We’ve simply been led to believe that it’s the other way around – that you were pulling him away. And the strange costume might only exist to lead us astray even farther. If you saw someone wearing something like that in this situation, of course you’d notice and be suspicious.” Peacock!! Poison frogging!!

Kiyondo: “Is… Is that it!? Did you… Did YOU stick me in that thing!?"

Celeste laughed, saying that was a ridiculous suggestion. Kyoko said it wasn’t. Celeste said, “Then shut your mouth and allow me to educate you.”

Kiyondo: “You put me in that suit after I KO’d… “

Sakura: “Then you had Hifumi carry his weight by draping him across.”

Celeste: “Like I said—ridiculous. As you can see in the picture, the suspect is standing perfectly upright. If the person inside the suit was unconscious… there's no way they could stand up straight like that.”

Kiyondo was easily defeated, a total pushover this trial. “Khh—So, I *DID* do this!? I’m just not remembering…!?"

Makoto: “No, even if the person inside the suit were unconscious, they could still stand up like that. Because that Robo Justice suit had a certain characteristic…” Hina chimed in, recalling that it couldn’t bend at the waist and required effort to move in the first place.

He snapped his finger. “Ohhhh yeah! When Kyoko woke me up I was standin’!” Kyoko said it was likely designed that way purposefully. Makoto said Celeste and Hifumi had hand-picked the target and hand-designed the costume to make the perfect frame job, chock full of plausible deniability. “All that to f-frame me? But *why*?!”

Byakuya declared checkmate. After a moment of quiet, Celeste raged out, “Don't make me laugh, you idiot! What do you mean, checkmate!?” Her demeanor was shifting. “Clearly, you want to cram me into your little ‘guilty’ box. Well there's one little problem! Have you already forgotten what Hifumi told us as he lay dying!?”

“Of course I didn’t!” Hina shouted. She repeated his words: “‘Who... killed me...? That's right... I almost remember... the name... What was it…? T… a… k… a…?’

“When we asked him who had attacked him, his answer was quite clear, was it not? He said, and I quote, “Taka.” In other words, Kiyotaaaka Ishimaruuuuu!”

“Settled!” He threw up his hands as if he were a referee. “I killed him!”

Makoto shook his head and Kyoko asked if they were really sure he was pointing the finger at Taka. Celeste exclaimed that she’d burn her alive. Uhh! Kyoko prompted Makoto to think about how Hifumi referred to him. “…That's right! Our last names! He called us all by our last names!” Kyoko agreed, saying she’d heard him say Mr. Naegi many times. That’s right, he usually said Mr. Ishimaru!

Kyoko: “So if Hifumi *did* mean to say Taka’s name, he would have said his last name—Ishimaru. “Taka” is a common element of many Japanese surnames… Takahashi, Takasu, Takada, Takai…” That’s true… He’d encountered a smattering of people with that as a part of their last names. “It’s also possible he was struggling to remember the name in its entirety, and was therefore naming off
letters within it. Or maybe he was confessing to his involvement in framing Taka, feeling guilty as he died.” Celeste said it was by chance, by accident. Kyoko rebutted, saying that was far too convenient, especially with that many possible explanations.

“But even then… The only one with that name is dead to rights!” Kiyondo said. *Taka died!* Sakura jutted her chin at him. “I mean… Since he didn’t respect me… I guess he meant me!”

Makoto: “Well, no, hold on... there's one other person it *could* apply to... And that's Celeste. She never actually told us what her real name is...” *Celestia Ludenberg sure is a weird name for someone Japanese but I'm sure there's weirder!* He'd had no reason to think before that it wasn’t her true name.

Celeste was very incredulous. “Wh...? What did you just say? To think you'd take your false accusations so far... I don't know whether to laugh or spit... Come on! Enough with your idiotic blather! That is a loser's name! Do I look like a loser to you!? Well!? Doooooo I!?” Her incredulousness was completely out of character, which Sakura conveyed by stepping away from her. *Whoa, what the hell?* Makoto asked her to fill them in on her real name. “Fine! Make sure your ear holes are wiiiiiiide open and listen up! My real name is Celestia Ludenberg! Could you PLEASE stop making me repeat myself over and over again!?”

Kyoko, Hina, Sakura, and Byakuya talked her into a corner. Kiyondo watched in confusion. “You still haven’t told us your real name,” Sakura said. “What is it?”

“How many times do I have to tell you...? My... name... is... Celestia Ludenberg, goddammit!” They kept making her repeat it, and each time she grew more angry and insistent that she was telling the truth.

“Maybe that really is her name,” Kiyondo suggested. “It’s a strong, distinctive name… Or maybe her family has a sense of humor!”

Makoto: “That's it...! The handbook!”

Kiyondo grunted. “Why’s it always gotta come back to eHandbooks!?” *Get a new trick, dude!*

Celeste: “What!?”

Makoto: “Any time you turn your handbook on, it shows the owner’s name when it boots up, right?” Kiyondo thought about how Mondo had used the deceased Leon’s eHandbook for over a month without him catching on due to the way he held it. He shuddered. “All we have to do is check her handbook and that'll clear up everything. That's how we can find out Celeste's real name!”

Celeste: “Th-That's an invasion of privacy! I-I refuse to cooperate!”

Kiyondo: “Yeah, that’s true, but… As the former head of the Morals Committee, I order you! Pony up, sister!” She practically growled at him. “This is bigger than just YOU or ME! Two people are DEAD!”

“Celeste... Can you please just tell us what really happened?” Makoto asked. “Please, just tell us...” *I hate to think noncompliance means guilt, but this theory would be so easy to disprove... Why hasn’t she?*

“...Even when I'm put in check, it's just my nature not to give up. Because... Because, because because because because because—! Until the game's over, you never know what might happen!”
“What the hell does that mean!? Enough with this ‘game’ poop!!” Kiyondo yelled.

“Fine then. Let me settle it. Let me go over the case again, from the beginning, and shed light on all your crimes. And that'll bring everything to an end!”

He did just that. He said that before putting any other plans into action, the killer recruited Hifumi. They convinced Taka to meet them in the rec room at 1 a.m., who they intended to frame. They drugged him, making him unconscious, put him in the suit, and took the incriminating photo. They shoved him in the pool room locker after they were done. Next, they called Hiro to the equipment room at 6 in the morning. Hifumi killed him using Justice Hammer 4 in order to create a misleading timeline. Then, they both played victims to Robo Justice; the first attack was on Celeste in the rec room in order to make sure everyone saw the photo and Justice Hammer 1, and the second attack was on Hifumi in the library where they planted Justice Hammer 2 and an injured Hifumi to sell the surprise attack and increasing Justice Hammer number angles. Since everyone bought that angle hook, line, and sinker, they left Hifumi alone in the nurse’s office to investigate. He took the chance to fake his death using a blood packet and Justice Hammer 3 and screamed to draw the group back to the scene. Hiro’s body was found at the same time, except he was actually dead. The simultaneous timing of body discovery led the Hifumi-finding crew to assume he was dead. Since they left him there again in order to find the rest of their classmates, Hifumi made his escape while Celeste distracted Hina. When told his ‘corpse’ was gone, everyone ran back to the nurse’s office. This gave Hifumi, who was hiding, a chance to move Hiro’s corpse to the repository using the tarp and dolly. To the group, this looked like both bodies had vanished; they separated to find them.

But Hifumi didn’t expect the killer’s true plan – to discard him once he’d done his job. While he was in the repository, after having moved Hiro’s body, the killer bludgeoned him with an ordinary hammer and washed it off. “That should cover everything that happened in this case. And the villain behind it all is...

Celeste! Sorry, you lose!”

Celeste: “I...lost? I lost...!? When was the last time... I was forced to utter such words? They hang heavy around my neck...” LOST? Then...?

“Then you admit it? You're the killer?”

“Hm. Heh... Listen to you, trying to take charge. As if you're my private instructor... I, Celestia Ludenberg—actually, no… Taeko Yasuhiro is fine...”

Kiyondo: “Taeko... Yasuhiro!? So--!?”


Byakuya: “So, you've finally accepted it.”

“I'm the kind of person, once I've lost, I don't like things to drag on,” Taeko said simply. “Okay, Monokuma. I'm ready to begin. Or, no... I suppose this is the end, isn't it?”

Monokuma: “Hmm. Hmm. It is indeed the moment we've all been waiting for! Time to vote!” Not this again! “Okay? Okay! If you would, please locate your lever and cast your vote! And when the votes are tallied...who will become the blackened!? Will you make the right choice, or the dreadfully wrong one? What's it gonna be? What's it gonna beeee!?”

Kiyondo hesitated to pull the lever. He still felt he was involved... And I don’t want someone else to die...
“Nuh-uh, little mister!” Monokuma shouted. “You pull that lever or so help me, I will end you RIGHT NOW! And then everybody else! It’ll be an Execution Parade!”

That was persuasive enough for him. He didn’t understand why she would do any of this, and he obviously thought he was involved somehow, but she’d already admitted guilt… With Monokuma’s threat, he couldn’t risk it. He voted for her.

“So… it’s basically a formality at this point, but once again you’re totally correct! The blackened this time… the true killer who devised the whole stinkin’ scheme, was… Celestia Ludenberg! Or more precisely… Taeko Yasuhiroooo!”

“I lost… Well, that sucks,” she said. Her voice was flat and completely absent her usual strange Germanic, romance-esque accent. “I guess trying to work with someone else was a mistake, after all. Hifumi's ineptitude was beyond all my calculations.”

“So…” Kiyondo said. “I really didn’t do it!”

Monokuma: “You may be tainted with the soul of a killer, but you haven’t become blackened… Not yet!”

“That’s not reassuring at ALL!”

Kyoko asked how on Earth she’d gotten him to agree to cooperate. Byakuya suggested she relied on her specialty – ‘lying’. “My specialty? Don't make me laugh. I didn't have to lie to get him to agree.”

“Then did you use… you know…?”

“’I knew you'd figure it out, Kyoko. You're absolutely right. To get Hifumi to act as my accomplice… I used ‘her’. For everyone who's still left, I'll avoid mentioning it by name, but... it was the one thing Hifumi and Taka were both super into.”

Kiyondo: “Y-you… You mean…!” Alter Ego!?

Monokuma: “What? What what what!? What are you talking about!!?” Kyoko cut him off and told him to quit interrupting. “I'm totally out of the loop, as usual. How sad…”

“Why did you make Taka the suspect!?!” Hina asked.

“Because he’s stupid.”

“H-hey!” He said.

She turned to him. “And in that regard, I made the right choice. I'm so glad your stupidity surpassed my every expectation. I considered having Hiro take your role, but I made the right choice. You were ready to confess before we even got on the elevator… You were the most convenient fall person I could’ve ever asked for in my wildest dreams.”

“So you capitalized on how he was acting…” Kyoko said.

“That too, yeah.” What?

“Are you implying…”

“You're on a roll tonight, aren’t you?”

Makoto asked what Kyoko meant.
“She didn’t just take advantage of the state he’s in… She primed him for it.”

That made him feel like a fool. *Another person messing with me…* “Y-you… I forgot you’re the one that told me to go to Makoto!” He grunted out.

Byakuya snorted. “And she’s been remarkably adept at picking at your weak spots since the beginning…”

“You’d know!” Hina accused. He shrugged. *B-bastard…*

Makoto: “So you were conditioning him since the beginning…”

“The more a person is exposed to something completely against their ideals, the more familiar and appealing it becomes. It’s a known cognitive fallacy. You could tell when he started to agree with things I was saying… Your catatonia provided the perfect opportunity to strike.”

“Why do you hate me so much!?”

She shrugged.

“What did I ever do to you!?” He said, eyes leaking.

“You’re in direct opposition to everything I believe in…”

“Howzzat?”

“Before I discovered my talent, I was an orphan who’d fallen between the cracks. They gave me up because I was too normal, too ordinary. When potential parents saw me, they’d forget about me immediately like I was in one ear, out the other. I ran away when I was 12 and I ended up in an underground gambling bar… No one even looked at me until I managed to talk the owner into playing chess while wearing gothic lolita clothes I stole the previous day. I beat him, and eventually became the star player. I became a total prodigy in the circuit, known for her mysterious accent, her unknown origin, and her wicked hand at gambling. Hope’s Peak scouted me once I moved up the international leagues.”

