Summary

How do you move forward when the world's ended?

How do you pick up the pieces of a broken soul?

A tree, once it crumbles to ash, will never again be a tree.

(But sometimes, in the ashes, there is a seed. And with enough patience and enough care, Does it really matter if it doesn't grow into the exact same tree?)

Sequel to The Lion's Den
All was quiet on the high seas. The ferry was the only vessel visible on the horizon. It chugged onward toward the sunset, rocking gently as white-crested waves split apart on its bow. Although sleek and new in shape, chipping paint and dents marred its hull. But these were the normal scars of age, and when the waves smashed against its hull, no water found its way inside.

Such a sturdy vessel was rare in these post-apocalyptic days and could belong to one of only two factions: the Future Foundation, the stalwart remains of humanity who resisted the madness that had engulfed their world; or the Remnants of Despair – a name surely chosen in mockery, for the Remnants had been anything but a fragmented, scattered movement. Until now, perhaps. It was possible the faction had collapse, but it was difficult to say for certain. What was true was that Despair was no longer united, and there was no guessing whether they would ever be again.

But although Ultimate Despair had fractured, that did not mean their offspring had been declawed. Which was why Kamukura was pleased that when the Future Foundation had taken possession of this ferry, they had retrofitted it for war. True, the hull was unsuited for battle and the ship would break apart with a few well-placed strikes, but at least the artillery would give them an opportunity to fight back. He hoped that wouldn’t be necessary; they had not taken this ship for battle, but for its original purpose of transportation. That said, if he had learned one thing during the last few months, Kamukura Izuru had learned that with the passengers onboard, everything was on the table.

Someone snapped their fingers.

Kamukura opened his eyes and quieted his churning thoughts. The snap had been loud, commanding. It wasn’t a request for attention, but an expectation of such. Even without that telltale manner, he knew who this was, for few possessed this brashness.

“Togami Byakuya.”

“So, you can speak,” Togami said. “I was beginning to wonder. I thought they may have cut a few too many brain cells.”

The long stands of Kamukura’s hair rustled in the wind, floating with the swaying of the ship. He continued to stare out at the sea, his back to Togami. It mattered not. He knew enough of Togami’s personality, heard enough of his tone to know exactly what Togami looked like: arms crossed, smirking, head tilted slightly to one side with a raised chin. His usual look. How boring.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why someone like me would bother to speak to you. . .” Togami began.

“Not particularly,” Kamukura said.

That smirk would have smoothed out into a frown. Togami was not insulted (yet), but only because his mind was too slow.

“I suppose even someone like you would expect this,” Togami said. “Given that you are under the roof of our very generous hospitality, it was inevitable that . . .”
“This is not going to help you,” Kamukura said. “You will not feel better once this conversation ends.”

“...How touching. Kamukura Izuru is worried about my feelings.” The sharpness of Togami’s words pierced through the air like an arrow. Kamukura sighed. What a boring man this was.

“No, I am not. They are simple feelings,” Kamukura said. Behind him, Togami bristled at the implication that anything about him was ordinary. “You are bitter. It angers you that you are now dependent on my talents. You need me much more than I need you.”

“Wh-what? What idiocy is this?” Togami demanded. “If I recall correctly, you were the one who proposed this arrangement.”

“Your choice of words betrays you,” Kamukura said. “You cannot recall something that you were not present to witness. And that is the root of your anger, is it not? Although given your unstable rapport with the others, you should have realized that you were not entitled to a role of authority.”

“Do you have any idea who you’re speaking to?” Togami said. “You are Hope’s Peak’s frankenstein. Nothing more than a pathetic satire. I am Togami Byakuya –”

“Scion of a fallen empire,” Kamukura finished. “Rubble is worthless.”

“You’re quite the comedian, aren’t you?” Togami said. “No wonder Naegi ended up in this state.”

Kamukura turned his head slightly, just enough to view Togami out of the corner of his eye. Woolen suit. Not Italian wool, though. Togami must have blown a gasket when he realized his fancy suits were no longer available. “Do we have to proceed? I know why you came here. This was not intended to be a friendly conversation. You should pick your enemies more carefully.”

Togami wasn’t bad at concealing his emotions, but his strategy of glazing over his appearance with arrogance was inferior to Kirigiri’s tactic of showing nothing. It bound his success to his confidence, so that when one suffered, the other also did. Furthermore, similarly to how one noticed when a smile adorned Kirigiri’s stoic façade, it was dangerously obvious when Togami doubted: the widening of the eyes, the sneer that dropped a degree and didn’t quite recover. Yet somehow, Kamukura seemed to be the only one that ever noticed. Normal humans must not be very perceptive, then.

“Don’t think for a moment that I trust you,” Togami said. “Scavengers like you are always feeding off our scraps.”

He didn’t care. Togami’s trust was meaningless to him. Barring Naegi, he needed trust from no one. Even Kirigiri didn’t trust him, but at least she understood what he was, and that was all he required.

Kamukura let his thoughts stray to the detective’s upcoming situation, dwelled on it, and then mentally turned away. Togami would take his anger out on her, but his pride would prevent him from mentioning any this conversation. He didn’t need to be concerned.

“I don’t care how you feel,” Kamukura said, dropping the statement with the finality of a slammed door.

He turned back to the sea. Behind him, he heard Togami’s shoe landing upon the deck as he stepped closer. Ah, so it had come to this. He let Togami take two more steps, and then turned so quickly hat he was a blur. Togami had significant height on him, but it didn’t matter when the Heir was inexperienced. This would normally be the moment that one of Togami’s bodyguards stepped in, but Fukawa Touko was with Naegi Komaru right now.
“Do you have something else to say?” Kamukura asked.

Togami would never admit defeat, but this would dull his blade, shift it so that Togami held it behind him instead of in front.

“If there is nothing else, leave me. I am thinking,” Kamukura said, turning back around. He wasn’t thinking that hard, but it would offer Togami the easy out he was looking for.

Once again, he heard Togami’s shoes against the deck. But then:

“We haven’t forgotten what all of you did to us.” The low timbres of Togami’s growl rolled over each other like a nest of hissing snakes.

Before anything else could be said, the sound of a slamming door pierced the bubble around them. Two sets of rushed footsteps came next: one heavy, the other precise and powerful. Hagakure Yasuhiro and Asahina Aoi.

“What are those two doing now?” Togami groused.

“Naegi has woken,” Kamukura concluded instantly.

“. . . And naturally, those idiots decide to rush him,” Togami said, masking neither the concern or frustration born of it. It was enough to finally pry Togami away from this conversation and send him toward the room that contained the most important member of their cargo.

The deck continued to sway under Kamukura’s feet. There was no point in checking on Naegi right now. His presence would only make things worse, and there was a good chance the others would blame him for that.

His brow furrowed. Yes, he needed to be careful about that. For that last thing Togami said to him before the others interrupted their conversation . . .

Kamukura hadn’t expected that.

The woolen blanket tickled his nose. Naegi didn’t move away. He wasn’t sure he could. In a word, he felt weak. It felt like someone had unscrewed his limbs from their sockets so that while he still could feel their weight, they didn’t move. He tried to open his eyes, but they fluttered closed a second later. Even his hair had a heavy weight to it.

But the small movement of his eyelids had not gone unnoticed. Hair rose on the back of his neck as something moved in the room. This was a bed. This must be his room. It was probably Kamukura. Or maybe Komaeda. That oddly didn’t make the chills go away.

“Makoto?”

The voice was quiet and unfamiliar. Must be a Monokuma. He didn’t know Soda had programmed them to use his first name, but it wasn’t too surprising; Soda had missed him when he ran away.

“Makoto?”

Something touched his shoulder. He wanted to swat it away, but he was tired and the Monokuma would only interpret that as a signal to keep tapping until he went mad.

A heavy groan filled the air. “You’re doing that again? I-is this why I never got a good sleep in Towa City?”
“I’m telling you, I saw him move!”

He still didn’t recognize the first voice and honestly, he hadn’t recognized the second until it stuttered. Something hard gathered in his belly, crouching low like a snake about to strike. Why Fukawa of all people? Genocider Shou would have been a much better choice if the Imposter wanted to intimidate someone. Unless the point was that the Imposter wasn’t trying to look dangerous.

As he imagined a super-skinny Genocider going after the Future Foundation (he wondered how the Imposter would mimic the tongue), memories trickled back to him. There had been an incident. A mutiny, with his own friends as the instigators. Komaeda had listed the Imposter as one of that traitors, and now Naegi was here with him . . .

He wasn’t afraid. The Imposter was his friend. But his eyes still opened because he had to figure out what was going on. His eyes adjusted to the inside light smoothly, snapping the picture before him into focus: the Imposter, gnawing on the end of a pen with frustration as she (he?) glared at something near him.

“Togami . . . Fukawa-san,” he croaked. It would be so nice once the Imposter adopted his own name. “Where’s Komaeda-kun?”

The Imposter stared at him. His pen lowered onto the desk. “Oh. He is awake.”

“See? I told you!” That last sentence came out as a strangled gasp, as if its owner was trying very hard not to scream. A large weight landed on the bed next to him and there were hands grabbing his upper arms, and the hard bones of a face pressing into his back. “I’m so glad you’re finally awake! Everyone thought you wouldn’t wake up for at least another hour so they’re eating dinner, but Touko-chan and I didn’t want to leave you alone.”

“D-don’t drag me into this!” The Imposter pointed at the person on his back. “I’m only here because your brother complex can’t be trusted!”

The stranger laughed. “We know you’re lying. Right, Makoto? Makoto?”

The weight was pinning him against the bed. He forced himself to swallow the blockage in his throat. The stranger was addressing him. They wanted something from him. The pounding of his heart made blood flow through his brain faster, rewound his memories faster until they were far before the mutiny. Grabbing him, holding him here . . . but they acted friendly and they were pinning him and laughing and that meant . . . Bad. Bad. Bad. He’d done something wrong. Komaeda wasn’t here because he was angry, and he had sent this person in his stead.

“Wh-what are you doing? Get off him,” Fukawa said.

The weight disappeared from his back. Naegi shuddered and gasped because he hadn’t realized he was holding back tears.

“Makoto?” That quiet voice spoke up again. “I’m sorry. Do I . . . do I really weigh that much?”

(In the background, there was the distinct sound of a palm meeting a forehead.)

Naegi turned his head and finally saw who the stranger was. And suddenly, nothing made sense anymore. He stared at one woman (man?), then at the other (or was that the Imposter?), and back and forth until he grew dizzy.

“Which one of you is the Imposter?” His insides shrivelled. He couldn’t tell which answer would be
“We’re not imposters!” The girl who looked like his sister grabbed his hand and pulled it tight to her chest so he couldn’t escape. “It’s me! It’s really me!”

“Komaru?” he whispered. That didn’t make any sense. Ultimate Despair was squabbling amongst themselves; where did that leave room for Komaru to fit in? How in the world had Komaru gotten inside his room . . . ? Okay, so it wasn’t his room or Kamukura’s room, but the point still stood . . .

. . . Where was he?

For the first time, he looked around. This room looked nothing like the ones he knew. The floors at Ultimate Despair’s headquarters had always been carpeted or cement. This floor was made of wooden planks. It wasn’t small, per say, and had more than enough room for the bunkbed, desk and closet, but it was smaller than his dorm room at Hope’s Peak had been. In the center of the back wall, between his bunk and the top one, there was a large, circular window with a metal frame. He forced himself to his knees, laid his hand against the glass and looked outside. Water. All he saw was water.

Ultimate Despair lived nowhere near water. He knew that. He had looked outside, been outside – there wasn’t anywhere nearby with this much water. Where was he? Where were they?

“Are you getting seasick?” Komaru asked anxiously as she hovered behind his shoulder, still squeezing his hand. “You look a little grey. I can get medicine!”

“I’m going to tell everyone he’s woken up,” Fukawa said. Naegi bristled because her words echoed with the distinct hollowness of one who wasn’t telling the entire truth.

He didn’t say goodbye to Fukawa. If she was even Fukawa. He continued to stare outside, thinking. He was clearly on a boat. Ultimate Despair had no boat. Ultimate Despair had no need for a boat. Even if the rebellion had truly been what it seemed, the losing side would have retreated to one of their underlings’ bases, not to the open waters where they were vulnerable. Therefore, this was not Ultimate Despair’s boat.

And yet whomever owned this ship had taken him with them. They had kidnapped him, he realized with a jolt. He touched his wrists, expecting to feel manacles or some other restraints.

“Are you okay?” Komaru asked. “You’re really quiet.”

Komaru. They had captured Komaru, too. But Kirigiri had told him that Komaru had been saved . . .

“This boat belongs to the Future Foundation, doesn’t it?” he said.


He closed his eyes. It was exactly as he had suspected. Fukawa had left to get others and she had been hiding something when she said that . . . Ah, so it wasn’t Kirigiri that sided with the Future Foundation.

“But it doesn’t matter where we got this boat!” his naïve sister declared. “All that matters is that we’re finally together again!”

Yes. For how long?

He grabbed Komaru’s wrist. “Come on.”
The fools hadn’t locked the door. In fact – he had to stop and stare because it was that disorienting – a gaping hole in the knob told him that someone had actually removed the lock. The Future Foundation must have assumed that the ocean was enough of a cage. Outside, the hallway was lined with blue carpet. On the walls between each door was a rail one could hold onto if the waves became too much, and the wall below the rail was made of mahogany while above it had been plastered with beige wall paper. There were doors, tons of them, and if they were all occupied then this clearly wasn’t some rogue element of the Future Foundation.

C-23, said the nameplate on the room he had been in. He didn’t really know ships, but the outside was usually considered A-Deck, wasn’t it?

“How well do you know this ship?” Naegi asked his sister.

“Um, not very,” she said. “I haven’t been here that long. I keep getting lost.”

“Do you know how to get out?”

“Out? Oh, you mean outside. There’s a staircase at the left end of the wall, but Touko-chan’s going to come back soon . . .”

She had seemed confused by his question. Perhaps she couldn’t see the path to freedom, or she had already given up. Disappointing, but he couldn’t blame her. She wasn’t Hope, after all.

Left, she had said. Left, they went. Then up the half-landing stairs that reminded him of a set in a horror film. The first door, the one to B-Deck, lurched into reach. He tried to run to the stairs leading to A-Deck, but Komaru suddenly planted her feet and the resistance nearly sent him to the ground.

“Wait!” Komaru said. “I think we’re storing some extra clothes in a storeroom here.”

Naegi grimaced and rubbed his wrist. Komaru stood there and stared thoughtfully at B-Deck. It was like she hadn’t even noticed that he had tried to drag her up the stairs. It didn’t feel right. And as he checked her over, she didn’t look right either. She was bigger than he remembered. Not just in height, but in presence. She stood tall, shoulders open in an expression of confidence; it wasn’t the meek, normal stance of someone who had accepted their normality. Her cheeks had lost much of their baby fat, and her biceps had likewise hardened into something more mature. Plus, there was the brand-new ahoge; apparently, it truly was a family trait.

“I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but your clothes . . . they have a lot of blood on them,” Komaru continued, oblivious to his prying gaze. “I would have gotten you something clean, but Kirigiri-san thought it would better if we didn’t change you while you were asleep.”

He glanced downward. He was wearing the same clothes as he remembered, and they were stained with blood. With Komaeda’s blood, he realized in horror. From when he had pretended to kill Komaru.

Where was Komaeda? He didn’t remember leaving him. He didn’t remember meeting the Future Foundation. And the Future Foundation was the enemy of Ultimate Despair. Like they were currently Naegi’s enemy.

(Like they had turned out to be Iwata’s enemy.)

His chest tightened. There were feelings, a memory bubbling up his throat. He swallowed it down and forced it back into the black pit. He pulled hard on Komaru’s wrist again. She resisted, confused, but then allowed him to lead her up the stairs.
“I think we should wait,” Komaru said as they neared the door to A-Deck. “Touko-chan’s coming back soon.”

He hesitated. He did, because Touko was his friend. But the circumstances were too suspicious; if Touko was really on his side, she’d understand. If Kirigiri was here . . . if Kirigiri was here, she would tell him he was wasting time. Yes, because Kirigiri was amazing and would have came to the same conclusions as him the moment she’d opened her eyes. He ignored Komaru’s protests and pushed the door to A-Deck open because surely, if he showed her the way into the light, she would follow because that’s what they did, that’s what Hope did. . .

He hadn’t literally meant to lead her into the light. However, that was what awaited behind the door. Light. Blinding light as mighty as a hurricane. Light that desperately wanted to be a batting ram and knock him off his feet. His reaction was to grab Komaru, and as he shielded his face in her shoulder, he couldn’t say whether it was to protect him or her.

Fingers brushed over his wrist. His skin tingled from the contact. Komaru, sounding near tears, whispered, “You’re so pale. You glow like a ghost.”

The light making him glow. Making Hope glow. He snickered. How deliciously appropriate. He wasn’t sure why Komaru thought this was a problem.

But at least he now knew what had shocked him. It wasn’t like he hadn’t been exposed to sunlight; he had gotten plenty of that when he had ran away from home. But he’d been hiding from the Future Foundation then, and had spent a lot of his time in forest and under other covers. Here, there was no respite from the heat, which made him feel like he was standing too close to a fireplace.

There was no time to worry about this though. He could hear footsteps, rapid ones at that, steadily moving closer. And he heard someone. Someone male and loud, and they used his name in the same sentence as the word ‘awake’ and the steps were getting louder. But they hadn’t seen him yet. They hadn’t known he had escaped.

. . . And his sister was opening her mouth and walking toward the voice.

He clamped his hand over her mouth and tried to pull her backward, but once again, her body hardened and she held her position. His hiss of anger was more like the irritated buzzing of a swarm of bees. He left her and took off around the other corner, hoping she’d follow.

She did. She cried out his name – not too loudly, hopefully – and tore after him. He spun around and this time, he got to be the one holding their position. Komaru skidded to a halt in front of him, arms swinging in circles as she struggled to keep her balance.

“Whose side are you on?” Naegi demanded. “Are you really my sister?”

“What are you talking about?” Komaru asked. “Of course, I’m your sister. Who else could I be?”

Naegi loved his sister, he did, but sometimes she could be really frustrating. He ignored her questions and continued to flee from the footsteps. They were on a small corridor between the deckhouse and the starboard railing, where the wall closest to the water was open. The wind coming off the waves was much colder than the air in the stuffy room had been. Naegi, unused to the cold, shivered.

“Where are you going?” Komaru cried as she fled after him, still speaking loudly.

“I’m looking for the lifeboats so we can get out of here!”

His sister stopped and stood dangerously still. Like a polar bear waiting in ambush at a seal hole.
“Makoto, that’s . . . I think you’re confused. We don’t need to run away from anyone.”

No, she was confused. Like he had been back when he thought the Future Foundation was the good guys. “This is the Future Foundation’s boat. Do you have any idea who they really are? They’re murderers. They’re evil!”

“No, it’s not!”

“You said it was!”

“Um, it was, but we took it from them. It’s just me and your friends here.”

“I was with Ultimate Despair. They wouldn’t let anyone take me.”

“They’re here, too,” Komaru said. “We’re keeping them near the stern. Makoto, let’s wait for the others. They can explain what’s going on, because I’m not sure what I should tell you.”

Ultimate Despair was here? How? Why? He’d seen neither hide nor hair of them. And Komaru was in the same place as them? It was like the laws of the universe had been undone. Nothing made sense.

Where was Komaeda? Where was Kamukura?

He ran for the stern of the ship, ignoring the shouts of his name – not just from Komaru this time – behind him. At the ship’s stern, there was another deckhouse with a door. He tore it open, stared into the dimly lit abyss that was downstairs, and then took the steps two at a time.

Chapter End Notes

It's finally happened. Welcome back everyone! I got a few quick things to announce:

1) Unlike TLD and AOAT, this one will not be updating twice a week. I'm going to put it at once a week for now, likely Friday or Saturday, and maybe drop down to biweekly if I have to.

2) Since some of you have asked in the past, I now have a tumblr at https://www.tumblr.com/blog/arcawolf where you can pm me. You can follow if you'd like, but I mostly got it for pms. (This may take me longer to reply to you than pm-ing me on fanfiction.net would, as tumblr doesn't email you when you have a message.)

3) Unlike TLD and AOAT, I'm not walking into this one with a big checklist of plot points and arcs to hit. (Which is partially why the update schedule will be less frequent.) This is more seat-of-my-pants. Which means while I'm not necessarily open to prompts, I am open to hearing suggestions on directions this story could go. Oh, and for those who read AOAT and know what chapter themes I'm going for, I'm always looking for fun new names!

That's all I have to say. Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed this first chapter, and that you'll enjoy this story as much as its prequel :D (Also is the summary too weird? I thought it'd be poetic cause Naegi saplings and all, but I'm a horrible poet)
Reality Is Such Brutality

If the time he had ascended the stairs had been part of a horror movie, then at the bottom of these stairs was the movie itself. The stairs didn’t have landings at each floor like the other one did. These stairs just went down, until he thought he was at least a floor below B-Deck. It may have been his imagination, but the lower he went, the older the ship seemed to become. The paint on the walls was more chipped; the metal stairs reflected dirt in the form of footprints. The light remained dim. If this ship had ever seen paying customers, then they had not been expected to see this place.

The stairs led into a storage hold. From the mouth of the stairs, the shelves lined up in the room made the space appear maze-like. They were open shelves with no backs; the only reason he couldn’t see through them was because the shelves were filled with boxes. Some of the boxes were open, and he peeked inside to find an entire box of canned beans. Okay. That didn’t bode well for the ship’s menu.

“Makoto!”

There was still at least a story between them. Komaru’s shout was hushed, a whisper meant to carry and yet meant to not be overheard. The prey-side of his mind recognized the contradiction and without prompting, he dropped into a partial crouch to hide.

They’re here, he thought dizzyingly a moment later. For Komaru would recognize Ultimate Despair as a predator, and that was why she didn’t want to be overheard. But that could change. Once he explained the situation and Ultimate Despair and Komaru realized they were all in danger, then everyone would be on the same side. They could all be friends!

He couldn’t make himself wait for Komaru to catch up. He rushed ahead, navigating blindly through the rows and rows of shelves. Until at last, he found an opening in the barrier that didn’t seem to lead to more shelves. He shoved through it, bumping a box and nearly knocking it off its shelf.

“Hello?” he said as he walked into the open. Faintly, he heard the door leading to the deck creak closed.

The light was even dimmer here, coming from a single hanging light that swung back and forth with the tilting of the ship. But it was enough to see, enough for a halo of light to reflect off the nearby metal. Enough for him to see it was a cage.

Naegi wrapped his fingers around the bars of the cage. Someone was inside. One of his friends was inside. He could see them crumpled against the far bars. All the light would tell him was that the form was thin. It could be so many people.

“Naegi-kun?”

He hadn’t noticed the second cage. In this one, someone was on their knees. He skittered over, sliding onto his knees as well. The sweaty hand squeezed his.

“Hanamura-kun, are you okay?”

His laughter jumped like a hiccup. “Mmhmm, just fine. This isn’t the first time someone’s slipped a little something extra in my drink. But I haven’t had the honor of meeting the ones who set up this scene.”

Hanamura combed his curl with his finger, but the action felt more reflexive to Naegi than conscious.
Halfway through combing his hair, Hanamura stopped, staring at something beyond Naegi’s shoulder. Naegi’s head whipped around, but it was only Komaru.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” Komaru said nervously.

Naegi ignored that. His fingers tapped against his thigh. “Hanamura-kun, this is Komaru. Komaru, this is the Ultimate Chef, Hanamura Teruteru.”

“The sister,” Hanamura said quietly.

He wasn’t oblivious to the menace he heard there. But he hadn’t explained yet. Everything would be fine.

“Hanamura-kun, the Future Foundation’s got us!” He waited for Hanamura’s eyes to widen, but they didn’t. He must have already known. “I’ll get you out of here. We’ll get the others, and then we can head for the lifeboats.”

“It would be easier to take over the ship,” Hanamura said.

“I…” Technically, Hanamura was right. It might not be literally easier, but it would be a whole lot more convenient. Naegi couldn’t let him know that, however. So, he shook his head and maybe-lied, “There’s no way you could kill them all before an alarm went out. We’d be swarmed.” (Komaru whimpered while he was speaking.) “This way we might be able to get out before anyone notices.”

He leaned back and looked around for a Monokuma – right, they weren’t at home anymore. He should have asked Kamukura to teach him how to pick locks. This was going to be rough.

“Komaru, help me find something to open the lock.”

He stood up, only for Komaru to grab his arm. She shook her head.

“We can’t let them go. They’re too dangerous!” she said.

He smiled in the face of her fear and patted her hand comfortably. “It’s okay. Trust me. I was scared, too, at first. . . But we’re all here on the same side. You guys won’t hurt her, right, Hanamura-kun?”

“That depends on her preferences,” Hanamura purred. “Maybe she would like it if I used a little force. She had enough spice to lock me in this cage.”

“Oh no,” Komaru whispered.

“What?” Naegi said.

“You don’t know?” Hanamura asked. “It wasn’t just some nobodies from the Future Foundation that attacked us. It was your class.”

“That. . . That can’t be. . .”

But before he could gather his thoughts, yet another person arrived on the scene. Naegi turned his head slowly and met the gaze of the one and only Ultimate Heir.

Togami glanced back at the direction from which he had come. “That door was supposed to be locked.”

When had he last seen Togami? Months ago. Eons ago. He should be jumping with joy, jumping at
him. Yet something held him back. His prey instincts had been online ever since he had discovered who this boat belonged to, and they spoke to him again now. Predator, they whispered.

No. He rocked back on his heels and whined. Togami was his friend. Togami had been there with him in the game and had witnessed his first true act of Hope. Togami was with Kirigiri, for god’s sake.

“Togami-kun, what’s going on?” Naegi asked, his grip tightening on the cage.

Togami pinched his nose and sighed. “I’ll explain it to you, but not in this dump. Come, Naegis.” Komaru shuffled after him like a scolded child.

“We can’t leave Hanamura-kun!” Naegi cried. “We need to help him.”

“That’s impossible,” Togami said bluntly. “Under no circumstances am I going to see any of them running free. They are in those cages because they are trying to kill us.”

“But we’re all on the same side!” Naegi protested. “I know Kirigiri-san has a plan to get us out of here, but wouldn’t it be nice to have extra firepower against the Future Foundation?”

Togami raised his eyebrows. “You’re kidding me. Do you honestly think we’re planning to march in there and usurp an organization with thousands of men at their disposal? We took this boat, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to actively fight them.”

They took the boat? Then... it wasn’t the Future Foundation? He looked around at the metal shelves and the dim light. Suddenly, it all seemed so much less scary.

“Naegi-kun?” Hanamura whispered from behind him.

“As I said before, we’re leaving,” Togami said.

“But...”

“Now.”

“Sorry,” he murmured to Hanamura. He took hesitant baby steps toward where Togami was tapping his foot.

As he walked, the ship passed over a large wave. He felt it in the ground and the way it rolled under his foot, just enough so that he felt off-balance, although he wasn’t at risk at falling. The swinging light picked up speed, traced out a longer arc. As it swung to the right, Naegi tracked the spotlight it cast upon the ground. Before, it had stopped just beyond the edge of the cage. Now the light penetrated to the center and fell upon its captive’s brow.

Naegi froze. “Komaeda-kun?”

Togami spun around. “You have got to be kidding me. . . .”

“Komaeda-kun!”

Naegi slammed into the cage, and then slammed his fists into them for good measure. Komaeda didn’t move. He laid there, skin sallow in the fading light. His hoodie drooped from his body as if it were a size too big.

“Naegi!”
“Komaeda-kun!” He ripped Togami’s hand off him. “Wh-why is he in there? Where’s the key?”

“I already told you, I am not letting any of them loose.” Togami’s arms were folded tightly across his chest. His jaw was equally tight. “Get up. You’re making a fool of yourself.”

“Not without him!” Naegi said, tears in his eyes. “Komaeda-kun!”

Komaeda remained as still as the dead.

“Get up.”

Togami grabbed him. But as Togami dug his heels in and pulled, Naegi spun with the force so that he was staring right into Togami’s face, and snarled. The flash of bared teeth startled Togami; his grip faltered. Naegi’s arm slipped out easily, falling to his side as he rose to his full height.


“I’d rather put soy sauce on my rice. Naegi, you’re considered an invalid, so I have decided not to hold this against you. Him, however –”

“Stay away from him!”

Togami, not expecting retaliation, didn’t react in time. Naegi’s palms found his chest without resistance, and Togami gave no sign of understanding what was happening until Naegi had thrown his full weight into the push. Togami reeled back, the force rocking through him from bottom to top like he was a whip. His stumbled backwards, slamming to a stop against the bars of a third cage. He laid there, arms splayed to the side, frozen with offended shock. Naegi’s arms were still outstretched.

Togami began to lift himself off the bars, flicking imaginary dust off his sleeves as he did. “If I see even one wrinkle on this suit after this, I’ll –”

Two arms burst out of the darkness behind Togami. One snaked through the bars, carrying an end of something long and red, which it threaded over Togami’s neck and to the other hand. Before they could realize the object was a scarf, before they could realize it was wrapped around Togami’s neck, a boot planted itself on the side of the cage and the arms pulled. The back of Togami’s skull clanged against the metal, but any cry he made dissolved into a splutter. His legs kicked out, as he pulled at the vice around his throat.

“Togami-kun!”

As both Naegis got closer, one of the pale hands curled back between the bars. The fingers cupped upward, sliding their nails against the bottom of Togami’s chin. The unspoken warning was clear, and the two stopped short as if that hand really had been carrying a knife. Togami’s eyes bulged as he instinctively tried to cough, but the fabric digging into his throat prevented that.

Komaru took two steps back. “I’ll... I’ll get help!”

And she was gone, leaving Naegi alone with the situation. Togami gasped like a fish on land. His kicks become sporadic.

“Stop!” Naegi said. “Tanaka-kun, stop!”

As if he hadn’t noticed him before, Tanaka moved forward out of the darkness so that Naegi could see his red eyes. He looked at Naegi, and then at his prey with a sort of satisfaction.
“Stop! You’re going to kill him!” Naegi cried.

Tanaka’s smile glinted. Naegi could hear his thoughts: *That’s the point.*

“No!” He tried to add his strength to Togami’s, to pull the scarf away. But Togami was already fading and his hands, still tangled with the scarf, were falling limp.

“Tanaka-kun!” Naegi screamed. “I know he locked you in there, but you’re not hurt, right? This isn’t going to get you out. It’s going to make everything worse.”

Tanaka had walked up right to the bars, and Naegi had fervently hoped it was because Tanaka was listening. But alas, it was so Tanaka could loop the scarf a second time around Togami’s neck and *yank.*

“Stop!”

One of Togami’s arms fell limp. His face looked weird, almost puffy, with a strange dark flush under his nose. His mouth hung open, tongue resting on his lip, nearly poking out.

“No!”

Naegi grabbed his face, about to administer CPR. . . Except that wouldn’t help. Togami’s other arm fell to his side. Tanaka’s only response was to wind the scarf tighter.

“Tanaka-kun, please. Don’t do this. He’s my friend.” Naegi had his hands clamped on Togami’s cheeks as he tried to will life back into him. “Please don’t do this to me.”

Tanaka, shoulder braced against the bars, hissed.

Naegi dropped to his knees, still reaching up towards Togami’s head. “Please don’t do this.”

Tanaka grunted. He falter as he stared down into Naegi’s eyes.

A moment later, Tanaka let go and Togami dropped.

Naegi scrambled over to Togami, catching him a moment before he would have faceplanted into the hard ground. He flopped over Naegi’s arms like a limp rag, surprisingly heavy. With a grunt, Naegi heaved Togami onto his back, landing afterwards with his hands on either side of Togami’s waist. Togami didn’t move through it all. He didn’t even complain about breathing Naegi’s air. Naegi couldn’t hear him breathe, couldn’t see Togami breathing, but when he rested his hand on Togami’s sternum, he felt the chest moving quick and shallow.

“Togami-kun!” With a sob of relief, Naegi rested his forehead on Togami’s chest. He breathed once, twice, and then raised his head. Tanaka stared down at him like an angel of death. With a snort, he drew back into the darkness.

A minute later, Komaru came rushing in. She dropped to her knees next to Togami, face ashen until Naegi told her he was okay. He guessed whomever she brought had also heard him, for the *click, click* of their footsteps didn’t quicken.

“He’s okay. Everything’s fine. Tanaka-kun was spooked, that’s all,” Naegi said, hit with a sudden need to defend his friend. With Komaru pulling Togami out of reach of Tanaka, Naegi felt free to stand and stretch. His shoulders popped as Komaru’s friend came up right behind him.

A glove suddenly slapped over his mouth and something sharp pierced his neck. Tanaka, in his cage,
flew forward, crashing against the bars. His teeth showed in a soundless roar as Komaru watched silently.

Before he could free himself and identify his attacker, the darkness swept in.

The first warnings of a migraine pulsed behind her forehead. Kirigiri took a deep breath and used that to smother her groan. Naegi, just as light as he appeared, hung from her grasp. She shifted him around to an easier position to handle, and then threw him over shoulder.

“Did you have to do that?” Komaru asked.

“Yes,” she said bluntly. “If he saw Komaeda-kun in there, this would have become a disaster zone.”

“Um, he already did,” Komaru said bashfully, as if it were her fault Kirigiri’s worst fears came true. “That’s what started all this.”

“. . . Of course, he did,” she said calmly. “Of course, he wakes up when no one who can control him is around. That’s just what he does.”

“Hey, he’s my brother! If you can control him, I can, too.”

“And yet you allowed him to lead you here, did you not?” Kirigiri said. “Despite knowing this area was off-limits to him.”

Komaru looked away. “I didn’t think he would come down here.”

“You should have kept him in his room.” A moment later, Kirigiri regretted saying that. Komaru obviously knew that; there was no benefit to saying it aloud other than to make Naegi’s sister feel bad. So, she changed the subject and nodded at Togami. “Can you carry him?”

Togami was bigger than Komaru, but her adventure in Towa City had grown some muscle on that small frame. Kirigiri watched as Komaru tried carrying Togami bridal style at first, but then found it too heavy – or realized what Fukawa would think if she saw them – and tossed him over her shoulder, too.

“My, that’s quite the recipe you brewed up in that little syringe,” Hanamura said from within his cage. His tone was light, but there was something heavy in his gaze. “I’ll remember that drugging is fair game, then.”

Kirigiri didn’t even look at him. “Take Togami-kun to the infirmary and then get Asahina-san. I’ll take Naegi-kun to his room and wait for him to recover.”

“Okay. Uh, I guess this time Touko-san will be with Togami-kun, too.”

“As will you,” Kirigiri said. “Unless you have something else to do.”

“Huh? But Makoto –”

“As I said, I will be staying with him.” Kirigiri flipped her hair. “One person will be enough. I suspect the more people there are, the more risk there is of him panicking when he wakes.”

“But he’s my . . .”

“Naegi-kun is in a delicate mental state.” She glanced at Komaru. It wasn’t a mean look, but it wasn’t kind either. It was simply nothing. “This isn’t the time to allow emotion to dictate our
Komaru flinched. Kirigiri began walking and didn’t look back. Komaru did once, only to see Tanaka sliding a finger across his neck in a promise. With a shudder, she grabbed Togami’s legs so he wouldn’t fall, and then scurried after Kirigiri.
If I Could Turn Back Time

The next time he woke, it was with a throbbing heart and a burst of panic in his throat. He wasn’t sure why he was frightened at first, but nevertheless, obeyed the instinctive drive to roll onto his belly and get his hands under him for a quick start. Not that he needed it, for afterwards, he remembered. He remembered Togami’s bluish face and Komaeda. Dear, sweet Komaeda. Locked away with nothing like a wild animal. That couldn’t be good for him. Didn’t they know he wasn’t healthy? It was obvious when you looked at his collarbone and saw how the skin sagged around it. Komaeda needed a bed, and a warm blanket, and the person he loved the most . . . had loved the most?

Wait, where was he? This wasn’t the damp, dark cargo hold. This was the same room he had woken in before, his jailcell. Had he been –?

“Nae. . . Makoto, relax.”

Kirigiri. His body instantly listened. It took her command a little too far actually, and his chin ended up falling back to the mattress. He had to prop himself up with his elbows. Kirigiri was sitting in the same place the Imposter (Fukawa?) had been before, her posture straight as she snapped a small book closed and set it on the desk.

“Are you ready to speak with me yet, or do you need a few minutes?” she asked.

“I’m ready. I’m ready!” he said breathlessly. He was always ready for Kirigiri.

She nodded. “Togami-kun is fine. Everyone is fine. What happened was unfortunate, but there will be no lasting injuries.”

“I saw Komaeda-kun and the others in a cage,” he said that hesitantly, not wanting Kirigiri to think he was accusing her of anything. He bet she would be as surprised to learn this as he had been.

Yet, she wasn’t. At least, she gave no physical sign of surprise. But, this was Kirigiri. Not reacting was kind of her thing. “I’m sorry you found out like that.”

He didn’t like the phrasing. It gave off the impression that she was the one who had carried this out. “Do you know where the key is? Wait, we don’t need a key, do we? I bet you know how to lockpick! Uh, not that I’m saying you do anything illegal. . . But you’re an amazing detective and all the detectives I saw on TV can.”

“That pop culture nonsense was hardly close to reality,” she scoffed. Feeling a blush come on, he turned his face away. “However, you are correct that I was taught how to pick locks. But releasing Ultimate Despair is out of the question.”

“But –”

She held up a hand for silence. “Do you remember when I found you?”

He smiled bashfully. “Which time?”

That earned a hint of a smile. “With Ultimate Despair.”

He nodded furiously, grinning widely. Of course. How could he forget the best day of his life?

She said, “I see. Then you should remember what you said Ultimate Despair would do if they got
their hands on me.”

The grin stayed on his face, but there was no longer any joy to it. It simply remained there like a
drawing on a chalkboard.

“You were unconscious for a while,” she acknowledged, “but the hostility between us didn’t lessen
in that time. It’s only gotten worse. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I could talk to them. Maybe I could get them to calm down.” Even the hopeful words didn’t make
his voice sound very strong. How was he supposed to argue with Kirigiri? She was Kirigiri! “But
what about Komaeda-kun? Some of the others are dangerous, but he isn’t. Komaeda-kun wouldn’t
hurt anyone!”

She stared at him for a very long time.

“I don’t want to take chances,” she finally said. “He may not be actively hostile, but his allegiance is
still to the Remnants, and his luck is a threat even if he doesn’t act like one.”

She was right, of course. She was right and he knew it, but that didn’t stop him from grinding his
teeth together. “It’s not their fault. The Future Foundation locked them up in cages. Anyone would
be upset!”

“Your sister didn’t tell you anything?” she said, aghast. “Makoto, the Future Foundation has nothing
to do with this.”

“But if the Future Foundation didn’t do this, then who . . .?,” he sat up fully. “Kyoko . . .?”

“Yes. Your suspicions are correct.”

“B-but why?” he cried. “You can’t do that to them! Komaeda-kun’s sick, and Tanaka-kun needs to
take care of his animals, and Owari-san doesn’t eat unless I make her –”

“Makoto, relax,” she repeated. “You don’t need to worry about them anymore. I have everything
under control.”

Oh. He still hated it, hated the thought of his friends behind bars. But if Kirigiri said she had things
under control, then everything must be fine. He still didn’t get why it had to be done, but who was he
to try to decipher Kirigiri’s brilliant mind?

“Judging by your reaction, you don’t understand what is going on,” She closed her eyes briefly.
“What do you remember before waking up on this ship?”

“There was something really bad happening. I don’t know why, but Ultimate Despair had started
fighting each other. Komaeda-kun said that some of them had turned traitor, and . . . We were
running. He was trying to keep me safe.” He remembered Komaeda pretending to kill his sister, but
he didn’t need to tell Kirigiri that. She’d overreact. “I don’t remember how I got here.”

“So, you don’t remember meeting us. Given your luck’s track record, I thought this might be the
outcome.” She turned in her chair so that she faced him. “Listen closely. We’re on a vessel heading
for an abandoned Future Foundation site on Jabberwock Island. The passengers consist of us, our
class, your sister, and Ultimate Despair. Kamukura-kun and I have reached an arrangement to treat
you and the Remnants on Jabberwock where we wouldn’t have to worry about the Future
Foundation attacking. I should also mention that in the eyes of the Future Foundation, our class are
now considered deserters.”
“Treat them? You mean we’re going to give them hope?” he whispered.

“Presumably. My understanding is that is the cure.”

“That’s great. That’s really great!” he said giddily. He couldn’t wait to spread Hope again! “But, uh, why did you include me in that sentence? I don’t need help. I’m already the Ultimate Hope!”

After a moment, she said, “You’re still in poor health. I’ve been informed that you’ve lost a significant amount of weight since our time at Hope’s Peak. Considering how slim you were to begin with, I find that concerning.”

He plucked at the skin on his forearm. “That’s because I ran away . . .”

“We can discuss the details once we arrive on Jabberwock,” she said. “In the meantime, I need you to keep your distance from the Remnants.”

Up to now, while Naegi hadn’t liked everything Kirigiri had said, he’d kept himself under control. But this? This was too far. He sprang to his knees, protesting. Kirigiri remained calm and cold; it felt like she had expected this fight.

“You can’t do that!” Naegi was saying. “You can’t stop me from seeing them.”

“This is for everyone’s sake,” she said. “They’re anxious and aggressive, and there are no hospitals we can turn to if something goes wrong. You are not going to flirt with danger just to provide them with stimulation.”

“I’ll talk to them!” he vowed. “They wouldn’t hurt me.”

“They wouldn’t hurt you,” she said. “But every time they see you while you are not under their control, they grow more hostile toward us. Your actions nearly killed Togami-kun today. I will not see a repeat of that.”

That was a low blow. That red-blue skin flashed in his mind, but he pushed it away. Togami was fine. He wasn’t dead or anything.

“You need to stay away from them,” Kirigiri said. “Do you understand?”

“. . . Fine,” he lied.

She studied him. He knew he hadn’t been a good liar at Hope’s Peak, but he’d gotten tons of practice with Ultimate Despair. That had to mean something, right?

If Kirigiri saw through him, she gave no sign of it. “Are you strong enough to walk? The others want to see you.”

“The others.” His mouth ran dry. “So, they’re all here. Everyone’s here?”

She stood. She readjusted her glove, making sure it fit snugly before extending a hand to him. “Come and see.”

He did feel strong enough to move. He could have gotten out of the room without any help, but Kirigiri still stuck to his side. She made no move to touch him, nor did she ask if he was okay. But she was there, and she made no secret of it. It was a comfortable presence, like how Ultimate Despair stuck close to him whenever he went outside.

They didn’t need to go looking for Komaru. His sister pounced the moment he set foot outside,
winding her arms around him like snakes, making him still and pant uncomfortably. Kirigiri only let
the hug last for a moment before reaching over and prying Komaru’s fingers loose.

“I told you to wait with the others,” Kirigiri said reproachingly. Her arms were crossed against her
chest; oh, she was mad.

“Everyone else is where you told them to be,” Komaru said dismissingly. She hung to Naegi’s arm
and aimed a bright, hopeful smile at him that was impossible not to mimic.

“We’ll talk about this later. Makoto, follow me.” Kirigiri walked ahead, not checking to see if they
were following.

Komaru continued to cling to his arm, as if worried Kirigiri would suddenly turn around and try to
separate them. He didn’t mind. Not much.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Komaru said quietly. “I don’t remember if I told you that before. After I
heard about what happened to Hope’s Peak, I worried about you every day.”

“Did you see what happened?” he said back, equally as quiet. It felt like they were trying to hide
their conversation from Kirigiri, although he couldn’t imagine why. “Enoshima did air it everywhere,
so…”

“No. I didn’t have access to a television. Not one that would show what was going on in the world,”
she said with a scowl. Obviously, there was an entire story behind that answer that he didn’t know.

“Where were you staying?” Naegi asked. “I know Ultimate Despair captured you and held you in
Towa City, and then Kirigiri-san saved you, but I wasn’t told anything else.”

Her shoulders slumped. Her eyes dimmed. Normally, that would have been a code red, a lightning
strike to his core that would electrify his inner hope and send that factory into overdrive. But, this
was different. This wasn’t despair, he was looking at. A descendent, maybe; or an ancestor. This
wasn’t the sickening sludge that had seeped into the souls of Ultimate Despair, or a ghost five steps
behind like that which followed Kamukura. This was acknowledgement, acceptance. Almost healthy
—

What was he doing? This was despair. There was nothing good about despair! He squeezed his jaw
as his fists trembled. What had he been thinking? He knew better! Was...was he contaminated?
He’d failed and despaired once already. What if he hadn’t recovered?

“Makoto! It wasn’t that bad!” Komaru was saying to him. Her words sounded like they were coming
through a long tube. “I spent most of it being held captive, so I had food and water, and I was safe
until Asahina-san kicked down my door.”

“Held captive?” he repeated in a daze.

He laughed. He laughed with high-pitched, hiccup-like sounds that hurt his chest. Like brother, like
sister. Maybe it was in the genes. With a great gale of relief, he shook off his earlier thoughts. Of
course, he wasn’t contaminated; he was Hope. The purest Hope to ever be.

“Makoto,” Kirigiri said sharply, “come walk with me.”

He glanced sideways at Komaru. “Um...”

“Makoto.”
He shrugged apologetically at his sister, and then picked up his pace so that he was at Kirigiri’s side. She seemed tense.

(He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard Komaru whisper an apology.)

They stopped before the door that would lead onto A-Deck. With a hand on his shoulder, Kirigiri spoke. “Our class is waiting behind that door. Are you sure you’re ready to see them?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Naegi asked honestly.

“We’ll see,” she said. Honestly, he couldn’t tell whether she was acting ominously as a joke, or if she was truly concerned.

Mentally, he was prepared for the sunlight this time. Physically, that was a different story. He didn’t want to, but his body still mistook the unfamiliar heat for flames and recoiled; his eyes blinked rapidly as they were unable to detect anything but white spots. It didn’t last long. It wasn’t allowed to, because Asahina rushed them, Kirigiri’s glare barely keeping her back as her shadow fell across Naegi’s face. The change in heat was noticeable.

“Naegi-kun!” Asahina was wringing her hands, bouncing on her toes, anything to burn off her energy without crossing over the invisible boundary Kirigiri had set. Asahina looked the same as he remembered, although she, uh, she was wearing a bikini. A pretty revealing one. Not that he was looking or anything.

“Yo, Naegi-chi!” Hagakure loped over. He had ditched the jacket and yellow shirt for a floral shirt with thinner fabric, although for a reason only god would understand, he had kept his baggy, rolled-up pants. His hair was hilariously frizzy, so that it looked like someone had taped a tumbleweed to his head.

“H-hello!” Naegi said. “Hi, everyone!”

“A year to think about what you’d say when you saw us again, and that’s what you came up with?” Togami sniffed. “I expected a little more.”

Togami had ditched the black jacket and tie, settling for his white dress shirt. He had rolled up the sleeves to fight the heat, creating a picture that struck Naegi as wrong somehow. Otherwise, Togami mostly looked as Naegi remembered. Except for the blue-black bruise blooming around his throat. Although he must have seen Naegi staring at it, Togami gave no sign something was amiss. He stared into Naegi’s eyes instead, as if daring him to point it out.

Last but not least, standing behind Togami was the real Fukawa. Though her clothes were the same, she had changed the most physically. The pigtails were gone, swapped for a hairdo made of long tendril-like strands – like Kamukura’s hair. A series of hairclips struggled to keep her mane under control, but they didn’t stop a piece of her hair from curling up and toward her head, just like his own ahoge.

They were here. They were all here. He took a dizzy step forward. Asahina stopped breathing.

As his mind skidded to a stop, all he could say was, “Hey.”

Asahina screamed. If Kirigiri and Komaru hadn’t been behind him to catch him when she leapt at him, that would have been a disaster, for Asahina threw all her weight into him. He had no idea why she had thought Naegi would be strong enough to lift her. But it was the thought that counted, and it was nice to know she trusted him. Even if he had to turn his face out of her... away from a certain part of her body.
Hagakure slapped his back. “Naegi-chi! You doing good, little man? If you need something to help you relax, just come by my room later. . . Uh, don’t mention that to Kirigiri, okay?” (“I’m right here,” Kirigiri said.)

“He doesn’t need relaxing, he needs exercise. Look!” Asahina pried his arm off her shoulder and let it hang pathetically. “He’s all skin and bone. I bet he hasn’t seen a pool since we at Hope’s Peak. I don’t know how you survived that!”

“Actually, they did have a pool,” Naegi said. “I didn’t use it very often, but sometimes me and Nidai-kun, or Owari-san . . .”

Kirigiri suddenly grabbed his arm hard, making him pause. She swept forward, and the prideful, powerful way she held herself grabbed everyone’s attention. “If our voyage goes according to schedule, then you two will have the ocean in a week. However, Asahina-san, you would have to keep an eye on him. Given his track record, I expect a whirlpool to spawn directly beneath him.”

“Aye-aye, captain!” Asahina said with a salute. “Don’t worry! I passed with top honours in CPR, first aid, lifeguarding, diving, swift-water rescue, open water rescue. . .”

Togami sighed and checked an imaginary watch. “No doubt you were also taught how to bore everyone to death.”

“Oh, lay off.” She swatted Togami’s arm.


Naegi smiled hollowly, not thinking. Not remembering.

And then he lunged and giggled and hugged Togami before he could run away. He wrapped himself around Togami like an octopus, pretending not to notice that Togami was spluttering and batting at him like he was shooing away a fly. That was such a Togami thing to do. So Togami. Just like that had been Asahina, and that had been Hagakure, and Fukawa was here and Kirigiri was here . . .

“Oi! What about me?” Hagakure cried, looking close to tears.

Naegi wiped his eyes and pried himself away from a horrified Togami. Hagakure went in for a bro-hug: an arm around his shoulder that reeled him in close. With his other hand, he ruffled Naegi’s hair, and wasn’t that so much like Soda?

He tried to rest against Hagakure’s chest afterward, content to bask in the warmth of his friends. Hagakure, however, didn’t notice and strolled away; Naegi had to stumble forward to keep his balance. That brought him in front of Fukawa. She curled her lip and looked away sharply.

“O-oh, so now you’re going to talk to me. It’s only because there’s nobody l-left, right? Don’t expect me to fawn over you like those idiots. I know you’re . . .”

She went quiet quickly when she was swallowed by a hug. Thankfully, they were around the same height because that allowed him to bury his face into her shoulder so that the fabric there soaked up his tears. It only lasted for so long; his nose started dripping and he had to tear his face away.

“Everyone’s here,” he said. “We’re all alive and we’re all here.”

“Barely,” Togami groused. “I thought I was going to rot in that hellhole. Thankfully, I’ve been to
Jabberwock before and while its still subpar, it is far superior to the sad little shack the Future Foundation calls home. I must say, I'm looking forward to landing.”

Hagakure frowned. “But wasn’t Jabberwock . . .?”

“It will be nice to finally be able to walk freely,” Kirigiri said as she brushed her hair behind her ear. “Kamukura-kun says Ultimate Despair has no presence there.”

“Did he provide proof?” Togami demanded. He studied Kirigiri with an intensity Naegi didn’t quite understand. She gave him a withering look in return.

“Jabberwock . . . ‘ It sounded familiar, but Naegi couldn’t conjure up an image.

“Yeah, check it out!” Asahina ripped out a brochure from one of the pockets in Hagakure’s pants. “It’s a luxury resort on this small island, and it has beaches and a pool. I’m so excited!”

Hagakure said, “But isn’t it . . .?”

“Wow, that place looks amazing!” Naegi said, jostling with Asahina for the best position to read the brochure. “And once we get there, you guys can meet my other friends!”

The group fell silent.

“Uh, come again?” Hagakure said.

“You know: Ultimate Despair,” Naegi said. “Kirigiri-san says I can’t see them right now, but once we’re on the island, everyone can be friends!”

“I didn’t say that,” Kirigiri said quickly.

Naegi shrugged. “Well, you can’t keep them locked up forever.”

“Oh, just watch me,” Togami mumbled. “Naegi, did you hit your head on the way here? Did you forget what that thug did to me?”

This time, Togami pulled down his collar and clearly pointed to the bruises. Naegi stared at them, hazy memories rising. . . and then he pushed the bad thoughts away and smiled. Fukawa, meanwhile, had screeched, her face drained of color. It must have been the first time she had seen. . .

“Are you going to do that every time I point them out?” Togami snapped.

Oh, never mind.

“It’s just bruises,” Naegi said. “Nobody’s dead. Tanaka-kun won’t do it again. He was probably just angry because he saw Komaru.”

Komaru pointed to herself. “Me?”

Naegi said, “They don’t like you. I think they hate you even more than they hate Kirigiri-san.”

“Th-that’s not fair!” his silly sister protested. “What did I do?”

Naegi shrugged. “You exist.”

Komaru took a step back. Naegi looked around. Everyone was staring at him. Oh! That hadn’t been very hopeful, had it?
“It’s okay.” He swooped forward and grabbed his sister’s hands. “You’re still just a kid. They hated me, too, at first. I could get Komaeda-kun to talk to them for you! They wanted to kill me, but Komaeda-kun talked them down. He showed me what I was really meant to be and once I understood my proper place, everything was fine.”

“They may not have killed you,” Kirigiri said, “but they did give you that.”

With her eyes, she pointed at the old scar on his forehead. Naegi touched it, letting his fingers run over the rough skin reverently, and laughed. “That was such a long time ago.”

“Did they attack you with a knife?” Hagakure asked.

Komaru glanced at Fukawa. “I don’t think they would leave that kind of scar.”

“She’s right,” Naegi said proudly. “It was a wrench.”

“A wrench left that?” Togami repeated in astonishment.

“Soda-kun wanted me to shut up.”

“ . . . Naegi –” Whatever Asahina wanted to say, it was lost when Kirigiri grabbed her shoulder.

After a careful silence, Kirigiri said, “You haven’t eaten yet. Follow me. I’ll take you to the kitchen.”

Naegi obediently waddled after Kirigiri. The others watched as the two drew further away and disappeared through a door into the ship’s bowels. Togami clicked his tongue, tried to pull his collar up to cover his neck, and slunk off.

Hagakure sighed. “Man, it started off so well. . .”

He walked off, Asahina following him a minute after. Fukawa watched them suspiciously, then turned to Komaru.

“Are you okay?” Fukawa asked seriously.

It took Komaru a couple of attempts to answer. “He didn’t see anything wrong with that.”

Fukawa shifted uncomfortably. This was not her domain. “They were saying he was a little crazy.”

“I don’t care what the Future Foundation thinks!” Komaru snapped.

The two stood in silence, Komaru still staring at the door her brother had disappeared through.

“It could be worse,” Fukawa said. “So what if he’s suddenly masochistic? It’s a lot better than, you know, something l-like murder.”

Komaru studied Fukawa. Slowly, she smiled.

“You’re right.” She squeezed Fukawa’s hand. “We can handle this.”
“Steak?” Naegi said. “If you’re trying to throw a welcome party, I think you forgot the rest of the guests.”

“It isn’t you,” Kirigiri said. “We are using the perishables first. And frankly, I think you could use a heavy meal.”

Ugh. His stomach sank in response, as if anticipating she’d literally stuff him until there was no space left. Naegi lifted the edge of the steak with his fork, letting the juices drip. It did look good, but this was a rather hefty piece. “Uh, are you hungry, too? There’s a lot here. You can have some.”

Slowly, she slid her steaming mug of coffee closer to her, as if it would be just as filling. “I’ll pass.”

Well, there went that solution. At least his first meal on this ship would be a good one: steak, bread and an assorted fruit salad. At least it sounded like a good combination, but he was no Ultimate Chef. He wouldn’t know any better.

He picked up the knife and sawed into the meat. He dropped a chunk into his mouth, and chewed slowly. It was good. It was fine. But . . . it was just that. It didn’t melt on his tongue.

“You don’t like it?” Kirigiri asked.

Naegi swallowed hastily. “I didn’t say that!”

“You didn’t need to.”

Bashfully, he looked down at his plate and picked at his food. “It’s not bad. But Hanamura-kun’s made most of my food for the last year, and . . . I think I finally understand why Togami-kun complained so much at Hope’s Peak.”

“You’re very fortunate to have had catered meals. That’s a rarity nowadays,” she said. “I must admit that I’m surprised. Usually, in the presence of good food, one’s appetite increases. However, I have been informed that yours has shrunk dramatically.”

He hesitated. “I didn’t exercise very much. I didn’t need as many calories.”

Kirigiri made a neutral sound of acknowledgement. “I see. I’m glad you’ve brought up the subject of living with Ultimate Despair. We need to discuss that.”

Oh. Naegi swallowed a mouthful of dry bread. He had seen enough television to know that the ‘We need to talk’ request always led to something bad. “What about it?”

“I want to know about your time with them,” she said. She glanced at a page in her notebook. “Take you time, but remember that the more information you give me, the easier it will be to arrange your transition into this new situation.”

“Sure. Where should I start?”

“Let’s start with waking up. Walk me through a typical morning.”
“It’s not that exciting, I wake up. I get changed. I brush my teeth and try to make my hair neat.” He smoothed his ahoge down and it popped right back up after, making his point. “Then I wait until someone brings me to the cafeteria for breakfast and we all eat together.”

“When would you say you usually have breakfast?” Kirigiri asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Nothing at all? You never looked at a clock?”

“No.” He rolled a blueberry along his fork. “Komaeda-kun wouldn’t let me have one.”

She remarked, “That’s unusual. What happened after?”

“Depends on what the others wanted,” he said. “Sometimes, Nevermind-san invited me for tea, so she could try to proposition me again. Mioda-san usually held a concert on Thursday, and on Fridays, me and Soda-kun would break Monokumas . . . Are you okay?”

She had been drinking coffee. Now, cheeks red, she was coughing furiously. He waited patiently for the choking to subside, and then for the two times she had to clear her throat.

“Sorry. You said Nevermind propositioned you?”

He agreed with a hum. “Novoselic needs a king.”

“And she, co-leader of Ultimate Despair, believed the Ultimate Hope would be the perfect candidate?”

“She’s not wrong,” he said. It wasn’t wrong, but it still embarrassed him to think about marrying her, so he downed a cup of water to buy time. “I’m the only one with a status equal to hers. I don’t think it’s about my title anyways. It’s about my relation to Enoshima.”

“I . . .” Kirigiri stopped for a moment. “I don’t know where to start with that answer. What status are you talking about?”

“I’m Hope,” he said again. “This is a world overrun by despair. I’m sure you figured out ages ago what that means. I’m not sure if I’m ready yet, but one day, I will be. I’ll take this world by storm. I’ll burn it until there’s no dark corners for despair to hide in, and when I do, what’s left behind will be a world of hope! It’s going to be amazing.”

Kirigiri was visibly struggling to control her expression. “Makoto, the Future Foundation has much more manpower than we do. Why don’t we leave it to them?”

“No way,” he sneered. “They’re murderers. They don’t know how to spread hope. They need me. Everyone needs me!”

“Is that what Komaeda-kun told you?”

Kirigiri said that with that tone, with that pointed decisive she adopted whenever she laid out the damming evidence in a case. It didn’t matter. Kirigiri may have laid out important evidence, but she had attended the wrong trial.

“He doesn’t need to,” Naegi said. “I’m Hope. It’s the obvious conclusion.”

Slowly, Kirigiri moved her hands off the table and onto her lap where he couldn’t see them. “Fine. Let’s move on. You spoke of the relationship between you and Enoshima. Was becoming the king
of Novoselic supposed to be your penance for defeating her?”

“I don’t think so. I didn’t have a choice not to defeat her. Enoshima had to die to make room for me,” he said. “I’m talking about the fact that Nevermind-san loved her. They all did. I’m the closest thing to Enoshima, so it makes sense Nevermind-san would want to marry me.”

“What about Towa Monaca?” Kirigiri asked. “I know she’s underage and unsuitable for marriage, but wouldn’t she be the closest thing to the next Enoshima?”

“Who?” Naegi asked.

“A child mentored by Enoshima herself,” Kirigiri said. “The reports say that she was just as obsessed with despair and Enoshima as Ultimate Despair was, although Towa herself was dangerously sane. She planned to produce her own kind of killing game while also conducting a citywide massacre. It was your sister who prevented her from pulling off her plans.”

Komaru did that? How . . . how wonderfully similar! Just as he, the Ultimate Hope, had defeated the Ultimate Despair, his little sister had defeated an immature Despair. Apparently, it did run in the genes.

“I don’t know anything about Towa, but I don’t see how she could be a better fit than me,” Naegi said. “I’m Enoshima’s descendent. It’s only natural I would take up some of the mantles that would have gone to her.”

He returned to his meal. Kirigiri stared at him, before taking a noisy, deep breath. “Why do you keep doing this . . . ? Makoto, why are you claiming to be Enoshima’s heir?”

He laughed. “You want to hear my reasoning? I guess we’re at the end of the trial, huh? Its straightforward: the Ultimate Hope only exists because of the destruction of the Ultimate Despair. My victory over her was the only reason everyone began to acknowledge my talent. I’m not her heir in the sense that I’m Ultimate Despair, too. It’s more like how a volcano erupts and gives birth to an island. I’m the next link in the chain.”

He ate a couple more bites. On the third, Kirigiri reached across and grabbed his wrist, stilling it. She said, “None of us have completely regained those years we lost, but we do remember some of our time at Hope’s Peak. I can say with absolute certainty that your personality during the Killing Game was no different than it was before the school isolated itself. Enoshima hasn’t changed anything about you.”

“If that was true, then why didn’t anyone know about my talent before her?” Naegi countered. “Hope was inside me the entire time, sleeping, but it was Enoshima-san who nurtured it into life. Without her, I wouldn’t exist. I’d still be boring, old, worthless Naegi Makoto.”

“Stop.”

“But . . .”

“No, stop talking.” She glowered at him; it was almost scary. “We befriended the Lucky Student. Naegi Makoto, the Ultimate Lucky Student, was the only one I trusted when I was investigating the school. Do not call yourself worthless again.”

Her command was . . . confusing. There was nothing good about Naegi the Ultimate Lucky Student. At least, there was nothing good that Naegi the Ultimate Hope didn’t already have. He was an upgraded form of his younger self in every way. If Kirigiri didn’t realize that, then it must have been
because they hadn’t spent much time together after escaping Hope’s Peak. After all, how could the best detective in the world think that a boring, ordinary student was better than the one that cured you of despair?

“Makoto,” Kirigiri said softly, “you’re still the same person you were before Ultimate Despair kidnapped you. We are your friends. We want to help you.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Naegi said. “Uh, I’m not too sure how much you can do, though. I’m the only one who can really fight despair.”

She held it for a while. Then, her mask broke; her face softened, but not entirely in a good way. The transition was so smooth and sudden that Naegi honestly couldn’t tell if he was witnessing a genuine or planned loss of control. What he did know was that a weary sadness had settled over her, mixed with uncomfortable pity and what seemed to be understanding.

“Let’s address the elephant in the room,” Kirigiri said. “What did Komaeda do to you? I know they’ve all hurt you, but he appears to be the main instigator, so . . . Why are you smiling?”

Oh? Oh, of course he was. The second that name had passed through Kirigiri’s lips, an airy mirth had filled him to the brim. The name, too, brought a bad memory of Komaeda caged. . . but he tightened his jaw and narrowed his vision until the bad thought went away. He wondered if Komaeda and Kirigiri had spoken during the time he couldn’t remember. He wondered if they had been friends back at Hope’s Peak.

“Kyoko-san, when you said I couldn’t see anyone in Ultimate Despair, you didn’t mean Komaeda-kun, right?”

Kirigiri watched him carefully. She told him, “When I made that statement, there were no intended exceptions.”

“You can’t do that!” Naegi slammed both his fists on the table. She didn’t flinch.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t open to changing my mind,” Kirigiri said. “But it’s up to you to convince me.”

Before, Kirigiri had asked for a summary of his reasoning. Now she demanded this? This really was another class trial. Good. Dare he say it, but he was quite competent when it came to navigating those little buggers. How to proceed was obvious – present the good things – so he knew how to start.

“Komaeda-kun saved me,” he gushed, watching her for a reaction. Detectives on TV were always saving people, so this should strike true. “When Ultimate Despair found me, they wanted to kill me, but Komaeda-kun stopped them. Kamukura-kun helped, too, but Komaeda-kun was there first.”

“A life debt,” she murmured. “He speaks of that a lot, doesn’t he?”

“No?” he said, confused. “I can’t remember a time he’s ever brought it up.”

“Oh,” Kirigiri sounded surprised. “I have another question about that situation. How did Ultimate Despair find you? I can hardly imagine someone as intelligent as Komaeda believed . . . What?”

Naegi had shyly raised his hand before like a schoolchild. “You keep forgetting the honorific.”

“. . . I can hardly imagine someone as intelligent as Komaeda-kun believed he could present you to Ultimate Despair without any problems.”
“That’s right. He didn’t mean to. He had been keeping me in his room before, but then Mikan came to give him some pain medication and found me instead. That’s what happened.”

“Then it was completely accidental,” Kirigiri said with a nod. “Did Komaeda-kun ever express plans to introduce you to the rest of them.”

“No.”

“I see. Then I suppose that incident was for the best. Was he angry that you were discovered?”

“Maybe, but only because he was worried.” Naegi shrugged with one shoulder. “It was just bad luck. There’s nothing either of us could have done to prevent it.”

“Presuming he hasn’t changed too much from our school days, that is a philosophy I would expect him to hold. Although given the state of his classmates. . .”

Naegi didn’t listen to her mumblings. He had blinked and Kirigiri shone with a new light. The ceiling had opened and let a spotlight from heaven enter so that she was the center of the universe. Everything around her blurred, but she remained crystal-sharp.

“K-Kyoko-san!” His words tumbled over each other and his tongue. “You do remember going to school with Komaeda-kun!”

“Yes, I do. Makoto, try not to take this harshly, but my memories tell me that you and Komaeda-kun were not close at that time.”

“I knew that,” he said. “Kuzuryu-kun told me that. But what about you two? You’re both amazing, so you must have gotten along!”

“Komaeda-kun tended not to interact with anyone outside his class,” Kirigiri said smoothly. “We were only acquaintances.”

He deflated. “Oh. What about the rest of Class 77?”

“I was a detective, Makoto, and a very busy one at that. I didn’t have much time to make friends.” In Naegi’s eyes, she answered that a little too harshly. “Let’s turn the conversation back to you and Komaeda-kun. What else did he do?”

He couldn’t tell whether he was winning her over or not. That was the thing about her. Kirigiri’s default face tended to be the same as her happy face, which tended to be the same as her angry face, which tended to be the same as her sad face, which tended to be the same as her bored face. You would think that living with Kamukura would have given him some skills at picking that apart, but nope. Granted, he couldn’t interpret Kamukura’s feelings either. Which was probably why he was having so much trouble now. He bet that when Hope’s Peak had crammed all those people’s talents into Kamukura’s head, they realized they needed to cram in someone’s personality, too. And who else but their next best Ultimate, Kirigiri Kyoko?

Either way, Kirigiri hadn’t said anything negative yet, so he decided to be hopeful, assume things were going well, and bring out his second bullet. “Komaeda-kun’s the one who made me realize I was Hope! I knew before, but I hadn’t known what it meant. Uh, I’m not saying it was your fault! I wasn’t smart enough to understand what you were saying back then.”

Kirigiri opened her notebook, the only sign of intense interest. “And what does it mean to be Hope?”

He crowed “I’m the antidote to Enoshima-san’s poison; I’m the fire that will burn away despair. I
can save those she’s contaminated and wring out every drop of despair. I’ll beat despair into the dirt until there’s nothing left but blinding hope.”

“That’s quite the responsibility you’ve taken upon yourself,” Kirigiri said.

He nodded. “It is, but it’s my destiny. I’m the only one who can do it.”

Kirigiri lifted her pen, as if to write something, but then put it down again. “If you’re the only necessary piece, then where do the rest of us stand?”

“You’re . . .”

He puzzled over it. His first thought was to make a comparison to a king and its pawns on a chessboard, that wouldn’t go over well. Then, he had a much better idea.

He said, “You know the Statue of Liberty? Everyone talks about the torch, but it wouldn’t exist if the statue’s arm wasn’t holding it up, and that wouldn’t exist if there wasn’t a body, and legs, and a foundation. That’s what you guys are. I might be the main attraction, but you’re the foundation that holds everything together.”

She nodded. “Alright. That’s not a bad answer. I can accept that.”

“I’m really glad you think so,” Naegi said. “I wouldn’t question you or anything, but if you hadn’t . . . Well, it just feels really disrespectful to turn your back on our classmates like that.”

The mood changed the moment he said that. He watched Kirigiri’s eyes narrow, enthralled.

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“Not the ones with us. The others.” He leaned away from her, suddenly uncomfortable. “I guess it could extend to everyone who’s died since the Tragedy, but they were the ones who mattered the most. They were the ones who died for me to become Hope.”

The tension returned to its normal level. Kirigiri sighed. She grabbed his hand and ran her fingers over the back of his knuckles.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I understand. Several times I have lain awake and wondered I could have saved them if I hadn’t obsessed over the mastermind. I’m a detective; it’s my job to spot murderers and those who would become them. If I had paid attention, I think I would have seen Maizono-san falling apart, or Ludenberg-san’s desperation. But our lives are full of what-ifs, and dwelling over them doesn’t change anything. This is the path our fates laid out, and all we can do is accept the consequences and move on. There is no reason you shouldn’t grieve, but I hope you’ll realize someday that none of this was your fault.”

Naegi frowned and cocked his head. She was trying to comfort him, he could tell, but . . .

“Why would I grieve?” he asked.

“Why . . .? Why wouldn’t you?”

“They had to die,” he said. “It was the only way I could be created. Kyoko-san, they laid down the foundation for my birth – how is that sad? Sacrificing yourself to bring the Ultimate Hope to life . . . it’s the best way to go! They’re forever entwined with the world’s hope. They’re part of me, forever. It’s nothing sad at all!”
Kirigiri stared at him. And stared. And stared.

“Makoto, they’re dead,” she said sharply. “You saw their bodies. None of them wanted to die. Even Sakura-san would have chosen to live if Enoshima hadn’t forced her hand. What happened in that school was a tragedy.”

He shook his head fiercely. “No, no, you’re looking at it wrong. Kyoko, they had to die. I could only become Hope in the presence of a great despair, so Enoshima had to kill them.”

“What are you suggesting?” she asked loudly. “Are you claiming that Enoshima planned that Killing Game to mould you into the Ultimate Hope.”

He gave her a flat look that tempered some of the heat in her stare. “Kyoko, Enoshima was Despair. Obviously, she didn’t mean to. But it’s a law of physics that every action has an equal reaction. So, if an Ultimate Despair existed, an Ultimate Hope must have, and of course that Hope would originate from the greatest despair. All that despair she poured into the game. . . That was the action.”

“Makoto, stop,” she said quietly.

“T’m the reaction.” He leaned forward. “An equal hope to match that despair. So, you can trust me, Kyoko, because I’m just as potent as that despair was, and you know what that means. You remember the despair of watching our friends die one by one, right?”

She wasn’t pale, but something was missing in her composure. Her mouth was partially open as she stared at him, unable to speak.

“Do you remember when you killed me? Did it hurt when you realized that to avoid Enoshima-san’s trap, you had pushed me inside instead? What was it like to become a murderer? What was it like to become the blackened after how hard you fought to stop her - ?”

“Enough!”

Her nails dug into his wrist. Still with that gormless smile upon his face, he stared at her flushed hand. He patted it.

“It’s overwhelming, isn’t it?” he said. “It’s hard to imagine all that hope being inside me. But that’s the truth. You’ll see.”

He smiled and returned to his dinner. Only . . . where were his utensils? It took a bit of searching, but eventually he found them: Kirigiri was holding them in her other hand. He hadn’t even seen her grab them.

“Uh, can I have my fork back? And the knife?”

She nearly threw them onto the table.

“Are you okay?”

“Finish your dinner,” she said, suddenly standing and moving away from the table. “I’m going for a walk.”

She was gone before he could say anything. He shrugged and dug into the salad.

Chapter End Notes
Creepy Naegi Part 1 :) 

Next Chapter:
Class 78 + Komaru: So, how is he?
Kirigiri: *silently screaming*
The floor lurched back and forth under her feet. It was just rough waves. It must have been. What Naegi said had startled her, but it was nothing in the grand scheme of things. The dead couldn’t complain. It was better for him to aim those twisted sentiments toward them than the living.

Outside the kitchen was a wide foyer and extending from that was the grand staircase that led to the entertainment area. This area would have been brightly lit in the ship’s heyday, but now the unmaintained lights and plentiful dust cast a dull haze. Such was the nature of this vessel, worn and weary, its parts rusting or stripped for more battleworthy ships. Some (Togami) might call it ugly; others, haunted. Kirigiri found it quaint. It reminded her of weathered castles and secret rooms, making it very worthy to carry their biggest secret – and everyone knew it. Asahina, in the week before the great rescue, had joked they should name it after Naegi. It did seem appropriate; Naegi was the only reason they had procured this boat.

Not that she could agree aloud, however. Give an inch and Asahina would hunt him down so they could christen the bow. That, it seemed, was Naegi’s real talent: his ability to cultivate loyalty. She had seen it before the Tragedy, she had seen it afterwards. Whether it be due to his optimism or genuine affection for everyone, it didn’t matter, but his gravitational pull tugged at all and rarely allowed escape. She, herself, was not immune, and with no resent, she recognized that her class were caught within the vortex. Even Ultimate Despair, those with the most reason to loathe him, demonstrated an unmistakable devotion to him. It was one of his best traits, the key pillar in what made Naegi himself.

It was also what made him dangerous.

Given that festering loyalty, it didn’t surprise her in the least that Asahina and Komaru were milling around suspiciously close to the kitchen door. Fukawa wasn’t a surprise either since Komaru was here. The three locked onto her as she approached, like lionesses tracking a limping calf.

“. . . Are you two g-going to ask her or not?” Fukawa stuttered, glaring between Asahina and Komaru. “Ugh, I get it. I’m the only one worthy of the dirty work, right? So, you two had an awful lot of private time, what’s the deal?”

“He’s changed,” Kirigiri said simply. The silence that followed explained all.

“Is he okay?” Komaru whispered.

“No.”

Komaru turned away. Her hands were up against her mouth, as if holding in her heart. What had she expected? They should have all known by now that Naegi wasn’t safe. He’d been the toy of Ultimate Despair for months and like wild animals, they had shredded any part he left exposed.

“You didn’t have to put it that way!” Asahina complained. It was a knife in the ear after the soft tones the rest of them had used.

“I’m not going to sugar-coat this,” Kirigiri said, arms crossing over her chest. “If you were a doctor, you would want the patient to list all their symptoms, not just the ones they feel like mentioning.”
“You make it sound like he’s broken,” Asahina said. “He’ll be fine. He just needs more fat on his bones. That’s why I said you should have given him donuts!”

“I don’t think he’d eat them,” Kirigiri said. “I suspect his palate’s been ruined by the Ultimate Chef.”

“You mean. . .” Asahina raised her knuckles to her mouth, looking as through she was about to gnaw on them. “The Ultimate Chef made him ultimate donuts?!?!?”

“It’s possible.” Kirigiri turned to Fukawa, the only one of the three she could trust to listen. “Give him space. Don’t approach him. I need more time to evaluate what we’re dealing with.”