“I’m sorry you had a tough life,” Kiyondo said. He truly was. “But that doesn’t answer my q—”

“I came from nothing, a total nobody… But not you. You have all this notoriety to your name, your appearance, and yet you think yourself to be ‘ordinary’… You’re the grandson of a former Prime Minister, you’re one of the least ordinary people here. You waste your status and treat it like a burden.” *Excuse me!?*

“You’re… envious?” Kyoko asked.

“No,” Taeko said flatly. “I abhor people who throw away opportunity.”

“I treat it like a burden because it IS one!! Grandfather MADE it one!” He barked, anger surging. “He ruined our family, our name, even our means of living! He said and did horrible things to me, all to try to mold me into a clone who’d fix his damn mistakes!”

“Why exactly did your parents abandon you for being ordinary?” Kyoko asked.

“The orphanage head told me I was too normal for people who wanted to make it big off by living vicariously.”

“That’s exactly what my grandfather tried to do! He tried to live through me! Your parents left you
because they wanted to do the *same thing*!” *She thinks we’re so *different*!* “Both of us had figures in our lives that threw us away for who we really are!!!!” His eyes blazed in trauma fury. *How dare she pigeonhole me like that!*

She flinched ever so slightly. “That’s what I hate most about you,” she said coldly. “You try to persuade people to your worldview… It’s obnoxious. That ridiculous robot costume was Hifumi’s spawn, but the idea of it being a caricature of ‘justice’ was mine.”

That wasn’t a surprise to him, though it still hurt to hear. That was exactly how people had seen him all his life. “That’s how you look at me…?”

“But of course. That’s how everyone else does, after all.” She twirled her fake hair drill around her finger. “Can we move on yet? Monokuma’s itching to flip the kill switch.”

“One more…” He said through clenched teeth. “How did you know my measurements?”

“Oh, Hifumi had an eye for that sort of thing.” *That’s right! He sized up Hina easily!* “He could make them out at a glance.” Gross!!

“Let’s continue.” Kyoko glanced at him for confirmation. He nodded and looked away, his fists shaking. The scarf tickled the back of his hand. “What was Hifumi supposed to do after your plan, assuming you had actually let him live?”

“That’s simple. After he did his part and pretended to be dead, once someone showed up… I told him to say he’d been seriously wounded, he was on the verge of death, but he just barely held on.” Hina questioned him believing that. “Well of course, that wasn't all there was to it. As I explained it to Hifumi, the plan was... While you were all questioning him about what had happened to him, I was going to murder someone else. At that point, Hifumi would have an alibi, so nobody could doubt him. I told him that, and he believed it.”

“It all seems very... straightforward.” Byakuya observed. “Stereotypical.”

“I just matched the lie to the level of the opponent. In fact, Hifumi ate it up. He believed the lie wholeheartedly, right up until the moment of his death.”

“So you *had* planned to kill him all along!” Sakura said through gritted teeth.

“...But of course. There would have been no point to my plan if the one who pretended to be dead did not end up dead himself.”

“How can human life mean so little to you...?” Hina said in tears.

“That's a non-issue. I simply did everything in my power to win.”

“Now you sound like Byakuya!” Makoto said.

“No, he derives his pleasure from the thrill of the hunt. In that aspect, we are nothing alike.

He was struggling and not paying close attention to what they were talking about. But something stood out to him. “You said earlier you didn’t lie…?” Kiyondo asked.

“Hmhmmhmhm... Anyway... Last night, after we had our meeting about how *it* had disappeared, I paid Hifumi a little visit.” *Course she wouldn’t answer...*

The screens behind them played video recorded in Hifumi’s room.
“Oh, um... what are you doing here?” He asked.

“I was hoping I could talk to you. Alone.”

“It is about what was stolen. I know who did it...”

“What...?”

“It was Taka. He stole it.”

“What!?”

“And I have proof. Would you like to see it?”

“As it turned out, I’d found a use for the digital camera. I’d taken you-know-what to Taka's room earlier and took pictures of it there. I deleted the picture as soon as I'd shown it to Hifumi, of course.”

“How’d you get in my room!??”

“Easily enough...”

“Grrn... So it WAS him! But how did he do it!? She was supposed to yell if either of us got close to her!”

“You are correct. Which is why Taka forced me to steal it.”

“Whaaaaaat!?”

“Please forgive me. He...he threatened me.”

“H-He did...?”

“He came to my room last night unannounced, and then... It's hard for me to even say...”

“He...abused me...”

“I WHAT!?” Taka shouted, picking up what she was implying for once. Struggling no more, he plummeted down the mental cliff. “You told him I, I, I, I I I I I I –”

“That he… Raped you?” Kyoko asked, looking disgusted. Celeste nodded.

“Y-you...” He was sobbing. “You… I...”

“Hrrrrgah! To falsely accuse someone of that most heinous crime…” Sakura growled lowly, fists clenched and aura menacing.

Even Byakuya was put off. “In order frame them for a murder, nonetheless...”

Kiyondo sank to his knees. In all the horrible truths and lies people has said and spread about him, he
had never heard that one before. It was even worse than being accused of murder…

The scene continued to play. “What!?”

“And he... he took pictures. He said if I did not do as he asked, he would show them to everyone... So I...I had no choice...

“Th-That's a crime! An absolute crime! He...! I mean, I knew he'd gone a little crazy, but...! I never imagined he would... would go that far!”

Kiyondo, mind bluescreened: “Y-y-y-you you you you you you--”

Hina: “What the hell is WRONG with you, Celeste!? No… Taeko!” She shouted.

“It was amazing how completely he bought it. Hmhm... I can't express how enjoyable that was.”

“You’re a sociopath. A complete and utter sociopath!” Sakura mountain lion roared.

Kiyondo fell the rest of the way to the ground and wretched hard, vomiting. He laid there, partially in his own sick and shuddering violently. “You you you you you I I I I I I I”

Genocide Jack said, peeking over the edge of her podium, “That's gonna be a ‘yikes’ from me, captain.”

“Uh oh!” Monokuma said. “Clean up on aisle two~!”

Makoto left his podium and ran to him. He pulled him away from the puddle of puke and sat him up straight. “H-hey… Kiyondo?”

Kiyondo rocked himself, staring into space.

“I'm about to say something I've never said before in my life... I'm going to kill him! I'm going to f...f... f-fucking kill him!”

“Wait, please! If you go now, you will be playing right into his hands!”

“Huh...?”

“Taka is planning to use her... to escape. And he has made *you* his target...”

“Escape? You don't mean...?”

“Taka is going to try to kill you.”

“Wh-Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!??”

“And all so he can keep her to himself...”

“Th-That bastard! Bastard bastard bastard BASTARD!”

“Can we allow him continue with these barbaric acts?”
“Absolutely not! How could I!? She... she... I have to save heeeeeeerr!!!”

“Then...would you like to join with me? It just so happens, I have come up with a plan...”

“Huh...?”

“I have devised a way to reclaim what he has stolen, and escape this dreadful school. Hmmhm... Hehehehe... And with that, it is complete...”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing...”

“Hifumi agreed without a second thought. Hmmhm. The effect that item had on him was... remarkable. The power of love... Even a love as twisted as that can still drive people mad, it would seem.”

And that was what broke him in reverse. He fell into the rocks; they crumbled; somehow, he ended up on the other side in burning red-white fury. “LOVE!?” Kiyondo shrieked like a banshee, a sonic boom, suddenly snapping to. Everyone flinched from the sheer amount of decibels. Makoto, being the closest, covered his ears with his hands and groaned. Kiyondo jumped to his feet, accidentally pulling Makoto with him. “LOVE!!! *LOVE*!!??!!?” Every cell of his body was shaking. Every hole in his face was streaming, magma and oceans pouring out his eyes. His face was fire truck red and the sheer color could probably be seen from the Moon. He was so full of righteous fury he and his voice detonated: “To accuse Someone Of That... That MosT EViL THIng... WHEN SURVIVORS ALREADY FACE SUCH A HOSTILE AND UNBELIEVING WORLD... WHEN FALSE ACCUSATIONS MAKE UP SUCH AN INSIGNIFICANT NUMBER... TO FABRICATE IT FOR YOUR OWN GAIN...” He screamed at the top of his lungs. “You’re EVIL!”

“You’re just mad that it’s *you* I framed. Let’s not waste more time on th--” Celeste said.

“No. Nooooooo! NOOOOOOOOOPE! WRONG!” He belted. “You coulda framed BYAKUYA or JACK for this and it’d still be just as indefensible! Immoral! Illegal! EVIL!”

Sakura was silently raging on the other side of the circular dias. She was glowing with pure ferocity.

Jack: “I may be The Cutie Crucifier, but even I wouldn’t do *that*.”

Kiyondo jabbed his finger at Celeste so hard it should’ve rocketed off and stabbed her through the head. “You don’t know SHIT about love, you stupid, you stupid, you stupid stupid Stupid STUPID STUPID MANIPULATIVE MOTHER FUCKER! Just cuz no one ever loved an undeserving PILE OF SHIT LIKE YOU doesn’t mean you know SHIT about LOVE! You don’t know SHIT about SHIT! What ANYONE experiences about ANYTHING! YOU’RE AN INFECTED PUSTULE WITH DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR AND IMPORTANCE!”

Oh, she looked far less amused now.

“For once, I agree with him,” Byakuya said. Kiyondo didn’t notice, just seething without more to say. “You’ve shown the true depths of who you really are.”

“Then...” Kyoko couldn’t even look at her. “What made you take things this far?”

“Was it really...” Hina started, “Just for money?”
“Are you talking about the ten million dollars Monokuma offered us? That *is* a lot of money, it’s true. But that's not all there is to it. From the moment our new life here began, my only thought has been escape.”

“Y-y-you said all along… Right from the very start…! That we have to ACCEPT AND ADAPT!” Kiyondo said. He was so wrathful it barely sounded like a coherent thought.

“Obviously that was a lie too!” Kiyondo groaned in frenzy without thought. “I couldn't take it! I hated it from day one! More than anyone anyone ANYONE else in here! I wanted to get out! Every day was fresh torture! And do you wanna know why? HUH!? Because…I had a dream. And accepting a life here would have meant nothing less than giving up on my dream forever... And there was no way…that I could ever do that.

In the underground world of gambling, I risked my life to make a metaphorical killing. And it was all for that dream...”

Makoto: “And what was this dream of yours...?”

“To live in a European castle.”

“A c-castle!!?”

“And to gather handsome men from all over the world to serve as my butlers-slash-bodyguards.

I was going to make them dress up like vampires and satisfy my every need. Once I obtained that, I would have created a perfectly aesthetic world of decadence... Living the rest of my life there was my only dream, my only goal... That's what life is all ABOUT! Combined with my own winnings, Monokuma's ten million dollars would have made that dream a reality. I got right to the edge, but... Unfortunately, my dream has been scattered to the wind. Still, I don't have any regrets. I pursued my dream till the very end, so why would I?”

Hina: “You sound so passionate, but...you were really able to kill and set up your own friends for it?”

Kiyondo: “Y-you… You framed me for THEFT, BLACKMAIL, MURDER and, and and AND RAPE… So you could could could COULD have a CASTLE and m-men…”

“Are you asking me to feel guilty? That's a pointless endeavor. I think nothing of sacrificing others for my own ends.” He spat at her with horrendous force. It easily arced through the air and landed at the other side of the pulpit… Directly on the top of her tie. She pursed her lips. “I feel nothing. That's all there is to me. That's what makes me...complete. Hmm. Isn't it terrifying how different our values are? There's simply no room for understanding.”

“Th-That's what *we* should be saying,” Hina said. “And plus... How can you be so calm? Don't you realize you're about to die? Why aren't you scared...?”

“Hmph. My ability to lie is unrivaled, and I take pride in that. It's not just other people—I can even fool my own emotions. The conscious deceives the unconscious.”

Makoto: “And that's why you're not scared?”

“That's right. I don't fear death. Kill me however you like. But you know, if I could be reincarnated... If I had a choice, then...I think I would like to come back as Marie Antoinette.”
“You'd just get executed again...”