“You want us to avoid him?” Komaru asked. “He’s not stupid. He’s going to notice and he’s always hated getting the silent treatment from you.”

“Must I remind you that was a life or death situation we were in? There wasn’t time to bother with pleasantries. . .”

Wait, Komaru couldn’t be talking about her freezing him out after he found out about Oogami. Komaru had been imprisoned while the Killing Game had been active. She hadn’t seen that. The only possibility was that Komaru was referring to before, to the years she couldn’t fully remember. Yes, Komaru hadn’t lost her memories. Komaru remembered, knew too much. Komaru might even know things about herself that she couldn’t remember.

Komaru said, “This isn’t about being nice, it’s about him. Which, okay, has a lot to do with being nice, but Makoto’s hurt and you don’t separate family when someone’s hurt. I should be the only one who gets to ban people from seeing him!”

Given the ages of everyone on this ship, sometimes she overlooked how young Komaru was. Until she did things like this, then it became impossible to forget.

“And yet, you’re the only one who’s made him go completely off the rails,” she said. “Or did he convince you that a detour to the cargo hold was a good idea?”

“That’s not my fault!” Komaru cried. “I didn’t know he was going to do that. No one warned me.”

“That’s the point. No one should have to. I can’t be there every second to tell you what you can and cannot say.”

Komaru flinched.

“Kiri. . .” Even though Asahina’s tone was soft, Kirigiri recognized the warning note in it. She took a deep breath and pulled back her claws.

“He needs more time to adjust,” she said to all and none of them. “Then some of this behaviour may subside. I’ll be back soon. If you want to be useful, make sure he doesn’t leave, but remember what I told you.”

She hoped that would be enough to ward Komaru away from her brother. If Hope’s Peak had taught her anything though, it was that Naegis were stubborn stock who loved nothing more than messing up perfectly crafted plans. Just to be sure, she gave a farewell node to Fukawa, lacing it with a message to keep her best friend under control.

Her next destination was a very high place: the bridge to be exact. This was no ancient boat, but one made in modern times, flicking with electronics and screens. Alter Ego hummed merrily on the main screen, his swaying face imposed upon the radar, shimmering whenever a radio wave passed over
him. Her target, Kamukura, was there, too, staring out a window onto the deck. When the door shut
behind her, he sighed.

“What did Naegi say?” Kamukura asked.

“Don’t. You’re not asking questions. What did you do to him?” she demanded.

“Unless it was necessary, I left Naegi to his own devices,” Kamukura said. “Nothing I did
traumatized him.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Nothing you did.”

“Oh, obviously,” he drawled. “Most of your rage should be directed at Komaeda Nagito and Kuzuryu
Fuyuhiko, although the latter would be inconvenient, wouldn’t it?”

She ignored that shot at her plans. “You allowed it.”

“I was present, yes. I am aware of my sins.” Kamukura turned. The window behind him was closed,
yet, somehow, his hair fluttered in a breeze. “You seek answers.”

“Yes.” Her weight shifted. Her body began to tilt to one side, toward the wall to lean –

“Don’t get comfortable.”

“. . . Is this a joke? You asked us for help. Providing help has a requirement of telling me what the
situation is.”

“I may not be able to read Naegi, but I can read you,” Kamukura said.

“I’m not difficult to read right now,” Kirigiri said. “I’m frustrated, and I’m going to be very angry if
you keep dragging this out.”

“I see,” Kamukura said, as if it were a truly remarkable discovery.

“. . . And?”

“And what?”

What was he doing? She didn’t know much about Kamukura, but he really didn’t seem like the type
to do this. At least, she didn’t think he was. She honestly knew nothing about him, never mind how
he thought.

“You’re not stupid,” she said. “Why are you giving me the runaround?”

“I’m pushing you,” he said blandly.

He was . . . what? Did someone put him up to this? No, that wouldn’t be right. Kamukura wouldn’t
let someone tell him what to do. But what was this angle? There had to be some end goal to this.

“Are you out of your mind?” she demanded.

“You detectives see so much, and yet can be so blind,” Kamukura mused. “You should cast your
gaze closer to home; a broken hammer may cause more damage than it repairs.”

“. . . What?”
“It’s not time,” Kamukura said. “Not now.”

“Fuck you, too.”

That tactic might have worked on the others, but Kamukura wasn’t full of it when he said he could read her intentions. The lift to his eyebrow said so, and what was infuriating was that he obviously wanted her to know that he knew.

This entire thing was a waste of time. Kirigiri turned to leave, but then Alter Ego let out a little beep, the computer equivalent of a cough to garner attention. The smiling avatar’s head rocked back and forth when she looked, like a waving hand.

“Um, I’m sorry if I’m interrupting,” Alter Ego said, “but is Naegi-kun awake?”

“He is. I apologize for not informing you earlier. He had an incident when he woke up and in the turmoil, we overlooked you. Although I’m surprised you haven’t seen him on your cameras.”

“Oh, I haven’t been using them,” Alter Ego said merrily. “It feels like spying.”

She nodded. “I understand. However, do feel free to check on the Remnants. I would feel better if I knew someone was keeping an eye on them.”

“If you want me to. . .” Alter Ego said. His head no longer rocked as he simulated an armless salute. “Um, Mr. Kamukura, I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t count as a Remnant,” Kamukura said.

“Okay. I’ll update my definitions!”

“I’ll talk to you later about the security on this ship,” she told Alter Ego as she turned the doorknob. There were indeed things they needed to discuss, mostly revolving around the Remnants and Naegi, but she’d wait until Kamukura was gone. As he’d again proven today, she couldn’t trust Kamukura.

Hagakure was there when she opened the door, cowering and looking behind him like he knew a tiger prowled nearby. He jumped when he saw her, then smiled too widely and sidled toward her.

“Hey, Kirigiri-chan! You look busy. Where are you off to?”

“What do you want?” she asked, walking away.

He hurried after her. “Uh, nothing. Just thought I’d stick close, you know. Cause. . . uh. . . they’re all awake.”

That made her stop walking. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. So, it was time. She had known it was approaching. Considering that the two remnants that had woken first had left an impressive mark on Togami’s neck, she hadn’t been looking forward to the rest.

“‘Yes, for once. He’s right: the Remnants are awake. I would have told you earlier if you had been around.” Togami approached them, hands clasped behind his back, glasses gleaming with a glint that said he was feeling particularly vindictive, although she didn’t know what he had to feel vindictive about. “I suppose continuing your affair was too alluring. What were you two doing?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said.

“Didn’t get the information you wanted, hmm?” Togami said, scoffing as if he would have stood a chance. “Are you afraid? Naegi may be a little unhinged and an idiot,” (His fingers twitched, as if
aching to touch the bruise on his neck) “But I certainly see no reason to fear him. What would he do: try to hug me to death?”

“Sounds like he just needs some time to chill with his pals,” Hagakure said. “I guess that would be scary to you two, since you don’t like other people that much.”

“Please don’t put words in my mouth,” she said. “Insanity is difficult to handle.”

“I hope you’re not looking to me for advice,” Togami said. “Do I look like someone who rubs shoulders with lunatics?”

She smirked. “Genocider likes you, doesn’t she?”

Togami shuddered.

“What about you?” she asked Hagakure.

“Me?” Hagakure pointed at himself. “Why would you think I’m friends with crazy people?”

. . . She wasn’t going to say anything.

“Though now that I think about it, sometimes when I’m advertising on the streets, I run into the crazies. Seriously, what is it with those people and thinking they’re Jesus? Usually, I just play along with them. Arguing just kinds of pisses them off.”

“You expect me to play along with whatever sick delusions are in that muddled head of his?” Togami said. “Ridiculous . . . What is his delusion?”

“He believes his hope is destined to save the world.” She managed to say that without any sarcasm.

“Hmph. That is less crazy than I expected. If he’s been swallowing the official propaganda like the rest of those fools, he’s simply taking that message the logical extreme.” Togami stroked his chin. She could see him chewing on the thought, teasing out its different flavours.

“Is everyone awake?” she asked Hagakure.

“The Imposter guy’s still sleeping,” Hagakure answered. “I think Owari is awake, but she’s pretty out of it.”

Understandable. Despite being among the hard hitters of their team, those two had the weakest bodies. The Imposter, she expected, would recover; and if he again started refusing to eat, dangling Naegi in front of him would likely change that. Owari would be a completely different monster.

“You can continue to follow me if you’d like,” she told Hagakure, “but I’m going to speak to Kuzuryu Fuyihiko.”

“The crazy kid who was in charge of the Yakuza before he started killing everyone?” Hagakure flailed his arms. “Kirigiri-chi, don’t do it! He’ll try to cut out your organs and sell them on the black market.”

“That’s an awfully specific threat,” she said pointedly.

“Heh. . . I may have owed him some money once.”

“Are we done here? I need to leave.”
“If that’s what you want. You’re welcome to mingle with those gutter rats,” Togami sneered, “but I have better things to do with my time. Hagakure, come. I need someone to carry things.”

“M-me? But . . .” Hagakure protested.

“Would you rather have a tea party with Ultimate Despair.”

“. . . Togami-kins! Wait up, won’t you?” And they were gone. Thank goodness.

She travelled to the cargo storage, descending to the bottom floor where Kuzuryu was being held. It was unfortunate that they all had to be held in the same general area. Housing them in completely different areas of the ship would have been ideal, but it also would make it nigh impossible to keep Naegi away from them. (Despite anything he may say, she knew he would break eventually and try to reach them.) At least they’d managed to isolate groups.

As promised, Kuzuryu was awake. He leaned back against his cage’s wall, dressed in a full suit and hat, sucking on the end of a cigar that he had no lighter for. When he saw her, his jaw jumped and the cigar jerked suddenly. As if it had been lit, he blew on the cigar before carelessly tossing it to the side. The cigar rolled across the metal floor, slipped between the bars and found its way into the neighbouring cage, where it stopped against Pekoyama’s foot. The woman stood at the forefront of her cage, waiting as if she had known Kirigiri was coming.

“Look who’s decided to finally show up,” Kuzuryu growled. “Last time I checked, we had a deal. We were supposed to be allies. So, you mind telling us why we’re in these fucking cages?”

“I agreed we would be treating all members of Ultimate Despair. That includes you two,” Kirigiri said.

His gait reminded her of a raptor: hungry and proud, the tap of his heel against the metal like a claw. He did not have the reptilian eyes, nor the glowing red eyes like his bodyguard did, but he did have that eyepatch. The milky white swirl sewed into the dark fabric made it impossible to overlook.

“Let’s pretend I think you have a point,” Kuzuryu said. “There’s still something you need to get through your thick skull: there is, and was not, anything wrong with Peko. Understand, fucker?”

“I know.” Before Kuzuryu could yell at her, Kirigiri turned to Pekoyama. “Pekoyama-san, if Kuzuryu-kun told you to kill me, would you?”

“Of course,” Pekoyama said proudly.

Kirigiri stared at Kuzuryu.

“Peko, you were supposed to lie,” Kuzuryu lamented.

“Surely, now you understand my situation.” This was not how she wanted the conversation to go. At this rate, Kuzuryu would plot to kill her during her sleep. “It is unfortunate, but the deal was sincere. We are trying to help you. To help all of you. We don’t need to be enemies.”

She watched him closely, waiting for a signal as to which way he was leaning. It was a true shame that it had to be Kuzuryu whom she dealt with. Nevermind, her memories told her, was more reasonable than her criminal, manhood-obsessed counterpart. A counterpart with whom she had shared a mutual hatred with in school, as well. Nevertheless, having one of Ultimate Despair’s leaders in her camp would go a long way to keeping the others under control, and Nevermind was still in despair and thus, not an option.
“. . . So, it’s me, huh?” Kuzuryu finally said. Two of his fingers rubbed together, as if twirling an imaginary cigar. “I’m the weak link. If I was out of the picture, you’d have no reason . . . Peko!”

Pekoyama blinked in surprise. “Yes, Young Master?”

“Don’t come back here.”

“Pardon?”

“When you get out of that cage, don’t come back down. Leave me here,” he barked. He glared into Kirigiri’s eyes. “There. You don’t got a reason to keep her locked up anymore.”

Kirigiri scowled. “That isn’t your decision.”

He grabbed the bars. Fit his face between them. “You say you’re serious about wanting to treat us? Well, she doesn’t need treatment.”

“I said I wasn’t willing to release a potential threat,” she countered. “Pekoyama-san never needed despair to commit murder.”

His spit landed on the tip of her boot, glistening in the dim light.

“You’re a fucking hypocrite,” he growled. “You think your friends are spotless? You were happy to cozy up with that mercenary in your class while you were lecturing us about what a crime murder was. You and Togami are goddamn pals – you think his hands are clean? Some of our hits were carried out on his family’s request! You knew about a goddamn serial killer in your class, and you didn’t turn her in because she promised not to kill anymore. What makes Peko worse?”

“Don’t try to say you’re in a place of moral superiority,” she snapped. “I didn’t end the world.”

“That’s not the fucking point!” He didn’t spit at her purposely; the spittle hitting her cheek was a result of his rage. “You’ve had it out for us since the day you heard about my talent. You solved all those trials in a few hours and yet when my sister died, you said nothing for days! You didn’t talk until that murdering bitch showed up dead, and then the only fucking thing you cared about was pinning it on us! Now, you want to be pals? Where’s the olive branch, Kirigiri?”

Swearing at Kamukura before had been a last ploy. This time, although it was in her head, it was completely emotional.

The key’s handle bent under the pressure as she wrenched it in the keyhole. She barked at Pekoyama, “Get out!”

Pekoyama stepped back. “I will not go with you.”

“You fucking will!” Kuzuryu shouted. “I’m in a fucking cage. What do I need you for? To polish the floor with your spit? I told you to go. Get the fuck out of here!”

Literally everyone who knew Kuzuryu had tasted his anger. Like Owada, this uncouth behaviour was simply the foundation of his personality. Yet what she was seeing here felt foreign. Even Pekoyama didn’t seem familiar with this, and something like hurt flashed across her face.

“If that is your desire,” Pekoyama choked out.

“Go.” Kuzuryu said. He turned away and no matter how long they waited, he didn’t turn around again.
She kept her hand on Pekoyama’s shoulder and marched her through the cargo hold like any other prisoner. By unsaid agreement, they were silent while they within possible earshot of the Remnants.

“What happened?” Pekoyama finally asked.

“What do you mean?” She didn’t mean for her voice to be so tight. She hadn’t realized her jaw was still locked.

“What he said was correct,” she said. “He’s right about you. So, why are you coming to us for cooperation?”

“A detective explores all options,” she said vaguely.

Pekoyama was silent for a little more. “Tsumiki-san would be the one to speak to. Apart from Komaeda-kun, Naegi-kun spent the most time with her. Unlike Komaeda-kun though, Tsumiki-san wasn’t blind to his torment. However, if you do speak to her, be warned: she strongly dislikes you.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know I’m late. But I was doing some Real Life stuff.

Next Chapter:
Someone asked for a Tsumiki/Kirigiri confrontation?
Tsumiki Mikan. Kirigiri had never known her well. Neither of them had social personalities, and Tsumiki had rarely spoken to those outside her class or the nurse’s office. Kirigiri, of course, had rarely frequented that place; treating her own injuries was a crucial part of ensuring her activities remained confidential. At most, they had exchanged greetings when she picked someone else up from the nurse’s office. While those memories were old and hazy, she had the distinct impression of dismissing Tsumiki as a threat after a glance. If she remembered correctly, not even Naegi had known the Ultimate Nurse well while they were at school.

How the times had changed. Granted, Tsumiki was still far from a physical threat. No, the danger she presented was in the form of medical experiments and poisons; scenarios that were mostly dangerous when one was already restrained. At least, that was the Future Foundation’s assessment. If despair had somehow made Tsumiki into a wildcat, then none of them had noticed.

She had another’s assessment, as well. Kamukura pointed to Tsumiki as the most tamed member of Ultimate Despair. She didn’t quite know what that meant, but she had seen the greyish hues to her eyes, not the blazing red most of her classmates carried. And if there must be only one person Naegi had a significant effect on, it wouldn’t surprise her that the person was Tsumiki. Naegi, experience taught her, had an inherent urge to pursue the quiet and withdrawn.

Regardless of their assessments, she couldn’t drop her guard. Tsumiki had a slim, wiry body. With the right burst of energy and timing, that could become deadly in a flash. Plus, there was the looming presence of Pekoyama. She was allegedly different than her fellow classmates, having never fallen into despair. . . That only made her more horrendous. Kirigiri didn’t understand how Class 77th had been twisted into monsters, but she remembered most of them had been good people to begin with. Pekoyama, though? Pekoyama was a murderer. Someone who had assisted in creating this world for no benefit to herself. There was no good person hiding inside Enoshima’s puppet.

She kept Pekoyama in front of her. She had stripped Pekoyama of her weapons, but she knew it wasn’t enough. Those killer instincts slept deep within her bones. Thus, as they neared the area Tsumiki was being held in, she went over her options. Allow Pekoyama to accompany her and risk that this was a setup; send Pekoyama away and risk an ambush later; leave Pekoyama with another and risk signing their death warrant. She still hadn’t decided how to explain this to the others, either.

Her decision made, she spoke without facing Pekoyama. “I need your hand.”

Puzzled, Pekoyama offered it. Kirigiri grabbed it, and then immediately snapped on the handcuffs.

“What are you doing?” Instinctively, Pekoyama yanked her arm away, but Kirigiri was holding onto the handcuff’s other end and that kept them close.

“Taking precautions.” Without further ado, she snapped the other end around the struct of a metal cabinet. “I can’t imagine why you would think that I trust you.”

Pekoyama stopped struggling and stared at her. It was a cold, calculating gaze; a predator watching the herd for a limp. It reminded her of a classmate long dead.

Pekoyama said, “You would be a fool to.”
Abruptly, she remembered there were no laws here. No police, or prisons except the ones she and her classmates could build themselves.

“I’m glad you agree,” Kirigiri said, and then she left Pekoyama behind.

As the most ‘tamed,’ Tsumiki was being held with Nevermind Sonia, the most dangerous Despair. It was akin to how Owari and Nidai were being kept together, the hope being that if Owari broke out, Nidai might see it fit to stop her. Both women were sitting against the wall closest to the other’s cage. Tsumiki was in her usual garb, but Nevermind had shed the dress, exchanging it for something similar to her old school uniform, which would be more comfortable in her current situation.

Nevermind saw Kirigiri first and scarcely reacted, as though a little birdie had whispered into her ear that company was imminent. It was all show, though. Royal conduct prevented her from lashing out, even if Nevermind was no longer a queen. Tsumiki, on the other hand, squeaked and leapt to her feet. Halfway through a hasty bow, she froze. She saw just who approached her cage. Kirigiri swore Tsumiki’s spine creaked as the nurse straightened. The nurse’s fingers dug into the hem of her skirt.

“Hello,” Kirigiri said. How else could she begin this? With a: ‘Sorry we’re keeping you prisoner?’

Tsumiki’s neck twitched, making her head bob oddly as she bounced between a need to answer, and a need to ignore her.

“Kirigiri Kyoko.” While she had been distracted with Tsumiki, Nevermind had risen. With her mismatched hands clasped in front of her, Nevermind walked forward with careful steps, like she was wearing heels and a trailing gown. “Oh, yes. I believe you’re in need of an introduction.”

“I’m not,” Kirigiri said. “I’ve met you two before.”

“So, you remember?” Nevermind asked, smiling pleasantly.

“Not everything, but we’ve recovered enough of our memories to understand the big picture,” Kirigiri answered.

“Does Naegi-kun remember?”

Tsumiki gasped. Kirigiri ignored her, and then delivered the message Nevermind wanted to her. “No. Those facilities are unavailable to us.”

“I see,” was what Nevermind said, but they both knew she wanted to say ‘Excellent.’ “Shall we sit? I’d offer you refreshments, but I’m afraid the circumstances don’t allow it.”

What was this? Habit? Mockery? An attempt to get into her head? Was there really a need for Nevermind to pretend nothing had changed? While Kirigiri did want to know the answer, she also knew it wasn’t important.

“I’m not here to speak with you,” Kirigiri said to Nevermind’s frown.

“Um, I don’t want to speak to you!” Tsumiki stamped her foot like a petulant child.

Kirigiri cocked her head and then went for the throat. “Not even about Naegi-kun?”

That got attention. Tsumiki went rigid, nostrils flaring as if Kirigiri had suggested flaying him.

“It’s strange,” Nevermind said. She spoke distantly, as if planning a party for the future. “I can’t imagine Naegi-kun standing by while his friends were imprisoned.”
She knew what Nevermind was trying to suggest to Tsumiki, and sure enough, Tsumiki teared up and clenched her teeth.

“He’s fine,” Kirigiri said before Tsumiki erupted. “It may be difficult to imagine, but we do care about his health. Both physical and mental.”

Nevermind’s pupils narrowed as she registered the insult. Tsumiki didn’t seem to understand, however.

“Um, d-did he ask about me?” Tsumiki asked. She nervously twirled a strand of hair around her finger.

It was tempting to say no, to drive a wedge between them. But if Naegi found out, he wouldn’t forgive her. Besides, someone would call it out as being out of character.

“He asks about everyone,” Kirigiri answered.

Tsumiki wrung her hands together. Then she burst into tears.

Kirigiri stumbled back. What? What did she do? All she did was admit that Naegi had been asking about them. How was that upsetting? Wasn’t Tsumiki supposed to be happy?

As it turned out, she was. Tsumiki wiped her eyes, smiling. Her words came out in a gush. “He’s so wonderful. To think that Naegi-kun asks about me. . . Wah! How can he be so kind to someone like me?”

Oh. So, that was it. And to think that Fukawa had accused Komaru of being a baby. She kept her thoughts to herself though and waited for the fit to subside. She could handle this. She may not like dealing with it, but dealing with emotional conversational partners was one of the requirements of being a detective.

When the sobs began to subside, Kirigiri said, “Good. So, we both care about him. In that case, it is imperative that you share Naegi’s medical information with me.”

Unfortunately, it appeared that command pointed Tsumiki toward her responsibilities, specifically the decree of medical confidentiality. She could already see it happening: Tsumiki’s face glazing over, her arms rigid at her sides, ready to do what was normally impossible for her and stand her ground. Great, just great.

“. . . Is he eating?” Tsumiki whispered.

“What do you mean by that?” Kirigiri asked because she had recently seen Naegi eat, and there hadn’t been any problems.

“He’s on a diet,” Tsumiki murmured.

The conversation screeched to a halt. A diet? Kirigiri remembered Naegi’s sunken cheeks and knobby elbows. Tsumiki had to be joking. There was no possible reason that Naegi needed to lose weight. Not unless they were trying to very slowly starve him to death.

“You really are trying to kill him,” she scoffed. Rage bubbled under her calm exterior. Kamukura had lied to her.

But before she acted hastily, Tsumiki – who apparently hadn’t been paying attention to her last sentence – murmured. “He doesn’t like to eat. He won’t eat unless you’re watching him. Hanamura-
kun kept track of his meals, so he’d get the proper nutrition. Oh, n-no! What if he’s starving? What if he’s not getting enough vitamins?”

With that, Tsumiki began to wail again.

“What other medical issues should I be aware of?” Kirigiri asked.

“H-he’s healthy,” Tsumiki insisted. “He wasn’t sick. Is he s-sick now? I don’t know. You won’t let me see him.”

Suddenly, Tsumiki was up against the bars. Her forehead lay against one of them, blocking half her face so Kirigiri could only see one eye. Thick strands of black hair fell upon her face like slash marks. Kirigiri checked; the eyes were grey and demonstrated no signs of reversion. This. . . she had the creeping suspicion that this wasn’t about Enoshima’s curse, but some darkness inherent to Tsumiki herself.

“Perhaps your country works differently, but I was not aware that it was normal for the authorities to make so many unfounded accusations,” Nevermind said.

“Then you should have done more reading,” she said briskly, in no mood to be playing these games. “You may say he wasn’t sick, but a healthy person doesn’t refuse to eat. What of his mental condition?”

Tsumiki jumped. “E-eh?”

“Confused? I suppose you aren’t a psychiatrist. Let’s start with something simpler: what are his triggers?”

“He. . . He doesn’t have any!” Eyes tightly closed, Tsumiki turned her body away. Her arms wrapped tightly around herself. “He’s fine! I took care of him. Nothing’s wrong with him!”

Oh? Interesting word choice, there. Perhaps that left her an opening. Kirigiri said, “I know you did. That’s why I’m asking you. I’m asking you what they did to him.”

Immediately, Nevermind coughed. “Naegi-kun was our dear friend. We wish nothing but the best for him.”

Perhaps it had been a mistake to room these two together. Kirigiri couldn’t have been sure what Tsumiki would have said if Nevermind hadn’t interceded, but what she did know was that Nevermind’s interjection had caused Tsumiki to close off. It was frustrating. She felt so close to discovering what she needed.

“This is for him. This is for his protection,” Kirigiri hissed. “You must know something. Think. Think of a time he panicked, and you couldn’t discern why. Think of an irrational hatred he developed that you don’t understand. It is impossible that you’ve spent all this time with him and saw nothing.”

Yet, Tsumiki refused to crack. Kirigiri gave Nevermind one last look (one that promised retribution), and then made to leave.

“H-his hoodie.”

“What about it?” Kirigiri had certainly noticed Naegi’s lack of his signature hoodie, but he hadn’t been wearing any of his own clothes when they recovered him. She had assumed it had been lost to wear, or it was being washed. Or that Ultimate Despair had burned it after they got their hands on
“I thought it was cute on him,” Tsumiki mumbled. “He won’t wear it anymore. He says it smells like death.”

What? That was weird. Death certainly did have a smell, but Naegi shouldn’t know it. They had seen corpses together, but those hadn’t been left long enough to decay. Unless Naegi was mistaking the scent of blood for death, he shouldn’t know.

This wasn’t good.

“Are you saying he came across dead bodies while in your care?” she asked.

“We have servants to take care of that,” Nevermind said dismissively, as if corpses were nothing more than unsightly piles of trash. “Although there was the bear . . .”

“A bear? Are you referring to Monokuma?”

“No. His pet bear.”

Her eye twitched. “He had a pet bear.”

“Tanaka-kun brought it for him,” Tsumiki said. “Makoto was lonely, so Tanaka-kun got him a friend.”

It sounded crazy, but she remembered Owada-kun mentioning that Naegi’s favourite animals were bears. Plus, a bear cub was rather cute. She could see Naegi going gaga over one.

“I’m surprised he was able to take care of it,” Kirigiri said. “Young animals need a lot of attention and care.”

“Oh, Kuma wasn’t young,” Tsumiki said.

“. . . You gave him an adult bear?”

“Yes! Tanaka-kun said it was a grizzly bear.”

. . . Her eye was twitching.

“Right. What were you saying about the bear before?”

“While Naegi-kun was outside, some of your Future Foundation friends tried their luck.” Nevermind smiled sweetly. Kirigiri didn’t react. Let them think they had the Future Foundation’s support; it was better that way. “Unfortunately – I suppose it’s fortunate for us – Kuma got in the way. The poor beast bled out in a few minutes.”

“And this occurred in front of Naegi-kun?” That wasn’t too bad. It was just a bear. If it was full-grown too, it would have produced enough blood that it was understandable that Naegi was scarred by the event.

“But he was scared of his hoodie before Kuma died,” Tsumiki said.

Nevermind rubbed her chin. “Perhaps it was that assassin the bear attacked? Although I thought Kuzuruyu-kun had waited until Naegi-kun was out of sight. . .”

“He had assassins after him?” Of the two stories, this was the more believable one. She had her
memories of their school days and yes, Naegi actually was that unlucky.

“Not quite,” Nevermind said at the same time as Tsumiki nodded furiously and shouted, “Yes!”

Kirigiri looked between the two of them.

“I’m sorry!” Tsumiki wailed. “I didn’t mean to contradict you, but you weren’t there when... when that nasty Future Foundation tried to kill him. They blew up his room!”

“What is this?” Kirigiri demanded. Did Munakata know? She had a hard time believing it after he had ordered her imprisoned so she couldn’t get in the way of him reaching Naegi.

“They were pretending to rescue him,” Tsumiki said. “They attacked us, but they were lying. They wanted to kill him! Some of them snuck in and they... they tried to...”

She covered her face and cried. Kirigiri closed her eyes. So, that was why. This was why Naegi was so hostile towards the Future Foundation. She had thought Naegi simply didn’t know any better, that Ultimate Despair had gotten to him first and poisoned him against them. No, Naegi had legitimate reasons to fear them. She’d have to get this resolved quickly then, and make sure he knew they were not on the Future Foundation’s side.

Kirigiri blinked. “Wait. Weren’t we talking about Naegi-kun seeing people die?”

Tsumiki nodded. “Kuzuryu-kun captured three of those terrible people...”

With a grimace, Kirigiri turned away. She knew where this was going. Idiots. Anyone who had spent an hour with Naegi would know he wouldn’t have wanted that.

“So, you did traumatize him. Once again, I see my assumptions are accurate.”

“You tried to kill him!” Tsumiki shouted.

“I assure you, I had no idea what the Future Foundation was planning. Bringing harm to him has never been on my agenda.”

“Why should we believe the words of a liar?” Nevermind asked.

“You believe Tsumiki-san, don’t you? Last I checked, I didn’t take you down alone,” Kirigiri said. Maybe this would drive a wedge between the two so they weren’t so chummy.

“You’ve always been clever with words,” Nevermind said. “Do you feel any remorse for taking advantage of someone as gullible as dear Tsumiki-san.”

So much for that. She ignored Tsumiki’s sobbed apologies.

“So, the Future Foundation has attempted to murder him at least twice, and Kuzuryu-kun tortured some of those would-be assassins in front of him. What else? Given this nonsense he’s spewing about hope, that can’t possibly be it... What?”

When she had said ‘hope,’ both had flinched. Nevermind recovered first, smoothing out her skirt as a last shudder ran up her spine.

“Forgive me, but that word is bothersome. It was difficult to handle Komaeda-kun alone before, but... I have grown so tried of that word,” Nevermind said.

Komaeda. Like most students, Kirigiri had gone out of her way to avoid him. But she had heard the
rumours and dealt with the fallout of some of his targets. What Naegi had said earlier did sound similar to what she knew of Komaeda. Naegi was alarmingly obsessed with Komaeda as well, just as... just as Ultimate Despair was obsessed with Enoshima.

Her skin crawled. What exactly was Naegi doing right now, now that he was alone and knew where Komaeda was? She suddenly regretted removing that lock from his door. Kamukura had told her it wouldn’t matter, but she thought it would have relieved him to realize he wouldn’t be locked away anymore. But maybe that was exactly what he needed to be.

“Komaeda-kun bullied him,” Tsumiki muttered. “He tried to make me help him.”

“And you refused? Wonderful. I am aware of how tenacious Komaeda-kun can be. I’m very proud of you,” Nevermind said.

“Is there anything else I should know?” Kirigiri interrupted. A muscle in her leg jumped, eager to be going.

“... Can you tell him I miss him?” Tsumiki said.

“Fine,” Kirigiri answered, not certain whether she was lying. “Expect me to return.”

She marched away, intent on locating Naegi before disaster struck. So intent on that was she, that she almost forgot Pekoyama and left her handcuffed to the cabinet. In fact, if Pekoyama hadn’t banged on the metal, Kirigiri would have left her there.

“Don’t go ahead of me,” Kirigiri told her. “I still need to convince the others not to throw you off the deck.”

Pekoyama mumbled, “They can try.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Pekoyama meets the others.
He was ready to ambush the prey. That was the distinct predatory feeling Togami had as he observed Naegi from the back. It almost made his mouth water, as if he were about to swindle a potential future into signing a crippling contract. He had to admit, he thought cornering Naegi would be harder given Kirigiri’s alleged territorial claim over him. Yet here he was, alone and defenseless. Lucky for Naegi though, a top predator like him wasn’t interested in consuming something made only of skin and bones. Naegi had a different role.

Naegi was idling rolling a blueberry on his fork. His fingers drummed on the tabletop nervously. Togami coughed, and Naegi whirled around in his seat, face lighting up. Good, good. That was exactly how a Togami should be greeted. He had been concerned that living with Ultimate Despair would have taught him some uncouth manners, but it appeared Naegi was even more polite than he had been before.

“You can relax,” Togami said. “You are one of the fortunate that have permission to speak to me.”

“Togami-kun, h-hi!” Naegi bounced eagerly, ready to jump to his feet. “Are you here to eat with me?”

“I ate earlier,” he said dismissively. “I came to see how you were faring.”

“. . .Really? You did?” Naegi looked around as if checking for a television crew.

It took more walking then he was pleased with (if he ever met the designers of this ship, he would file an official complaint), but he walked around the table and took a seat across from Naegi. Now, if Naegi would move that plate out of the way, he could pretend he was sitting at his office desk and this was a real business meeting.

“I imagine it’s hard to believe, but I have decided that you could potentially be an asset to the Togami Corporation. Despite the setbacks my family has experienced, I still breathe, which means the Togami Corporation still stands. This is merely a chance to start from the ground-up and build a grander empire.”

“Like a phoenix from the ashes,” Naegi said, nodding. “To take the despair Enoshima spread and reform it into something bright and glorious. I understand. I understand completely.”

“Good. I thought I would have to break this down into little pieces. Because you have agreed to follow me, you must now inform me of what steps you have already taken to reclaim this world.”

“. . .What?” Naegi stared at him. Togami glared back, until Naegi was pressured into answering. “Uh, I’m spreading Hope. Did no one tell you about what I did with the Remnants? I’m . . .”

“I know all about your activities,” Togami said. “Tell me what Kirigiri is planning with Kamukura.”

Naegi put his fork down. “They’re planning to help the Despairs. You should know that. You did put them in cages.”

The bruise on his neck throbbed. “And clearly, it wasn’t enough. But that can’t be all. What would he get out of it? There’s some angle that they haven’t told us.”
“If there is, I’m not aware of it,” Naegi said. “Why would I be? Kamukura-kun’s . . . himself, and you know how much Kirigiri-san kept from us in school.”

All true. Perhaps Naegi didn’t have as much of Kirigiri’s confidence as he has assumed. If Naegi truly didn’t know what Kirigiri and her new partner was up to, then there almost certainly was a nefarious plot at hand! Yes, that was why she wasn’t telling him anything, because she feared he would interceded.

“I knew it,” he said lowly to himself. “Naegi, keep your ears open. You will report all suspicious activity to me.”

Naegi raised his hand. “What you said there was pretty suspicious.”

“Suspicious activity from her, you dolt!”

Naegi had the gall to argue with him and thus, when the intrusion came, he was almost grateful. Almost, because of whom the intruder was. A tall, slim woman stood in the same doorway. The black and white hues she wore only made those red eyes stand out all the brighter. Togami leapt to his feet, reaching for a gun at his belt that wasn’t there.

“How did you get out?” Togami demanded. There was a knife by Naegi’s plate. He could use that.

Pekoyama Peko, the blood-soaked sword of Ultimate Despair, just stood there, statue-like. Typical of an assassin. Togami knew plenty about how they worked. If she hadn’t shot him yet, then she was hoping he would run and she could put a knife in his back. Or she was distracting . . . Kirigiri? She had just appeared behind Pekoyama. Perhaps Kirigiri had been in pursuit of the rogue Despair this entire time.

“What do you want?” Togami demanded of Pekoyama. He kept one eye on Kirigiri to see her next move.

It was a good thing he did, because the next thing Pekoyama said was, “She led me here.”

“I’m sorry. If I had known he was in here, I would have asked you wait in the hall,” Kirigiri said to Pekoyama. “Togami-kun, please calm down.”

“There is a mass murderer standing not ten metres away, and you’re asking me to calm down?” He was not hysterical. Of course not. He was nowhere near that. The Togami family did not do hysterical. “They were locked up for a reason!”

“Believe me, I know. As much I loathe admitting it, however, Kuzuryu-kun is their leader. He can control them. We need his cooperation.”

“And this was his price,” Togami said in a monotone. “Freeing his personal assassin to walk among us.”

“I understand your concern,” Pekoyama said quietly. “I do not understand why he did this either. It should be him standing in my place.”

He wasn’t going to fall for that nonsense. He would have told her that, too, only Naegi distracted them all by merely standing.

“Pekoyama-san?”

There was a table between him and the idiot, which was why Togami couldn’t just reach over and
stop Naegi from toddling to Pekoyama like a newborn penguin. Thankfully, Kirigiri hadn’t taken leave of all her senses, and she strode forward and stopped him where he could not. She clamped down on his wrist with a firm yank whose command couldn’t be misinterpreted. Pekoyama immediately reached toward her waist and shifted her weight forward, about to charge.

“Now is not the time,” Kirigiri said to Naegi. For once, she looked stressed and Togami took a vindictive delight in that.

“Pekoyama-san, you’re okay! Where’s Kuzuryu-kun? Why are you here without him?”

“The Young Master is well,” Pekoyama said, voice calm even as Naegi distractedly pulled on Kirigiri’s fingers. “No one is hurt.”

“I saw Komaeda-kun! He wasn’t moving!”

“You did?” After an uncomfortable pause in which Togami saw her struggle not to look at Kirigiri, Pekoyama said, “I’m sorry. I did not expect you would see him.”

“He wasn’t moving!” Naegi’s voice rose higher in pitch, like a whining child.

“Komaeda-kun has always been in poor health,” Pekoyama said. “It can be hard to wake him, sometimes.”

Togami despised thinking of this woman in anything but negative terms, but he had to admit that her explanation shut Naegi up nicely. According to Kirigiri, it was too nicely. That must be why she yanked on Naegi’s arm again so that he was behind her.

Whatever. There were more important things than a fit of jealously over Naegi’s affections. Togami said, “Now that we’ve settled that nonsense, can we return to the fact that you released a mass murderer?”

“I already told you that we need Kuzuryu’s cooperation. This was the only deal he would accept,” Kirigiri said defensively. Naegi took the opportunity to wiggle out of her grasp and pad towards Pekoyama.

“So, you decided we needed his help so badly that you didn’t need to tell anyone about her.”

“Obviously, I was going to,” Kirigiri said. “I wanted to check on Naegi-kun first.”

“You’re not this stupid,” Togami said dryly. “That wasn’t the point I was making. The point is you went and made this decision all on your own. Did it ever occur to you that we might have something to say about this?”

Kirigiri was tugging her braid, staring straight ahead into space. “It had to be done. Fighting over this would have only caused unneeded strife.”

“Are you out of your mind?” He wanted to shake her, to grab her by the collar and show he meant business. “This isn’t the Future Foundation. You’re not our boss anymore. You can’t threaten to throw us in jail for insubordination.”

Good lord, was she ignoring him? He had half a mind to vault over this table, except that a Togami never exerted themselves like that. What would the commoners think?

“She’s not Despair,” Kirigiri suddenly said. “She isn’t going to go into fits of murderous rage, if that’s what you fear.”
“Once again, you’re completely missing the point.”

“I’m doing what I need to do to take control of this situation,” she insisted stubbornly. “I’ll take responsibility for Pekoyama-san.”

“We don’t need her or Kuzuryu,” Togami said slowly. “The plan was to rescue Naegi, let him do his hope voodoo, and send them packing. There was no Kuzuryu involved.”

“The situation’s more complicated than that.”

“It really isn’t.”

“You don’t understand what we’re dealing with. None of you do.” She was staring at him, talking at him, and yet he had the strangest feeling she wasn’t really speaking to him. Which was preposterous, because who ignored a statement from a Togami? “If I see a chance to stack the deck in our favour, I see no reason not to take it.”

“I don’t even need to yell at you,” Togami muttered. “Everyone else will take care of that when they discover what you’ve done.”

“I look forward to it,” she said sarcastically.

“. . . but now you’re here and that means Komaeda-kun will be here soon, right?” Naegi was babbling.

Had Naegi always been filled with so much blasted hope? Togami remembered enough from his school days to know he especially didn’t want that lunatic, Komaeda, running around.

“I don’t think so,” Pekoyama said to Naegi. “Komaeda-kun is unwell. It may be better to keep him isolated.”

Naegi kicked at the ground, clearly displeased. “. . . They put him in a cage.”

“He asked for it.” Pekoyama said that so confidently that Togami sincerely bought it, until he remembered that Komaeda had never been conscious to make that request.

Naegi’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Were you in a cage, too?”

“I’m not caged, Naegi-kun.”

It didn’t answer his question and Naegi must have known that too, but he dropped it. He instead grinned up at Pekoyama, shifting his weight back and forth on his heels, before letting himself fall toward her in a hug.

“Are you done eating?” Kirigiri asked suddenly. Naegi nodded. “Good. Let’s get going.”

Naegi offered no protest. He marched after Kirigiri like a good little soldier. Togami sensed Pekoyama look back at him, but he was careful not to look in her direction. The three departed, one after the other, leaving Naegi’s dishes as if there were servants to take care of them.

Togami sneered. He knew this deal with Kamukura had been rotten from the start.

There were certain skills that came naturally while growing up in the Yakuza. You could scarcely be a major figure in the Yakuza if you were too squeamish to get your hands dirty. Even her Young Master, her master with his too gentle heart, had proven his birthright through blood. Thus violence,
and unexpected violence at that, was simply the way of the criminal empire. Learning how to handle it was simply part of growing up.

Still, Pekoyama might not have reacted to the weapon swinging toward her if it had been just her and Kirigiri. Naegi, however, was with them and while he was not the Young Master, he was still someone to be protected; a reason for her senses and instincts to be sharp. So, when she heard the weapon swinging, she moved. She stepped forward onto the ball of her foot, pivoted around, and grabbed the assailant’s wrist. The bat swung a little from the momentum, knocking her glasses astray, but she didn’t need them to fight.

It was a testament to Pekoyama’s skills that Kirigiri and Naegi had no idea they were under attack until they heard the shout: “Kiri, there’s a Despair right behind you!”

Naegi turned. “Pekoyama-san!”

He would have rushed over, but Kirigiri grabbed his shoulder and held him back. She took in the scene without any emotion. “Asahina-san, it’s fine. I told her to follow me.”

“Oh. Well, how was I supposed to know that?” Asahina frowned and tried to yank her wrist free, but Pekoyama wasn’t letting a potential threat go that easily. “You do remember who she is, right? She’s the Ultimate Swordswoman!”

“Without a sword,” Pekoyama pointed out.

“Who cares?” Grunting, Asahina dug her feet in and pulled. Pekoyama dropped into a stance in response. “Let go!”

“Asahina-san, please let go of the bat,” Kirigiri said.

“Then she’ll be able to take it!” Asahina cried. “Not like it matters anyways. Someone like her could crush a weakling like Naegi-kun with her bare hands.”

While Naegi sadly looked at his underdeveloped biceps, Pekoyama felt something similar to anger pulse within her skull. “I have no intention of harming him.”

“It’s a little late to be saying that!”

She twisted Asahina’s wrist a little, but still Asahina refused to let go. “I have never hurt him.”

“Bullshit!” A drop of spit was expelled with that word. “We’ve met Naegi-kun’s sister. She told us all about how you were torturing him. Why else would he be so scared of you?”

Scared of her? She almost looked back before she caught herself. No, Naegi trusted her. He had followed her without hesitation when she had tried to save him. This was simply the accusation of someone who knew nothing of which they spoke.

“I make no claims about the others, but I have never brought him harm,” Pekoyama said. Perhaps she should take this bat and wallop the woman about the head, prove she never hurt Naegi by demonstrating what harm from the Ultimate Swordswoman looked like.

“Both of you, calm down.” Kirigiri marched toward them. “What’s done is done.”

“Then she did hurt him!” Asahina accused. Pekoyama squeezed that wrist, unable to look away from her opponent.
But then something small scuttled its way between them. Naegi simply appeared, popping up between them and beaming at Asahina like a jack-in-the-box. It startled Asahina enough that Pekoyama finally wrenched the bat out of her grasp. Asahina was very lucky that Naegi was standing in the way of a direct swing.

“Asahina-san, it’s okay,” Naegi said. “Pekoyama-san won’t hurt anyone.”

“Our course she will! It’s what she does.” Asahina stepped back from Naegi. If he would move out the way, she’d be in perfect distance for a swing of the bat. “Ikusaba was the same way. She didn’t know how to do anything but violence.”

“Ikusaba. . .” Naegi said slowly.

“The Ultimate –”

“I remember who she is,” Naegi said. “But why do you know so much about her?”

“Don’t you remember? The Future Foundation did some fancy therapy stuff, and now we’ve got a good chunk of our memories back.”

“All of you do?” Naegi sounded hurt. Pekoyama couldn’t tell what he was thinking when he glanced at Kirigiri. “Then that means you must remember Oogami-san.”

Why on earth had he brought her up? Everyone at Hope’s Peak was well aware of that loud friendship. If she hadn’t already met legitimate stalkers like Komaeda and that friend of Koizumi’s, Pekoyama would have thought Asahina had foolishly decided to stalk the strongest person in the world. Regardless, Oogami was an extremely important person to the naturally overemotional Asahina, and although Naegi’s lost memories meant he didn’t know any better, Oogami’s death was the last thing he should have brought up.

She had already taken the bat in both hands, holding it nearly parallel to the ground in preparation to push Asahina away from Naegi. But the attack never came. Asahina smiled. There was a trace of tears in the corner of her eyes, but she was smiling and it wasn’t one of those cracked ones Naegi sometimes wore.

“I do,” Asahina said. “She was exactly who I thought she was.”

“I know she was,” Naegi said gently. “I’m happy for you.”

Asahina dabbed at her eyes, but they seemed to be happy tears. Pekoyama didn’t understand.

“I’m so glad I got to meet her,” Asahina said, still with that watery smile.

“I bet you two were close from the beginning.”

“We were!” The tears were gone, replaced by one fist slamming into the other palm. “There weren’t very many people who used the gym like we do, and one day she was using one of the weight machines and she was lifting so much. I just had to discover her secret! Not that there was one. She was just that amazing.”

“It sounds like when I’m solving cases with Kirigiri-san,” Naegi laughed. “Ah, Asahina-san, I’m afraid Kirigiri-san wanted me for something, but I’d love to talk later. You should come by when I’m not busy, and you can talk about Oogami-san all you want.”

“You mean it?” Asahina went in for a one-armed hug. “You’re a good friend, you know.”
“I try.”

They exchanged goodbyes, and then Naegi left to stand beside a confused-looking Kirigiri. He waved at Asahina, and then started leading the way. Pekoyama naturally followed.

“Hold on! Just a second, Despair. You’re not off the hook yet!”

She saw it flash over him: annoyance. It unnerved her, made her stomach turn over before she had even interpreted its implications. Naegi’s discussion with Asahina . . . that hadn’t been entirely innocent, had it? He’d done that on purpose. He’d so elegantly cut in with his words and came close to stifling the conflict completely. If it hadn’t been for that split-second loss of control, she never would have known that was his goal.

“You said she’s like Ikusaba, right?” Naegi said. His voice was a shade chillier, but Asahina didn’t seem to notice. “Ikusaba was dangerous because she was the Ultimate Soldier . . . but a soldier fights because they’re obeying orders. I don’t see Kuzuryu-kun around.”

Asahina blinked, taken aback. As was Pekoyama herself. What Naegi said was true, logical, but it sounded so wrong for him to bring that up. Not the person who had so consistently insisted to her that thinking that way wasn’t right.

“A rogue soldier isn’t much of a soldier,” Naegi continued. “The military always prizes the ones who are loyal, so I’m willing to bet Ikusaba didn’t do much other than what she was told. So, if Pekoyama-san is like Ikusaba and Kuzuryu-kun can’t talk to her, what’s the danger?”

“You don’t know what he told her!” Asahina protested. “This could all be part of some big secret plot to bring back Ultimate Despair!”

Naegi made a show of looking Pekoyama over. “Asahina-san, she’s the Ultimate Swordswoman, not the Ultimate Spy. I don’t think she’s capable of pulling off something that sneaky.”

Another person may have been offended, but it was true. She hadn’t been raised to be subtle.

“Asahina-san, if your theory turns out to be correct, then I grant you permission to say ‘I told you so,’” Kirigiri said. “For now though, I need you to trust us.”

“Why do we need to do this anyways?” Asahina shouted.

“It’s a gesture of goodwill. Do you have any other questions?”

Asahina’s teeth ground against each other. The bat was safely out of her hands, but she still had that arm raised as if it wasn’t. A few tense beats passed, and then she lowered that arm halfway.

“No,” she ground out.

With that admission, the danger passed. Pekoyama tossed the bat aside as a placating gesture, although she didn’t know who she wanted to placate.

It didn’t take long for Asahina to claim she would leave them alone, but Pekoyama saw her trailing them from time to time. Kirigiri wasn’t concerned, and only remarked that they had gotten the two hardest introductions out of the way. Naegi said nothing about their tail, but he stuck by her side. Perhaps he feared Asahina would charge at her with another weapon.

“This is your room,” Kirigiri said. She turned the knob of said door and pushed it open. “It locks.”
Pekoyama asked, “From which side?”

“The inside,” Kirigiri said with what may have been regret. “I strongly advise you lock it while you’re sleeping.”

Pekoyama looked behind them just in time to see Asahina hide around the corner.

“I understand,” she said.

The topic had gotten too grim for Naegi. He grabbed her sleeve suddenly, tugged, and spoke with a wide smile. Even after everything he had been through, he was still so innocent and naïve.

“Don’t worry, Pekoyama-san. Trust me, everything will work out.”

She hoped so. (For him, she would try.)

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Creepy Naegi pt 2.
Night at sea was a surprisingly bright phenomenon. There was the moon, for once unblocked by smog, whose light fell to earth and reflected off every watery space it could find. The ocean had adopted a silvery sheen, one strong enough that no stars were reflected in its depths, though they twinkled in the sky above. Even with the sharp angle of the ship’s hull to the water, some of that reflected light found its way through the portholes. It left an imperfect circle on the otherwise blank expanse of the cabin’s floor, like a comforting nightlight. Not that Komaru needed those anymore.

Komaru listened to the waves outside, hoping they would lull her to sleep. By far, this had been the most eventful day she’d had since escaping Towa City. Of course, reuniting with her brother was always going to be a big day, but she definitely hadn’t expected him to nearly get one of his friends killed the same day. Then Kirigiri had banned her from seeing her brother without any justification whatsoever, and then ended the day by announcing Pekoyama Peko, a member of Ultimate Despair, was going to be allowed to roam the ship. She honestly didn’t know as much about Ultimate Despair or Class 77 as Naegi’s classmates did, so she hadn’t participated in the fight between Kirigiri, Fukawa and Hagakure and had snuck into her room instead. Which is why she was in bed, wishing tomorrow would be a better day.

Despite that wish, she was restless, tossing and turning. She closed her eyes, but remained aware of everything around her. The click she heard didn’t alarm her – the boat made plenty of weird sounds. But the sound of someone else’s breathing? That did.

She rolled to her side and lunged for the lamp on the bedtable. But thankfully, as she raised it above her head, she saw the ahoge.

“Ugh! Why didn’t you say anything?” she scolded. He hadn’t snuck up on her like that since she was in middle school!

“I didn’t want to wake you,” Makoto said softly. “I guess you were already awake though.”

“I am now.” She rubbed her eyes furiously, removing all remainders of sleep. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

“I can’t say hi to my own sister?” Makoto asked.

“That’s not what I mean and . . . I’m sorry. I wanted to speak to you all day, but . . . I don’t think Kirigiri-san likes me very much.”

“Nah, she doesn’t hate you,” Makoto said. “That’s just how she is. Trust me: it’s not easy to tell if she likes you. She acts cool on the outside, but on the inside, she’s like everyone else.”

“Thanks.” She set the lamp down and turned it on.
A moment later, Makoto slipped past her and firmly turned it off. As the darkness rushed in, she waited for him to explain.

“They might see the light under the door,” he said. “I don’t want to draw attention.”

“You’re not supposed to be here, are you?”

“I don’t care,” he said. He settled cross-legged on the foot of her bed. “I wanted to see you. So, I think you said you ran into trouble in Towa City. Where is that?”

“It’s this big island off the coast,” she answered, taking her own seat just below her pillow. “It’s like one of those cool sci-fi cities you see in futuristic movies, although there wasn’t anything cool about the boring apartment they locked me in. It happened a few months after you locked yourself in Hope’s Peak. A bunch of people wearing those bear heads broke into our house and took mom and dad away. They locked me in that apartment and that’s all that happened until your friends kicked down the door.”

“Kirigiri-san told me there was someone named Towa Monaca involved.”

Komaru sighed and began to relay the whole sorry tale. Makoto was a good listener. He wouldn’t speak unless she paused for breath, and usually it was a request to continue.

“. . . and that’s it,” Komaru finished. “The Future Foundation said she might have been crushed under the rubble, but I don’t think so. I think she’s still out there somewhere.”

Makoto was silent.

“You’re not going to clap?” she teased, poking the centre of his chest.

Makoto tilted his head to one side. A few degrees too far. It must have been the shadows that made him look so odd.

“The Warriors of Hope, they sound like Ultimate Despair.”

“They’re similar,” Komaru said. “But they thought the world would be better without adults. They weren’t hurting people for fun.”

Makoto nodded. “Maybe they had different motives, but Towa was an Ultimate Despair.”

“Like your friends? I don’t think so,” Komaru said. “She was crazy, but she wasn’t insane.”

Thankfully, Makoto brushed off the insult to his weird friends. “No, not like them. Like Enoshima-san.”

“Oh. Towa did have a creepy shrine to her. She claims she wasn’t Enoshima’s successor,” Komaru explained, shuddering as she remembered Towa trying to talk her into it, “but I don’t see how she wasn’t. Everyone else thinks she would have become the next Ultimate Despair, too.”

“I knew it,” he breathed.

“You did? It sounded to me like you didn’t know anything about –”

She squeaked. She hadn’t expected Makoto to grab her wrist like that and in the darkness, had been unable to see it coming.

“You’re just like me.”
“You’re my brother. I think we’re supposed to be similar,” she said, confused. Concerned.

Makoto laughed. It wasn’t a regular laugh or that hiccup-y one from before, but a harsh, wheezing sound that made her wonder if he had something caught in his throat.

“You don’t understand: you’re *exactly* like me.”

He grabbed her with both hands this time, grabbed her shoulders. His touch slid down her arms, leaving them tingling with goosebumps. She jerked away and rubbed her suddenly clammy arms.

“One step at a time,” Makoto murmured. “Then baby Hope slays the baby Despair.”

She shoved his hand away. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you ever watch the Killing Game?” Makoto asked. “You should. I think you’d understand if you did.”

“But…” She backed away from her brother – her weird brother who had some point had gotten too close – until she hit the bedframe. “Why would I want to? I’d be watching people die!”

“Didn’t they tell you anything?” Makoto exclaimed. He crawled forward, claiming the space Komaru had just put between them. “The Killing Game was so much more than that. It’s where we began.”

“Me?” She pointed at herself. “I wasn’t there.”

“Not us.” She was paralyzed as he brushed a stand of hair out of eyes. “It’s where Hope began.”

“Is that where it came from?” she asked carefully. “I had been wondering when hope and despair became such a big deal. Even Kamukura-kun keeps talking about it.”

“Yes,” he said. He choked like he was suffocating on his next words. “I can show you. I can show you everything you need to know.”

Okay, this was genuinely weird. And wrong. She shifted so that her legs hung off the mattress, and then knocked her heel into the wall three times. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Of course not,” he said. “I didn’t understand at the beginning either. But I learned. You will, too.”

He was just about to touch her face again when the door slammed open. Suddenly, Makoto was yanked off the bed; a silver gleam hurt her eyes as something sharp flashed through the air. Makoto gurgled as the blade nestled itself against his throat.

“Well, look what we have here. A hot midnight rendezvous and I wasn’t invited! You must be some hunk for little miss virgin here to . . . Would you look at that? I caught myself a cute little Naegi!”

Genocider Syo laughed hysterically, tongue swishing through the air. But she let Makoto go and whirled about to face Komaru instead.

“So, was Gloomy right about the brother complex? Or did Naeggles confess he had a good old crush on me, and you just had to let me know? Spit it out. You interrupted our beauty sleep.”

“Komaru, did you call her?” Makoto asked suspiciously.

“You haven’t seen her since we rescued you, right? So, here she is!” Komaru said quickly. No way she was going to admit the real reason she signalled Syo to burst in.
“Well said!” Genocider said, snapping her scissors. “Haven’t seen you since you eloped. Never thought that guy would be your type. I thought you would go gaga for the brooding and mysterious cliché.”

Makoto blushed. He blushed. “I never told anyone what I was interested in, so I didn’t lie.”

“No, you didn’t.” Genocider laughed. “Nice to see ya again. Heard you went through some rough times. Hey, I got an idea. Why don’t you give me a name and I’ll go slice them up? My treat!”

“That’s nice of you to offer,” Makoto said offhandedly. “Can I take a rain check?”

Komaru had been worried about Makoto meeting Genocider. While she knew that Fukawa and her brother were friends, he had never told her about Fukawa’s alternate personality. But, just as Asahina and Hagakure had insisted, she had been worrying for no reason. Naegi appeared to be just as close to Genocider as he was to the others, and it was obvious that Genocider liked him, too.

“What are you doing here?”

Busted. Genocider turned around to face Kirigiri in a swirl of hair and silver. Makoto, on the other hand, winced.

“I was talking to my sister,” Makoto said stoically.

Kirigiri marched in. “You’re supposed to be in your room.”

Kirigiri couldn’t see his face, and that must have been the only reason Makoto had the courage to roll his eyes while Komaru was looking at him.

“I don’t remember being banned from talking to my sister,” Makoto said frostily.

“Makoto.”

“Fine.” With no shortage of displeased sounds, Makoto got to his feet. “I’ll see you later, Komaru.”

Kirigiri watched him until he left the room. Then those sharps eyes flashed to her. “What did you talk about?”

“He wanted to know what I had been doing while he was gone,” Komaru said carefully. It wasn’t a lie, although it wasn’t the complete truth either.

Thankfully, Kirigiri didn’t press further. She glared at Komaru, as if she knew she wasn’t getting the answers she requested, then turned on her heel and followed Makoto out the room.

“When did she regress into Ice Bitch mode?” Genocider complained. “I haven’t seen her this pissy since Big Mac was invited to the gangster’s party!”

“You mean Kuzuruyu-kun?” Komaru asked. “Why would he . . .?”

“That was shortly after the Reserve Course chicks died,” Genocider said dismissively. “Kirigiri was getting all up in his face about it. Next thing you know, his bodyguard’s storming into the cafeteria and dragging Naegi off to who-knows-where. Course, Naegi doesn’t see anything wrong and buys that shit about a party. Pissed Kirigiri the hell off though.”

“What is with those people and kidnapping him?” Komaru hissed.

She kicked the wall, and immediately regretted it when she made the discovery that walls were hard.
Genocider gave her one of those ‘How stupid are you?’ looks as she hopped over the bed and sat down. She collapsed backwards into the mattress, letting her arms sprawl.

“Can I ask you something? Was Makoto always so . . . fond of the Killing Game?”

Genocider said. “A wimp like him enjoying that kind of bloodshed? Never. You sure that was your brother?”

“. . . Didn’t they say Ultimate Despair had the Ultimate Imposter?”

Last time she had been down here, she hadn’t been afraid. Not of Ultimate Despair, at least. She had been worried about Makoto, and too occupied with him to consider the danger that waited at the bottom of the stairs. This time was different. This time, that barrier of friendly sibling concern was missing, and she knew Ultimate Despair was awake. She should be afraid. She should be trembling at the memory of how Tanaka had nearly killed Togami. She wasn’t though. Because Syo was snapping her scissors right behind her in a cheery melody. Some may say having a former serial killer following her was even more of a reason to be afraid, but not Komaru. Syo wouldn’t hurt her, and with the two together, she felt like they could handle anything.

“Do you know where we’re going?” she asked.

“Why would I know? Gloomy was awake for this stuff,” Syo complained. “Weren’t you there?”

“I wasn’t paying attention because I didn’t expect someone to swap places with my brother,” Komaru said. “This is just like one of my favourite mangas . . .”

“Is there blood?”

“Um, not really.”

“Then how can it be any good?”

She almost argued with Syo, but she stumbled on a step and the impact of her heel with the metal echoed through the stairwell. They were being awfully loud, weren’t they? (Syo didn’t even know how to be quiet.) Ultimate Despair must know they were coming.

“Hey, Syo? I know the Future Foundation didn’t let you become an official member, but you still worked with them. Did you ever fight them?”

“They? You mean Ultimate Despair? Not these guys. Kind of hard to take a chunk out of someone when they’re too busy chasing your brother’s tail to come outside.”

Syo started up with her signature laughter. Her tongue flicked upward, flinging a drop of spit into the air. And Komaru, who had just reached the bottom of the stairs, put her foot down and shouted, “That’s not funny!”

“Relax, won’t ya?” Syo said. “Naegi’s way too innocent for that. Now I know they wanted nothing more than to have a good, old-fashioned orgy, but he . . .”

“Stop it!”

She couldn’t look at Syo right now, lest the other woman’s thoughts invade her own. In the crowded space, there wasn’t very many places to go. She settled for a corner, where she rested her burning forehead against a metal shelf.
“What’s up with you?” Syo demanded. Her scissors hung loosely by one finger.

“Don’t joke about what happened to him,” she said.

There had been about two metres of space between them. Now there was one. Less than one. Syo leaned into her sight, hanging out on the peripheral of Komaru’s vision even as she tried to look away.

“What did happen to him?”

“I don’t know. I barely know anything,” she said quietly. “But I did... I spoke to him while he was with them. It happened twice: they brought a laptop to the apartment, and they let us speak over video-chat until they thought I said too much.”

“Huh. I never heard about this,” Syo said.

“I didn’t tell the Future Foundation,” Komaru admitted. “Kirigiri-san knew somehow, but I tried not to tell her much because I was worried about what they’d think. The first time I spoke to my brother, I didn’t understand what I was seeing. But after what happened in Towa City, I do. I know what people look like when they think they’re going to die.”

Her voice broke on the last word.

“He didn’t say anything about it. He never does. He never wants people to worry about him. But he’s always been horrible at keeping secrets. He was telling me, but I couldn’t understand him. I wasn’t listening. And the next time we spoke, I couldn’t recognize him anymore. What if he was right? What if he died in there?”

She braced her arms against the shelf; her legs were too weak to keep her standing alone. Syo’s scissors clicked twice, then fell silent.

“It’s been one fucking day,” Syo suddenly said. “Ya didn’t think this would be over in a week, did ya? I could have told you that, and I’m not even awake most of the time.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. He’s—”

“So, what? He wasn’t your dream knight in shining armour, so you’re going to give up on him?”

“You’re not listening!”

“Sure, I am!” Syo grabbed Komaru’s lapels and pulled her in close. “You’re upset because some bimbos are moving in on your guy. Well, you know what you do when that happens? You eviscerate them! Slice those pretty pigtails off and leave scars all over their cute littles faces.”

“I don’t think Makoto would like that.”

Syo scowled. “If you want him back, fight for him. You don’t think I moped around and cried whenever the gold-digger of the week tried to move in on my master, do ya? I take great pride in what’s mine, and I’m not about to let Sally Big Breasts ruin my beautiful man.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t matter how big they are. He’s my... What am I saying?”

Syo erupted into gales of laughter. Self-consciously, Komaru crossed her arms over her chest.

Syo said, “Come on. Let’s cut open an Imposter!”
“We don’t need to,” Komaru said. “I know that was actually my brother, not an imposter.”

“So?”

Before Komaru could remind Syo that impromptu, non-consensual operations were frowned upon by polite society, the Serial Killer took off. Komaru had to follow her, otherwise whomever came down to deliver breakfast the next morning would find an awful surprise.

“Makoto was never the only one there,” Komaru blurted out, still needing to talk about what she had seen. “Komaeda always was, too, right behind him. He touched him, sometimes. He didn’t care I was there; he knew I couldn’t do anything.”

“. . . Do you know what we need? A detour!”

Syo grabbed her upper arm, and then tugged her off their current path. She found herself pulled around corners and through dark paths, not understanding why until a memory lit up in her brain. That half-opened box on the left she recognized; she had knocked that bottle of water on the ground. This was the path that would take her to –

“Komaeda,” she gasped.

“See? Now you’re speaking my language.”

There was no dissuading Syo from her course. Komaru scarcely had time to prepare before she was catapulted into the middle of the triangle formed by the three cages. She stood there, legs wobbling like a newborn lamb, and slowly turned in a slow circle. As she had suspected, they had known she was coming. Tanaka was at the front of his cage, squatting, but with his body hunched forward like a massive bird of prey. Komaeda, on the other hand, was huddled in the far corner of his cage, knees brought up tight to his chin. Hanamura was midway between the front and back, although he was slowly coming toward the front, letting his hand skim over the bars as he did.

Tanaka, catching her eye, slowly slid a knife-hand across his throat . . .

“Is that a threat!?”

Oh, right. She had been brought here by a crazy serial killer. Thank god Syo was a crazy serial killer!

“You don’t threaten someone by cutting their throat. They’ll bleed out in seconds and barely have enough time to figure out what happened. That’s why I start off with non-vital areas like the hands. The arteries are small, so there’s not a lot of bleeding, and it lets them know you mean business. The number of cute boys I’ve made wet themselves . . . I’m getting wet myself just thinking of it!”

Right. Syo was a crazy serial killer. What’s more, Tanaka was nodding very seriously like she was giving him advice on how to treat a sick animal. Was . . . was he taking notes?

“Genocider Syo,” Hanamura purred. “I never had the pleasure of meeting you in school.”

“Yeah, Gloomy tried to keep me cooped up all the time. ‘Sides, your class didn’t have any boys that could get my motor running.” Syo sighed, stars in her eyes.

Hanamura said, “I’m a pretty big fan of yours. I always respected someone who knew who to use a knife.”

“Hey, whatcha talking about there?” Syo demanded, pointing her scissors at Hanamura in a threat.
“You think just because you stabbed a few people to death, that you know anything about using a blade?”

“Not at all!” Hanamura shook his head. “But a true chef can always identify a talented butcher. When the meat’s delivered in a shapeless chunk, it doubles the preparation needed to make it into a piece of art. Anyways, the mark of a good butcher is consistency, and you have it. The same technique each time, the same slices, hitting the same spot over and over. . . don’t your loins quiver thinking about it?”

Syo tapped her chin with the tip of her scissors. “You know, I like the way you think. There are not many people who understand the sweat and blood that goes into my art.”

“It’s a travesty!” Hanamura said. “Hungry patrons flocking to tasteless fast-food chains instead of locally-sourced restaurants. Oh, the humanity!”

“Okay, this is really messed up,” Komaru said. “Can you two stop talking to each other?”

“If you ever want to feel appreciated, I’m available. Any time.” Hanamura smirked, brushing a hand over his hair. “Anywhere.”

“Nobody but my Master gets to stain my clothes with –”

“Stop!” Komaru clapped her hands over her ears, drowning out Syo’s incessant chatter. “I didn’t come down here to hear you two talk about cutting people open and –”

Oops.

Suddenly reminded of why she was here, Syo teleported to Komaeda’s cage. Komaeda, curled up, didn’t see her, didn’t know she was there until she reached through the bars and grabbed a handful of his hair. He had a moment of surprise, and then Syo yanked his head up and smashed the back of his skull into the bars. Her echoing cackles were cruel.

“Rise and shine!” Syo sang. “You got a date with a real cutie.”

Komaeda’s face twisted. “I told him we’re not doing that.”

“You’re going to leave him high and dry? Now if that isn’t –”

“No, that’s good!” Komaru snarled. Snarling was such a foreign thing to her, and yet it felt so natural. Komaeda was huddled in the corner, making himself as small as he could, and she felt no pity. He deserved it. He deserved to be in this cage.

Komaeda shifted slowly into a cross-legged position. “Naegi Komaru. Even though you’re not an Ultimate, I guess you would have every reason find me disgusting.”

“Are you kidding?” Komaru said quietly. “I do think you’re disgusting, but that’s not even close to being it! You’re a monster and I hate you. I wish they left you with the Future Foundation!”

Komaeda chuckled. He leaned back on the bars. “How wretched am I to have fallen this low?”

“Shut up! You don’t get any sympathy after what you did to him! You’re only here because Makoto would be upset if you weren’t!”

“He would,” Komaeda said simply. He stared off into the distance, as if satisfied by his answer. Komaru wasn’t, though.
Apparently, neither was Syo. She reached through the bars, snaking around his neck until her grip fastened itself in his collar. Then, she pulled him all the way around, crushed him against the bars, and lifted him until he was standing. Had Syo been taller, no doubt she would have lifted Komaeda off his feet.

“Want to rethink that answer?” Syo hissed.

“Just what do you two think you’re talking about?” Hanamura said. “We gave that kid everything. Tanaka here even tamed a bear for him!”

Syo scoffed. “Like that’s supposed to be difficult for the Ultimate Breeder. Oi, Komaru, your fist is probably small enough to fit between the bars.”

“Okay…”

“Like for a punch,” Syo stressed. She pushed Komaeda back just enough that he could turn his head without his nose hitting the metal. “Come on. I got him.”

Komaru approached slowly. Balled her hand into a fist. Raised it and stared. Girls weren’t supposed to go around punching people, but this was her brother’s kidnapper. Surely, he deserved it.

“. . . I can’t.”

Syo frowned. “You sure?”

“There’s not a lot of space. I’m going to punch the cage!” She rubbed her knuckles nervously. “It would really hurt.”

“So, if he wasn’t locked up you’d hit him?”

“Syo!” She ran over and grabbed Syo’s shoulder. “You can’t unlock it!”

“Relax, won’t ya? I’m not going to do that. But Kirigiri’s going to have to let him out eventually and when she does,” she cackled loudly, “he’ll let you nail him right in the kisser. He’ll have to, because if he doesn’t . . .”

Quick as a flash, the scissors snapped open. She slammed them against the cage so that the bars were cradled by the blades. Each tip poked out beyond the bar’s circumference and if Komaeda had still been squashed against them, he would be bleeding.

Syo grinned ferally. “. . . Then I’ll take more creative methods to hold him in place.”

She backed off. Komaeda, wide-eyed, carefully avoiding eye contact, stepped back into the center of the cell where Syo could no longer reach him. Pleased at the obvious sign of fear, Syo planted her hands on her hips and spun around proudly.

“You two aren’t going to get in our way, right?” Syo said to the other two member of Ultimate Despair.

Tanaka chuckled lowly as Hanamura answered, “We’ve all taken swings at him before.”


“Makoto did,” Komaru said darkly.
Syo snorted. “Oh, I bet he did. I heard all about that.”

“Not that,” Komaru said. “Makoto mentioned Komaeda a few times when he was attending Hope’s Peak. He never liked Komaeda.”

“Ouch. Disliked by Naegi. Now that’s a burn!”

“Not even my brother liked you,” she said to Komaeda. “Do you even have friends?”

“. . . No. Not anymore,” Komaeda said softly. He pulled at the loose fabric of his hoodie, as if to wrap it around him.

“Let’s go,” Komaru said with a nod. “I don’t want to look at him anymore.”

Komaeda, it appeared, wanted the same thing. He already had his back to them and although Komaru checked, he didn’t watch them go. The other two did. Hanamura’s hand twitched in what was more a ‘Come hither’ summon than a goodbye. Tanaka waited until they were past his cage, until there was no chance at reaching through and snagging one of them. Then he returned to the blanket and pillow in his cage and settled down to sleep.

“So, you feeling better?” Syo asked. “It always feels good to express your anger.”

“Not really,” Komaru admitted. “I feel really frustrated.”

“Don’t worry. Just wait until Kirigiri lets him out of that cage. There’s nothing more satisfying than hearing them squeal.”

“It won’t do anything though. It isn’t going to make my brother normal again,” Komaru said. “Makoto will just get mad.”

“Maybe he’ll bring out the swear words again,” Syo cackled.

She laughed. “He always says them so awkwardly. It’s weird because I met Owada-kun once; his friends are always swearing around him.”

“It’s because your brother a fucking saint,” Syo said. Komaru was sure her use of a cuss was only for the irony.

They reached the stairs. Syo began to ascend, bouncing up the steps two at a time. Komaru lingered at the bottom.

“Do you think Makoto’s still like that?” Komaru asked.

“Isn’t this whole shitstorm about him wanting everyone to be lovey-dovey with each other?” Syo said. “Seems like a fucking saint to me.”

“He does. Then, if we befriended them, do you think he might start getting better?”

“First you want to punch ‘em, now you want to be friends?”

“Not with him,” Komaru spat. “Not with most of them, actually. But Kirigiri said Pekoyama was okay, right? And Kamukura-kun said Tsumiki was the one who took care of him.”

“Sure, sure. Hang out with Pekoyama if you want, just remember that a pipsqueak like you doesn’t stand a chance if she decides to snap your neck.”
“Sh-she wouldn’t do that, would she?”

Syo’s grin was razor-sharp. “Honey, she was part of the yakuza.”

They returned to the hall that connected to their rooms, where Syo suddenly stilled, cocking her head slightly to one side like a dog. She raised a finger to her lips and after a few seconds of strenuous listening, Komaru heard it: the muffled, steady sounds of footsteps. If this were a horror movie, this would be a sure sign that she was about to die. But considering the serial killer was already right next to her, she was pretty sure she was safe.

Syo went after the sound but relaxed quickly. Komaru, unfamiliar with the nuances of Class 78, did not realize they were stalking Kirigiri until they saw her. Next time though, she would remember that those sharp taps meant heels, and that heels probably meant the member of her brother’s class that she was least enthusiastic to meet. Kirigiri was already looking their way when they rounded the corner and saw her.

“You two should be in bed,” Kirigiri said.

“So should you!” Komaru shot back.

“I have responsibilities. You don’t.”

“Responsibilities where you have to walk around at midnight?” Syo asked curiously.

“Yes.”

“Okay!”

Kirigiri said, “Get to bed. Both of you.”

With that, their fascinating conversation came to an end. Komaru hoped she was overthinking things when she thought that last twist to Kirigiri’s lips was disdain. It wasn’t like she had done anything wrong. Okay, except for letting Makoto get into the cargo hold. But that could have happened to anyone!

“Like I said: Ice Bitch,” Syo said. “You can head to bed if you want. I’m going to check whether Master forgot to lock his door!”

With hearts flying above her head, Syo flounced away. Really. She flounced. Although the hallway was brightly lit, the emptiness was haunting. The only sound were the ambient creaks of the ship, and the barely audible sound of Kirigiri prowling the halls.

Komaru sighed. When they had first told her about this plan, she thought it would have turned out to be more fun.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
A very awkward breakfast.
Of the Surface of Things

Chapter Notes

Day 2: Morning

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Breakfast was quiet. That wasn’t unusual. Even if Kirigiri had been present, she wasn’t one to speak much until she had enjoyed her morning coffee. Likewise, Komaru was always bleary-eyed upon waking. Togami and Fukawa, on the other hand, simply didn’t like to speak – unless it was to tell the others to shut up. However, even the resident loudmouths, Asahina and Hagakure, were subdued. Surely it had nothing to do with the missing people. Nope. That wasn’t why they kept looking at the door, either. Not at all.

An alarm went off on Hagakure’s phone, producing an image of a clock that was quickly replaced by a smiling face.

“It’s nine o’clock,” Alter Ego announced. “Can I say hello to Naegi-kun?”

“He’s not here yet,” Hagakure said.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you said at breakfast…”

“Yeah, I did, but Kirigiri-chi’s probably having trouble getting him up. The guy got to sleep in all year!” He pouted. “I wish the Future Foundation let us sleep in.”