“… Good.” Kiyondo said, freakily calm. His fury became cold. “You’d die then just as you’re gonna now. An symbol of decadence and cruelty no one cares about! Or LOVES!”


“I am not your GOD DAMNED puppet!” He shouted.

“Mine, Byakuya’s, Monokuma’s… What's the difference, really?” She chuckled airlessly. She smiled.

“You all done?” Monokuma called out, plush paw to his ear. “Okay, then let's get rollin'! The blackened disturbed the peace, and must pay the price! Now then, I've prepared a very special punishment for... her! The Ultimate Gambler! Let's give it everything we've got! It's...

PUNISHMENT TIIIME!

“I guess I'll let Kyoko hold on to this.” She quickly tossed an object over.

“This is...!”

“Will it really give you the hope you're looking for? I can't say I ever saw it that way... Which is why... Actually, it's not important. Well then...take care, everyone. Perhaps we'll meet again, in another life.”

The whole shebang began anew once more. The rising, split-off platform. The shackles. The podiums arranging in a semicircle around her. Just like with Mondo, Taka was facing her directly.

“Do you feel ANYTHING!?” He asked.

“… Certainly not what you’d like me to.”

As she hurtled backward, tittering, she tried to keep her arms down. Whether by air forcing them up or by her secret fear breaking through, she reached out.

He looked at her face as hard as he could. He put all his effort, all his brain power, all his knowledge of expression and social cues, all his fury and rage and frustration and fear and self hatred and mania and depression and guilt and suffering into reading her expression for half a quarter a millionth of a split second.

He could tell she was lying.

He could see...

That she was afraid.

He reached out and took her hand. Makoto tried to say something. “Fuck off!” It was an instinctual act of compassion.

“W-what are you--” She grimaced, trying to pull her hand out of his grip. It wasn’t a hard hold, it was just a struggle because she was being pulled backward.

“Clam it!”

“But--”
“No matter how fucking EVIL you are – VERY!!!! – You didn’t deserve your parents abandoning you!”

“Excuse me!?”

“You deserved GOOD PARENTS!” He shouted. At that moment, he was forced to let her go lest the force pull off his arm.

Her expression as she hurtled the rest of the way through the air, away from the group, stained his retinas. Disgust. Confusion. Indignation. Surprise. With a hint of…

A hint of…

What was it…?

Gratitude?

She was stood upright in the middle of an arranged pile of sticks, in a similar way to how she and Hifumi had arranged him in the robot suit. Her hands clasped together in front of her as if in prayer. A large wooden pillar came up from behind her and rope sprung forth, binding her tightly to it. Beautiful, dramatic baroque harpsichord music played over the speakers. An enormous stone castle erected brick by brick behind her, as did iron bars and a stage that a creepy rabbit plushie engulfed, looking itself like a puppetmaster she’d claimed to be. A crowd of hundreds of Monokumas popped up in front as if gathering to watch a public reckoning. A Monokuma decked out in a black and white-split executioner’s hood lit the wood underneath her.

As the fire crept upward toward her, she began to sweat. The smile on her face could be seen for miles. This was clearly the grandiose execution fit for a medieval witchqueen she’d been hoping for.

But once she was engulfed, and surely not far from being burned alive, giant letters appeared and alarms sounded. “HELP!! HELP!! THERE’S A FIRE!!!”

A fire truck materialized, went zooming up a ramp, flew midair… And crashed directly through her and the rest of the setup. A tiny Monokuma used the truck’s hose to douse the last flame.

But the fire in Kiyondo’s heart was still burning.
It was over. The third execution. Three more students, dead.

Unlike the previous g-around, Kiyondo was standing. He’d stood with the others through it all. It wasn’t a physically nauseating death this time – nothing like watching Leon get pummeled with a thousand baseballs or Mondo going so electrifyingly fast that he turned into a paste – but it was even more theatrical. And far stranger. In a way, Taeko was afforded a mercy the other two weren’t; she was set up to suffer by burning alive, but he figured she was dead as soon as the truck hit her and smeared her across the ground. What was the point of all the setup? Was it to deny her what she craved? Regardless… watching her die… No relief there. Even after the horrible lies she’d told Hifumi about him and the way she’d been toying with him all along, seeing and knowing her death didn’t fill him with peace. He hadn’t consciously thought that it would, but perhaps some small part of him hoped it would give him some kind of closure. Obviously, it didn’t – even as she answered to what she’d done, she left so many mysteries in her wake. Not just about herself and her motivations, either.

Vengeance, huh? He thought back to when he grabbed her hand and shouted affirmations to her. It wasn’t something he’d planned, it wasn’t even something he’d *felt* in the leadup, he just did it automatically. There was some strange kind of pity for her lodged in his gut. Dunno if it’s real or fake… Still, that didn’t chance the sheer amount of malice he’d expressed toward her just minutes before. He had no intention of hurting her and he wasn’t blacking out, but it also didn’t change that he’d shoved Byakuya the previous day, nor did it change the fact that Sakura caught him while he *was* blacked out and lunging toward the snob. Where is the truth in my reactions?

Now he also had to deal with the fact that more people died on his watch. He still felt responsible for the other deaths, especially Chihiro and Mondo’s… But unlike those it’s a for-sure FACT that I was targeted… It didn’t take any psychological twisting to observe that. Even then, though, He couldn’t help but feel like his very existence compelled Taeko to fulfill her plan. Regardless of whether or not she was as much a manipulator as she fashioned herself to be, would she have done this if he weren’t there? Would anyone have fallen for it hook, line, and sinker if she had? Would there have been such a perfect, self-flagellating scapegoat present that, were it not for her accomplice’s mistakes, would’ve cost the lives of everyone else?

None of that changed the fact that he was framed for rape and murder in an almost seamless plan – that, too, was concrete. And everyone had bought it. Would they’ve believed if I wasn’t like THIS…? Would *I* have…? He looked down at his hands. He hadn’t noticed, but he’d cut his palms open with his nails again. There were streaks of blood on the front of his podium and uniform, though thankfully his scarf was unmarred. Musta been when she said what she told Hifumi…

Aside from the rape allegation, he’d fully believed the scenario that’d been carefully constructed
even more than his cohort. The horror of her false accusations, as well as the truth that they had been believed by everyone, felt like a fatal wound. He could feel it in his guts. If his transformation into Kiyondo was him at the precipice, then he was now in complete free fall. He knew he’d crash into what laid beneath the air sooner rather than later. But what waited to meet him? A literal death? A meltdown? An ego death? The death of someone *else*…? *Somethin’ has to happen, somethin’ has to change… somethin’ has to die with Taeko.*

Because this was unsustainable. Everything since Mondo’s execution had been unsustainable, he just hadn’t realized it before. *I don’t know who I am anymore… Was who I was before this awful place just waiting to break, too??*

Like she’d done the first day they were in this accursed place, Sakura unwrapped one of her arm bandages and handed it to him to cover his wounds. He nodded in thanks. After doing the task, he ran the scarf Mondo gave him through his fingers. It was soft. Comforting and cozy. But it, too, bore the reminder of who was gone and how much everything – and himself – had fall apart.

As Monokuma popped up for post-trial shit-talking, he felt a wave of intense bitterness rise within. The bear spoke: “Isn’t it just awful? Someone couldn’t cut free of their regrets from the outside world, and so more people had to die… You guys are still young! You need to place more value on your lives! Jeez… And here I thought you guys were gonna pass the torch of hope to the next generation!”

The mention of the school’s espoused purpose hit Kiyondo. “Only hope in this place is that we’ll make you pay!” He wasn’t even sure if he could still hold on hope for escape anymore.

Monokuma giggled. “Still with the empty threats, huh? You’re all the embodiment of hope, whether you like it or not. And it’s my destiny to knock you down one by one! It’s sad, yes it is. But that reality just can’t be avoided.”

“Inevitable, my butt!” *There HAS to be more to life than some whackjob’s plans for us!*

“Don’t talk like you’re not responsible… How long are you gonna make us keep going through this!? What do you want from us!?” Makoto shouted.

“God, I'm so sick of people asking me that! Give it a rest already!” Monokuma replied sharply.

“He wants to watch us kill each other! Just like SHE did!” Kiyondo yelled. “He wants to drink our DESPAIR, just like he said before!”

Monokuma shrugged. “So aaaaanywaaaaaay… Kyoko, did I see you get some kind of key-type object from Celeste? So uh… what’s the deal with that?” *That’s not what MATTERS now! She said nothing. “Huh? What’s the matter?”*

“I’ll answer your question, if you answer mine. What did you do? What did you… do to me?” *Whazzat mean…?* Monokuma reacted with surprise. “Answer me. What did you do to my body?” *HUH!?* Kiyondo swallowed hard.

“Uwaaah! Oh man, oh jeez… Oh man, oh jeez! What do you mean, what did I…do!? I-I have no idea…!!

I don't know anything about it…” *What the HELL is that reaction!?*

Given the trial, he had to ask. “Did h-he… Did he hurt you? Did he touch you!?”
She didn’t reply. Instead, Monokuma did: “Okay, things are getting kinda awkward. I think it's about time I got out of here... Meanwhile, you guys can go on enjoying your school life. If you get lonely, gimme a shout! Not that I'll do anything about it, of course! Puhuhu... See ya!” And with that, their tormenter was gone.

“Tryin’ to hold him to the fire’s like tryin’ to stab water…” he said with disgust.

The remaining students regarded Kyoko with confusion. What was she goin’ on about? What did she see…? After a few minutes, Makoto broke the tense silence. “Hey, Kyoko. Monokuma already mentioned it, but... What's that key that Celeste gave you?”

“Most likely... it's the key to one of the dressing room lockers.”

“What!?” Hina said. “Then that means...!” I don’t get it…?

Byakuya: “Celeste probably hid *it* in there.”

Sakura: “I suppose sometimes it's easiest to miss what's right beneath your nose. Well then, we'd better go check.” It…? What’s missing? Oh! Alter Ego!?

“Good idea,” Kyoko replied.

When they got back up to the pre-Trial elevator room, Kyoko said, “I'm going to go on alone from here. Everyone else head to the dining hall. I'll check in with you later.”

Byakuya asked why she was going alone, but in reply she glanced quickly at the surveillance camera. “That's not what I mean,” he said. “Why *you*? There's still the risk of a spy, you know.”

“Spy, schmy!” Kiyondo said. “I'll go with her and make SURE she’s not up to any funny business!” Even if she won’t let me talk to him, I wanna make sure he’s okay...

She looked down at her boots. “No…”

“What! Why n—“

“We can’t discuss this here. I said, no.” Her voice was flat. She was frowning as she looked up at him.

“Tch…” He folded his arms defiantly. Byakuya raised his eyebrow. This crap again! But I guess she’s right... Wrong place. He knew there was no winning here, and that in the presence of a camera wasn’t the place to throw a fit about it. He fought back angry tears.

“Then I’ll go,” Makoto said. Kiyondo tutted at him in disappointed approval. After some reluctance, Byakuya gave his consent for him to go with Kyoko.

“Screw this, I'm goin’ to the dining hall...” Kiyondo grumbled. No one followed him out. His stomach was churning, but he didn’t realize he needed food. He zoned out while staring at one of the giant metal plates, fantasizing about pulling it apart with his bare hands and climbing up the window that was surely on the other side. Wish I could look out...

The person who broke the tense quiet was surprising. “Booooo~!” Genocide Jack said, suddenly
“AAAAAAgggH! Get AWAY!” Kiyondo screamed, jumping. He landed several feet back. “What the FUDGE!!?” He was so out of track with himself that his training didn’t kick in. *I didn’t even shift to defense!!* If it was someone who wanted to hurt him, he’d left plenty of time for them to strike. But it was Jack, after all, and she could easily seek to harm him regardless of any action he might take… He stood there firmly facing her in the event she tried to rush him. He checked their surroundings; they were the only two in the room.

“Oh, come on booboo boy! We know you got the ‘fuck’ in ya!”

“W-what the hell’s THAT mean!?”

“I suppose maybe you *don’t* any more since butterboy’s toast!”

“HEY!” he shouted. He felt a prick of fury in his gut, but he was so mixed up from everything else that it just made him more nauseous instead of angry. He clenched his stomach. *Why is she so gross about intercourse!? And WHY’s she gotta drag Mondo into it!? “Knock it off or I’ll send you to Detention Hell where ya belong!”*

“Butbutbuuuut anyway,” she said, straightening her tongue like it was an askew tie, “Sooo ya really didn’t do any of that stuff, did ya, Tacky?”

He grunted. “‘Course not… She said it herself…”

“She’s the Queen of Liars though! For all we know… she coulda lied about how big her boobs were!”

*Um… “Jeez! Please just turn back into Toko, already…” For cryin’ out loud! She blew a raspberry at him. “Whaddya even *want*…?”*

“Like I said, are you sure you can trust her? Maybe you *did* do all that!”

That didn’t hit him in a nice place. “Ghhk – But Monokuma, he said we voted correctly!” *Can I really trust HIS word either…?*

“He sure did, kyeeehahahaha!” *Oh, she’s TROLLING!* That realization didn’t ease the turbulence of unsureness she’d thrown into him.

He’d never taken kindly to being toyed around with. “Why’re you MESSIN’ with me!?” *I dunno if I can get rid of that awful feeling that those two lied about what I REALLY did outta my gut now…*

“Something you said in the trial really got me going…” She said, her voice threateningly emotionless. He backed away and assumed the stance of a fighter, being sure to protect his face. “You compared yourself to *me*.”

He remembered and shuddered. “Only due to the personality shift—“

“That’s where you got it wrong! You’re not an alter or some different facet of your own brain like me! You’re not two sides of a coin!”

“Well, I—“

“You’re just some sad little kid who turned his self-hated up 69 and dissociated!” *I’m tryin’ to figure stuff out!* “You’re off the rails, but not like me! Don’t think you know for a second you know what
THIS—“ she gestured to herself, “is like! Both of us feel trapped in here… Ya keep yapping about Mondo’s soul in you…”

He let out a deep breath. “Can barely feel him anymore…”

“You’re soooo lucky right now I have a policy against slaughtering insects. Sounds like your delusion’s wearing off!”

“Delusion!?“

“Delusion that his soul’s in you, dummy!”

“But I FELT—”

“First rule of Fight Club: no feelings allowed! But! Since I *am* the Ultimate Serial Killer and I have DID, I’d be able to use my amazing powers to sniff you out too! But the only things you smell like are puke, pity, and a dash of peen to tast--!”

“A dash of COME AGAIN!?” He blushed. PEEN? Does she mean--

“Right, a dash of cum!”

His jaw dropped. CUM?! Hina appeared by his side. “Leave him alone, Toko! Er, Jack!”

“Milkbags! To the! Res CUE!”

“Hey! If anything, she’s MEATbags like the rest of us!” Kiyondo shouted. “We’re made primarily of meat and water, not milk!”

“How udderly amazingly scientific, Ishimooru! Get that milk! Kyeeehahaa!” she skipped back to bother Byakuya.

“She’s a fudgin’ nuisance…” he grumbled, eyes threatening to stream out of frustration and revulsion. “What’s ejaculation got to do with anything, anyway!?”

Hina scrunched her face, clearly uncomfortable. “Uh… She was basically calling you--”

“Dickbreath!!” Jack shouted from the other side of the room.

Kiyondo went even brighter red, his face aflame. “Wh—Y—Th—“ He stammered. It took a minute, but he recovered: “Cut the homophobia, Jackhole!”

Unfortunately by then she had already left. He hadn’t noticed Sakura telling her to get out, nor the rest of the survivors entering the room. That could’ve been a cure for Hina to leave, but she didn’t.

“Uh…” He stood there awkwardly. “’Sup?” He tried to will his face to lose its red, but he was too mortified still for it to work. He felt like he should probably sit down and try to collect himself but the nearest chair was a few feet away.

“We have to talk!”

“Yeah… Alright.” He shrugged. I should say sorry! “So, I—“

“I’m just so mad at myself at how I treated you like oh my gosh I believed Celeste of all people even when she was clearly lying and I was so gullible and I should’ve known by now not to take crime scenes at face value but Hifumi died in my lap after my tears brought him back to life and I thought
he said your name and that was more than enough evidence for you to be guilty ON TOP OF how you’d been acting like I was really really hurt and I just don’t get why you were like that and I have big feelings and take rejection even if it wasn’t intended really bad but this clearly was and I don’t like being yelled at and all of that made me just so angry and vengeful and sure that you did this and I wanted you to feel awful and own up to what you totally did but you totally didn’t do it well I mean aside from the acting out stuff and I’m just so so so soooooo sorry I don’t really know what got in my head but it wasn’t fair of me to just dump on you like that I could even see how hurt you were and—"

*THUD*

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Kiyondo came to a while later. For some reason, his eyes were closed. He tried to take inventory for a moment. Laying down... Sheets... Boots off? Physically, he felt congested and a little nauseous. When he blinked, he saw the ceiling of his dorm room. He couldn’t help but feel a little scared, hoping this wasn’t like the last time he suddenly came too in his room after the second trial. “Wh—“

“OH MY GOD I’M SO SORRY ARE YOU OKAY!?” Hina said, running from his bathroom to him with a fresh washcloth.

“How did I—What—“

He noticed Sakura at the foot of his bed. “You fainted and then fell asleep.” She saw he was about to ask, so she added, “It’s been about half an hour. We brought you back here due to the ‘sleeping is only permitted in the dorms’ rule.”

“Fainted...?” I *was* feeling weird...

“You threw up several times and have been through almost every end of the emotional wringer today...” I see!

“And I dumped all that on you!!” Hina said sheepishly. “All at once!”

“So my body lacks the proper nutrition and I was too emotional... And I guess I also prolly got overwhelmed, too, with that much stimulus at once...” With my autism I usually just freeze or melt down but I guess all the other factors on top made me white the heck out! Thinking about it, he *had* forgotten to try eating after the trial and he’d been too preoccupied to take any kind of breather to recuperate. He was queasy, so he wasn’t sure anything would stay down, but attempting would’ve been better than nothing.

“You just went *down* like a bird shot for sport!” Hina said. “I caught you before I hit the ground!”

Good thing I didn’t smash my head!

“How’d you know it turned to sleepin’?”

“You started lightly snoring,” Sakura chuckled.

“I don’t do that! Snoring’s for LOSERS!”

“You’ve sounded off since midway through the trial. The emotional weight of everything has you somewhat congested. That’s likely what caused you to snore.”

He sat up and stretched his neck. He saw someone’d said a box of tissues next to his bed, so he spent a few minutes blowing his nose, then taking a deep breath through it. Now THAT’s instant relief! He did some grounding breathing exercises.
“Sooo, uh…” Hina said.

“Oh!” He startled. Evidently the destractability was still present. *Forgot they were here… That was rude! “S-sorry!”*

She waved it off. “Can we talk? Without me and my motormouth running you over I mean…”

He thought for a minute, tapping his chin. *Don’t wanna do stuff to fast…* He’d been impulsive, after all, and what did that bring aside from ruin? He reflected on when he and Chihiro had taken time before having their painful discussion about ‘strength’ in order to be prepared. *“Not just yet… Need some time to settle, y’know?”* *Wanna be able to actually hear her out ‘n respond… Obviously I’m in no shape now!*

“Aw, okay…” she said disappointedly.

“No use in me passing out like that again when we’re tryin’ to talk!”

“Gotcha!”

“Now then… Are the others still there?”

-----

They waited for about fifteen minutes in the dining hall before Makoto and Kyoko showed up. Kiyondo ate. Since it was much later than his usual supper time and he had been throwing up, he settled on his regular, easy lunch of toast and a banana. He took it slow so as to not disturb his stomach too much.

“Here for a status report, yeah!?” Kiyondo demanded while glaring at his watch. *How’s my friend!?!*

“Uh… Yeah,” Makoto said. “You, Byakuya, and I should head to the bath house for a soak, don’t you think? Wash everything from the last few days off?”

“I’d rather eat DRAIN HAIR!”

Byakuya just scoffed. Hina made a grossed out noise in the background. “Please?” Makoto asked. “What’s more communal than three guys in the bath house together…?”

“’s right, only Hina and Sakura know…” He groaned. *Guess it’s to stay incognito.* “Fine, whatever…” The walk to the bathhouse was silent and very uncomfortable. Having to be near Byakuya made him want to crawl out of his skin.

The girls arrived a few minutes after they did. Kiyondo was tapping his foot. “Well? Spit it out!”

“Alter Ego is safe and sound and working on decoding the last set of files,” Kyoko stated. *Thank goodness!!*

Byakuya: “Finally. It’s been weeks. Strange that the files are so thoroughly encrypted…”

“According to that letter, the school shut down. Maybe the Ultimate Security Agent, Ultimate Cipherer, or Ultimate Hacker did the job beforehand!” Kiyondo asked. *Who knows why they’d be so tough to crack, but SOMEONE did it!*

“Anything’s possible,” Kyoko said.

“So we’re gonna get out soon!? We have some clues!?” Hina asked excitedly.
“We can’t view the files until all of them have been processed, unfortunately,” Kyoko said. Hina’s bubble burst and she looked a little sad.

Sakura: “And he doesn’t know when he’ll be finished…?”

Kiyondo: “How could he not know? They’re on a computer, there’s limited SPACE and TIME!” He’s been runnin’ for, like, a MONTH!

Kyoko: “Estimated times are just that – estimations.”

Makoto: “Computers have only been reliably estimating that for the last decade or so – before, the displays were to just keep impatient users at bay. That’s what he told us anyway. And he said that he’s running into new mechanisms and can’t actually tell directly how many files there are. He’s just looking at the file size.” I don’t get the in-depths of how computers work… but how can he be finding new stuff the more he digs!?

“That’s it, then?” Sakura asked. Kyoko nodded.

“I’ll keep you all posted.” I guess that’s that…

With that, everyone but Kyoko and Kiyondo left in pairs. As he was about to leave, she cleared her throat. “Huh?”

“How are you feeling…?”

He raised his eyebrows and pondered that. Didn’t expect that! “… Dunno. Too many things at once, I s’pose.” He massaged his temples, trying to soothe the strong headache that’d developed.

“Celeste proposed a lot of awful theories to make you look guilty… Have any of them taken hold in you?”

“Yeah…” He folded his arms and exhaled. “Stuff about DID and sleepwalkin’ and poop… Jack told me it’s definitely not the first one. Though she did troll me and try to make me doubt that Taeko’s story was true. I’m just scared of what I’m capable of, y’know?”

“If you want, I can come by tonight to keep watch over you.”

“Really!?” She nodded. “But… why?”

“Most of the things Celeste said can’t be tested while you’re awake.” Testing!? “Am I just a lab rat!?”

She sighed. “You’re my friend, Taka.”

“Friend…?” Never thought I’d hear that again after everything… “I’m your… friend?”

“Am I yours?”

So many people were asking so much of him today. His mixed up, confused duality of feelings for everyone else and their parts in Mondo’s death still remained as well. “I—”

“Wait, sorry. You don’t need to say. Just… Don’t worry about it.” She went to leave, but this time, he stopped *her*.

“Who the hell knows? Not me, that’s for sure…” He walked up to her side and said, “Bet you know
my schedule by now, huh?”

“Of course.”

“I uh… I don’t wanna be by my lonesome tonight,” he admitted. Lonely and scared… He hadn’t had any companionship since he started to push people away; he hadn’t had an equal, two-sided conversation since the day Mondo died. “So if you’re still offerin’, swing by at bedtime.”

She offered him a small smile. “Until then, take it easy on yourself.” Best I can do is *try*…

Since it was late, there were just a few hours before the curfew announcement would sound. He spent his time working to get the warehouse inventory back up to speed. The blueprints and materials Celeste and Hifumi had collected for their nefarious plan sat in a large box in the very back right corner of the large room. Guess Monokuma put ‘em there… I could sort ‘em but… He shivered, a chill running through his hands. Not now. Instead, he rechecked everything else that was there. The easy, familiar task was soothing. When he finished, he went back to his room and showered.

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Right after the bell, Kyoko knocked on his door. He let her in. After he tucked himself under his sheets and she got settled into the chair she’d left by his bed from her night watches while he was depressive catatonic, he yawned.

“If you’re looking for a deep conversation, right now’s not a good time,” she said quietly.