“Okay! I’ll check again in ten minutes.”

Alter Ego’s face disappeared. The clock reappeared, along with the text Sleep for ten minutes.

Alter Ego checked twice again. Both times, Hagakure had to tell him to go back to sleep. At that point, they began to worry. If it was only Naegi, twenty minutes late wouldn’t be a concern; after all, he was a very average person. Kirigiri though, had always been punctual.

“Do you think we should check on them?” Asahina asked.

“No,” Togami said. “If she can’t handle this, then she has no business being responsible for any of this.”

“I’m going to check on them!” Asahina announced, standing.

Surely, Asahina would have kept her vow if the door hadn’t opened at that exact second. Asahina gasped, and covered her mouth to muffle her excited shout –

But it was just Kamukura. Kamukura dully blinked at her. He examined the room and its audience.

“How boring.”

“Ugh, why’d you have to come in now?” Asahina complained. “We were waiting for Naegi-kun.”

“Obviously I knew that,” Kamukura drawled. He walked past her without even a glance.
“And he’s not even going to apologize,” Asahina muttered.

Hagakure cleared his throat. “Uh, Asahina, you might want to look...”

Asahina continued, “You know, you could have arrived on time like everyone else! Kirigiri-san said it would be better if we were all here, so he only has to get excited once.”

“It’s not my interactions with Naegi-kun that are a concern,” Kamukura said. He circled an empty table in the far corner before choosing a seat that would allow him to watch the entire room.

“It’s called being polite!”

Hagakure cleared his throat. “Uh, Asahina-chi?”

“I mean it’s not like we’re asking much. This is our boat, after all. We made you breakfast and everything, too. The least you could have done was show up on time!”

With a heavy sigh, Hagakure stood. He walked behind Asahina, grabbed her shoulders, and then physically spun her around to face the entrance.

“Hey, what’s the big...? Oh, Naegi-kun! You didn’t hear what I was saying before, right?”

“I did,” Naegi said casually, stepping forward.

He wasn’t wearing his own hoodie, but one of Hagakure’s oversized jackets. He had his hands stuffed in the pockets and apart from that jacket that hung down and crept over the floor like a royal gown, he looked decidedly normal. Even his tone of voice was casual. Normal.

“I’m surprised you were late,” Naegi said to Kamukura. “Don’t you have an Ultimate Timekeeper talent in there?”

“Don’t,” Kamukura warned.

Naegi gave Asahina a ‘What can you do?’ shrug and said to her, “You don’t need to worry about him. He could run an entire country by himself, if he didn’t find it boring.”

“Hey, if he wants to take over cooking duty, go ahead,” Hagakure said. “The less work I have to do, the better. Oh, Naegi-chi, I got someone who wants to meet you.”

Once he saw Hagakure holding the cellphone, Naegi nearly ran over. Asahina smiled, feeling like a mother watching her children get along.

“I presume that’s Alter Ego. This won’t divert any processor power from the navigation system, will it?” Kirigiri asked, walking up behind her.

“Alter Ego said it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Good. He’s a face Naegi-kun knew while imprisoned. It’ll do them good to speak.”

“So, what took you so long this morning?” Asahina asked.

What seemed to be fatigue overtook Kirigiri. It was gone in an instance, so quickly that it could have been mistaken for a fluke of the light. Her face stony again, Kirigiri said, “He insisted on winning an argument before he would come with me.”

“With you?” Asahina asked warily.
Kirigiri glanced at the door. “Not with me.”

Naegi’s excited tones suddenly drowned out their conversation. She hadn’t heard exactly what he said, but he was definitely enjoying his talk with Alter Ego. Asahina grinned and basked with Kirigiri in the glow of the peaceful scene. Until she remembered something really important. She scurried past Kirigiri, slid out a chair from a table and fell into it in one smooth motion. She hit the spot beside her hard.

“Naegi-kun, come sit next to me!”

Naegi turned slowly. There was something weird about the way he moved, something stiff and not very normal-feeling. Pupils that were a shade too large shone in his eyes. Whatever. Her brain was just playing tricks on her. She called Naegi over again, because he was fine and he needed to sit with her!

Naegi said goodbye to Alter Ego and came over. Kirigiri followed. Awesome, it was a breakfast party! They could stuff him full of food together because he looked like he needed it, and would needed plenty of calories anyways for when she finally dragged him to the pool.

“Oh my gosh, it’s just like old days! Togami’s even sitting by himself!” she gushed. She was across from Naegi and Kirigiri. If Hagakure sat next to her, then it would really be like old days. Except that Toko wasn’t sitting alone and, oh! She should invite Naegi’s sister to the table! The two siblings were adorable on their own, and she bet they were be three times as adorable together. It made her miss her own brother, but after witnessing that giant brawl when they were capturing Ultimate Despair, she had decided to leave him behind for his own safety.

Naegi beckoned to someone. “You can sit next to me!”

Of course, Naegi would want his sister to sit next to him. He was so predictable like that. But why was he looking in the opposite direction of his sister . . .?

Oh.

“Don’t you want your sister to sit there?” Asahina said loudly. “It’s been forever since you two ate together, right?”

“If she sits there, then there’s not even room for Fukawa-san to sit next to her. It’s better if she sits next to you,” Naegi said perfectly reasonably – dammit!

“I will take my meal to my quarters,” Pekoyama said. She had yet to step through the door, as if an invisible barrier was in the way.

“You can’t. Kuzuryu-kun will ask what happened when you see him next and he’s a much better liar than you. If he thinks we tried to keep you imprisoned in your room the entire time, he’ll be really upset,” Naegi said that monotonously as if reading from a script.

“It is my will,” Pekoyama countered.

“He’s not going to care.”

“If she doesn’t want to be here, then let her go.” Asahina said loudly. Come on, that was so obvious. Why should they talk Pekoyama into staying when she was just going to make everything uncomfortable?

“I’m going to start serving food!” Hagakure said loudly. Coward.
“I’ll assist you.” Kirigiri stood up and began following him.

Hagakure tried to wave her away. “You don’t need to do that. Everything’s fine! I already told you I didn’t use any –”

Within that last sentence, Kirigiri quadrupled her pace. She reached Hagakure just as Asahina realized what he was talking about, just before Hagakure was about to say something stupid. And Hagakure would have said that stupid thing if Kirigiri didn’t jab the point of her heel into his instep. Oof. That would hurt. She knew from experience.

“Oh, sheesh! Couldn’t you have just said something like a normal person?” Hagakure complained as they vanished from sight.

Great. Now she and Naegi were alone at this table with the Despair. And apparently, Komaru and Fukawa weren’t thinking about joining them. Plus, she had nothing to eat to distract her.

Asahina leaned back in her chair and awkwardly stared at the ceiling. It might sound funny, but she and Pekoyama never knew each other well. They both spent a lot of time exercising, but Pekoyama always stuck to the dojo and she to the gym and pool. The only times they invaded each other’s space were for the friendly spars between Sakura and Pekoyama.

But now, she was stuck with Pekoyama. With this stuck-up snob who would try to kill her if she let her guard down. What a nightmare.

“How was your sleep?” Naegi asked.

“Fine,” they answered at the same time. Asahina scowled. Seriously? Now Pekoyama was even stealing her conversations with Naegi!

He looked between them expectedly. Stupid Naegi with his stupid need to see everyone get along.

“How is your. . . swimming?” Pekoyama asked slowly.

“Fine. Wet. How’s your swording?”

(“I couldn’t write a dumber conversation if I tried,” Fukawa muttered to Komaru.)

“It is adequate. It has been long since I have last engaged in a satisfactory duel.”

“Well, gees, I guess it’s hard to find a good opponent when you’re too busy murdering people,” she snapped. She preened until she remembered Naegi was right there. Why was he glaring at her like that? She had only told the truth!

“It has been some time since I last killed,” Pekoyama said. There was no hitch in that sentence. No hesitation. God, killing really was normal for Ultimate Despair.

“I’m so glad to hear that!” Naegi said. Apparently, he didn’t know the correct answer was, ‘I have never killed anyone ever!’ “Do you think Kuzuryu-kun has calmed down?”

“He has as of recently. Primarily though, the lack of action on my part is simply because there was no opportunity. We were occupied with other things.”

“Like what?” Asahina demanded.

Pekoyama glanced at Naegi. “Him.”
Thank god Kirigiri came back then, because with another girl to back her up, Asahina reined in her anger a little. Kirigiri’s arrival also distracted Naegi from his crusade – of course it did! She had known it ever since Hope’s Peak: Kirigiri and Naegi had a secret besties thing going on. As if they could have hidden it from her.

With Kirigiri and a belated Hagakure bringing food out of the kitchen, it was time to eat. Asahina wolfed her food down. She had to. Every time she looked down at her plate and away from Pekoyama, her limbs trembled, and her imagination assaulted her with a vision of Pekoyama lunging at her with a butter knife. So, she ate quickly and furiously. It was in direct contrast to Pekoyama, who barely ate at all. Thankfully, halfway through her plate, Pekoyama excused herself. That was awesome, except Naegi excused himself, too.

“What about the pool?” she whined.

“I don’t think normal people are supposed to swim right after they eat,” Naegi said.

Kirigiri said, “Makoto, what are you planning to do next?”

“I was going to go to the bridge and talk with Alter Ego some more,” Naegi said. “I still haven’t thanked him for saving me.”

“I still have the phone,” Hagakure waved it.

“I know, but . . . this isn’t really something I want to talk about in front of you guys. Sorry.”

Something seemed a little off, but Kirigiri pre-empted any suggestions by standing up abruptly. She nodded at Naegi and said, “I’ll take you there. You can go swimming with Asahina-san later.”

Naegi had never been in a boat’s bridge before. The number of screens and buttons and lights were overwhelming – and here he thought a captain just needed a steering wheel. All that data must be right up Alter Ego’s alley though, because the disembodied, virtual head couldn’t look happier. Naegi glanced up at a panel of screens that were showing security footage. Alter Ego was flashing through them so fast that Naegi never had enough time to identify the exact place they were showing.

“Alter Ego, hi!” Naegi stood on his tiptoes and waved with both hands, unsure how to grab his attention. The virtual face had eyes, but that didn’t mean they worked like real eyes.

And they didn’t. Although Alter Ego’s eyes pointed straight at him, the avatar looked confused. Something whirred in the corner. Slowly, a security camera rotated on its axis, sweeping the room, finally stopping when the lens found Naegi and Kirigiri at their center. At the same time, the avatar literally brightened up.

“Oh, hello! I didn’t see you two come in. Is something wrong?”

“No, I wanted to see you,” Naegi said. “We didn’t get to talk much this morning.”

“Okay, I’m always happy to speak with you. What did you want to talk about?”

Oh. He wasn’t ready for this question yet. He could feel Kirigiri’s stare on the back of his neck, making it flush red. He naturally tried to cover that part of him, and then tried to cover up that action by pretending his neck was itchy.

“Alter Ego, do you remember being inside Ultimate Despair’s headquarters with me?”
“Some of my circuits were damaged when we escaped,” Alter Ego said, “but I was able to recover most of that data. Did you want to talk about that timeframe?”

He nodded, and then turned to Kirigiri. “You don’t need to stay with me. I know you’re trying to protect me, but I’ll be here for a while. Besides, I don’t think Kamukura-kun is planning to leave so I won’t be alone.”

The slight hesitation was the only sign that Kirigiri hadn’t realized that Kamukura had followed them. She said, “I don’t mind waiting.”

“Are you sure you don’t have anything else to do?” he asked. “I know Togami-kun will do his best to make sure everything’s running smoothly, but he doesn’t work very well with the others. I don’t want anything to happen because you were busy taking care of me.”

“Why are you trying to get rid of me?” she asked.

He froze. He had expected this conversation could go south, but he hadn’t expected her to confront him so aggressively. His calm evaporated. With it, it took all the logic and reasoning he had been going over on the trip to the bridge. His throat swallowed several times as it tried to moisten itself.

“I thought he explained that downstairs,” Kamukura said, a slight tilt to his head.

“Then why would he be okay with you here?” Kirigiri demanded.

“Because I was there, too,” Kamukura said blandly.

“Kamukura-kun... he doesn’t really count,” Naegi said softly. “He just... stands there all the time.”

“I’m perfectly capable of standing,” Kirigiri retorted.

“But nothing he talks about would change my view of him,” Kamukura said with a sense of finality that could only come from an Ultimate talent. Kirigiri seemed to hear that too, for she immediately went into an emotional lock-down and studied him.

Kirigiri turned her back completely on Kamukura. To Naegi, she said, “If you insist, I’ll be back for you later.”

He nodded. No doubt, he would get grilled when later came, but at least he had some privacy now. He didn’t mind that Kirigiri was babysitting him, but there were some things he couldn’t discuss in front of her. This was going to be one.

When Kirigiri was safely out of earshot (he opened the door and checked just to be sure), he turned to Kamukura. Obviously, Kamukura had some idea of what he wanted to do. Naegi couldn’t figure out why he had decided to help.

“Thanks,” he said carefully.

Kamukura nodded and then retreated to a dark, gloomy corner.

“Um, Naegi-kun, should we be having this conversation?” Alter Ego piped up timidly.

“Don’t worry, it’s not as bad as it sounds,” Naegi said with a wry smile. “Alter Ego, do you remember before Ultimate Despair? Like when we were at Hope’s Peak?”

“I remember everything from after when Father created me,” Alter Ego said. “I’m not the exact same copy that was with you while Ultimate Despair held you captive, but our source code is the same.”
“When you say you remember, what does that mean? Do you have an internal list of the dates and what happened each day, or...?"

“It depends on what equipment I was attached to. During the trip to Towa City, I didn’t have a camera, so I only have all the wifi and time data I was using. But that Monokumas I controlled had cameras behind its eyes, so I have video recordings.”

Slowly, he clenched his fists to stop them from shaking in excitement. “What about at Hope’s Peak?”

“Yes.” The avatar’s head bobbed up and down. “I extracted the footage Enoshima played to the outside world.”

That was what he needed to know, but to obfuscate his trail, he also asked, “If you were in the systems, is it possible you also got hold of footage from before the Tragedy?”

“No. Someone else must have erased that before I got access to the systems.”

Erased? It must have been Enoshima. Yet another reason to curse the Ultimate Despair’s name. True, he didn’t need those videos, but they would have been nice to have.

“I bet Asahina-san’s up here a lot, reliving those memories of her and Oogami-san. She misses her more than she admits.”

Alter Ego said, “No, she’s never asked. I don’t think any of them are aware I have that functionality. If it isn’t an inconvenience, could you tell them?”

Translation: it’s lonely up here. He couldn’t blame the poor guy. Kamukura made for a poor discussion partner.

“Sure. Do you know where the pool is?” Naegi asked.

“Leaving already?” Kamukura said.

Naegi turned away, trying to hide his smile. “Asahina-san and I have a date in the pool.”

Kamukura was still watching him. It was too much to hope that Kamukura didn’t know what he had been looking for, but when Kirigiri came asking Alter Ego about him, would it be enough? Would she think he was simply looking for memories of his lost time at Hope’s Peak?

Ah, well, if he didn’t fool her, he would surely find out. For now though, it was time to put the second step of his plan into motion.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Naegi isn't as innocent as they think he is.
Won't You?

Day 2, Noon

That was a big pool. When there was only one person inside, it must feel big and empty. Unless, naturally, Asahina Aoi happened to be that one person. She tore through the water so quickly that she created a wake five feet high, giving the impression of a giant water fight taking place. A mass of fine mist, stirred up by her ceaseless strokes, hovered over the center of the pool an saturated the nearby area with the smell of chlorine. It made Naegi’s eyes water until he grew used to it.

How Asahina saw him through that water wall was impossible to determine. She did at some point, though. He didn’t know when, for there wasn’t a change in her pace. That wake just kept coming his way and then near the edge of the pool, a massive geyser appeared and Asahina popped out the top. She landed and slid across the deck, smacking into him. They fell. Naegi, of course, took the brunt of it.

“I’m so sorry!” Asahina cried. She pulled him to his feet by before he was ready. “I’m just so excited. You’re here to swim with me, right?”

“Yep. And after, we can get doughnuts.”

“I knew you wanted doughnuts! Wait until I tell Kirigiri-san.”

Would that be a problem? Nah. It was obvious he was buttering her up, but that’s just what he was known for: going along with things. As long as Asahina didn’t say anything suspicious, Kirigiri probably wouldn’t think it was anything more.

Asahina said, “There’s some lawn chairs over there. You can leave your clothes there, unless you’re planning to swim in them.”

“Okay, okay. Give me a sec.”

He pulled his shirt over his head, shaking afterwards like a wet dog. The shoes went next, and then the shorts, leaving him in his plain black swim trunks.

“I’m ready. Asahina-san?”

“No,” she said swiftly. She startled suddenly, as if thrown out of a daydream. “Sit down. You’re not ready.”

Really? He checked quickly; yep, those were swim trunks and not boxers. He did as she said, puzzled as she rifled through a small backpack. Without warning, she turned around and tossed a bottle at him. He caught it, and then threw it a little into the air as if it had been hot.

“Well, don’t just look at it. Open it!” Asahina said.

She reached him just as Naegi opened the lid and turned the bottle upside down. Her hand slid over his, so that the suntan lotion he teased out landed in her palm instead. Then, she snatched the bottle away and hopped onto the section of lawn chair right behind him.
“I’ll give you ten minutes until you burn if I don’t do this.” He jumped violently when she squeezed
a cold wad onto his back. “Sorry. Seriously, Naegi-kun, did you think you could get away without
any protection?”

“How do you know I didn’t put some on before I came to find you?” he asked.

“I lived at the beach during the summer. I know when people are using suntan lotion.” He could hear
the roll of her eyes in that statement. “Did you get any sun while you were gone? Like, any at all?”

“I did,” he protested vehemently. “Not a whole lot, but . . . There wasn’t anything interesting outside
anyways. It was just rubble and dust. Why would I have wanted to go out there?”

“. . . Okay. Here’s the bottle. You can start working on your front while I get your back.”

She nudged the bottle into his thigh. There was still some lotion on the lid’s tip and he secretly
shifted so that he could compare it to his flesh. He wasn’t that pale. Asahina didn’t understand that
not everyone tanned as dark as she did.

She touched him. He been so busy comparing their colors that he had forgotten she was going to
touch him and dammit. Thankfully, she took his lurch as a reaction to her cold hands. She lingered
for a moment, letting him get used to the temperature, and then began to spread the lotion across his
back. Her fingers glided across his skin, silk-like in their softness. It left his back feeling clammy and
weird; his core twisted into a ball that kept growing smaller and tighter until his limbs stiffened from
the pain. Yet it wasn’t a bad feeling. It was good. It was nice.

When was the last time he had been touched so delicately (so innocently) like this?

He shuffled backwards, leaning into her touch. The weird feeling spread up to his throat, making it
hard to swallow. He wanted to tell her to stop because it was too much, and his chest was too tight
and there was too much building inside him and ready to burst; but even if his throat worked, he
didn’t remember how to speak. He dug his nails into his shins as a distraction, but those pinpricks of
pain were nothing to the ache tainting his clenched muscles.

“Here, I’ll get your face. Turn around.”

It was hard to do so when his limbs didn’t bend, but somehow, he shuffled. Asahina, humming
happily, squeezed out another wad and started with his cheek. The two fingers traced out a spiral,
and his brain went all gooey and swirly to match it. He closed his eyes as she got closer to them, and
something kicked his stomach from the inside when she reached the bridge of his nose. Were there
chemicals in this lotion? Because his nose was getting stuffy.

“Okay, let me get the other side.”

The other side of his face knew what was coming and somehow, that made it worse. Her touch
burned more, yet he craved the pain. He bit the inside of his cheek and leaned into her hand, wanting
it to hurt more.

“There, done. Now let’s go . . . You still haven’t done your front? What were you doing that whole
time?”

“Oh, s-sorry.” He didn’t move.

“Ugh, fine. I’ll turn around. Boys,” she muttered as she did so, slapping her hands over her eyes for
good measure.
Well, she’d know something was up if he didn’t do it himself. He looked down at his hands, where the wad he had squeezed out earlier was still waiting. He brought it up to his chest and began to rub. At first, he used large motions. Then he switched into small circles, rubbing deeper and deeper into his flesh as he clenched his jaw and tried to mimic the way Asahina’s hands had felt.

“Done,” he said afterwards, once he thought he was in control.

“Awesome. Swimming time, it is!” She grabbed his wrist playfully, swinging it like they were a couple on a date. “Last one in is a rotten egg.”

Of course, Asahina had the most beautiful swan dive. He... well, it wasn’t a complete belly flop. But it was enough to make Asahina wince, and swim over to check on him.

“Do you need to take a breather?” she asked sympathetically.

“I just got started,” he panted. “I’m fine.”

What followed was the most lopsided race in history. Asahina took her dear sweet time with the laziest backstroke he had ever seen. She leisurely floated in the pool and swam in giant circles, all the while keeping ahead while Naegi frantically dogpaddled after her. At last, she took pity on his poor soul and reminded him how to do the front crawl.

“O-one lap down,” he panted.

“Good job! Now it’s time for a break.”

“No, not yet.” He gently pushed her aside. “Komaru and I always used to race in the pool. I can do three laps no problem.”

“But . . .”

“If I beat you, I get the last donut!”

He kicked off. Asahina was saying something, but with his ears in the water and his arms breaking through the surface, he couldn’t hear. His chest was tight with tension, muscles stretched like a rubber band on the brink of snapping. But he had meant what he had said; he had plenty of childhood memories of him and Komaru frolicking in the water. That was all he could see as he aimed toward the distant edge through the lightheaded-ness.

Until something yanked hard on his hair and slithered around his neck. He could barely breathe as Asahina tightened the headlock and dragged him backwards toward the pool’s ledge. His first true gasp of air only came when she hauled him out of the water and threw him onto the deck. He landed on his side, arms shaking and unable to stand.

“. . . you’re going to drown, dummy!” she was saying. With her foot, she rolled him onto his back. “What was that about? What were you trying to prove?”

“I was fine,” Naegi said.

“Really? Cause you don’t look it.”

“Because you nearly strangled me,” he countered. “I was fine.”

“I’m a certified lifeguard. I know when people are starting to drown!”

“I was fine!” he snapped. “I’ve done this before. I know I can do it!”
The irritation faded from her face. “Oh, Naegi-kun . . .”

“I was fine!” First the suntan lotion, now this? When did he become such a baby?

Asahina sat down cross-legged across from him. She grabbed his arm, playing with that bone at the end of his wrist. She plucked at his skin.

“I know you can,” she said softly, “but you have to work up to it. No offense, but you’re a bit out of shape. Ultimate Despair didn’t let you exercise much, did they?”

“Nidai-kun and Owari-san were always working out,” Naegi muttered. “She shouldn’t have been because she didn’t eat anything, but she did anyways. I spent a lot of time with them.”

Asahina stared hard at him, like she was trying to tell him something. When he didn’t respond, she said, “But did you exercise with them?”

He looked away. “There was no way I could keep with them. They told me it was okay. I’d only slow them down.”

“Maybe that’s why they didn’t want you to work out, or maybe it was because . . .” she trailed off. “We don’t have to race, you know. Being the Ultimate Swimmer doesn’t mean I can’t relax and have fun. We can play volleyball!”

“Volleyball?” he repeated, glancing at the pool.

“Not like official volleyball with all the rules,” she said. She was already racing towards a ball. “Don’t tell me you’ve never played water volleyball! Don’t worry: it’s simple. Just hit the ball and don’t let it touch the water.”

She vaulted into the shallow end, and he was a little miffed at what he thought was patronization, until he realized that it would be very difficult to play volleyball in the deep end. He lowered himself into the water and – geez, why was his abdomen cramping so much? – and waded over to the center of what had been deemed his side.

“So, how was your talk with Alter Ego?” Asahina asked. “What did you talk about?”

\textit{Finally.}

“It was good. I was trying to figure out exactly which one I was talking to; I’ve seen him ‘die’ twice now, you know. So, I wanted to know what he still remembered.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. It’s hard to wrap my head around the idea that’s sometimes, there’s more than one of him. And then he’s creating backups, and reverting to earlier versions. . . It really makes my head spin.” As if eager to turn the conversation away from things she didn’t understand, Asahina whacked the ball hard. He dove out of the way.

He popped back up out of the water. “Uh, wanna take it easy on me?”

“Sorry!”

“No problem.” He waded over to the ball. “Did you know Alter Ego still has videos of everything that happened at Hope’s Peak? Everything the cameras saw, he saw. I think I’ll ask to see some of Maizono-san. I know what she did to me wasn’t right, but it wasn’t her fault; Monokuma made her do it. And I . . . I didn’t expect anyone would really die. That time I spent with her, I didn’t pay as much attention as I should have.”
There. The hook was baited. He watched her closely as he went through the motions of readying a serve. *Come on, Asahina-san. Bite!*

“Is that okay?” Asahina asked. “Isn’t that a little creepy?”

“I’m only going to ask for videos of the times where I was with her, so it’s not spying,” he said. “It’s the same thing they do at Western funerals: watch videos of the good times you spent together. I don’t think Maizono-san would mind at all.”

“Oh, I see.” Asahina looked in the direction of the bridge. She was still looking that way when she effortlessly returned Naegi’s serve, and he had no chance of rallying.

He moved sluggishly in the floating ball’s direction. “You’re thinking of her, aren’t you?”

She nodded. “It was stupid when everyone else was dying around us, but I never thought it would be her. She was so strong. . .”

“She was. To sacrifice her own life to bring us Hope took a lot of courage. Not a lot of people have the courage to make that choice.”

“I know. Sakura-chan was the bravest person I knew.” She set her shoulders; the mark of one who had made an irreversible decision. “You know what? You’re right. After dinner, I’m going to talk to Alter Ego and ask for videos, too!”

“He’ll like that,” Naegi said. “I think he’s lonely. Kamukura’s there, but as someone who used to live in his room, I can tell you that he’s pretty boring.”

Asahina winced. “Oh, I forgot Kamukura is always there! And he’s so creepy and sneaky that you can never tell when he comes in. I don’t want to watch those videos with him lurking around. Forget it; I’m not going to ask. Sorry for being such a downer today.”

“It’s okay.” *I was counting on it.* “Hagakure-kun had a cellphone that Alter Ego connected to. Maybe we could do something similar? Like use one of those handheld televisions. Then you could watch them in the safety of your room.”

“That would work, but where are going to get one? We’re fugitives now; even if they were available, we couldn’t walk into a store and buy one.”

“Then let’s make one ourselves.”

She half-glared at him skeptically. “Did you suddenly become an electronics master, because I don’t think that’s a summer camp project.”

“I couldn’t make it,” he admitted, “but Soda-kun could.”

For once, he scored a point on her, but only because she was too shocked to react to the incoming ball. “There’s no way he would –”

“He would if you told him it was for me,” Naegi said. “I know how you feel about them, but Soda-kun would never make anything to hurt me. If we ask for two and tell him one’s for me, he won’t know which one I’ll take and make them both safe.”

Asahina quickly scanned the area around them for eavesdroppers. “Naegi-kun, we can’t just . . .”

“Kirigiri-san let Pekoyama-san out, and I can say from firsthand experience that she’s much more
dangerous. Pekoyama-san never actually hurt me, but Soda-kun did.” He moved aside the bangs plastered to his forehead, letting her see that scar. “We’re not going nearly as far as Kirigiri-san did. If you’re worried he’ll break out while he’s working on them, just take away the tools whenever you leave. I can talk to him, too.”

Asahina hugged herself. “This is a really bad idea.”

He laughed. “I know it sounds crazy, but I always seem to get the best outcomes when I’m doing weird, crazy things, right? I guess that’s part of my talent.”

Still, she shook her head furiously. “There’s no way I’m going to trust someone like him!”

“You already have,” he pointed out. “You were willing to trust Ultimate Despair when you came to get me. Soda-kun wasn’t as bad as some of the people you teamed up with. It’s okay if you don’t trust him. I’m the one proposing this, so it’s more about trusting me.”

Asahina looked away. Naegi settled back and waited patiently.

“If anyone finds out . . .”

“They won’t. Trust me. Kamukura-kun never tells anyone anything. And you can just ask Alter Ego not to tell. He’s not going to say no unless someone ordered him otherwise and if they did, then at least he’ll warn you about it.”

“. . . It’s just for videos of our friends, right?”

“Of course,” he said.

“I need to think about it,” she said. “Can we go back to playing volleyball?”

“If that’s what you want.” He smiled. “I would never want to make you uncomfortable.”

If Asahina hit the ball even harder now, Naegi didn’t comment. He settled into the game, fully relaxed. There was nothing more he could do now. The wheels had been set in motion. Was this how Enoshima had felt? Was this how Komaeda had felt?

Their game, while it began with tension, slowly eased into something more relaxed. But fragile balance couldn’t last forever. Out of nowhere, Kirigiri cleared her throat, and they looked up to see her watching them critically. Her arms were crossed over her chest in a standard ‘I am not pleased’ pose.

“I thought you said you would be in the bridge,” Kirigiri said to him.

“I was,” Naegi answered. “But I promised this morning that I was going to swim with Asahina-san.”

“Strange. I remember Asahina saying she was going to swim with you, but no promise from you.”

“. . . Yes?”

Her mouth twisted. “Never mind.”

“Kamukura-kun brought me here. I didn’t know the way,” Naegi lied. Because he was pretty sure that him walking around on his own was her trigger, and although it was a lie, Kamukura would probably back him up out of apathy if Kirigiri asked him.

“The ship is very confusing,” Kirigiri said. “It’s easy to get lost. That’s why you should wait for me.”
“You wanna join?” Asahina raised the ball.

Naegi’s hand shot into the air. “My team! Called it!”

They both stared at him.

Naegi laughed awkwardly. “I’m getting my butt kicked.”

Kirigiri smirked. “Very well. Let’s see if we can turn this around, shall we?”

(They didn’t even come close.)

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Kamukura isn't the only ally holding back information.
Said the Cannibal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 2, Late Afternoon

“Come on, where is it? I know I packed some. Man, did Kirigiri-chi go through my stuff already? I knew I should have stuffed it in the mattress . . . Oh, wait. I did!”

With a relieved sigh, Hagakure slid out from the bottom of his closet, back cracking as he straightened up. He stepped over the rumpled coat on the ground, tiptoed his way between the tarot cards he had dropped earlier, and then dropped to his knees next to the bed. He felt the underside of the mattress for the slit. Hah! Take that, coppers! Kirigiri would never find his hidey-hole unless she had packed a drug dog in her suitcase.

“There’s the good stuff!”

You could never be too sure Kirigiri wasn’t watching, so he rolled the good stuff up in his shirt before tiptoeing into the corner of his room. He cupped his hand over the blunt’s end to protect the small flame, and then raised his lighter.

Kirigiri was watching! She was! Why else would someone be knocking on his door right now? Oh man, he knew from experience what the cops were like; if he didn’t answer, Kirigiri would kick down the door and send him the bill.

Thinking quickly, he hid the blunt in his hair, and then wrapped an old shirt around it to keep the smoke in. He whistled loudly – because he was relaxed and not doing anything suspicious, of course! – and strolled over to the door. He opened it.

“Hey, Hagakure-kun. Is this a bad . . . What are you doing?” Asahina asked, squinting up at him.

“She was! Why else would someone be knocking on his door right now? Oh man, he knew from experience what the cops were like; if he didn’t answer, Kirigiri would kick down the door and send him the bill.

Thinking quickly, he hid the blunt in his hair, and then wrapped an old shirt around it to keep the smoke in. He whistled loudly – because he was relaxed and not doing anything suspicious, of course! – and strolled over to the door. He opened it.

“Hey, Hagakure-kun. Is this a bad . . . What are you doing?” Asahina asked, squinting up at him.

“Me? I’m, uh . . .” She was asking about the shirt. He knew that had been a bad idea. “I just took a shower, and I forgot to grab a towel for my hair. Yep. That’s it.”

“You’re not even wet.”

“. . . Okay, you got me.” He ripped the shirt off and threw it to the ground. “I thought you were Kirigiri-chi.”

“Oh, I get it.” Asahina smiled craftily. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell. Actually, I was hoping that you did have some . . .”

He threw the door open. “C’mon in! You want a smoke?”

“And ruin my lungs for swimming? No thanks.” Asahina walked right in and threw herself onto his bed. Lying like a starfish, she groaned loud and long. “But if you have edibles, I’m down. I was just hanging out with Naegi-kun.”

“Naegi, huh? It’s crazy to think that little guy could cause so much stress.”

“No, this isn’t his fault – well, it kind of is – but he was fine. Like, really fine. I know Kirigiri-san’s a lot smarter than me, but I really don’t understand why she’s freaking out so much. Anyways, he gave
me something to think about and it’s stressing me out a lot.”

“I’m here if you want to go over your options,” Hagakure said, rifling through his dresser. Once he found the gummies, he palmed them. “If you want to complain about Kirigiri-chi, you gotta make sure she’s not outside first. She’s still pretty out of whack so, heh, she kinda scares me a little.”

“What do you mean she’s out of whack?”

“You didn’t notice? Ever since she came back after finding Naegi-kun, her energies have been all crazy. I keep telling her she should attend one of my sessions and get everything back in balance, but she won’t listen.”

“That’s because you were probably going to charge her!”

“Hey, it takes a lot of work to get these ready!” he protested, slapping on of his bigger crystals. “Not everyone can siphon the planet’s aura and... Ack!”

In a truly heroic action, Hagakure dove to the floor just in time to keep said crystal from hitting the ground. Asahina offered courtesy applause.

Hagakure huffed. “I just saved you a couple thousand so that’s right: clap!”

“Me?”

“I wouldn’t have knocked it over if you hadn’t been here, so yes, you!”

They bickered about that for a few minutes, even though Hagakure knew he was right and Asahina was just being a cheap customer (remind him not to offer her a two-for-one deal!) They ended up in an uneasy peace where both had yet to admit fault.

“Here.” He tossed a gummy at her.

She swallowed it, and then he sat back and popped one into his own mouth. It always took a while to seep in, so they relaxed and settled into that haze of anticipation.

“Hey, Hagakure-kun, do you ever think about... you know?”

Shit! How did she know about that?

“Like, I know nobody’s forgotten about what happened, but no one ever talks about it either. It’s like we’re pretending that we never got our memories back and everyone who died were strangers. I tried to talk about it once with Kirigiri-san, but I don’t think she was very happy about it.”

Oh, she was talking about that, not that. What a relief!

“I think everyone’s coping in their own way,” he said. “Getting our memories back was heavy. It’s probably a good thing Naegi-kun didn’t get his back.”

“It feels like we’re trying to leave them behind,” Asahina said. “Like they didn’t matter.”

“If you feel strongly about it, then they mattered to you,” Hagakure said. “If they mattered to you, then they mattered, too.”

“Yeah. That makes sense. Wow, you’re kinda smart when you’re high.”

He gave her a limp thumbs-up. “Years of practice.”
Asahina sprawled out on her back again. “You know what? I’m going to do it. I’m going to get those videos and I’m going to watch them and I don’t care if anyone thinks it’s weird!”

“You can cook, too? Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Kirigiri said briskly. “Cooking isn’t difficult as long as you follow the recipe. I had plenty of time to practice, as well; Grandfather was often out on cases when I was younger, and wasn’t home to prepare dinner for me.”

“You’re amazing,” Naegi gushed. “I’ve tried to cook a couple of times. It was okay, but it wasn’t good.”

“It was average, I’m assuming,” she said. “Nevertheless, until Hanamura-kun recovers, it’s likely that our class will do most of the cooking. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to practice. You’ll find, too, that it’s more satisfying to eat food you personally prepared.”

“Ah,” he said neutrally. He looked around at the empty kitchen, as if thinking of fleeing. She wondered if these were the issues Tsumiki had mentioned popping up, and if he had been planning to skip this meal. “So, what are we making?”

“I thought I’d let you decide today. You can find all the available ingredients on here.” She powered on the computer screen. Once, it had been a dining room tool used to keep track of all the tables and their orders. Now, it was their electronic records.

“Hello!” Alter Ego shouted, his chef’s hat bouncing on his head. “Your handy kitchen assistant, Chef Fujisaki, is awake!”

“Hi again, Alter Ego,” Naegi said cheerfully. “You have a mustache. I think you might want to make it curl more at the end if you’re going for a French chef.”

“Merci!” In a flash, the mustache changed to match his suggestion. “What can I help you prepare today?”

Naegi immediately looked to her for help. She stared back. Getting the hint, Naegi wandered over to the cabinet and opened it, slowly checking out everything that was inside. “Uh... Alter Ego, what kind of meat do we have?”

Alter Ego said. “We have pork, fish, duck and poultry. Oh, I should also mention that serving human is not permitted here!”

Internally, Kirigiri sighed. She was going to have talk to Alter Ego about appropriate things to say, especially in front of Naegi. Because of that thought, she was extremely surprised (and alarmed) when Naegi’s only reaction was to say, “Really? I thought that would be the easiest to get.”

“It doesn’t matter. We don’t serve it!”

Had these two coordinated a prank? It seemed like the most likely explanation, because she wasn’t coming up with any other answers.

“It’s just meat.” Naegi took out a spice container and checked it over, looking bewildered after he read the name.

“It is, and in some cultures, cannibalism is perfectly acceptable. However, in our culture, cannibalism is considered unhygienic and highly offensive. There’s no reason to serve human meat when there’s
lots of other meats that won’t upset anyone.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense.” Naegi put the container back and examined another.

“. . . Makoto, why don’t you check out the freezer in the back? That’s where we keep all the meat; it may give you inspiration.”

“Oh, okay.” he said eagerly, pleased to be given directions.

She waited until Naegi was securely behind the heavy fridge door.

“Alter Ego, what was that?” she demanded. “Why would you bring up cannibalism?”

“It seemed like a good time to do so,” Alter Ego said. He smiled brightly. “It’s better to handle it now so he doesn’t bring it up later and upset everyone.”

“Why would he ever bring it up?” Although no one was there to see her, she still fought the rising emotion and the paling of her skin. “Is that what they fed him?”

“I’m not aware of any occasion where Naegi-kun consumed human flesh. But his friend, Tanaka Gundham, did and they convinced him it was okay.”

She leaned her weight against the counter and squeezed the ledge. Thank god it hadn’t been him, at least. That scenario was not something she had ever imagined.

Kirigiri asked, “Alter Ego, did you you witness this? Or did he tell you?”

“Neither!” Alter Ego said cheerfully.

“If that’s the case, then how did you know about this?”

“Kamukura-kun told me,” Alter Ego said.

By the time he finished that sentence, she had pushed off the counter and was back before the computer screen. She grabbed both sides of it, even though Alter Ego could neither see nor feel her.

“Kamukura-kun told you about this? What else did he tell you?”

Alter Ego shook his head. “I’m sorry, Kirigiri-san, but I was instructed not to share that information with you.”

But he had told Alter Ego something. Kamukura had decided to share his knowledge. With the computer.

Naegi came running up with a slab of meat. “Kyoko-san, how about this?”

“It’s fine,” she said, barely looking.

Naegi went to Alter Ego afterwards, and the two worked together at piecing together a plan for dinner. Kirigiri stood back, watched, listened, wondered if she would hear enough clues to piece together the rest of Naegi’s story. They stayed on subject though, leaving her with nothing to grasp at. She felt like a dog snapping at a laser beam, unable to understand why it felt nothing between its teeth.

“I think I’m ready,” Naegi announced. “Do you want to help?”
“Yes, I’ll guide you,” she said. She followed Naegi to the cutting boards, keeping her eyes trained on the back of his head. He really was small. Not only in height, but in width. Most of the wardrobe they had recovered had been scavenged from Kuzuryu Fuyihiko in the first place and even still, it didn’t fit right; always a shade too large. He had that child-like aura of wonder, innocent and eager-to-please, that was somehow draining. Even the way he moved, the way he spoke, the way he looked at you and smiled seemed years younger than he was.

(And sometimes, it seemed rehearsed.)

Naegi was gathering the vegetables together. It would have been better to prepare the pork and set it to bake first since that would take longer, but she’d let him learn from experience. He shoved the carrots to the side, toward her, while he concentrated his own knife on the celery. Some feeling pin-pricked up her spine, but she steadfastly ignored it.

“How your friend Tanaka likes to eat human flesh,” she said, phrasing that so he would think she had figured it out for herself. “Did that happen often?”

“I don’t know,” Naegi said. He sliced into the celery stalk, lopping off one chunk after the other. “I only saw it once, and I don’t think I was supposed to. I . . . I think I wanted to see if he wanted cake. Pekoyama-san tried to stop me, but I ran into him . . .”

The chopping stopped. Naegi stared into space. He shook his head and started up again.

“I only saw it once,” Naegi repeated. “Tanaka-kun usually ate with the rest of us, so unless Hanamura-kun made him something different to eat, I’m not too sure how often he ate bodies.”

A small part of her wanted to apologize to him for what he had experienced, but Naegi didn’t seem to see anything wrong with it. She doubted he would understand why she was apologizing.

“Pekoyama-san was there with you at the time,” she repeated.

“Yes. She was my bodyguard, so it’s only natural she was. We spent a lot of time together,” he remarked.

“Your bodyguard? Wasn’t she Kuzuryu-kun’s bodyguard?” More likely than not, Pekoyama hadn’t been a true bodyguard, but a guard meant to ensure Naegi stayed under lock and key.

“She was, but after an assassin got in and almost killed me, Kuzuryu lent her to me. I shouldn’t say it like that,” he suddenly mumbled. “You can’t lend people.”

“I’m glad we agree on that,” she said distantly. “Did she end up protecting you from anything?”

“No one broke in after that, so she didn’t need to,” he said. “Although, she . . . Never mind. I think I’m remembering wrong.”

He wasn’t paying close enough attention to the knife and ending up chopping past the celery and swishing it through open air. The shockwave vibrated through the handle, making him start. Quickly, he laughed it off and moved to the next stalk. Kirigiri, though, didn’t shake off the shock so quickly and deliberately had to twitch her muscles to break out of it.

“Makoto,” she said, “you’re a poor liar.”

He stilled. “Oh? You think so?”

“I did say you were an open book once. Tell me: what did Pekoyama-san do?”
Naegi gave her a hooded look that was hard to decipher. He moved the celery stalk into place, readied the knife, and began chopping. “We tried to escape once. I don’t think she would have come all the way with me, but we ran outside together. It didn’t work out.”

“You got out?” she said slowly. “Is this the time you told me about on the phone?”

“No,” he said. “I got out three times before that. The first time, I saw the Imposter and thought he was Togami-kun. The second time, I literally ran outside right into the army. The third. . . it doesn’t matter.”

“I beg to differ. I think it matters very much, especially since this was an escape a member of Ultimate Despair helped you with.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’s suspicious, isn’t it, that your escape failed when it was assisted by someone who should know the inner workings of Ultimate Despair,” Kirigiri said. “One might wonder whether it was an attempt at demotivation, rather than a genuine act of mercy.”

“You think she . . . ? That’s wrong!” Naegi whirled around and for that split second before he dropped the knife, every cell in her body flashed a warning. “Pekoyama-san wouldn’t trick me like that. She would never do that. Nothing that happened was her fault. There was no way for her to know that . . .”

“That what?” she pressed.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said again.

“Repeating that doesn’t make it true,” she countered. “It’s clear to me that it does matter. If it’s because of a mistake you made, I’m not going to blame you. You shouldn’t have been in that situation in the first place.”

Naegi shook his head. “I can’t. You wouldn’t like it.”

“I dislike anything that caused you harm or inconvenience. However, I am a detective; it’s my job to put those feelings aside to evaluate the facts before me. What I would feel about this is irrelevant.”

“I can’t.”

Kirigiri had dealt with plenty of uncooperative witnesses in her past. But the ones that were always hardest to crack were those who didn’t defend themselves, who didn’t respond or speak. Thankfully, Naegi was doing that much or she would be facing an entirely different problem. She could read his body language: raised shoulders and a curled in chin, angled away from her – it was classic defensive instinct, an unconscious attempt to shield his vital organs. Naegi felt threatened. Naegi was afraid. It appeared that even with Ultimate Despair safely locked away, he feared their reprisal.

“Makoto.” She squeezed his shoulder. It was unusual for her and he knew it too, for he twitched and almost moved away. “You’re safe. I’m not going to repeat whatever you tell me. Nobody is going to hurt you.”

“That’s what everyone always says, isn’t it?” he bit out bitterly.

She pulled back, startled. He seemed to be, too. She cleared her throat and cut up a carrot because for once, she had no idea how to respond.
“I can’t,” he said softly, and it took for a second to realize he was continuing their conversation.

“We both know that isn’t true,” she answered. “I thought you said Ultimate Despair would never harm you.”

“They wouldn’t. What does that have to do with anything?”

The question was honest. But that meant . . . This wasn’t about Ultimate Despair’s wrath? In that case, why wasn’t he talking?

“. . . Komaeda.” She breathed. Of course. “It was Komaeda’s fault, wasn’t it?”

“Komaeda-kun? What does he have to do with this?” Her gaze flashed to the knife again, held tight in Naegi’s clenched fist. “Why are you blaming him?”

“Who else would you be protecting?” she asked. “There’s no one you care about as much as him.”

“That’s . . . b-bullshit! So, what if I do? He isn’t the only person I care about! He’s not the one I’m protecting.”

“But there is someone you are protecting,” she observed.

He blinked. “I walked into that one.”

She smiled. “You did. Go ahead: keep talking. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

His refusal was a bit firmer, had a bit more anger.

“Makoto.” She raised her voice, too. “How long do you intend to drag this out? Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but the one thing a detective excels at is discovering the truth. Are you going to give that to me, or are you going to try another lie?”

He backed away from her, staring at the ground, but he had left the knife behind. She closed the distance.

“I am willing to be patient with you, but that doesn’t apply to when you’re deliberately deceiving me. If you want to treat me as an adversary, then I will respond appropriately.” She didn’t like threatening him, but this was about more than him. This was about the safety of everyone on this boat, and he had no right to jeopardize that. Naegi couldn’t keep waffling between their class and Ultimate Despair. He couldn’t keep pretending that everything was okay.

He seemed to be ignoring her. Apart from backing away straight into a wall, that is. She closed the distance again. Keep the pressure on. Throw accusations until they were on the defensive. That was how to crack a suspect.

“Makoto, I am not a good enemy to have.”

He twitched, tips of his teeth showing in a half-formed grimace.

“Kirisaki, a word?”

Hm? Had Kamukura sensed his monopoly on secrets was about to break?

“We’ll talk later,” she said to Kamukura.

“No. We will talk now.”
“Being the most talented doesn’t put you in charge,” she said sternly. “In fact, one might argue that your complete lack of social skills makes you the least qualified to direct this.”

“None of that is relevant,” Kamukura said.

“What makes you say that?” She turned her head, so she could watch his reaction.

“Why do you think?”

She waited to see if he would enlighten her. He made no move, however, and as she hated to jump to conclusions, she simply had to accept that she didn’t understand what he meant. So be it. If he intended to ignore the conversation, then she would ignore him.

“. . . Makoto?” She blinked. He had been here just a second ago.

“He believes you are angry with him,” Kamukura observed. “You shouldn’t get angry with him.”

“If I’m angry at someone, it’s not him,” she said pointedly.

“Naegi-kun isn’t as blind as he wishes he was,” Kamukura said. “He understands how fragile some things are. Not all secrets are malicious.”

“You know what it was, don’t you?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Then how do I know you’re not protecting yourself?”

“You don’t.” Kamukura said, “This is not a case, Kirigiri, and those secrets belong to him.”

“Naegi-kun’s feelings do not override the lives of those upon this ship. The Naegi-kun I knew would understand that.”

“Do you still not see the problem here?” Kamukura asked. “Do you not understand why you will fail?”

“Do you intend to actually tell me anything?”

He shook his head. “Not until you stop lying to yourself.”

And he was gone. Just like Naegi. Kirigiri stared at that closing door, thought about pursuit (of which one, was the real question), then glanced back at the uncut vegetables. She sighed. The others would be by in about forty minutes to help, as they always were. She had only begun preparations now so Naegi and her could have that private time.

She picked up her knife and began cutting.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Naegi decides Pekoyama's being too antisocial
Day 2, Evening

It had been a long time since she had been on a ship. Pekoyama had never liked ships. No matter how experienced the crew or advanced the technology, there was no such thing as a safe ship. Mother Nature, if she so desired it, always found a way to seep through the cracks. You could not fight the ocean; a sword would be swept away in the smallest current. Those base fears of her were true for all methods of transportation, but she always considered ships the worst. On land, at least there was a chance of escape. In the air, at least it would be fast. A ship with compromised lifeboats was neither.

She jumped when her bedroom door slammed open, turning her head just in time for the mattress springs to creak as a small figure landed upon them. Naegi, having underestimated his momentum, rolled across the bed and fell off the other side.

“Ouch,” he said.

“Naegi-kun. Are you okay?” She reached out to help him up, smoothing back a frown when he didn’t accept it.

He said, “Fine.”

He did look unhurt, but there was the matter of him hunkering behind her bed like a soldier hiding from an artillery barrage. While she watched the doorway through her peripheral vision, she began to make her way toward the desk. The chair there was wooden, and she was reasonably confident she could break off a leg to wield, if need be.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Naegi said unconvincingly from his hiding place.

She made a sound of acknowledgment and leaned to the side. She could see the hall outside her room and found no suspicious persons or shadows. Carefully, she eased her way backwards toward the bed.

“What are you really doing here?”

“Nothing. Aren’t I allowed to visit?” She let the silence linger and that finally broke him. “Kirisu-san keeps following me everywhere.”

“I see.” She didn’t understand where Naegi was going with this. Did he not like Kirigiri as much as she had assumed?

“I’m not trying to say anything about you,” he said, “or her. She’s mad at me. She keeps asking questions and I can’t answer them, and then she gets angry.”

That made more sense. To her trained eye, he seemed to be dealing with it well. Well, perhaps not well in the normal sense, but well considering some of the fits she had watched him throw in the past. However, he was avoiding eye contact and kept licking his lips nervously, all signs of a person...
on the brink of a much more volatile reaction.

“If she was angry, I highly doubt it was personal,” Pekoyama told him kindly. “Kirigiri is a professional private detective, and my understanding is that she conducted her own interviews. Psychological pressure is an incredibly valuable interrogation tool. My own experiences support this.”

Naegi took some time to answer. “You don’t think she’s mad at me?”

“If the situation was an interrogation, then I do not,” Pekoyama said.

“But last time I kept things from her, when I saw Oogami-san fighting Monokuma, she got mad at me. She wouldn’t talk to me for days.”

“Has she stopped talking to you this time, as well?”

“Um. . . I don’t know. I. . . I didn’t stick around.” He poked his head over the top of her bed – a good sign that meant he was starting to relax. “I’m surprised you’re defending her. Kuzuryu-kun implied you two didn’t like her.”

“Kirigiri is not my friend,” Pekoyama said. “However, the Yakuza studies her kind enough that I can understand some of her actions.”

Naegi’s thoughtful frown had become sadder and droopier. Like a whipped puppy, he said with big eyes, “Is there anything I can say to change your mind? You know, about the whole not-liking-her thing?”

“No.”

She was surprised Naegi dropped that topic so quickly. That quickly turned to suspicion. If there was anything that Naegi liked best, it was making friends – or making friends make friends. Surely, he would work later on some plot to bring her and Kirigiri together.

For now though, Naegi turned his attention to other things. “But. . . she’s not mad at me?”

“She is not.” Pekoyama didn’t know that, but she did know that if the detective was angry, she would hide it.

Naegi seemed to trust her answer. He slithered out from behind the bed, choosing to take over her mattress instead. “What have you been doing this entire time?”

“Meditating,” Pekoyama said promptly.

Naegi blinked, and then peered at her shrewdly. “That’s a really fancy way of saying you’ve been hiding in your room. Pekoyama-san, they’re never going to like you if you keep avoiding them.”

“Why does it matter? I have my class and you. What else do I need?”

Naegi stared at her for a while before shaking his head. “Maybe, but you’re going to be living with them for what might be a long time.”

She sighed. “You need to understand. You were able to force friendship upon my class with simple persistence, but this is a different situation. Enoshima ordered my class to keep you alive and close; there are no such orders controlling your classmates. They do not want to be my friend. Trying to force this upon them is only going to antagonize them. The best way to keep the peace is to keep my
“But you were like that, too!” he shot back, rolling up to his knees. “You thought I was like Enoshima when we first met, but then you realized you were wrong. They think you’re planning to attack them once they let your guard down, but they’re wrong, too. They haven’t realized that yet.”

“It would be much harder for them than it was for me,” Pekoyama said. “You have no memories of the world after the Tragedy. You have no idea what we left behind.”

“Then maybe we should start with someone else who doesn’t know,” Naegi said. “Komaru was locked up in an apartment for most of that time. She doesn’t really understand what the world was like either, right?”

“Naegi-kun. . .” He wasn’t going to give up, wasn’t he? Of course not. Naegi never did that.

“Haven’t you learned not to write us Naegis off,” he said cheekily. “I’m not saying you have to become best friends, but I am going to say you have to give her a chance.”

“Fine,” she said. She could agree to this because she knew something Naegi didn’t seem to: Komaru resented her brother’s kidnappers and wasn’t going to give her that chance.

“Great! Uh, is Kirigiri-san out there? I don’t think she’s going to approve.”

She checked the hall as he requested. “She’s not there.”

“Great!” He grabbed her wrist and pulled her out of the room and how could someone with such a small frame be so strong? “Let’s go find my sister!”

If he thought he could get away with it, Naegi would have made them run through the hallway. But even with the way he goaded her to move quicker, she didn’t and maintained a leisurely place. Naegi, unable to take it, abandoned her once they were in the proper hallway and hammered on Komaru’s door. He knocked in sporadic groups of three until she answered.

“Makoto? Should you be . . . ? Uh, it’s you!”

Komaru having peered down the hall, pointed at Pekoyama with a gasp. She retreated into her bedroom until just her head was peeking out.

Naegi either didn’t notice or ignored his sister’s fear. “You’ve met Pekoyama-san before, right?”

“I guess, but she didn’t say anything,” Komaru muttered. She squeaked and fled a little more into her room when she caught Pekoyama’s eye. “She’s staring at me.”

“She does that,” Naegi said, peering back at Pekoyama. “She’s kind of like Kirigiri-san, but without all the questions.”

“So, she’s just bossy?” Komaru asked with dread.

“No! I mean Kirigiri-san isn’t bossy either. . . I think she worries a lot more than she admits, but she doesn’t like to talk about anything until she’s absolutely sure about it. So when she tells people to do things, no one understands why and they think she’s bossy. And Pekoyama-san isn’t bossy either,” he added as an afterthought. He smiled wide. “Do you mind if we come in?”

Say yes.

“No.” Komaru stepped aside.
Naegi strolled inside and hopped onto the foot of the bed as if he lived there. As for her and Komaru, they stared at each other, and then Komaru half-jogged, half-walked to the other side of the bed and claimed that. Pekoyama remained standing in the middle of the room. It was fine; she could react faster to unwanted intrusions when she was standing.

“Tell her about yourself,” Naegi said, nudging Komaru with his elbow.

“I’m Naegi’s sister, Naegi Komaru,” Komaru said after a pause. “Nice to meet you.”

Pekoyama wasn’t sure why they were reintroducing themselves, but she humoured Komaru. For Naegi’s sake. “I am Pekoyama Peko, the Ultimate Swordswoman.”

Komaru laughed awkwardly. “Oh. I’m not an Ultimate. I don’t have any kind of special talent – not even luck like my brother! Although, maybe I would have won the lottery, too, but school ended forever before it was my turn. There’s nothing special about me – ow! Makoto, why is your elbow so sharp? – Okay, I did stop Towa Monaca’s evil plan.”

“. . . Who?” Pekoyama asked.

Komaru drooped. “You don’t know her? But she was a big fan of despair! She was even planning to create Enoshima’s heir. Somehow. Honestly, I’m not sure how she expected that plan to work. . .”

“You never did tell me what her plan to create the heir was,” Naegi said. His sister’s pupils immediately widened.

“Ah! That’s because. . . because it didn’t matter! I think she thought she could just, you know, talk someone into becoming like Enoshima. Which is really crazy because who would ever want to become an evil person like that? Towa must have been desperate. I bet she was just trying out a bunch of things hoping one would work.” Komaru said that all in a rush, and then burst into the most strained laughter Pekoyama had ever heard. Naegi, eyebrows raised, exchanged a glance with her.

“Alright, Komaru,” Naegi said with the distinct tone of an older sibling indulging the younger one. “You’re right: she sounds completely insane.”

Komaru’s jaw was clenched into a smile. Naegi, leaning against the bedframe, feet kicking off the side of the bed, beamed in a way that could only be meant to tease.

“You really didn’t know her?” Komaru said quickly to Pekoyama.

“I made a point of not getting to know outsiders associated with Ultimate Despair,” Pekoyama said sternly.

“Kirisaki-san mentioned something about that. I think she said that you were never with Ultimate Despair.”

“No, that is incorrect. I never fell into despair, but I was indeed a member of Ultimate Despair.” She frowned at the memory. “That was where my Young Master stayed and thus, so did I.”

For some reason, Komaru appeared extremely uncomfortable. Naegi scooched over and said to her, “Pekoyama-san is Kuzuryu-kun’s bodyguard. It’s not another Togami-kun and Fukawa-san situation.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Komaru gasped.

It was purely reflective, the move Pekoyama was about to make to correct Naegi’s statement about
only being a bodyguard. Only when she opened her mouth, he read her mind and gave her that rare, but very fierce glare he donned whenever he argued with Kuzuryu about her. She kept silent.

“But your eyes…” Komaru said weakly.

Pekoyama took her glasses off and checked her reflection until she saw what the problem was. “I was born with red eyes.”

Komaru made a thoughtful noise and continued to stare into her eyes, apparently not realizing it was impolite. Naegi looked like he wanted to clap.

“I need to go to the washroom!” Naegi blurted out. He hopped off the bed and walked backwards toward the door. “I’ll be back soon. Don’t go anywhere!”

And he was off. Komaru scowled at the empty doorframe.

“That jerk!” she said. “I know he’s lying. He’s trying to get us to hang out alone.”

Komaru crossed her arms and sat there, prepared to wait in silence until her brother returned. It took less than a minute before the quiet got to her.

Komaru said, “So, if you weren’t in despair, then does that mean you didn’t help with . . . you know.”

“Only Komaeda Nagito was involved with his kidnapping,” Pekoyama said. “However, once the rest of us were alerted to Naegi-kun’s presence . . . We all played a part in what happened to him.”

Komaru glanced at Pekoyama’s shoulders. Pekoyama knew that gesture; it was someone checking to make sure Pekoyama didn’t have her sword.

“I followed orders,” Pekoyama continued. “It was easy, at first. Your brother was flaunted as the heir to Enoshima, and I treated him as thus: as something the world would be better off without. But even after I realized that was a lie, there were too many dangers. There were too many fronts to defend him properly, and everyone – even Naegi-kun himself – was his enemy.”

“Don’t blame this on him!” Komaru snapped. “Don’t ever say this is his fault!”

“My apologies. That was not my intent.” Pekoyama gazed out the porthole and over the ocean. “Your brother is an extraordinary person. He refuses to lose his hold on the light that everyone else has lost, and forgives those who had done nothing to deserve it. That kind of strength, the only person I knew who had anything like that power was Nanami-san. I . . . I am sorry that I failed to protect him.”

They were looking away from each other: Pekoyama at the sea, and Komaru at the wall. Thus, Pekoyama almost missed Komaru’s small whisper:

“Thank you.”

She nodded, even though Komaru couldn’t see. “Your brother always had his champions. Unfortunately, Komaeda-kun found him first, and the damage was done. I hope he can find peace with you.”

“He will,” Komaru said. “I won’t stop trying until he does! Even if I have to beat him up again!”

“. . . Is that something that happened often?” Pekoyama asked after a long beat.
“Um, well… He knew my favourite show is always at seven on Wednesday and Mondays and he kept taking the remote anyways. I wasn’t really beating him up.” She pumped her first. “I was standing up for what’s right!”

Pekoyama quickly checked out Komaru’s build. Yes, she could believe Naegi would lose a fight to his sister.

In the hall, there was a noise and voices. The voices immediately dropped in volume, and she naturally went to check it out. It was only Naegi and his friend, Asahina. They were whispering.

“Oh, that’s Asahina-san,” Komaru piped up beside her. “She’s really nice. All my brother’s friends are! Except Togami-kun can be a real jerk sometimes, and Fukawa-san can be rude until you get to know her. And Hagakure-kun’s kind of selfish, and Kirigiri-san’s weird... Huh. I guess only Asahina-san is nice.”

“Kirigiri-san is weird?” Pekoyama had many words she could use to describe Kirigiri Kyoko, few of them pleasant, but weird was not one of them.

“She is!” Komaru said defensively. “When she got back the first time after finding Makoto, she barely told us anything about what had happened – not even me! And now that we got him back, she keeps getting mad at us for wanting to hang out with him. She keeps telling me I’m not allowed to be around him. It’s stupid. And there she is.”

Just as Komaru said, Kirigiri was marching down the hall straight toward Naegi and Asahina. She didn’t need Komaru to know there were elements of truth to her story; Naegi himself, upon seeing Kirigiri had lapsed into a more neutral and defensive stance. He didn’t loosen it when Kirigiri began to scold him, tightening up instead when Kirigiri looked down the hall and saw Komaru and Pekoyama. She couldn’t quite make out Kirigiri’s words, but the sharp whip to them and Asahina suddenly stepping forward made it obvious what the conversation’s tone was.

“See what I mean?” Komaru complained.

Pekoyama didn’t say anything, unsure what to think. She hadn’t known Kirigiri well in school, except as an adversary. However, this did strike her as unusual behaviour. Usually, Kirigiri was content to let others live their lives, unless it came into conflict with the law. However, she was confident in her assessment that despite her odd behaviour, Kirigiri wouldn’t hurt Naegi.

“It’s stupid,” Komaru griped. “He’s my brother; I don’t care if he’s gotten weird. She says it’s because I don’t know how to handle him, but how would she know? He’s only been here two days, and she hasn’t spent much more time with him than we have.”

“Kirigiri-san always worked alone,” Pekoyama said.

“She’s working with Kamukura-kun, now.”

“No, she is working for him,” Pekoyama corrected. “I doubt Kamukura-kun is capable of truly working with someone.”

“Who is he, anyways?” Komaru asked. “Makoto never talked about him at school. I met Kamukura-kun because he randomly broke into my apartment one day. I guess he heard about me from Makoto.”

“Kamukura-kun is the product of an experiment by Hope’s Peak,” Pekoyama said. “The purpose of Hope’s Peak was not only to cultivate talent, but to study it as well. While my class was in their first year, Hope’s Peak decided to put that research into practice, and create what can only be described...
as a superhuman – a person with all the talents that had preceded him in that school.”

“Does that mean he was grown in a test tube?” Komaru asked with horror.

“I don’t know what he used to be,” Pekoyama said. “If anyone knew, it would have been Nanami-san, but she is no longer with us.”

“What happened to her?” Komaru asked softly.

Her face hardened. That familiar, exhausted hatred throbbed in her chest. “Kamukura happened.”

Komaru swallowed. “He . . .?”

“None of us know for certain how Nanami-san died.” She scowled. “What I do know, however, is that she would still be alive if Kamukura-kun had not come into her life.”

“He can’t be all bad,” Komaru murmured. “He tried to help me, even though he turned out to be wrong.”

“Are you sure that was what happened?” Pekoyama asked. “Kamukura-kun has no empathy for others.”

“Makoto trusts him.”

“Your brother also trusts Komaeda-kun.”

“Makoto doesn’t have the best judgement,” Komaru said. “Except when he does. He’s weird like that. I think he was right about you, though. I don’t think you’re as bad as Kirigiri-san thinks. Maybe we could hang out again sometime. Right now, I think we need to rescue my brother.”

Komaru picked herself up and headed straight for the ruckus. It was only then Pekoyama realized that this had gone the exact opposite way of what she had expected.

She had no idea if the inherent friendliness of the Naegi line was a blessing or a curse.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Asahina approaches Soda.
Day 3, early morning

Ships were creepy in the early morning. They moved and made all these weird sounds, and they were all empty and quiet so that said weird sounds kept echoing. Her sneakers were naturally quiet, too, so the sounds of the ships were even louder in comparison.

Asahina stepped out onto the desk, and pulled her jacket in closer around herself. The came the ocean with a chilling edge, lashing at her exposed skin with the sharpness of glass. She jogged to the bridge, where it would be safe from the wind, and threw herself inside. For once, Kamukura wasn’t there. That was good. It was five or so in the morning, so it would be creepy if he had been. She stepped way from the door and waved her arm at the security camera so that Alter Ego would see her.

“Oh, Asahina-san!” The virtual face smiled while his security camera tracked her walking across the room. “I saw you walking through the ship. I thought this was your designated sleeping time.”

“Long day yesterday, couldn’t sleep,” she said awkwardly. “Also, I have a couple of things I need to do so I got up early. Um, Alter Ego, I’m going to take Naegi-kun into the cargo hold. I’ll be with him the entire time, so you don’t need to tell Kirigiri-san when you see him go down there.”

“Okay, thanks for telling me!”

So, Naegi was right. Kirigiri was trying to use Alter Ego to spy on him. She couldn’t blame Kirigiri though, not after what Ultimate Despair had done to him. As she thought about that, guilt churned in her stomach. Kirigiri would be pissed if she heard about what she and Naegi were planning. But it would only be once. And Naegi was only going to persuade Soda to play along. Then she would take over and keep everything from falling apart.

She met Naegi in his room as they had planned. They wandered aimlessly around the ship for a bit, making sure Kirigiri was asleep and not stalking them. Once they were confident in their privacy, they made a beeline for the cargo hold. Naegi was calmer than she had expected, and moved with a steady sense of purpose. It helped her relax, as well.

“Well, here we are,” she said once they were safely inside the hold. “Don’t go wandering off, okay?”

“I’m right behind you.”

She nodded, trusting him. He kept his word, shadowing her the entire time, stepping on the back of her heels once or twice. She did her best to navigate through the maze and keep him away from everyone else, but they did have to pass through one group to get to the Ultimate Mechanic. It was there, while passing through that group, that Naegi froze.

“Naegi-kun, come on!” she urged. Quietly.

“Mikan...” He was a few feet away from the cage. If he bolted, Asahina didn’t think she could stop him from reaching it.
“You promised!” She stepped forward slowly, not wanting to trigger him into acting rashly. “We can’t stay here. Is she a screamer? What if she wakes up? Everyone will know we’re here, and do you think they can keep that from Kirigiri-san?”

Naegi whimpered helplessly in the back of his throat. He looked between Asahina and Tsumiki, desperate. At last, gnawing at his knuckles from stress, he started following her again.

“Who feeds them?” Naegi whispered.

“I think it’s Kirigiri-san, or Togami-kun. Maybe Fukawa-kun. They don’t trust me to do it. Say I’m too ‘overemotional.’” She added bunny ears on the last word. “They are getting fed though. Promise.”

“What about Owari-san?”

“Uh, of course!”

His eyes narrowed. “Really?”

“Hey, you said we were only going to see Soda. I’m not taking you on a tour!”

He was still glaring at her, but shrugged as if it was no big deal. “Okay. If you say so.”

Thankfully, Nevermind and Tsumiki were the only Despairs they passed on the way to Soda Kazuichi. They arrived at the set of three cages, and Asahina approached the one in the center. It was quiet. Empty-looking. Her breath hitched. He couldn’t have gotten out –

And she screamed as Soda slammed up against the bars.

“Help me,” Soda gasped.

“Soda-kun?” Naegi approached, eyes wide.

“Naegi-kun, please. Help me!” The Ultimate Mechanic was on his knees, begging. “You’ve got to save me, please!”

“I will. I’m going to.” Before Asahina’s horrified eyes, Naegi dropped to his knees and clasped Soda’s hands through the bars. “Don’t worry, Soda-kun. You’re going to feel hope again and . . .”

“Hope? What the heck are you talking about? I need you to save me from them.”

Slowly, they all turned their head to the right. There they saw it: a tall gaunt figure, staring at them from the dark, mouth twisted into a toothy smile. Scarecrow-like legs carried the shadowed figure forward as it raised its bony arm.

“Wohoo! Now the party’s started! Being locked up in here has given me all sorts of crazy ideas for my next album.”

“Mioda-san! Or, well, you’re dressed up as her.”

“Hey, Naegi-chan,” the caged Mioda to the right said. “Are you and your friend here to listen to my latest single: Sailing Along with Boaty McBoatface? I promise it’s nothing like you’ve ever heard before!”

“Yep!” They spun around to face the cage on the left. A second Mioda Ibuki!? “It’s a duet, but guess what: we can do both parts!”
“Naegi-kun, please!” Soda was sobbing, snot trailing down his face. “Don’t let them do this.”

“. . . I’m sorry.” All of a sudden, the pitch of the right Mioda’s voice had dropped drastically. “Becoming her was the only way I could survive her.”

The left Mioda bobbed her head to an imaginary drummer. “And a one, and a two and a . . .”

Soda wailed. “Noooooo!”

The Miodas had no microphones, but that didn’t matter when they had a large, echoing hold and sheer volume. Asahina dove at Naegi, tackled him to the ground and held him close as the sounds of hell washed over them. Piercing through those terrible sounds was the faint wail of Soda’s scream. The Mechanic had his ears covered by both his beanie and his hands, but obviously, it wasn’t enough. How could it be against this vile sorcery?

It lasted forever. Her heart never stopped pounding, for each beat could have been its last; the vibrations were that intense. Finally, the storm passed and silence rushed in with an audible whoosh. One of the Miodas sucked in a deep breath, basking before an imaginary crowd.

“Naegi-kun!” Asahina shouted, voice wobbling. She had to shout because she was pretty sure she was nearly deaf. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said, gently pushing Asahina off him. “Mioda-san, you’re adopting a new style?”

“It’s still Ibuki’s style,” the left one said. “But I decided it was time to mix the subgenres!”

“Ah. Well, I’m glad you’re having fun.”

How could Naegi be walking after that? Because Asahina couldn’t stand. She could only watch helplessly as Naegi knelt before the cage holding the Ultimate Mechanic and rubbed the collapsed Despair’s back.

“Alright, who’s ready for Ibuki’s second single?”

“Mioda-san, maybe you should take a water break,” Naegi said. “I think the last one was too much for Soda-kun.”

“Oh, did Ibuki’s revolutionary music break Soda-chan’s brain?” She clapped. “Well, it’s no good if he won’t be able to hear my next single. Alright, take five, everyone.”

Forget Jesus: Naegi was the true saviour.

Naegi continued to rub Soda’s back and speak to him in soft tones as Asahina recovered. The left Mioda was sitting against her cage, humming cheerfully. The right Mioda was holding a bar, carefully lowering himself to the floor. Only, about an inch or so above the ground, he slipped and fell the remaining distance. It wasn’t high enough for her to think it had hurt, but she still winced.

“You okay?” Asahina asked. She was surprised she did.

“I’m fine,” the right Mioda said.

“You don’t look fine,” Asahina said. As she watched Mioda closely, she realized that the two Miodas weren’t identical twins. The one on the right was much thinner, and her limbs shook when they had to support her. Her spirit didn’t seem as jovial either, like a circus clown resting between shifts.
“. . . and you can’t escape while building it. Do you understand?” Naegi was saying.

“Uh, do you need something to eat?” Asahina asked. “Are you hungry?”

Skinny Mioda laughed. “I don’t know how to feel hunger anymore.”

“. . . Right. Hey, Naegi-kun, how’s everything going?”

Naegi didn’t answer, instead delegating to Soda. The Ultimate Mechanic wouldn’t look at her, choosing instead to play with the fringe of his jumper as he muttered, “Whatever. I’ll make it for you.”

“You will? That’s . . .” At the last moment, she remembered just whom she was talking to, and schooled back her enthusiasm. “Oh. Okay.”

“You’ll have to make a list of what we need to get you,” Naegi said to Soda. “Do you need paper?”

“Nah,” Soda said. “I can remember by myself. Just give me a couple of hours to think about it.”

“Naegi-kun!” she said sharply. “This wasn’t part of the deal. I said I’d bring you down here once –”

“I know. You shouldn’t need me the second time. Just bring your own pen and paper so you can write down whatever he tells you.”

“Okay, I guess that’s true. But,” she waved Naegi over to her side and whispered into his ear, “What if he was lying?”

“He did promise, but I know you’re not going to believe him,” Naegi said. “You could keep an eye on him while he’s building it, and then make sure you remove all the tools from his reach before you leave.”

It seemed to make sense. Still, she worried. “You really think this is going to work?”

“Hey, I want that television as much as you do,” he said. “I’m just as motivated as you.”

“You’re doing this for Maizono-san, right?”

“Not just for her. For all of them. For the Killing Game itself. It would be awful if something as important as that was lost to history,” Naegi said. “It will be nice once I can see those videos without Alter Ego telling everyone whenever I do.”

“He wouldn’t do that, would he? I know Kamukura’s usually there, but who else would Alter Ego. . .?”

“Kirigiri-san.”

She blinked. “Huh. Are things really that bad between you?”

“That’s not what’s going on,” Naegi answered. “We’re not mad at each other, it’s just that Kirigiri-san and I are disagreeing about certain things. It’s not her fault. She’s doing her job. Kirigiri-san didn’t see any of it for herself and has only my word to go off of. In a court, I think that would be dismissed as hearsay. I just need to show her.”

“Show her what?”

Naegi fell silent. “. . . That I can do this.”
She still didn’t understand, but then Soda groaned in his cage and said, “If you want to aim all that hope at her instead of us, no one’s complaining.”

For an adorable moment, Naegi allowed himself to preen. Then, seriously, he told her, “We should get back. I’m not sure when Kirigiri-san is going to check on me.”

Asahina couldn’t help but ask him, “This early? You think she might?”

“She caught me when I snuck out to meet with Komaru on the first night,” Naegi said. “So, definitely.”

Asahina said, “I don’t get it. Komaru’s your sister. Why is that a big deal?”

Naegi sighed. “You’ll have to ask Kirigiri-san. Don’t you remember when she saw us yesterday? She wasn’t happy about that.”

“Seriously, what is her deal? I know she doesn’t like to have emotions, but I thought she’d be happy when we got you back. Instead, she’s being a big grouch.”

“You shouldn’t say stuff like that about her,” Naegi scolded her. “Kirigiri-san always has good reasons for what she’s doing. Don’t doubt her like that.”

“S-sorry,” she stuttered, confused. Hadn’t Naegi been complaining about her a little while ago?

He brushed his hand through his hair. “Let’s get back to our rooms.”

Together, they headed back. Apart from the Miodas nearly ripping apart her eardrums, that had gone well. Really well. She had expected Soda to put up a fight, seeing that he was a Despair and her sworn enemy and all that. Naegi had gotten him to agree so easily. It stunned her even though he had told her this would happen.

As it was however, things were going too easy. So it was that halfway back through the cargo hold, she encountered a new problem. She had been slow to detect the second set of footprints – Naegi’s – had stopped. By the time she realized what that meant, the soft sound of a fist knocking against metal reached her ears.

She spun around, mouth opened in a wordless scolding. It was too late. Her sleep having already been disturbed earlier by the Miodas, Tsumiki Mikan was stirring and opening her eyes.

“M-m. . . M-Makoto?!”