“Duh! I need to recharge. But what about you?”

“What about me?”

He swallowed. “How are YOU feelin’?” he asked tentatively.


“Over what?”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“I leave everything in your capable hands, Captain Kyoko. G’night!”

As she chuckled, he flicked off the lamp. “Good night, Taka.”

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He slept like a rock. When he woke up just before the bell, he was surprised to see her still sitting there. She was asleep, her head lolled slightly off to one side. He couldn’t help but smile at the sight.

Looking at himself in the mirror, he ran his fingers through his hair. His black roots were grown out by a few centimeters now. It was a striking look, and it wouldn’t be long before his hair lost its usual natural short spikiness and fell to gravity. It’d been a long time since he let his hair get this long – he found comfort in his style’s utilitarian nature, and the sensation of having hair flop onto his skin wasn’t one he liked - but he’d been far too disorganized as his ‘new’ self to trim it.

He hummed quietly. Leave it for now… He’d have to make sure he could actually devote the attention needed to the task before starting, and as of the day before the trial he still couldn’t focus enough to read. He poked at the bags under his eyes. Not as bad as when I didn’t sleep at all… His default expression was still more intense than Taka’s usual, but it was better than the baked-in
catatonic grimace or the static angry disgust mania had bequeathed upon him.

While he got ready, Kyoko returned to her room to do the same. They went to the breakfast meeting together for the first time while enjoying companionable silence. He couldn’t stop thinking about the events of the day prior, nor Kyoko’s question if he considered her his friend.

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After the breakfast meeting, the two of them stayed in the dining hall.

“I think you’d be pleased to know that last night, you slept like a rock.”

Right to topic! Her straightforwardness is refreshing! Unlike with some of the others he’d met in the corrupted shambles of Hope’s Peak, she didn’t generally beat around the bush, talk with loaded words he could only guess at the implications of, say too much at once, or weave a confusing narrative. It was also the first time they’d sat down to spend time together not out of necessity or convenience. “Nothin’ weird? No sleep walking or planning or whatever? No alter? No possession?”

“Nope. You were so peaceful and quiet that after a few hours in I looked through one of the books you took from the library.”

That excited him. *I haven’t had a chance to discuss information with someone in SO long!*

“Which!?”

“Abnormal Psychology. I consulted after the second trial it to figure out what was happening in your head, actually, along with the international diagnostic book. Those were probably available here for Ultimates in psychiatric and medical fields.”

That excited him even more. “Did ya LEARN anything!?”

“Understanding more how the mind works is fascinating.” He nodded enthusiastically. “Are you up for that discussion, now?”

Still feel really weird and mixed up, but… “Pretty sure I can handle it! Oh, before that…” He’d noticed a contradiction yesterday. “How come you’re calling Taeko Celeste, but *me* Kiyotaka!?”

“Celeste was a construction. A performance. An alter ego Taeko assumed.”

“Well YEAH!” He wasn’t particularly insightful about others in his altered state, but she’d pretty much spelled that out herself. “But why call HER by what she wanted, and not call me by what *I* want!? I’m KIYONDO!”

“Are you?” *I think...!* “You’re not an alter ego. You’re not put on, and you’re not someone else.”

“How can ya be so sure?” He’d certainly *felt* like someone other than Kiyotaka…

“Because you’re genuine. You’re not a good actor or liar. It’d be very obvious if you were faking it.”

He grunted. “I don’t really know what’s up with me… Wait! If I ever changed my name, would you honor THAT?”

She looked at him oddly. “Of course.”

“Then why aren’t you *now*?” He pressed.
“…This isn’t like that. This isn’t you re-defining yourself and getting rid of an assigned name.” Oh, she picked it up… I was just gonna say it’d be if I got stuck in witness protection! “It’s your self-hatred overflowing to the point that you’ve depersonalized.”

He grunted. If that’s how she sees it, her logic makes sense I guess. “Fine. But why are you so insistent? It makes me feel real crummy…”

“Because this isn’t healthy, and I’ve been trying to counter your extreme externalized self-hatred by reminding you that you’re trash talking *yourself*.”

“Ain’t that you DEFININ’ me? I hate that kinda stuff!” He grit his teeth. Other people had been defining him his whole life. “If I wanna be someone else, then who’re you to say I’m not!?”

“Hmmm… I understand where you’re coming from. I’m sorry. But—“

“‘Sorry but’s ain’t REAL sorries!”

“Let me finish…” He bit his tongue to stay further objection, an irritated look on his face. “I don’t think it’d be good to let you cut your true self off from yourself… Especially not stuck in this mess. When you’d inevitably blame yourself for someone else dying, what would you do?” That’s right… She saw how all of that got me even back to Sayaka, Junko, and Leon… “You can’t pin it on Kiyotaka anymore… So what becomes of your depersonalization, your constructed version of yourself that you believe in?”

“Does it… Come crumblin’ down?”

“You know the unfortunate answer to that, don’t you?” He reluctantly nodded. “Your world ended, but instead of acknowledging that and trying to pick up the pieces, you looked at what happened and said it deserved it and it wouldn’t happen again in your totally new world you assembled from the scraps you pretended were built from scratch.”

“Ouch…” He sighed. I guess that all tracks… but… “What gives YOU the right to decide this, though? All on your own?”

“I admit, I *have* been making a lot of decisions about your wellbeing without consulting you.”

“Not the biggest fan!” She nodded and gestured for him to elaborate. “This stuff, takin’ care of me when I was down, almost stickin’ a tube in me to make me eat, everythin’ about our friend…”

“You feel a lot of animosity toward me for those decisions.” Now it was his turn to nod. “I want you to understand something. What I do, I do with the intent of protecting everyone and keeping us in one piece. Getting us out of here. I’m trying to hold us together… But I also know that sometimes I don’t make the right calls and that even the right ones hurt people.” She was quiet for a minute. “Even though you’re usually not in a place to make those decisions *with* me… I… Feel guilty about it.”

He cocked his head and stared her in the eyes. She feels bad about it…? He had no idea what to say. It was a bit of a surprise to him – he’d thought she had him trapped under some kind of machinations, that she had some kind of ill intent, that she was purposefully robbing him of agency for some goal other than trying to keep him alive. With how disturbed his mental state was, how could he have seen it otherwise?

Speaking of keeping him alive… “Do you wish we hadn’t helped you? If we’d just left you there…?” She asked quietly.
I woulda died, for sure, after my health nosedived first. “… Yeah.” His delusions of being the avatar of death who must perish so as to not spread despair had long ceased, but the feeling that his former self deserved to die hadn’t. “Nothin’ good’s happened since Mondo… You know… I mean, Taeko did her business cuz of me…”

She blinked rapidly. “Kiyondo… Kiyotaka… Whoever you are…” He jumped. The first time she ever called me that! “You don’t deserve to die as punishment for what you think you did.”

“I told Sayaka to go through with her plans for Leon and Makoto… I served as an easy scapegoat for Taeko’s bull poop… I couldn’t stop Mondo from killing Chihiro! I even piled on his triggered state…”

“None of that is solely your fault.”

“What…?” He scrunched his eyebrows. “You gonna say some crock about how only Monokuma is to blame, like usual!?!” His mental split certainly exacerbated his tendency to think in black and white.

“No. You weren’t the only person interacting with them… We started out with there being 15 of us, on top of being Monokuma’s playthings. Even if you were the last unintentional nudge, that doesn’t mean it was the only one. Makoto still blames himself for Sayaka, for example…”

“Wait…” He flashed back to a conversation they had that seemed like it was ages ago. She implied after Leon’s execution… “You… Feel guilty, too, don’tcha?”

“I do. I’ve been so *preoccupied* that I didn’t pick up on things that ended up happening. Like Celeste’s plans… It should’ve been incredibly obvious what she was planning, but I didn’t catch it. I knew she was a liar, I knew she was pushing your buttons, but I didn’t foresee what she intended to do. I was keeping an eye on you, but I couldn’t be in more than one place at once…”

He tapped his fingers on the rectangular table separating them. She sees a lot… She’s got her finger in every pie. “I s’pose you do more for us than we see, huh?”

“I’m certainly *trying*…”

“I didn’t make it any easier myself,” he admitted. “To keep an eye on me, I mean…” I shoved everyone away, *especially* her…

She chuckled a little. “You really didn’t.”

“So you feel the burden of this falls on *you*. If we both feel that way… One of us has GOTTA be wrong, right?”

“Maybe both of us are…”

He rested his arm on his propped-up fist and glanced at the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. That’d be sweet, but nah… I don’t think that’s it. “Or maybe we’re both right…”

“But regardless of who holds the blame… Would you be happy to see me will myself dead over it?”

“No way!” He caught himself off-guard. His feelings about her were a tangled ball of yarn, especially about her role in the second trial… But he didn’t want her to *want* to die like he had wanted to himself. Like he maybe still did? No one oughtta feel like that… And he definitely didn’t
want her to die, period.

“Then why would you do that to yourself?”

“Well, I *am* the Ultimate Moral Compass, so violations of justice and morality fall on *my*--”

“You hold yourself to an impossibly high standard. Your Ultimate may be part of it, but with your history, you’ve been taught to do that, right?”

“You mean…” Mental illness… Neurodivergence… He cringed and shuddered deeply. Being punished for them… Being punished for failing, for letting him down… Grandfather…

“You deserve to be easier on yourself… To hold yourself to the same standard you hold everyone else.”

“Ah…” he hissed, letting out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Familiar…” That was, after all, what he’d learned from his therapists over the years. *The relentless suffering and tragedies of this place beat it out of me…* He recalled trying to put into practice those lessons, and encourage others to apply them to themselves, but the infinite traumas he’d faced here hit him like a wrecking ball and seemed to demolish what he’d worked so hard to build. Becoming aware of that loss was like having a bucket of ice water splashed on him. He made himself small as if to conserve body heat. “That applies to you, too!”

“Easier said than done, as I’m sure you’re aware… Now then. I think I have a lot to own up for… I’m sorry for being cryptic and encouraging you to doubt yourself, or at the very least leaving room for you to think I inherently doubt you. I’m… Trying to figure things out. That’s what my focus has been on, and I’ve been frustrated… So that’s why I’ve been like that. A reason, not an excuse.”

That was a really solid apology. *Impressive! But- “You don’t doubt me…”? Why not? Been doin’ lots of stuff that’d make it justified, right?*

“No. I’m just concerned and trying to make decisions that actually help you.”

He chewed his lip. *I can get it…* It’s not like he’d never made calls like that. He was – or had been, status self-revoked - the chairperson of the Morals Committee. He assigned classroom duties, he kept an eagle eye on the halls, he mediated conflicts, he kept classes on track, and he overall ensured the health of the student body in whatever ways he could. He carried around detention slips, too. All of those required making unpopular decisions and, if anything, engendered even more disrespect on top of his surname and personality. Since there was no learning environment to keep in balance here, he just hadn’t been able to do such things. Pretty much all he could do were schedule meetings, keep rooms organized, do cleaning duties as they were assigned to him (with spot cleaning sometimes required when it was someone else’s week), and try to keep morale high. It made him feel ineffective and adrift. *But none of the decisions I made have been as important as the ones *here*, and definitely not as major as the ones she’s made… Didn’t think about that before…” ‘M sorry, too… I’ve been pretty harsh, and takin’ for granted everything you and the crew did for me… Are tryin’ to do for me, really. For all of us, too.”

“Apology accepted. I don’t expect you to forgive me, though.”

“I got a lot to work through…” He shrugged. Perspective changes usually weren’t immediate, and he still didn’t understand her actions in the second trial. But he didn’t want to talk about that now. “Even if I can’t forgive ya, I know I don’t wanna shut ya out anymore, so…”

She tapped her finger on her chin. “Yesterday made me wonder if I’ve been making the right calls
about our friend.”

“Huh? I mean, I guess I can see your logic…”

“If I hadn’t forbidden you from seeing him, I think Hifumi would’ve been less easily convinced…” I guess Taeko wouldn’t have been able to start with ‘Oh no, dearest Hifumi! Alter Ego, Your True Love, Has Been TAKEN!’.” “And besides, your catatonia was going to break eventually.”

“I was plannin’ to kill myself…”

“Better for it to break and you end up with white hair than it to break and you end up with it painted red.”