“Shh!” He dropped to his knees to be closer to eye contact. “We can’t wake Nevermind-san!”

Tsumiki nodded and slapped her hand over her mouth. With her free hand, she reached through the bars and stroked Naegi’s cheek and hold up, that was too much! Quietly, Asahina stomped over and then seized Naegi by the back of his sweater. But Naegi lurched forward and clung to the cage, legs snaking around as he if planned to wrap them around the bars, too. Tsumiki wailed – quietly – behind her hand, and then relinquished her attempt at self-suppression to wrap her arms around his shoulders. That only encouraged Naegi to be clingy back and pretty soon, they were wrapped around each like a pair of baby monkeys.

Tsumiki squealed and struck out blindly. Asahina, having dropped her body weight so he could dig further into the ground, got caught by the tail end of it. She grunted and Tsumiki homed in on it and lashed out again with her eyes closed. That grazed Asahina’s face, making her eyelids slammed shut as skin grazed it. The affected eye watered immediately, and she had to give up one arm to rub at it.
“I’m not. . . I’m not going to do anything!” Naegi said. “She’s my friend. I just want to make sure she’s okay.”


“It’s n-nothing.” Naegi pressed the side of his head against the cage as Asahina’s second hand return. “They don’t cook as well as Hanamura-kun.”

“Ugh! This is ridiculous.” Asahina let go and back up, searching for a better angle. “Naegi-kun, don’t make me get Kirigiri-san!”

“Kirigiri-san? Wh-why is that a threat? Is she being mean to you?”

“No, no. Kirigiri-san the one who gets to ground people, that’s all—”

“No! No more grounding!”

Somehow, Nevermind was still asleep. That was definitely a blessing. Asahina would already be facing tough questions if Nevermind woke up and saw Naegi; she didn’t want to consider what Nevermind would think if she woke up to Tsumiki weeping into Naegi’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, really,” Naegi said. “Kirigiri-san worries about me, too. She wants me in one place so she can make sure I don’t get hurt anymore. She’s not bad. You don’t need to be scared for me.”

Asahina, behind him, watching from above as Naegi combed through Tsumiki’s hair as she sniffled, felt strangely uncomfortable. She rubbed at the goosebumps on her arms, not understanding.

“Are you okay?” Naegi asked. “They’re not starving you, are they?”

“No,” Tsumiki said quietly. “We get three meals a day.”

“Are they treating you okay?”

Tsumiki sniffled. “They locked up us.”

“I know.” Asahina watched the muscles across his back tightened. “Kirigiri-san can be very stubborn. I’m trying. She won’t listen to me. . . .”

Internally, she winced. Naegi wasn’t going to start crying too, was he. Watching this was awkward enough, but it would be much worse if her friend started to cry.

“I miss you,” Tsumiki whispered.

The bars were leaving indents in Naegi’s forehead as he pressed against them and swallowed hard. “I miss you, too.”

That said, she heard the crack in his voice and couldn’t stand it. She felt. . . she didn’t know what she felt, other than that she almost felt like crying herself. Or like punching Tsumiki in the face. This time, when she grabbed Naegi, it was enough of a surprise that she wrenched him free of the nurse. Tsumiki reached for him for a second, then let her arm fall to the ground.

“Naegi-kun, we’re leaving now!”

Naegi nodded wordlessly, not taking his eyes away from Tsumiki.

“Naegi-kun,” Tsumiki squeezed the bar as if it was someone’s neck, “you really did miss me, r-
right?"

For whatever reason, Naegi saw it fit to smile, albeit shakily. “Of course. I’ll... I’ll see you later.”

Surprisingly, Tsumiki – the weak, crybaby nurse – looked up at him and *smiled*.

“Okay.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I thought it may interest you,” Kamukura said.

Pekoyama frowned. Why? What use did she have for the knowledge that Naegi Komaru had brought a collection of stuffed animals with her?

“Was there anything else?” she asked.

“No,” Kamukura said before promptly turning around and leaving. Through the door that was supposed to be locked, mind you. The intrusion, like his words, had been random. Still, random was not a state Kamukura did. She followed him out to the hallway, but he was already gone.

Curiously, the hall wasn’t empty. Naegi and Asahina were there, walking together in silence. Pekoyama nearly returned to her room, but then paused, thinking.

Maybe what Kamukura had told her wasn’t so useless after all.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
The only thing cuter than an egg boi is an egg boi with a teddy bear.
Komaru was pretty sure she was being watched. The first time that feeling washed over her, it roused her from sleep and she spent the next twenty minutes playing detective and scouring the room for hidden cameras. But she made for a lousy detective; not only did she fail to find anything, but she also banged her head against the bedframe while looking under it. Skull throbbing, she wiggled back under the sheets, threw them over her aching head, and called it a night. Well, morning.

The next time, she leapt into a sitting position, ready to point and yell ‘Aha!’ at the person that had. Oh. Her door was closed. She checked the porthole; also closed. Hm. Maybe this was an empathy thing and she was getting these feelings because Touko was stalking Togami again.

The third time, she elected to ignore it. She announced that loudly, and turned over so that her back faced the door. Feeling smug, she pulled the blanket closer.

“. . . I only wish to speak with you.”

She squeaked and rolled over. Ultimate Despair was in her room! Ultimate Despair was in her room and thankGoditwasonlyPekoyama.

“Hi,” she said.

“Good morning,” Pekoyama said slowly, as if uncertain what time it was. “Is this a bad time?”

“No. I kept waking up anyways. I’m sure someone is watching me.”

“Most likely that was me. I have been checking whether you were awake.”

“Oh. Why?”

Without asking, Pekoyama stepped inside. She gave the room a courtesy onceover, then said, “Kamukura-kun was correct. Do you need all those stuffed animals?”

“Why are you asking?” Suddenly, it hit her and her eyes widened. She grabbed her collection and hurriedly hid them behind her back. “You can’t have any. They’re mine, and it took a lot of work to get them.”

Pekoyama gave her a weird, almost insulted, look. “I have no need for them. I thought your brother might like one.”

“Oh. I guess he can take one – but Mr. Wiggles is mine!” Absently, as she hugged the large caterpillar, she asked, “Is the rabbit not enough for him?”

“You already gave him one?”

“No, but when we rescued him, I got that stuffed rabbit he had been sleeping with. Doesn’t he have it?”

Pekoyama said, “I know the toy you are referring to, but I have not seen it.”
“I guess someone forgot to bring it on the ship,” Komaru said. “Okay, send him in. B-but give me like ten minutes to change!”

If she spent those ten minutes not just changing, but making her bed and running around cleaning up, that was her business and nobody else’s. Regardless of what magical things may have happened in that ten minutes, it ended with her waiting on her perfectly made bed in her neat and tidy room. Makoto, being the average messy male teenager, looked surprised at the cleanliness.

“Hi!” Makoto said enthusiastically. “Why am I here?”

“She didn’t tell you?” It took Komaru only a second to recover. “Because you’re here to pick an animal, you big baby.”

“H-hey.” Cheeks red, Makoto nearly glanced at Pekoyama before straightening up and pretending he was Cool and Mature. “I mean if you have too many, I’ll take one for the team, and help my baby sister out.”

“Naegi-kun, you had a stuffed rabbit while you with us,” Pekoyama said flatly.

“It’s not like I bought that! I didn’t even ask . . . Hey, this one looks cute.” He picked up an orange tabby with big cartoon eyes. He made pleased sounds as he examined its stuffed belly and she was certain he would choose that one. . . Until he didn’t. He was about to, she could tell, when he suddenly stilled. The tabby fell from his hands. He grabbed her stuffed bear – just an ordinary brown bear – held it at arm’s length and stared.

“If you want that one?” she asked. Bears were his favourite animals.

He nodded and stuffed it under his arm.

“. . . So, what’s his name?” she asked, surprised he hadn’t already told her.

“Kuma,” he said quietly.

That was a dumb name. She would have heckled him except he was being all quiet and solemn and Pekoyama was, too, and everything was telling her this was not something to tease him about.

“Let’s go put Kuma in your room,” Pekoyama said to him.

She wanted to ask what was going on, she really did, but the moment slipped past her and Makoto shuffled back to his room. Uncertainly, she stayed in hers, until she decided screw it and marched over to his room herself. He was ruffling his pillow to make a comfy nest for the bear. Too bad the best little sister ever was about to ruin his perfect bed!

“Komaru!”

“What?” She rolled over and made herself at home like a lounging cat. “Your favourite little sister can’t pay her big brother a visit?”

“You’re only my favourite because you’re the only one,” he groused. Perhaps thinking she was here to reclaim the teddy, he scooped it back up. “So. . . What should we do now?”

“I dunno. Play a game? This has been a very boring cruise so far.”

“Hm. . . What about hide-and-seek?”

“Hide-and-seek, Naegi-kun?” Pekoyama said warily.
“Yeah, you’re right. This ship is way too big; we’ll never find each other!”

It didn’t seem like that was Pekoyama’s real problem with that statement, but she didn’t say anything.

“Top two floors,” Komaru declared. “And on this side of the ship.”

Naegi nodded thoughtfully, smiling.

“Then I suppose you should run and hide,” Pekoyama said.

“Huh? Why does she get to hide first?” Naegi complained.

But before he could press his case, Komaru was off. She tore out of his room, turned sharply to the right, and then skidded to a halt because she had no idea where she was going. As Naegi started to count to one hundred, she ran frantically from room to room, up and down stairs, until she ended up in the kitchen. Kitchens had lots of boxes, right? Plenty of room to hide.

She had just finished pushing a bunch of crates to shield a completely unsuspicious corner when the door opened. She dove behind the crates, pressed against one and curled into a ball.

“And to think that worm had the gall to critique my body? As if muscles would allow me to sign business deals any faster – although it might mean I would have to make less trips to the bank.”

“But why would you do that when y-your servants would do it for you? I-if you want bulging muscles, then I c-could spot you. It doesn’t matter what time. I’ll tape my eyes open so I can w-watch you exercise. I’ll carry your sweaty towel and when sweat rolls down your back, I can lick –”

“Be silent, you simpering fool.”

Yes, please.

“If you’re going to fantasize, then let me be with the only thing that matters: money. Yes, imagine me in my summer castle lounging with my feet in a tub of cash. It isn’t nearly as pleasant as warm water, but sometimes it’s nice to remind yourself how incredible you are. Forget the Towa girl; they were – are – nothing compared to my family’s legacy.”

“Of course, Master!” Fukawa gushed, evidently having forgotten Togami’s previous command. “She’s probably living in a ditch somewhere, scourging for scraps like a mutt.”

Silence. Then Togami chuckled.

“That foolish girl. She thought wealth would allow her to stay on the sidelines while the world went to war. Any true scion would tell you it’s the opposite. It is precisely those powerful people – those who have the power to create change in the first place – that need to take the wheel and steer the ship back to land. She got what she deserved.”

More silence and footsteps.

“So, the Naegis . . . When are we going to tell them?” Fukawa asked.

“Really? You want to tell them now? They have enough on their plate.”

“Yes, but . . .” A short silence. “I should have told her before.”

“Naegi’s a big girl. She’ll handle it when the time comes. Let things settle down first.”
“When will that be? How will we know when Naegi – Makoto – can be trusted to know?”

The footsteps stopped. Togami said, “Trust? Why would trust matter?”

“. . . Haven’t you noticed? He’s different now. He looks at people and calculates. He didn’t do that before. He used to just go along with things.”

“If Naegi wants to control the direction of his own life, then I have no objections,” Togami said. “Besides, even if he is sitting in the captain’s seat and we told him, what could he do with that knowledge?”

“I don’t know,” Fukawa said reluctantly.

“Exactly: nothing. Now let’s leave this conversation behind us.”

A few moments later, a small voice piped up. “Chef Fujisaki, here!”

The sharp edges of the wood dug into her back. Komaru turned her head towards the noise, half-hoping, half-dreading to hear more. What were they talking about? What did Touko want to tell her, but Togami did not . . . ? She gasped. Were they dating? Was Touko pregnant? They were acting awfully chummy there. How could Touko not tell her they were seeing each other? After everything they had been through together. . . She thought they were friends.

(“Sorry, Togami-kun, but we don’t have any escargot!”)

But then she immediately softened her heart and pulled herself together. Togami must have made her keep it a secret. He was bossy and mean like that. How terrible it must be for Touko to endure, but Touko would do it because she wanted Togami more than anything. Komaru wiped her weeping eye. As Touko’s best friend, she would take this secret to the grave!

“I won’t let you down!” she swore.

“Who’s there?”

She covered her mouth. Oops.

“Well, if this isn’t a suspicious stack of crates. Come out before we gather dust.”

She sighed. Arms raised in surrender, she stepped out of her clever hiding spot and bowed her head. At least she got the pleasure of that moment of regret when they realized she had been within earshot the entire time.

“You. You were there the whole time. What did you hear?”

She grinned. “That somebody’s got a secret.”

Touko gnawed at her knuckles, looking to Togami for guidance. Togami was carefully not revealing anything.

“So, Touko-chan, anything you want to tell me?”

Touko flinched. “I-I have nothing t-to say.”

“You’re going to set her off if you keep pressuring her,” Togami snapped.

“Okay, but I have to know. . . Are you two having a baby?”
“What?” Togami barked. Touko fell to the ground.

She cringed. That hadn’t been the reaction she had hoped for. “Uh, cause you two, you know, you’re being all secretive and hanging out alone together...”

“And have you asked Kirigiri if she’s having a child with your brother or Kamukura?” Togami asked, disgust etched into the lines of his face. Down at Touko, he ordered, “And you! Get that look off your face.”

Touko giggled as a drop of blood left her nose.

The next thing she did was try to apologize and regain control of the situation. It took up so much time and effort that she didn’t notice Makoto until he came up behind her and said, “Wow. You’re really bad at hide-and-seek. Also, just one floor next time. This place is too big.”

“Makoto!” She jumped around. “When did you get here.”

“Right now.”

Pekoyama peered at her. “Naegi-san, do you know how to play hide-and-seek?”

“I do! I just got distracted because Togami-kun and Touko are keeping secrets from us!” As she beckoned to them, she saw the stricken look on Touko’s face. Oh. She wished she could take her words back, because this suddenly seemed more serious than she had thought.

“Hide-and-seek?” Togami repeated a little too loudly. “You’d give Kirigiri a heart attack if she knew.”

Naegi shrugged with one shoulder. “Nah, she’s in the bridge watching the cameras.”

“Naegi-kun, why do you say that?” Pekoyama asked. “We haven’t seen her.”

“Exactly! She hasn’t shown herself all morning, so she must be somewhere that she can keep an eye on me at a distance. Since we’ve been running around the ship, that’s got to be the bridge.” He blinked. “I’m surprised she’s stayed there though because I was obviously hanging out with Komaru.”

It hurt a little when he referred to that without any anger. Touko also shifted in empathetic uncomfortableness. Togami, though, spoke with genuine confusion when he asked, “What would that matter?”

“She doesn’t like us hanging out,” Naegi said.

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely,” Togami muttered. “This is why leadership should be left to those who were trained for it.”

“Guys, it’s fine. She’s just watching me.”

“There’s a word for that: it’s called stalking,” Touko said. “Do you still think it’s cute when she comes into your room while you’re sleeping and watches you like some demented murderer?” (Togami side-eyed her.)

“Relax,” Naegi said. “If she’s going to keep watching me, that’s her choice. It’s none of my business.”

They stared at him. Touko said, “That’s exactly the kind of thing that’s your business. She’s
invading your privacy.”

“She’s just making sure I don’t do anything wrong or run away.” His cheeks flushed. He shuffled his feet. “Uh, although we’re on a ship now, so she doesn’t need to worry about that!”

“Is that what you want: to run away?” Komaru’s eyes filled with tears. All of this and he was still afraid?

Well, clearly she was wrong about that too, because his mouth was hanging open in horror. Actually, he was pale; blood had drained from his face, leaving it chalky white. Stress lines radiated from his eyes like spokes on a wheel, making them look sunken.

“R-run away? No. No! I’m not trying to run away. I didn’t mean it like that. I want to stay here, with you. With everyone!” He grabbed her shoulders and he was suddenly so much shorter than her, so that she was looking down at her as he pleaded. “I’m not trying to escape. I swear I’m not.”

Pekoyama squeezed his shoulder. “I believe you, Naegi-kun. You will hurt your sister if you cling to her like that.”

True to Pekoyama’s promise, Komaru’s shoulder was bruised, although she only noticed after he released her. His grabby hands locked onto his own body. And he was gone: out of the circle, out of the room, beyond the swinging door. The only clue he had been there at all was that she was still reaching out for him.

“I should be upset with you,” Pekoyama said, “but it is not your fault. I understand that you asked out of concern, but. . . There were precautions taken when he tried to escape from us.”

“Like what, exactly?” Togami demanded.

“The use of restraints, mostly,” she said. “His free movement was tightly controlled. It is of no surprise to me that he sees Kirigiri-san’s supervision as a minor annoyance.”

Komaru sighed. “I’ll go apologize.”

“Apoloizing is not necessary. What he needs to hear is that you are not angry with him.”

‘Of course I’m not! Why would I be. . .? Right, I’ll go talk to him.”

If her brother had a radio, no doubt he would be playing the saddest music he could possibly find. Komaru drank in his pathetic form as he hid under the blankets in a lump. The teddy bear had disappeared under the sheets with him, as had the pillow. It was the snapshot of pitifulness, so that Komaru almost second-guessed her decision to talk to him. Until Pekoyama came up behind her and the idea of walking away felt like chickening out.

She knocked. “Makoto, can I come in?”

He didn’t say yes, but he didn’t tell her to go away either, so that was a yes by default, right? She slipped into his room and took a seat next to the lump. She was close enough to reach over and pat his back. Not that she did. She just thought about it, that’s all.

“Hey, Makoto, you know I’m not mad at you, right? If you really want to leave. . . um, then I could try talking to the others. Though I don’t know where you would go. The Future Foundation would probably. . .” Makoto hissed under the sheets. “Ahem. I mean I’m sure we could find someone to take you in. It’s just that I don’t want you to go. I missed my big brother a lot. So, if you don’t like it here, please just tell me.”
Makoto uncoiled under the sheets. He murmured, “Want to stay.”

“I’m happy you want to stay, too.” She sniffled and pulled back the corner of his blanket, exposing his upper body. He was curled up on his pillow, staring at the teddy.

“This is Kuma,” he told her.

“I was there when you chose the name,” she reminded him, confused.

He shook his head. “Kuma wasn’t a toy. He was real. He was my bear, and the Future Foundation shot him.”

“Like you had an actual pet bear?” She would have normally said something about how cool that was, but Makoto had already told her the bear’s fate.

“He was good. He didn’t do anything wrong. He was just there, and they shot him. I . . .” If stuffed animals could feel, that thing would be squealing in pain. “He didn’t do anything to them. He didn’t hurt anyone.”

She had seen it in movies, but never in real life. She had never had anyone cry into her lap before, and especially not her happy-go-lucky brother. He grabbed onto scrunched-up handfuls of her skirt, keening. A patch of cold soaked into her thigh from his tears. Pekoyama was no help; she just bit her lip and looked away.

“He didn’t do anything wrong!” he sobbed.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. She combed her fingers through his hair.

She didn’t stop him. She didn’t speak to him. She only rubbed his back when he began to wheeze. Because she knew, even as his nails clawed into her skin, she knew this was important; just as the doctor knew when their pager went off in the middle of the night. Naegi cried into her lap, moaning.

She laid her chin atop his head. “I’m so sorry.”

She wrapped her fingers around his hand, and he weakly squeezed back. It was a weak connection, so fragile she was careful to breath in a way that would barely move her chest. He was quieting now, breathing heavily, almost panting. She combed through his hair again.

She didn’t know how long they waited there. She didn’t keep track. His ribs rose and fell steadily, almost like he was sleeping.

“It is nearly lunch,” Pekoyama said. “They will come looking for us if we choose not to appear.”

“That’s not our problem,” Komaru said. “Makoto, do you want to go?”

He sniffled, but nodded. He clutched the teddy tight.

“Are you bringing that?” Komaru asked.

When Makoto nodded, Pekoyama reached out her hand to him. “Come. Let us meet the others.”

Chapter End Notes
Next Chapter:
Naegi introduces Kuma to the others.
**Auguries of Innocence**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Day 3, Noon**

Togami choked on his food. Unfortunately, he had just told Fukawa to keep her distance, so she could only gasp instead of hitting him on the back. Once again, Togami had to take the world’s burdens upon himself and thump himself in the chest repeatedly until the chunk of bread came up. Good lord, how undignified! He had to quickly redirect attention elsewhere before calamity struck. Sternly, he pointed at the thing that had made him choke in the first place.

“You brought a stuffed animal?”

Normally, Togami would have went into detail about what a faux pas that was – for Naegi’s benefit, of course – but that fell off the rails when Asahina squealed right next to his ears. In the middle of rubbing the ear most affected by that noise, he caught sight of Pekoyama’s cold stare. She would have to do better if she wanted to intimidate him. But the Naegi girl, what was she doing? Why was she glowering at him like that?

“It’s so cute!” Asahina was saying. Naegi, seated at a table with the teddy bear in front of him, basked in the praise. “I used to have a stuffed harp seal with the cutest big eyes and a ribbon tied around its neck. I bet Yuta stole it while I was away at school!”

As Kirigiri would, she picked up Naegi’s bear without asking. “This is yours?”

“Well, it was mine first,” Komaru said. “I’m letting him borrow it because I’m nice like that.”

“Naegi-chi, I can’t believe you still like bears,” Hagakure said. Unsurprisingly, the cowardly oaf was keeping two tables between them.

“There’s a big difference between bears and Monokumas,” Naegi said. “Besides, even Monokumas can be cute when someone like Alter Ego is controlling them!”

“Hah! That’s what you think,” Hagakure said. “He was just pretending to be Alter Ego. You know, like the body snatchers and . . . Ow!”

In absence of her sword, Pekoyama had struck Hagakure with a fork. Naturally, the prongs had become entangled with that ratted nest of hair, and had disappeared. Pekoyama looked at her empty hand, baffled. Kirigiri twitched as she fought the instinct to investigate.

Who the three weren’t paying attention to was Naegi, although Pekoyama must have been the moment before she struck Hagakure. With fingers splayed out on the table, Naegi’s eyes were dilated with a horror of a man who had realized that the cave he was resting in was actually a dragon’s throat.

“Preposterous,” Togami scoffed. “Ensuring that virus could infect the robot was my task. Do you think a halfwit robot that can’t open a door would fool me? We’re talking about robots that need children with a remote control to lead them, not a science fiction movie.”

“Alter Ego wouldn’t lie to me,” Naegi muttered. He stared up at Kirigiri, waiting for confirmation that never came.
Pekoyama cleared her throat. “At no point was Ultimate Despair aware of the Monokuma system being compromised. If I may ask, who is Alter Ego?”

Naegi said, “He helped us fight Enoshima. Didn’t you see him?”

Pekoyama sighed. “I paid that show little attention until Enoshima was executed.”

Naegi babbled on about Alter Ego, occasionally joined by Asahina and Hagakure. Togami, feeling no need to add his two words to the introduction, turned his attention to Kirigiri. She was still holding that damn bear – perhaps the allegedly mature detective craved one of her own. Or she was checking it for fleas because she was picking through its fur patch by patch.

“So, why the bear anyways?” Asahina asked as her chin rested in her hand. “I get that they’re your favourite animal, but I thought you would have gone for a stuffed rabbit like the one you had before.”

“It’s because of Kuma. He . . .” Naegi squirmed. Komaru leaned over and rested her head on his shoulder. “He was my pet bear. Tanaka-kun gave him to me.”

“Are you telling me there was a bear running around when we were there?” a wide-eyed Hagakure demanded.

“No,” Naegi said. “He didn’t. . . He didn’t survive long enough to meet you.”

A bear? Hm. Personally, Togami thought they stunk, which was why he preferred cheetahs. Bears were big, hairy things, which was fine if you were a Russian warlord, but not when you were a sleek businessman. And the Naegi girl was glaring at him again. He hadn’t even said anything!

“I’m so sorry, Naegi-kun.” Asahina reached over and took his hand. “I know that must have been hard on you.”

“It . . . it was bad and. . . Kyoko-san? Where are you going?”

“You’ll need to excuse me,” she said as she walked toward the door.

“Um, okay, but. . .” His gaze flickered to the teddy bear under her arm. “My bear –”

“I’m sorry, Makoto, but I’m confiscating this,” she said without breaking stride.

“But -!”

The door shut behind her.

“What the hell was that?” Togami couldn’t help but ask.

“Naegi-kun, are you okay?” Asahina asked.

Naegi twitched. It was a nasty thing that made him bend at the neck and waist, like he’d been jabbed with a cattle prod. His laugh was fragile, like crumbling glass, and his voice wasn’t much better. “I guess Kirigiri-san likes bears, too.”

Togami expect that the Naegi girl would say something or would awkwardly try to comfort her older brother. Instead, she stood up without a word and walked out the same door Kirigiri had.

As her steps echoed through the halls, Komaru couldn’t help but think she was about to make a big
mistake. She had never like confrontations. When she was younger, she had usually handled these situations by either crying to her parents and making them handle it, or by cajoling her big brother into intervening. She, on the other hand, had never really defended Makoto before – if only because he was a big softie and people couldn’t get mad at him. But, she reminded herself, this last year had been one of firsts. Kirigiri, as scary as she was, couldn’t be worse than Towa Monaca.

She still felt compelled to knock. Or cough loudly. Anything that might make Kirigiri open her own door so she didn’t have to. Alas, luck wasn’t on her side today. She opened the door as carefully as she could, half-expecting it to be rigged with a tripwire.

If Kirigiri was aware of her presence, she gave no sign. Seated at her desk, the detective poured over her brother’s teddy bear. Komaru gathered her resolve and strode forward.

“Kirigiri-san, you can’t. . . What did you do?”

From the doorway she hadn’t seen it, but now she spied the gaping wound in the bear’s back. Clumps of stuffing sat on the desk next to it or clung to Kirigiri’s glove. She had one glove inside the bear’s body and even as Komaru watched, pulled more of its insides out.

“Were you aware there was a tear in the back of its neck?” Kirigiri demanded.

“Wh-what? Why does that even matter?”

“Please leave,” Kirigiri said. “I’m not in the mood for distractions.”

Kirigiri stuck another finger into the bear. Komaru watched her grope inside it, watched the button eye bulge as a finger prodded the space behind it. Then, as Kirigiri began to extract another chunk of fluff, she struck. Komaru leapt for the bear, nearly snagging it away before Kirigiri yanked it out of reach.

“You can’t just take his things and wreck them!” Komaru shouted. “I bet you’d freak out if any of us touched your stuff. You can’t do this!”

Kirigiri ignored her.

“You weren’t even listening to him. It’s important to him! He’s grieving over it! Don’t you care about him at all?”

And the worst part was that Kirigiri didn’t seem to. Her expression never changed. The cold atmosphere never warmed. Komaru never lost the feeling that she was shouting at an unfeeling, deaf rock.

“It’s a good vessel for smuggling,” Kirigiri said. “There’s a large cavity, cushioning to make it hard for anyone to feel something inside, and no one would give it a second look.”

“. . . You think he’s using that to smuggle something? That’s stupid. I’ve been with him ever since he got it, and he hasn’t done anything with it! Maybe you would have known that if you hadn’t been stupid and taken it.”

“Are you done?” Was that bit of heat in Kirigiri’s voice just her imagination?

“I’m not done until you tell him you’re sorry and stop harassing him!”

“You really are still a child,” Kirigiri remarked.
Komaru blinked.

“Please leave.”

She growled and stomped her foot. “I’m not going anywhere!”

“Fine. If you insist on behaving this way.”

Kirigiri didn’t seem like a person of action to her, which was why it caught her by surprise when she stood up and grabbed her arm. Geez, she grabbed hard, and she was strong! Komaru had no problems wrestling with her brother, but when Kirigiri tugged her along like this, it was all she could do to flail and keep her balance. Even when Kirigiri was opening the door and only holding on with one hand, Komaru couldn’t shake her off.

“What are you doing here?”

That question wasn’t directed at her. No, that was aimed at outside Kirigiri’s door, to the other members of Makoto’s class that had clustered around the entrance: Touko, Togami and Asahina. Touko looked on the verge of ripping her hair out, while Asahina looked like she was simultaneously seething and crying. Togami had his poker face on, but Komaru swore that when Kirigiri first opened the door, he had been staring at it with complete shock.

Togami recovered first. “Naegi’s with Hagakure and Pekoyama, since his whereabouts seems to be a major concern of yours.”

Kirigiri slowly loosened her hold on Komaru, trying to make it look as casual as possible. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Perhaps, but –”

“What is wrong with you?” Asahina screeched. “How could you do that to him?”

“I was taking precautions.” Kirigiri locked onto Asahina. “Naegi-kun sent you.”

“No, he didn’t,” Asahina spat. “He’s too busy pretending he never had a teddy bear because someone stole it from him!”

“Do you have a fetish for stuffed animals?” Touko asked. “I’m sure I saw you grab his dumb rabbit, too.”

“That’s enough,” Kirigiri said. “I’m sorry that I hurt him, but I did what had to be done. In case you’ve forgotten, we’re not actually on a vacation. We are trapped in the middle of the ocean with some of the most dangerous people in the world. If that’s not a reason to be concerned about safety, then please enlighten me as to why.”

“Who cares?” Asahina said. “We’re talking about Naegi-kun’s stuffed animals, not Ultimate Despair. You’re treating him like he’s a criminal.”

“He’s the reason we’re on this ship,” Kirigiri said evenly.

“. . . What’s that supposed to mean?” Komaru asked. “Wasn’t this your idea? It’s not his fault!”

“That’s not what I said,” Kirigiri said. She backed a step into her room. “Now, if you’ll let me work, I’ll see if I can put his bear back together.”

“You broke it?” Asahina cried.
The only sign of regret, or anything, was the slight flare of Kirigiri’s nostrils. “Goodbye.”

That was the problem of dealing with Kirigiri. She was so composed, so utterly emotionless that there no satisfaction to be had from shouting at her. Perhaps that was why Komaru felt too exhausted to stop Kirigiri as she closed the door.

But while Komaru was too tired, Touko was not. Her arm snapped out with surprising strength, palm stopping the door in its tracks. Kirigiri looked down at her classmate, and nobody could tell what she was thinking.

“Okay, spit it out!” Touko pointed at Kirigiri accusingly. “I want to know what your problem with Komaru is. You’re not even dating him, yet you’ve had it out for her since the day we got on this boat.”

“My conversations with her are none of your business,” Kirigiri said. She tried to close the door again, but Touko stuck her foot in the way.

“Being the resident ice queen doesn’t give you a free pass to be a bitch,” Touko said. “What is your problem? You’ve been nagging both of them nonstop.”

“Because if I had, it would have made a murder more likely to happen,” Kirigiri said. “The situations are completely different. It shouldn’t surprise you that I’m taking a different approach to keep everything together.”

“Keep things together?” Asahina said lowly. “If you ask me, you’re doing a terrible job. You don’t care that you let a murderer loose, yet you’re tearing up Naegi-kun’s stuff just because. Komaru-san didn’t do anything and you keep treating her like crap!”

“Pekoyama-san has nothing to do with this,” Kirigiri said slowly. “This is about Naegi-kun.”

“Uh-huh. It’s about my brother. It’s about your friend.” Komaru said. “Do you even care he’s back, cause you keep treating him like he’s one of them –”

“Will you wake up?”

That wasn’t a shout. It was simply a raised voice, and not much louder than its regular counterpart. But they all, even Komaru, even Kirigiri, went still, because no one had ever seen Kirigiri come that close to screaming with emotion. Whilst it was Kirigiri who had suffered the uncharacteristic reaction, she recovered first. However, the mask she smeared over her face was too sharp. There was still no emotion one could place to it; it was simply intense.

“Naegi-kun spent the last year living alongside them,” Kirigiri said coldly.

“So what? It’s not like he wanted to go with them,” Asahina countered. “They took him from us and yeah, we had to save him, but he tried. He never stopped trying to get back to us.”

“What makes you so certain about that?” Kirigiri asked.

“Because I know him!” Asahina declared.

Kirigiri’s eyes glinted with something that looked like triumph. Softly, she said, “No, you knew him, but you haven’t known him for nearly a year. All of you keep pretending that the last year didn’t
happen. You have no idea who he is.”

“Then why don’t you inform us, since you seem to be the expert,” Togami suggested.

“He’s a wolf wearing the skin of a sheep,” Kirigiri said. “He’s been using us, and all of you are standing back and letting him.”

Asahina backed away, looking at the floor guiltily. But no one noticed as Komaru had taken the spotlight. The younger Naegi blazed like an inferno, making the other place at least an inch of space between them.

“So what?” Komaru demanded. “I mean he did make me hang out with Pekoyama-san when I didn’t really want to, but he just wants everyone to get along. He’s being himself!”

“Do you want to know what kind of person your brother is?” Kirigiri said. She spoke each word carefully, choosing each to make a point. “If it wasn’t for me, he would be a murderer.”

Of them all, only Komaru could claim innocence. Only she could view that statement with the eyes of one before The Tragedy. And what those eyes did was turn away. Kirigiri must be exaggerating. It hurt, it truly did, to think that Kirigiri would stoop low enough to heap this accusation on someone who wasn’t well enough to defend himself.

“If Naegi-kun wanted to kill them, you should have let him,” Asahina spat. “I would have helped him.”

“He wasn’t trying to kill them. He was trying to kill me.”

Before, when Kirigiri first opened the door, Komaru hadn’t been sure if Togami was having any real reaction to what was going on. Now, she knew for sure. Togami’s eyebrows lifted and his smirk slowly flattened into a thin line. Perhaps that reaction was why Touko said what she did next:

“What did you do?”

“What do you mean?” Kirigiri asked.

“You know, how did you piss him off that badly?” Touko tapped her index fingers together, glasses glinting. “I can’t imagine him even getting angry enough to kick a puppy.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Kirigiri said fiercely. “When I found him, he was in the throes of despair. After treating me to a detailed description of how Ultimate Despair would torture me to death, he tried to convince me to submit to a mercy kill.”

Komaru blanched. It sounded like a completely different person and yet at the same time, it sounded like her brother.

“Now, do you understand what I’m saying?” Kirigiri asked. “He was one of them.” Asahina tried, “Maybe he was…”

“He had the eyes,” Kirigiri said.

Huh? What did that mean? Komaru glanced at Touko, hoping for an explanation, but Touko had gone completely silent, irises as round as her glasses.

“Then what you’re telling us is that there’s an untreated Despair running free and you never thought to warn us –” Togami said.
“No, he doesn’t seem to be that far gone anymore, but he’s dangerous,” Kirigiri said. “You can’t trust him –”

“No!” Komaru shouted. The word echoed through the ship. “You’re lying. He’s just scared and sick. He isn’t going to kill anyone! You . . . you said it was a mercy kill. He just wanted to save you. He was trying to help you, like he always does –”

“Stop,” Kirigiri said through gritted teeth. Komaru fell silent, and Kirigiri found the opportunity to step back into her room and close the door.

If Kirigiri had wanted to leave things as awkward as possible, then she couldn’t have done better.

Asahina whispered, “Naegi-kun, he really tried . . .?”

“No!” Komaru shouted. “He was trying to help her. You heard her!”

“Still,” Togami said, “for him to even think that was a viable option . . .”

“Shut up!”

“D-don’t talk to him like that,” Touko scolded.

“Then he can’t talk about my brother like that!” Komaru said. “She’s wrong. He’s not crazy, and I’m not going to abandon him.”

When no one immediately agreed with her, Komaru sniffled and turned away. She ran down the hall, not looking back when they called after her – if they called after her. She ran and left them all behind.

Chapter End Notes

Canon has shown that Kirigiri has major trust issues. The Kirigiri that came out of the school at the end of DR1 probably only truly trusted three people, one of which was Makoto. I don’t think she’d take it very well if one of those people "betrayed" her. Especially when you think he’s displaying the same pattern of behaviour he did before he turned on you.

Next Chapter:
Class 78 picks sides.
Day 3, Afternoon

“Easy, Naegi-chi. Just relax. Worry about that stuff later.”

“Ah, okay.” Sprawled out on the cluttered floor and tongue lolling like a dog, Naegi stared up at the third person in the room. “Pekoyama-san, are you sure you don’t want any?”

“Yes,” she said. She was no stranger to marijuana as it wasn’t rare for the Yakuza to indulge, but as the Young Master’s bodyguard, such distractions had always been forbidden for her.

“If you’re sure,” Naegi said. “It’s pretty nice. It’s sleepy.”

Hagakure laughed. “That’s called relaxing, Naegi-chi. And if you get the munchies, there’s chips in my dresser. Course, you’re gonna have to buy me a replacement after.”

“If you desire something to eat, please tell me and I will retrieve something from the kitchen,” Pekoyama said after clearing her throat loudly. Given the state of Hagakure’s room, she was leery of allowing Naegi to eat anything that had festered here.

Naegi gave her a lazy thumbs-up, eyes already closing.

There were footsteps in the hall. Quick footsteps that made her perk up, but didn’t quite set her on edge. Pekoyama took a couple of steps so that she was against the wall next to the door, so that when it slammed open, she saw the interloper before they saw her.

“Makoto?” Komaru sniffled.

“Komaru? What are you doing here?” There wasn’t as much concern as she expected, but that was likely due to the drug. “Are you crying?”

With no further prompting, Komaru threw herself into her big brother’s arms. Luckily, Naegi still had enough of his senses to catch her, otherwise she would have crushed the air out of him. He patted her awkwardly.

“Oi, what happened?” Hagakure asked. Although he and Naegi had both indulged, he seemed much less out of it.

Komaru sniffed. “It’s Kirigiri. She’s saying all these terrible things about him and it’s not right.”

“Kirigiri-san?” Naegi echoed drowsily.

“She’s horrible,” Komaru said into his shoulder. “I don’t know why she’s your friend.”

“You shouldn’t . . . Komaru, that’s not very nice,” Naegi chided lightly. “Kirigiri-san’s amazing. She’s super smart, and solves murder and, like, is super cool.”

“Who cares?” Komaru bit back. “She’s out there telling everyone that we can’t trust you and that you’re going to try to kill us.”
When Hagakure had offered Naegi marijuana, Pekoyama had thought about arguing against it. Thank goodness she hadn’t, because surely the high was the only thing keeping Naegi anywhere near calm right now. She knew Naegi; Naegi was good, Naegi was kind, and hearing those terrible words would have surely distressed him. No doubt the impact would hit once the high wore off, but for now, Naegi kept his composure. Still, Pekoyama worried how much he could bear.

*Why would Kirigiri say that?* was on the tip of her tongue, but she refused to speak. Not in front of Naegi. She wouldn’t explore this in front of him. But the other might. She briskly strode over and grabbed his wrist hard, snarling with her eyes for Hagakure to keep his mouth shut.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Naegi said, thankfully with more confusion with hurt. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“I know you aren’t,” Komaru said. “That’s why she’s stupid.”

“She’s not stupid,” Naegi said with a sigh. “It was probably a hypothetical scenario. Kirigiri-san makes plans for every possibility, you know.”

“I was there!” Komaru countered. “She said you were despairing like them, and you tried to mercy-kill her.”

Hagakure cringed as Pekoyama’s grip on him involuntarily tightened. When Komaru had first repeated Kirigiri’s statement, Pekoyama had automatically rejected it. Now, for the first time, she actually thought about what Naegi’s sister had said. For the first time, she doubted. There had been a period where Naegi had fallen into despair, and she knew little of his actions during that time.

“When? Despairing?” Naegi laughed, and there was only a touch of hysteria. It almost did sound like he thought it was amusing. “I’m the Ultimate Hope. I don’t despair! Kirigiri-san knows that. I never despair.”

But he had. Pekoyama didn’t know if Kirigiri spoke the truth and witnessed it, but he had. Hagakure was clawing at her vice-like grip now, and she reluctantly released him.

“I know it’s not true,” Komaru said. “You’re my brother.”

“Yes, I’m Hope.”

She thought... It must have been her imagination. She thought she had seen the faintest swirls in his eyes. Not the swirls of her brainwashed classmates, but the ones once exclusive to Komaeda.

“Kirigiri-chi said that, huh?” Hagakure wrung his hands together, before throwing them in the air and adopting a loud, boisterous manner. “You know, sometimes this stuff makes me super sleepy. I think it’s time I laid down for a nap. So, uh, maybe we can hang out some other time? Like not anytime soon, but later!”

“Huh?” Naegi said.

“Time to go!” Hagakure prodded Naegi’s back with his foot, looking both desperate to get him moving and terrified at touching him. “You should go back to your room and not be here! Nothing personal. Just need to sleep!”

Perhaps disgusted that Hagakure was coming dangerously close to leaving foot marks on his back, Naegi stood up with his sister. Hagakure continued to herd them toward the door without actually touching them, Pekoyama following. Once the three of them were in the hallway, Hagakure slammed his door shut. The lock clicked.
Komaru slammed her fist on the door. “Coward!”

“He doesn’t believe me,” Naegi said conversationally. “He acted like this when Monokuma ordered Oogami-san to kill someone.”

Komaru’s nudge was more like a shove. “You don’t need him. He’s always trying to rip you off, anyways. Plus, his room stinks.”

Naegi nodded, staring at the closed door.

Pekoyama swept forward and squeezed his shoulder. “His decision is no fault of yours.”

Gently but firmly, she steered Naegi away from Hagakure’s room. She meant what she had said. After what Naegi had been through, how could he be blamed for giving in, no matter how brief the time? She did not know if he had done what Kirigiri claimed, but it didn’t matter, for he wasn’t to blame. His classmates, they knew nothing of this brand of despair; they didn’t understand how it weaved into your mind, how it consumed everything in an inky plague and twisted the thoughts inside. They didn’t understand how it held them prisoner in their own bodies, how it drowned them until there was nothing left. Maybe Naegi did try to kill Kirigiri, but it wasn’t his fault.

“You can hang out with me!” Komaru declared, throwing open the door to her room. She ran inside and hopped on the bed, arms crossed, as if she had something to prove.

“Alright,” Naegi said lazily. He walked inside, apparently forgetting where he was, and Pekoyama had to direct him to a chair.

“Are you okay?” Komaru asked.

“He is high,” Pekoyama said.

“He’s what? He’s on drugs?!”

“You. . . did not notice?”

Komaru gashed her teeth. “I don’t do drugs, okay? I don’t know what high people look like.”

“I see.” Pekoyama reached over to keep a sleepy Naegi from falling out of his chair.

As the clues had suggested, Naegi didn’t make for great company. Komaru tried to start a conversation once or twice, but gave up once it became apparent he was too out of it to keep up. Pekoyama scooped him up, carried him to Komaru’s bed, and tucked the covers over him as if it was his own bed. Komaru continued to complain to an imaginary audience.

“. . . and even if he did, it’s not the end of the world,” Komaru was saying. “It doesn’t automatically make him evil. . . Maybe becoming friends with killers is my Ultimate talent.”

Pekoyama felt something close to nervousness, until she realized Komaru was referring to Genocider Syo, and not herself. With that anxious moment out of the way, she took up a place beside Naegi’s bed, guarding him from nothing and everything.

The whispers in the hallway were whispers, so they couldn’t tell what they were saying. But they were loud enough to tell people were talking, and a group of people at that. Pekoyama looked over Naegi worriedly, only easing up once she confirmed he was asleep and couldn’t hear them. Komaru had gone tense and was ripping a strip of paper into itty bitty pieces.
The door opened without anyone knocking, and Fukawa slunk in as if it were her room. Her eyes flickered to Komaru, then to Naegi, and she didn’t seem surprised. She only startled when she saw Pekoyama there, as well.

“Oh. You,” Fukawa muttered. “What, are you two best friends now?”

“No. I think she’s following my brother around.”

Fukawa smirked, but it looked like she was straining to. “Her, too? Is he forcing himself on all the pretty girls when nobody’s looking?”

“He is my friend,” Pekoyama said slowly. It was the first time she had ever said that aloud. She had to admit that it was nice.

“Everyone’s his friend,” Fukawa said with a roll of her eyes.

Komaru scowled. “Not Kirigiri.”

The look Fukawa gave Komaru was sympathetic, but patronizing, like a teacher who had just overheard their worst student announce that they intended to become the next prime minister.

“Not here. Outside,” Pekoyama said firmly as she gazed down at Naegi’s slumbering form.

Komaru shut the door gently behind her, patting it once for good measure. A moment later, she realized she had essentially been kicked out of her own room and scowled.

“So, this is despair,” she muttered.

“Did you tell him?” Touko asked sharply.

“About what Kirigiri said? Don’t be. . . I might have mentioned it.”

Touko sucked in a breath through her teeth. “How did he take it?”

“Pretty well, but,” she dropped to a whisper, “he might have been high.”

“No shit,” Touko said. “What did you think Hagakure was going to do with him?”

“Oh. That was nice of him. Wait, he got my brother high. So, that wasn’t nice of him?” She cried out to the heavens, “This is so confusing!”

“Take what you can get,” Touko sniffed. “I can’t imagine that idiot handled it well.”

“He kicked us out,” she complained. “But I’m glad you get it. We’ll show those guys how stupid they’re being.”

The longer Touko stared at her, the less certain Komaru felt. At some point during her tiny speech, she had grabbed Touko’s hand. She let it drop awkwardly.

“Look, Komaru,” Touko pushed her glasses up her nose, “I get that you and Kirigiri don’t know each other well, but . . .”

“Don’t. Don’t say it.”

“Kirigiri can be a bitch, but she’s not a liar,” Touko said. “Especially not about things like this.”
Komaru almost kicked the wall, but she remembered how the last time had gone. “I know. But what do you expect me to do about it?”

Touko said, “We don’t know what’s going on in that thick skull of his. I still don’t know what he was thinking half the time while we were in school. And you. . . you’re still a kid. My point is that your brother apparently has a history of trying to murder people, and you’re like a cheerleader in a horror movie. . .”

“Because all murderers are monsters who don’t deserve a chance, right?” Komaru said quietly.

Touko flinched violently.

“. . . I’m sorry. I went too far, didn’t I? Touko-chan?” She reached for Touko’s turned-away shoulder.

Touko lightly brushed her wrist aside. “I guess I was asking for that.”

Komaru swallowed, trying to moisten her suddenly dry throat. “I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s fine,” Touko said. “Just keep your eyes open, and if something does happen, don’t be stupid and keep it to yourself.”

“Okay.” Komaru smiled. Her fingers brushed over the top of Touko’s hand. “I can do that. So, what are you going to do now?”

“You’re going back in there?” Technically, it was a question, but Touko obviously knew the answer.

“Are you scared?” Komaru asked quietly. Emotionlessly.

“If Naegi did try something, I don’t think he would get anywhere before she popped out.”

“About that. . . If she finds out, she’s not going to do something crazy, right?”

Touko grimaced. “If she finds out, she might jump his bones.”

Komaru was still for a second, and then she banished that dreadful, dreadful image to the darkest depths of her mind. She told Touko, “Don’t ever say anything like that again.”

“Agreed,” Touko said, looking disturbed herself.

They returned to Komaru’s room. Pekoyama glanced up when they first entered, but otherwise pretended that they weren’t there. Touko occupied her time by scribbling in a notebook she had brought, and Komaru entertained herself by reading over her shoulder and asking lots of – in Touko’s words – obnoxious questions.

She should have expected it. Apparently, Pekoyama did, for she wasn’t the least startled by Kirigiri’s sudden appearance. Komaru though felt her stomach turn over because how could she come here so soon after saying those awful things? That was one of the unwritten rules of girlhood!

“I told you he would be here,” Togami said, sounding smug as usual.

“I never said he wasn’t,” Kirigiri said. “I merely wanted to check Hagakure’s room first because that was where he was supposed to be.”

Without asking, Kirigiri walked into the room. Komaru scrambled to her feet and stood in the center of her bedroom, between Kirigiri and her brother. Touko grumbled in exasperation.
“What do you want?” Komaru demanded.

“I’m checking on him,” Kirigiri responded briskly. “Why is he sleeping here?”

She honestly couldn’t tell if that was another accusation. “He was tired.”

Kirigiri studied her for a long moment, then Naegi, then Touko and then even Pekoyama. Her brow pinched. “Did you tell him?”

“I…”

Her hesitation was enough to answer Kirigiri’s question. “Why would you do that? What are you hoping to achieve?”

“He deserves to know what you’re saying behind his back!”

Kirigiri rudely turned to Togami. “This is exactly why I kept it to myself.”

“Yes, yes, I know that, but there was no need to keep it from me,” Togami said. “I wouldn’t have done anything this irresponsible. Believe it or not, I also do take value in knowing which of our classmates are capable of murder.”

“You believe her?” Komaru squeaked. She hadn’t spent as much time with Togami in Towa City as she had with Touko, but the impression she had gotten was that Togami was a rough-around-the-edges good guy.

“As insufferable as she is, I have yet to see her draw an incorrect conclusion,” Togami said. “Given these circumstances, we’ve obviously been too careless with him.”

“So, that’s it? You’re all just going to turn on him?”

Togami said, “Be realistic—”

“Outside!” Pekoyama barked, standing at the side of the bed, blazing in her guardian fury. There was enough pressure and heat in that glower to force them all back into the hall, where Touko nearly bumped into Asahina.

“He needs to be monitored closely,” Togami said once they were outside.

“Thank you for volunteering to take shifts,” Kirigiri said dryly.

“Hmph. So now you want to work together. But I suppose I can take him off your hands once in a while.”

Kirigiri nodded. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

Asahina cleared her throat. “What about me?”

“I would prefer that Togami-kun and myself are responsible for supervising him,” Kirigiri said.

They settled into a satisfied silence, content with their solution. Komaru, ever the vengeful one, let it linger for a few seconds out of spite.

“Can someone explain what you’re trying to do?” Komaru asked.

“We’re arranging a supervision schedule,” Kirigiri said.
“Right. And what do you think he’s going to feel about that?”

Asahina and Touko both glanced her way; apparently, they hadn’t thought about that. Kirigiri was unbothered though, and it was Togami who said, “Do you remember how he thought nothing of Kirigiri constantly watching him?”

“Other than the times he’s complaining to me about it, I guess he thinks he doesn’t mind,” Komaru spat. Kirigiri tilted her head the tiniest bit and Komaru prayed she hadn’t signed Naegi’s death warrant by revealing that. “He notices, you know. He’s not stupid; he just doesn’t say anything!”

“If he has no problem with being supervised, then there’s no problem,” Togami said slowly, as if repeating this for the third time for someone who was particularly hard of hearing. “He seems to be accustomed to it.”

“He didn’t have a choice!” she shouted. “They would have hurt him if he said no.”

“Komaru might have a point,” Touko suddenly said. “Naegi’s been in two situations where he was constantly watched. One was with them. The other time we were trapped in Hope’s Peak. He could have a lot of unpleasant associations with being watched like this.”

“And?” Togami asked archly.

Touko flushed. “W-well, I’m just saying that, you know, we could be introducing a lot of stress. It might not be conducive to his r-recovery.”

“I am not letting him run amok.” Kirigiri’s tone made it obvious this was not a point up for debate. Meanwhile, Asahina shuffled away from the group and left without another word.

Komaru growled. “Don’t you think about what he needs at all?”

“I try. However, given that none of us have any idea what he experienced, how can I be certain? At most, all I can do is guess.”

“That’s not true!” Komaru said. “You said you knew him. He’s still Makoto. Even if he did do what you said he did, he was trying to help because that’s what my brother does!”

“Alright.” A pause. “Then can you explain why he’s been so difficult to work with?”

“Yes, I can! He’s all awkward because you’re scary and intimidating and he gets nervous really easily. He’s scared and worried but he’s not saying anything because he can’t tell how you’ll react and he doesn’t want to upset anyone. He knows you don’t trust him and he’s not going to tell you anything because all you do is say that he’s wrong and he thinks nobody wants to listen to him!”

“He is wrong,” Togami said. “Some of the nonsense that comes out of his mouth. . .”

“That’s not what I meant. You’re not saying he’s wrong; you keep saying that he’s wrong.”

“How do you know all this?” Kirigiri asked.

It took everything she had not to explode. “Because I’ve known him my entire life!”

She was pissed, so pissed that she thought the bang was caused by her voice. In reality, it was Pekoyama who was now approaching them. She walked strangely, with a gait that was more shoulder than hip. Her hands were clasped behind her back.

Pekoyama stopped before them.
“You woke him.”

“. . . And?” Togami tried.

It was the wrong response. Pekoyama didn’t move, but she stared...

“You guys can continue with this. I’m going. . . somewhere.” Touko, quailing under Pekoyama’s silent pressure, said.

“I’m going with her,” Komaru muttered and the two scurried away to safety.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
It’s been days since Owari’s eaten and something needs to be done.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Day 4, Morning

Things had changed.

They arrived to eat breakfast together, as they normally did. However, Pekoyama didn’t need to be convinced this time and followed at Naegi’s heels. When she took a seat next to Naegi and across from Komaru, Komaru only spared the once-killer a glance. She didn’t even blush that hard when Pekoyama pointed out the piece of cereal stuck on her cheek.

Not all had reacted so joyously though. Hagakure, his back to the group, hunched over and pulled his jacket over his head until only the tip of his hair was showing. Asahina said nothing, but that was it: she said nothing. There was also an absence. Kirigiri wasn’t there. Togami was though, and he surveyed the room like a king overseeing his kingdom.

“Where’s Kirigiri-san?” Naegi asked.

Komaru’s spoon paused midair. Fukawa, seeing her friend wasn’t going to answer fast enough, said, “Probably asleep. She was up all night.”

“She works too hard,” Naegi said. Fukawa nodded wordlessly, wondering if he truly didn’t know.

Togami walked over. “Naegi.”

Fukawa choked and stuttered so badly that she passed out for a moment due to lack of oxygen. As Komaru fretted over her, Naegi blinked up at the tall man who had approached them.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Togami asked.

“Fine,” a very weirded-out Naegi answered. Meanwhile, Komaru was fanning a steaming Fukawa with a plate.

“Good, good.” Togami said, nodding with closed eyes like a satisfied cat. “Feeling like your ordinary, common self? No intrusive thoughts?”

Naegi nodded, bewildered. Pekoyama wondered what Togami was playing at, and then realized that as part of his breakfast setup, Naegi had a dull knife within arm’s reach.

“Is that so? Then what are you thinking when you look at that?” Togami leered, making a sweeping gesture toward Naegi’s setup.

Naegi leaned forward. “Um, it looks nice. Are those breakfast sausages? I haven’t had them in a long time. Hanamura-kun doesn’t like them; he says the only sausages worth eating are homemade ones.”

“Really, now?”

Naegi cringed. “. . . You didn’t make them, did you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I wouldn’t sully myself preparing a meal like this for you lot,” Togami scoffed.
“Yeah, Togami-kun doesn’t know how to . . .” With a gulp, Komaru swallowed the end of her sentence when Togami glared at her.

“You’ve only spoken about the food. What about the rest of it?” Togami said.

Naegi made a show of looking over the table. “It’s good? Thanks for setting a place for me?”

“That wasn’t me,” Togami said abruptly, but he looked pleased all the same as Pekoyama quietly sizzled, Komaru shuffled in closer to her brother, as if to protect him. Pekoyama let her searching gaze fall upon the rest of the room’s audience; she caught Asahina’s eye, and the other woman quickly looked away. Elbows on the table, Naegi began to dig in as Togami slowly circled them.

“Can we help you?” Komaru demanded.

“No,” Togami said lightly.

Pekoyama didn’t like the way he said that, or the way he stared at Naegi. Komaru apparently didn’t either, for her chair screeched as she moved it even closer to Naegi until their shoulders touched.

Whatever kind of warning that was, it appeared to be effective, for Togami walked away and snapped his fingers at Hagakure. “You. Bring that extra plate to Kirigiri.”

“But I’m not done . . .” Hagakure whined.

“I didn’t say later.”

“I can do it!” Naegi said, already halfway out of his chair.

“No,” Togami said, for once his tone losing that biting edge of superiority. “You eat. I’m offering Hagakure the chance to do something useful with his life.”

“Nice joke, Toges!” Hagakure laughed, but Togami didn’t smile.

“Really, I don’t mind,” Naegi said. “I’ll bring it to her.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Asahina said quietly, barely being heard.

“You’ll wake her,” Togami said promptly. “That idiot, on the other hand, is scared of her, so he’ll at least keep quiet.”

“Geez, you think that’ll work?” Hagakure asked. “I’m not sure she actually sleeps.”

“Now.”

Hagakure fled with the plate, dropping a few crumbs on the floor as he did. Togami huffed and returned to his royal throne, where he dined on the same food as his subjects. Nothing else exciting happened and when the others finished eating, they left without much of a goodbye.

Naegi stretched, using the movement to slyly glance at Togami who despite finishing his breakfast, was loitering. Naegi scooched close to his sister, as if he wanted to cuddle. Instead, he used the lack of distance to speak to her without Togami overhearing.

“Kirisu-san’s mad at me, isn’t she?” he fretted.

“She’s not exactly mad at you. . .” Komaru tried.
“She is! That’s why they wouldn’t let me see her. She doesn’t want to see me.”

Komaru pursed her lip. She had warned them that he was smarter than they thought. The real problem though was that he was close to the mark. Kirigiri wasn’t mad at him in the traditional sense, but she probably didn’t want to see him.

“Fukawa-san!” Fukawa jumped as Naegi called out her name. “Is Kirigiri-san mad at me?”

“Why are you asking me?” Fukawa said. “I know I’m not the one you want whispering sweet nothings into your ear.”

Naegi whined. “She is mad at me!”

“Naegi-kun, she is not mad,” Pekoyama said. “She simply needs to rest. It is much more exhausting to keep watch over an area without a fleet of Monokumas.”

“Ugh. Isn’t Alter Ego enough?” Komaru said. If you asked her, it was creepy enough to know their virtual friend was constantly watching them, let alone a real person like Kirigiri.

“So, Kirigiri-san is sleeping?”

“Yes.”

Naegi cocked his head to one side. When you looked deep into his eyes, you could almost see through the skull to the whirring gears of his brain.

“What are you thinking?” Pekoyama asked.

Naegi shrugged and looked away bashfully. “Nothing.”

Naegi finished his meal without any more question, to their relief. They let him lead the way out of the dining hall, which he did in a prance. Only to stop short once he stepped into the hallway. Pekoyama started forward, until she saw Kamukura blocking Naegi’s path. Kamukura frowned down at Naegi, who was shuffling his feet and biting his lip like... like a guilty child.

“Naegi-kun,” Kamukura said.

Naegi gazed up at him with wide eyes.

“Kirigiri-san like coffee, does she not?”

Impossibly, Naegi’s eyes widened even further. He slowly broke out into a smile. “Pekoyama-san, can we go to the kitchen?”

“You do not need my permission to go anywhere,” Pekoyama said.

He nodded keenly. “Thanks, Kamukura-kun!”

Pekoyama naturally followed Naegi back into the room. Komaru exchanged a glance with Fukawa, shrugged, and then followed suit. Naegi had already bolted into the kitchen by the time they entered and when they entered that room, he was busy pilfering through the cabinets.

“. . . And we can make pastries or cookies, but I don’t think she likes sweets. Do you think she would like chocolate? Girls like chocolate, right?”

“Before you get carried away, I need to ask whether you know how to bake,” Pekoyama said.
Naegi’s shoulders sagged. “No, but it can’t be too hard, right?”

Something close to a smile spread across Pekoyama’s face. “I can help you. Sometimes, Kuzuryu-kun grew hungry and there was no one around to cook. Although I . . . My cooking skills are not nearly as sharp as my swordsmanship. He always yelled at me when I cooked for him.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re a bad cook though,” Naegi said. “Maybe he just didn’t like you cooking if other people were supposed to do that. Kuzuryu-kun’s weird like that. Either way, with the four of us, I’m sure we can figure this out.”

“True optimism from the Ultimate Hope himself,” Pekoyama said, making Naegi preen.

They only set off the smoke alarm once, which alerted Alter Ego who quickly took charge and saved the day. Pekoyama even won the glamorous title of The One Who Stopped The Coffee From Burning While Everyone Else Fanned Away The Smoke. The muffins, surprisingly, tasted alright, although they were dense. Given their appearance however, it was unanimously agreed they would not be giving them to Kirigiri.

Dressed in an apron his sister insisted he wear (“It makes him look cute,” had been Komaru’s winning argument), Naegi carried a tray through the halls, flanked by his entourage. He rapped on Kirigiri’s door. When she didn’t answer, he fretted that she was still sleeping.

Just as Naegi was beginning to blame himself, the door creaked open. Kirigiri slowly took in the collection of people outside her room.

“Hi!” Naegi said. “We made you coffee!”

He thrust the tray at her. Kirigiri stared at it. She carefully picked up the teacup Naegi had insisted on including, and then stared at that.

“What is the purpose of this?” she asked.

“Because you like coffee,” Naegi said, confused. “I couldn’t find any of that civet coffee you really like, but this one’s not terrible! I think. I don’t drink much coffee myself, so I don’t have a great benchmark.”

“Did any of you try it?” Kirigiri asked.

“I prefer tea,” Pekoyama said while Fukawa muttered something about catching Naegi’s lovey-dovey germs.

“I don’t think I’m old enough,” Komaru offered.

“Komaru, there’s no age limit,” Naegi said.

“But it’s a grownup drink, isn’t it?”

Naegi grinned as Pekoyama shook her head in exasperation.

Kirigiri asked, “What about you, Naegi-kun?”

“I made it as a gift for you. It doesn’t seem right for me to drink some,” he said.

“Alright. If that’s how you feel about it.” She put the teacup back and accepted the tray. “Please excuse me.”
Naegi was beaming after she shut the door. Lost in his post-gift giving high, he seemed to take Kirigiri’s departure no different than the end of yet another hangout at Hope’s Peak. Cheerfully, Naegi led his group back to the kitchen to finish off the hideous pastries.

In her room, Kirigiri lifted the lid of the coffee-filled teapot. She grabbed the handle and moved it in small circles, making the liquid swish around. Then, without a chink in her armour, she tipped the teapot over and poured the contents down her bathroom’s sink.

At the same time Kirigiri was dealing with the horrific problem of unwanted girls, Togami was dealing with his own. He, with Hagakure as his flunky, was going through the daily ritual of trying to talk Owari into eating. Trying, being the key word. As she had the last three days, Owari stuck her nose up and tossed the food right back at Hagakure. A safe distance away, Togami snorted and eyed the now-dirty floor with disgust.

“You commoners are such slobs,” Togami said. “At least order the servants to clean that up.”

“But Togami-chi, wouldn’t that be us?” Hagakure said.

“No. It would be you. Now, chop, chop!”

Hagakure began picking up bits of cereal and depositing them into a bowl. “Why are we bothering with this? If she doesn’t want to eat, we can’t make her.”

“Believe me, I would love nothing more than to let her starve to death,” Togami said. “However, if she dies now, it’s too easy for Ultimate Despair to spin that into murder on our parts.”

“But Naegi-kun wouldn’t believe that, would he?”

“I imagine he would be just as keen to believe she willingly starved herself to death,” Togami said. “Especially since I’ve been quite vocal about our dislike for them.”

“Yeah, go fuck yourselves!” Owari crowed.

“Charming,” Togami sniffed. “Does your kind always resort to such crude insults? Don’t you have a sense of creativity?”

It took Hagakure a while to realize Togami was also talking to him. “H-hey. . .!”

“Come on in here and try to make me eat. I dare you!” Owari snarled, snapping her teeth together as if she actually knew how to use them.

“You!” Togami snapped his fingers at Nidai Nekomaru. “Have anything to say to your ‘friend?’”

Nidai heaved a great sigh. “Owari-san. . .”

“Don’t you start, traitor!” Owari snapped. “I don’t need you. I got despair, and that’s all that matters.”

“Tch.” Togami clicked his tongue. “How you’re still alive is beyond me. Although. . . you! Yes, you. My sources told me that Naegi got her to eat.”

Nidai said, “He did, but . . .”

“It was a hunger strike, wasn’t it?” Togami said casually.
“It was. Why are you asking?” Nidai demanded. He didn’t have a good feeling about this.

Togami ignored them. “Hagakure, come. We’re leaving.”

They did. Once they did, Owari turned to Nidai, bristling, hands clenched at her side.

“Betraying us wasn’t enough, huh?” she said bitterly. “You gotta betray the kid, too.”

Nidai said, “They’re his friends. They won’t hurt him.”

He said that. He prayed it was true. But sure enough, a few minutes later, Togami and Hagakure returned with Naegi in tow.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Naegi was babbling to Togami. Nidai wouldn’t be surprised if the kid started frothing at the mouth.

“What do ya think you’re doing?” Owari demanded warily.

Togami smirked. “I just happened to find him in the kitchen. For whatever reason, he decided to try baking today and made more than he could possibly eat. I, in my esteemed generosity, decided to let him share the excess with his old. . . comrades.”

“You made those, kid?” Nidai asked.

“Yeah.” Naegi blushed and looked away. “Sorry if they aren’t very good.”

“Now, Naegi, why don’t you get on with what you came down here for,” Togami said. Even Naegi seemed to find that suspicious, and he peered at Togami. However, he didn’t seem to figure out what Togami was up to and handed each of them an oddly-shaped bun.

With Naegi looking at him like that, Nidai had to take a bite. It tasted okay. Not great, but okay. Wasn’t fluffy, though.

“Not bad,” he told Naegi, taking a second bite. “But it could be way better. Make sure you add baking to your training regiment!”

Naegi beamed and then looked at Owari. Although she wasn’t looking back at him, she still sensed his gaze. Naegi’s grin faltered as Owari’s shoulders lifted. The cords of muscles on her arm, only more noticeable without any fat, swelled until they almost didn’t look emaciated.

“You bastard.”

Naegi stumbled back, thunderstruck. Nidai was quick to try to intervene, saying, “Not you. She means your friend over there.”

As if to confirm it, Togami’s smirk widened. He held Owari’s glare without fear.

Naegi, still looking like he didn’t quite believe Nidai, said, “Owari-san?”

Owari glanced at Naegi. It was less than a second-long look, but Nidai still saw something change, something sag in her face. Her lips pulled up above her canines and then she took the most aggressive, most violent bite out of that bun that was physically possible. She stared at Togami, chewing viciously, grinding it between her teeth as if she had taken a chunk out of his heart. The swallow at the end was anticlimactic.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she told Naegi.
Naegi suspected they were pretending; even after several of Nidai’s hearty exclamations that it was okay (not great), he didn’t seem convinced. Even if he had been however, they doubted that Togami would have let him leave. Thus, Owari continued to eat, going pale at one point with the sheer unnaturalness of it. Nidai was torn; people needed to eat, but how Togami had gone about that. . .

“There. Done.” If Owari had been given a plate or utensils, no doubt she would have thrown them at Togami.

“Naegi, let’s head back up,” Togami said, strutting like peacock with its tail out.

“Ah, okay. Uh, bye guys.” Naegi waved at them while trying to jog backwards and follow Togami.

“That bastard,” Owari hissed again after they heard the distant echo of the cargo hold’s door closing. “He was going to let him do it. He’d let the kid starve himself over something as. . . stupid as this.”

Nidai wanted to disagree with her, but honestly, he couldn’t.

Owari’s grin reminded him of a skeleton. “Still have no regrets?”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Togami’s actions have opened up a can of worms.
The Fool's Song

Day 4, Morning

“Do you think we could see Komaeda-kun? Or Mikan? I won’t tell anyone. It can be our secret. I’ll. . . I’ll let you boss me around all week!”

“I already do that,” Togami said. “We are not seeing anyone else.”

“B-but I have another bun. See?” Naegi held out said bun. “I’m not hungry. I ate too much.”

“My answer is no. There is nothing you can say to change that.”

“. . . Could I bribe you?”

“You?” Togami exclaimed, intrigued. “What could you possibly have that I would be interested in?”

“Uh, how about this bun?”

He was a little disgruntled that Naegi was trying to bribe him (and poorly!), but on the other hand, it meant Naegi was finally beginning to open himself up to how the real world ran. Soon, maybe he would even stop denying that adequate salary Togami had offered him to. . . Wait, this Naegi didn’t remember that.

“I hope you have a good explanation for this,” someone else said.

Togami sneered. “Isn’t this my shift?”

Kirigiri, who had silently walked up behind them like any good creepy detective would, only glared. Her hair was ruffled instead of falling in smooth locks, as if she had jumped out of bed in a hurry. She had caught them a few steps away from the cargo hold, leaving no way to misinterpret where they had just been. Naegi knew that too; he was inching behind Togami, using him as a human shield. He supposed it could be forgiven, if only because it reinforced that he was the one in charge here.

“Explain,” Kirigiri ordered curtly.

“Hmm, well if you insist.” He smoothed out his shirt first, just to make her squirm. Not that she did, but he knew that deep in her heart, it irritation her. “Since it appeared that the rest of you were inadequate at keeping certain prisoners fed, I took it upon myself to remedy that. Any objections?”

“Do I have any objections. Really? Please don’t insult me like that.”

Palms-up, he spread his arms wide in a suitable regal gesture. “It got results. We don’t need to worry that Owari will keel over and die in the next two hours.”

“That’s not the point. I don’t care about that,” Kirigiri said. “There’s a reason we’re keeping him separated from them.”

“Relax, won’t you. It’s not like I let any of them out. If anything went wrong, I would have grabbed Naegi and that would be the end of it.”
“Do you understand how people work at all?” Kirigiri asked. “An addict doesn’t recover when you keep allow them to relapse.”

Togami laughed. “You think he’s addicted?”

“It’s a metaphor,” she said coldly. “Their relationship is toxic. That’s my reasoning.”

“Well, if you want to let them starve, I’m not going to fight you,” Togami said flippantly. “I’ve advocated for that route all along...”

_Slam!_

Both sunk down, bringing their weight over their feet where they were steady. For this close to the cargo hold, it was only natural to assume that sound was Ultimate Despair launching their attack. Ominously, the door to the cargo hold had been the one to make that sound, too. Yet nothing came out. Kirigiri understood first and bolted for the cargo hold. Togami took a moment, reflecting. Alright. He’d admit it: they might have made a minor mistake having that conversation in front of Naegi.

As Togami descended into the hold, a sharp yell echoed through the stairwell: “No!”

“Makoto, let go!”

Thankfully, Naegi hadn’t gotten far. That or Kirigiri had been that much faster than him. They were close to the bottom of the stairs, where Naegi clung to one of the metal shelves. Kirigiri, never one to exert herself unnecessarily, pulled on him with maybe a third of her strength. There wasn’t a point to pulling harder; Togami could see that Naegi had both arms wrapped around the shelf and would be difficult for even Asahina to move.

“I need to see Owari-san again!” Naegi cried. “And the Imposter! And Komaeda-kun is sick, and...”

“Makoto, they’re fine,” Kirigiri said. “Togami-kun should never have brought you down here.”

“I don’t know they’re fine!” he said.

“You do, because I’m telling you they are –”

“You don’t even care about them!” he shouted into her face. “You don’t care if they’re okay.”

Naegi wheezed. He continued to hug that shelf. He lurched and twisted in ways that, from behind, made it look like his spine had broken in several places. Kirigiri wasn’t pulling anymore. Emotionlessly, she watched him. Then, she deftly reached around, wrapped her fingers around one of his wrists, and then ripped it off the shelf and twisted it sharply to the side. Naegi yelped in pain, instantly losing his grip on as Kirigiri twisted further and brought him to his knees.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you stay here,” Kirigiri said. “Remember that discussion we had when you first woke up?”

She didn’t wait for an answer. She grabbed him under the armpit and then hauled him to his feet. Naegi let her, but Togami saw his chest swell with a deep breath.

“Komaeda-kun!”

With how short the phrase was, it was impossible to muffle him before he finished. Not that Kirigiri
seemed inclined to. She was pretending he wasn’t screaming as she twisted his wrist behind him and forced him to walk in front of him. Naegi walked on his tiptoes, listening desperately for an answer that didn’t come. At least not from Komaeda.

“Leave,” Kirigiri commanded the moment they were free of the hold.

Holding himself, scowling, Naegi nevertheless did as she said and skulked off. She then turned her furious stare to Togami.

“Congratulations. You’ve planted the thought of rebellion in his head,” she said. “At least before he was still listening to me.”

“And how long would that last once he discovered one of his ‘friends’ had died?” Togami asked. “How did you expect to earn his trust after that?”

She was silent, but what she was thinking was clear: I would have handled it.

“Let’s make this clear,” Togami said. “Despite everything they’ve done, we don’t want them to die. Even if that’s only because that would make him that much harder to deal with. That woman is on her last legs. We can’t afford to wait until Naegi’s able to handle them on his own. So, if you have a better plan than what I did, then tell me now.”

For a while, she stared at the wall, silent. “You shouldn’t have done this.”

She began to walk away. But Togami grabbed her shoulder firmly and waited until she looked at him.

“Are you really going to do this again, when working alone has turned out so well for you in the past?” he asked quietly.

“I’m surprised that you of all people haven’t figured it out,” she said. “Naegi-kun’s planning something.”

“Is that so?” Togami asked. “With all the time you’ve spent watching him, you must have some idea of what it is.”

She was silent for a long time. “If the target isn’t me, it’s going to be his sister.”

Togami could read between the lines. He idly looked in the direction that Naegi had left. Of all the people on this ship, Togami had thought Naegi had the weakest stomachs for murder. Still, during the trials, he had displayed an unnatural conviction and while they had attended school, Togami had been caught off-guard more than once by Naegi’s unwavering principles. If the seed of murder was somehow allowed to take root, it wasn’t that hard to imagine Naegi following through.

“This is how it happened before,” Kirigiri said. “He panics at first and then suddenly recovers. He says he’s okay. He pretends to cooperate. He waits until you trust him. Then he takes that trust and uses it against you.”

Logically, what she was saying wasn’t incorrect. Yet, there was still something wrong that Togami couldn’t put his finger on. It was as if they were having a debate but they each had a different definition of the topic.

“I don’t understand you,” Togami said. “If you truly believe this, why are you letting him run around?”
“You saw how they reacted when I told them what Naegi-kun had done. How do you think they would have reacted if I suggested treating him like the rest of the Despairs?” She exhaled through her nose. It was the only sign of emotion. “I’ve been trying to keep this group together, not divide us. We’re safer as a unit from them, and him.”

“Things didn’t go quite to plan, then,” Togami observed.

“It could be worse,” Kirigiri said. “I had expected Asahina-san to choose his side.”

He nodded carefully. “And this is it? This is all that’s going on here?”

“What are you implying?”

“Nothing,” he said, taking a moment to smooth over the crawling unease in his gut. “I thought I’d ask.”

Even after she was out of sight, Kirigiri’s promise hung over his head like an executioner’s axe. Once or twice he found himself checking behind him, as if Naegi would be there with a bloody knife in hand and a wild grin. Each time, he told himself he was a fool; Naegi was no master at stealth. Yet he wondered.

When Komaru, with Naegi close on her heels, cut through the hall in front of him, he reeled back. They were gone before he could blink, Pekoyama hot on their trails. He tried to refresh the image in their mind; had there been a weapon? Had Komaru been frightened? He didn’t think so, but he had gotten only a brief look.

He cleared his throat. Then he clapped twice and waited.

Fukawa came bounding down the hall like a dog, panting. She screeched to a halt in front of him and blubbered, “You c-called me?!”

“I did.” Reluctantly, he patted her on the head and added, “Good girl. I have a question for you.”