He shook his head in confusion. “Are you saying it was a good thing that we talked…?”

“Makoto should’ve discussed it with me first… And it definitely threw you into mania, but at least you counted your ‘transformation’ as your own death instead of actually attempting suicide like you were about to. That may have just been luck, but still.”

“I’ve been so unstable since Mondo died… Guess that’s grief and trauma for ya…” He closed his eyes.

“I’d like to offer you an olive branch.”

“Huh…?”

“We can go see him when you’re ready.” That made his eyes shoot open.

He grinned in confusion that was quickly turning to elation. “WHAT!? Are you sayin’… I don’t gotta be banned from him anymore!?”

“Indeed.”

“But when’ll I be ready!? Whose call is that?”

“This time… It’ll be yours. As well intentioned as things have been from us, I think you deserve to call your shots.”

“For REAL…!??”

“I don’t know if you know best right now, but it’s clear we don’t. We’re just trying to help, so why not let you in on it too, at the very least?”

“It’s what I want most right now…” And yet, he could feel some kind of tightness in his mind.

“Exactly. I think it would be best to wait a little while until you even out and process what’s happened, but if you feel talking to him would help you with that I’d be happy to oblige as soon as needed.”

Almost too good to be true! “…”

“How do you feel about it?”
“I’m kinda scared… I’m excited, and rarin’ to go, but I think I’m… Nervous.” Been so long… What do I say? What’ll HE say…?

“This has a lot of significance to you and it’s been an upward hill to climb. It makes sense.”

“I think… I think I should apologize to everyone first. Since that was what I was gonna do before the trial anyways…” Yeah… time sounds good. I wanna think about what I want to say to him anyway.

She stood up and stretched shook her hands. “Let me know when.”

“What will you do now, then?”

“I have plenty of things to mull over. See you later, Taka.”

He recoiled a little at the wrong name, but not like he had been. It didn’t fire him up, or really hurt. It was just jarring. Maybe the current me is a construction being taken apart…

He spent the rest of the day tidying up the school store, pondering who he was. What do I stand for? What do I want to accomplish? Who *am* I?
By the end of the breakfast meeting a few days later, Kiyondo had gathered the nerve to approach Makoto. *He’s the one who knows about PEOPLE!* While attending to his cleaning and organizing needs, he’d been spending a lot of time ruminating. Trying to understand every single thing that was cumulatively affecting him and keeping him from feeling in tune with himself. Unsurprisingly, he’d taken to making lists to inventory them all. The mania was somewhat subsiding so he was more able to focus than at its heights, though it was difficult to pay attention long enough to read his lists if he didn’t keep the entries short. Unfortunately, he didn’t quite the nerve to say what he was thinking, so he just kind of… stood there.

“Hey, are you okay?” The boy asked. “You’ve been keeping to yourself a lot since the trial…”

“Well, yeah! I was *before* it too!" Though what I’m doing with my time is less impulsive!

“That doesn’t make me any less worried.”

He sighed. “I’m weak, Makoto… So very weak…”

“Did something else happen…?”

*There’s one thing in particular…* But he decided to start with something that wasn’t related to the death and trauma they were stuck living through in this place. “Haven’t you realized? This school is missing something of utmost importance! Textbooks! Classes!” He groaned in frustration. One of the cores of his being, at least previously, was schoolwork. Even his passions for ethics, politics, morals, and justice were focused around it. *No way he hasn’t noticed!*

“Oh, um… I can’t say I really miss that stuff.”

Kiyondo looked at him in shock. *Academics are of utmost import! Why wouldn’t he miss them…? I know he got in from the lucky student lottery, but striving to be at the top of your class is so important to *me*…* He took a breath. “I’m just gonna come right out and say it… I’m freaking out!”

It was one of the most frequent variables on his list – he’d been stuck thinking about it quite a lot. “As we speak, we’re being left in the dust by other students our age! I’m stuck here with nothing to do!” *School started in May, and it’s late July now!*

“You’ve been cleaning, right? And reading through stuff from the library?” He had, indeed. He’d even started sorting through the garish, weird ‘collage’ of pictures plastered on the art room’s wall.

“Yeah, but it ain’t the same! The studying, the assignments, the *structure*…! I don’t got SQUAT to do here!” Even if it weren’t for his neurodivergence, he was absolutely the kind of person who thrived on schedules. *Morning and night curfew just don’t cut it*! He’d felt lacking due to the zero classes but was still able to regiment himself until the second trial. *I’m so far out of whack now!* His most important scheduled activity had no signs of being implemented here. Since the acute effects of catatonia were wearing off, his brain was going back to its usual state of having too much time to
think about things; and since things here had started to fit a certain predictable pattern, he had more
time to hyperanalyze what was missing. All while he was trying to figure out who he was and what
he was capable of. And add to that the feeling of suffocation because they were stuck in this place
away from the outside world. *Trapped in this Tartarus left to rot or kill each other!*

“Yeah, we kind of just gotta keep ourselves occupied…”

Kiyondo was trying to not panic thinking about it. “I'm totally freaking out! Makoto! What should I
do!?” There wasn’t anything, or anyone, to distract him from it anymore. “If I keep involuntarily
skipping class like this, I'm gonna reach dunce status in no time!” His academic status was one of the
few things that he could both take pride in and look to as proof of his effort. *Grandfather always
beat me for not getting straight As…* Thankfully, once he was free of Toranosuke’s influence he’d
realized he truly was organically passionate about education. It’s not like he’d be able to put his
smarts out there anyway, since they were stuck in the abandoned Academy, but at least if there were
classes he could keep his regiments and appreciate his own progress in learning. *I want OUTTA here… but unless we can find an exit…*

“I-it's really not that big a deal. Just calm down... You were always at the top of your class at the
private school you used to go to, right?” He gestured at where the badge on Kiyondo’s chest used to
be. He still wasn’t comfortable wearing it, nor the armband that proved his status as the head of the
Morals Committee. Kiyondo nodded in assent. *I got in with a scholarship for my ranking! If I hadn't,
I woulda been poop outta luck because the tuition was so high…* “I mean, you're basically genius
level. So even if you miss a few classes, it's not the same as just some ordinary kid ditching…”

*More than a few! Months’ worth! Wait--* He flinched. “...Genius...? Don't say that...” He suddenly
frowned. His posture became much more rigid.

“Huh...?”

“I'm no genius.” *I *can't* be! His voice was unintentionally ramping up. “I'm a normal person, just
like anyone else. I'm from a middle-class family, you know? Actually, we're not even middle-
class...” *We're in dire straits...* “That's why I have to push so hard! I have to knock down that wall!”
*I gotta prove that your background shouldn't keep you from success, whatever the hell it looks like!*
“It's not geniuses that change the world. It's ordinary people who make every effort they can.”
*History has proven that time and time again!* “And to prove that, I have to keep on making effort
after effort after effort!” His eyebrows were a harsh v and he grimaced. While crying, he shouted,
“So don't call me a genius! Don't lump me in with those lazy clods who don't put in any effort!” *Like
Grandfather, Byakuya, and other privileged classes... People who coast on their connections and
inheritances! People whose success is guaranteed! People who get off on HURTING OTHERS!* He
was definitely panicking now.

Makoto looked down and put his hands up in apology. “S-Sorry... That's not what I was trying to
do.”

Kiyondo rubbed his temples and eyes. *Went off the rails...* He sat down at the table behind him and
did breathing exercises and tried to think about the different sensory input he was unconsciously
taking in to ground himself. After a few minutes, he was out of anxiety’s clutches enough to use
words again. “...No, *I'm* sorry. I got a little carried away...” It’s not like he never thought about
such matters or traumas without provocation; they were, after all, a part of his history. But as had
happened over and over again in his life, someone hitting any of the words and concepts or stimuli
that he associated with those experiences brought them right to the forefront and overwhelmed
whatever he was thinking about before. It was both overwhelming *and* yanking him down to a
dark place. As Chihiro had found early on, Kiyondo had even less tolerance for being tripped up like that within the context of the school and killing ‘game’. Add to that his currently thorny yet fragile mental state and you have a recipe for very easy triggering. “But I only said all that because you and me are the same. You and me, we're just normal people. We know what it means to have to make an effort.” Even if he got in on luck and doesn’t care about school… Neither of us have the ability to jump up on top the ladder! “That's why I want you to know exactly how I feel...”

“I understand...”

He felt awful for talking, but couldn’t stop. The train was completely off the tracks and hurtling forward anyway. “And that's why I'm so passionate about my work on the Morals Committee. I want to create an environment where everyone has the opportunity to give it everything they've got. That's why I put all my blood, sweat, and tears into creating that kind of environment.” Even if no one else on the planet might appreciate it, they certainly couldn’t claim he wasn’t passionate. There shouldn’t be stratification, or lack of opportunity for ANYONE! “I want everyone else to understand that, too. In the end, you can't succeed if you don't try. Anyone who says differently is selling something.”

Grandfather didn’t try, and even though he got up the ladder, his lack of effort snowballed into the scandal and got our whole family ruined. “Effort is everything! That's the only way to fix anything in this world!” Zilch will change on its own... Jerks up top won’t let that happen! “AND I have to prove that to all the other ordinary people out there so they'll keep on trying!” If only he’d had someone carrying that message to look to when he was younger. Not forcing people to try to be something they weren’t, but working with what they had to keep going and, eventually, affecting change. “I have to become the ordinary man who can surpass any genius!”

He absently wondered if such a representative would’ve helped Mondo and Chihiro grow up carrying less burden, feeling a pang that resonated somewhere deep inside. Tears fell from his eyes again. “Those are the feelings I carried with me when I entered Hope's Peak Academy... But now that I'm trapped in here, I've been robbed of the opportunity to make that effort... Every way I’ve tried to espouse that message here has failed or backfired... I should’ve been able to keep them from killing each other... So now what am I supposed to do...?” Who am I supposed to be?

“Kiyondo...” He moved to put his hand on Kiyondo's shoulder. It’d been a while since someone had done that. It felt nice; he leaned into the touch.

He stared at his boots. “Sorry, Makoto. I didn’t mean to make you listen to my pathetic complaining...” I accidentally infodumped... Just rolled right over him... I'm not supposed to do that. People hate when I do that... I hate when I do that. It's forcing how I feel on people... He’ll probably turn me away now and get with everyone else and they’ll make fun of me... It wouldn’t be the first time...

“No, it's not pathetic at all.” Kiyondo’s head snapped up. What!? “I can totally understand why you’d be upset. You obviously feel really strongly about this,” Makoto explained. “Being stuck here’s done a number on all of us... I really hope you don't give up hope and start to lose track of what you want to do. If you really believe that effort is what matters, then you can't give up, right? Because if you can't make that effort, then what do you have left?” Oh!

He raised his eyebrows. “...I think until you said that just now, I'd totally forgotten what I was here for. The foundation of effort is the will to never give up.” I gave up so many times, so many ways in the past month. “You’re right. I have to try, no matter the situation. Even without classes, without assignments... I can just look back at what I've learned already and reinforce those basic principles!”

A rush of purpose overcame him.

“Yeah, good idea! But, wait, hang on.”
“What is it?” He hadn’t noticed, yet, that he’d inadvertently derived forward momentum from more self-flagellation.

“Try not to look at what you *have* tried here as failure. You’ve been doing what you can, right?”

_What’s he getting’ at? “Well, of course!” It wasn’t *enough*. “But if I did MORE, no one would’ve__

“Even if you were stricter or you never turned away… Even if you responded differently, the others still had their own problems and desires and reasons. They would’ve found ways to work around you. The only thing you’d be doing if you did more than you could is burning yourself out.” _Is burning out a bad thing…?

“But I wasn’t making an effort at all when I was down for the count!” _I lost so much time! Time that I could’ve spent HELPING!

“I don’t know any details, but I think you were, you know?”

That was a shock. _No way… His disbelief showed on his face. “H-how so!”_

“You truly believed you deserved to die, right…?” He flinched. _More than once! “Yeah. You believed that, and you were putting all your effort into *making it happen*. We watched in slow-motion as you were trying to commit suicide…”_

“Wh…”

“That’s why I took you to see our friend… Even with Kyoko’s rule, I couldn’t just sit there and turn you away when you needed help,” the other man explained. “We were helping you physically, sure. But not emotionally, not really… I decided to take you because I was worried… I hoped that talk would convince you not to go through with it…” _Taeko was the one who told me about Alter Ego. Would he have thought of it on his own?

“She said afterward it was a bad idea though…” _And that’s what she kept thinking for so long!

“Oh yeah, she chewed me out real good!” Makoto laughed in spite of himself. Taka cocked his head but smiled. _Where’s he goin’ with this? “And she was right that I should’ve talked with her about it first, but here’s what I thought: What do we have to lose?” Kiyondo folded his arms. “You were already a ticking time bomb, so we should try everything we could to at least slow you down until we came up with something else.”_

“Huh…” That actually made sense. _I prolly woulda done the same thing… He imagined it was pretty difficult to see him in that state.

“If you don’t mind… Why *were* you planning on that? What did you believe? I’m sure it was an extreme version of blaming yourself, right?”

Kiyondo sucked in a breath. “I…” He looked away. _I don’t believe it to that level anymore… He’d never actually said it out loud. “Are you sure I can… say it?”_

“Yeah, of course. If you can.” _I’ve already said way too much… The burden of even thinking about such a matter wasn’t one he wanted to put on anyone else, let alone analyzing it. When he didn’t respond for a minute, Makoto said, “Hey, really. It’s okay.”_

He sighed bitterly. “I thought I was…” He paused, trying to find the words. He felt like his large vocabulary was failing him in trying to talk about what he’d been planning. Or maybe it was just the
enormity of it, trying to force its way past his tongue and out through his lips. *How could such a small vessel contain such enormous, grand delusion?* The space inside him must have been multitudinous, he supposed. “Some kind of avatar of despair and death… and that my presence here kind of infected the others and that’s why they did what they did…” He closed his eyes. He couldn’t handle seeing Makoto reacting to all this. *That’d make it real.* “At first, if I moved at all, the plague would spill out of me and take all of you down… That that’s what Monokuma wanted… I thought I had to die both as penance for that and so that I couldn’t hurt the rest of you too… You wouldn’t die cuz of me… But you’d only be safe if I did it myself, not if someone else did it first.”

Makoto stood there, stunned, then kind of plopped into the chair next to Taka. He bit his lip. “What did it… Feel like?” He asked quietly.

“It was odd…” Kiyondo massaged his temples, stimming to try to keep from falling back into that endless quasar. He wasn’t super close, fortunately, but he knew it wouldn’t take much. He had to avoid the event horizon or there’d be no going back – he’d be consumed whole, then digested and spit back out as a gamma beam. “It even felt like something was trapped inside me. A force… A kind of light? Pushing against my mind, my skin… I had to go before it broke its way out…” *I was a broken doll trying to hold itself together. Shattered, chunks falling off… I just had to stick it out long enough to jump off the ledge to end it the rest of the way. “But I had to be strong enough to *do* it first.”*

“Damn… So, shock, grief, guilt?”

“I s’pose, yeah…” He shrugged. He had felt those things, certainly, but he hadn’t identified them as such.

“You feel so responsible for us, for keeping us safe, that any time something happens you think it’s your fault… And you wanted to kill yourself to prevent more from happening, right?” He nodded. “So I was right… Even when you were at that low point, you were still trying to do something to protect us. Not solely that, but was still a big factor.”

His eyes shot open and he stared in front of him at the kitchen door. “But what about my reign of terror afterward…? No way you can spin how I was acting like it was to help y’all!” *I actively wanted them to be punished!! I wished they’d kicked the bucket instead of Mondo!!*

“Maybe it wasn’t really, but you *did* feel like a failure so you tried to become someone else. That’s what you put all your effort toward….” Makoto said from beside him. He noisily scooted his chair with the goal of facing Kiyondo, who immediately scrunched his face in pain and covered his ears at the screeching, scraping noise. *HATE that sound! And it’s Too Much, I’m gonna melt down if he doesn’t stop-- “Oh, s-sorry.” He stopped and picked it up, moving it quietly to its destination and taking his seat. Kiyondo untensed, his face going slack, and Makoto gave him time to recover. “But yeah… it was really obvious during the trial you were convinced you’d done it. Kyoko and I only stopped you from throwing yourself on any sword you could find by begging you to wait until we helped you figure out what happened. You put your effort there into hanging on until then.”

*I went from thinking I deserved to die… To thinking the old me *did* die… To thinking the new me deserved to die too. More things change, more things stay the same… “What’re you getting’ at?”*

“Even if you’re putting effort in different ways, to different goals, everything you’ve done here has still been you trying your hardest for something… Don’t get me wrong… It’s hard to hear how you were feeling, and it was *definitely* self-destructive…” *Literally!* “And really unhealthy… And I’m not glorifying it. But that doesn’t change the fact that effort is effort, right? It’s true even for smaller things, too, things that aren’t so bad for you… You put effort into organizing, into helping in the trials, into keeping us doing the cleaning duties, into interacting with us, into keeping our morale up,
into understanding the deceased, into the morning meetings… And I’m sure there’s stuff I’m not even thinking of."

Kiyondo unfolded his arms and unintentionally slammed his hands on the table. He squinted and blinked rapidly, tears falling. A powerful surge of clarity hit him in waves. “So you’re saying… I HAVE been putting in effort, all along?! ALL this time?!”

“Yep!” Makoto offered him a warm smile. He reached across, hesitated for a moment, and took one of Kiyondo’s shaking hands in both of his in a reassuring gesture. “Even if it’s just you trying to hang on and survive here. That’s still trying!”

Kiyondo looked down at his hand in Makoto’s and hiccupped a little as he cried. *No wonder he saved that injured crane… That’s just who he is, isn’t it? A gentle soul with healing hands!* A toothy smile slowly worked its way outward from the pain inside him. He had a realization and laughed. “Hahaha! It’s kinda funny… I was gonna ask you what you thought about Taeko and her stuff. Like how you helped me figure out Sayaka and Leon… That’s effort on my end, too, isn’t it…?”

“Absolutely!”

“Jeez, Makoto…” He put his free fist against his chin, totally taken aback. He sniffled. “You just rocked my world! I’ll remember this FOREVER!” *He skewered me! Emotionally… but in a GOOD way!*

“I’m happy I could help!” He offered him another smile, this time larger. He let go of Taka’s hand and stretched his back. “Oh, did you wanna talk about Taeko? Celeste?”

“Yes!” Kiyondo said after standing and doing some stretches himself. He was curious what kind of conclusions Makoto had come to about the gothic lolita, and not *in*significantly relieved to change the subject. “What the heck was UP with her…? She was the Queen of Lies…” In retrospect, Taka remembered seeing a couple people vaguely mention someone with that moniker in the student roster threads. Even if he had made the connection that they meant Celestia, he still would’ve been just as shocked and disgusted by her actions in Hope’s Peak. “Was everything she said fake?”

“Her façade, definitely… But once she lost, there was something in her eyes that tipped me off that she was mostly being honest. She told me other things before I think there were grains of truth too.”

“You spent time with her!?” *I can’t imagine her doing that with ANYBODY!*

“Well, yeah… Wait!” He saw Kiyondo was firing up. “I’ve spent time with everyone here, even people I don’t like.”

“Why!?”

“To understand them.”

“Hmmm… I s’pose that makes sense.” *That’s one of the reasons I’ve talked with people… But not HER!* “Let’s go bit by bit then.” He scratched the back of his head. His scalp was more sensitive due to the rough bleaching and the weight of his hair’s extra centimeters. “What about her backstory and beef with me?”

Makoto scratched his head. “Yeaaaah, I think those were legit.”

“I can’t believe someone’d waste their life voluntarily tryin’ to be something they’re not…” *I got forced to do that and it was AWFUL!*
“She wanted attention and stuff, and she clearly wasn’t getting any… Her parents sounded pretty bad.”

“So did the potential adopters! Criminal, really!” *Her parents should be sent to jail! And there’s no penalties for the possible families, but there definitely are for the people who ran the orphanage! Ultimate Neglecters!!*

“Yeah. Her motive, though… With the castle and the vampire men…”

Kiyondo made a face. He was still incredibly alarmed *that* was what she deemed worthy of killing Hifumi and Hiro, accusing him of rape and blackmail, and framing him over. “That GARBAGE…”

“I don’t think that was the main reason… She clearly wanted to go out in style and for us to remember her as someone grandiose… A queen. It sounds like something out of a twisted gothic novel.”

“Then what do you REALLY think was so important to her that she’d commit such atrocities!?" He looked up at the ceiling and thought for a moment. *Might as well go back to the start. “Well, first motive… Someone was held captive for her…” And obviously she didn’t want her secret exposed… Was she planning something that far back?*

“That’s true. You know, I dunno what her motive was. But I think the real *reason* she might’ve done it was to be in control.”

“Huh?”

“Think about it… Celestia was short and probably not very strong. She would’ve had zero chance if someone decided to come after her… I mean, even with that huge mallet, she only *mostly* killed Hifumi.” *That’s right, she bonked him and left him alive enough to utter his last words!’ The images of the corpses of Hifumi and Hiro flashed through his mind. He’d been focused on other things today, but those sights never really left him. Hiro’s wound was a lot deeper and more decisive even though a smaller hammer was used. “Even Sayaka managed a fair fight with Leon, though it wasn’t for super long since she picked a bad weapon and he was an athlete.”

“That’s true… And Sayaka had to be in top shape for her performances! I saw her shake the Monomono Machine to get the prize she wanted. I tried that myself and it’s super heavy!”

Makoto withdrew a little and frowned sadly. “Uh, yeah…”

“Agh, I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have brought her up like that…” *Of course mentioning that she got a prize would upset him, I’m sure she gave it to him…*

“I’m the one who mentioned her, not you…” *I still feel like a jerk! “Anyway, I think Celeste made up for her lack of physical power with trying to manipulate everyone else.” Back on track, he thought about everyone’s physicalities. She musta been the weakest, after Chihiro… It couldn’t have been Toko, since she shared a body with Genocide Jack who lifted victims to crucify them with scissors. Even Junko was in shape! And weirdly acrobatic!*

“Like trying to get us to give up and adapt while she was, in reality, planning to kill one of us?” *Those who gave up were easier targets… Obviously.*

“Exactly. And enforcing the night time rule – it’s a good idea anyway…” *If she hadn’t thought of it, I would’ve eventually! “But it definitely served her since she’d be even less likely to survive if attacked in the middle of the night. She also talked Hifumi into doing a lot for her…”*
“Persuaded! By emotional ABUSE!” He wished he’d been present enough to confront her about it more as it happened. The way Hifumi reacted to it, though, also made it difficult to tell when it was consensual…

“Yes. And she definitely manipulated you as well.”

“Do you think she woulda been like that if not for… All this?” He gestured widely around himself to indicate the twisted scholastic murder scenario.

“Probably to a lesser extent… Her talent was gambling. She described it to me as gods-given luck granted to her at birth. She could win any kind of gambling game, but…”

“What? So she coasted on luck…?” So she WAS a genius!? If she really was, that’d explain why she was so weird about her skills… But then again, she put a lot of effort into her plan…

“I mean, you heard her backstory. She used that ability to get out of where she was, but she also made it believable by learning the ins and outs of each game, probability, game theory, all that stuff. That allowed her to become someone else, too. And to prove that when she did win, it was based on skill, not luck.”

“I see!” So she tried to course-correct for her ability… She built her persona on it, but it didn’t define her and she preferred to rely on her own knowledge… He was horrified by what she’d done, but with that in mind he could also vaguely appreciate that she made an effort to succeed and didn’t just ride luck to the top. “So like Leon, her skill was both a blessing and a curse to her…” What is *mine*, to me? There’s no Committee here, my duties aren’t doable, and my strong morals have caused me to clash with others and even myself… “Then what about this place pushed her to such an extreme?” We know what broke the others, and even me, but not *her*…

“The fact that this is a kill or be killed sort of thing… I think that hit her after Sayaka, Junko, and Leon were all killed.” Kiyondo nodded. It made sense – that had made them *all* see exactly what was at stake here. It wasn’t just Monokuma pulling their leg or threatening them… Someone actually fell for it, and Monokuma himself showed he was more than willing to use deadly force to ‘maintain the peace’. “That made her see us as her opponents here… She knew someone would size her up eventually and see how weak she was, so she tried to control all of us. No one fell for it *completely*, except for… Well. No offense.”