“Yes! The answer’s yes!” The disgusting plebeian was drooling. “I’ve d-dreamt about this since the day we met.”

“Stop. Sit.” Fukawa did, mouth snapping shut. “My question is about the Naegis.”

“One day,” Fukawa muttered, wringing her hands.

“You like to stalk her. You must have seen the two interact,” Togami said. “Is there anything that concerns you about that?”

“Komaru can be an immature idiot, but she isn’t going to jump him,” Fukawa said.

Togami took a moment to clear his mind of any images that answer may have provoked. What was with this perverted troll’s obsession with Komaru’s alleged brother complex? A petty display of jealousy, perhaps?

“Is Naegi a danger to her?” he asked bluntly.

Fukawa blinked. “I don’t think so. Komaru’s got experience with Monokumas. If he starts losing it, she could take him. Either of us could.”

He exhaled. “Alright.”
The two cut through the hall again, Komaru chasing Naegi this time. They must have been playing a childish game of tag. Once again, Pekoyama chased after the two of them.

He wondered, if it came down to it, would having Pekoyama around would make it easier or harder for Naegi to make his kill.

Asahina finished wrapping the towel around her hair and pushed open the door to the kitchen. After a late-night swim, there was nothing better than a hot chocolate. True, they might not have any, but she was adaptable! She could always dip chocolate donuts in milk instead!

Considering the time, she had expected to be alone, so the scent of cooking came as a surprise. So did the dark figure that stepped out of the corner. But before anyone overreacted, Pekoyama finished checking her over, nodded, and slipped back into the shadows. Hand over her heart, Asahina shuddered. She peeked at the place where Pekoyama had disappeared and realized she had no idea where the very dangerous woman had gone.

“Naegi-kun?” she called out hesitantly. She kept close to the wall so that Pekoyama couldn’t sneak up behind her. Unlike what Naegi and his sister thought, she certainly didn’t consider the Ultimate Swordswoman to be a tamed beast.

“Asahina-san?” Naegi popped up in the distance. He wore giant oven mitts and an apron, and his hair was powdered white with flour.

“Hey, you’re a bit…” When she reached him, she absently brushed his hair. The cloud of flour that appeared made her cough wickedly.

“Heh, heh. I might have ripped open a bag of flour when I was trying to take it off the shelf,” he said. “But Pekoyama-san and I swept it up! Please don’t tell Kirigiri-san. She’ll get mad that I’m wasting supplies.”

“Wouldn’t she already know?” Asahina asked, pointing with her chin to one of the cameras in the corner.

“Maybe, but I’m hoping that she might have turned in for the night,” Naegi said. “I think she and Togami-kun are taking turns, but I don’t think he’s very likely to use the cameras.”

That would explain Togami loitering in the hallway. It surprised her that Naegi had already figured it out. Did he overhear Togami and Kirigiri discussing that or something?

Just like that, the awkwardness rose. She had forgotten briefly about what had happened. The back of her neck pricked as she remembered Pekoyama snooping in the corner, like an assassin waiting for their handler to give the signal. But Naegi wouldn’t do that. He would at least have the dignity to strike the blow himself; that’s what he had done to Kirigiri!

“Why are you baking anyways?” she thought aloud. “Uh, not that you can’t, it’s just… why?”

Naegi blushed. “No reason! I just felt like baking. Why are you here, Asahina-san?”

“Hot chocolate,” she said. She shuffled past him. “It’s always good to warm your muscles up after being in the water for so long.”

Naegi nodded. His eyes tracked her as she walked towards the cabinets.

“I’m surprised you haven’t run away yet,” Naegi said. “You know, because I can’t be trusted
anymore.”

She stiffened. “Who told you that?”

“Komaru said that Kirigiri-san said that.”

Shit. Why did Komaru do that? You didn’t just go up to people and tell them that! Naegi seemed to be taking it well, but maybe he was really mad. Like so mad that he looked super calm. Part of her was curious what a pissed off Naegi looked like, but more of her liked that she had never seen Naegi that mad and wanted to keep it that way.

She gulped. “Naegi-kun, I . . .”


She turned away from him. How could he stand there and act like he was okay with this? Was it . . . true? Had he tried to kill Kirigiri? Is that why he was acting like this: because Kirigiri was telling the truth?

“Look, I . . . Actually, I think he’s supposed to be finished tonight,” Asahina told him. “I’ll get you your tv, but after that . . . I’m not doing anything like this again.”

Naegi smiled. “Because I can’t be trusted. I understand.”

She really hated how he was reacting to this. It creeped her out.

The blast of the oven’s beeping was so unexpected that she screamed. Naegi screamed a little too, terrified by her reaction. They both stopped around the same time, cheeks red, exchanging a giggle. Naegi’s eyes suddenly it up, and he beckoned her to follow as grabbed something off the counter.

“She should be cool now!” He shoved into her hands what appeared to be a loaf of bread. “Give it to Soda-kun.”

She held the loaf away from her as if it would bite. “Why?”

“He did us a huge favour. I think he deserves a thank-you,” Naegi said. “It’s the polite thing to do.”

Like she felt any need to be polite to them. She wasn’t going to tell Naegi that, however. Not when he was looking at her with those earnest eyes.

“Fine,” she said. “But don’t think this makes me your delivery boy. Girl!”

Naegi grinned. “I know.”

Late that night, in the bowels of the ship where there should only be snoring, a cackle filled the air. If one looked at its source, they would have seen pointed teeth flashing in the dim light, while red eyes narrowed in satisfaction and understanding. That is, if they weren’t scared off by the painful-looking hunch to the figure’s back.

Mioda stirred sleepily. “Oi? What’s this? Has Kazuichi-chan accepted that we’re supposed to be the big bad villains of this story?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Soda said.
“She’s asking why you are making that awful racket,” the Imposter said. His wig had slipped off during his sleep, and it wasn’t until he fixed it that his expression smoothed into one of Mioda’s likeness.

Soda’s tongue lolled out of his mouth like an excited hyena. “Do you guys remember when Naegi came down and asked me to make him those tiny televisions.”

“Didn’t you finish those this evening?” the Imposter asked.

“Yeah, yeah. But do you remember what Naegi said when he asked me to do it?”

The two Miodas exchanged looks and then shrugged.

Soda smirked. “He said I couldn’t escape while I was making ‘em.”

“Why’d you agree to that anyways?” Mioda asked. “Doesn’t seem like a thing a big bad member of Ultimate Despair would do.”

“That’s cause you guys aren’t soul brothers like us. Sure, it sounded like he was saying one thing, but he was totally saying another.” Soda chuckled. “Naegi said I couldn’t escape while building the televisions. Check out what he got that Asahina chick to bring me.”

With that, Soda reached into his jumper, where for some strange reason he had decided to stash a loaf of bread (which had several bites taken out of it). He held it out so they could see. The bread arched as he pulled on both ends before it finally split.

Soda turned the exposed bread toward them. Poking out of the bread, barely visible, was the end of a wrench.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Naegi continues his tradition of invading his sister's room in the middle of the night.
A Little Boy's Dream

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Naegi might be a smart boi, but he's also fucking delusional :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Day 4/5, Midnight

Komaru grunted as she wrestled with her dastardly bedsheet. She had one corner of the sheet scrunched up in her hand and had sunk into a half-crouch as she eyed the opposite corner of the mattress. She sprung like a panther, and quickly wrestled the sheet’s elastic corner onto the mattress. She sighed in relief. Then screamed when she looked back and saw that the other corner had come undone yet again.

“What am I being punished for?” she demanded of a truly merciless god.

She flopped back on her sheet-less bed and pouted. Whatever. It was her room. She didn’t care if it was messy.

Shortly after, someone knocked. Well, she was assuming it was a knock; it sounded more like someone had run face-first into the door. The only reason she was sure that wasn’t the case was that the knock was followed by several more of the same volume. She opened the door just as her brother swung for another knock. The momentum sent him stumbling into her room, swinging her arms for balance.

“If you knocked like that at home, Mom and Dad would kill you,” she said.

Makoto gave her an odd look, but he quickly shook it off. He bolted past her – she thought he was trying to run out of the room – and shut the door with a quiet click. He turned the lock, barring them inside.

“Is Kirigiri-san stalking you again?” she asked.

“No.” His voice bounced. His body did too, bobbing up and down as he kept going up on the balls of his feet. “I think this is Togami-kun’s shift. He was watching me earlier, and I didn’t see her when I was talking to Alter Ego.”

“Him, too? Is the whole ship -?”

He pushed her. Kind of. He kept his hands on her shoulder so that even when she lost her balance, she didn’t fall. He directed her backwards to her bed, and she let him push her down.

“Sorry,” he said. He was visibly struggling not to look at the ceiling for some reason. “I just . . . I want to see if Kirigiri-san is going to come.”

“There’s cameras in my room?” she squeaked.

“Maybe. I don’t know. There’s probably one in mine.”
They waited. Makoto vibrated in excitement, making his teeth chatter. She was getting excited too, even though she had no idea what was happening.

“I think we’re clear,” he finally said.

“Great! So, what are you doing? You got that super suspicious look on.”

Makoto giggled and reached under his sweater. “Look!”

He pulled out a medium-small rectangle. It had buttons and metal and hey, was that a screen? It almost looked like a walkie talkie, but the screen was where the speaker should be.

“Tada!” Makoto preened.

“You found a tv? Do you think we can catch some anime? I haven’t been able to watch any of my shows ever since the world ended.”

“It’s not for watching anime,” Makoto said. “I’m pretty sure none of those television stations are still around anyways. It’s probably all Future Foundation and Despair propaganda. This is just for us.”

“I’ve always wanted to direct my own show!” she squealed. “We need to talk to Touko-chan. She’s a cool writer, so she’ll have all the good ideas.”

She was faster than him, but he had locked the door and that delay allowed him to catch her by the arm. It was a firm grip. Well, it was a firm grip for her scrawny brother.

“Not her either. Not anyone else. This is just for us.”

His arm was shaking. She nodded, suddenly feeling ten years younger. Makoto herded her away from the door, and they sat next to each other on the bed.

“I... I already got some videos on here,” Makoto said. “I thought we could watch them together.”

She flicked him in the ear. “Why didn’t you just say that in the first place, you bozo? So, what’s on it?”

Part of her was hoping. Part of her was hoping that if Makoto was coming to her now at this time with such a strong desire to stay quiet, that the video was about them: the parents she hadn’t seen since she was kidnapped. Parents that Towa Monaca had only alluded to. That dream was dashed when the face that appeared on the screen was a Makoto with fuller cheeks and bright eyes. Still, that didn’t make things a complete downer. It was nice to see her brother’s true self again, as if he was whispering into her ear that everyone was going to turn out okay.

Komaru had only been to Hope’s Peak once or twice, as the administrators didn’t like outside visits. (Although, Makoto had implied that the other Ultimates weren’t given as much hassle. Just lucky students.) Even with that shallow well of memories to draw upon, she could recognize the school’s crest. She watched the screen. Maybe she’d see Maizono Sayaka! She’d always wanted to meet her, but her favourite idol had been so busy that Makoto hadn’t been able to arrange a visit. Oh, that’s why Makoto made this video: he’d gotten Maizono to record a message for her more loyal and greatest fan in the world! Makoto was such a great brother! She loved him. She did! Although Maizono was dead now so her life was pretty much ruined and, oh, she was crying.

“Uh, Komaru?”

“Sorry.” She wiped her eyes several times before they started to clear. “I was thinking about
Maizono-san.”

His lip lifted into a small smile. “I do, too.”

Barely keeping herself in check, she watched the screen. Maizono appeared and introduced herself and – huh? – was this his first day at school? Because Makoto was going around introducing himself to everyone. Hmm. It was kind of nice know that Kirigiri was mean even back then.

Then it happened.

Makoto had turned down the volume so it wouldn’t go through the walls, but the sound still stung her. Monokuma. It was a miracle she didn’t scream. The bear laughed with that ominous, high-pitched giggle. She could hear them all over again: the laughter resonating in their metal chests as they surrounded her.

“What is that doing there?” she demanded.

“Explaining the rules,” Makoto said.

Rules? She tried to catch her brother’s eye, but he was too focused on the screen. Rules for what? He couldn’t mean. . .

“You’re showing me the Killing Game.”

“Yes, I’m . . .”

“No!” She nearly swatted the television out of his hands. “I told you that I don’t want to see it! I know they were your friends, and this is important to you, but I’m not doing it! Get Touko-chan to write a summary for me.”

“You have to,” he said flatly. “You need to. How can you become Hope if you don’t understand?”

“Huh?”

“I mean you probably won’t become the Ultimate Hope until I die, but at least there will be a backup. And how can two Hopes possibly be a bad thing?” he asked, voice strained. “You need to see this. You need to understand why we’re so important –”

“I’ve already seen people die. I’ve seen dozens of them die!” she snapped. “I don’t need to see any more people die!”

That was the wrong thing to say. He smiled toothily, but with the way his eyes dilated, it was more like the fanged smile of a vampire smelling prey. “Exactly. You saw them die in Towa City, and look what happened: You became strong. You evolved and defeated the heir to Despair. That’s how we grow. We absorb the hope and dreams of the people who die for us and add it to our own. They live within us, and together we –”

Crack!

His cheek was red. Her palm was, too. Makoto touched his tender face. Winced. She wanted to slap him again. She wanted to keep slapping him until he lost that stupid look and cried and felt bad for what he had said.

“. . . You’re still so naïve,” Makoto mumbled. “That’s okay. We’ll watch it together. I’ll show you the truth. Then you’ll understand. You’ll . . . Hey! What are you doing?”
“Leaving!” she barked as she unlocked the door.

“You...! You can’t do that!”

“Yeah? Why not?”

“Because... because that’s not allowed.”

“You can try and stop me, but it’s not gonna work,” she said. “I’m going to sleep in Touko-chan’s room.

“You... you can’t leave. I didn’t say you could!” he shouted from the center of her room. He wasn’t making a move to pursue her. “I said you had to watch it, so...”

“You can’t tell me what to do!”

“If you leave, I’ll... I’ll get mad.”

“Good!” she shouted back.

He didn’t say anything. Instead, he twitched. His mouth was hanging open. He looked stunned. She didn’t think about it and shut the door behind her.

A quarter of the way to Touko’s room, the silence was shattered.

The low timbre of the boat’s horn ripped through the ship. It died, then sounded again, pulsating rhythmically. Even though she couldn’t immediately remember what it meant, the sound seized her body and froze it to the spot with fear. Gradually, the memory came back to her; the memory of the briefing they received the first time they set foot on the ship... 

“This is the sound of the general emergency alarm,” Alter Ego said cheerfully. “You should evacuate to the designated meeting place when you hear it.”

“Makoto!”

He was frozen in the middle of her room like a rabbit, hands clamped over his ears. She couldn’t blame him; while the sound wasn’t loud, it came with an intensity that made it feel like your eardrums would explode. Alter Ego had chosen wisely; even without knowing what the sound meant or what it was, it still plucked at the strings of instinct and evoked a primal fear. Though it would be nice if Makoto would move.

She grabbed his hood and yanked. “Come on, let’s go!”

She led him like a dog on a leash. There was something disturbing about that, something wrong about how he asked no questions and how he stared at her like she held the answers to the universe. Was that what siblings looked like when they relied on each other? Had she ever looked at her brother like that?

They had already been up and active, and that gave them a head start over the others. If she listened hard, she could hear the others making noise. Maybe they should have waited because they were all probably looking for her brother.

She heard doors closing in the distant stairwell. Oh, so they weren’t the first. She bet it was Hagakure; the coward would run like that. Makoto and her reached the bend that would turn into the stairs. She propelled him in front of her and that’s what it happened: Makoto’s luck reared its
hideous head and he tripped. Right when she was about to put her foot down in the place where his body now laid. She tried, she did, but her dumb brother didn’t roll away fast enough and she stepped on him and immediately lost her footing.

She fell and halfway towards hitting the ground, something slammed into the wall where her head would have been.

Makoto snapped into protective big brother mode and tried to simultaneously wriggle out from under her and crawl over her. He was awkwardly halfway wrapped around her when her eyes fell onto the source of the offending noise: a shattered wine bottle. The red liquid pooled around the shards, like her blood would have if it had met its mark. Who in the world would have –?

There was only one answer, wasn’t there?

They were already on the stairs. Hanamura’s portly silhouette nearly hid Soda, but she saw him. Hanamura must have lobbed the bottle; he had a bag slung over his shoulder that appeared to be filled with various throwing materials. Soda had gone for the more direct approach and wielded a metal pole with holes where the screws had once been.

“Soda-kun? Hanamura-kun?” Makoto brushed himself off and stood up, as if they just hadn’t tried to whip a glass bottle at her face. “You should have waited until morning. I’m usually sleeping right now.”

The two members of Ultimate Despair exchanged looks. Soda said, “Yeah, maybe we would have especially if we had known this dumb alarm was gonna go off. Say, could you take two steps to the left?”

Her chest tightened. Makoto was between her and them right now. He wasn’t that stupid, was he?

Thankfully, he wasn’t. She could only see his back, but could imagine his suspicious expression when he asked, “What are you doing?”

“Eh? It doesn’t matter,” Hanamura said. “I can get her.”

With that, Hanamura reached into the bag and whipped out another bottle. She saw it coming, she knew it was coming, but that didn’t mean she was fast enough to react –

And the bottle shattered midair in a cloud of red liquid and gleaming shards. Pekoyama shielded her face instantly, holding the snapped-off chair leg in front of her. There was no way to tell whether the red on her face was just from the wine, or blood.

“Pekoyama-san!” Makoto cried.

“Naegi-kun!” Pekoyama’s heel slid back until it bumped into him. She kept her gaze on the staircase.

Soda was laughing. “Yo, that was pretty cool.”

“How did you get here?” Pekoyama barked. “You shouldn’t have been able to get this far!”

Soda said, “What’d ya mean?”

Pekoyama closed her eyes briefly. The chair leg lowered to her side. Then she grabbed Komaru, who had just scrambled to her feet, and shoved her towards Makoto.

“Run!” Pekoyama shouted at them.
Komaru didn’t hesitate. Makoto did, but she yanked him along. Male voices shouted behind them and she thought they were Ultimate Despair but couldn’t be sure. She ran and didn’t stop running until they were near the end of the hallway where another possibly compromised staircase was three doors away.

“K-Komaru, hold on.” Bent at the waist with his hands on his knees, Makoto panted heavily.

“They got out!” she shouted hysterically. “Togami-kun and Kirigiri-san promised they wouldn’t.”

“Komaru, it’s fine.” Even though he was still hunched over, he grabbed his shoulder. “It’s okay. They...”

“Did you see what just happened? They tried to kill me with a wine bottle!”

Makoto grimaced. “I know, I’m sorry! It’s not their fault; it’s mine.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“I didn’t say anything,” Makoto explained. “If I had explained, I could have made them stop. Everything would have been fine.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Komaru said. “They’re crazy.”

“They’re not. They’re confused!” Makoto protested. “Enoshima messed with their minds, but they’re still good people. They’re just confused about what’s right and wrong.”

“Are you kidding? Do you remember what they did to Togami-kun?” She clamped a hand around her own neck for emphasis. “They nearly killed him!”

“But he stopped!” Makoto cried. “Tanaka-kun could have killed Togami-kun, but he didn’t. Tanaka-kun stopped because I asked him to!”

“He would have killed Togami-kun if you weren’t there, and you’re not there now!” She swept her arm out to gesture to the empty hall.

A second later, she realized what a mistake that had been.

Adrenaline made you quick, which would have been nice if she was one experiencing the rush but nope, that was Makoto. He bolted back to that staircase. Komaru’s adventures in Towa City had strengthened her muscles while Makoto’s captivity had weakened his, but he was just fast enough to constantly remain slightly out of reach. Until he stopped, at which she smashed into his back and they both fell to the ground.

“They’re gone,” he said and sure enough, they were. Makoto got up first (she had taken an unfortunate elbow to the gut) and hobbled up the stairs.

They spilt onto the deck. And that wasn’t a good thing because everyone was there: Ultimate Despair on one side, Makoto’s classmates on the other. Pekoyama was a few steps in front of Makoto’s classmates, facing down her own friends, although she kept scanning the shadows as if looking for something. Komaru did too and made a discovery of her own: Komaeda Nagito was missing.

“They’re... they’re armed,” Makoto mumbled. “They’re not supposed to be armed.”

“Duh!” she snapped at her dumb brother. “Why do you think they came up when everyone was
supposed to be sleeping?”

In the pale moonlight, Makoto’s face went white.

“Come on, Pekoyama,” Owari was calling, “Let’s tear these bastards apart!”

“You can still join the party even if Baby Gangsta didn’t want to come!” Mioda cheered.

“Whose side are you on anyways?” Saionji demanded.

“Pekoyama-san, you don’t need Kuzuryu-kun to tell you what to do,” Koizumi chided. “You’re perfectly capable of making your own decisions.”

Voice strained, Pekoyama said, “Go back.”

“Pekoyama-san!”

Komaru knew her brother, so she knew why he had to call out like that. It was both the worst and best thing he would have possibly done. On one hand, he’d drawn the murderous attention of Ultimate Despair away from his friends. On the other hand, now everyone knew he was here. As she heard Tsumiki Mikan’s loud squeal, it seemed to confirm that this was a very bad thing.

“Naegi-kun.” Pekoyama, at least, sounded happy to see him. Or maybe that was relief at having someone to tell her what to do.

“Oi, Naegi! Over here!”

“Naegi-kun!”

“There you are!”

Ultimate Despair was waving and shouting at her brother like he was a long-awaited celebrity. It wouldn’t have been so bad if Makoto wasn’t reacting so positively to it. He was beaming. It… it was the happiest she had seen him in days. What was weird was that Ultimate Despair seemed super happy, too.

“Makoto, what did you do?” Kirigiri snarled. It was a good thing his classmates were closer to them than they were to Ultimate Despair, or Makoto might have run to the latter for protection upon seeing Kirigiri’s face.

“Hey, leave the kid alone,” Owari said. “Soda’s the one who. . . Urk!”

Having just elbowed Owari in the ribs, Soda shouted, “That’s none of their business!”

“Guys, calm down,” Makoto said. “I know there’s a lot of bad blood between everyone, but we can put that behind us. We’re here on a clean slate, right? You guys don’t even have a reason to fight anymore because you’re no longer Ultimate Despair, and they’re not with the Future Foundation. You’re no longer enemies. In fact, the reason we’re all here is because the Future Foundation’s after us so shouldn’t we try to get along? Safety in numbers, right?”

“What, you think we need help to protect ourselves from them?” Owari cracked her knuckles and then her neck. “We were winning before without their help.”

Saionji giggled. “If you want us to get to know them so badly, we can sit down and drink hot cocoa cooled with their blood!”
Hanamura smiled. “Mioda-san, you were talking about a party, right? We can use their intestines as party streamers!”

“No! No!” Before Komaru could stop him, Makoto dashed forward. “No intestine streamers! These are my friends. You don’t need to fight them. Don’t forget that some of you helped us get here. This is how you wanted things to be: all of us together, free from the rest of the world. And aren’t you guys happy to be out of those cages? It’s better this way for everyone! So, Soda-kun, you can put down that pole —”

“You know, I heard rumors that some people were having seconds thoughts about that deal you guys struck,” Soda said, leering at Kirigiri.


Nidai said, “Sorry, kid. I’m not completely convinced they have your – or our – best interests at heart.”

“They’re terrible people,” Tsumiki said. “They lied to us.”

“You, too?” Makoto said, dismayed. “I know locking you guys up wasn’t nice, but you have to understand where they’re coming from. You guys did some really bad things as Ultimate Despair. They’re afraid of you —”

“For good reason!” Togami said, pointing at Tanaka. “Must I remind you that these friends of yours are all mass murderers?”

“At least we didn’t kill anyone who mattered,” Saionji said.

“The life of Enoshima-san. . . it was worth a hundred times more than any of yours!” Koizumi said.

“Enough talk! Let’s get this over with!” Owari cracked her knuckles and started forward.

“Not on my watch!” Asahina planted herself in front of her friends, even as Touko fainted behind her. A moment later, a cackling Genocider Syo pulled her scissors out of nowhere and waved them threateningly. On the other side, Ultimate Despair was beginning to move as a pack.

“Guys, stop! Just listen to me!”

Either her brother was blind to the danger or overly optimistic. It was bad enough when he had drawn attention to himself, but now he was running straight at Owari herself. He clung to her arm as she tried to shake him off.

“They’re not your enemies,” Makoto was saying. “They’re my friends. You can’t fight them!”

Owari ripped him off and nearly threw him to the ground beside her. “Move aside.”

“Don’t touch him!” Asahina shouted.

“Hah? You gonna stop me?”

“Stop -!”

But Makoto’s cry was cut short as Tsumiki zipped to his side and swallowed him in a hug. She frantically picked through his hair, looking for an injury. That was enough of an opening for Owari to charge.
“Nope!” Before Asahina could swing, Genocider Syo bounded forward and checked Owari with her shoulder, sending the athlete spinning to the ground. Syo laughed hysterically, eyes gleaming with bloodlust. “Hm, I know I only go for guys, but being called the Ultimate Despair Slayer has got a bit of a ring to it.”

“Stay away from her!” The air flashed red. The light faded into bolts of forked lightning that somehow were coming from Nidai’s eyes. He ploughed forward and Genocider rushed forward too with a shriek of glee.

“Genocider, wait! He’s not cute!” Makoto cried, finally ripping free of Tsumiki. “Stop!”

Another blur passed and then Pekoyama was slashing upwards with her chair leg; had it been a sword she would have taken Genocider’s arm at the wrist. Genocider, seeing this new opponent, moved back and put some space between them.

“This is enough!” Pekoyama barked. “Put your weapons down now. All of you.”

“Traitor!” Soda shouted. Pekoyama directed a crooked sneer at him.

“. . . Got you!”

As Genocider Syo and Nidai had come close to clashing, Asahina had naturally moved forward to support her classmate. . . leaving Owari between her and the others. Owari pounced on the next threat after Syo and Asahina – Kirigiri. Although Komaru saw Kirigiri move, slip into some martial arts stance, she had nevertheless been caught off-guard. Komaru thought she saw a flash of red as Owari’s nails dragged over Kirigiri’s arm and –

“Get any closer, and I’ll snap her neck.”

Owari was behind Kirigiri, having pulled the detective back until they were nearly against the ship’s rail. She had an awkward, almost fragile-looking hold on her with one hand gripping the side of Kirigiri’s chin and the other holding her upper arm. It made Komaru question whether Owari even could break a neck from that angle. But there was a possibility that she could, and that was enough to make everyone stay back.

Except for one.

“Kyoko-san!”

Owari had never registered Makoto as a threat, which meant she barely noticed he was there until he screamed. By that point, he was already flinging himself through at her back. Makoto landed, locked his arms around Owari’s neck, and pulled. His arm slipped under her chin and pressed in. Owari dropped Kirigiri. She snarled, face hazed over with bloodlust and wild instinct. She reached up and over, grabbed onto the first thing she found – Makoto’s sweater – and twisted to the side as she wrenched him over her shoulder and flung him blindly into the air –

Everyone froze.

Ten seconds later, everyone heard Makoto hit the water.
When Naegi decided to become Komaru's Komaeda, he (and I think everyone else) forgot that there's a huge missing factor: Naegi doesn't have any power over his sister, unlike Komaeda having power over him. Komaru was safe from video brainwashing all along~ XD

Next Chapter:
There's a lot of water.
“Makoto!”

Tsumiki screamed. She pulled at her hair. She ran at the rails and scrabbled at them and would have thrown herself overboard, too, if Nidai hadn’t pulled her back. She screamed again until her voice broke from the strain and the only noises she could make were high-pitched and scratchy.

“M-Makoto?” Komaru stumbled forward, collapsing onto the rail. She peered over in search of her brother, but between the dark night and the height, she could barely see the water.

“What have you done?” Pekoyama shouted, red eyes shining as if reflecting fresh blood. The chair leg cracked under the pressure of her grip.

“I didn’t mean to,” Owari said. She took a step back. “He wasn’t supposed to be there. What did he think he was doing -?”

The last of her sentence was lost in a choke as Asahina rammed into her side. Yet the normally vengeful swimmer neither followed up on her assault nor paused; in fact, she hadn’t even noticed the collision. Gritting her teeth, Asahina bounded forward and hauled herself onto the top of the rail with momentum and arms alone. There, she landed, legs bending to absorb her weight before she sprung off again. They saw her carve an arc through the air, arms opening in a swan dive before she dropped.

Her body sliced through the water, leaving a small tunnel of air behind her that was quickly filled. The ocean was freezing; cold enough to paralyze, cold enough to kill. Her heart pounded in the deep as the chill gripped her. She pushed out the last of the air in her lungs, stretching her back. Her heart thumped once more, sending a shockwave of heat to her limbs, burning away the rust. She kicked. The moon’s reflection glimmered on the distant surface.

The air was not much better than the water. She filled her lungs, rode the waves as they passed her. When she had jumped, it had been from the front third of the boat; now she was within the last third, and the stern was fast approaching. She knew ships; she knew it would be well past them before it could stop, let alone turn around. Her arms and legs moved by themselves, keeping her afloat as she scanned the waves around her. If there was any time she needed to prove she was the Ultimate Swimmer, it was now.

There. Over there. No one else would have seen him, but she who lived and dreamt of water knew that shadow on the surface shouldn’t be there. As the ship’s foghorn howled, she lurched into a head-up front crawl. She could see Naegi’s hands reaching for the sky, groping at the waves as he desperately tried to stay float.

He went under. She did, too. Lungs full and eyes open, her muscles burned as she soared toward the feebly convulsing corpse. She grabbed him under the armpits from behind, hauling them up and back until her stomach faced upward and broke the surface, for once thankful for how goddamn light he had become.

Naegi hacked up water, which poured down his chin in a foamy blend of ocean and saliva. He tried to flip over; his hands groped and grabbed at her even though they were too numb to hold on tight.
“Naegi-kun, stop! Your sweater...”

But she knew it was in vain. Panic had already taken him over and his sweater, thick and swollen with water, was dragging him down. It would be up to her. She let him slide down her body and as he thrashed, as the water rose over his mouth again, she reached and grabbed the bottom of his sweater. Quickly, she pulled it up, but the wet fabric didn’t want to leave. She swore as it covered Naegi’s face, preventing him from breathing. She was quickly running out of options, so she clocked him in the head, using the moment of disorientation to get a full two hands on the sweater and rip it off.

Within seconds, the sweater had sunken too far to be seen. With Naegi relieved of that unnecessary weight, she pulled him back onto her chest and floated, one hand around his ribs to keep the waves from separating them. He could breathe now, but she could feel him shivering. The clock began to count down. Fifteen minutes to fall unconscious. Twenty minutes to freeze to death.

And if that wasn’t enough, Naegi was crying.

“This isn’t the time!” she shouted, even though she knew it would do nothing.

The tail end of the ship sailed past then. Naegi keened, reaching after it with fingers that could barely bend. She took a big breath before the wake flowed over them. The ship hadn’t stopped yet, but it would soon. Someone would tell Alter Ego, and he was sure to come back for them.

Except... then her friends had to find them. Without running them over. Alter Ego’s eyes only covered the ship’s interior. And the others? None of them knew water like she did. Would they know what to look for? Did they have any idea how hard it was to find someone in an ocean? She had discarded everything more than her tank top and pants before taking the leap, which meant her tank’s white fabric was the brightest thing they had; but even that could easily be missed.

“Come on,” she said. With one arm, she paddled towards the ship. Did they have searchlights? Ladders? Anything? God, at this rate, they would have to somehow climb up the hull themselves.

Naegi was quiet. He wasn’t even moving. But he wasn’t unconscious yet; his breaths were too heavy. Ugh. She might have been the Ultimate Swimmer, but that didn’t mean she was a floatation device.

“Hey, I need you to work with me here,” she said.

It sounded like Naegi might have squeaked an answer. But his rattling breath was louder, and it frightened her.

“Look.” She shifted the hand around his ribs until it found his and gripped. “I know this looks bad, but we’re going to get through this. That’s a promise, okay? I’m not going to let you die here. It’s going to be a lot easier if you help, though. You know how to swim; I know you do. It’s just like you and me in the pool again.”

“Th-the pool wasn’t this cold,” he whined.

At least he was speaking. “You’ve swam in the ocean before, haven’t you? Just you and me in the ocean then, and afterwards we can tan on the beach.”

With water constantly flooding their vision, it was impossible to tell whether he was still crying. If she were honest, he wasn’t moving much more than before her pep talk either. But she had done what she could. The ship was still within sight, but with its size, that meant nothing. She couldn’t afford to waste time encouraging him.
She thought it had been five minutes now. Likewise, she thought the ship had visibly started to slow. Naegi’s fingers, wrapped around her lower arm, were losing strength. Even she, moving slower than she was accustomed to, was beginning to feel the effects of the cold; it teased at the edge of her muscles like whiskers brushing against the skin.

“We’re going to be fine,” she promised. “Trust me.”

If the ship had searchlights, they weren’t turning them on. Her stomach dropped; it would be nigh impossible to find them from that height without light. Alright. She... she could cling to one of the lower portholes? Maybe? There had to be something to grab onto!

How long had it been now? Seven minutes? Ten? At least one third of the clock had passed and Naegi was sagging more in her arms. Thankfully, he could keep his chin above water on his own. Still, she could feel the sagginess of his stokes, as if he were out of breath. It that were all it was, she would count that as good luck.

The ship had definitely slowed down. It had turned as well, so that it nearly perpendicular to them. She saw nothing within reach; nothing, save the anchor line which had been lowered for some reason. She grabbed the chain and pulled herself up. God, oh god, she’d let go of Naegi... but he was okay, treading water while watching her with uncertain eyes. Each chain on the line pointed out perpendicular to the adjacent ones. She hooked her feet onto the top of one, wriggled the fingers of one hand through the hole of another one, and then reached down. It was a struggle, but between his kicking and her pulling, they at least lifted him to the point where he could get a handhold.

“A-are we going to climb?” he asked.

She studied the distance. “No.”

If they tried, she might be able to do it. But it would be a gamble. Not only were these chains wet and slippery, they were thick and hard. If they slipped, if they fell, it’d only take one good knock against any of the chains to put someone out of commission. She couldn’t say anything about herself, but for Naegi that would be a death sentence.

“Then what’s the plan?” he asked.

“Stay out of the water,” she said. “I’ll think of something.”

Just as she said that, Naegi shifted and nearly lost his footing. So did she. But she didn’t lose her balance just because; at least, she didn’t think so. It really felt like the anchor line had jerked suddenly. Just as she dismissed that thought, she felt it again.

“Asahina-san!”

“I felt it, too,” she said. “Someone’s up there.”

The two of them shouted up at the ship. There was no answer. But the chain began to rise. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. Soon, she and Naegi weren’t trying to keep their balance anymore; they were simply holding on and hoping for the best.

She gritted her teeth and grimaced as the edge of a porthole clipped her shoulder. The chain was rising fast, quickly enough that she was afraid to move at all to avoid any obstacles. Naegi, somehow, was holding on, but the tension was visible in his clenched jaw and stiff neck.

“Hold on!” she shouted at him.
The chain lurched to a stop, though it still swung. Asahina, her cheek pressed so hard against the metal chain that it felt like they had melded together, opened her eyes just in time to see someone reaching past her. The arm was reeled back up with surprising speed and Naegi in tow. She looked up; red eyes peered down. Then there was a tug as an unseen arm grabbed and hauled her aboard.

Kamukura let Asahina flop to the floor like a fish.

“Y-you...!” She balled her fists on instinct.

He merely observed her before his eyes suddenly flicked to Naegi.

She pushed herself up. “Naegi-kun!”

He seemed okay. He was on his hands and elbows, keeled over and ribs heaving like a dog after a run, but he wasn’t spitting up water; he was alive. Stripped of his sweater, there was nothing protecting him from the cold. She could have spent hours counting the goosebumps. She reached for him but the moment she made contact, he shoved her hand away and scrambled to his feet. With tears dripping down his face, he fled.

“Naegi-kun!”

Kamukura’s iron-clad grip closed on her arm. The explosion of rage was imminent, like a lit match touched to an oil-soaked torch. However, within the mixture was fear; had Kamukura finally decided to show his true colors?

“Let him go,” Kamukura said.

“Are you nuts? He’s –”

“He needs to process this,” Kamukura said. “They needed this wakeup call.”

She didn’t push Kamukura’s hand off; he let her. Still, it made her feel better. “What are you talking about? You . . . Did you -?”

“It would have been much worse had he acted on the island,” Kamukura said. “Most likely, there would have been deaths.”

_Death_. The word hung in the back of her mind. “You made him betray us.”

“His actions were inevitable,” Kamukura said. “Even if Kirigiri didn’t drive him to it, therapy eventually would have.”

She suddenly felt very small, like a child. And Kamukura was the big scary adult who had caught her stealing from the cookie jar. It didn’t make much sense because she hadn’t done anything wrong. . . at least she didn’t think she had.

“Was Kirigiri-san right?” she asked in a whisper. “About what . . . what he’s going to try to do to us?”

“No.” Kamukura said that one word firmly, let it resonate. “Not intentionally. Naegi-kun has no taste for murder.”

“Then why would he. . . ? Why would he even think. . . ?”

“When your world is restricted and controlled, you lose perspective,” Kamukura said softly. “A bed becomes a home. A building, the world. When Naegi-kun adapted to Ultimate Despair, he learned
how to understand them. To him, that is power. He has mistaken his progress with them as control. In his eyes, the master and slave are reversed.”

She couldn’t say anything. It made sense, it did. Except when she tried to think about it. Then she realized that she couldn’t understand what he was saying at all, even though it had made perfect sense while he was speaking. At a noise in the distance, she turned, half-assuming it was Naegi. Not him, she realized; but a medley of voices made of her classmates and them.

“Wait,” Kamukura said. “Do not go to them yet.”

“They still think we’re down there!” she pointed out.

“Exactly,” he said. “For now, there is peace. Should you take away the reason for it, they will simply resume their fighting. You must wait until they begin to lose faith.”

Quietly, almost unable to believe it, she said, “You want me to let them think he’s dead?”

“Hope creates miracles,” Kamukura said, “but so does despair. Despite their abnormal views on morality, they do love him. If you want your friends to survive this, you will wait.”

“Hey! Hey!”

“What?” Kirigiri snapped, masking her jump with the harshness of her tone.

Hagakure shielded his head as if she was going to slap him. “Err, I just… I’m not seeing anything down there. I mean it’s dark and these flashlights aren’t that great.”

“And?” she said. “Did you come here just to complain?”

“Nah, I thought that, you know, you’d tell me what to do or something.”

“Unless you have a submarine hidden in your hair, we don’t have very many options right now.”

“Right. Uh, heh, you feeling okay? Just asking cause you seem… I’ll be going now.”

And so he did. She should follow. She shouldn’t be skulking back here, shielded from the others by shadows. She had the eyes of a detective, the eyes to pick out detail. Her chances of spotting them was greater than most.

But she didn’t. Couldn’t. Because once again, the thought of going out there in front of everyone made her stomach lurch. The back of her throat was stained with bile. Saliva pooled in her mouth. Her stomach jumped, her throat clenching with it and this wasn’t the time. She had no time to deal with this. She had a duty to attend to.

She pressed her fingers into her forehead until her skull began to ache. Sucked in air and ignored the bead of sweat tracing the curve of her brow. Naegi and Asahina were currently lost in the ocean. She didn’t have time for this.

When her vision focused and she started paying attention to her surroundings again, Kamukura was there.

“There you are,” she said. “You would have been useful earlier –”

“He’s fine.”
She blinked. “Pardon me?”

“Naegi-kun is safe. I pulled him aboard.”

That . . . that was much more than she had expected him to do. It took care of that problem, at least. Still didn’t do much to stave off the queasiness though.

“That was strange behaviour for someone who wants you dead,” Kamukura observed.

The message was as clear as if he had grabbed her by the lapels and shouted, ‘You were wrong!’

“This needs to end,” he continued. “There was a time where you could hold his trust without offering any in return. That era has long passed.”

“Why are you saying this? You’re smart enough to know that isn’t how this works. Do you think anyone is going to trust him after this?” She swept her arm out at the deck, where the silhouettes of Ultimate Despair were frantically running around with those of her classmates. “The only reason we’re not looking at a field of corpses is because Naegi-kun was reckless enough to get himself thrown overboard.”

“Such terrible luck,” Kamukura murmured.

“We already tried giving him our trust. Look how he repaid us.” Her lip curled in disgust. “I’m still not certain how he managed it.”

“You never trusted him, Kirigiri-san,” Kamukura said.

“I was right not to,” she said.

“Were you?” he asked mildly. “Do you believe this was inevitable? That there was nothing –”

“I’ve heard those excuses from so many suspects,” she said. “It’s always the same. If she hadn’t been such a bitch, I wouldn’t have killed her. If he hadn’t tried to scam me, I wouldn’t have hit him. They’re all excuses in the end.”

“And Naegi-kun?”

“He isn’t some helpless kitten!” she snarled. “You don’t ‘accidentally’ release a hold full of insane killers. This wasn’t a spur of the moment decision. He planned this. He’s been lying ever since he looked me in the eye and told me he wouldn’t try to see them. He used me. He tried to make me trust him so he could stab me in the back again!”

Kamukura stared at her. Slowly, he reached up and plucked her hand off his chest. She blinked. Something icy slipped down her spine. She hadn’t even known she had grabbed him.

“Kirigiri-san, what happened to objectivity?”

She didn’t understand at first. Then, a switch was flipped. She pressed a finger to her jaw, where her lips were still contorted in that snarl. She could feel the tension in the muscles of her face that were rarely used. She was emoting. It wasn’t just some crack in the mask or a momentarily loss of control. This emotion was as pure, as obvious as it would be on an average person. As if a decade’s worth of training and suppression had never happened.

“Naegi-kun truly does perform miracles,” Kamukura said. “Kirigiri-san, are you sure I can trust you?”
Even now she hadn’t regained control over her body. Her legs were still trembling, blood still on fire. She didn’t how to make it stop. After all this time feeling nothing, she couldn’t remember how to handle emotions this strong. All she could do was cover her mouth to try to keep the noises in.

“What an ironic situation you have created for yourself,” Kamukura said. “Captain of a voyage of healing, yet this is your truth. It is called post-traumatic stress disorder, Kirigiri. You never saw a therapist after escaping Hope’s Peak, or for anything after that.”

She pushed away from him. Still, her jaw refused to settle, as if it were made of solid rock.

“The blind cannot lead the blind,” Kamukura said. “You have failed. You will continue to fail. You cannot lead them.”

She closed her eyes. “What do you want from me?”

“You must step down,” he told her. “You must step aside so Naegi Komaru can do her job.”

It must have been something in his mannerisms that reminded her of Grandfather. That was why she meekly nodded like a young girl. The humiliation unbalanced her, until she reminded herself that was an emotion, too, and wrestled to bring it under control. How? How had she come undone so easily?

“Go,” he said.

And she did.

Kamukura watched her leave. Asahina hadn’t interrupted the fruitless search yet, which meant she was listening to him – as he had known she would. That would be enough to dampen Ultimate Despair’s fire, to bring even the Queen under his heel. There was no further reason for him to remain here, then.

As Pekoyama attempted to sneak up behind him, he turned to face her.

“You lied,” Pekoyama said quietly. “You told me not to worry about this. You said you knew what Naegi-kun was preparing. You said you had a plan.”

“I did,” he said calmly. “Everything is how it should be.”

She stared him in the eye for a few, long, quiet seconds. “I should have known better than to trust you.”

Chapter End Notes

_RandyTrevelyan_: Is Kamakura letting them fail so bad so he can swoop in, avert disaster, and finally take control?

Ding, Ding! Give the man a prize!

Next Chapter:
Kamukura searches for Naegi.

Edit: It looks like Kamukura's sentence about Komaru was too cryptic. He's saying that Kirigiri needs to step back and let Komaru deal with her brother, not let Komaru rule the
entire ship.
If one listened closely, even from two floors below, they could hear the cries coming from the top deck.

That haunting melody lingered in the background, rising with each resurgence of hope, fading to deathly silence with each added level of despair. A lesser man might have been sent to his knees with nightmares, but Kamukura was not one of them. To him, the panic above was nothing more than rustling of grass, or crickets in the evening.

He looked up at a security camera. Slowly, it rotated right. He went right. This new hall was the same as the ones before. Boring. He waited for the next camera to guide him and turned that way.

At last, there was a difference. On the right, the fourth door down had been recently opened; this he knew from the lack of dust on the carpet in front of it. When he opened the door himself, he indeed could hear soft noises from inside. The bedroom itself was empty and the door to the washroom was closed, but there was light at the bottom of the door.

He opened it. The shower curtains were half-drawn. Peeking out of them were Naegi’s legs and the front tip of his face as he brought his knees close. The rest of him showed through the curtain as shadow. Carefully, Kamukura pushed the curtain aside.

Naegi gave no sign of noticing, but Kamukura knew that he had. It was no surprise. He knew what he was to Naegi: a silent observer, just another part of the scenery as a piece of furniture was. Just as Kamukura had once wanted to be characterised. Those needs had changed though, had crumbled silently to dust as he had closed the chapter of his life that had once belonged to despair. There were new needs now; a new role for him to play.

Still, he said nothing. He waited, as he must, with patience that would have been surprising from anyone else. His broad shoulders filled the room like a barrier against the storm outside. Faint sounds from the top deck murmured at them from the vents, but they were too quiet for Naegi to notice.

“Are they okay?” Naegi finally whispered.

“Yes. Everyone is safe.”

“They weren’t supposed to start fighting,” he said. “I was going to introduce them. They would have been friends. They were supposed to listen.”

“I know.”

“Owari-san shouldn’t have. . . None of them should have. . . None of them listened. Not even Komaru.”

There were answers to be sought about that last statement, but not now. Not from him. Kamukura crouched down so they were at eye-level and waited once more.

“I didn’t spend that much time with Owari-san, did I?” Naegi said. The tremors in his tone were settling, his voice becoming solider as he came to a conclusion. A wrong one, but a conclusion, nonetheless.
“Naegi-kun,” Kamukura said, “for the last two years, they were Ultimate Despair. Your classmates were the hope of the world, once. Who you chose to spend your time with doesn’t matter. Their basic natures are meant to clash.”

“No, you’re wrong!” Naegi cried. “They’re not the same, but that doesn’t mean they can’t get along. I’m the Ultimate Hope, and they love me!”

There was no hesitation in that last sentence. Naegi’s classmates would have taken that as a red flag, not the reassuring promise Kamukura saw.

“They do love you. There is no doubt about that, but that has not always been the case. They clashed with you once. They feared you once. Their love took time. It took fear and blood and violence.”

Gently, he took control of Naegi’s arm and made him feel the old scar upon his forehead. “Is that the fate you wish on your classmates?”

He shook his head fiercely. “It doesn’t have to be like that. I can... I fix this. I can make everything right.”

“In the end, we all make our own choices,” Kamukura said. “Ultimate Despair chose to fight. That is not on you.”

“No! I can fix this. If I just spoke to them – one at a time – I can... I can...” Strange gasping, hiccuping sounds escaped Naegi’s lungs every time he breathed. Kamukura pretended not to notice.

Kamukura waited until Naegi’s breathing calmed, until he no longer jerked forward with every gasp as if about to puke. He grabbed a tissue from the countertop and cleaned up under Naegi’s dripping nose. “Do you remember when the Imposter showed his real face? Would that have happened had you not been there? Without you, Nevermind would never have handed away her crown, nor would Pekoyama had found herself again. You did this, Naegi-kun. Not I. Not Kirigiri. Not Komaeda.”

“They wouldn’t have done it!” Naegi grabbed onto his sleeve, eyes flickering with desperation. “They stopped before when I told them to. No one would have died!”

He said nothing. He didn’t need to. Naegi had spent a year with them and knew what they were. Without Kamukura’s answer to either confirm his statement or to whip him into a frenzy of denial, Naegi had to think about the contradiction to himself. It easy to read the emotions on his face: denial; guilt; anger; finally all collapsing into grief. Kamukura could see the pressure eroding his mental dam, eating away at it the way a fast river carved out a sand bed.

“You don’t need to become anything more, Naegi-kun,” he said. “You are already enough.”

Teary-eyed, Naegi looked up at him. “‘If I can’t do this, then what am I?’”

“You are still the Ultimate Hope,” he said. “You haven’t failed. That I promise.”
The collapse of the dam was sudden, violent, and Naegi’s skeleton seemed to melt and crumble with it. He keened; there was no other description for that long, high-pitched sound. Kamukura grabbed his arm and guided his fall away from the hard bottom of the tub. He redirected it into his own shoulder and didn’t move as Naegi wrapped his arms around his neck and wept.

Kamukura turned his eyes toward the door and listened, making sure no one was there. Without a word, he scooped Naegi up and let him burrow into his chest as he carried him out of the room. His steps were as constant as a metronome.

“They hate me,” Naegi whispered, lip wobbling. “Everyone hates me now.”

“That meeting could have ended in a massacre,” Kamukura said. “It has not. Why is that?”

Naegi mumbled indistinctly unintelligibly.

“You fell overboard,” Kamukura said. “Obviously, you did not bare witness to it, but the fighting stopped immediately afterwards. Why would they have stopped if they did not care?”

“That was before,” Naegi said. “But they hate me now cause I... I...”

“If your positions were reserved, would you have given up on them?” Kamukura asked.

Naegi’s fingers dug into the back of his skin. He felt rather than saw him shake his head.

“Then there is no need to give up on them now. Believe in them.”

Naegi’s elbow jabbed into the flesh of his shoulder as he twitched. He pawed at the scar on his forehead. It was almost humorous considering most of the time Naegi forgot it was there.

“They do have a right to be upset with you,” Kamakura explained. “This is no longer a fortress buttressed by a thousand expendable robots and benefiting from the aftermath of a societal collapse. This is a floating cage without medical care for fugitives that is actively sought by the remnants of civilization. It is easier for everything to go wrong, and the consequences are direr when it does. You need to follow the rules. The anarchy you observed when you lived with Ultimate Despair is dangerous here. Even a day’s delay may allow a Future Foundation vessel to stumble upon us.”

“They’re not going to find us, are they?” Naegi’s whisper was thin and frantic, but there was still traces of venomous hate.

“No. The delay was not that long,” Kamukura said. “But had you not gone overboard and stopped the fighting, it could have been.”

“I’m sorry,” Naegi said into his neck.

“I know.”

Kamukura stopped outside Naegi’s room and listened until he was sure they would be alone. He opened the door and headed not for Naegi’s bed, but for his bathroom. He placed the boy on the closed lid on the toilet and handed him a box of tissues so he could clean up. Naegi dabbed at his eyes, soaking up the shiny trails of tears and the gunk that had gathered in the corner of his eyes.

“This will not happen again,” he ordered. Although he didn’t think Naegi would try anything this grandiose again, a reminder with him was never bad.

Naegi nodded.
“Are you hungry?” When Naegi shook his head, he said, “Then sleep. Tempers will cool overnight. That will be the time to make amends.”

“Would they even forgive me?” Naegi asked.

“Ultimate Despair is not angry with you,” Kamukura said. “The others will come around in time. Your classmates have done worse to you.”

“They had no choice. It was even me or Kirigiri-san…” Naegi mumbled. He shook his head and then looked Kamukura in the eye. “Is Kirigiri-san going to forgive me?”

Kamukura took a moment to observe the spark of maturity there, one that Komaeda had all but stomped into dust. “Kirigiri has a hard path ahead.”

“Then no,” Naegi said, resigned.

“That was not what I said. Get some rest,” Kamukura ordered again. He moved as if to leave the room. Out of the bathroom and halfway out the bedroom, still within Naegi’s sights, he paused as if just remembering something.

“Kamukura-kun?”

“I have something for you,” Kamukura said. He moved out of Naegi’s sight for a moment and grabbed what he had stashed in the room earlier. He returned to Naegi and presented it.

“You . . .! Kuma!”

Naegi snatched the away and wrapped himself around it, uncaring about how the stiches in the teddy bear rubbed against his cheek. He was crying again, but this time he wore a small smile. Kamukura really did leave the room this time. In the hallway, he observed for a moment, judging, before trying to close the door.

Naegi’s voice came from the bathroom. “Kamukura-kun? Where was Komaeda-kun?”

“He remained in the hold.”

Kamukura closed the door and walked away. A tiny frown tugged at his lips. He had been so close to marking that as a complete success.

When he emerged from the stairwell back to the deck, Asahina wasn’t far away. That was no surprise. She would have been unable to tear herself away from the sight of her frantic friends, yet at the same time, she knew she had to stay hidden and thus, would have lingered here. He picked her out hiding in a covered lifeboat; every so often, she would lift the cover to peek outside. He approached during the time that cover was down, so that when she raised it again, he was all she saw.

“You have my permission to yell at them,” he said.

“Say what?”

“You can yell at them,” he repeated helpfully. “As much as you desire.”

“You think I’m the kind of person that . . . Yeah, fine. I really want to yell at them. but . . . Hey! Is this a super sneaky way of trying to get me killed?”

“No harm will come to you. I will ensure it.” He set his jaw. She recoiled, telling him that she knew
he was serious. “I am going to tell them he is safe. The rest is up to you.”

He turned without waiting for a response, walked towards the two classes without waiting for her. He could sense her energy though and knew she would follow. Save Kirigiri, who had disappeared, Class 77 and Class 78 were gathered around the rails. There wasn’t a lot of movement, but that was a side-effect; despair sucked energy right out of your marrow. Even though Asahina was loudly grinding her teeth, they still walked up right behind Nevermind without anyone noticing. He coughed.

Nevermind turned sharply. Her pupils had dilated; no doubt, it had been a very long time since anyone had snuck up behind her, not when she was usually flanked by loyal subjects. It took her a moment to see past his threat and see him, and another moment after that to see Asahina.

“Asahina, you’re . . .”

Several more heads turned at that name. They watched in silence. Waiting. Hoping.

“Naegi-kun is safe,” Kamukura said.

“That so? How come I don’t see him then?” Soda demanded.

“I put him to bed. He had a long day,” Kamukura said.

“Sounds like we’re having a slumber party in Makoto-chan’s room!” Mioda crowed. “I’ll bring the party favours!”

Asahina was nearly shaking. He met her eye and gave her a nod, granting her the permission she so desperately sought.

“Are you kidding?” she shouted at Mioda. “You nearly kill him, and you think you can just laugh it off and throw a party.”

“We had no intention to hurt him.” Nevermind stood tall, adopting her royal persona. “I behest you: apologize at once!”

“I have no idea what behest means, but I sure as hell aren’t apologizing!” She took an aggressive step toward Nevermind, leaving one foot of space between them. “You’re the reason he went overboard!”

“I told you: I didn’t mean it.” Owari picked at some earwax. In anyone else, it would have been a sign of boredom or indifference, but in her it was one of frustration and insecurity.

“It’s not about that. It’s about you trying to kill us.” She pulled at her hair in anger. “What were you planning to tell him anyways? That we all suddenly decided to jump off the ship and drown?”

“I. . . I don’t think we thought that far ahead,” Koizumi said.

Togami, never one to be left out of a tongue-lashing, spoke up. He stared straight at Tsumiki. “And yet I thought this was about protecting him for some of you. This only proves that your need to endlessly murder outweigh any devotion to him.”

“D-don’t say that!” Tsumiki screeched. “Take it back!”

“You truly have gone too far,” Nevermind said.

“Oh, shut up!” Asahina said to the queen’s shock. “None of us wanted to fight you. I mean I might
have wanted to punch a few of you, but we didn’t want to fight. You guys did. This is all your fault!”

It was quiet afterwards. Kamukura calmly pushed Asahina back from her opponent.

“You should return to the hold,” Kamukura said to Ultimate Despair, even as he stared down Nevermind. “It is best for all.”

More silence. Then Koizumi and the Imposter turned, trudging toward the cargo hold. One by one, the others peeled off to join them. Nevermind was last, but she did leave.

“Is Naegi-chi really okay?” Hagakure asked afterwards.

Kamukura nodded. “He is. You should let him sleep.”

The danger was over. The truce implied. He left them there to come to terms with it on their own.

He returned to the bridge. It was quiet there. It always was. Idly, he examined the security feeds; no matter how quickly Alter Ego flashed through them, each one burned into his mind like lightning. Then without warning, all the screens went dark. The central one lit up again with a familiar face.

“Mr. Kamukura, sir?”

“Yes, Alter Ego?” he said patiently.

“Um, I heard about what happened out there. I guess this was the plan you were talking about, but. . . I don’t think that was . . .” Suddenly, the avatar shook off its shyness and puffed out its cheeks in determination. “I don’t like what you did!”

He had to shake off the strange visual echo before answering. “Nothing like this will happen again.”

“Ah, okay. I believe you, but you were really cruel to them.”

“My apologies,” he said. He walked up to the captain’s wheel and wrenched it to the right.

“Mr. Kamukura-kun!”

“The winds are going to change.” He pointed at the sky Alter Ego could not see. “This angle will bring us to Jabberwock faster.”

Below, he could see the last members of Ultimate Despair returning to the hold. He rubbed his thumb against the weathered wood of the wheel and mulled over the current state of things.


His eyes gleamed like blood.

That meant he could finally begin.

Chapter End Notes

End of Arc 1
Next Chapter:
Kamukura may have stopped Naegi's downward spiral this chapter, but that doesn't mean it was permanent.
Naegi lay awake. The sun poured in though the porthole, painting the floor with small fragments of rainbows. Obviously, it was day, but he could narrow the time down even further, for his stomach was churning and knocking at his consciousness, ready to receive its scheduled meal. Still, Naegi did nothing but turn over. He faintly remembered those times with Ultimate Despair where he days without feeling hunger and was a bit disappointed that wasn’t an ability he could wield on command.

"Knock, knock."

He jumped up to a sitting position. Someone was calling on him? Pins and needles shuddered up his spine. Even after yesterday, there were looking for him? Or were they fetching him for the trial? He’d done something horrible after all, and they still hadn’t told him what the punishment would be.

He sidled up against the wall, on his hands and knees as he bent and pressed his burning forehead into the back of his knuckles. He hadn’t even thought of that before. He had been upset and crying yesterday and then Kamukura had been there . . . he hadn’t had time to think about it. People had almost died because of him, like Maizono and Oogami and Fujisaki and all the rest had, and. . . and there hadn’t been hope. He’d gone against orders. There would be a punishment. They would lock him in here and that was fine, but Kirigiri would also punish him and . . . and . . .

The door creaked open. The gleam of glasses told him it was Pekoyama.

He raised his chin. Komaeda always got mad if he didn’t look. Pekoyama didn’t look angry. She didn’t look anything and that was bad, bad, bad, because she was hiding it because he had to go with her to where he’d be punished.

"Naegi-kun?"

Pekoyama approached slowly. Her steps made no sound and every movement was projected. She began to reach for him, but stopped before her elbow left her side. She continued to study him, and Naegi waited for her verdict.

"Why would you think that I would hurt you?" she asked, sounding confused. Sounding hurt.

He felt confused, too, and could only speak in a daze. "I did something bad."

Pekoyama continued to stand there. Her hand twitched toward the comfort of a sword that wasn’t there.

"Naegi-kun, did . . . did Komaeda-kun ever hurt you?"

His muscles failed him and dropped his forehead back upon his hands. It felt like something was caught in his throat.

"I am sorry," Pekoyama said at last. It was all she said for a good while. "Breakfast is being served. The others will be expecting us."

"I’m still allowed to go?" Naegi asked.
He could tell that Pekoyama didn’t know the answer. She probably hadn’t even thought of that. But he couldn’t act on that without calling out her lie, so he let her bundle him up and herd him out the door. Perhaps part of him wanted to go, could no longer bear the wait, and that was why he found the courage to say nothing.

The dining hall didn’t fall silent when they entered; it already was. Like everyone had been waiting for this moment, staking out the door like assassins. He snuggled into Pekoyama’s side, brought his chin into his chest so he would look all small and vulnerable – she liked that, right? Pekoyama grew up protecting Kuzuryu, so she thrived off that sense of purpose.

Kamukura was there. That was unusual. He was munching on toast as his sister used one of his long strands of hair as a mustache. What did it mean? If Kamukura was here . . . did that mean he was safe? For now, at least?

“Look what the cat dragged out of the gutter,” Togami sniffed. Naegi wasn’t sure which one of them he was talking to.

“Keep speaking like that and you may lose your tongue,” Pekoyama warned.

“Oh, yes. Violence,” Togami said over Fukawa’s indignant splutters. “The only thing you animals know. How very unexpected. Though I must admit that even your kind can surprise me occasionally. I didn’t think you had the gall to show yourself.”

That one was directed at him. It had to be, because it didn’t make any sense for it to be aimed at Pekoyama. It was a strange turn of phrasing, too, with real implications. Naegi would never object to being grouped with his friends in Ultimate Despair, but his old class had always made a point of not doing so. They were keen to insist on the opposite, actually. He looked to his old defenders, but Komaru was picking at her sleeve and Asahina. . . he didn’t like how she was looking at him.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” Togami said. “Usually, I can’t get you to shut up.”

Pekoyama glared at Togami. He knew she wanted to do more, but Pekoyama was a master of physical sparring, not the verbal sorts. Absently, Naegi noticed that the bruising on Togami’s neck had cleared a bit, if you wanted to call it so. It was a sickly yellow-green sprinkled with red. Nothing pleasant to look at, but less striking than the purple-blue of before.

“I’m sorry,” Naegi said, moving out of the umbrella of Pekoyama’s protection. . .

Only for Togami’s next words to send him scrambling back. “Sorry? That’s it? I’m sure Maizono was sorry, too, when she realized Kuwata was about to stab her in the gut.”

“I didn’t mean to. . .”

“On the contrary, I think you knew exactly what you were doing.”

“Togami-kun, this isn’t helping,” Kirigiri said heavily.

Kirigiri gave Naegi one of those long, emotionless looks. But just because it was devoid of emotion didn’t mean it was empty. The pale, workaholic Kirigiri was well-accustomed to odd sleeping patterns and hiding it, but Naegi still thought the faintest of shadows lay under her eyes. There was a crease in her brow that wasn’t normally there and the stirring of her coffee was sluggish.

Not like any of that mattered. They didn’t want him here. He didn’t need to be a former trial master to make that conclusion.
“Pekoyama-san, I’m not hungry,” he murmured to her. By her reaction, she hadn’t heard him.

“Was there a purpose to coming here,” Togami to Pekoyama, “or was your intention to disturb our peaceful breakfast?”

But he deserved this, didn’t he? He’d been so selfish. He’d set up those dominos to make them get along and that was so selfish of him. He’d been thinking about his hope, not theirs. No, his classmates had made their hopes very clear: they wanted him to go back. They wanted the old Naegi Makoto who did what Kirigiri and Togami told him to and made hope speeches. He could do that, couldn’t he? It would be like living with Komaeda again –

“Aa-choo!”

Fukawa’s loud sneeze cut through the air as Kamukura brushed something off his sleeve. Fukawa’s transition was less violent than usual. Fukawa merely blinked, and then Genocider was there, confused and still holding her cutlery properly like a civilized human being. Of course, Genocider had always been one to adapt quickly and that she did.

“Well, isn’t this cozy?” Genocider said. “You could cut the tension with a pair of intricate scissors. Say, Naegi, aren’t you supposed to be taking a swim?”

“That was yesterday,” Komaru said.

“Well, it’s not like Gloomy and I share a mental calendar saying what happened when. From my perspective, it was just a few minutes ago!”

“The betrayal’s still fresh, then,” Togami said.

“Hmm? Whatcha talking about?”

There were no accusations thrown out. Not verbally, at least. Still, It was hard not to understand whom Togami was referring to when everyone, save Pekoyama and Genocider Syo, was staring at one person.

Genocider said, “Now I remember.”

To Naegi’s confusion, she burst into bright laughter.

“Nothing like a little excitement to get the blood going, right?” Genocider stretched out that last word in a song. “Pity you had to jump off the ship and ruin it. Come on, Naeggs, don’t just stand there. Get over here!"

She enthusiastically slapped the table next to her. The pressure of Togami not wanting him there was pressing up against him like a wall, but there was still a clear corridor to Genocider’s table. Plus, if Naegi had learnt anything about people like Genocider, it was that you should be very careful about making them mad.

He meekly shuffled over to the table. Komaru said nothing, only stared as he sat next to her. Genocider was babbling about something, but no one was listening.

Kamukura nodded. “Naegi-kun.”

Pekoyama’s brow furrowed. “Since when didn’t you use honorifics?”

Interest stirred around the room. Kamukura didn’t seem bothered by it. Without missing a beat, he
said, “I see no reason he doesn’t deserve one.”

Togami squawked with indignation.

“What’s this? Am I seeing the birth of steamy boy-on-boy right before my eyes?” Genocider licked her lips. “Got to say, there’s a lot less fluid than I expected, but sometimes a girl’s gotta take what she gets. This ship’s been drier than Gloomy’s love life, and I’m fucking thirsty.”

Komaru violently stabbed her eggs. “Do you have to talk about this?”

“Aw, come on. Don’t be such a prude. Romance may be more of Gloomy’s style, but I can certainly see the appeal of this cold, aloof hunk dominating your submissive Lolita of a brother. I bet he’s a squealer. There’s nothing hotter than that, whether they’re squealing because you’re pulling out their intestines or sticking your dick into their –”

Komaru wailed and used Kamukura’s hair as earmuffs.

“Seriously, Big Mac, you need to get working on that.” Genocider jerked a thumb over her shoulder at Komaru. “Someday, a creepy old man in a white van is going to offer her candy, and your innocent, virgin sister is going to get inside.”

“She’s not stupid,” Naegi said. After a second, he amended, “Not that stupid.” (“I heard that!” Komaru muttered.)

Of course, Genocider had already moved back to Kamukura. “Any chance you could dress up as my dear old Master while you’re going at it?”

“No.” Kamukura tossed his majestic mane over his shoulder. The luxurious strands of hair fanned outward before settling over his back in neat, soft-looking lines. Truly, it was a feat worthy of the great Kamukura.

Genocider grinned lecherously. “Most people get flustered when I talk about them like this. You’re certainly different.”

“This kind of talk is only to be expected.” Kamukura lifted his chin, showing off his smooth, neck muscles as the light caught the angles just right. “As the Ultimate Model, it is natural for others to fantasize about me.”

“Hanamura-kun told me his brother was the Ultimate Escort, so that means…” Naegi shrunk into his hair when Kamukura looked at him. “I’ll stop now.”

“Well, you certainly have that pretty boy look,” Genocider agreed. “You’re missing the rugged air of my Master, though. Oh, how I’d like to sink my teeth into that!”

“Some of us are trying to enjoy breakfast,” Togami said, his implied command going unsaid. “Although, I suppose a pleasant breakfast is out of the picture given the present company.”

This time, Komaru seemed bothered by that passive-aggressive snipe. Or maybe she was jabbing her eggs so viciously because she wasn’t over Genocider’s previous comments.

“You heard him!” Genocider leapt onto the table and posed as if about to strike. “You’re making the entire ship smell like smoke. Why don’t you take care of that before I make it smell like blood instead?”

“W-wait!” A half-eaten piece of toast bounced off his chair as Hagakure dove under his table. “Not
me! He’s talking about Naegi-chi”

“Huh?” Genocider cocked her head to the side. “Oh, that’s right! I forgot we were just talking about that. Say, Naegi, what was that all about anyways? Some convoluted way of getting revenge?”

“Revenge for what?” he asked. He knew this was how Genocider thought and she was just throwing the question out without any real thought behind it. Still, he was going to play along. It would keep her happy. (And it was so much easier to have this casual conversation with her than confront the one Togami was introducing.)

“For that time, we nearly killed you!” She read his face and continued, “You know, when that bitch rigged the trial. I dunno about Gloomy and that coward over there, but everyone else knew you didn’t do it.”

“Wh-what are you saying?” Asahina demanded. “We’d already ruled out Kirigiri-san, so that meant . . .”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean you actually believed it!” Genocider said cheerfully. “So, is that what pissed you off, Big Mac?”

“No! I wouldn’t hold a grudge for something like that,” Naegi said. “Right, Pekoyama-san? I don’t care about that kind of stuff!”

Before Pekoyama could answer, Kirigiri spoke up. “Makoto, why would Pekoyama-san be able to confirm this? What evidence does she have?”

“Uh, well. . . Um, I didn’t hate those assassins the Future Foundation sent after me! Right, Pekoyama-san? I wasn’t mad at them.”

“You hate the Future Foundation,” Kirigiri pointed out.

“I didn’t back then. . . Fine, bad example. Uh, I got more. Like . . .”

“Komaeda-kun,” Kamukura suggested.

Naegi’s face brightened. “Right! Komaeda-kun! I forgave him. I wasn’t even mad the second time.”

Pekoyama very slowly turned his way. “Komaeda-kun?”

“Oh, he wasn’t really going to kill me,” Naegi said with a chuckle. “I didn’t know until afterwards though, so that should still count.”

“What are you . . .? When did this happen? Why?”

“Uh, the second time it was because I sent the Future Foundation an email from his computer behind his back. The first time it was because . . . because . . .”

He wasn’t aware he had stared shaking until his sister grabbed his hand to keep it still. In the mug of tea that Fukawa had, he could see his grey face in the surface.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Komaru said quietly.

He shook his head. “It’s not like that. It’s . . . It’s embarrassing, if that’s the right word. I did something really bad. I was angry and I shouldn’t have been – he was only trying to take care of me – and I . . . I said something unforgivable. I told him that he didn’t care about . . . you know.”
“Oh no,” Pekoyama whispered.

“Hope. I told him he didn’t care about Hope.” The urge to claw at his face until it bled was so strong that he couldn’t stop those sharp nails from passing over his skin in a loving caress. “I don’t know what came over me. I was just so angry and Komaeda-kun. . . He’s amazing. I don’t know how he developed such strong self-control. Sure, he scared me, but he didn’t actually hurt me. He should have. I would have punched me if I had said that to myself.”

“Did his gun jam when he aimed it at you?” There was a certain resignation in Pekoyama’s tone that told him this was something that had happened before.

“No, there weren’t any firearms involved,” Naegi said. “Did you ever see that block Enoshima used in my execution? He chained me to that!”

Pekoyama’s mouth dropped open. It was an unusual action, enough so that he instantly looked to the others for reassurance. Kamukura’s coolness was comforting, but the other two weren’t. Komaru had a hand over her mouth, and her face was pasty white. Genocider had stopped smiling. Instead, she watched at him with a cool, steady stare that was very similar to what he would expect from Kirigiri.

“Soda-kun mentioned that he was forced to dismantle it. . .” Pekoyama said. “Komaeda chained you to that twice?”

“Only the first time,” Naegi clarified. “The second time he just threw a bag over my head. Uh, Pekoyama-san, are you okay?”

The Swordswoman was staring at a spot on the table, teeth clenched.

“Naegi-kun, were you going to eat breakfast?” Kamukura suddenly asked.

He blinked. Although he hadn’t wanted anything when he had first entered, he was feeling a lot better now. Definitely up to eating some food. He thanked Kamukura for the reminder and then scurried off to the kitchen to get some food.

“. . . I never knew,” Pekoyama croaked. “He never told me.”

“Naegi-kun keeps many secrets,” Kamukura said. “They are his shield.”

“And coincidentally, you were the one that brought up the subject,” Kirigiri said. “I highly doubt your intention was to upset Pekoyama-san.”

He answered, “Criminal liability.”

Both Kirigiri and Togami clearly understood where he was going, while the others needed time and a dictionary. Of the two, Kirigiri, who only cared about catching the criminal and not what happened after, would be the most receptive. Togami, on the other side of things, was the type who expected those he prosecuted to face the full weight of the consequences.

“You’re joking,” Togami said. When Kamukura didn’t agree with him, he went on. “You can’t make up nonsense just to get him off the hook. None of told him to set them free.”

“Has Naegi-kun seemed sane to you?” Kamukura asked. “Did he sound like he had a solid grip on morality? He can’t be held responsible for those actions. Naegi-kun is nothing more than the unfortunate product of their, and your, influences.”
“You’re blaming us?” Hagakure exclaimed.

“Naegi-kun released them out of a need to protect them, and to prove himself to you,” Kamukura said. “There was nothing malicious.”

“So you are blaming us?” Kirigiri said. “At least along with Ultimate Despair.”

“A child is shaped by their parents,” Kamukura said. “In essence, that is what he has been reduced to.”

Kamukura stood. If he remained, this argument would continue and Naegi would overhear.

“Put away your pride,” he said. “Listen to him for once and what he is really saying.”

He strolled out of the room, calm and collected like a jaguar after making its kill. He returned to his roost in the ship’s bridge, where he quickly checked the security cameras. Naegi was eating and Pekoyama hadn’t removed him from the dining hall, which meant his class had at least decided to leave him alone. It was a start. Bonds were rarely repaired overnight, but a lack of open hostilities would open the way.

And it was just in time, too.

Kamukura stared out over the ocean. In the far distance, underneath the swollen sun, he could see the dark shadow of Jabberwock Island.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
The gang arrives at Jabberwock Island.
“That’s Jabberwock, huh? It’s pretty big.”

“You would think so,” Kamukura said to Naegi. “It is bigger than that shadow you see on the horizon. Jabberwock is not one, but five large islands connected by a central hub. That one you see is uncreatively named First Island. How boring.”

“If that’s the first one we’re approaching, then we’re docking there, right?”

He nodded. “That is correct.”

Laying his arms and chin on the rail, Naegi watched the simmering shadow of Jabberwock with the impatience of a child waiting for dinner to be made. They were too far away for someone like Naegi to make out much more than outlines and faint green, but some details would be visible to his naked eye. The crags of First Island, cutting through its center like a bony spine, made fuzzy mounds on an otherwise flat surface. Kamukura could pick out splotches of darker coloration that marked thick forest, although no one else could. Even if the island itself had not been visible however, its presence was betrayed by black seabirds. Kamukura watched one dive under the surface, and then turned to address the question Naegi was about to ask.

“How far away are we?” Naegi said.

“It will be an hour before it gets interesting,” he said. “Do you need to pack?”

“Pack what?” he asked with genuine curiosity. “I didn’t really have anything, even when we were back home.”

Oh? So Naegi still saw the possessions given to him by Ultimate Despair as theirs? Not unexpected. It had been more likely than not, but he still took the time to update his mental profile.

“There is much in the kitchen and storerooms that will need to be moved,” he suggested.

Naegi lit up at an opportunity to help. He dropped down from his tippy toes and clambered below deck. He would naturally seek out someone he viewed as having authority over him. Kirigiri or Togami then, or even Pekoyama. Togami would be a problem, but where Togami was, Touko and Komaru were bound to be, and they’d blunt the effect of his disdain.

The hour passed by. Kamukura barely noticed. Months of boredom had made it necessary to learn how to fall into a stupor. He roused only when his mental alarm rang, then turned on a dime and wandered into the bridge. He grabbed the coiled wire in the corner and slung it over his shoulder.

“Hello, Mr. Kamukura-kun. Are we ready to begin?” Alter Ego asked. “I’ve been refining my image recognition algorithm all day. Accuracy is now at 97.34 percent!”

What a mediocre statistic. He could do better. But image recognition did come much more naturally to humans than machines. He nodded at the computer and then walked back onto the deck. Despite the tension between them, Naegi’s announcement that they would be near Jabberwock island had turned heads, for his entire class had gathered. Due to the angle of their approach, Third and Fourth Island were for all intents concealed from them, as was the much smaller Center Island. But some
craggy cliffs on Second Island could be seen, and the peaks of the fifth island rose up beyond the south-west edge of First Island. They were close enough to see sand, to see where it ended and the plants began. On First Island, straight ahead, was the protruding husk of the Future Foundation’s docks.