Kiyondo frowned and grunted. “None taken…”

She used her physical weakness to her advantage in her lies to Hifumi about me… And in her staging of the crime scene. “Even Hifumi embarrassed her several times, and I’m sure you butting heads with her didn’t make her feel like she had tight reigns either.” True! Never missed a chance whenever she said something wrong… Like how she applied game theory incorrectly… That was definitely an attempt at manipulation from her. He’d even noticed it at the time – he just hadn’t identified its context until now. “She didn’t have the control over her surroundings she craved and relied on. She’d established it on the gambling circuits under her persona, and it was worthless here…” Bet she figured out how to manipulate by observing successful gamblers…

“Why did she pick Hifumi, Hiro, and me, though…?” No way are we a cohesive trio!

“She tried to pass her knowledge off as though they were her own stories, but she was actually a huge fan of gambling and game manga and anime.” That’s not related at all!

“Answer the QUEST—Waitwaitwait, was she an… Otaku!? Like Hifumi!?” The concept of someone so regal and seemingly apathetic as her having a dedicated interest in fiction was really
strange. Is it like how people engage in media to have something to talk about? No, she was shunned, wasn’t she…?

“Most likely, but she was a lot more normal about it. It was part of her escapism and creating her persona.” So she modeled her persona off that stuff, too! “Well, normal on the surface anyway… You saw how Hifumi was. She probably saw Hifumi as an embarrassment to her passion… Especially since he went on and on as if he was the protagonist in some game and clearly had a fantasy life he wanted to live. But he wasn’t living it, he just came off as desperate and delusional…”

“So he wanted to live in a fantastical way, too? Aside from his…” He pursed his lips, “*Overtness* and creepiness, did she take issue with how he did it…?”

“Definitely. Like you, she took him under her wing to mold him into someone more respectable, but…”

“To her…! As a servant!” She browbeat him, she didn’t try to *teach* him… *He was just a tool to her!*

“Yeah, and he didn’t see that, he just thought she was a tsundere. He was a lonely guy, too, so he fell for it.”

“Tsundere? Huh…?”

“It’s a splice of tsuntsun and deredere.” Ah, etymology!

“Cranky, cross, turning away… and flirty, acting lovey-dovey?” *Someone who’s both…?*

“It’s a common anime character type. It’s all over the most popular ones… It’s a girl being hot and cold with a boy she likes… Bullying him to show her affection because she has issues being close with people, or something like that…”

“Ew…” He shuddered. *I don’t know much about anime, and Makoto taught me it can be used to bond with others, but an objectionable trope like that speaks volumes of the overall quality!* “But why’d she choose someone she knew was incompetent? I mean, he messed up so many times that he basically handed you smoking guns!” *Even Yasuhiro wouldn’t have had to wipe his glasses! Wait, he didn’t wear any!*

“She may have been letting him live out his fantasy of being a hero… To him, you were a villain who stole Alter Ego and hurt Celeste.” A chill went through his spine at that. *Even when we fought over Alter Ego, did I see him as a real villain? No…* “Getting you killed would’ve been justice to him, right…? And she made sure he died a hero, too.”

“H-holy—…” He covered his mouth. “Jeez…” *If I hadn’t acted toward him how I did, he would’ve been that less likely to listen to Celeste… I primed him to hate me!* Though Hifumi was dead, Kiyondo had the the sharp feeling of a regret that would never be solved.

“As for Hiro… He was an incredibly easy target. His head was in the clouds. He was kind of living in his own dream world… He wouldn’t think twice about that note.” *Even I *thought* about it…*

“He *was* kind of an obstacle in trials…” It wasn’t that everyone had to be useful, or that tangents were a bad thing, but he repeatedly interrupted and sidetracked important conversations with his odd contributions. “She coulda seen him as a threat, too! I mean, ’she’s really tall and strong enough to carry you, so he definitely could have bested her… And he talked so much about his huge debt, maybe she thought he’d be rarin’ for blood to get the stacks from Monokuma!”
“He *was* weirdly cunning sometimes, and he mentioned conning people to amass his money, so…” *Yikes!*

“Even so…” He sighed. “I wasn’t very good to *him*, either.” *I wish I could apologize to both of ’em, and thank Hiro for stepping into the lead role and doing his own thing to try to reach out to me… At least he hadn’t called him a ‘jiggling sack of fat’, but he did bear some of Kiyondo’s direct cruelty in his leadership role. How am I gonna deal with all this guilt? I guess I might as well ask… “And… What about me? Make it short, please. Don’t wanna talk about me much.”

Makoto nodded. “I think she was being truthful when she explained why she targeted you. You were also an easy target due to your mental state – and she threw fire on that… But more than that, she resented you for being *someone*, being born with a name people paid attention to. Even though it was obviously the wrong kind of attention… People who seek that out don’t really care if it’s good or bad, as long as the spotlight’s on them.”

Kiyondo folded his arms and quickly tapped his foot, biting the urge to argue on the subject of his life as someone who inherited his Grandfather’s reputation as a pariah. *Makoto’s not sayin’ that’s how it was, just that’s how she saw it… And he also didn’t want to get into that subject again. “So the pressure was on, she was feeling more and more powerless living here for several months with us… And she used the most easy pawns?”*

“Yep. And she made her scheme so complicated to feed into her own presented smartness if she got caught… I’m not sure why she didn’t try to take out someone who was actually a threat to her, though… Unless it was just pettiness?” Makoto shrugged.

“Hmmmm… Oh! The three of us were easy targets… Meaning we weren’t threats. Meaning the people left *were*. She wanted to show off her skills, right…? If she targeted you, or Byakuya, or Kyoko, she wouldn’t have been able to fleece all of ya, it woulda been more suspicious… And y’all wouldn’t have had as much of a fair shot at winning! She didn’t want anyone, not even herself, to think she won just based on luck!” *So as impossible as the framing was, she wanted *them* to have a fair shot too! That was such a strange concept to him. Someone who had so much to prove and present to herself – and others – that she deliberately made it just complicated enough to both throw the ‘students’ off and also expose more of the plan’s underbelly. All just so she could not rely on her talent, if it even applid here at all. Grandstandin’ on their bodies! And mine too…*

“And that bit about love… She was trying to make a point with that. About how mysterious and unemotional and better than us she was,” Makoto said. *Especially me… She took what I had with Mondo and then Alter Ego and used it against everyone… “She fashioned herself a True Ice Queen…”*

“So did she actually believe that?” *Was she *right* about love?*

“Not completely, at least.” That seemed to be a running theme when trying to analyze Celeste’s real self. “She had her own views of companionship. She liked to rank people based on their potential to ‘serve’ her and how much she liked them.”

Kiyondo stuck his tongue out. “Nasty!” *But not surprising, how she used Hifumi…*

“In a roundabout way, she admitted that one day I could be an “A Rank” to her – someone to walk beside her. It was ‘elusive’ and ‘hard to obtain’, but possible… if I was lucky.”

“What rank were you?”

“A C Rank. Someone with great potential… She called me a knight, hahahah… She framed it as a
business deal, but I think it was her weird way of showing she considered me a friend. When I reacted to it, cuz it was *weird*, she was like ‘Oh, hahaha nevermind, sit on it then’. It could be something to do with her being afraid of rejected? I’m shooting from the hip here.”

“But then she threw that away at the Trial! What kind of ‘friend’d want to get you killed…?’ Even Sayaka left a clue to save Makoto and cancel her frame job… And Mondo was gonna come forward but then things got way too complicated. Then it hit him again. If they’d listened to me, we all woulda died… More guilt for the mountain upon him. “I’m sorry, I almost did exactly that…”

“No, that really wasn’t your fault. She took advantage and manipulated you into believing her narrative.”

“Alright…” he said, not really convinced. Isn’t being weak like that a bad thing? If I hadn’t been, the case woulda been easier to solve… And they wouldn’t have needed to waste time to keep me from throwing myself on the sword…”

“At the end of the day, it’s like you said – she used everything she had at her disposal. When all that went up in smoke…”

“Her persona and control fell… But it came back right before the execution, didn’t it? That whole Marie Antoinette thing…? I put all my brainpower into reading her face when she was being taken to the execution room, and I could tell it was fake… She was scared.” He’d been so stuck from the day’s troubles, trial, and that single act that he hadn’t even realized how much it overtaxed and overwhelmed him. He’d slept like a log the night of the execution, nightmares red. In hindsight, it was no wonder to him why he had been keeping to himself aside from this conversation and the one with Kyoko – he was trying to gather himself and recharge, in addition to the emotional and mental fallout.

“She said she was even able to lie to herself about her true feelings. She tried, but it didn’t work. I could see it before you did, but when you reached out and tried to reassure her, you put a huge dent in it.”

“Was that manipulative of me…?” He screwed up his face. He wanted nothing more than to be genuine. But a lifetime of abuse inside and outside his blood relation left him very afraid that he was somehow a manipulative person. It’d been one of the many things Toranosuke had convinced him of, so it was a sore spot.

“What…?”

“Breaking her façade after she’d been so awful toward me…” I don’t know why I did it… “Was it manipulative of me? Was I just getting back at her?”

“What do *you* feel it was?”

“Just sorta happened without thinkin’… So I dunno, really.” My brain shut off as soon as I put everything into understanding her expression right before I took her hand… It was pure instinct!

“It seemed genuine. And since you did it automatically, without even considering it first, I think that’s even more proof.”

“Really…? Burden of proof, Makoto! That leaves lots of reasonable doubt!”

“If you *actually* wanted to break her, you could’ve targeted any of the flaws she exposed herself. But you just tried to console her.”
“I couldn’t stomach what she did, but… No one deserves a childhood like that.” Abuse and neglect are *ALWAYS* evil, but even more if that person’s responsible for your care! “My dad was there for me, even while things were bad… It was so hard to bear even *with* one person’s support… But Celeste didn’t have anyone… Can’t imagine how that felt…”

“It definitely explains a lot about her… But yeah. I was sure anyway, but you just proved again that what you said was good-intentioned.” Kiyondo cocked his head in confusion. “It’s not like it was only just about the morality of what her parents did. You’re empathizing with her…”

“What..?”

“I mean, you’ve tried to do that a lot here, you know? You wanna understand people and help them, right?”

“Of course! Though that’s not how I was before the trial…”

“People have bad times, Kiyondo. It’s okay.” Makoto gave him a thumbs up.

“Thanks, Professor…”

“And, you know, it all goes back to another fact: you’re making an effort.”

“Ya know what? You’re… RIGHT!” He said with loud enthusiasm. “I *am*!” It felt good to have his perspective changed enough that he could at least allow himself that much. “If nothing else, I can say that I’ve put in the work, and with good intentions to boot…” He closed his eyes and took in a steady breath. “Thank you! I’m glad we had this talk, Makoto. Wow, I feel so much better getting all that off my chest!” He still felt poorly for the infodumping, but he couldn’t deny that Makoto had been very receptive and that he felt some boulders had fallen away from the pile on his back. “As my way to say thanks, next time I buckle down for a study session, I’ll make sure to invite you, whenever it is! Let’s work together as fellow ordinary people to show those geniuses who’s boss!”

Makoto chuckled. “Oh! I have an idea… Why not do some informal classes?”

“What?”

“I know you read some of the textbooks, and you have those reference books in your room… Maybe you could write up and do assignments for yourself?”

“Like an independent study…? I never really did one cuz I always preferred an expert taking the lead…” It’s a little intimidating, to be honest!

“From a certain angle, all of that’s very true indeed!”

“You could even call yourself Professor if you want!”

“Ha!” Kiyondo barked a laugh. “Don’t worry, I won’t reinvent myself again via dissociation… At least not to the point where I make you all call me that!” He joked darkly.
“Pffft!”

“Well, I’m gonna go rest and prepare… To LEARN!” He shouted happily, aura much more relaxed than before. “Thank you so much once again, Makoto!” He zoomed off to his room, missing the other student’s reply of ‘You’re welcome’.

*There’s still so much to push through… But NOW I have something to occupy myself with *and* that I can look back on and appreciate my effort towards!*

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