Kamukura spoke. “Asahina.”

“Me? You’re talking to me?” Asahina said. She still looked around anyways, as if it were possible that he had mistaken names.

Kamukura said to her, “It is fortunate you are wearing a swimsuit. Take this.”

He handed his cargo to her. She scrabbled desperately to keep it from uncoiling.

“That is a long-range camera attached to Alter Ego’s feeds,” Kamukura explained. “You will need to take it underwater.”


“No. Mines. Bombs,” he amended when Asahina, Hagakure and Komaru didn’t understand. “I already gave Alter Ego the coordinates of where the Future Foundation would have placed them, but natural causes may have caused them to drift. Hence, Alter Ego will need eyes underwater.”

“Why would there be bombs in the water?” Komaru asked shrilly. “Togami-kun, you told me this was a resort!”

“It was a resort,” Togami said. “Honestly, did you believe the Future Foundation would take over his island just for vacations? This archipelago was repurposed into an outpost. Still, most of the infrastructure from before the Tragedy should be the same. It would be a tremendous effort to replace it when we are so far from the mainland.”

“Yeah. Too bad it got all bombed though!” Hagakure said cheerfully.

“What was that?” Togami said.

“It got all bombed,” Hagakure repeated. “You know, from those fights between the Future Foundation and Despair.”

Togami hadn’t read those reports. Kamukura had already known that, of course; Togami had been too content with their choice of a hideaway for the reality to be otherwise.

“You didn’t know?” Kirigiri was smirking. Normally, she wouldn’t have, but her self-esteem had been torpedoed just yesterday which left her particularly keen to indulge in friendly rivalry. “Then I wonder why you thought the Future Foundation abandoned this island.”

“Because once transportation by air became relatively safe, the costs of keeping this place supplied would vastly outweigh those of maintaining a fleet,” Togami said. “It’s simple cost analysis.”

“That’s reasonable,” Kirigiri said. “However, it is not the case. The Future Foundation abandoned Jabberwock after Ultimate Despair began taking to the seas and they discovered it was too difficult to defend.”

“So, not only are we going to be living in a bomb crater, but one that’s completely vulnerable to attack while we’re being hunted by the Future Foundation,” Togami said.
Kirigiri tossed her hair. “Which is why they won’t look here. Besides, you’re exaggerating how badly damaged it is. My understanding is that most of the damage was contained to two islands.”

“The Future Foundation used to be here, huh? I’m glad Ultimate Despair got rid of them,” an unstable Naegi muttered.

Right when Togami opened his mouth again, Kamukura said, “I understand you two enjoy debating. However, it would be troublesome if this ship were to explode. Asahina, if you will.”

Asahina backed away as if he had pointed a knife at her. Perhaps he had pointed a metaphorical one, but she did need to get going. The coil of wire had loosened enough that the bottom dragged across the ground as she trudged over to the rail. She let it fall, keeping the end in her hands, then took a deep breath and dove.

(“Wait. Why did I have to stop -?” Togami began.

“Shh!” Komaru hissed and he fell silent.)

“Where are you going?” Kirigiri asked Kamukura.

“Somewhere high,” he told her. Alter Ego’s accuracy was only 97.34 percent after all, and that would decrease with Asahina’s handling of his eyes. He’d need to watch the ocean himself and serve as a backup.

“Okay! Alter Ego, are you seeing this?”

It took a long time for Alter Ego to reply. Because he couldn’t reply, duh! Alter Ego was a super smart computer who was basically magic, but not even he could talk through cameras. This thing she was holding was just like one of his arms. Or like one of those eyestalks that snails had, but less slimy.

She was here in the water, which was great, but what the heck was she supposed to do now? Kamukura hadn’t told her anything! Was she just supposed to hold her breath underwater for as long as she could? Did she hang out at the front of the boat? The side of the boat? Everywhere?

Ugh. Stupid smart people. Always assuming everyone knew stuff!

Well, if she needed to do this in the first place, it probably meant it involved swimming. She was called the Ultimate Swimmer! So, she took a deep breath and descended into the deep.

The water was crystal clear. It always was. She didn’t know why people always complained that they couldn’t see things, or that their eyes hurt. It was literally no different than opening your eyes above water. Except for the lighting, she guessed. The passing waves disturbed the sunlight coming down and made it ripple funny when she looked at the surface.

The ocean floor was deep enough that she looked down, she saw black. Though, there was still a good chance that she could swim all the way to the bottom, but the ship’s hull didn’t go that deep so it seemed pretty pointless. She wasn’t seeing very many fish, but they were probably closer to the seabed. She wasn’t seeing very much at all to be honest, but that was good, right? That meant no bombs or whatever Kamukura thought might be down here.

She went up for air, waved at Hagakure who was peering over the rail at her, and then went back under. She let Alter Ego see one side of the water, then swam in a half-circle that took her to the bow and then the other side of the both before going up for air, always pointing the camera outward. She
kept that up for a while. By the nine millionth repeat, she understood why Kamukura didn’t do this himself; it was so boring.

Ships were not like cars; they didn’t turn the instant you turned the wheel. But she still felt the sudden turn; not by the ship changing direction, but by the sudden change in the water currents as the rudder began to move. It groaned like bending metal; the haunting noise was suited to something coming from the black depths below her. There weren’t any big rock formations she could see, so she wasn’t sure why they were turning. Unless . . .

Her strokes took on more urgency. Her circuit became more frequent. She still didn’t know what she was looking for, but . . .

Oh.

Yeah, that had to be it.

They were still distant. Small enough that the first few times she had seen them, she had dismissed them as plants. But Alter Ego was clearly aiming to go around them, and now they were close enough that she could make out not very plant-like feature. Those longs things descending into the deep that she had thought were stems? Nope. Those were chains. And the bulbous heads on top were not buds, but what must have been the bombs themselves. Spiked like a puffed-up pufferfish, they gave a definite vibe of: ‘Avoid at all costs.’

Though they weren’t that close, she still stuck close to the ship’s hull. More and more mine fields surrounded them, and she couldn’t tell which one to point Alter Ego at. In a stark contrast to the growing danger, the wildlife was starting to thrive. She still couldn’t see the bottom, but it was shallow enough she could see the tops and slopes of some of the larger rock formations. The weird patterns on them spoke of coral and plants whose colors couldn’t be seen. Fish swam freely around the area, passing through the links in the chain and weaving through the mines without a care in the world. Some small ones got too close to the ship’s wake and were roughly pushed aside by the force – into the jaws of a shark, in one case.

Finally, as the black floor below grew into rolling dunes and clusters of rock, pillars came into sight. She could tell just by their positions and girth that they belonged to the docks. Algae coated the wood. If there had once been a ladder leading from the water into the dock, it was missing now. Maybe if she swam fast enough, she could burst out of the water and fly high enough to jump on the docks all by herself. Either way, they were close enough to embarkment that she didn’t see a reason they needed her anymore.

She surfaced. The ship was just releasing its gangplank. Hagakure, waiting for her, tossed a rope overboard. With Alter Ego’s camera slung around one arm, she grabbed the rope with the other. As he pulled, she steadily walked up the side of the ship. It was slow-going until a bored Kamukura took the rope from Hagakure and reeled her up like a fish on a hook.

She panted. “Sl-slow down next time.”

He yanked her onto the boat and let her drop to the ground. “That would be boring.”

Although the gangplank was set, no one had crossed. Kirigiri and Togami were standing right on its edge, taking in the island silently, but they didn’t dare step forward. Kamukura didn’t care though and walked past them, Naegi following him carelessly. Seeing that, Kirigiri and Togami were quick to cross onto the docks before Asahina and the others could.

“Welcome to Jabberwock’s First Island,” Kamukura droned.
Honestly, he would be a terrible tour guide.

The Naegis apparently disagreed with her because Naegi was prancing down the pier and it was adorable, and it was so nice to see him so truly happy and... Komaru also looked excited. She wasn’t dancing around like her brother. She walked slowly instead, drinking in everything. Then Naegi rushed back to challenge her to a race and took off again. Komaru didn’t follow him. Fukawa glanced at her, looking concerned.

“You know he will beat you, so you decided not to participate.” Kamukura nodded. “A wise strategy.”

Komaru puffed up, offended. “What? That’s not true at all! I... Hey, you got a head start, cheater!”

And Komaru took off after her brother. Asahina didn’t think anything of it until she saw Kirigiri shoot Kamukura a suspicious look.

The shouts and cries of the competing Naegis mixed in with those of birdsong and waves rushing against sand. They did, she realized, have good reason to be excited. For an international athlete like Asahina who made a point of training in the wild waters, tropical islands weren’t that new. But the Naegis were ordinary kids. This was probably their first time at an island resort. For all she knew, that time on the ship had been their first cruise. The piers, long enough for a battleship or a massive cargo ship to dock, must feel as long as a racetrack to them.

They couldn’t see a whole lot of the island from here. Outcroppings encircled the dock almost like a cove, although she could see stretches of sand in the distance behind them. The immediate area around them was craggy and full of rough cliffs; not a great place for chilling in the sun. Naturally, since it was a port, the Future Foundation had shaved most of the vegetation, leaving little protection from the wind coming off the waters. Normally, it wouldn’t be that bad, but she had just been in the water and was still only wearing her swimsuit. Thankfully, there was sunlight; light behind clouds, yes, but still strong enough that the dark hues of her hair were absorbing and radiating heat like a mini-heater.

“Look at that,” Togami suddenly said with a hint of delight. “We don’t have to walk.”

The two Naegis had ended their race at an abandoned forklift at the end of the pier. Being a boy, Naegi had naturally clambered into the driving seat and was pushing his sister to keep her from climbing up, too. That forklift wasn’t the only one. There were a couple more scattered among the piers in front of small buildings that must have once been used for administrative work or to store incoming goods.

“Are we going to drive the forklifts?” Hagakure said, grinning like a kid himself.

Togami didn’t seem against it; he was probably too happy he didn’t have to walk. Kirigiri didn’t seem to care. In the end, it was Kamukura who said, “If that is what you want.”

By now, Komaru was trying to crawl through the space where a windshield would usually be. Naegi was fending her off with an empty clipboard.

“Is the key in there?” Kirigiri asked. Apparently unable to resist, she also added, “If that were to start accidentally, there is a very good chance one of you would get hurt.”

Sulking like little kids, the Naegis got off.

“Was the key there?” Kamukura prompted them.
“No,” Naegi said.

Kamukura idly looked at the buildings scattered on the docks. He walked into one three down from their group. When he returned a minute later, he was dangling not one, but several keys. He tossed one each at Kirigiri and Togami.

“Naegi-kun, you will sit next to me,” Kamukura demanded. The two of them climbed into the forklift, and then that rude Kamukura turned it on and started leaving without them!

“Guys, he’s kidnapping Naegi-kun again!” she cried. “Come on!”

She ran for the forklift in front of them. Kirigiri leisurely followed her, meaning there was also an entire minute between the time she got there and Kirigiri got there. Unruffled by their annoyed scolding, Kirigiri climbed into the forklift, turned it on. And then Kirigiri also started leaving without her!

Kirigiri stopped the forklift a couple of metres away. “Are you getting on? I can take Komaru as well, but this vehicle was only meant to hold two, so do you mind hanging off the side, Asahina-san?”

“Nah, that sounds pretty awesome,” she declared. She half-expected Komaru to fight her for the honor, but Komaru was staring at her brother. She wasn’t smiling anymore.

“You okay?” Asahina asked.

Komaru jumped. “Uh, yeah. It’s nothing. Let’s go!”

Togami and the others had grabbed the last forklift and had come to the same solution as Kirigiri. Hagakure was hanging on the side of their forklift while a very uncomfortable Togami was sitting next to Fukawa, who kept tilting her head to the side as if to lean on his shoulder.

They took off. The forklifts were quick but not fast, so Kamukura wasn’t that far ahead of them. They followed the paved road out of the docks and into the heart of the island. The land around them was lumpy and full of pits. She wasn’t sure why until it flattened out a bit and she could see lines of tree stumps in the distance. This entire place had been forest once. It was hard to imagine, given that now it was a tangled bush of grass and shrubbery.

“What’s that?” Komaru asked, pointing at a large building in the distance.

“Airport,” Kirigiri said immediately, as if that wasn’t given away by the fact that they were currently driving along a chain-link fence with a runway behind it.

From the outside, the airport didn’t look like anything special. Lots of glass on the wall facing the runways, but that was normal. It was a regular airport with high control towers, a rounded roof and metallic color. Standard. Komaru was awing in excitement though. Really? The Naegis hadn’t seen an airport before, either?

“There’s no planes,” Asahina said.

“Naturally,” Kirigiri said. “The Future Foundation would have taken them during the evacuation. They can’t afford to waste equipment like that.”

First Island didn’t have a lot of trees. Not in the area they were in, at least. Those trees that were still standing were upon the mountainous slopes toward the island’s center. The road went around that section, carving out a rectangle with straight lines which meant they didn’t have to pay much
attention to the road. When the occasional turtle showed up on the asphalt, it took only a slight turn of the wheel to avoid it.

“Do you think anything’s still there?” Asahina asked as they chugged past Rocketpunch Market.

“Nothing valuable,” Kirigiri said to their disappointment.

They turned twice more before the next landscape rose into view. Komaru scooted close to the windshield and leaned forward. Asahina couldn’t blame her; there was something inherently interesting about areas hidden behind walls and gates. It could have been a top-secret laboratory that they were about to invade. Like sure, there wasn’t any barbed wire, but those was fancy garden fences they were using. You know, the ones whose height rose and fell in waves, where the bars curled into cool emblems and the whole things was covered in pointy tops. Fancy stuff. The gate itself was a wooden double door with a stone pillar on either side; bridging over the doors and connecting the pillars was a flat roof that stuck out enough to shield them from rain. Kamukura and Naegi, the first to arrive, had already parked their forklift and dismounted.

“Whoa! Makoto, where are we?” Komaru tugged at her brother’s sleeve.

“You’re about to find out,” Kamukura said. He pushed on the doors. They didn’t move. With a sigh, Kamukura picked a stick off the ground, stripped it of the excess twigs, and stuck it in the lock. They didn’t hear a click, but he still pulled the twig out. He raised his hand and quickly hit the center of the doors with a lazy-looking palm strike. The doors flew open with a bang.

It wasn’t a completely open area like they had expected. The part by the gate was, but that narrowed quickly into a cobblestone path. The path wasn’t on ground, but extended out over water. Halfway along, it produced a left and right branch made of tightly coupled planks like those used in the docks. Each branch led to a set of small cabins that sat on a raised platform. They were all the same; all white, all with slanted burgundy roofs and two large windows in the back. Past the cabins, there was a building whose shape reminded her of a two-story hospital.

Kamukura looked back at Naegi. “Welcome to Hotel Mirai.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
More fluffy exploration.
This was way fancier than any of the places their family had stayed at. She wasn’t saying their parents had been cheap, but look at this place: separate cabins! Gated community! Over the water! Makoto and she hadn’t stayed in a place with even one of these features – and this was just what she could see from the entrance.

Komaru inhaled, tasting the scent of flowers and the ocean breeze. The water looked so inviting. It was probably cold like the rest of the ocean, but it looked so gentle and smooth that her brain instantly assumed it would be warm like a pool. She could see all the way to the bottom where crabs scurried through fields of white sand, the water so crystal clear that had she been half-asleep, she would have wondered if it were there at all.

Makoto nudged her in the gut. “Guess we get to live the first-class life this time.”

He grinned and then dashed ahead like a little boy. Her smile faded. Less than twenty-four hours ago, her brother had nearly drowned from his own dumb decisions. He had nearly gotten his classmates and her killed and then there had been that weird thing with the Killing Game. But you couldn’t tell any of that had happened by looking at him. Apart from breakfast (where Togami, not Makoto, had broached the topic), he hadn’t brought up anything from yesterday. She could understand that. Makoto tried to avoid talking about things that would bother someone else, but that only applied to verbal communication. He still talked about it with long pauses and loaded stares that made it clear that something was on his mind. There was none of that. It was like yesterday had been completely wiped from his mind.

“She shouldn’t you be prancing around like him?” Touko asked her, making her jump.

She quickly fit a smile on her face. “Sorry, just thinking.”

Aha! There was a loaded stare. Just from Touko and not Makoto.

“The keys for the cabins will be inside at the reception desk,” Kamukura said, ignoring Makoto who was waving at him from the other end of the path. “We should retrieve them now.”

“Duh!” Asahina said. “How else are we going to check them out?”

Asahina was the second to take off. Halfway down the cobblestone path, she started screeching about a pool, which was kind of weird since she already had the entire ocean right here. Just how much water did she need?

Asahina and Makoto had stopped on the tiles surrounding the pools. Asahina... was rubbing her eyes like she was crying? Komaru nearly tripped as her legs locked up. Right here in front of everyone? What was he thinking? What had her brother done now?

But her panic was for nothing, for as they approached, Asahina sniffled and pointed at the pool. The
water was high, nearly filled to the brim, but the surface was thick with algae.

“I know I shouldn’t cry over this, but it’s so terrible,” Asahina said. “Who could let a beautiful pool become so disgusting?”

“No one’s been here to maintain it for at least a year,” Kirigiri said. “It’s only to be expected.”

“It’s just moss, right?” Makoto said. “It can’t be too hard to clean up. Plus, you have the entire ocean while you’re waiting.”

That’s what Komaru had said! Well, she had said it in her mind.

Komaru made sure she was first into Hotel Mirai’s lobby and... it wasn’t as fancy as she had expected. It wasn’t ugly, but she had expected crystal chandeliers and golden statues. Instead, the lobby had those hanging lights with fans. Like every other hotel. And the carpet was a kind of tacky checkered blue instead of the red velvet she had imagined and there wasn’t even fancy wallpaper, just white paint... It wasn’t bad. Just not great. Oh, but there were games!

“This stuff still works!” Hagakure remarked. He was holding a plastic gun that belonged to an old arcade game. “Aw, it says I need a quarter. Toges, think you could spot me? I can take the money out of my fee for your next reading.”

“As if I would trust my future to an imbecile like you,” Togami scoffed.

“Gathering the change from the arcade would have been something they overlooked,” Kamukura said from behind the reception desk. He was picking keys off the wall behind it. “If you locate the keys to open them, there will be change inside.”

“Awesome! Is that what you’re holding?”

“No. These are keys for the cabins,” Kamukura said. He walked right out of the hotel without even asking if they wanted to check out the second floor.

Like ducklings, they followed Kamukura to the nearest cabin, where Komaru jostled Makoto out of the way so she could be first in line.

The lock clicked. The door opened. Komaru scurried past Kamukura and into the cabin.

“This is so cool!” she squealed.

It was like a tiny little house, but with no kitchen. Or dining room. Or lots of things. But the point was that it was cool, even kind of rustic with its wooden floor. The Future Foundation hadn’t stripped the cabin bare when they had left. The bedframe and mattress were still there, although there were no sheets. They’d even left the beige curtains around the bed. A small rug that looked like it was made from actual fur was in the center of the room. There was an empty bookcase nestled in one of the room’s corners, a wooden table on the rug, a desk underneath one of the two windows in the back, and a very dead potted plant next to it.

“These cabins will need cleaning,” Kamukura said. “That is good. It will help keep them occupied.”

“They? We’re hiring the Despairs to clean up?” Hagakure asked.

“Naturally,” Kamukura said. “They will be the ones staying here.”

Komaru very slowly turned to face Kamukura.
“What? Why do they get to stay here?” she cried. “Where are we staying? Wait. It is even cooler than this?”

“There’s a motel on Third Island,” Kamukura said. “It will be adequate for your needs.”

“So, they get the super-cool cabins and we get a motel,” she repeated. “That’s totally unfair!”

“Yeah!” Hagakure said. “Why do they get the good stuff?”

“There’s little difference,” Kamukura said. “They both have beds.”

“. . . But this is a cabin,” she complained.

“Are there enough cabins for Ultimate Despair?” Kirigiri asked.

“With two to spare,” Kamukura answered.

Komaru tried once more. “But. . .”

“It is also fenced in,” Kamukura pointed out.

From where she was examining the bathroom, Asahina said, “So? That fence wouldn’t stop me.”

“Certainly, there are some Despairs who cannot be contained by it,” Kamukura agreed. “But there are also some who would be. Some protection is better than none. There lies the risk of violent outbursts as they progress through treatment.”

All this time, Makoto had lingered just inside the cabin, listening to their conversation without a fuss. Kamukura suddenly pushed him outside. Confused but not questioning it, Makoto wandered away and Kamukura shut the door. Komaru wasn’t sure why Kamukura had done that until Asahina carelessly asked, “Is that what happened to Naegi-kun while he was with them? ‘Violent outbursts?’”

All eyes turned to Kamukura.

“There were incidences,” he said carefully. “Some minor. Some not.”

Asahina nodded thoughtfully, as if Kamukura had whispered the winning strategy for a game of chess into her ear. Kamukura was watching her closely, as if reading words inscribed on her back.

“To summarize, Ultimate Despair will take these cabins,” Kirigiri said. Huh. After all the hassle she had given her and Makoto, it was odd to see her concede with no fight. “We will take the motel on Third Island.”


Kirigiri ignored him as they walked out the door. “Kamukura-kun, will you be staying here?”

“Not in these cabins,” he said. He walked outside and pointed somewhere else. “I will be staying there.”

They turned to look –

. . .

That wasn’t a cabin or a motel room he was pointing at. That was basically a small house! That. . .
selfish jerk!

At least it was funny watching Togami explode with jealousy.

The way Jabberwock Island was set up was weird. Komaru could understand not being able to go directly from First Island to Third Island because Second Island was in the way, but why couldn’t you go from First Island to Second Island when they were right next to each other? Instead, you had to go to this small, silly island that acted as a central hub. Plus, it turned out their hotel was way on the far side of Third Island. At least she got to giggle at that strange place called Titty Typhoon on the way. (Kirigiri had sighed and said something about male humour.)

“We’re here,” Kirigiri said.

Wow. After the paved, water paradise of Hotel Mirai, this place looked like a dump. It had one of those big, trashy motel billboards in front, because there were so many other buildings around that it could be confused for. The motel was a single-story building in a L shape that had doors and windows at set intervals. They all looked the same. She couldn’t even tell which room held the main office until she saw the small plate on the door.

“I hate you,” she muttered at an uncaring Kamukura.

It didn’t take him long to locate the keys. She wasn’t first in line this time, but lingered at the back with a disgusted Togami, determined to make sure Kamukura knew how unfair she thought this was.

Hmm. Alright. The room had a weird yellow and white wallpaper. Like the cabins, the bed was lacking sheets. There was a washroom. And there was a half-raised barrier that came out from either wall but stopped so that there was a reasonable gap in the center, dividing the room into two sections. One section, the one furthest from the door and closest to the washroom, held the bed and a chest of drawers. There was also a scruffy grey carpet that probably held the dirt from a thousand previous visitors. The section closer to the exit had white tiles, a counter, a sink, and a big gap where the oven must have been. Altogether, the motel room had less furniture than the cabins, and was more empty-looking.

“It’s going to take a lot of work to get this place back into shape,” Asahina said. She sounded like she was looking forward to it.

“Soda-kun will be happy,” Makoto remarked. He padded into the room and then flopped backwards onto the bed.

“You should wash those first,” Kamukura droned as a big centipede, disturbed by Makoto’s presence, crawled out from under the mattress and made them all (okay, just her) scream.

Shielding her face, hiding behind Hagakure’s big back, she cried, “You didn’t tell me there was going to be bugs, too!”

Apparently, no one else shared her fear because they were ignoring her. Instead, Kamukura said. “Naegi-kun, take one of these.”

Kamukura pulled out a handful of keys. Slowly, watching Kamukura’s face, Makoto grabbed one.

“That will be your room,” Kamukura said. “Find it, and report back.”

“Okay!” Makoto rushed out of the room. The door shut behind him.
“We need to discuss something,” Kamukura said to the rest of them. He locked eyes with Komaru.
“Naegi Makoto’s room is his room. No one else has a free pass to it.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Siblings have a tendency to barge in unannounced,” he said.

“Hey! He does that to me all the time.”

“That is irrelevant,” Kamukura said. “You must not return the favour to him. It is critical that Naegi-kun’s room remains under his strict control. Unless he hands you the keys or explicitly allows you inside, no one else may enter.”

“That seems like a poor plan,” Togami said. “That unfortunate incident with Ultimate Despair happened because we weren’t paying enough attention to his secret activities.”

Kamukura glared at him. Okay, not really, but she liked to interpret it that way. Kamukura said, “Naegi-kun’s accommodations changed several times while he was with us. What always remained true, however, is that his lodgings were open to all. Privacy was forbidden to him and so, he presently operates under a siege mentality. If we ever wish to tackle that, we must give him a shelter to retreat to. He needs somewhere to call his own, where he can always feel that he is safe.”

“But if we keep Ultimate Despair away from him, isn’t that enough? They’re the ones who hurt him,” Komaru said.

“He makes no distinction between your factions,” he said. Kamukura must have noticed she took offense to that, for he tapped his head and reminded them, “Siege mentality.”

Changing the topic, Kirigiri said, “We may as well pick our keys while we’re here. I don’t think it matters who rooms next to who.”

Kamukura nodded and placed the keys on the barrier in the center of the room. They all took one. Komaru let hers dangle from her finger by metal loop it was attached to. Oh! Maybe she could find a cute keychain for it later!

“If it’s alright, I’m going to take a look around and see if I can find anything interesting,” Asahina said. “These rooms look pretty sad and it’d be nice to make mine less empty.”

“Not yet,” Kamukura said. “There are higher priorities right now, namely food and water. Unfortunately, the Future Foundation would have taken all the fuel with them.”

“Don’t we already have that stuff back in the ship?” Hagakure said.

“Someday, it will run out,” Kamukura said. “Given the supplies on that ship are properly preserved, it would be best to use them as a backup.”

“...Alright. Who’s up for seafood?” Asahina asked. Komaru stared at her because seriously? Asahina had just been in the water maybe two hours ago, and it was obvious she was eager to jump right back in. Were all the Ultimates this obsessed with their talents?

“You have my permission,” Kamukura said, and that was all the permission Asahina needed because she took off in a flash. Makoto walked in right after she left, half-turned at the waist as he watched her vanish into the distance.

“The abandoned farm on First Island wouldn’t have anything stored,” Togami thought aloud.
“Depending on how aggressive the island’s vegetation is, however, some of the crops might have continued to grow through the seasons. In that case, we would need tools to harvest them. . . Fukawa, bring your scissors and follow me!”

Wearing a goofy grin, Touko reached beneath her skirt. Touching the scissors reminded her of whom they really belonged to though, and Touko stiffened, trembling. Finally, she gave up, pulled out the taser and pressed it against her head. Moments later, Genocider pranced after her master and out the room.

“Kirigiri-san, we require both the salt and water from the desalination plant on Fifth Island,” Kamukura told her.

“Understood,” she said before walking out of the room.


“H-hey! Knock it off!” Hagakure said. “I haven’t had eaten any mushrooms since the world.”

“I said plants, not fungi.”

“You don’t need to call me names!”

Komaru could feel what Kamukura was thinking.

“Go look for herbs,” Kamukura finally said. “Center, First and Second Island are your best bets.”

“I’m going, I’m going!”

Very abruptly, Komaru realized that everyone else, barring her brother, was gone. Just him and her and the mysterious Kamukura in a room together. Not intimidating at all.

“We should start cleaning,” Kamukura said. “There will be supplies in the administrative office.”

So far, Komaru’s tropical vacation was not off to a good start. Her parents had never made her do this much cleaning before! Kamukura insisted that they sweep all the floors, and vacuum all the carpets, and dust all the bathrooms, and he even made them wipe the mirrors! Granted, Makoto and her only cleaned two of the rooms because the time they were finished with the second, Kamukura had finished cleaning the rest, but it was still way more cleaning than she ever wanted to do again.

Since the others had taken the forklifts, they were stranded at the motel. Kamukura did say they could tour the area, but after all that cleaning, she just wanted to lie down. She and Makoto settled outside, lounging in the shade of a palm tree on the road opposite the motel. She sipped on a water bottle Kamukura had kindly wrangled out of a vending machine.

“When they said we were running away to a tropical island, this isn’t what I had in mind,” she remarked.

Makoto sighed and adopted his I’m Older And Wiser Than You voice. “Komaru, you’re always going to have to do chores.”

“I bet Ultimate Despair didn’t make you do chores!”

“I . . .” He paused. “Huh, I guess they didn’t. But it’s not like I was doing nothing. I was doing work way more important than chores.”

The peace lingered on for a couple more minutes. After that, Komaru couldn’t contain herself
anymore.

“We should talk about it, you know.”

“What? You want to make a chore schedule? We can do that, but we should wait for the others –”

“No, about yesterday.”

He looked at her, frowning. “What about yesterday?”

“. . . Are you kidding? Uh, geez, I wonder what important life-changing event happened yesterday!”

He scowled. “You wouldn’t know. You wouldn’t watch it.”

She had to take a moment. Was Makoto being annoying, or just really dumb? “I’m not talking about that video. I’m talking about the part where you nearly got killed!”

“Oh, that. It’s not like I had much choice. You know they don’t like each other. Owari-san would have hurt Kirigiri-san, so I had to do something. She didn’t mean to toss me overboard. That was a complete accident. Ask anyone.”

He was taking this way too calmly. He was explaining it too rationally, too, with that ‘it’s pure logic’ voice that Kirigiri or Kamukura would explain things with. It didn’t suit him at all.

“You were the one who let them out – don’t make excuses. Everyone knows you did!”

“That’s not what I was going to say,” he said. “I was going to say that I know where you’re going with this and you’re right: I misjudged the situation. I forgot they’re still holding the whole Enoshima thing against them. Uh, were you even told about that?”

“I did spend some time with the Future Foundation,” she reminded him. “It was hard not to hear about how Enoshima died.”

She still wanted to yell at him for being such a dummy, but his calm reaction was throwing her off. She felt uneasy, like she had at breakfast when he had first walked in with Pekoyama. Funnily, that made her think of Kamukura of all people, and what he had said to them afterwards: listen. Listen to what her brother was really trying to tell them.

She frowned.

As her brother sipped from her water bottle, she asked, “Hey, Makoto, did you drop the honorific for Enoshima on purpose?”

The bottle remained pressed to his lips, tipped upward so the liquid would roll towards him. Yet the water level remained the same. Slowly, he put down the bottle. It wasn’t right. It was like the casualness of the hero in a Western movie when he was being threatened and about to kick butt.

“You didn’t use one when you talked about her,” he pointed out.

“I barely even knew her,” Komaru said.

“That’s true.” He nodded. He wasn’t looking at her. “It’s hard to figure out what I’m supposed to call her. I’m Hope, and she was Despair. Everyone’s looking to me, and they wouldn’t be happy if I use an honorific.”

“I’m surprised you even considered it after everything she did.”
“It’s . . . It’s not black and white, you know,” he said softly. Quickly he added, “I’m not saying despair is good or hope is bad or anything! But there’s a lot more than just despair involved. Enoshima created the biggest despair the world has ever seen, and that was the best thing she could have possibly done for everyone.”

She really, really didn’t like where this was going. “Why?”

“Because of me,” he said. “Despair breeds Hope. It’s like a forest fire: despair sets the world aflame, and hope rises from the ashes. I know I wasn’t Hope back then; there was nothing to push me into becoming Hope. When Enoshima brought despair to the world, she also set up the dominos to create me. You see? What she did isn’t pure evil.”

She drank in his eager face. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

He reeled back, insulted.

“I didn’t watch your friends kill each other, but everyone told me all about that last trial. She literally told you she did it because it was fun.”

“She did,” he acknowledged, “but there was more. She just didn’t say –”

“Have you given this any thought at all?” she demanded. “She’s the Ultimate Despair. Why would she care about hope? I don’t see you going around trying to recruit people for your crazy friends.”

“It’s – they’re not crazy – it’s complicated, okay? I’m not explaining it well.”

“No, you’re just wrong,” she said. She groaned and leaned back against the palm tree. “Come talk to me when you make sense again.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Ultimate Despair takes their first steps onto Jabberwock Island.
Out of principle, Naegi was no longer talking to his Annoying Little Sister. It was a horrific punishment that might have been effective if Komaru actually noticed it was happening. But nope; fate wasn’t having it. Instead, Komaru - he had no idea where she had gotten those sunglasses - thought he was kicking back and lounging in the shade just like her. No amount of scowling or mean looks in her direction fixed that because she assumed he was being a surly older sibling and smiled back. Plus, he couldn’t correct her because that would defeat the point of not talking to her in the first place!

He sagged. She didn’t understand. It wasn’t her fault. Not really. Her Ultimate Despair was still out there, alive and kicking and... Was that the problem? Was Komaru still a baby Hope because Towa Monica was alive? It made sense in a way. If Enoshima had simply run away during the last trial, then Naegi wouldn’t have truly defeated her. He wouldn’t be the world’s hope – at least not to the extent he was now. Hmm. He’d have to think more about this later.

Of his departed friends, Kirigiri was the first to come chugging back on her forklift. The forklift was carrying a wood pallet, upon which were random containers filled with water. A couple of buckets of salt rested on the seat next to her.

“I’m afraid some of it spilled among the way,” Kirigiri said. She tucked her braid behind her ear as the sun caught the side of her face and turned it into gold. “Nevertheless, there’s plenty of water. If you two are thirsty, help yourself.”

Komaru scooped up her empty bottle. “I could use a refill.”

Next, Kirigiri asked Kamukura, “How are these vehicles powered?”

“Not gasoline. I would not have allowed this if that were the case,” Kamukura assured her. “Solar cells. There are charging stations scattered around the islands.”

“I presume most of the facilities run on similar power.” She let light fall upon her gloved palm. “Certainly, this is a good location for green energy.”

They chatted about more science stuff. Naegi adjusted his posture and held his chin up proudly like he was showing off a tie. It would be his turn soon to speak soon, right?

The two finished speaking. They stared at each other. Then Kirigiri turned to him and said hello.

“Hi!” Naegi said back. He settled back on his haunches, content.

Togami and Genocider were the second to return. They hadn’t used any pallets. Instead, their forklift cradled what appeared to be a feeding trough from a barn. As if in preparation for an animal’s lunch, the troughs had been partially filled with plants.

“The island hasn’t been wild long enough for the native vegetation to overrun the crops,” Togami announced proudly, as if he personally had sowed the seeds. “Something will have to be done about the pests and weeds, however. Additionally, while most of the trees on First Island have been cut down, I did spy a collection of fruit trees on Center Island. There’s a good chance that the other islands have more.”
By this time, both Kirigiri and Komaru were picking through the trough. His silly sister went right ahead and took a big bite out a yellow fruit without checking for insects.

“This is good! What is it?” she asked.

“Papaya,” Kirigiri said. “It’s common for tropical islands to have an abundance of fruit. If Togami-kun is correct, there should be enough on this island to last for a long time.”

“Ugh. No one said we were going to become vegetarians,” Syo complained. “I need meat! And not just the kind you eat.”

“That’s not for you to decide,” Togami said, making her swoon.

Hagakure was the third to return. Unlike the other two, he hadn’t thought to use the forklift to his advantage. Instead, he had balled his jacket into a sac and thrown it over his shoulder. That meant he was steering with one hand. Of course, Hagakure could have compensated for that by driving slower, but this was Hagakure so . . .

“W-watch out!” Hagakure cried.

They didn’t move. Hagakure drove right past them, and nearly tipped the forklift when he tried to turn sharply and break at the same time.

“I’m alive!” he called, although no one had asked. “Takes a lot more than that to put me down.”

“Don’t just stand there,” Togami said. “Show us what you brought. I need to verify it’s not poisonous.”

Hagakure whimpered, “Don’t you trust me at all?” (The answer was no, of course, but Naegi was much too nice to say that.)

Togami, Kirigiri and even Kamukura got into the task of sorting through the plants Hagakure had brought back. Of the three groups that had left, Hagakure seemed to have been the most affected by the heat. There was a slight flush to his cheeks, like the beginning of a sunburn. He grabbed one of the water containers and dumped it over his head. Naegi and Komaru silently judged him while Genocider swapped personalities in the background.

“We’re having a big feast tonight, right?” Hagakure asked.

“Sure,” Kamukura said.

“Is that wise?” Kirigiri questioned. “We don’t have a full understanding of how much resources we have.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Kamukura said vaguely. (“Hah! You hear that?” Hagakure cried.)

Kirigiri merely shrugged before returning to her task. “If you think it’s best.”

On Kamukura’s advice, they didn’t wait for Asahina. They drove the forklifts back over to First Island instead, where she was still at the beach. Togami choked violently when he saw the pile of seafood stacked upon the sand.

“Do you realize we’re going to need to eat next week, too?” Hagakure asked her awkwardly.

“I didn’t grab everything out there,” Asahina answered as she wrung out her ponytail. “No one told me how much to get.”
“This is sufficient.” Kirigiri examined the shoulder-high pile. “We can store the excess in the ship’s fridge.”

“Speaking of which, how much longer can we power that?” Togami asked Kamukura.

“I can rewire it to accept power from solar panels,” Kamukura said. “Because neither the Imposter nor Owari can be expected to consume much, a fifth of this should do for tonight. Move the rest to the fridge.”

Apparently, Naegi was the only one listening because when he grabbed some fish and looked back, no one else had moved!

“I am not letting that touch my clothes!” Togami said.

“Wear gloves,” Kamukura deadpanned.

“ Aren’t you going to carry something?” Komaru asked Kamukura.

Kamukura said, “ I am going to speak with Ultimate Despair.”

“Uh, who’s doing all the cooking?” Hagakure asked. “Cause that one guy. . . I don’t think I want him anywhere near knives. Or the stuff I’m going to put in my mouth.”

“You will be eating the same food as Ultimate Despair and Naegi-kun,” Kamukura said. “Not even someone with your intellect would risk using poison in that situation.”

“. . . Thanks?” Hagakure said, confused. “That doesn’t mean he can’t stab us though!”

“The food will distract him,” Kamukura said. “In the end, he is still an Ultimate Chef at heart. Regardless, they would have noticed by now that the engines stopped. They need to be released eventually.”

“ All at once?” Kirigiri asked warily.

He shook his head. “We will escort them to their cabins a few at a time. However, if we only allow some to move into the cabins today, the others will revolt. Naegi-kun, please proceed with moving the excess food into the fridge.”

“By myself?” he whined.

“Your sister, Hagakure, and Fukawa can accompany you.”

“He’s going to give orders just like that?” Fukawa muttered. “Who does that egotistical loudmouth think he is –?”

“Stop polluting my air,” Kamukura said with Togami’s voice.

Fukawa squeaked. Bright-red, she covered her mouth and nodded, although that didn’t stop Naegi from seeing a drop of drool.

As Naegi and the others headed toward the ship with their load, he heard Kirigiri say one last thing:

“There’s no need to look like that, Togami-kun. You’re the one who claims to love competition.”

Naegi, of course, would shirk his duties and spy on them. That was fine. He had an assigned task,
which meant he wouldn’t be able to hang around the deck and wait for each member of Ultimate Despair to emerge. It was fine if Naegi observed from a distance; it meant he couldn’t harass them or plant any seeds of defiance in them. Or in himself.

As the least likely of the remaining people to trigger a violent reaction, Kamukura was the one who headed to the cargo deck. On the ship’s deck just outside the door, Pekoyama stood watch. A deep furrow marked her forehead. He understood her stress. When the time came, Pekoyama had refused to side with her comrades in Ultimate Despair. She was an outsider, neither melding with Class 78 or Ultimate Despair. Kuzuryu and her had not yet had a chance to reconcile this. For Pekoyama, who was used to having a clear-cut side to follow, this would be harrowing. With such pressure heaped upon her, it was no surprise that she reacted to his sudden appearance by jumping and attempting to draw an absent sword.

“It is time,” he told her. Pekoyama nodded silently and then stepped aside.

It was quiet in the hold. The mood was not comfortable, but it had an atmosphere of people pretending to be happy. Someone had spread a blanket on the floor and Nevermind, Koizumi, Mioda and Saionji had each claimed a corner. They had raided the nearby crates, finding water bottles. Nevermind, hands neatly in her lap, had placed a bottle before her like it was a teacup. That was the largest group of Despairs. The rest had split off into ones and twos. They were leaning against the shelves in silence or talking quietly among themselves. All except Komaeda, who remained huddled in the corner of his cage, ignoring the open door that would allow him to leave.

With it so quiet, it was only natural Kamukura’s arrival would be noticed. Kuzuryu was the first to approach; he would be the boldest, as he had not been part of the chaos that nearly killed Naegi. The Yakuza’s heir stopped a safe distance before him, his gaze and steadiness so similar to the Swordswoman who waited up above.

“Hanamura-kun,” Kamukura said, “if you are willing, I would like you to prepare today’s dinner.”

Hanamura blinked. “That’s what you’re here for?”

“He’ll do it,” Saionji declared. When the others looked at her, she said, “Do you really want to keep eating that vomit the other class makes?”

“It would be nice to eat real food again,” Koizumi admitted. “Hanamura-kun, what do you think?”

“Um. . .” Just as so many of these people seemed primed to do, Hanamura suddenly snapped into a new state, one brimming with confidence. “Well, how can I say no when you’re on yours knees begging for another taste? It’s only fitting; once you’ve experienced the ecstasy of my world-class dishes, everything else is just unsatisfying. Kamukura Izuru, I accept your challenge!”

“Great,” he deadpanned. “Will you need assistance?”

“Hmm. . . There’s certainly an advantage to more hands onboard. Tanaka-kun, Togami-kun, shall we dance?”

Tanaka pointed at Hanamura, mimicked groping someone, and then mimicked being damned to a hundred-year torment in the fiery bowels of hell. It was impressive.

“Hard to get, hmm?” Hanamura chuckled and brushed back his fringe. “That’s no problem. Every chef knows the value of patience.”

The four of them departed. As they passed Pekoyama, Tanaka made a throaty, rumbling sound in his chest, like a wolf who couldn’t quite decide whether to growl. Hanamura winked at her, but
otherwise, she was ignored.

They crossed the gangplank. Kamukura sensed eyes on their backs – Naegi, no doubt – observing the next reunion of Class 78 and Despair. At least there were no personal grudges between these two groups. Barring the one Togami held against Tanaka. As Kamukura had easily predicted, Togami stood in the front of his group, a position of power and strength. He made no move to hide the bruises on his neck, instead showing them off in a primal display of unyielding grit. He was so focused on Tanaka that he hadn’t noticed the skinnier likewise of him behind Tanaka. Tanaka, on the other hand, walked forward and ignored Class 78.

That was the best way to describe how they interacted: they ignored each other. That had been Ultimate Despair’s goal at the least, and they walked after Kamukura without faltering. Class 78 watched them go, but made no effort to speak. Some might say this was a sign of terrible unity, but it was miles better than the violence they had immediately embraced last time.

Forklifts were exciting and sharp and would tempt Ultimate Despair, so after they grabbed some raw ingredients, Kamukura forced everyone to walk. With his dark, heavy clothing, Tanaka bore the worst of the heat. Although his hamsters valiantly fanned him with leaves, he was slick with sweat by the time they reached the gate to Hotel Mirai, and his undershirt was stuck to his chest. It truly was remarkable that Tanaka hadn’t been intelligent enough to take his jacket off at any point.

“Nothing like some hot, sweaty activity to build up an appetite,” Hanamura quipped. “Hotel Mirai. . . Hmm, it’s modern but rather bland. Not the place I ever expected myself to end up.”

They journeyed up to the second floor of the hotel, where the Imposter sniffed at the dirtiness. As Kamukura had guessed, the kitchen – having been equipped before the war – hadn’t been completely stripped. How would one transport a walk-in fridge, for instance? Once they turned the fridge on, it would take a few hours to cool, but afterwards they wouldn’t need to always walk to the ship to retrieve food. Likewise, there were still ovens, stoves and fryers, which fit into their slots so perfectly that it was obvious they were the same ones from the hotel’s money-making days. Microwaves had vanished (“Good riddance!” Hanamura exclaimed when he heard that), as had larger appliances such as blenders. However, many utensils had been left behind.

“Well, we’re going to need to scrub this place down,” Hanamura said. “It’s completely unsanitary. It’s like working in a pig sty!”

“Feel free to get started. We may be able to assist later,” Kamukura said.

The need to clean was a welcome boon. It would keep the Despairs busy and out of mischief. Indeed, the general state of this island - in disrepair, but still functional enough for them to survive – was a blessing. Boredom was the path to ruin, especially when half the inhabitants were convinced that violence was the best entertainment.

He took the girls on the blanket next. There was no reason why it had to be them. Kamukura didn’t care about the order, so long as Kuzuryu was last so Pekoyama wouldn’t be tempted to abandon her post. The four had more sensible clothing than Tanaka and displayed only signs of mild exertion when he showed them to their cabins.

“You are going to have to stay inside for now,” Kamukura commanded.

Nevermind looked at him. “Or else?”

He nodded and lied, “Or else. I will let you know when you are free to step outside.”
The next person he decided to bring out of the hold was Komaeda, just to get it over with. Unlike the previous two groups, Kamukura brought Komaeda up alone. It was too dangerous to do otherwise. Not because of Komaeda’s luck, but because he was the focus of Naegi’s world, which meant Naegi’s luck was in play.

Thankfully, when they emerged on the ship’s deck, they learned from his sister that Naegi’s bad luck had indeed manifested – in the form of him tripping in a corridor on his way to the freezer and having to pick up everything again. It looked like poor Naegi would have the terrible luck of missing his favorite upper classmate. It was for the best. To Class 78, Komaeda was just as bad as Enoshima. If Naegi were here right now to suck up to Komaeda and put his worst traits on display, his friends surely would have lost control. Even now, they were barely containing themselves –

Oh, there went Komaru.

She moved quickly. He’d seen it coming, of course, but in the quick seconds it had taken for her to lunge at and shove Komaeda, he had concluded there was no real benefit to stopping her. Komaeda, having expected violence the moment he saw Naegi’s class, had done the exact opposite of what he should have and stiffened up. So, when Komaru made contact, Komaeda lost his balance and toppled over.

“You . . . You!” Komaru simmered.

Would she or wouldn’t she punch? That was the question.

“Naegi-san, stop! We don’t need a repeat of yesterday.” Kirigiri briskly made her way over. She grabbed Komaeda’s arm and pulled him up an inch, then accidentally dropped him when she realized who she was touching.

“He deserved it!” Komaru said.

Komaeda picked himself up. That didn’t go completely unnoticed: Komaru suddenly went quiet. Like a scolded child, she stared at the ground and shuffled her feet. Kamukura thought about it and decided he couldn’t be bothered to stop her as she suddenly threw a punch. Kirigiri did catch Komaeda before he fell again, leaving Komaeda to hold his hand to his leaking nose –

A blur slammed into Komaru’s side and goddamn–!

Kamukura pressed two fingers against his forehead as he shook off . . . whatever that had been. And now the two Naegis were wrestling by his feet.

“Don’t touch him!” Naegi Makoto screeched.

Kamukura reached down and ripped Naegi off his sister. Komaru scrambled to her feet and stumbled back toward the safety of the others. They were all staring at the wildcat Kamukura had by the scruff. Ah, yes. Apart from that pitiful attempt to attack Owari yesterday, this would be the first time they had seen Naegi get violent. Except for Kirigiri.

“That’s enough,” Kamukura told the boy.

“She started it!” Naegi squealed. “She hit him!”

Komaeda’s voice was a little stuffy when he spoke. “Naegi-kun, it’s fine. . .”

“She hit you! She hit you!”
Kamukura went over the options. Anything Komaeda or Komaru said would make things worse. Kirigiri was likely to trigger him as well. If he wanted this dealt with quickly, he needed to take care of it himself.

“Naegi Komaru, you’re grounded for three days,” Kamukura said.

“What? You can’t -!”

“Keep talking and it will be four.”

Komaru shut her mouth.

Naegi smirked smugly. Komaeda shifted, checking if his nose was still bleeding, and his number one fan immediately locked onto the movement.

“Hi, Komaeda-kun!” Naegi said breathlessly. In his sparkling eyes, there was a flurry of questions: Did you miss me? Did you see what I did? Are you proud of me?

Komaeda looked away. “Hey.”

Just enough acknowledgement to make him crave more. At least this time, Komaeda wasn’t messing with Naegi’s head on purpose.

“Naegi-kun, have you finished transporting the food?” Kamukura asked.

“No, but I can do that later. There’s plenty of time!”

“It isn’t fair that Hagakure and Fukawa are working while you aren’t.”

“But -!”

“Naegi-kun, do as he says,” Komaeda ordered.

Naegi pouted but in his world, Komaeda’s will was law. He shuffled back down the gangplank while trying to shoot Komaeda puppy eyes over his shoulder.

“. . . That was enlightening,” Togami said. Meanwhile, Kamukura could see Kirigiri reevaluating a dozen theories in her head.

The rest of Ultimate Despair was escorted without much trouble. Tsumiki, who had the potential to be a problem, seemed content with exchanging long-distance eye contact and waving at Naegi. As Kamukura had decreed, Kuzuryu was the last to leave. Silently, Pekoyama peeled off from her guard duty to join them.

“So, you’re here,” Kuzuryu said to Pekoyama. He kept his gaze fixed ahead. “Heard some things from the others about you.”

Pekoyama said nothing, awaiting his opinion on how she had handled the Ultimate Despair – Class 78 conflict.

Kuzuryu didn’t press it however, and that was for the best. Instead, he grunted, “You got tanned.”

It was true, but the tan was so slight that only someone who paid Pekoyama an abnormal amount of attention would have noticed that.

“The weather has been very pleasant,” she said. “I imagine it will be to your liking.”
Kamukura knew that Kuzuryu wanted to speak about much more. However, in the presence of himself, he would never display that vulnerability. Still, things went smoothly. And then they reached the cabins. Kamukura cleared his throat as Kuzuryu and Pekoyama tried to enter the same one.

“What?” Kuzuryu asked, nonplussed.

“There’s only one bed,” Kamukura said. “A single.”

“Tight fit, then.” Kuzuryu remarked.

“You and Pekoyama intend to sleep together?” Kamukura said.

“Don’t say it like that! We’re just sleeping in the same bed,” Kuzuryu snapped, cheeks turning red. “We’re not... We shared a crib before!”

“Kuzuryu, the intent was that you could both have your own rooms,” Kamukura said.

“Oh. Yeah, sure. Right. Uh, go check out your cabin, Peko.”

Thoroughly humiliated, Kuzuryu bolted inside his cabin and shut the door tight.

“Was that necessary?” Pekoyama said with a glare.

Kamukura shrugged. “I was bored.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Kirigiri attempts to reconcile the Naegi she knew with the Naegi that is.
She looked at her hands in the mirror. Lumpy, rough scar tissue. Discolored red and yellow flesh as if the first layer of skin had been stripped away and never replaced. The same sight she had known for a decade. Gingerly, Kirigiri slid her glove back over unfeeling flesh. She wouldn’t call herself a vain person, but she was well-aware of society's customs. Thus, as she looked at her dress in the mirror and the thick gloves that accompanied, she could only think about how strange she looked. In ordinary days, she would have taken off the dress and simply stayed in. However, apparently Hope’s Peak had made this school dance mandatory. She doubted that was the norm. No, this was just another mechanism by that man to get under her skin.

Quick, enthusiastic knocking came at the door. That would have to be Naegi or Asahina. As it opened, it was revealed to be the former student in his rented tuxedo alongside his best friend.

“Wow, you look amazing, Kirigiri-san!” Naegi said, eyes glowing with all the light of someone meeting their greatest hero.

Maizono clapped her hands in joy. “I knew that dress would look great on you.”

“Once again, your psychic powers saved the day,” Kirigiri said dryly. “Thank you, both. You two look great, as well.”

“Thank you.” Maizono tilted her head slightly to the side. “You’re going to wear your gloves?”

She didn’t answer. If anything, she was a little surprised that Maizono had pointed that out. By now, they should have realized that she never took them off. She wasn’t going to change that for something as insignificant as this.

“Sayaka...” Naegi whined. He turned to Kirigiri. “We thought you were going to.”

. . . Of course they would. Naegi at least noticed habits like that.

Maizono nudged Naegi, startling him into speech. “Uh, yeah, we thought you would want gloves, so . . . I brought you something.”

That last bit was said in such a hurried whisper that the sound of him pulling something out of his pocket nearly muffled it. Though he refused to look at her, he thrust the object at her fiercely. Kirigiri picked the chain up by two fingers and let it dangle.

“It goes with your dress and gloves!” Naegi said enthusiastically. “I knew you would look great in whatever you wore, but I thought you might have trouble finding something that went with them. But the gems on that necklace match the studs on your gloves.”

“This is surprisingly high-quality,” she said. Certainly, more than Naegi could afford. She doubted he could talk Ludenberg into giving up one of her trinkets, so its former owner must have been the princess from the other class.

“Heh, don’t worry about it. Think of it as a thank-you.”
“For what?”

“For that time Hagakure-kun tried to sell my organs,” Naegi said. “And the time I walked into rival gang territory while wearing that Crazy Diamond sweater Owada-kun gave me. . . And for noticing when the bus left me behind on the school trip. . . And when I got trapped in that room with that killer robot Fujisaki-kun was working on. . .”

With each step into the past, Naegi became more and more dejected until Maizono could no longer resist the urge to ruffle his hair.

Naegi shot back up. “You’ve done a ton for me, so I thought I should get you some kind of thank-you present.”

Maizono giggled. “You don’t want to know what he did to get that for you.”

Was that so? It probably was related to the reason she saw him walking in dress pants and a white shirt the other week.

“This wasn’t necessary, but thank you, Naegi-kun,” she said. “This was extremely thoughtful of you.”

He beamed. “That’s what best friends do. Here, pull your hair up for a second.”

Naegi stepped forward and grabbed the necklace. He undid the clasp and then slid the chain into position around her neck, where he fastened it again. The necklace had a weight to it, but it was a small, comforting one that sat on her chest.

“Hmm . . .” Maizono reached forward and adjusted it. “Perfect. If you’re ready, we should all go to the gym together.”

“Alright. Give me a moment to grab my purse.”

Kirigiri stepped back into her room and grabbed the purse waiting on the dressing table. She paused for a moment to examine her reflection.

She had assumed this dance would be another chore she had to get through, but maybe she was wrong. Maybe she could enjoy this after all.

“Hey, Kirigiri-san, what’s next on the agenda?” Asahina asked, snapping Kirigiri out of her hazy memories.

“Kamukura-kun didn’t suggest anything, and we have basic supplies,” Kirigiri mused. “I suppose there are no pressing tasks.”

“So, what you’re saying is that this is free time.”

“You could interpret it that way.”

Asahina’s eyes slowly lit up. “Party on the beach time?”

“It will take some time for Hanamura-kun and the others to prepare the food.”

“So, we could totally have a party on the beach right now!”

“Yes,” Kirigiri agreed.
They may or may not have covered their ears as Asahina whooped and then ran at Hagakure for a high-five. That said, Asahina’s proposed party didn’t start immediately. Most of them were carrying supplies so they didn’t have to walk all the way back to First Island every time they were hungry. Even after they deposited the food, not as many people were as willing to join Asahina in the water as she had hoped.

“But there’s bombs out there!” Hagakure had protested.

“Have you seen them? They’re too big to be this close to shore.”

“How do you know there aren’t little bombs, too?”

“Well, then they’d just make little explosions, so it’s no big deal.”

That was patently wrong, but Asahina was correct that there would be no mines when the water was this shallow.

“You just want to show off,” Fukawa muttered. “You know I can’t swim like you. You want them to laugh at me.”

“I don’t just swim for competitions. I practice recreational swimming, too. So stop complaining and start having fun, everyone!”

Kirigiri said, “Asahina-san, just because there are no pressing tasks doesn’t mean I don’t have any responsibilities.”

“Aw, come on! You worked all the time on the boat and now that we’re on a beach, you’re going to keep working?”

Despite Asahina’s arguments, the only person she was able to talk into wading into the water was Komaru. Naegi – possibly remembering his last encounter with the ocean – lingered nearby on shore, letting waves tickle his toe. That meant Komaru didn’t stay long, so Asahina’s Swimming Party turned into a Sunbathing Party instead.

“Are you always this pale?” Asahina asked Kirigiri, who was sitting under a palm tree. “It’s like you spent your entire life in a library.”

Knowing Asahina wasn’t trying to insult her allowed Kirigiri to brush off the comment. It did, however, remind her of something important.

“Naegi-kun.” Despite clearly addressing the male one, both siblings looked at her. “Come here.”

He approached and she told him to crouch in front of her. She leaned forward. Sweaty. But they all were after walking so long in the hot sun. Breathing a little quick but that could have been from being too close to the water for comfort. What she was more concerned about was the red flush spreading out from the bridge of his nose.

“The sunscreen’s worn off. You’re developing a minor burn,” she concluded. It was surprising that she – no, that Kamukura – had overlooked this. “Asahina-san, do you have sunscreen?”

“Back in my room,” she answered. “Hang tight. I’ll be right back.”

The implied order was that Naegi was to remain in the shade, which he did. It meant, Kirigiri realized, that the two of them were face-to-face. Close. Within arm’s reach. Within a weapon’s reach. And although she knew he was unarmed, it still bothered her. In the past, she could have worked
through this discomfort by talking with him. But now? With this strange, foreign Naegi who cloaked himself in lies, where did you start?

“Hi!” Naegi said energetically.

Apparently, that was where. That was the second time he’d done this in the past day: said hi and nothing else. Succinct conversation wasn’t the norm with him; too much talking was usually the problem.

Given the events of the previous week, she could read Naegi more accurately than before. Or so she hypothesized. That oddly focused, smile-too-wide stare he gave was indeed a sizing up, as she had earlier assumed. It was a diluted version of her own searching stare, an attempt to ferret out secrets and desires before they left one’s lips. Like an overeager pet desperate to please. Like a child walking on eggshells around an abusive parent.

And yet, she couldn’t afford to disregard his threat completely. Naegi wasn’t stupid. He had never been stupid, but he was demonstrating a newfound ability to turn that intelligence to dangerous ends. She knew, as Kamukura had pressed upon her, that he didn’t mean to cause trouble, but Naegi’s understanding of reasonable actions had been smashed upon the pavement and then run over with a few trucks.

Hmm. Kamukura had mentioned in passing that the best way to maintain order until things settled down was to keep the potential threats occupied. It occurred to her that he could have been talking about more than Ultimate Despair.

Naegi was still sitting there. Watching her every move. Waiting for a command.

“That was stupid,” she told him. “I told you not to get involved.”

“He was going to hit Ishimaru-kun, and everyone but him saw it coming.”

“And you decided to block the punch with your face?”

“It’s not like I wanted to,” Naegi said. He touched his swollen cheek and winced. “But he swung and... I know that you knew Ishimaru-kun knew how to fight, but I didn’t know that. Even if I did, I can’t leave him high and dry.”

“If Oogami-san got into a fight, would you also attempt to intervene?”

His eyes burned with fire. “Of course, I would!”

She shook her head. “You’re incorrigible. Fighting is a very serious thing and it’s easy for an untrained person to get hurt like you did. Leave the fighting to those who can handle it.”

He laughed cheerfully. “Sorry, Kirigri-san, but I can’t do that. If I see my friends in trouble and there’s something I can do to help, I’m going to do it.”

She shook her head in exasperation. “Don’t you ever listen?”

“Nope!” he said cheerfully. “I know you don’t like it, but I’m not going to change that about myself. Otherwise I wouldn’t be me.”

She handed him a glass of water from the nightstand beside his infirmary bed. “No you wouldn’t.”
“How do you like the island?” she asked.

“It’s very bright,” he said. A strange statement to make, until one considered that his eyes must have been accustomed to the florescent lights of the indoors. “Kind of hot, too. Not that I’m complaining. I never needed to worry about sunscreen before.”

“The temperature was mild where you were,” Kirigiri agreed. “I found the weather there also tended to be cloudy.”

“Sure. I guess it was.”

There were many clues to be drawn from his words. So many little pieces that came together in an unpleasant whole. She chose not to dwell on them. What use would it be? These conclusions were things she already knew, things that would only sow rage amongst their classmates.

“What about your room? Is it suitable?”

“It’s perfect!” he gushed. “You went all out for me, huh?”

She saw the problem. It was a new one, obviously, because he had admitted to her before that he had preferred the meals he received under Ultimate Despair. However, before he also hadn’t huddled into Pekoyama’s side while looking at them all with fear.

“I think someone’s stalking me.”

Kirigiri said nothing and instantly began staking out all possible routes of escape and entry. It was her room, so she knew it was secure. Still, as she continued the conversation with Naegi, she began picking through her dressers, looking for any bugs.

“Are you sure it isn’t Ikusaba-san?”

“Positive. She felt it, too, when she was with me.”

“But she didn’t find anyone,” she finished. Troubling. At least they had a warning this time before the latest calamity befell him.

“I can feel someone watching me,” he said. “And. . . and there’s weird things happening. Like I’ll be walking in the hallway and there’ll suddenly be a banana peel and I swear there wasn’t one there before and sometimes my stuff goes missing and. . . I don’t think the principal believed me, but I walked into something that – it didn’t go off, but I swear – it was some kind of crazy death trap!”

“Death trap, you say?” She stopped looking for bugs. “Interesting. Does that scare you?”

“Well, it makes me nervous and yeah, maybe it scares me, but I’m not going to give into fear,” he said. “That would be letting them win.”

She nodded. “I have some theories so if you give me some time. . .”

“Already? Wow. You really are the Ultimate Detective.” He beamed.

She waited until Naegi left. Then she pulled out her phone and searched through her contacts.

“Nanami-san? We need to discuss that friend of yours. . .”
Alright. Naegi was unwilling to admit he was dissatisfied, so she would have to meet him halfway and demonstrate it was okay.

“I think your room could use improvement,” she said. “What do you think the most pressing need is?”

“It’s a bit bare,” Naegi said easily. “There’s not a lot of stuff for how big it is. Can I have more things?”

She chose her words carefully. “It’s your room. Do with it as you will.”

“Does that mean. . .?” He seemed to struggle with his words. “Can I keep things in it?”

She narrowed onto that word. “What exactly are you referring to?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Things.”

There were many, many things that could be used to fill in that blank. Was he scheming again already? Naturally, Kamukura just had to stay behind with Ultimate Despair so she couldn’t bring this to his attention.

“Can I?” Naegi pleaded.

Stop. Listen to him, to what he was saying. See this question through his eyes. Naegi, stolen away from his home with nothing but the clothes on his back, thrust into a world where he had no say over his accommodations, no relief except which Ultimate Despair decided to grant him. Naegi would have had no say over his belongings. His decorations would be those that Ultimate Despair gave him, that which they had explicitly deemed okay. Through that perspective, his question made much more sense. Naegi’s answer was vague because he didn’t know what he wanted to keep. He simply wanted to know if keeping things, if choosing his own possessions, was allowed.

“As I said, it’s your room.”

His excitement would have been cute, if it wasn’t for the horrific story behind it.

“I’m back!” Asahina declared. “You hanging in there, Naegi-kun?”

He nodded happily. He glanced at Kirigiri, and then addressed Asahina. “C-can you get my back?”

She giggled. “I always have your back.”

The shade wasn’t large, so Kirigiri had to shuffle to the side to give Asahina room. Naegi had already turned his back to them and she found herself automatically searching his back, looking for a scar like that on his forehead, or marks that may have suggested an experience with chains or being dragged. He seemed alright, however, barring the general paleness. Judging by the ease in which the two had settled into their roles, this wasn’t the first time Asahina had done this.

Positioned as she was, she couldn’t see Naegi’s face. She still saw enough. She saw muscles tighten across his shoulders the moment Asahina’s hands made contact. The ribs heaved as he took a deliberate breath and unknotted his tense back. His weight shifted, moving back into each of her strokes, spine flexing. If she hadn’t known Naegi before, hadn’t known that simple flirting was enough to send him running for cover, she would have thought he was tricking Asahina into doing something inappropriate.

“Come on, Naegi-kun. Don’t just sit there. The longer you take to put sunscreen on your face, the
worse it’s going to get,” Asahina chided.

“S-sorry!” He scrambled to obey but Kirigiri could tell by the jerky movements that he wasn’t paying close attention.

“All done!” Asahina announced after a time. “You should still try to stay out of the sun, but at least you shouldn’t end up looking like a lobster.”

Naegi was just about to get up when Kirigiri said, “Makoto, come here.”

As Naegi hobbled over, she wordlessly held her hand out and requested the sunscreen from Asahina. She made up the excuse of wanting to doublecheck Naegi’s work, and carefully squeezed some into her palm. Naegi caught on quickly, at least to the part where she intended to start where Asahina had left off. He settled neatly in front of her, legs bent under him and hands on his thighs like she was about to guide him through yoga.

It was an odd thing, to watch someone shudder under your touch. She could only imagine how it felt, for between the gloves and the scars, she was numb. Naegi closed his eyes and she could feel him pressing into her palm like a cat receiving pets. Had it been back during their school days, she would have found his behavior odd, but not too concerning. If she were completely honest with herself, just a few days ago she would have found his behavior frightening. That part of her was still there, buried deep beneath her core where it flitted in and out of reach like a shadow. As it always did. But it was getting easier to brush aside, to take off those goggles and view Naegi through the ones of... well, pity. He wasn’t the first to demonstrate this kind of behavior. She’d seen it in dogs who had been waiting home alone for their dead masters to return.

What have they done to you? she wondered. She had always been determined not to see Naegi as helpless as Komaru and Asahina had, but now she understood the temptation.

“Hey, Kirigiri-san, do you have to deal with a lot of people who have split personalities.”

“No. Contrary to what pop culture suggests, it’s an extremely rare disorder. Most cases are misdiagnosed schizophrenia. Why do you ask?”

“Genocider Syo is a split personality,” Naegi said. “And... I read somewhere that split personalities are caused by trauma.”

So, they were. She had been afraid that Naegi’s abnormally optimistic view of the world had been caused by a sheltered upbringing. And of course, it would fall upon her to break that.

“Not everyone had a pleasant childhood like you did,” Kirigiri told him.

“I know. If I’ve picked up the hints, I’m sure you did a long time ago. I keep wanting to think she’s exaggerating, or there’s some reason why they treated her the way they did, but there isn’t. They hated her for existing.” Naegi shook his head sadly. “It’s a special kind of crime to abuse someone who’s completely dependent on you. I don’t know if there’s a way to forgive people like that.”

“Alright. We’re done here.”

Naegi didn’t do much of anything at first, other than slyly glance around. He was hoping that someone else was going to jump in and continue her work, she realized. When that didn’t happen, he looked over to the sunny beach he was supposed to avoid where Komaru was trying to play catch with an unimpressed Fukawa. Then he shuffled back and leaned against the palm tree with her. He
wasn’t quite next to her; there was a generous space. But his body was turned towards her and it was obvious he wanted to be touching. She considered it, but something churned in her gut and she accepted that she wasn’t ready for that.

The sun was still high when Kamukura came for them. Naegi wasn’t the first to spot him, but he was the first to go running over and it puzzled her. How did you bond that strongly with a man who felt no love for anything else and wasn’t shy about admitting it? Then again, she could ask how a computer program managed to integrate itself so intimately into their circle of friends.

The walk to Hotel Mirai was leisurely and quiet. She had to admit: while Class 77 did have the better accommodations, there was something to say for the knowledge that they were contained behind walls and gates. The designers of the hotel obviously hadn’t wanted to make their security look ominous, but as she examined the fence’s spires and thought back to prisons, they were mildly threatening. Not enough though for her to feel any trepidation when Kamukura opened the gate.

In a rare moment of sympathy, or perhaps plain pragmatism, Kamukura told them, “Enter when you are ready.”

And as Naegi lit up and prepared to dash ahead into the arms of her tormentor, Kirigiri’s thoughts were a chaotic storm.

We were friends once. In that ancient life I only half remember. But now. . .

Now I don’t know you at all.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Some people wanted Ultimate Despair/Class 78 interactions?
They should have expected it, they really should have. Somehow it still managed to catch them off-guard when Makoto dashed inside without hesitation. His classmates exchanged looks and for some reason, Togami was the first to go after him. Asahina followed quickly while Kirigiri adopted a leisurely place. Hagakure hung back. If Komaru didn’t know how much he liked free food, she would have wondered if he would ever enter.

“This is it,” Touko said dully. “We’re walking back in there. It hasn’t even been a full day since they nearly killed us.”

“It’s okay, I’m nervous, too,” Komaru said.

“It’s not nerves,” Touko grated out. “I’m not a coward like that moron over there. But . . . I have more experience with these kinds of people than anyone else.”

“But Genocider reformed. So maybe . . .”

“Do you think it was easy? It took years to get her under control, and it was only because of Master. So, unless they’re all madly in love with your brother . . .” Touko trailed off. “Actually, considering what a shameless flirt he is, that could be true.”

“Makoto, flirting?” she echoed in disbelief.

“That’s what I said,” she snorted. “He was always sweettalking girls and sneaking off alone with them. When we were in the Killing Game, when our lives were in danger, it never stopped him from getting Kirigiri all alone. I heard she was even in his room once! He never tried anything with me though. Big surprise. With all those big breasts floating around, why would he notice someone as ugly as me?”

Komaru completely ignored the last part. “Makoto’s a player . . .?”

“Jealous?”

“This is horrible! Mom didn’t raise him that way.” She puffed up. “Come on, we’re going in . . . Uh, Touko?”

“I’ll catch up,” Touko said.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just need a minute to myself.”

Komaru had barely stepped inside before she heard Touko breathing behind her again. She turned to say a greeting –
“Hey, Dekomaru!” Syo said. “So, what’s going on. I’m feeling a little antsy.”

“We’re going to have dinner with Ultimate Despair.”

“And Gloomy decided to drop out, huh? Hah! For once, she did something smart. These are my kind of people we’re dealing with!”

Well, maybe if Syo was here they wouldn’t pay so much attention to plain old her.

Makoto hadn’t gotten far, but he’d already been surrounded. Nidai was there and so was – ugh – Tanaka. Komaru had only seen the scary, scarred man twice in her life, but neither of those times had been good memories. They had been frightening ones. Which was why it was weird to see him with his arms crossed over his chest like Togami and listening to her dumb brother. Oh, Pekoyama was there, too, with that short guy. They were hanging out a short distance away like they didn’t care what was going on, only the short guy kept peeping over at Makoto so obviously he did care. Makoto’s classmates were nearby, but they kept a safe distance away.

“. . . Well, he is right,” Naegi was saying to Tanaka. “Preparing food for animals is a lot different than making food for people.”

Tanaka reached toward the ground and frantically mimed stuffing something in his mouth.

“I know he eats garbage, but he doesn’t make garbage!”

Syo waved giddily, and cried, “Yoo-hoo!”

If Nidai recognized Syo, he seemed to think she was Touko and so, looked very confused. Tanaka knew, however, and greeted her with a slight raise of his chin. Syo took that as an invitation and slipped herself in next to Makoto.

“Well, ain’t this a party! Aren’t you worried that Mr. Fabulous Hair is gonna get jealous?”

“They’re just my friends,” Makoto said. “Besides, Kamukura-kun and I aren’t dating and I’m sure Komaeda-kun wouldn’t mind.” (Kuzuryu and Pekoyama cringed in the background.)

“Oh, a threesome already? You sure work fast, Big Mac. Actually, given that you’re attracting so many boys, maybe I should be calling you Big . . .”

“St-stop that!” Makoto cried, too late to cover his scarlet face.

Nidai laughed heartily and hit him on the back. “Don’t be embarrassed. There’s no shame in being the best you can be. Don’t waste all your time with us though. I know someone’s dying to see you.”

“Komaeda-kun?” Makoto suggested brightly.

“I was thinking of Tsumiki-san, but that’s the spirit!”

Kuzuryu took that as his cue to mosey on over, Pekoyama close behind him. He grabbed Makoto’s shoulder and with the context of him being a criminal heir, that grin was absolutely sinister.

“Hey, Naegi. These assholes treating you alright?” Kuzuryu asked.

Makoto blinked. “We’re just talking.”

“Not them. Them. You know, them.” Kuzuryu leered at Kirigiri and the others.
That made Makoto start prattling about his room. Somehow, Kuzuryu managed to pretend he was interested.

“Well, don’t forget what I told you once: you got problems, you come to me.” Forget that previous smile; this one really was scary. “I’ll find a way to take care of them.”

Of course, the implications completely went over her brother’s head. Syo obviously understood, but seemed to find it amusing.

Abandoned by her crazy serial killer bodyguard, Komaru made her way over to the rest of Makoto’s classmates. They hung close together like a gang. Togami even had his arms crossed like a gang leader.

“So, what are we going to do?” Komaru whispered to them.

“I don’t need Kamukura-kun to tell me that getting between them would be a poor decision,” Kirigiri said regretfully. “For now, we wait and observe.”

“Is that . . . safe?” Asahina asked.


“It hardly matters whether it’s intentional. He’s clearly damaged,” Togami said, perhaps admitting it for the first time aloud.

“I know,” Kirigiri said, resigned. “Look at them though: he’s happy, they’re happy. Ruining that would sow a great deal of ill will towards us, and there’s already enough of that. Kamukura-kun also told me that Naegi-kun needs this break to curb his rebellious tendencies.”

Togami nodded. “We’re offering him a carrot.”

Kirigiri nodded. “We’ll survive this.”

Naegi could hardly walk straight. There were so many people and he could hear them all and every time he heard someone, he lurched in their direction. Who did he go to first? He would have said Komaeda, but he was one of the people he hadn’t heard yet.

He tottered down the cobbled path and emerged into the open pool area. He could see people, he could! With the pool as dirty as it was, no one was swimming, but a few of them were seated at the tables near the entrance to the hotel. Nevermind, Owari, and Saionji were there, to be exact. He got pretty close before Saionji took notice of him.

“We’re finally good enough for you to talk to, huh?” Saionji sniffed.

Heat rose to his cheeks. “Huh? N-no, that’s not true. I mean it is true! It was never not true! I was just . . .”

Nevermind raised a dainty hand. “Do not fret, Makoto. We know you were not involved in what happened back home.”

Although he understood why they were upset, he still felt an urge to defend his classmates. “They’re just scared. Sometimes, people make bad decisions when they’re too emotional.”

Owari grunted. “It’s not like they didn’t have a reason to be scared. So, uh, yeah, sorry about the
whole boat thing.”

“IT’s okay. I know you guys aren’t going to fight anymore.” He gave them his brightest smile.

“Whazzat? I was talking about the whole flipping-you thing.”

“Oh. That,” he said with disappointment. “That’s fine. I know you didn’t mean to hurt me. Friends always forgive each other!”

Nevermind gave him a piercing look. “While friends are certainly more generous with each other, sometimes they still can cross a line. You shouldn’t be so quick to forgive everything.”

Owari slapped the table. “You trying to make the squirt mad at me?”

“That was not my intention,” Nevermind assured her, “You were not the one I was thinking of.”

Up to now, Saionji had been picking at her nails. Now, she paid attention and watched Nevermind shrewdly; Naegi could guess that Saionji had guessed whom Nevermind was referring to, but Naegi couldn’t. . . Oh, wait!

“They were doing their best,” Naegi said honestly. “They don’t understand though; it’s hard for them. They spent nearly an entire year with the Future Foundation, so of course that they would have a warped view of things. If anyone’s to blame for how they’re acting, it’s the Future Foundation.”

“That isn’t. . . Ah, I see. Thank you, Makoto.” Nevermind beckoned to the last seat at the table. “Sit with us.”

Had that been a command or a request? He couldn’t tell because it was Nevermind and she was a queen and everything she said was always so queenly. The other two weren’t helping either, but they were waiting for him to do something.

“Doesn’t take you long to start picking up the ladies.” Syo leered from behind him. “You planning to start your own Killing Game with yourself as the prize?”

“Don’t make jokes like that!” he snapped at her. Honestly, what would be the point of him starting a Killing Game? He couldn’t become more of a Hope than he always was! Besides, if you were the one running the game, he was pretty sure that excluded you from reaping the benefits.

“Those manic eyes and that elongated tongue . . . Please forgive me if I am mistaken, but you are the prolific serial killer, Genocider Syo, correct?” Nevermind leaned forward in her chair.

“In the blood and flesh! Got a good look at me on the big screen, huh?” Genocider struck a pose. “Hmm. Thinking about it, it’s kinda annoying that everyone only knows me because of that dumb show. I didn’t even do anything memorable on the air. The only person I slashed was a girl, for crying out loud.”

“I assure you that this is not like that!” Nevermind nearly got out of her seat in her haste to explain and. . . uh. . . what was happening here? “I knew of your exploits long before Enoshima-san revealed them to the world.”

“A prissy princess knew about me,” Genocider said in a tone that clearly stated she wasn’t sold.

“The princess of Noveselic did!” Nevermind declared. “I took great effort to keep up with the latest in true crime! So dedicated am I, that I retrieved the original articles about the Spanish killer Sparkling Justice and translated them—”
“Don’t talk to me about that broad!” Syo snarled, and Nevermind look both offended and chastised. “She’s nowhere near my level.”

“You know of them?” Nevermind asked in amazement.

“Course I do! Every artist has to keep tabs on the competition.”

“Who’s Sparkling Justice?” Naegi asked.

Nevermind looked like she was about to explode in glee. “A vigilante who commits murder in the name of justice. Sparkling Justice is renowned for their insistence on only targeting other criminals. Their identity remains unknown to the world.”

“The bitch is a coward,” Syo added snidely. “That whole ‘murder for justice’ crap is just her way of pretending she’s a hero. She wants to think she’s a murderous fiend? Tough shit then, because a real artist owns her shit. Sure, you gotta stay out of the coppers’ radar, but none of this crap about ‘murder for the greater good.’”

Nevermind seemed put-off, but the other two were nodding in agreement.

“Only a loser needs to make excuses,” Saionji said. “Squishing people is funnier when you don’t have any reason at all. Oh, Naegi? You’re fine and this one seems okay, but did you have to bring that idiot along?”

He blinked, and then turned. At some point, Kirigiri had decided to come over.

“Hi, Kyoko-san!” Belatedly, he remembered how the last meeting between these guys had gone. “Uh, we’re just talking! That’s okay, right?”

“It’s fine.” She said that, but she didn’t look happy. Although that was normal, if he thought about it. “Interesting choice of topics, however.”

“Makoto can make his own decisions,” Nevermind said.

“The ship’s already sailed on the bad influences, honey,” Syo agreed.

Kirigiri didn’t respond. “Makoto, didn’t you want to see Tsumiki-san?”

Yes. Yes, he did. He was leery about leaving Kirigiri alone with these guys, however. Although Kamukura was the one who had invited his classmates here, so they should be okay, right? Even if Ultimate Despair did want to try something, Kirigiri must have already figured it out and come up with a plan. In fact, that was why she was probably here in the first place.

“It’s not like I didn’t want to see any of you,” Naegi started, “but…”

“Don’t make it sappy,” Owari said. “Tsumiki cries enough for all of us.”

She did? Naegi did know that she was awfully weepy, but she didn’t cry that much. Though he hadn’t spoken to her in some time, and she could be so sensitive and lonely . . . Oh, he hadn’t spoken to her in some time . . .

“I gotta go,” he mumbled, and stumbled through the doors of Hotel Mirai.

There was no difference in Hotel Mirai’s lobby between now and the time he had seen it last. It was still the worn, dusty location that once had been beautiful, like the ship they had arrived on. It was a tad surprising, because Ultimate Despair had lived in a pretty tidy place before. Although they also
didn’t have Monokumas anymore. It would be much harder to keep this place in shape without them.

The other three girls were here. Koizumi was sharpening a pool cue while Mioda, with her tongue sticking out, lined up a shot. Mikan clung to her own pool cue so closely it was like she was trying to slow dance with it. He ran at her, waving.

“Mikan!”

The pool cue clattered to the ground. She opened up, and he was swallowed whole by her warm embrace. She smelt musty from being in the cargo hold for so long, but he didn’t care. Because this warmth was Mikan, and these arms were Mikan and no one was tearing them apart this time.

“Are you okay?” she demanded. “You were in the water for a long time and even though Kamukura-kun said you were okay, no one let me l-look at you and . . .”

“I’m fine, Mikan. Really. Look at me.” Hand on her cheek, he gently directed her so that she looked straight at him. “See? There’s nothing wrong with me.”

Mikan sniffled.

He frowned. “What is it?”

“You look the same as before,” Mikan mumbled. “But Kirigiri-san said you were sick.”

He had been sick? He didn’t remember that. Wow. Kirigiri was truly an amazing detective if she had been able to see Naegi was sick even when he himself hadn’t noticed!

“Why can’t I see it?” Mikan tore away from him and buried her face in her hands. “What kind of nurse am I?”

“Mikan!” Frantically, he tried to pry those hands away. “Don’t think like that. Whatever I had, it was mild. It could have only lasted for a couple of days at most. You didn’t see me during that time, so obviously you couldn’t have noticed anything. Not even Kamukura-kun can look back in time.”

That seemed to soothe her. She wiped her eyes and said, “I’m sorry for being such a crybaby.”

“There’s nothing wrong with caring about your friends,” he told her.

He looked over at the other two. Koizumi had her hand slapped over Mioda’s mouth, and awkwardly removed it when they made eye contact. Bashfully, she said, “Sorry. You two were having a moment and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“I appreciate that, thanks.” He extended his hand for a handshake. Koizumi thought about it, then rolled her eyes and pulled him in for a hug.

“Don’t be so formal with us,” she chided lightly. “I’m not your mom.”

“Makoto-chan thinks being the smallest makes him the baby,” Mioda remarked. In a stage-whisper, she said to Koizumi, “Do you think it’s cause we keep calling you-know-who baby gangster?”

“I’m surprised he never asked Pekoyama-san to punch anyone for that,” Naegi said. “He doesn’t even get despair out of it.”

“They’ve been calling him that since we met him,” Koizumi said with a sigh. “He’s used to it.”

“We tease him out of love!” Mioda added.
He smiled. He certainly knew about that kind of relationship.

Koizumi said something, but his attention was suddenly caught by a flash of green in the corner of his vision. He turned just in time to see the tail end of a green sweater disappear up the stairs.

“Komaeda-kun!” He almost took off. If Mikan wasn’t there, he would have. Quickly, he told them, “Sorry, I have to go. Please don’t take this the wrong way. I have to go see Komaeda-kun. I haven’t seen him at all since we left home. . . well, I did a little. . . but my sister punched him last time so I need to make sure he’s okay and . . .”

“Um, Makoto, I’m sorry for interrupting but . . .” Mikan’s voice faltered, but then returned stronger than ever. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” he said blankly.

“Sometimes, Komaeda-kun says rude things. He can be very stubborn and. . .” She struggled with her words. “Komaeda-kun can be very unpredictable. He doesn’t mean to, but he hurts people.”

“I’ll be fine,” Naegi said. “Komaeda-kun’s a difficult person to understand, but his intentions are always good.”

Koizumi said, “You sure you’re okay doing this? We could always go with you.”

Once again confused, Naegi said, “I don’t see why that would be necessary.”

He did feel bad about leaving them, about leaving Mikan, but Komaeda was right upstairs and they still hadn’t had a real conversation. He took the stairs two at a time, then three, then attempted four but ended up landing flat on his face instead. At least he had cleared the stairs when he fell over.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Togami-kun. . .” He blinked the double-vision away. “Oh, Imposter-kun. You should consider switching up the disguise. Everyone’s going to get confused. . . You don’t look so good.”

“Don’t worry about me,” the Imposter said. “Cooking and cleaning for this amount of people is a lot of work. So much moving and carrying and . . . I underestimated the work involved. They told me to sit down.”

The Imposter sighed. He was hunched over, elbow on the table. His bangs were plastered to his forehead and gleamed like bronze against the pale skin.

“Someone who calls themselves a leader being defeated by such a little thing, while those he is responsible for proceed with the work he can’t,” the Imposter said. “It’s pathetic.”

“Come on, that’s silly,” Naegi said. “Are you going to be upset if someone gets sick and Mikan is drafted to take care of them? Nobody needs a leader who’s good at everything; they need someone who cares and tries their best. I know you have the first one down, and if you’re sitting here too exhausted to continue, you must have the second part down as well.”

The Imposter chuckled humorlessly. “You home in on weakness like a shark to blood. It’s not a bad thing.”

Naegi tiptoed up behind him, threw a quick hug around his back and then took off before the Togami-side of the Imposter took over.
One last room. One last place to check. This kitchen was so much smaller, so much more cramped and less busy than the one at home had been. Yet the smells were the same: frying food and foreign spices; sweet and salty all at once. Hanamura was in his element, juggling the contents of six frying pans between three different stoves. Soda stood nearby, sipping at a glass of water and chatting away. Naegi would have said hi, but he didn’t want to spook them when they were so close to so many knives.

The two people he saw were standing still, but there were footsteps. He shuddered, and swallowed a mouthful of drool.

There he was. Naegi hoped that Komaeda would forgive him for staring. Komaeda’s alabaster skin was a gentle backdrop for his stylish hoodie and pale eyes. His skin stretched over his body tightly, letting his collarbone jut out in sharp, defined edges. He was the picture of calm: hands stuffed in his pocket, easy smile on his face – the kind of smile you wished to wake up to after a long day at work.

Oh. He took a moment and clenched his lower body, made sure he had control over his bladder. Maybe he should have gone to the washroom beforehand. He hadn’t expected to be this nervous. He was breathing through his mouth in shallow pants, throat dry and scratchy and clenching. He must look like an idiot standing here. He wiped his mouth again, just to make sure he wasn’t drooling. Patted down his shirt and made sure his pockets were tucked in. Then he lifted his chin high and marched forward.

Despite his bold approach, his greeting was a whisper. “H-hi, Komeada-kun.”

Komaeda’s smile flattened. He turned slowly. “Ah. Naegi-kun.”

“Hi! So, this hotel belongs to you guys, right?” He looked around as if he hadn’t seen the place before, if only so he didn’t have to maintain eye contact. “It’s really nice. We don’t have a big kitchen in ours, so I guess that means we’ll be coming here to eat everyday.”

His face hurt from smiling too wide. Hanamura and Soda had heard him by now and said hi to him. He didn’t hear though, so focused was he on Komaeda’s response.

Komaeda’s lips quirked in a humourless smirk. “They feel safe enough to face my classmates? Looks like I underestimated the Ultimates again.”

Komaeda thought that was funny. That was wonderful! Naegi could barely ever make him laugh.

“I’m sorry about my sister,” Naegi said. “She isn’t usually like that.”

“You can’t blame her,” Komaeda said. “Someone like her is expected to react like a savage.”

Naegi smiled, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

“Hey, don’t just ignore us!” Soda cried, tearing up.

“I wasn’t ignoring you!” Naegi said quickly. “Wow, that’s a lot of food. You made this in a single day?”

“Tsk, tsk.” Hanamura shook a finger at him. “No feast is too much for this world-class chef. It was much busier working at the restaurant. Ah, that was a dream. So many tightly-packed cooks slick with sweat, the room filled with the aroma of good food and exertion. . . Someone hold me!”

“Urk! G-get away from me!” Soda whacked the amorous chef away with a rolling pin. Face-first on the ground, Hanamura sighed dreamily.
“So, how’s your room, Komaeda-kun? I saw the cabins and they looked nice . . . Not that I went into your room without asking! I don’t even know which one it is.”

“It’s fine,” Komaeda said curtly. “I wouldn’t dream of saying otherwise even if it wasn’t true.”

“That’s not right! Uh, not that I’m saying you’re lying, but you can say it if you want. You’re not worthless. You’re more important than lots of people.” (Soda gave him a strange look and then hit his ear.)

“I have nothing to complain about,” Komaeda said. “Shouldn’t you be hanging out with your friends?”

“You are my friend! You’re my best friend!”

Unfortunately, Naegi forgot others were listening. Before Komaeda could say anything, Soda looped his arm around Naegi’s shoulders and said, “We sure are. We should crack open a beer and celebrate.”

Getting drunk? That didn’t seem like a good idea. Drunk made your tongue loose and who knew what he would say under the influence? It wouldn’t help him get back into Komaeda’s good graces.

“Naegi-kun,” Komaeda said, “you should –”

“I can help!” He bounced up and down. “Tell me what to do.”

“So young and eager . . . How could I say no?” Hanamura gushed as he pushed himself to his feet.

“This party is for you,” Komaeda said. “It’s not fair to ask you to help.”

He pouted. “But . . .”

“Nah, he’s right,” Soda said. “Don’t worry; we’ll take care of this.”

“Ah. Alright,” he said, disappointed. “Komaeda-kun, can we sit together layer?”

Komaeda was slow to answer. “We’ll see.”

That wasn’t a no! He pranced back into the dining room, then burst into giggles and swooned into a chair.

“What are you so excited about?” the Imposter asked.

He giggled. “Nothing.”

This had not been how she had expected her interruption to go. Nevermind had been right; she had intervened for the purpose of preventing Naegi’s fragile grip on morality from eroding even further. However, she hadn’t expected Naegi to simply pack up and leave, and she couldn’t get up herself and follow him without alerting him to the fact that she was keeping an eye on him. Given how he had apparently worked around that last time, she wasn’t keen for a repeat.

Unfortunately, that meant she was at this table with the worst choice of companions: Genocider, who she only got along with because they were on the same side; Nevermind, the head of the enemy faction; Saionji, whose attitude rivalled Togami’s during a bad day; and Owari, who was possibly dumber than Hagakure. While she would like to leave, Nevermind was someone she wanted to make a connection with, for her efforts with Kuzuryu had proven very fruitful.
“Don’t you have jaywalkers to arrest?” Saionji asked. The girl – woman – drummed her fingers on the table impatiently. It was strange to talk to her when the Saionji that Kirigiri knew in her memories looked very different. To be precise, that Saionji had been much shorter than this beanstalk in front of her.

“I presume we were invited here to socialize as well as eat,” Kirigiri said.

“Not like we had a choice,” Owari snorted. “That asshole just said you were coming and there was nothing we could do about it. And we’re all on ‘probation’ because he thinks we overreacted on the boat. Not like anyone got hurt.”

“Naegi-kun almost did,” she said sharply.

“But he didn’t!” Owari countered. “He said it himself: he was fine. ‘Sides, I wasn’t aiming for him anyways.”

Yes. She knew that. She was well aware of Owari’s intended target. Thankfully, Owari hadn’t left visible marks on her the way Tanaka had on Togami.

“Pissy marksmanship if you ask me,” Genocider said. “You know how much collateral damage I’ve racked up? None. Because I’m a specialist, not a knuckle-dragging caveman who thinks swinging a club is enough.”

“Genocider-san, we would love to hear about your work.” Nevermind said that with a perfect smile, as if she was still in her royal role and cutting the ribbon at the opening of a new national park. “While my friends and I have engaged in our fair share of bloodshed, the scale of our operation means that we are unable to express our art in such a precise, careful manner as yours.”

“Don’t lump me in with the rest of those losers,” Saionji said. She blew some bangs away from her eye. Without making eye contact with anyone, she said slowly, “Uh, if you do want to talk about it though, I guess it might be interesting.”

Bang. The sound was loud, but Kirigiri didn’t flinch. She had seen it coming; the strain in Nevermind’s shoulders as she fought to keep herself sitting had been visible to anyone who had known where to look. So, when that tension unwound, it was only natural to not be stunned by Nevermind leaping to her feet and slamming her palms on the table.

“Please! Explain everything in your own words.” Stars were shining in Nevermind’s eyes. “My body is hella ready!”

Red eyes but no swirls. Interesting.

Genocider preened. In one fluid motion, she reached beneath her skirt and flicked out a pair of scissors, which she twirled around her finger by the handle. “Why not? We got time before dinner comes out. . . What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Kirigiri looked at her blandly. It took her a moment to realize what the problem.

“Sorry. Force of habit.” She tucked her notebook back into her jacket.

“You’re not planning to rat me out, are ya?” Genocider demanded.

She shrugged. “Everyone already knows. So long as you don’t create any new murders, there’s nothing for me to report.”
“New murders? Does that mean . . . ? Genocider-san, forgive my presumptuousness, but have you stopped killing?”

“ ‘Fraid so, honey.” If Kirigiri hadn’t known the serial killer, she would have thought that the look Genocider gave Nevermind was . . . sultry.

Speaking of Nevermind, the woman looked like a little kid who had watched Santa jump on their presents until they were flat. Hands still on the table, her highness sunk into her chair.

“Thanks to a certain someone, everybody knows who I am,” Genocider complained. “Sure, blatant, no holds-barred murder is great, but half the fun was keeping ahead of the cops. So, I’ve moved onto something better: true love!”

“You serious?” Owari asked.

“As serious as I am sure that there’s a blond dreamboat on this island!” A drop of drool peeked out of the corner of her lips.

“You got a crush on Kuzuryu?” Owari chortled. “Did anyone tell Pekoyama about that?”

“That twerp? No way. I can’t marry someone shorter than me. I’m talking about the one and only Togami Byakuya. So don’t you get any ideas, you blonde, blue-eyed hussy!”

“Giving up murder for love. . .” Nevermind mused. “I wonder. . . If Soda-kun were willing. . .”

“I’m vetoing that,” Saionji said. “High-class people like us don’t marry blue-collar guys like him.”

“You’re dismissing him for such a minor thing,” Nevermind said. “Consider how diligently he works toward our cause. Soda-kun’s inventions have the highest kill count on the planet, and yet he’s so modest. He toils day and night until he’s drenched with sweat and reeks. . . Oh, what a delicious, manly scent. Truly the smell of a rightful man.”

Red swirls. Curious. No, not curious, not if she thought back and remembered. While they had been in school together, Kirigiri had met with Nevermind a few times at the Princess’s request, usually to discuss crime. (With the information revealed in this conversation, she now understood why Nevermind had initiated those talks.) Kirigiri had had no such personal talks with Tanaka Gundam, but it had been accepted school-gossip that the Nevermind and Tanaka were attracted to each other. But now Nevermind was expressing attraction to Soda Kaziuchi instead of Tanaka while simultaneously exhibiting swirls. She could make a few educated guesses.

“What does Soda-kun think of you?” Kirigiri asked.

“I am sure that I am a valued classmate,” Nevermind said. “However, Soda-kun is a strong, independent man who does not wish to be tied down. Perhaps time will soften him.”

Saionji leaned forward and hissed, “He basically pretends she doesn’t exist.”

“That’s not true!” A red-faced Nevermind said. “Soda-kun is merely a very busy man!”

The smirk on Saionji’s face said otherwise, even if Nevermind’s flustered response had not. An awkward silence settled over the group.

“I’ve already started to plan our wedding. . .” Nevermind said dreamily.

With Naegi having disappeared into the kitchen, he had been left in the dining room alone. Given
that he was the only one there, he hadn’t seen much need for light. Thus, out of the dozen or so lights scattered along the ceiling, none were on. He was content to linger in the natural light the windows offered.

He shifted in his seat, wincing as his kneecaps throbbed. Hanamura, although not weak, was not someone he would have pegged as fit. Yet the portly Chef was still slaving away, not a waver in his beat. Yet he remained out here, too worn out to follow. This exhaustion was a different kind than he was used to. It lurked over him not as an ache in his muscles, but like a heavy coat: pressing him slowly into the ground.

He stared at his hand, ran a finger up and down the edges of the protruding bones. He had never been in the league of the elite athletes like Nidai or Owari, but in the old days, before Enoshima, he had been fit enough for his tasks. Many voices had expressed surprise at the speed and nimbleness he had achieved with that round form. It was, of course, because they only saw the skin he wore. Someone who looked beyond, who had seen the one who could twist and bend every muscle into his chosen form’s mannerisms, should not be surprised. Few understood the structure of their body as well as he did.

Yet it was that same body that betrayed him now. He knew there wasn’t any sweat on his brow, but it still felt grimy as if there were. His skin felt paper-thin, ready to tear should he move too quickly. And he was tired. Oh, so tired.

He tried to ignore the person coming up the stairs. However, that person was not content to ignore him. The footsteps ended right next to him, and were then punctuated by a loud clearing of the throat. He looked up, and saw the face of the Original.

“You have some nerve,” the Original said. “You would dare sully my image with that . . . that hideous appearance?”

“It is the words and actions that matter. The appearance is optional,” he said.

“You must have been dropped on your head as a baby,” said the other. “I wouldn’t be seen in the pauper clothes you’re wearing. My suits are hand-woven from the finest wool sheared from sheep that are bred specifically to supply my clothing. Ask any chemist: the suits of the Togami line are nothing like those of the common folks.”

“Everyone treated me the same as you.”

The other sneered. “And that why they never reached the top like I did. You can’t blame me for their simple minds.”

He shrugged. “On the contrary, maybe they did know, but they preferred this version of you as their leader. When I first became you, I found I had few allies to rely on.”

“That’s the nature of the game. A pretender like you who only experienced my life after I made it to the top couldn’t understand.”

“Berating those below you is hardly work. A true leader gathers his followers through responsibility and strength of character, not status alone.”

“You wouldn’t have survived two days without my status protecting you. You’re a fraud, nothing more. Nothing you say can be taken seriously.”

“That arrogance will be your downfall someday,” he said. “Although given the current state of affairs, there isn’t much further you can fall.”
For the first time, he seemed to have struck a nerve. The chords in the other’s neck tightened and his teeth slowly ground together. “And who’s fault is that?”

He mimicked the Original’s signature smirk and drove the nail in. “According to the world, it’s Togami Byakuya.”

Silence. Then, without a word, the Original stormed off. The timing was convenient, as Naegi slumped out of the kitchen not a few minutes later. Naegi waved to him and then dashed down the stairs with the speed he himself once possessed.

He looked at his skeletal arm and sighed. Perhaps he should start working out.

“Uh, h-hello.”

Pekoyama dipped her head. “Hello, Naegi-san.”

Kuzuryu tilted his fedora up, giving Komaru a good look at his eyepatch. “Naegi-san, eh? So, this brat is the sister.”

“You don’t need to be so rude,” Komaru groused. “I only said hello.”

“And now we can say goodbye. Scram.” The young heir to the Yakuza made a brushing gesture in her direction, like she was an annoying dog.

Kuzuryu looked away. He had his chin stuck up in the air like a snooty cat. The side of his face she could see was the one with the eyepatch so that he looked like a creepy robot. But Kuzuryu wasn’t a robot; he was just mean!

“Perhaps you should seek out someone more sociable, Naegi-san,” Pekoyama urged. “The Young Master is tried after his long journey.”

“No, he isn’t,” Komaru scoffed. She slipped in front of Kuzuryu and jammed her finger into his chest. “Hey, you know I’m Makoto’s sister. Which means if you want to get to him, you have to go through me. So start being nice!”

Kuzuryu rolled his eyes – his eye. “All I have to do is call Peko a rude word and your brother would be falling over himself to get over here.”

“Do you know that from experience?” She scowled deeply and ignored the tiny shake of Pekoyama’s head. “You’re a bully! Pekoyama-san’s way cooler than you.”

He clenched a fist and raised it in front of him. “I didn’t say I was calling her names, only that I could! Damn brat.”

“Well, I’m taller than you!”

It was a lame insult, but it had always gotten on Makoto’s nerve. And apparently it got on Kuzuryu’s nerve, too. He pulled his collar up to hide the red flush on his neck. Within that single eye, she saw an intense rage. Then she saw his back as he whirled around and demanded, “Peko, you’re just going to stand there?”

“I apologize Young Master, Naegi-san. Tensions are high and . . .”

“Why don’t you fight your own battles?” Komaru demanded. Pekoyama grabbed her just in time to stop her from planting herself an inch in front of Kuzuryu. “Chicken!”
“Naegi-san!” exclaimed a pained Pekoyama.

“Do you have any idea who I am, kid?” Kuzuryu barked. “I rule the fucking yakuza! I have more guts in my pinky than you have in your entire body!”

“Chicken!”

Before either of them could say anything more, Komaru found herself lifted into the sky. For a moment, she was flying, the ceiling approaching at a dizzying pace. Then she was over Pekoyama’s shoulder, staring at a smug Kuzuryu who was growing further and further away.

“Put me down!”

“Not if you two intend to fight.”

“Ugh! You’re worse than Kamukura-kun. He tried to ground me!”

“I don’t blame him,” Pekoyama said flatly.

Pekoyama plopped her down well out of the way of Kuzuryu. By plopped her down, she meant that Pekoyama dropped her on her butt. Which was kind of her own fault, since she had refused to do anything but cross her arms and pout.

“Naegi-san, would your brother approve of picking a fight with a known, violent criminal?”

“Yes!”

A beat passed. “Would he have approved two years ago?”

“Yes. . . ! Maybe. . . No. You’d protect me anyways!”

“Naegi-san!” Pekoyama quickly checked behind her. “I would strongly prefer that you do not place me in such positions.”

“Kamukura-kun said. . .”

“Your brother also trusted Kamukura-kun with his safety,” Pekoyama said brusquely. “See where that got us? Please do not antagonise Kuzuryu-kun, or any of them. They are not your friends.”

“Was he always this mean, or is it because . . .?” She trailed off, unsure how to describe what Enoshima had done to them.

“. . . In another world, he might have appreciated your spirit,” Pekoyama said quietly.

Asahina shuffled into the hotel lobby. She didn’t understand how Genocider and Kirigiri could talk to those. . . those big-breasted would-be murderers! Komaru had gone off to talk to Pekoyama, who she supposed was cool, but Pekoyama was with that short yakuza guy who had been scary even at Hope’s Peak. She had thought she could hang out with Togami, no matter how insufferable he could be, but he had stomped off while saying something about defending his birthright. Hagakure hadn’t dared enter the compound yet and while staying away from all this was tempting, it sounded too much like surrendering. So, she was all by herself, sullenly following the path Naegi had travelled.

Three of the Despairs were at the pool table. Tsumiki, the one Naegi had the hugfest with, she recognized right away. Mioda she recognized quickly, too, because not a lot of people had dyed hair at Hope’s Peak. The last one took her some thought because apart from the red hair, nothing was
noteworthy about her. Finally, she placed the name as Koizumi, at which point they had noticed her as well.

Mioida squinted and raised her hand to shield her eyes from the light. “Akane-chan, you put on some weight.”

Koizumi elbowed her. “She’s part of the other class.”

“I know this one: Ultimate Donut Eater!”

That wasn’t . . . okay, it wasn’t completely wrong. She ate a lot of donuts but not that many. In fact, she hadn’t eaten a donut in nearly a week! And thinking about that was a bad, bad idea because now she was salivating and hungry and her throat was burning with the need for sugar. Stupid Ultimate Despair had probably done this on purpose!

“Hey, one of your guys is cooking, right?” She asked weakly, “Any chance he’s making donuts?”

“I don’t think so,” Tsumiki said.

“Seriously? Why not?!”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry! Please forgive me!” Tsumiki wailed.

“Hey, lay off!” Koizumi snapped at her. She grabbed Tsumiki’s shoulder and whispered something to her.

“I didn’t even say anything!” Asahina protested. Tsumiki was probably crying just to get her in trouble. Not like she cared if these people were mad at her. They should be the ones apologizing to her.

“So, whyda come in here?” Mioda asked.

“I’m looking for Naegi-kun.”

The three of them exchanged a look – she was right here, you know! Whatever silent debate they had ended with Koizumi as the unlucky sod who had to say, “He went looking for some of the others.”

“Not me I’m guessing.” she muttered. She couldn’t blame him. Actually, she could . . . No, she couldn’t. For whatever reason, Naegi still thought the best of these people and he hadn’t been able to talk to them freely in some time. Everyone knew how much Naegi loved rubbing shoulders with everyone who stood still for even a moment. Still, she worried about him. Kirigiri claimed they wouldn’t hurt him, but they didn’t have a great track record.

Asahina shuffled her feet. “What are you guys doing?”

“Pool.” Koizumi, leaning over the table, thrust her cue forward. It hit the billiard ball slightly off center, causing it to spin wildly and only glance the intended target. Said target drifted a little to the side, but otherwise didn’t move much. Koizumi straightened up and sighed.

“Did you want to play?” Tsumiki asked. “I’m not very good, so you could take my place. . .”

“You can’t do that,” Mioda said. “She’s a super-athlete.”

“Not at this kind of pool.” Asahina wrinkled her nose. “If we were arm-wrestling or playing football it wouldn’t be fair, but pool isn’t a real sport.”
“I think Aoi-chan just upset a lot of people,” Mioda stage-whispered.

Aoi?!? The nerve! None of her friends used her given name. The only one who did was . . . was Sakura.

“Give me that!” She ripped the pool out of Tsumiki’s hands. She couldn’t punch anyone here, so she’d vent her rage this way instead.

She didn’t actually know how to play pool. Thus, she never thought to line up her shot, or even check which ball to aim for. She lashed out with her stick instead and it hit the white ball, but the ball didn’t act the way any of them had expected. It rocketed forward, smacked into the lip of the table, and then propelled itself off the table and through the air. They watched in silence as it zipped its way across the room. At the same time, a fuming Togami strode down the stairs –

*Whack.*

“. . . I’ll see you guys later!” Koizumi said, already running toward the door.

“Uh, I’ll come with you!” Asahina said.

“Togami-kun?” Tsumiki crept towards the downed figure. “Are you –?”

“Don’t fall for it. Run!” Mioda cried, pulling a hapless Tsumiki along with her.

Deep breath. Rub the rabbit’s foot two time. Alright, he was ready to do this! It sucked that everyone else had forgotten about him and left him behind, but Hagakure was nothing if not self-sufficient. That was the word his mom used, right?

He stepped into the compound. He –

“Hey,” a huge man said, “you’re one of Naegi-kun’s friends. . .”

Hagakure screamed and ran away.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
The first communal meal.
Naegi stood before Hotel Mirai, just as he had once stood before Hope’s Peak, with that same, swirling disbelief and sense that he didn’t belong here. He blamed déjà vu, for there was no reason for he, the Ultimate Hope, not to stand among these other amazing talents. If anything, they should be the ones wondering if they should be here. Tell his legs that though, because they were shaking so hard his knees knocked together.

Absently, he hoped Togami – both of them – were okay. When he had walked down the stairs into the hotel lobby, he found the real Togami lying on the ground. That was followed by a bunch of rude words, so he had left the Heir there to sulk while he retrieved Kirigiri to help him. Then he had dodged what seemed to be another proposal from Nevermind, at which point he had bumped into Kuzuryu and Tanaka. Shortly after, dinner had been officially announced.

Speaking of Tanaka, the Breeder was breathing heavily behind him, which was like his way of speaking. Naegi didn’t know if Tanaka’s hamsters understood Japanese, but clearly understood that it was dinnertime and were tunneling through his sleeves and bouncing on his shoulders in agitation. Naegi would have pet them, but apparently his fingers looked like tasty carrots in hamster-vision.

Gripping the hem of his jacket, Tanaka tried to dramatically swish it across his body like a vampire would with its cloak. Only it didn’t work nearly as well. Tanaka was perturbed, but as he would, that vulnerability disappeared a moment later to be replaced by his smug ‘I-meant-to-do-that’ face. Even his hamsters stuck their chests out and twisted their mouths into an imitation of a smile.

“Naegi, you not hungry or something?” Kuzuryu asked gruffly, still waiting for Naegi to get out of his way.

Naegi moved aside swiftly. “No, I am! Uh... I just need a moment.”

Kuzuryu looked him up and down. “Right. Well, we’re going in.”

Kuzuryu went ahead into the hotel. Tanaka probably would have waited for him, but the hamsters were too impatient, so Naegi got a pat on the shoulder and then Tanaka was gone, too. Naegi was alone, which honestly wasn’t a problem.

With a deep breath, he pushed open the doors to the hotel. The lobby was empty. That was nice. Gave him a little more time to collect himself. Not that he was scared! His friends were finally agreeing to sit down and eat with his classmates. It was everything he ever wanted.

He climbed the stairs. They were carpeted. He never noticed that before. It was scruffy red carpet – Oh! A red carpet laid out for Hope, leading up, up to his destiny. He rubbed the sole of his shoe against the fabric, and watched the bristles bend to one side.

Upstairs, someone had turned the lights on. A small billboard with a list of the available food had been placed at the top of the stairs, so that it was the first thing he saw. Judging by the spelling mistakes and lack of savory detail, Soda had written it. He looked beyond. The windows and balcony door had been thrown open to expose them to the mercy of the elements, not there was anything unpleasant to be experienced at the moment.

Each table in the hotel was able to support two chairs. Ultimate Despair had gotten around that by
cramming them together, creating one long table like the one they had at home. They needed that
closeness, too, as several of them scuffled and stole from each other’s plates for no real reason. With
Naegi’s thoughts already on food, he instantly sought out the Imposter and Owari. Owari had been
caught in a headlock by Nidai, who appeared to be playfully trying to cram a piece of broccoli down
her throat. The Imposter sat at the end of the table, listlessly shoving a muffin around his plate, not
participating in any of the buzzing conversations. Naegi studied the sagging skin around his cheeks.
He really hoped the Imposter started picking up some weight soon.

Class 78, on the other hand, had gone the more dignified route of moving the tables closer, but not
attaching them to each other. Instead, they had left enough space for someone to pass between each
table. That left them in pairs: Kirigiri and Asahina; Fukawa and Komaru; and Togami and Hagakure.
He had a feeling Togami had only picked that partner to avoid sitting next to Fukawa.

As luck would have it, they noticed him at the same time. Komaru scuffled her chair over and then
pushed a bunch of dishes around in the hopes their table could support a trio. Ultimate Despair went
for the more direct route of calling out to him.

Naegi was rooted to the spot. There were so many of them, so many eyes waiting for his next move.
Each side had valid reasons for choosing them. Ultimate Despair’s table had more space and was
closer. But Komaru had already gone to the effort of making space for him and she was his blood
relative. Oh, Komaeda! He could sit with . . . Drat. Somehow, Komaeda had ended up in the middle
of the table, which meant there were no free seats around him.

Someone sighed heavily behind him. A powerful hand entangled itself in the back of his shirt’s
collar, lifting him so that he was on his toes. An irresistible force propelled him forward and then left
him in a spot between Class 78 and Ultimate Despair. Screech went a table as it was dragged across
the floor, and then Kamukura set it and two chairs down. Nothing happened for a moment.
Kamukura sighed again, put his hands heavily on Naegi’s shoulders and pushed him into the chair.

Kamukura gave Ultimate Despair a long look, and then gave Class 78 a long look. He asked, “Do
you have something to say?”

No one answered. Several people suddenly took a great interest in their breakfast.

“Can I go get breakfast?” Naegi meekly asked Kamukura.

Kamukura shrugged. “Do what you want.”

While everyone was sitting at small tables, there were larger ones present as well. These, however,
had been reserved to hold the food buffet-style. Nestled near the back of the room, the buffet tables
were closer to Class 78 than Ultimate Despair. He passed close to Asahina and Kirigiri’s table.
Asahina smiled shyly and waved, while Kirigiri watched him with her detective eyes.

Hanamura had gone for a light dinner approach; no carbs, heavy on steamed and fried vegetables.
Most dishes had only a single protein that rested on a plate of veggies doused with light sauce.
Maybe he had cooked this way due to the lack of supplies. Unless Hanamura wanted to take them
from the ship, they hadn’t provided their chef with any carbs or dairy. Either way, Naegi was sure
that the Ultimate Chef had still put something together that would knock anyone’s socks off.

Curiously, Naegi peered back at his classmates. The only person who was even halfway through
their plate was Hagakure and obviously, he had really liked it because he was standing up in
preparation of a second helping. This was a good sign. If the food was good enough, maybe it would
lighten the tension between these two warring factions.
As Naegi puzzled over what to eat, Hagakure came up so close beside him that their arm-hair touched. Hagakure hummed a little melody. He slightly lifted one arm, and his jacket hung under it like he was casting a shield between Naegi and the others.

“Hey, Naegi-chi, you’re tight with that yakuza guy.”

“Kuzuryu-kun and I are friends.”

Hagakure nodded thoughtfully as he checked over his shoulder. “Did he say anything about me?”

“You? No. Why would he? Are you two friends?”

Hagakure choked. “No! But, uh, he didn’t say anything to you about debts?”

Ah. That was why. “If he remembers, it was never at the top of his mind.”

“Whew.” Hagakure wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. “That’s a relief. Uh, don’t tell him that we had this conversation.”

Rolling his eyes was tempting, but Naegi settled for pretending to zip his lips shut instead.

Suddenly, Hagakure was bumped out of the way by a smaller body. Then roughly elbowed even father out of the way.

“Who’s this loser?” Soda asked.

Before Naegi could answer or tell Hagakure that, yes, Soda did know who he was, Hagakure himself said, “Name’s Hagakure Yasuhiro. And who are you calling a loser?”

Soda ignored him. “You know, there’s a couple of empty cabins here that nobody’s using.”

The implied question was obvious. Naegi busied himself with shoveling random food onto his plate so he didn’t have to look Soda in the eye.

“I spent an entire year with you guys,” Naegi said quietly. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen them. Don’t you think I should spend time with them?”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Soda said.

“My sister’s there,” he said weakly.

As far as he knew, Soda was an only child. Thankfully, Soda still seemed to understand the idea of sibling bonds because while he scrunched up his face and looked displeased, he dropped the subject. Hands shaking, Naegi hurried back to his table with his plate.

“I . . .” He picked up his fork and tried, but he couldn’t manage it. “I’m not hungry.”

Kamukura didn’t look up. “Is that wise?”

He didn’t get what wisdom had to do with this.

“There is a lot of work to be done in these next days,” Kamukura continued. “You will need energy.”

True. He could snack though. Later.
Kamukura looked at him. “You set a bad example.”

For whom? His sister? Why did it matter if his sister saw him –?

Not his sister; Owari and the Imposter. After all he complained about them not eating, skipping dinner now would be super hypocritical. Thus, he held his breath and forced himself to swallow a slimy mouthful of octopus. The next couple of bites were equally painful, but it got easier afterwards when he realized he actually was hungry.

“Isn’t eating octopus kinda weird?” Mioda said suddenly from right next to him. “It’s like you ripped someone’s arm off and gnawed on it.”

“Thanks for the imagery,” he said.

“Don’t you think so, too, Kamukamu?” Mioda pushed. In response, Kamukura picked up a tentacle and slurped it up like a noodle.

“Makoto, do you even like octopus?” Komaru called from across the room.

Naegi said back, “I like anything Hanamura-kun makes.”

Togami held back a laugh. “You always were a suck-up.”

The high-pitched, sliding noise was familiar somehow. He didn’t know why, couldn’t place it. He had no idea what it was, until Kamukura suddenly stood up. That was odd. What was really of note though was that Kamukura had plucked a knife out of thin air. Or rather, he had grabbed it after it had been thrown through the air.

“Sacre bleu!” Hanamura was on top of the table, waving his arms in frantic answer. “You would insult him for relishing in the creations of the world’s greatest chef? How outrageous! You and I need to duel right here!”

“As if I’d waste my time entertaining plebeians like you,” Togami scoffed. He did his usual haughty, nothing-is-better-than-me lift of his chin, although it lost some of its intended effect when right across from him, Hagakure was using his plate as a shield against Hanamura.

“What’s the matter. You chicken? You rich city boys are all the same: all bark and no bite. Of course, I don’t mind who’s on top.”

It was typical Hanamura words with typical Hanamura flair. But the mood was off. Hanamura had another knife and didn’t seem keen to put it down.

“You should be arrested for imagining us in the same room,” Togami said. “This is an insult to the very idea of the Togami family.”

“I’m waiting.” Hanamura smoothed back his hair. “Come to me.”

“I wouldn’t sully my hands with such a chore,” Togami said.

“That’s enough,” Kirigiri said sharply. Alarmingly, Naegi also saw Kamukura push his chair back a little from the table.

“Shall we reminisce about those grand galas where I was the Head Chef?” Hanamura said. “My fair lady, if you could...”

“The monarchs of the world were truly impressed by the feasts you laid out for them,” Nevermind
said. “It’s a shame we don’t have such a wide variety of ingredients here.”

Naegi had a bad feeling about this because Togami only looked smugger. He was leaning back in his chair so that he had more room to make grandiose arm movements, which he indulged in freely when he answered.

“There you have it: the princess herself admits she has had better than what you served,” Togami said.

“Do not apply false meanings to my words,” Nevermind said. That was alright, until she added, “Hanamura-kun did an excellent job with what supplies were given to him.”

“I’d like to see any of your hired brutes prepare anything this wondrous,” Hanamura said to Togami. “They may have five stars reviews, but they’re only there for the money. There is no equal to raw passion.”

“So you say. Power is the only thing that matters. Your partner there can attest to this,” Togami said.

Nevermind’s smile was such a delicate thing. So radiant and tender, so nerve-wracking and sharp. “We are nothing alike.”

Togami, the heir of the former Togami empire, the boy who believed he would sit on the throne of the world, took that personally. To his credit, he tried to control his emotions; Naegi watched his pants bunch as Togami curled his fingers into them. Was that because of Togami’s pride though, or was Nevermind’s royal aura so strong that even Togami was affected and held his tongue?

“When my parents died, the world went to war,” Nevermind said. “Who stood up to avenge the Togami family? Your crown only existed while you had money. Without it, you are nothing.”

“Nevermind-san!” Naegi leapt to his feet. This was too far! Sure, Togami could be a jerk who gave out tongue-lashings as easily as he breathed, but they weren’t this personal. And this was worse than anything Togami had ever said because what had happened to his family had been Nevermind’s fault and – No, not her! Despair! It was despair, always despair, Enoshima and –

“Big words coming from a loser like you,” Asahina shouted, rising to the defense of the man who, half the time, she didn’t even like that much. “I don’t see Noseylic launching any rescue missions.”

“Novoselic,” Nevermind said with a bite. “Why would they? This is a sanctioned vacation.”

“V-vacation? You think you’re going back after this?” Asahina said. “You’re an idiot. Who would want to take back a murderer like you?”

Nevermind laughed. “Do you think Ultimate Despair is my legacy? That honor belongs to Novoselic. I will always be welcome there.”

“Not if we can help it!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kuzuryu snapped. “What are you doing behind our backs?”

“Nothing,” Kirigiri said. “How could we? We have no connection to the mainland.”

“There could be a ship radio you didn’t tell us about,” Soda said. “It’s not like any of us got to explore.”

“Peko! You hear anything about this?”
“No,” Pekoyama said. “I found no evidence of anything like that.”

“Still doesn’t mean shit,” Kuzuryu said. “They could be hiding it.”

“No one has contacted the Future Foundation or any other organization,” Kamukura said firmly. “Neither are we on friendly terms with the Future Foundation.”

“So? You’re a liar,” Owari said.

“Traitor!” Soda spat. Literally.

“Um, Makoto, you wouldn’t lie to us,” Mikan said softly. “Are they doing anything bad?”

“No!” But then Mikan’s words tightened themselves around his chest and he corrected himself. “Uh, I don’t think so. I haven’t seen anything to suggest they were. Of course, I’m not around all of them all the time so . . .”

“Naegi-kun, stop,” Kamukura warned him.

“Why does he need to stop, huh?” Soda was waving a fork like he would a wrench. “Was he gonna say something you don’t want him to?”

“If you refuse to let even him speak freely, why should we think you’re honest?” the Imposter demanded.

“You don’t believe this,” Kamukura said. “You merely are seeking a reason to fight.”

“We already got a reason.” Kuzuryu leered at Kirigiri. “Traitors.”

“I knew we couldn’t trust them!” Asahina said furiously.

“Sit down,” Kamukura told her.

But the lid had already come off the boiling pot. Asahina ignored Kamukura’s order, and shouted at the other side. “You want to go for round two? Cause that didn’t go so well for you last time.”

“Uh, yeah it did. We were winning until Naegi got involved,” Owari said.

Right. Him. He had stopped the fighting last time. . . Yes. Of course. He was the Hope, and this was . . . it was some aftershock of despair!

“Everyone, stop!” Naegi leapt onto the table and waved his arms. “It took Hanamura-kun a lot of work to make this for us. Can’t we stop fighting and enjoy it?”

“Maybe if these guys weren’t so ungrateful, we could,” Soda said.

“Don’t you idiots realize that we’ve saved you?” Fukawa hissed. “The Future Foundation wanted you executed.”

“They’ve wanted that for the last two years. Didn’t make us die,” Saionji said with a roll of her eyes.

Okay, so words wouldn’t solve this. Because now a bunch of them were talking over each other and Naegi couldn’t make himself heard. That was fine. Words hadn’t worked last time either. He couldn’t throw himself into the ocean though. . . But the windows! The windows were open – Kamukura suddenly lunged across the table and grabbed him by the throat. Not tightly, not enough
that he had trouble breathing, but firm enough for him to freeze in place as those fingers wrapped
around him like a collar. Several people got to their feet and the two sides began to surge like a
wave.

Kamukura twisted around and karate-chopped their table in half.

“... Do I have everyone’s attention now?” Kamukura looked around. Satisfied, he beckoned to
Class 78. “Come. This was a mistake.”

The hand shifted to the back of Naegi’s neck and tightened. Naegi gulped, and then found himself
presented with his breakfast plate that Kamukura had somehow saved from falling on the floor.

It felt like a walk of shame somehow, or running away. But Kamukura and his class weren’t giving
him the chance to stay behind, so he led the way down the stairs. He could feel the frustration rolling
off Asahina in waves, but she wasn’t the one he worried about. Togami hadn’t said a word since
Nevermind had attacked his status.

“Togami-kun, are you okay?” Naegi asked.

Togami stared ahead unerringly. “It doesn’t matter. The Togami empire will rise again with the new
world order. I will have the chance to shape the world from the ground up. No other Togami could
claim that.”

This was okay, right? Togami was talking about the future, and that was hope, right?


“It could have worked,” Kamukura said, “but... It no longer matters. The chance has passed.”

“Is it my fault?” Naegi asked quietly.

“Yours? Why?” Kirigiri stared at him and then for some reason, pulled back her intensity.

“Kamukura-kun’s only wrong when my luck’s there. So I...”

“It’s nor your fault,” Kamukura said. “It was probability. It wasn’t your fault.”

He wasn’t sure he believed that. He had been the Ultimate Lucky Student for a reason because like
Komaeda, all sorts of strange things happened in his vicinity. Still, like the last time, maybe what
happened today would pass by like the wind.

“Go ahead,” Kamukura said to the others. “I need to talk to Naegi-kun.”

With a last look back at him, Class 78 walked out of the hotel. Naegi gulped and met Kamukura’s
eye.

“I’m sorry...” he began.

“Don’t.” The hardness of the word shut him up. “Don’t ever consider an idea like that again.”

Naegi hesitated. “I...”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Chapter End Notes
Next Chapter:
Titty Typhoon.
“It’s called Titty Typhoon,” Asahina said. “How is that not a strip club? Or at least inappropriate.”

“Exactly!” Makoto agreed. “Komaru’s way too young for this.”

“Well, she can wait outside,” Hagakure argued. “It doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t check it out. We’re all overage.”

“Actually, despite its questionable name, the brochure indicates that Titty Typhoon is a music venue,” Kirigiri said. She was skimming over a tourist brochure she’d liberated from the motel’s lobby. “They did serve alcohol. Given that fact and the choice of name, I imagine that back in the day, the scene inside wasn’t family-friendly.”

“But... there’s no alcohol now and it’s not a strip club.” Komaru pumped her arm “I can go inside!”

“I don’t know...” Makoto said.

“Aw, come on. She deserves a break.” Hagakure ground his knuckles into the top of Makoto’s head. “You gotta cut the apron strings and let her grow. Besides, she’s hanging out with Fukawa. What hasn’t she heard by now?”

Normally, Komaru wouldn’t want to go into a place like this, but it looked really cool. It had a flashy storefront with its name in big bubble letters that would have lit up if they were plugged in. The outside was purple and orange with silver splashy designs that looked like someone had thrown buckets of paint at the wall and called it a night. Plus, everyone else was going in so she wanted inside, too!

That wasn’t to say everyone was here, though. When Hagakure had announced his plans to visit Titty Typhoon, Togami had said something about how all this walking was for plebeians. Touko had elected to stay behind, too, claiming she needed to support Togami, although Komaru suspected she was tuckered out. Plus, Kamukura was still at Hotel Mirai. Probably stopping an angry mob of Despairs from coming after them.

When they pushed the doors open, Komaru announced the first discovery: it was dark inside. Makoto rolled his eyes. It might have been successfully sassy if, when he hit the wall, he had actually hit the light switch. They watched him fumble around for a bit, and then Kirigiri stepped forward and found the switch on her first try.

“You’re amazing!” he gushed.

“There’s a bar?” Asahina gasped in shock, even though Kirigiri had already told them about the alcohol. “Do you think...?”

“Not a chance. They would have taken it all with them,” Kirigiri said.

Hagakure walked into the center of the grey-blue dance floor. “What a waste. All this wall space and not a single skimpy poster.”

“Ugh. You’re disgusting,” Asahina said.
“Don’t pin this all on me!” Hagakure said. “I’m just doing what all teenagers do. Right, Naegi-chi?”

“Don’t drag him into this!” Asahina shouted.

“Why not? I wasn’t the only one who took a peek at you guys, you know?”

“You... what?”

Komaru didn’t know exactly what he was talking about (nor did she want to know), but Kirigiri’s eyes had narrowed. Kirigiri didn’t seem surprised though; it was more like she was confirming something she had once overheard.

“Nothing!” Hagakure cried. “We didn’t do anything fishy. Nothing at all! Naegi-chi can back me up. Right? Naegi-chi?”

They looked around. Given that the dance floor was bare, it should have been easy to find him. But he was nowhere to be seen.

“Congratulations, you’ve frightened him into hiding.” Kirigiri’s chest rattled as she breathed, like a growl.

And thus began their game of hide-and-seek. Kirigiri went straight for the bar and checked behind it. Asahina went for the stage and the back curtains. Hagakure trailed her, unable to figure out a place to search for himself. Komaru almost walked into the girl’s washroom, and then reminded herself that even if he was having a panic attack, her brother would never go in there. She headed into the boy’s washroom instead.

Her little sister instincts struck true, for of the six stalls she saw, only the third stall door was suspiciously closed. He hadn’t locked it either; the moment she placed some weight on the door, it swung open. There he was. Somehow, Makoto had fit himself into the space between the toilet and the stall wall. She cleared her throat and waited for him to tell her off for invading a boy’s-only area.

Only he didn’t. He didn’t even look at her.

She clapped her hands in front of his face. “Hi! That’s a public washroom’s floor. Don’t you know how gross that is?”

Instead of getting up right away, Makoto ducked lower instead. That allowed him to peer under the stalls, so that he could search for any other pair of feet. Knowing it was only her present relaxed him somewhat, but his neck was still trying to sink into his torso.

“How mad is she?” he whispered.

“Asahina-san? She’s not mad anymore. She’s just looking for you.”

For some reason, that only seemed to make things worse. His teeth cracked together so hard she swore there were sparks.

“It was Monokuma’s idea,” Makoto blurted out. “He’s the one that told us to. He insisted!”

“Wow. Everyone’s was right: you would be a terrible criminal,” she said. “Can you come out now? She’s not mad at you and it’s really gross to see you sitting on the ground and I’m trying not to gag.”

“She’s pretending she’s not mad because everyone else is here,” Makoto muttered as he got to his feet.
“Really? I didn’t think Asahina-san could control her emotions that well.”

Makoto gave her a long look. He dithered, “Well, no, I guess she usually can’t.”

“Then you’re overthinking this.” She grabbed his arm and pulled. “Come on!”

They burst back onto the dance floor. Komaru was about to shout that she had found him, but yelped in fright instead when Kirigiri was right there. Specifically, she was leaning against the wall next to the door to the boy’s washroom.

“So, he was in there,” Kirigiri said simply before pushing herself off the wall and walking away.

Okay. Thanks for explaining things like usual, Kirigiri!

Makoto clung to her as Asahina got closer. In fact, if Komaru closed her eyes, she could use the tightness of her brother’s grip to guess how close the other woman was. He peeked out from behind her neck, chin resting on her shoulder.

“Why’d you run off like that?” Asahina asked.

Makoto looked confused.

“It doesn’t matter,” Kirigiri said. “We found him.”

Kirigiri made her way to the stage. Asahina shrugged and followed. Her poor brother still didn’t seem to understand what was going on.

Hey, they had entertainment, now. There was an actor on the stage: Hagakure had plucked an empty beer bottle and was lamenting the tragedy of a bar without booze. It might have been dramatic, but he kept talking fancy and using words she didn’t know.

“It’s Shakespearian,” Makoto told her. “I’m surprised he would read anything like that. Maybe it’s fun to read when you’re high.”

Hagakure continued his dramatic reading. The four of them watched from the floor in front of the stage. Komaru still didn’t understand what Hagakure was saying, but she guessed he was mangling it because Kirigiri looked personally offended. Asahina looked off, too, but not in the insulted way Kirigiri did. More like. . . frightened somehow. The hairs on the Swimmer’s arms were erect, and she kept glancing at Kirigiri for some kind of comfort.

“Makoto, if I was going to be angry about what you three did, I would have let you known before this,” Kirigiri said suddenly. She turned. “Didn’t you notice that I knew you were there?”

“What are you. . . ? You knew they were peeping?” Asahina said, aghast. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I had a towel on. It was no big deal.”

“But not everyone did. How could you betray the girl code like that?”

Kirigiri stared at her blankly.

Asahina said, “You really didn’t do anything but detective stuff when you were a kid, huh?”

“See? It’s no big deal,” Hagakure said, having somehow heard them. “Nobody got hurt so let’s pretend it didn’t happen.”
“You’re not off the hook. I can’t believe you dragged Naegi-kun into something like that, cause it obviously wasn’t his idea.”

Even though Asahina had more or less absolved him of blame, Makoto still recoiled as if that pointing finger was aimed at him. He looked to Kirigiri for help, then to Komaru, even though Asahina had fixated on their older comrade. If Hagakure was currently a demonstration of the loud, flailing kind of fear, then Makoto was the quiet, cowering kind.

“I’m sorry!” Makoto blurted out, drawing attention back to him.

Asahina blinked. She worried at her lower lip as she looked Makoto up and down.

“Tell you what: if you do something for me, I think I can forgive you,” Asahina said slyly.

“. . . What?” Makoto asked slowly.

Asahina grinned and bounced toward him. “I get to call you Makoto!”

“What?” Makoto and Kirigiri said at the same time.

“Yep. And you can call me Aoi!” Asahina bounded forward and grabbed Makoto’s hands. “It’s not that bad, right?”

“O-of course not! Aoi. Aoi-san.”

“This is fine with me, Aoi-chi,” Hagakure cut in.

“That condition wasn’t for you!”

While the two squabbled, Komaru took the opportunity to check on her brother. He was mouthing Asahina’s given name to himself with his signature look of gormless confusion. Touko was right; her brother was a shameless flirt.

With a dramatic gust of wind, the double-doors to the venue burst open. On the breeze came green leaves that swirled past Kamukura’s majestic form. He took a deep breath – like one of those cute girls in an air-freshener commercial – and surveyed the room.

“Naegi-kun, it’s time to go.”

Makoto walked over without hesitation. The rest of them followed slowly, unsure what was happening.

“Here.” He handed Kirigiri a handheld radio. “Soda-kun and I created these. It will allow you to contact those at Hotel Mirai, should the need arise. Refrain from testing it. They will spend the next two hours prank-calling if you do.”

“That’s useful,” Kirigiri said. “It’s certainly easier than making our way there ourselves. What do you need him for?”

Kamukura looked her in the eye. “You know why.”

Kirigiri nodded mysteriously. To the rest of them, she said, “Electric Avenue is nearby. If we’re done here, we should explore that.”

“There’s nothing dangerous there,” Kamukura added. “I was there earlier.”
With her brother in tow, Kamukura drove off on the forklift. Not towards their motel, but the opposite way toward the hospital and Center Island. Komaru watched them nervously and then approached Kirigiri.

“It’s fine,” Kirigiri told her. “I wasn’t the only one who had contact with Naegi-kun while he was with Ultimate Despair.”

“I don’t get it,” Komaru said.

Kirigiri said, “Not all our allies are on this island.”

“We’re going to see the others?”

“No,” Kamukura said. “We are going to Hotel Mirai, but not for Ultimate Despair. Quite frankly, it would be best if we didn’t run into them at all.”

“Oh,” Naegi said, disappointed.

They walked through the gate marking Ultimate Despair’s compound and down the cobblestone path. Though he craned his neck every way, Naegi didn’t see anyone near the cabins. Closer to the hotel, he could hear voices, but Kamukura steered him away. They walked left, away from the hotel and toward the standalone cabin that Kamukura had claimed for his own.

“We’re going in your house,” Naegi remarked.

Kamukura opened the door and nudged him inside.

Kamukura’s house was a nice-looking, log cabin, like in one of those old American movies. There were wooden floors and wooden walls, the latter of which were covered by pale wallpaper that looked paper-thin. There were no doors he could see from the entranceway. Just a small hallway that veered sharply to the right and disappeared.

“I apologize for the mess,” Kamukura said. “I haven’t had the time to clean this place fully.”

“The mess?” Naegi raised his eyebrows. “It looks fine to me.”

“Look at the top sill of the door. There’s dust,” Kamukura said with disdain.

“. . . I’m flattered you think I’m tall enough to notice that,” Naegi said dryly.

Kamukura led him into the first room they saw – an office, apparently. The rustic, wooden design continued here, only broken by a small red carpet that was in front of a wooden desk. There were shelves and a couple of cabinets, all bare. The only thing of note was the laptop sitting on the desk and a bunch of electrical things pushed into a corner.

“I constructed a satellite dish earlier,” Kamukura said. “We have connection to the internet now. Sit.”

He did. Kamukura opened the laptop and began typing.

“I will be in the large room down the hall,” Kamukura told him. “Find me when you are finished here.”

Sure. Although it would be nice if Naegi knew what he was supposed to be doing. Kamukura wasn’t talking though, so he watched the slow loading bar on the screen as it filled up.
“One last thing, Naegi-kun. Don’t say where we are.”

Huh?

The screen flickered to life. It was a wall. A wall and a floor in a room. That was . . . exciting. He turned to ask Kamukura, but he had already walked out. Naegi moved the cursor around, but nothing happened.

There was, however, noise coming from the speakers. Like the sound of someone rifling through papers in the background. Naegi turned his head to the side and pressed his ear against the speaker. However, the noise stopped shortly after. Frustrated, he raised his head –

And cried out in alarm at the sudden face. The virtual rabbit cried out and jumped, too. It was kind of funny considering that the person in the wheelchair, the person controlling the rabbit, didn’t budge.

“What’s that? You’re scaring me!” the plush white rabbit waved cheerfully. “It’s been a long time since I last saw you. Oh, you’re looking good. You have a nice, healthy glow to you.”

He laughed. “That’s probably the sunburn. Miaya-san, I thought you were . . . with the Future Foundation.”

“You don’t need to be so formal,” Miaya said. “The Future Foundation generously gave me a house, but I work for the good of mankind.”

The good of mankind? So, hope? Plus, Kirigiri had trusted her so. . . Miaya didn’t really work for the Future Foundation, just like Kirigiri! Still, if they gave her lodging, that meant they were close. That meant she was within their reach.

“Miaya, are you okay?”

“I’m okay. Are you worried about me? Can you tell me why?”

“The Future Foundation!” he gasped. “You should get out of that house. Don’t trust them. They might pretend to be your friends, but they’re not.”

“Is that what they did to you?”

He nodded. A paranoid urge made him check the room for cameras. “They used Kirigiri-san to trick me. I thought they were on my side, but they. . . Miaya, did you ever know someone named Iwata Torio?”

“Yes, he was one of my employees. I haven’t seen him in a long time,” the rabbit said sadly.

“They . . . they killed him,” he choked out. “He helped me get out, but Munakata didn’t even care. They just killed him. Just like they killed Kuma. They shot him and. . .” He sniffled and rubbed his eyes until they were clear of tears.

“You can cry,” Miaya said gently. “I’m not going anywhere.”

That reminded of what Kamukura had said after that incident on the boat. It brought a smile to his face even as his eyes flushed hot with tears. He wept and as she promised, Miaya waited patiently.

“I knew him well. I know he cared about you a lot,” Miaya said after it was all over. “That’s the kind of person he was.”

“He has a niece. . . In Sixth Division. Can you tell her what happened to him? Tell her that he died
protecting the Ultimate Hope from the Future Foundation.”

“Of course,” Miaya said. “Now, are you okay?”

Though there were tears still attached to the bottom of his eyelids, he nodded.

“Do you want to talk about him?”

He shook his head.

“Kirigiri-san said you went somewhere far away. Ah!” The rabbit held up a paw. “You don’t need to tell me where. Wherever you are, is it nice?”

“It is! Everyone keeps worrying I’m going to burn up.” He laughed awkwardly. “My cheeks are a little tender, but it’s not that bad.”

“I love sunny getaways. It must be the happiest place on earth for you.”

His smile drooped. The rabbit, which had been twirling around and shooting sparks out of its wand, stilled. Its plushy head tilted to one side.

“Can I ask you a question?” Miaya said. “You don’t have to answer.”

“Okay.”

“Are you happy?”

He stared at her. “Why wouldn’t I be? All of my friends are here and my sister is here, and the Future Foundation can’t find us.”

“Hmm. You love your friends.”

He nodded.

“I love people, too. Talking to everyone is my job,” Miaya said. “But sometimes, I need to be alone. It takes a lot of work to get along with everyone, and I need that time to recharge. Personally, I reserve two hours a day for me-time.”

He tried to smile, he did, but he could tell that it fit awkwardly on his face. He looked away.

“Ack!” The rabbit lurched back onto one foot, like a cartoon elephant that had spotted a mouse. “I shouldn’t have said that. I hope you don’t think I’m too weird.”

“You’re not weird,” he said. “Kirigiri-san likes her private time, and so does Kamukura-kun and... and Togami-kun...”

“They do? I guess it’s pretty normal then.”

He frowned. “Aren’t you a therapist?”

The rabbit froze. Its cheeks went rosy-red. “That doesn’t mean I’m self-conscious. What are you going to do after this?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I haven’t asked anyone yet.”

“Hmm. Whatever you do, I’m sure you’ll have lots of fun. After all, you’re on an island full of
people who love you!”

For some reason, that sentence fit oddly in his ears. It made him. . . he didn’t know. There was *something* fluttering in his stomach. Something slimy and cold curling up inside him. He touched his cheek as the rabbit spoke again, feeling like he was trying to understand something spoken in a different language.

Miaya didn’t say anything after that. The rabbit waited. The feathers on its small wings fluttered.

“L. . .” Naegi said. Elbows tucked, he brought up his knees so his feet were on his chair with him.

“Makoto, are you okay?” He shrugged. “You know there are lots of people there who care about you, right? So, whatever you choose to do, they’ll understand. And if someone doesn’t, you can always ask for help.”

That’s where the conversation ended. He hobbled out of the office and into the large room Kamukura was repurposing into a bedroom. The other man put down the table he was carrying and faced him.

“How was it?”

“. . . Fine.”

Kamukura said, “It’s getting late. I’ll return you to the motel.”

Kamukura led the way out of the cabins. There were lights on in the hotel but once again, Naegi couldn’t see anyone outside. The sun was beginning to set, painting the world in orange. Kamukura was ahead by a couple of steps.

“Kamukura-kun?”

“Yes?”

“It’s. . .” He moistened his dry throat. “This place is beautiful.”

Kamukura looked back.

“Yes, it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Kuzuryu and Pekoyama come to terms.
When was the last time he had seen a sunrise? To him, the sunset was something that only happened in movies; it was a fantastical painting the world had fallen in love with. Yet, this sun was real. Far away, yes. So far away that it wasn’t much different then a painted backdrop, but it was real. He was quietly grateful that Kamukura seemed to understand that and let him stay on the beach alone to watch it.

When the first stars appeared, Kamukura returned to retrieve him. Naegi uncrossed his cramping legs and grabbed Kamukura’s offered hand. The sky was so clear, unblemished by the toxic smog that choked much of Japan; they could see easily even without a flashlight.

The wilds were alive with the baying of insects and crackles of unseen things ruffling through the scrub. A little bird landed on his shoulder, but Kamukura shooed it away and mentioned something about bloodsuckers.

His friends were still awake. They had taken advantage of the abundant vegetation to build a bonfire that blazed a couple of feet high. He wondered, back at Hotel Mirai, if Ultimate Despair was making the most of their time, too.

“They’re back!” Komaru shouted. She dropped her smoking stick into the fire and ran over.

“Are you cooking marshmallows?” Naegi asked.

“No. We don’t have any. We’re just burning things.” She picked up a twig and tossed it at the blaze for good measure. “What were you doing?”

“Talking to someone I haven’t seen for a while.”

Komaru gave him a puzzled look. She looked good. Healthy. A bit sunburnt if he was seeing colours correctly. She’d shed the T-shirt for a long-sleeved one, although that was more to ward off bugs than to protect her from the weather. Naegi looked at his own short sleeves and felt inadequate.

“Don’t just stand there. Come join the fire!”

She tugged on his arm and he went along. He went along further than she had intended and fell into her. Komaru stood there stiffly, and then sunk into the hug, wrapping her arms around him too.

“How’s this about?” she asked.

“I just wanted to.”

She patted him on the back, and then resumed pulling him toward the fire. The others were seated on the ground; someone - Asahina, he bet - had dug up the grass nearby so it wouldn’t burn. They were watching them. Their greetings were warm, but they weren’t full of pent-up energy like the times before. He was okay with that.

Someone offered him a stick. He stuck the tip in the fire and watched the bark curl black.

“Remember sky-writing, Komaru?” Naegi asked. He looped the burning end of the stick up and
down in the beginning of their family name.

“Are you sure you should be waving that around?” Togami said.

“It’s fine. I’m . . .” He had brought the stick back up again to form another letter – or that’s what he intended to do. He couldn’t, because he suddenly realized his hand was empty.

They all looked back at the motel, where Naegi’s stick had landed on the wooden sidewalk and begun to smoulder.

Kamukura got there first, of course. By the time an apologetic Naegi made it over, Kamukura had already dumped a water bottle over the fire. They looked down at the very wet, very sad-looking stick.

“. . . How?”

Naegi looked up. “Sorry?”

Kamukura grabbed his hand and turned it over so that the palm faced upward. He repeated, “How?”

“I think it slipped out of my hand and landed here.” Naegi shrugged and extracted his arm. “Who knows?”

Not having marshmallows or snacks at a bonfire was a first for him, but he couldn’t say he didn’t enjoy it. If anything, it was a chance for everyone to relax, a warm-up for their first nighttime sleep on the island. Curiously, no one else asked what he had been doing before with Kamukura, and Komaru didn’t ask any more questions either. It was like they already knew. Or had been warned off asking.

“We should sleep,” Kirigiri said as she studied the heavens. “Tomorrow will be a long day.”

“I suppose that’s reasonable,” Togami said. “A Togami always strives to get a good night’s sleep.”

“We’re all going to sleep now?” Naegi asked.

“You don’t have to,” Kirigiri said after a pause. “However, I will be retiring.”

“I guess I will, too,” Naegi said. What Kirigiri said before had made sense. Tomorrow would be another adventure.

Although Naegi knew his room was clean, although he himself had witnessed the cleaning, it still smelt musty when he opened the door. Though that was only to be expected, right? Years of neglect didn’t fade in a single day. He left his shoes at the door – no slippers to be seen, sadly – and changed into the star-patterned pyjamas they had given him back on the ship. Kuma was waiting on his pillow. He stuffed the teddy under his armpit and then settled into bed.

The motel room had two lights: one in the ‘bedroom’, and a softer one in the kitchen area. He left the latter on because total darkness was too much. Though this quiet light didn’t seem much better. He was beginning to wonder if it would have been better to lay here in the dark because everything just looked so . . . alien. The room was too big and empty, like being surrounded by the void. It was so wrong; he didn’t recognize any of the shadows while he was lying down. Even the blanket didn’t feel right. Kuma, beloved but also new, did little to combat the room’s strangeness.

It took a few tries for his rebellious body to obey, but he pulled himself out of bed again. He wobbled over to the empty cabinet and stared. He shoved it. It teetered a little.
Abruptly, he threw his weight behind it. The cabinet made a horrible sound as it slid across the floor, but he didn’t stop until he had shoved it against the front door. His chest hurt from the wild pounding of his heartbeat. He staggered back once the cabinet stopped moving and observed the results of his efforts.

He grabbed Kuma again and clambered into bed. He flipped over, facing away from the blocked door, and he held the bear close.

It was almost time to retire for the night. One by one, her classmates returned to their cabins. A couple of them had wandered alarmingly close to the locked gate, but then had reconsidered their choices when Kamukura popped up out of nowhere.

Days ago, the Young Master had yielded to Kirigiri, but Pekoyama herself was the only other member of her class that knew that. To the others, Kuzuryu still held the mantle of leadership, and he knew it. She knew it was that feeling of responsibility that kept him outside, waiting until naught but the two of them remained. From the open double-doors of Hotel Mirai, the entire compound was visible, and Kuzuryu surveyed his territory until he was satisfied all was well.

“The island is beautiful,” Pekoyama said. “It reminds me of your father’s vacation places.”

“It’s a prison, but at least it’s one with a good view,” Kuzuryu grunted. He headed for the stairs leading out from the hotel.

Pekoyama trailed him. She might as well. Her cabin was next to his. Kuzuryu glanced her way, confirming she was there.

“What about the ship?” he asked suddenly. “Was that like the old man’s ships, too?”

“It was large. Too large for the number of passengers,” Pekoyama said. “There was no crew either, so there were no activities.”

Kuzuryu snorted. “You want to do a three-legged race, then go ahead but count me out. I’m too old for that kind of shit. They treat you okay?”

“I was given the same liberties as the others.”

“That so?” His single eye narrowed in deep suspicion. “You ain’t lying to me, are you?”

“Do you think Naegi-kun would have allowed them to mistreatment?” she responded.

Kuzuryu shrugged. “He didn’t stop them from locking the rest of us up.”

That was a good point. She spoke again so he couldn’t dwell on it. “I was allowed roam the ship as I pleased. However, Naegi-kun was the only one I wished to see, so I primarily chose to stay in my own room.”

“Don’t blame you,” he said. “Those dumbasses are annoying.”

A threat, is what he didn’t say. She said nothing. She didn’t believe Naegi’s class posed a threat, not one she was incapable of handling. There was, of course, Kamukura Izuru to worry about, but he wasn’t on Class 78’s side. He wasn’t on anyone’s side.

“We need to have a meeting tomorrow,” Kuzuryu muttered. “Figure out what we’re going to do about them. This back-and-forth shit won’t get us anywhere. We need to pick a stance and stick to
“Do you believe our classmates will yield?”

“Nah, too stubborn. But at least I’ll know what I’m supposed to be doing,” Kuzuryu said. “We’re off the ship, so I don’t have to play nice with Kirigiri anymore.”

She was silent. They walked out of the hotel together, and then Kuzuryu stepped in front of her and turned to face her.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” he said to her.

Confused, she said, “What do you mean?”

“Y’know what I’m asking. What are your thoughts on this?”

He was asking her opinion? It wasn’t that he usually ignored her, but seldom did he ask, for her opinion would be the same as his. When he did ask her advice, it was almost always within the context of violent acts.

“I have none,” she said helplessly.

He just looked at her. “You’re the one who spent the most time with them. Give me something to work with.”

So, he was asking for her opinion. It was almost frightening, but the reason he had told her made sense and soothed her nerves.

“Is this truly so awful?” she asked. “To remain here on this island in peace, to recover from the ravages of the last few years and . . .”

In the uneasy silence, Kuzuryu sneered. “Go ahead. Say it.”

She wasn’t sure if that was a command, but she took it as one. “. . . and shake off the remnants of Enoshima-san’s touch.”

Kuzuryu turned his head so that blank eyepatch faced her, as if he himself were nothing but an unthinking robot. He grabbed his pants and balled the fabric in his fists.

“My apologies.” Pekoyama bowed her head. “I meant no offense. I know you cared deeply about her.”

“. . . Did I?” Kuzuryu said quietly. He stroked his chin absentely, lost in his mind.

This was a day full of surprises. Did he not remember? Because she remembered the way her Young Master had looked up at Enoshima with adoration, like how Naegi looked at Komaeda. She remembered Kuzuryu turning to her for advice, how he learned to harvest glee from his family’s violence because she enjoyed it. She remembered how he soaked up her praise, how he assimilated the tales she weaved about his future and birthright, until he ordered his Sword to his room one dark night and laid out his plans for seizing control of the family.

She remembered how Enoshima had called her a worthless slave, and how he had laughed and agreed.

“You know, even if we out of his place, it’d be a hell of a lot of work to restore the status quo back home,” Kuzuryu mused. “I’m not sure Owari and the Imposter would survive it.”
“His condition is getting worse.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Owari seems fine, but he looks like shit. And not just because he looks like that rich asshole.”

“He needs to eat,” Pekoyama said. “We need Naegi-kun.”

“You don’t think we can take care of this ourselves?” Kuzuryu thought about his words for a couple of seconds. “Fuck. How we gonna get to him though when he’s surrounded by his guard dogs . . . ? You up for a field trip, Peko?”

“Now?”

“Not now. Tomorrow. Or whenever. They’re okay with letting you walk around, right? Plus, that dumb little bitch seems to like you.”

“They did before, but that was because of the deal you made. I’m not sure if that agreement still applies,” she said cautiously. “You are no longer caged.”

“We are. It’s just a bigger cage.”

She understood his anger. Once, nearly the entire world had been under their control. Now their universe had been reduced to his island, and they weren’t the ones calling the shots. Of course that would disturb him. Of course that would disturb all of them. With great change always came great worry. She understood this intellectually but emotionally, she could not relate. Kuzuryu was there before; he was here, now. For her, the world was the same.

“I’m not meant to retire,” Kuzuryu said. “People in my world don’t get to retire unless they want to get assassinated. This whole thing’s unnatural.”

They were still on the steps to the hotel. The cabins were nearby and slowly, each of their lights turned off. The lights by the poolside remained on, making the green-blue surface of the water glow from beneath. There were small pinpricks of light whirling in the air – fireflies.

“Is this such a terrible thing?” she asked again. “This is a cage, and yet we are free.”

“. . . What?”

“We are free of our former bonds,” Pekoyama explained. “Ultimate Despair is a thing of the past and the Yakuza. . . they are no longer.”

“Yeah. It sucks,” Kuzuryu said quickly. He looked away from her sharply and she knew he was remembering how he had been responsible for most of that.

“It is tragic,” she said, “but that is how our freedom was earned. Now that they are gone, that future you were bound to has also disappeared. Without Hope’s Peak, without the society we once knew, our titles mean nothing. We can choose our own paths now.”

She could sense it: the question dancing on his lips. But he held it back.

“We no longer need to be criminals,” she said, and of all the things she had said, she knew this was the one he wouldn’t argue with.

Kuzuryu leaned on the porch’s railing. “Shitty trade. Get out of a career of crime and murder by causing the second holocaust. I don’t think those paths are much different.”
It’s not your fault, she wanted to say. It was that witch. That video. She didn’t though, because he would prefer it this way: that he himself had chosen this dark path; that he hadn’t been weak and seduced to by a siren’s call.

“Now we have a chance to choose,” Pekoyama said.

Kuzuryu said nothing. He leaned on the railing and stared out into the horizon.

“I’m a fucking monster.”

“Young Master?”

“Stop. Don’t try to sweettalk it,” Kuzuryu said. “I know what I did. I thought I was going to enjoy watching that bear bite the dust. Killing animals by themselves isn’t much fun, but that was Naegi’s bear and I knew he was going to cry. I was looking forward to it.”

His arm was shaking as he squeezed the wooden railing.

He continued, “I couldn’t even take the blame. What kind of honourless asshole does that?”

“You want me to keep it to myself like a fucking coward.” That golden eye gleamed. If she had been anyone else, he would have threatened her for suggesting that.

“For his sake, you must,” she said. “I doubt Naegi-kun could cope with the truth.”

The fire in Kuzuryu’s eye died down. “No. I guess not. He’s such a pansy. Kid’s way too optimistic about people for his own good. He doesn’t understand the world we live in.”

She understood the anger, the self-hatred. What puzzled her was why. Not why one would be upset over his actions, but why he was having these revelations to begin with. None of the others had expressed this degree of self-awareness. Even Tsumiki, the first and closest to Naegi (Pekoyama never counted Komaeda), had yet to display remorse for her crimes against the world.

“. . . Peko, why are you still here?”

“Is there somewhere else I should be?” Perhaps he would rather that she guard the gate, to make sure their classmates didn’t try anything rash.

“That’s not what I meant. Why are you here with me? Why are you talking to me?”

“I . . . We were having a conversation.” Now she was concerned. She had speculated, with no true belief before, that he was having trouble remembering events. What if she had been right?

“Argh! That’s not . . .” His throat tensed, choking on words he couldn’t say. He did that sometimes: became so overcome with emotions that he spluttered and couldn’t speak.

“If you are not well, we can speak later,” she said carefully. Kuzuryu hated implications that he looked weak, and sometimes that was enough to set him off.

“L-later? That’s . . . Fuck, that’s what I’m trying. . .”

So he wasn’t done with her. She reached out to steady him, to pat his back in case this shortness of breath wasn’t psychological, but because he was choking on something. But when she touched him,
he reeled back. He slammed into the staircase’s railing, spine bending so that he was nearly laying on top of it. Alone in the glimmering night, they stared at each other.

“If you’re free, then why are you still by my side?” he asked her. “How can you hate Enoshima-san for what she did to you, and just ignore what I did? She died over a year ago and I didn’t fucking stop. I couldn’t because I loved what I was doing. I . . . made you sleep on my floor like a fucking dog. I wanted you dead so badly. Sometimes, it was all I could think about.”

“That dark time is over,” she said simply. Because there was nothing else to it. “There’s no further need to dwell over it.”

“Fuck! Open your eyes, Peko!” a red-faced Kuzuryu snarled. “I’m still Kuzuryu Fuyuhiko, leader of Ultimate Despair and all that fucking nonsense. How can you just say it’s over?”

“Because that person was not you,” she said, thinking back to an argument she once had with a boy in a hospital bed. “If it had been, then I would not be here watching you cry.”

“Had to point that out, huh?” he said with a cough-like laugh, wiping at his eye. “How do you know these aren’t crocodile tears?”

“That isn’t possible. You’re not a good actor,” she said immediately.

He froze and stared at her. She froze, too, as they both digested that she, however mildly, had just insulted him. Kuzuryu broke it first: shoulders shaking, hand rising to cover his mouth before it gave up and he burst into laughter. It started small and grew and grew until he needed the railing to support himself. She just tried to smile, unsure why he was so happy.

Kuzuryu led the way to the cabins in silence. The short walk was silent, but not uncomfortable. Her cabin was closer to the center and so, they split apart once they reached the branch that led to hers. Still, they were still so close, right next door.

“Hey, Peko,” Kuzuryu said just as he had laid his hand on his doorknob. She hadn’t entered her own cabin yet, wanting to see him safely inside first. “You. . . Have a good sleep.”

She heard the words he didn’t say.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Kamukura tries a new approach.
The Aim Was Song

Chapter Notes

Question that surely wouldn’t have any effects down the line! How do you guys feel about character death?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thump!

Kamukura slowed to a halt. Without looking down at the person beside him, he said, “You should be careful. The ground is uneven and it is easy for one with a distracted mind to lose their footing.”

“Wow, thanks!” Asahina bit out, having just fallen on her face after encountering one of those uneven spots. Nidai’s throaty chuckle rumbled nearby, creating an ambient sound like a passing truck.

“Don’t worry so much about getting covered in filth. It makes it harder for our prey to smell you.” Togami exhaled deeply, eyes drifting shut as if he were recalling some ancient, but pleasant memory. “You should have allowed me to bring my hunting rifle, Kamukura. We’re tracking these beasts anyways, and it’s been some time since I’ve had a good hunt.”

The last member of their party, Tanaka, loudly snapped a rather thick branch in half. Keeping eye contact with Togami, he snapped it again into quarter, then into eighths.

“Beasts? I thought we were looking for chickens?” Asahina said.

“We are,” Kamukura said. “They are descended from the animals the Future Foundation kept at the farm. They should be returned there.”

“And you brought us along. Is the mighty Kamukura admitting he can’t do this alone?” Togami sneered.

“Don’t be absurd,” Kamukura said. “I could be this alone. However, Tanaka’s talent would make the task faster – No, Tanaka. It is because of your talent, not your imaginary mystic powers.”

They were in the midst of Center Island. She understood why – because it was an easy meeting place for everyone – but Kamukura also seemed convinced they could find things here. She didn’t see how. Center Island wasn’t small, but it wasn’t big like the others. Why would a chicken settle for a small place when they could roam one of the bigger islands?

“Territory,” Kamukura said. Because he was a creepy bastard who had read her thoughts again! “Even social animals compete over resources.”

“Like in this random park?” she asked, because that’s where they were. A park with a stone-tile floor and nothing much else to it but a bunch of statues on a pedestal and some benches. Exactly where she expected to find wild animals. Yep. And she was sure the tiger and snake statues wouldn’t scare anything away.

Which was why she did a doubletake when Kamukura bluntly said, “Yes.”
“You’re kidding.”

She looked around for support from the others, but Tanaka had his arms folded over his chest and was nodding. Nidai was just going along with whatever his classmate thought and even Togami wore an amused smirk.

Hands on her hips, she demanded, “If you’re so smart, then where are they?”

And that jerk pointed behind her!

When she turned around, she expected to see an entire flock of them literally sitting behind her. There wasn’t, however, and when she scanned the area, she didn’t see a single one. Gleefully, she turned back to Kamukura . . . He shook his head and pointed behind her and up.

She still didn’t see anything. Nope. Nothing. There wasn’t . . . No . . . Okay, fine maybe there was something. Like in the trees. Not her fault! There were a bunch of leaves and stuff blocking the way.

“They’re not sure what to make of us,” Kamukura observed. “Many of the older ones would have been alive to see the Future Foundation abandon this place.”

“But this will be easy,” Togami said. Casually, he picked up a rock that had been sitting on the statue’s platform –

Tanaka lunged. Jesus, if Togami’s had been holding an actual weapon, Tanaka would be in big trouble. Because what kind of idiot lunged like that and didn’t expect to get hit?

“Honestly.” At some point Kamukura had gotten between Togami and Tanaka, and he didn’t look happy. Though he never did. Tanaka growled at him, and Kamukura casually whacked him with the back of his hand. Like, it looked like a backhand strike, but it wasn’t one because there wasn’t nearly enough force.

“Maybe you should put the rock down,” Nidai suggested.

“You must be mad if you think I was going to waste my time throwing this,” Togami said. He let a dramatic pause seep in, and then said, “I was going to tell you to do it.”

Tanaka gave Nidai a fierce look, as if his classmate had already pledged his allegiance.

Togami laughed. “If you’re upset, then why don’t you take care of that thing?”

With a snarky jerk of his head, Tanaka agreed and marched forward. He stood beneath the tree. The chicken stared down at him. With his feet shoulder-width apart, Tanaka raised his arms to the sky like he was召唤ing the sun.

And the chicken went ahead and jumped out of the tree into his arms. She swore the damn thing was purring!

So maybe Tanaka had a reason to come back to them with a smug smirk. Didn’t mean she had to appreciate it! The chicken wasn’t as plump as the ones she saw in cartoons, but still fatter than she had expected. It was curled up in Tanaka’s arms like a pompom ball. It was kind of cute. Not as cute as a kitten or even Naegi, but it was stretching its neck up and rubbing against the underside of Tanaka’s chin.

“Don’t get too attached,” Togami said. “We’re going to eat it.”
Tanaka made a voiceless protest and turned away so that his body was between them and the chicken.

“They have no natural predators here,” Kamukura said. “You know what that means. Leaving their population to swell and run out of resources would be just as cruel.”

It was amazing how a drop of a shoulder could convey so much. Because that was all Tanaka did and yet they understood him completely. The dumb little chicken was clucking away, oblivious to the ongoing conversation about its fate.

“Maybe we don’t have to eat this one,” Asahina said. “I mean we could keep it around for eggs, right? And... it’s kinda cute.”

Togami said, “I’m not against that. It’s certainly easier than hunting them down every time we want poached eggs.”

If Togami agreed, she doubted anyone else would object. The chicken was fluffyish. And dirty, she realized when she dragged her fingers through its feathers and they came back with black flecks.

Ugh! She would have to jump in the ocean after this.

Tanaka was laughing at her. It was odd because he didn’t like to talk, so he was covering his mouth and letting out these little peeps like a baby chick.

“You could have warned me,” she said. She couldn’t believe he was so ungrateful when she had saved his pet.

Or maybe he didn’t see anything to warn her about. For as he stroked the chicken’s head, he certainly didn’t care where it had been. Plus, he obviously didn’t care that it was sitting in his arms and getting his jacket dirty. The only time he frowned at all was when a hamster poked its head out of its collar and the chicken tried to peck it.

“Do you bathe chickens?” she asked, because she would be up for a bit of lowkey cuddling once it was clean.

Tanaka shook his head and pointed at the ground.

“Birds clean themselves through dust baths and preening,” Kamukura translated.

“Hmph. No worries. We’ll put it through a thorough cleansing before we eat it,” Togami said.

Tanaka swung his arms and the chicken away from Togami.

“It will happen eventually,” Togami said. “Whether it’s from old age or someone’s craving, that thing will end up on Hanamura’s cutting board.”

“It sure will!” Tanaka looked at Nidai with betrayal, and Asahina understood because she thought Nidai would have taken his classmate’s side no matter what. “Sorry, but you’re the only vegetarian here. I don’t think Owari-san or I could survive without meat.”

Tanaka began making a series of frantic hand gestures and... Yeah, she had no idea what they meant.

“Aw, come on. Do we have to talk about this in front of them?” Asahina demanded. The chicken clucked, oblivious to its ally.

Togami didn’t apologize, just like everyone expected.  

Asahina walked up to Tanaka and crouched down a little to look at the bird better. “Maybe you could be our mascot. We can call you. . . Uh. . . What’s a good name for a chicken?”  

“I can’t believe you’re naming. . .”  

Tanaka made a sharp, loud noise, like a bark. It was weird, just weird enough to shock Togami and make him stop talking. Now that Togami was quiet, Tanaka shifted. He presented the chicken to her, and waited.  

“Uh. . . Man, I really don’t know how to do this. Oh! Okay, I got it. Let’s call it Hedwig!”  

“Then Tanaka-kun is Harry? Bwah ha ha!” Nidai chest swelled with laughter. “His scar does resemble a lightning bolt!”  

Tanaka traced his scar, looking pleased. With one arm, he began to make complex motions, like he was tracing out a sigil.  

“Now that we’re finished with this pointless waste of time, can we continue?” Togami said. “We were looking for more than one chicken.”  

Kamukura looked around. “We should all grab some.”  

“Okay. How?” Asahina asked. Now that they had shown her the first one, she knew what to look for. She could see a couple of others, but they were up in trees way above her head and she was pretty sure they hadn’t climbed there.  

Kamukura cleared his throat. He walked into the center of the park, stopping right before the statue. He threw his arms out just as the clouds cleared above him, crowning him with a glowing spotlight. Nearly two dozen chickens burst out of their trees and flocked toward him. Within seconds, Kamukura’s arms had been taken over by chickens. There was even one on his head! The other chickens jostled on the statue behind him, fighting to claim the prime territory close to him. Jealous, Tanaka cradled Hedwig close.  


“Your humour bores me,” Kamukura said.  

Between Tanaka and Kamukura, they calmed the chickens down enough that they ended up transporting all of them. So, Asahina had one chicken in each arm and two on her shoulders. Nidai and Kamukura, both having broader shoulders, had fit a couple more there and Tanaka. . . One was riding on his head. He was ecstatic, of course. Being covered with chickens must be the equivalent of being surrounded by water for her.  

If the farm’s coop had been damaged, Kamukura must have repaired it this morning. It was musty inside, sure, and felt oddly damp, but there were no holes. They dropped the chickens off – at least they tried. They would have been in and out, but Tanaka insisted on putting in one chicken at a time so he could examine and fawn over each and every one of them. The first five times were cute, after that it got embarrassing.  

When Tanaka was on his last chicken, the rest of them left the coop, fully sick of chickens for the day.
“It was goats next, right?” Nidai asked.

“Goats?” Asahina repeated.

“Hardy animals. Herbivorous and take up less space than cattle,” Kamukura droned. “They’re ideal for the Future Foundation.”

“It won’t be the same as wrestling a bull, but it’s something,” Nidai said.

“You wrestled a bull?”

“Only twice.”

That still raised a lot of questions. She would have asked, but Tanaka returned at that point and he wasn’t alone. Somehow, in the two steps it took to get him from the coop to them, he’d picked up a friend.

“That’s a funny looking chicken,” Nidai said, referring to the small, green bird on Tanaka’s shoulder.

“Are you.. .? In what world is that a chicken?” Togami exclaimed. “It’s not big enough to even pass as a snack.”

“Fuck you!” the bird screeched at Togami. Togami blinked.

Asahina asked, “Did that bird just talk?”

“Parrot,” Kamukura answered. “Many humans think it’s funny to have them mimic vulgar words. It’s very unimaginative.”

The parrot shuffled sideways until it could rub against Tanaka’s neck like a cat. It trilled. And she thought the chicken had been cute!

“Can I get one?” she blurted out.

Kamukura said, “No.”

With that, off they went searching for goats. They remained on First Island, Kamukura reasoning that the animals would prefer the lack of tree cover and easier access to grasses. Given how few trees there were, it was nuts that the goats were hidden so well. Must have been the hilly terrain.

They found them in a dip between two hills. These weren’t the shaggy, white goats she seen in wildlife books, but regular farm goats with white bodies and brown heads. They grazed up and down the hill, little tails flickering from side to side. They were starting to notice their guests, pausing mid-chew to watch them from across the pasture.

“Move slowly,” Kamukura told them. Though that apparently didn’t apply to him or Tanaka because right after they said that, those two walked ahead at a normal pace. The nearest goats bleated and retreated to be with their further-back brethren, refusing to be tamed as easily as the chickens.

“So, do you guys have any idea what to do?” Asahina demanded. “Seriously, Togami-kun, why are you here?”

“Kamukura probably wanted to keep the numbers even,” Nidai said.

She said, “I guess that makes sense? But why did we have to come at all? Tanaka and Kamukura-kun are basically doing this by themselves.”
Nidai nodded in agreement, but Togami looked at her like she was stupid.

“What?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” he said.

Tanaka and Kamukura might have corralled the goats into a single herd, or the goats had conveniently gathered together out of nervousness. The two men stood on the opposite sides of the herd, slowly circling it, giving the animals nowhere to run. Kamukura and Tanaka moved in sync, like they had known each other from birth. The circle tightened and tightened, until Tanaka broke from the circle and dropped down on one knee. Though he stared at them like a lion, the goats still considered approaching him anyways. They would take a couple of steps forward, and then the frontmost ones would retreat, bumping into those behind them and creating a ripple that passed through the herd. It happened a few times before the boldest finally took those last few steps and thrust its muzzle right into Tanaka’s face. Tanaka let it snuffle and chew on his hair, and that was enough to break the spell.

“The beasts have been tamed. No more of this tip-toeing nonsense,” Togami said.

She didn’t how Togami knew that, but he was confident enough to pick up his pace. Kamukura didn’t yell at him, so she and Nidai assumed it was okay. The goats side-eyed them but otherwise ignored them, more interested in chomping on Tanaka’s jacket, which was valiantly defended by his hamsters.

Asahina pumped her first. “So, now we pull a pied piper and bring them all to the farm!”

“They are more willful than chickens,” Kamukura said. “They will not follow. Pick one up.”

“Huh. . .?”

Kamukura demonstrated. He grabbed a confused goat and tossed it over his shoulder. Poor thing. It didn’t look uncomfortable, but it kept moving its front legs as if it was walking.

“Not a chance,” Togami said. He pointed at Nidai. “You! You will pick up two.”

Nidai shrugged. He wandered toward a thicker part of the herd. Asahina herself remained on the outskirts. She didn’t doubt that she could carry any one of these guys, but if she wanted to grab one, she wanted it to be cute. Though they were all cute if you looked at them right. She wanted the cutest though!

Oh, there was one! Maybe its ears were too big for its head, because they were kind of floppy and that was like a puppy. She walked up to it and leaned over so her hands rested on the front of her thighs. “Hey, you want to come with me.”

The goat backed up and lowered its head. Was that a yes? She . . .

. . .Ow. That hurt. That hurt a lot more than she had expected. She didn’t think an animal that small would have been able to knock her off her feet like that. But her butt was definitely on the ground and. . . Hey! Why was that thing rearing up and pointed its horns at –

She remembered how Tanaka crowed about a being mystical wizard back at school. (Because who didn’t know? That guy could be so loud.) For once, he lived up to it. He appeared next to that goat out of nowhere, holding it by the horn so that it couldn’t drop its weight on her. Tanaka shook his finger like he was scolding a puppy. He pushed the goat a little back when he let it go, so that the hooves didn’t land on her leg. Then, he slapped it on the flank and sent it off. He huffed fondly, eyes
closed, like a father who had just set his child loose on the jungle gym.

His eyes opened. He saw her on the ground and froze.

She froze, too. She didn’t know why. But she had, and they were both frozen, staring at each other. Her chest suddenly began to pulse with anxiety.

Her eyes darted to his arm when he shifted it. That, or his own motion, caused him to freeze again. Their standoff lasted for another three seconds, and then Tanaka glanced at his wrapped palm. He looked at her again. Without breaking eye contact, he stiffly extended his hand.

It snapped like a trap around her wrist. The pull was hard, and she knew it was because – like her – he wanted this physical contact to be as brief as possible. She rubbed her wrist afterwards, enduring an incessant need to watch it.

“Thanks,” she said awkwardly, looking at his chest instead of his face.

Obviously, he didn’t answer her. Instead, for some reason, he pulled his scarf up to cover part of his face.

That was the most eventful thing to happen during that detour. The only exciting thing, actually. With everyone but Togami carrying a goat, they returned once more to the farm. Kamukura shut the animals in the barn right away, saying they weren’t tame enough to be trusted in the fields yet.

As Nidai locked up the barn, Kamukura turned to Tanaka. “I will leave this in your hands. I trust your talent will not fail us.”

Tanaka looked offended that Kamukura thought otherwise.

Meanwhile, Asahina, her mind on other things, cocked her head. That little parrot was still on Tanaka’s shoulder, despite the fact that one of the hamsters had tried to chase it off before. It didn’t seem keen to go anywhere.

“Hey, Tanaka-kun, are you going to name the parrot?” When Tanaka frowned, she continued, “Come on, if we named Hedwig, we have to give that little guy a name.”

She and Tanaka began to negotiate a name, oblivious to their audience. Togami watched for a couple of moments, and then turned to Kamukura.

“Are you marking this as a success?” Togami asked.

Kamukura nodded. “It is a start.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Tsumiki joins Class 78 for breakfast.
The Nurse's Song

Chapter Notes

I don't know if I've ever put this disclaimer up before for this story, so here we go:

Any views expressed by the characters in this story are not my own. They are merely the views I believe the characters themselves would hold.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back at the motel, the remaining members of Class 78 (and Komaru) were eating breakfast in the communal dining lounge. It was nothing fancy: cereal, fruit, things that didn’t need refrigeration and could be transported easily. They had no kettle, and nobody wanted to man a fire this early in the day, so what tea and coffee there was lukewarm. Compared to the breakfasts they had on the ship, it was rather tasteless.

“Reminds me of the old days,” Komaru commented. “Although I would have liked milk for my cereal.”

“From what cow?” Fukawa asked with a particular look on her face. Her mouth opened again with the beginning of a lewd comment before Komaru shut her down.

At least everyone seemed to be in good spirits. Naegi was afraid that after yesterday, everyone would be grumpy. But, if they were taking that dinner fight with Ultimate Despair personally, they weren’t showing it. Rather, they seemed content to realize that they had survived the night. Or maybe they were excited because if Togami and Asahina’s mission went well, they could have eggs and milk tomorrow.

Someone knocked. That was odd. Togami and Asahina had gone out with Kamukura, but that couldn’t be them because they wouldn’t knock. Come to think of it, neither would Kamukura. They all looked awkwardly at each other, and then Kirigiri took the reins and told the knocker to come in.

It was a true mark of progress that Pekoyama’s appearance only garnered curious stares. She nodded at them respectfully and asked if they were able to accommodate one more.

“Someone else?” Kirigiri repeated.

“Kamukura-kun gave permission,” Pekoyama said.

“Very well.” Kirigiri took a sip from her lukewarm coffee. “Who are we hosting?”

Pekoyama beckoned to someone out of view. Nothing happened. She didn’t seem surprised and temporarily disappeared herself to corral their visitor. When she reappeared, it was with a woman with long hair.

“Mikan!”

There were too many people around for her to come to him, so he went to her. He plopped into her arms with the squishiness of a wet sponge, waiting for her to squeeze the air out of him. The hug wasn’t as bone-crushing as he had expected; perhaps Kirigiri and the rest intimidated her?
“Hi, Makoto. Oh, are you already finished eating?”

“We just started,” he said. “Come in!”

He led her by the hand to his table. It was meant for four, not five, and Komaru, Fukawa and Hagakure were already there, but he made room. Pekoyama joined Kirigiri’s table instead.

“Uh, I’m guessing you three remember each other from school, but Komaru, did I ever introduce you to Mikan? I mean Tsumiki-san!”

“I don’t think so,” Komaru said. She looked to Fukawa for confirmation, who only muttered something about ‘Why would I know?’

“Alright, then. Komaru, this is Tsumiki Mikan, the Ultimate Nurse. She…”

He trailed off, not knowing what to tell her. He didn’t remember Mikan from school, and he didn’t think talking about her days in Ultimate Despair was going to endear her to his sister.

“Um, h-hello,” Mikan said. She twitched oddly, as if fighting not to bow. “You’re the sister, right?”

“Yes.” Komaru popped the ‘p’ as she stared Mikan down. She took a loud bite out of her apple. It wasn’t that intimidating, but it was still enough to make Mikan flinch.

“Ultimate Nurse…” Hagakure mused. “Hey! I know you!”

“You d-do?” Mikan exclaimed. Hagakure’s volume had clearly knocked her off-kilter.

“Yeah, I do. You’re the one who keeps calling me a liar!”

Fukawa glanced at Kirigiri, who was keeping herself very still.

“I did?” Mikan said. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember that. But I’m very sorry! I won’t do it again.”

“What’d she say?” Komaru asked. She didn’t look like she knew who to believe.

“She kept labelling my stuff as ‘placebos’, even when I told her that’s not what they were called,” Hagakure said. “And then she kept saying I was selling pseudoscience, but I don’t have a single product called that.”

That flicked a switch in Mikan’s mind. Her hands, which had been twisting and wringing each other before, stilled. Her posture straightened. It was a miraculous change; they all knew Mikan was the Ultimate Nurse, but suddenly she looked knowledgeable in a way she rarely ever appeared.

“Are you talking about those homeopathic products you were selling?” Mikan asked. “Hagakure-kun, the JMA doesn’t recognize homeopathy as a medical field. If you advertise otherwise, you could get in very serious trouble.”

“See!” Hagakure said. “Now she’s lying. Homeopathy is 100% real. She’s saying that because she’s part of the establishment.”

But Mikan wasn’t backing down. With the stern look of a teacher laying down the law, she said, “You don’t have enough evidence to back all the claims you make.”

“And who decides how much evidence you need? The establishment.” Hagakure slammed his fist on the table. “You guys are just mad that we figured out your deal.”
“All this pseudoscience you promote endangers my patients! They don’t get treatment because they fall for your... your lies. Why do they listen to you people instead of me?”

Mikan looked angry. Hagakure didn’t; he looked like someone who was winning a debate. And that was a very bad thing because if Hagakure had worn that face while he was fighting with someone like Asahina, she’d probably try to choke him. Mikan was shy and gentle and nice, but there was a... dangerous side to her Naegi couldn’t ignore.

“Does any of this matter anymore?” Naegi said. “There’s not any hospitals around for you to work at, so you don’t have patients.”

“It’s the principle.” Mikan sniffed, but she did look calmer.

“Exactly. Now that all that high-tech world government stuff has been destroyed, we aren’t slaves to your medicine.” Hagakure pointed at his head. “I got everything we need up here.”

And suddenly, Mikan was crushing Naegi in a side-hug. “Stay away from my patients!”

“So, you’re a nurse,” Komaru said, still with that tone of sizing up potential competition. “Does that mean you watch doctors cut people open?”

“I’m not usually an operating room nurse, although I did work in an operating room for a couple at months for Hope’s Peak.”

Komaru’s mouth dropped open. “Hope’s Peak had an operating room?”

“No, I was placed in a regular hospital,” Mikan said. “Hope’s Peak was investigating brain surgery, so they asked me to attend some surgeries so I could report back and help them with their research.”

“But how does that teach you anything?” Komaru demanded. “Don’t you have to go to school for like ten years?”

“Well, I was right there in the room, so I learn how to perform the surgeries correctly.” She blushed. “I couldn’t operate on anyone, though. That’s the surgeon’s job.”

“But you still shouldn’t have been able to...” Komaru shook her head. “Are all Ultimates like this?”

“All she’s doing is learning rules. That’s how most talents work. Bestsellers are about rules and templates,” Fukawa said. “If I wanted to, I could write a trashy anime story you’d consider a favourite. I’d just have to figure out the rules to create a bestseller in that genre first.”

Naegi wasn’t sure how Fukawa had failed to predict what came next.

“Oh my god! Can you?”

“I-I... Why would I waste my time writing garbage like th-that?” Fukawa crossed her arms at the chest. “I know what you’re thinking. Big words from someone who writes trashy romance novels for delusional woman who can’t get satisfaction in their sex life.”

“I know!” Komaru gushed. “It’s so cool how you understand your readers so well that you know exactly what they need.”

“. . . Thanks,” Fukawa mumbled, cheeks red.

Naegi remained silent through all this. Mikan didn’t know why Hope’s Peak had asked her to attend surgeries. But he did. He knew what Hope’s Peak had been researching, and why.
“Hey, Mikan,” he asked, “did you ever know someone named Hinata Hajime?”

“That name sounds familiar,” Mikan said after some time thinking, “but I don’t remember anyone.”

He’d expected that, but it was still disappointing.

He frowned. It was weird, now that he thought about it. He was the Ultimate Hope, a title invented by Hope’s Peak; a title he’d earned at Hope’s Peak; a title bestowed upon him by the daughter of the headmaster at Hope’s Peak. Yet, he’d given the school itself so little thought. What was Hope’s Peak? Was it hope, or despair? It had been an incubator for his dormant talent, yet it had also been a buffet for Enoshima. Then there was Kamukura. What was he supposed to be?

A tragedy, a voice inside him said.

“So…” Leaning forward with her elbows on the table, Komaru addressed Mikan again. “Did you get queasy when you saw all the blood?”

“No, I… I’m used to it,” Mikan said. Naegi couldn’t help but notice how she tugged at the bandages around her left arm.

Komaru noticed, too. “What’s that for?”

Naegi had to admit that he was curious. He’d noticed them, of course, but hadn’t really asked because… well… Ultimates could be weird. His class had mostly dressed like normal people, but Hagakure still didn’t seem to understand that his jackets had sleeves. Class 77, on the other hand, seemed to dress in a (sometimes odd) way that better reflected their talents, and both Oogami and Tanaka also wore bandages for some reason.

“It’s… uh… I-it’s for emergencies!” Mikan said. “It’s in case someone gets injured and needs a bandage.”

That was one of the worst cover stories he had ever heard. The only person who might have bought it was Hagakure. Komaru looked at Mikan for a long while, and then cleared her throat.

“What’s your relationship with my brother?” Komaru slammed both fists on the table.

“He’s my friend,” Mikan said, and Naegi was proud of how she didn’t need to ask him to confirm that.

“Is that it?” Komaru asked. “You two seem awfully huggy for friends.”

“Like you didn’t wouldn’t cling to Fukawa-san all the time if she would let you!” Naegi deflected. He and Mikan both knew that admitting that Mikan wanted to be his mom wouldn’t go over well.

Komaru demanded next, “What’s the worst thing you saw in the hospital?”

When Tsumiki finally finished explaining, Komaru was green. Naegi was fine, because he had very carefully avoiding picturing anything Mikan had said.

“The smell is always the worst,” Kirigiri absently agreed. “You can desensitize yourself to sights, but there seems to be no way to force your body to ignore smells. I suppose it’s a primal instinct we haven’t shed yet. Though, I primarily deal with the smells of death.”

“I didn’t think it was that bad,” Naegi mused. “But I guess it’s different when they weren’t decaying.”
Everyone was staring at him.

“I knew it,” Fukawa said. “You two couldn’t resist rifling through the Biology Lab.”

Kirigiri said, “We only looked at Ikusaba’s body, and that was frozen. That’s a very different smell. Makoto, what are you talking about?”

“Uh...”

What an intelligent response. Yep, he had totally thrown off suspicion. He had no idea how he could get away with this. He wasn’t dumb enough to believe that they would let him drop the subject so easily, and he knew they wouldn’t understand.

“I mean, he wouldn’t know any different,” Hagakure said. “He’s only seen that one body.”

Naegi latched onto that. “Exactly.”

“Alright,” Kirigiri said slowly. “I propose we change topics before your sister throws up.”

Naegi dug into his cereal with gusto, not daring to look up. He could feel people watching him.

“How did you two meet?” Komaru asked Mikan.

“Um, I was trying to find Komaeda-kun to give him some medicine. I went in his room, and found Makoto instead.”

“Huh? Really? Hey, Naegi-chi, why were you in there?” Hagakure asked.

“Because that’s where I was living,” Naegi said.

“But why there?” his sister demanded.

“This was before I knew all of them. At that point, I only knew Komaeda-kun so I stayed in his room. I couldn’t go anywhere else because...” How did he explain without upsetting Mikan? “...They were still really upset about what happened to Enoshima.”

“That’s right,” Mikan said nervously. “None of us knew Makoto was there. Komaeda-kun didn’t tell anyone.”

“Kamukura-kun knew, but I don’t know if Komaeda-kun told him. He could have figured it out himself.”

Hagakure laughed. “That must have been awkward.”

“It was,” Naegi said shortly.

Their conversations remained civil for the rest of breakfast. Pekoyama, he noticed, barely spoke. Now that she had escorted Mikan to her destination, the Swordswoman seemed content to fade into the background. That bothered him but truthfully, he was more worried about Mikan’s composure and about how she was getting on with the others.

“There’s dishwashers in the kitchen,” Kirigiri told them. “Bring your plates back there.”

“I can wash the extras,” Naegi said.

“You want to do chores?” Hagakure said, stunned.
“He already volunteered! No takebacks!” Komaru cried, darting to her feet to make absolutely sure she wouldn’t get roped into taking his place.

When Naegi brought his plates into the kitchen, Mikan followed him. Shyly, she said, “You don’t have to do the dishes. I can help. Please, let me do them for you!”

“Sure, you can help,” Naegi said, having expected this.

The meal had been simple, so there wasn’t much that couldn’t go into the dishwasher. There were no gloves, but Fukawa had found some soap in her washroom that Kamukura said could be used to wash dishes. That said, there wasn’t too much Mikan could do to help with only one (very large) sink, so she hovered behind him.

“Are you okay?” Naegi asked her.

“Huh? Um, yes. They seem . . . nice.”

Nice. The word you used when you couldn’t think of anything good to say. He wasn’t too surprised; Mikan had only spoke to them when directly spoken to. Otherwise, she had focused on him. Plus, he was sure that she worried about what the rest of her class would think. Pekoyama may have gotten away with hanging out with them, but she was much more strong-willed and confident than Mikan, despite the subservient role she saw herself in.

“They are,” he said. “Well, not Togami-kun, but they’re not going to hurt you. You’re allowed to talk to them.”

“Oh. Are you okay?”

“Yes?” he said, confused.

“Yes, I guess you are now . . . But what about before? Were you okay before?”

“Look, stop trying to. . . Just tell me the question.” It came out harsher than he meant and made her flinch, but she didn’t cry.

“Did Komaeda-kun . . . Was he good to you?”

“Of course, he was.”

“But did he . . . Did he ever hurt you?”

“Come on, no one’s perfect,” Naegi said. “I remember you slapped me once.”

Mikan squeaked and seized her wrist, as if afraid her arm would move on its own and hit him again.

“I did? I’m sorry! I’m so sorry. But did . . . did Komaeda-kun hit you, too?”

“What? No!” She looked surprised. Why did she look surprised?

“But did he hurt you?” she insisted.

“Why does everyone hate him?” Naegi shouted. “Everyone here just keeps ignoring him and he didn’t do anything! You guys were doing it before we got here, too. He’d tell me about you guys always avoided him and I saw how he wasn’t allowed to sit with you at meals. And he . . . He looks up to Ultimates. He admires you all so much and everyone treats him like crap.”

“Komaeda-kun is difficult,” Mikan said. “He’s scary.”
“Half of you are scary,” Naegi pointed out. “Kuzuryu-kun and Pekoyama-san were part of the Yakuza, Nidai-kun can look scary, and I don’t have an idea what’s up with Tanaka-kun.”

“But that’s different,” Mikan protested. The tips of her index fingers pushed together as she struggled to explain. “They talk and look scary, but they’re sweet inside. Kuzuryu-kun would have been happier if his sister was the heir. Komaeda-kun isn’t like that. He doesn’t care when he hurts people. Well, he does, b-but only because we’re Ultimates. If we weren’t, he wouldn’t care about us.”

“Mikan…” He groaned at the pulsing headache that was coming aboard. “Not even I can care about every single person out there.”

“But that’s… I’m sorry, I’m trying so hard to explain,” Mikan cried. Quieter, she said, “I don’t hate him. Komaeda-kun’s been sick for a long time and has a lot of pain bottled up inside. But the way he thinks frightens me.”

“If you stopped avoiding him and spent more time with him, I bet you’d change your mind,” Naegi said. “You scared me at the beginning, but now look at us. We’re best friends!”

“Yes, because you’re sweet and kind and you. . . you care about me. You want what’s best for me, but Komaeda-kun. . . Komaeda-kun isn’t like that. Komaeda-kun only cares about hope.”

It felt like she punched him in the stomach. His breath escaped in a rattling gasp. Everything about this conversation was wrong and he felt all greasy and oily inside. And the grease was settling in his belly, making it all queasy so that he tasted his half-digested breakfast at the back of his throat. Mikan was supposed to understand; Mikan was supposed to be on his side. He’d seen her and Komaeda together and. . . they weren’t supposed to hate each other.

“Are you listening to yourself?” Naegi cried out. “You said it yourself: Komaeda-kun cares about hope. So what you’re saying doesn’t make any sense. If Komaeda-kun didn’t care about other people, then why would he care about hope? Because bringing people hope is caring about them. I bring people hope, too! Are you saying I don’t care about you?”

“No, no! I didn’t mean to imply that. I’m sorry! But you. . . You’re different.” She grabbed him by the shoulders hard, the impact making him wobble. “You. . . You’re different! I’m sorry. I’m sorry!”

And another hand appeared, resting on Mikan’s shoulder. With a tear-stained face, the Nurse glanced at the interrupter.

“Tsumiki-san, I think you should leave to collect yourself,” Pekoyama said. “I can keep Naegi-kun company.”

Mikan didn’t seem keen to leave. Well, that wasn’t completely accurate. She didn’t know whether she should leave. She kept opening her mouth to speak and then shutting it, and looking between the two of them like someone would shout and tell her what to do. Eventually, probably because of Pekoyama’s unyielding stare, she scurried out of the kitchen with a last look over her shoulder.

“Naegi-kun, were you trying to upset her?” Pekoyama asked.

“No, never! But she. . . She’s wrong! I know him and Komaeda-kun’s not like that. She just won’t give him a chance. None of you will!”

He was crying, too. He didn’t feel sad, though. He felt frustrated, and angry with himself for making Mikan cry. But he couldn’t scream at her or hit something, so the feelings had to force themselves out of his body some other way – through his eyes. His jaw was sore even though he was doing his best not to clench it.
“I know you feel very close to him,” Pekoyama said. “I know why you are upset.”

“You agree with her, too,” Naegi said bitterly. He’d seen enough movies to know where this was going.

“Tsumiki-san is right: you and Komaeda-kun are very different.” Pekoyama touched his cheekbone where a tear was slithering down his skin. “You want everyone to be happy. Komaeda-kun does not. You try to relieve pain, but Komaeda-kun often tries to cause pain in the name of his pet projects.”

Naegi shoved her arm away and turned back to the sink. He scrubbed at a pan furiously.

“You can love others while acknowledging their faults,” Pekoyama said. “Sometimes, you end up loving someone who is terrible.”

His scrubbing paused.

“The Young Master did so many horrible things while he was under her influence. He was a monster, and I knew that,” Pekoyama said quietly. “Yet I stayed. Even though I regret standing aside and letting him run rampant, I could never hate him. Even now, I remain indifferent to his victims. Perhaps that makes me a monster, as well. But I believe acknowledging that is better than mindlessly following him and brushing away his faults, as I did before.”

“Pekoyama-san. . .” The sponge fell into the soapy water. “It’s not his fault. Despair makes everyone do horrible things. It’s Enoshima’s fault.”

“See? You two are different,” Pekoyama said. “Komaeda-kun would have told me I was overreacting because the lives of his victims never mattered.”

Naegi didn’t know what to say. What she said had been. . . There were no words he could combine to describe it. His tears hurt now; they felt like were filling his lungs with red-hot fire.

“I will finish cleaning up,” Pekoyama said.

If he had been wearing gloves, he would have thrown them at her. He tore out of the kitchen, then froze in the doorway. The others were back; Togami and Kirigiri were talking in the threshold of the main entrance. He slunk around the perimeter of the room, until he could slip through one of the emergency exits and run to his room. He needed to be alone. He needed. . . He needed everyone to leave him alone and shut up.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
So how does the Sonia-Tanaka-Soda triangle work in despair?
“Hey, be careful. It’s a long fall if you slip.”

“I know, mom,” Soda griped. “You think I haven’t worked on tall things before?”

“I’m just saying. If you get too cocky, you might make a mistake” Koizumi said. She was leaning out the window of the hotel’s second floor, anxiously watching the boys on the roof.

“Girls,” Soda muttered to his companion. “If they wanna micromanage me so much, they should be the ones working.”

Just then, from the poolside below, Miss Sonia called to him. Again. He groaned. If he’d look, he’d see her in that sweet swimsuit she’d nabbed from Iceland, but it was so much better not to look at all. It was just so great how she hopped up and down and waved her arms to get his attention, and he just didn’t look.

“Pass me the slot head, will ya?” he asked Tanaka. This guy wasn’t his usual choice for a construction partner, but Nidai and Hanamura might have fallen through the roof, and he wasn’t about to ask the Imposter to climb up here. He had been planning to build the satellite dish alone actually, but then Tanaka had noticed Miss Sonia trying to get his attention, and then begged to help. That was fine though because when she started yelling, sometimes Tanaka would try to make him look, and that made ignoring her harder and that meant it felt better.

Only sometimes though. Sometimes Tanaka just rested his head on his shoulder and sniffed his hair.

Once he screwed the last bolt in, Soda wiped his forehead and leaned back. This was easy stuff. It was all he had though, because those bastards hadn’t left much behind on the island. Say, Naegi still had that radio, right? With this satellite, he could totally whip up a way to send messages waves to him.

“What’s the point of this anyways?” Koizumi asked as they climbed back through the window. “There’s not much on the air. We ran almost all the radio stations.”

“The point is Kamukura’s got his own, and if he can have one, we get one, too!” Soda declared. “Plus, now we can keep up with what’s going on in the mainland.”

“Is it one way?” Koizumi asked. “Could we send messages from us to them?”

“That would be a bad idea,” Togami said, lurching into view. “The remaining Despairs would rally to us, an action that would no doubt be detected by the Future Foundation. It’s better to stay under the radar.”

Of course that rich bastard would say that. He and his cronies had dragged the rest of them out here!

“Aw, step off!” Soda said. “Nobody asked you. What are you doing here anyways? Go back to. . .”

Everyone was staring at him.

“Uh, sorry.” He pulled his beanie further down his face so he could pretend they weren’t all.
Flustered, he stuttered, “It’s not my fault! How am I supposed to know which Togami he is when he keeps dressing like that?”

“He’s got a point,” Koizumi said. “It was fine before when it was just you, but isn’t this a little dangerous now? What if you accidentally scare Owari-san while you look like that?”

“Are you two tag-teaming me with Naegi?” the Imposter asked. “He made a similar complaint yesterday.”

“Just go back to how you dressed when we were in school,” Soda said. “I bet it’s a lot less work than looking like that prick.”

“There is significantly less self-grooming involved,” the Imposter agreed. “If it is truly that much trouble, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Whaddaya mean? Can’t you just put on that old costume?”

“I would,” the Imposter said, “however, Naegi’s classmates did not load it onto the ship.”

“Are you still able to make disguises?” Koizumi asked.

A pause. The Imposter answered, “I’ll have to see what we have available.”

Man, poor guy. That must have sucked. It was like being trapped on this island without his tools. It was . . . this was basically prisoner abuse! Someone should bring the law down on Naegi’s friends.

Tanaka shrugged off his jacket and offered it to the Imposter. The Imposter declined. That wasn’t a surprise. With that jacket, he could pretend to be Tanaka or Nidai, and that didn’t really solve their identity problem. Tanaka tried to put his jacket back on, but the guy got knocked over by a starry-eyed . . . Here they went again.

“Hello, everyone!” Miss Sonia said cheerfully, stepping on Tanaka as she passed over him. “Soda-kun, I am truly enthralled by your ability to create even in the bleakest of places. Please, tell me about this new wondrous invention.”

“It’s just a satellite,” he said.

“How wonderful! It has been so long since I’ve been able to watch the world’s despair. Mahiru, you must summon the others. We shall have one of those ‘girl’s nights’.”

“I said it’s a satellite, not a television,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “I already checked the electronics stores. They don’t have any screens.”

“Oh, I see. Please forgive my ignorance. I should have listened to you more closely!”

Miss Sonia was pretty cute when she did those short little bows. Which was why it was so great that he could just turn away and leave her bowing like that. Hah, to think that he could have her eating out of his hand, and he just didn’t. From the corner of his eye, he saw Tanaka stand up. He felt Tanaka’s hand gestures as he assured Miss Sonia that her crush was just playing hard to get and she should keep fighting.

Tanaka made for a pretty handy wing-man. It was just a shame it was Miss Sonia he kept trying to hook him up with.

“We could still listen to the despair. Right?” Koizumi sighed. “Although that’s not nearly as
“Satisfying as seeing it happen.”

“Mahiru, you should be grateful, not demanding more. Soda-kun has done a splendid thing.”

“It’s just a satellite,” he grated out, loving the roughness of his voice and how it sanded out any hint of affection.

Being the attention-stealing kid he was, Kuzuryu then chose to walk through the room and clap his hands to get everyone’s attention. “You done, Soda? You better be because we all need to talk. Head up to the dining room.”

“No one informed me about this,” the Imposter said, offended.

“I’m informing you now!” Kuzuryu said reasonably. “So stop your whining and get moving.”

“Sheesh, you don’t need to be so bossy,” Koizumi said because she was one to talk. “What’s the rush for, anyways? Are we escaping?”

“I dunno. We’ll see.”

Almost everyone was already upstairs. Tsumiki and Pekoyama were missing, but when they mentioned that, Kuzuryu said that they were busy with something else. Kuzuryu took a seat at the head of the table, ignoring Komaeda who stood in the corner behind him. He was probably standing there cause no one wanted to sit next to him.

“We need to talk,” Kuzuryu said.

“Are you breaking up with us?” Mioda gasped. “Ibuki didn’t even know we were all dating!”

Kuzuryu ignored her. “As much as we would like to pretend otherwise, we can’t ignore that we’re stuck on this island for the next little while with those bastards. We’ve all been winging it, but that’s not going to be enough. We need a strategy.”

Hell yeah! Time to show those losers who was boss. That class might have a bunch of Ultimates in their ranks, but there was more of them and they were older.

“Our enemy has substantial assets,” Nevermind said. “My understanding is that ship is controlled by their electronic friend, who I do not believe would bow to us easily. Naegi-kun is in thrall to them, and I believe Kamukura-kun would assist their side in a war.”

“We have the advantage of numbers,” Nidai said. “Our top players are closely matched, but we could wear them out with regular substitutions. Although if Kamukura-kun gets involved, I think the ball’s in their court. They’ve got good strategizes, too. Togami and Kirigiri work well together when they’re on the same team. Unless we take out Kirigiri fast, we don’t have a strong counter for her.”

“You said they have guns, too,” Kuzuryu said. “We don’t. We got Soda’s tools and whatever shit we find on the ground, but Peko’s the only one who can use that shit well. She’s got a soft spot for Naegi though. I don’t think she’d be much help once he starts crying.”

“Can’t you just order her to ignore him?” Owari asked. Kuzuryu said nothing. Instead, he just glared at her.

“These are not good odds,” the Imposter said. “It would be foolishly irresponsible for any leader to proceed when the risks are so great.”
“We’re giving up?” Hanamura asked, voice hushed.

“Nah, we just got to go with the flow!” Mioda cried cheerfully. “Kick back and let the river carry you.”

He didn’t get it.

But apparently, the Imposter did. He stroked his chin, and said, “You think we should wait for a better opportunity. I see sense in that. The greatest mark of a leader is knowing when to step back.”

“If the other options are going to get us killed, I’m for it,” Koizumi said.

“Until then, we’ll have an awesome beach party!” Mioda shouted.

“So, what’s the plan?” Soda asked. “We really just partying?”

Kuzuryu shrugged. “Keep your heads down and don’t cause too much trouble. Mioda’s right – wow, that’s fucking weird. It’s too early in the game to do anything.”

“It’s unpleasant, but sometimes you have no choice but to align with the great powers,” Nevermind said. “All empires fall. We will await that time.”

“I hope nobody gets injured. This place doesn’t look the least bit sterile.”

“If the need arose, I’m sure Kamukura-kun would do a more than adequate job at cleaning.”

Naegi nodded. “You should have seen him clean out our rooms. He’s a machine!”

Even as she reassured him, Kirigiri worried herself about the state of the hospital. Not about hygiene; she wasn’t lying when she said Kamukura was more than capable. But what use would a hospital be without any equipment? Medical supplies were valuable in this post-apocalyptic world, and she had no doubt that the Future Foundation had taken everything they could.

“Hey, Kyoko-san, those stains on the ground, it’s not dirt, is it?”

“No.” She wouldn’t lie to him. Not about this. She expected this wasn’t the only trace of the Future Foundation’s struggle on the island, nor did she expect she could shield Naegi from it forever. Old, dry, red-brown blood was a good impersonal way to ease him into the real world, although she knew several of the others would adamantly disagree.

They passed a gurney in the corridor. No body on it – but naturally, that would be. The Future Foundation hadn’t been in such a rush that they would leave their dead rotting in the open. But that led to the question of where the bodies were, for the Future Foundation had endured multiple attacks on this island. It would be a waste of resources to have transported all those corpses back to the mainland. Perhaps the answer was the one that explained why the underwater wildlife was thriving.

Not that it mattered. Solving such puzzles was not why she had escorted Naegi to this place. It so happened that the hospital was a building between their motel and Hotel Mirai. It made for a convenient place to meet.

As the island’s population had been small, the hospital wasn’t too big. It was two stories high, and only the first floor had rooms for patients. For them, it was enough rooms, but once again, they were next to helpless without supplies. Naegi and her passed the first three rooms and then walked up the stairs. Up here, there was a conference room that was bare, save for a couple of stacks of folding
chairs. It resembled those stereotypical rooms from movies where the protagonist attended a therapy group.

Ironic.

Their walk had been the shortest so naturally, Naegi and her were the first to arrive. They set the chairs up in a circle. Again, it was stereotypical, but that formation had its advantages.

“Do you think this is going to work?” Naegi asked her suddenly.

“I can’t tell you that. I don’t know them well enough.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “However, wouldn’t you agree that it’s best for us to try?”

That seemed to calm him down. She wished she could unzip his skull and peer inside, to see whether this was general nervousness or if something more sinister was at foot. It was a fine line she had to walk; letting him be and allowing him to open up at his own pace, while simultaneously trying to sand away his triggers without fully understanding what they were. A fool’s errand, her grandfather would have called it. However, she couldn’t see a better path.

Kuzuryu arrived at the head of his delegation. As always, Pekoyama was a step behind. The Imposter came next, then Nidai and a yawning Owari. The dim-witted Gymnast scratched under her armpit and surveyed the room.

“Yo, what’s she doing here?” Owari demanded.

Kirigiri crossed her arms. “I’m not leaving him alone with you.”

“Lame,” Owari scoffed. Then she looked at Naegi and grinned. “Hey, Naegi. This place is super ugly.”

“It’s a conference room so I don’t think it ever looked that nice,” Naegi said.

“If this is where you like to hang out, I’m not judging,” Owari said, “but next time choose somewhere more exciting.”

“I chose this location,” Kirigiri said. “Given the nature of this meeting, it seemed suitable.”

“Why are we here?” Owari asked. “All you guys said was that I had to come along.”

Before anyone could answer, someone tripped over the doorway. Legs askew, arm pinned under her, Tsumiki exclaimed, “I—I’m sorry! Am I late?”

“Nah, we didn’t start yet,” Kuzuryu said, making no mention of her mishap.

“Start what?” the Imposter asked. “Did you receive an itinerary?”

Nidai walked past them all and took a seat. He patted the chair next to him and called to his sparring partner. Owari plopped herself down, foot tapping afterwards in impatience, and surveyed the room again. Seeing that Nidai was keen to get things moving, Kirigiri and Naegi grabbed seats of their own, followed by Kuzuryu and Pekoyama, and then by a flustered Tsumiki.

The Imposter was more cautious. Ill-at-ease, he adjusted his fake glasses. His touch passed over the top of the only empty chair.

“This looks like an intervention,” he remarked. Owari laughed, and then fell silent when she realized she was the only one laughing.
“Is this serious?” Owari asked. “Alright! Who are we knocking some sense into?”

“You, dumbass,” Kuzuryu said.

Flabbergasted, Owari’s face twisted. She didn’t understand, but the Imposter did. He closed his eyes for a long moment, sucking in air through his nose. When he exhaled, he sunk into the empty chair.

“. . . That’s not how I would have said it, but he’s right,” Naegi said, taking the. “Owari-san, Imposter-kun, we’re really worried about you. I know why you two don’t like to eat, but I don’t think you understand what you’re doing to yourselves.”

“Naegi-kun, I understand your concern, but my body is my responsibility,” the Imposter said. “This isn’t something you need to worry about.”

“Of course it is!” Naegi’s chair rattled as he hastened to sit up tall. “You’re my friends. Friends worry about friends. If we didn’t worry about each other, then we’d just be. . . roommates or something!”

“Look, squirt,” Owari said, rubbing her forehead in exasperation, “this is our business. It only affects us so—”

“No, it doesn’t!” The chair was shoved backwards as Naegi clambered to his feet. “It affects all of us because it hurts seeing you this way. If this wasn’t affecting us, then why would all of us have decided to come here?”

As if aware of her audience for the very first time, Owari looked around the room. Tsumiki flinched and turned her attention to the shaking hands in her lap. Kuzuryu, his fedora almost hiding his eyes, bowed his head just a little. Nidai leaned back in his chair, shoulders dropping even as he raised his chin.

“There’s three pillars to a great training program: exercise, sleep and diet,” Nidai said. “Without any of them, the foundation crumbles. I miss the great battles we used to have.”

“I can still take you on!” Owari declared, flexing her right arm. “You want to rumble, old man?”

“Th-that’s not a good idea!” Tsumiki cried. “Your muscle mass is so low and Nidai is very big. What if he leaned on you too hard and broke something?”

“I’m not going to crumble just because he’s heavy,” Owari said.

“You could! It doesn’t have anything to do with willpower,” Tsumiki said. “Your bones are constantly being reshaped and animals need a constant supply of calcium and vitamin D for them to be rebuilt properly. But you’re not eating properly so you don’t get that calcium and your body would be taking calcium from your bones instead to make up for your lack of nutrition.”

Owari clacked her forearms together. “So I’m still getting calcium in the end? Seems good to me.”

“But it’s not,” Naegi stressed. “Imposter-kun, you’ve been having a lot of trouble with your stamina lately, haven’t you? That isn’t normal.”

“That’s what he gets for not working out,” Owari said dismissively. “It’s unrelated.”

“It’s very related!” Tsumiki said. “Although I don’t know why he’s feeling the effects first. Could it be because fat is broken down before muscle?”
“Alright, everyone, calm down,” Kuzuryu said. “I get this is an emotional moment and shit, but we’re not going to get anywhere by sniping at each other. Look, Tsumiki’s an expert in this stuff so we should be listening to her. Besides, us dying was never on the agenda. Other people, sure, but not us.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” the Imposter said.

“It isn’t much of an exaggeration,” Kuzuryu said. “People need food. End of story.”

“People need despair!” Owari hollered. “If food’s so important, then why are we doing fine?”

“Well, you’re not doing fine,” Tsumiki began. “Also, you haven’t been completely starving yourselves and people can last for a while on their muscle and fat reserves. . . .”

“So, we’ll keep doing that,” Owari said with a cheesy grin. “Problem solved.”

“Th-there’s only a finite amount of reserves!” Tsumiki said in a rush, sensing she was losing control. “You can’t keep starving yourself forever.”

“I can do anything I put my mind to!” Owari leapt to her feet and stomped one foot down on the seat of her chair. A spotlight seemed to shimmer around her. “Just stand back and watch.”

Nidai slumped forward. “Owari-san, I admire your spirit, but . . . What if you’re wrong? If you’re right, then all that happens if you get some more meat on those bones. If you’re wrong. . . .”

“I don’t have to put up with this,” Owari snorted. “I’m out of here.”

And she was. And no amount of protests and pleading from Naegi could bring her back. Naegi slunk back into the circle. The Imposter was between him and his chair, and Naegi stopped in front of him with a pleading look. The Imposter slowly rose to his feet. If he was hoping that moving would alleviate everyone’s concerns, he had been very wrong. But the Imposter didn’t notice the uncomfortable glances, and laid a skeletal hand on Naegi’s shoulder.

“Tsumiki-san is an excellent nurse. I know you trust her, but there are many things science still doesn’t understand. Like despair,” the Imposter told him. “I’m fine.”

“But. . . .”

“I promise.”

Without a word to the rest of them, the Imposter shuffled off. They didn’t try to stop him; the Imposter had that look in his eye that stated his mind couldn’t be changed. Kirigiri reached forward and squeezed Naegi’s hand.

“Um, what do we do now?” Tsumiki asked.

“Nothing,” Nidai said sadly, staring the doorway the two had disappeared through. “You can’t coach someone who isn’t willing to listen.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Owari says she's fine, damn it!
“This is the last place on our island,” Asahina said, seemingly oblivious to the inflection in her tone.

“A movie theatre,” Naegi said flatly, eyebrow cocked. “That isn’t something I thought would be a priority for them.”

“On the contrary, if you look at history, you’ll find that movies are very popular in times of strife,” Kirigiri said.

“Why?” Asahina asked. “Did they teach you how to shoot people?”

“Certainly, there was propaganda, but it also served as an escape,” Kirigiri explained patiently. “Movies offered a chance to detach from the grim reality of their lives. They were cheap, as well.”

“Cheap, huh? Not the word I would have used,” Asahina muttered. “But everything’s free, now!”

“If the Future Foundation left anything behind.”

“Come on, Kirigiri-san! Where’s your hope?” Asahina pumped her fist, stars gleaming in her eyes.

Naegi leapt on the bandwagon because why not? “Kyoko-san, you mustn’t lose hope!”

She gave them a dull look.

The doors were locked, but that didn’t last long under Asahina’s kicks. The door flew inward, landing in a cloud of dust. Asahina coughed and backed out of the building. Naegi, having learned from last time, turned on his flashlight instead of looking for the light switch and let the beam fall inside. The carpet was a dull red. Unlike the rest of the island, it didn’t just look dirty. It also looked old.

“Where’s the lights?” Asahina asked.

“Somewhere the customers can’t reach them,” Kirigiri answered. “Likely behind the snack counter.”

Kirigiri must have been guessing because Naegi couldn’t see far enough inside the building to find the snack counter. Not until he swept the flashlight upward and pointed it toward the room’s rear. Asahina started following the beam. Her silhouette became darker and darker the further away she moved from the door.

Kirigiri went alone. She didn’t stick near the beam as Asahina and Naegi did; clearly, the background light the flashlight offered was enough for her to see. He had no idea what she was looking for; she was the one who had suggested the snack counter, but she wasn’t going there. She simply continued to prowl along in the darkness, the clicks of her steps soft against the carpet.

“Eww. Come look at this!”

For something disgusting, Asahina sounded awfully excited. Naegi made his way over, stepping carefully as if the carpet was made of glass. He squeezed between the cash register and an empty glass display case, and hauled himself over the counter. Asahina stood in front of a popcorn machine that was half-way filled with black things.
“Guess we’re not having popcorn,” Naegi remarked.

She shook her head. “Think there’s anything else around?”

To their surprise, they found the soda machines still worked, although the drinks were flat. The ice machine had been unplugged some time ago and when they opened the cover, they found the inside coated with a thick green mould. Gagging, Asahina tipped her partly-empty pop into the nearest garbage.

“Is that is for food, then?” Naegi asked.

She nodded, face slightly green.

Kirigiri returned to them. They had been so caught up in their hunt for food that they still hadn’t turned on the lights, something she quickly remedied. They blinked, dazed at the sudden brightness.

“There’ll be a lot of memorabilia from before despair,” Kirigiri said. She was holding a plastic fountain drink cup with a green tyrannosaurus rex head on top.

“And it’s all ours. Sweet!” Asahina propelled herself to the left of the rotting popcorn and set to tearing a superhero poster down.

“If you want something, go ahead,” Kirigiri urged him. With a slight smile, she said, “We get first pick.”

Hands clasped behind his back, Naegi walked around the theatre. He recognized few of these movies, and the ones he did recognize, he only did because they were sequels or adaptations. Oh, that’s right. It made sense he didn’t know them. These would have been out near the time the world ended, maybe even some time afterwards if this part of the world had endured that long. But he couldn’t remember that period of his life. For all he knew, he had seen these movies before.

There were a couple of action movie posters, of strong men with guns and set jaws. They made his back crawl. He had never liked guns to begin with, but he especially didn’t like them anymore. There were a few posters from what sounded like comedies, but they had people on them, and he couldn’t help but think how creepy it would be to wake up and see them staring at him. There was some kid’s movie – he ignored it. He wasn’t a child. Honestly, he wasn’t sure if he wanted any of these posters, but he could feel Kirigiri’s eyes on him.

He stopped in front of one. It was a scenic poster. Stormy grey skies. An empty street with abandoned cars. A crumbled newspaper tumbling across the asphalt in an invisible wind.

Kirigiri walked up beside him. Eyes on the cartoon poster next to the one he was looking at, she said, “Do you want this one?”

He nodded. “How do you get them off? Is there a key?”

“Nope! Just pull at the bottom and the case opens,” Asahina called, having already made the discovery for herself. She had two posters now. Going by the bit of the second one he could see, it was something to do with sharks.

Naegi stepped forward and felt under the glass lid until he found a hold. He worked his fingertips into the crack and tugged.

“Are you aware that’s a horror movie?” Kirigiri asked him.
“I remember that!” Asahina rushed over. “It’s about this couple who moves into a new house and it’s haunted and super creepy.”

“Yes, it was critically acclaimed,” Kirigiri said, her eyes on him.

He grunted, letting them know he was listening as he opened the case.

“Makoto, you. . . want that one?” Kirigiri asked one last time.

He nodded. “Yeah!”

Asahina shivered. “Creepy.”

They left their posters by the front door and then ransacked the souvenir cups. He grabbed some googly-eyed puppy cup for Komaru and very seriously considered taking the Scrooge McDuck one for Togami. But then he decided he’d rather not get murdered and that if Togami wanted a cup, he could come get his own. He ended up with a cup with dinosaurs because. . . Well, it was that or animated cars.

“Whew! I’m ready to tackle the food again!” Asahina said.

“If you want,” Naegi said with a shrug.

And she did. They broke into the locked cabinets behind the snack counter. Most were filled with meaningless things – popcorn bags, fountain cups and other useless items. But the missing candy in the display cases had to be somewhere, and Naegi finally hit the jackpot.

“Aoi-san, catch!”

“Just Aoi. Honorifics make me feel old,” she said as she snagged the bag out of the air. She took one look at the front and her mouth dropped open in glee. “Holy crap! How did you know these were my favourites?”

Because they’re round and look like donuts? he didn’t say. He went for the more neutral reasoning of, “You use lifesavers in water, don’t you?”

“Heh. You make it sound like I’m obsessed or something,” Asahina said. “Oh, what do you think Kirigiri-san’s favourite candy is?”

He turned very slowly. Kirigiri was watching him closely.

“Uh. . . Ice-cream?”

Kirigiri snorted, and then immediately tried to hide it.

“You don’t like ice-cream?” a horrified Asahina gasped.

“I do, but. . . never mind. It isn’t important.”

“Of course it is. It’s bonding.”

Kirigiri chose that moment to change the topic. “Have you two gathered enough? Remember, you’ll have to carry everything back to the motel.”

With that new consideration, Naegi and Asahina decided they had enough stuff – but not before stashing some old candy in Naegi’s hood. They walked back to the motel, where Asahina split off to
decorate her room with her prizes. Naegi nudged open the door to his own room with his foot, and deposited his cargo on the table.

He wiped his hands free of dust and looked beside him, jumping when no one was there. He looked back. Kirigiri was still outside, staring into his room.

“Aren’t you coming in?” he asked her.

She hesitated. “If you wish.”

He didn’t understand why she acting so cautious. Maybe she wasn’t convinced his room was clean like hers. It was a little insulting, but he was a teenage boy so she could be excused for thinking that.

“Where are you planning to place the poster?” she asked him.

He pointed at the wall across from the bed. Whatever Kirigiri thought of his decision, she didn’t say.

Once the poster had been hung up, he plopped into his bed. Legs crossed, arms tucked behind his head, he stared straight at the poster. Seemed good to him. If it had a wooden frame, it could have been a window.

“Do you have an affinity for horror movies?” Kirigiri asked.

“I like them, but I get a little freaked out,” Naegi admitted. “Some of them are really creepy.”

She stared at him for a long time. When he asked why, she said, “I’m sorry. I’m trying to understand why you chose this one.”

“Why not?” he countered.

She didn’t have a good reason, as it turned out. Instead of answering him, she tucked some hair behind her ear in a clear attempt to buy time.

He cocked his head to one side. Huh. She wasn’t moving around his room a lot. Naegi assumed she would have started investigating right now; that she would have succumbed to her curiosity and detective instincts and searched every crack. Yet she remained next to the table, where she checked his dinosaur cup and muttered something about how it was much more reasonable.

“I should give Komaru her cup,” he thought aloud. He leapt back to his feet, scooped up the puppy cup, and led Kirigiri out of his room. He knocked on Komaru’s door and waited.

“. . . There you are!”

Huh? What was that? He looked over his shoulder and spied a lithe blur that seemed to crackle with electricity –

Owari slammed down on the ground a couple of metres away from him, making it shake under their feet. Hagakure, having been eating outside, shouted in alarm as his teacup slipped from his fingers and shattered upon the asphalt. The Ultimate Gymnast rose steadily, the muscles on her limbs visibly contracting and flexing as sunlight gleaned off her sweat-tinged skin.

“You!” She pointed a ghastly finger straight at Naegi. “Fight me!”

“Makoto!” Kirigiri immediately lunged forward, sweeping him back as she moved forward to intercept. But with a sharp-toothed grin, Owari took a couple steps forward and then bounded into the air. With those gymnast skills, she flipped over Kirigiri somehow, landing on the wall above
Komaru’s door where she pushed off and then landed feet-first between Naegi and Kirigiri. Stunned, afraid, Naegi couldn’t move as Owari’s arm whipped out and seized his left hand.

“One, two, three, four . . .” she said, thumb moving from side to side. “I declare a thumb war!”

“What?” he said blankly.

At that moment, Owari’s thumb slammed down on his. “Hah! I win. Whaddaya say? You wanna go for best two out of three?”

“. . . No?”

“What are you doing here?” a furious (by which Naegi meant her voice was slightly louder than usual) Kirigiri demanded.

Owari ignored her and cracked her knuckles. “Look, squirt, I know you had something to do with that dumb plan Coach and the others cooked up.”

“Not really,” he admitted. “It wasn’t my idea.”

However, Owari wasn’t listening. “You think I’m weak, huh? Well, here’s the deal. You’re coming with me and I’ll prove how great I am. Then you can go tell everyone I’m not weak and I don’t need their help!”

“No,” Kirigiri said firmly. “He’s not going anywhere alone with you.”

“Shut up! This is none of your business. This is between Despairs!”

“I’m not a . . .!” Naegi bit back his protest when Owari absently rolled her shoulder, and the tension in her body bled through their clasped hands into his.

“He’s not an athlete,” Kirigiri said quickly, saving him from having to finish that sentence. “He doesn’t have the background to reach a conclusion about this kind of subject.”

“Sure, he can. He’s smart. So, come on, Naegi.” Owari yanked him towards her so that his face was nearly in her armpit. “We’re going on an adventure.”

“Not alone, you aren’t,” Kirigiri said, marching forward, volunteering – nay, demanding . . .

“I’ll go.”

They looked right, where Asahina had just stepped out of her room. “You want to compete with someone, I’ll do it.”

“Asahina-san. . .” Kirigiri began.

But Naegi interrupted her. “That sounds good.”

He ignored Kirigiri’s eyes on him because he couldn’t explain to her now. But he could explain to himself. Because he remembered Owari trying to pry him off a bounded man and failing. What if he could pull that off again? Make her fail? Make her see that something was wrong. Obviously, even now he couldn’t stand up to Owari in a game of pure strength, but against Asahina, a well-fed and trained athlete? There was a chance. Asahina might not know his plan, but she was naturally competitive.

“You’re on. We can start with a race to the airport!” Owari said.
“Why there?” Naegi asked.

“Cause afterwards we can bench-press a plane,” Owari said.

They . . . They could do that? He looked at Asahina and found she looked as shocked as he did.

“Th-there’s no way you can do that!” Asahina cried.

“Won’t know until I try,” Owari boasted. “Giving up already?”

“As if! Let’s go!”

The two of them took off. Naegi started to jog after them. Then stopped. The airport was at First Island. They were on Third Island. He’d basically be running across three islands.

“Kyoko-san, can I have the keys to the forklift?” he asked. After all, Owari and Asahina hadn’t said anything about him competing.

Kirigiri reached into her pockets. As he waited with an open palm, she asked him very seriously, “Are you sure about this?”

“The forklifts aren’t that fast,” Naegi said. “You might not know this, but I’ve driven a car before.”

“Not that. I trust you won’t crash,” she said. “About letting them compete like this.”

“Yeah,” he said breathlessly. “It’s the best idea I got.”

Her eyes widened a little. “Idea?”

He didn’t explain. “I’ll be fine. Them, too. Don’t worry.”

(In retrospect, that was probably the worst thing he could have said.)

Owari and Asahina beat him to the airport. He found them red-faced and huffing, hunched over and hands on their thighs to keep themselves somewhat upright as they glared at each other. They appeared to be in the midst of some argument, and neither appeared keen to back down.

“Give me a break!” Asahina was saying. “If you had let me swim between the islands, I would have been here early enough to take a nap while I was waiting for you.”

Owari sneered. “Someone seems a little defensive.”

“Oh, yeah? If you’re so sure, then let’s get in the water right now!”

“Why? You gonna get on a beam and do some flips after?” Owari asked. “Cause swimming against the Ultimate Swimmer doesn’t seem fair.”

“I’m surprised you’re bright enough to know that.”

“Guys!” Hands held up placatingly, Naegi rushed towards them. “Why don’t we choose something that doesn’t directly involve either of your talents. Like thumb wrestling?”

“That’s lame,” Asahina said, not noticing how he wilted. “I’m down for arm wrestling though.”

Naegi said, “Great, so . . .”

The two had already decided without him. Still glaring at each other, they made their way to the
tables of what had once been the airport’s cafeteria. They kept glaring at each other, until Owari missed a stair and tripped over it. Naegi rolled his eyes and walked past them.

They settled at a table. With hands clasped and elbows planted on the tabletop, they stared deep into each other’s eyes. Neither refused to give and Naegi felt like he was catching on fire just being near them.

“Hey, Makoto, count us off.”

They hadn’t started yet? Oh. That wasn’t good. For this much intensity to exist even before they started competing... He was having second thoughts.

“Are you sure this is fair?” he asked as he tiptoed closer. “Owari-san does a lot of climbing and swinging, so her talent is directly related to the strength in her arms.”

“It’s fine,” Asahina said shortly. She let go of Owari’s hand for a moment to pull off her jacket. Her bronze skin stood in stark contrast to her white tank. “Count us off.”

He gulped. Placed his palm on the top of their joined hands. “Three, two, one, go -!”

He lurched backwards, expecting an explosion or lightning or some intense blast of energy. But there was none, and the arms remained perfectly still. Not that the two weren’t fighting, because they were. He could see it. Even though he had no idea what legs had to do with arm wrestling, he could see their legs straining under the table. Owari was growling, letting her teeth show in a primal smile. Asahina was the complete opposite, all silent intensity.

This was a lot more evenly matched than he had expected. Owari’s talent was all about flinging her body weight around with her arms, so how was Asahina keeping up? Had Owari simply weakened from malnutrition? He didn’t know and as he watched them struggle, arms shaking but neither giving way, he suddenly had an urge to reach out and touched those bulging triceps. He blinked and tore his eyes away from the site, letting them travel upwards to... Oh. That had to be how. He had never noticed before but Asahina’s shoulders were crazily well-defined. Forget her arms; that was where her strength came from.

Something was giving. He could sense it. There was a sense of urgency in each woman’s pants as they felt the scales change. Owari gritted her teeth. The air was heating up from their exertion now and stumbled back a few paces just to be safe.

Then it was over. It was no gradual fall, but a sudden one with the force of a meteor striking the earth. There was no shockwave, but he still fell over from the sheer force of the slam. It was over. They had their winner.

“Shit,” Asahina gasped. She slumped forward, using the arm that hadn’t been wrestling to prop herself up. Her other arm still laid upon the table, on top of Owari’s own. Owari looked like she had been punched in the gut. Knowing her competitive nature, maybe her loss had felt like that.

“I guess you win this round,” he said to Asahina with a weak smile.

“Yeah.” He had thought she would be celebrating her win, but if anything, the look on her face was wary as she watched her huffing opponent.

“Fluke,” Owari growled. “Come on, other arm.”

Asahina set her jaw and extended her left arm.
“Guys, wait!” Naegi shouted, suddenly desperate to stop this from happening. “I don’t think that table’s going to survive another hit like that. Let’s try something else.”

“Fine,” Asahina said shortly. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The battle continues!
Naegi was beginning to think this wasn’t one of his better plans.

Hollywood had taught him that nothing promoted bonding between rivals like a sports competition, but merely one event in and he was having doubts. One look at their faces and he was wondering how he was going to bridge this gap. Nidai had told him that Asahina and Owari were friendly competitors when they were in school. But if either of them remembered that – if either of them remembered each other – they gave no sign. Or maybe that was the problem. After all, he knew Asahina didn’t take betrayal well.

“You guys were kidding about benching a plane, right?” he squeaked.

Bad question! Bad question! Owari perked up in a way that told him she hadn’t been thinking about that; she might have forgotten about that boast, actually. Now, she was on her feet, flexing her biceps in preparation. Asahina got that look of wariness and disbelief again, but she, too, rose and flexed her noticeably bigger muscles.

“That’s... Oh. Actually, you did use that word correctly.”

“That’s not an idiot!” Owari snapped.

“Could have fooled me, Miss ‘What’s the point of swimming caps anyways?'” Asahina snapped back, clearly referencing a conversation Naegi hadn’t been there for.

“Let’s go find those planes,” Owari said.

Naegi followed them anxiously through the airport grounds. Thankfully, luck was in his favour. There wasn’t a single whole plane left. They found a few husks, but they had been stripped of their engines and several of their pieces had been salvaged to use somewhere else. Mind you, they were still heavy, but not enough for Naegi to worry that the two would break their backs on the first attempt. In fact, Owari and Asahina mutually agreed that the way the planes had been dissected made them too unwieldy to lift. Thus, Naegi reset his panic dial with a sigh of relief.

“Then let’s lift other things!”

That was the only warning Naegi got before he was hauled high into the air. Owari held him up above her head, one hand between his shoulder blades, and the other where his spine met his pelvis. Naegi kept very, very still. He really didn’t want to fall.

“Seriously? That’s your suggestion. Anyone could lift him,” Asahina said.

“Not true!” Naegi said. “I couldn’t lift myself.”

“Sure, you could,” Owari said with a snort. She basically tossed Naegi back onto his feet. “Lifting people is easy.”

“Well, maybe not the way she did it,” Asahina said. “I don’t think you would be able to bench
anyone, but you could lift them. Come on, try me!”

They were insisting, so he tried. And almost immediately, he was shut down.

“Not like that! You’re gonna throw out your back.” Asahina swatted at his.

“Yeah, didn’t Coach teach you any of this stuff?” Owari said. “You gotta lift with your legs.”

“Yeah! Bend your knees – not your back! – now grab me, and stand up.”

Shakily, he did it. Asahina was one of the smaller people on the island, but her muscles made her heavier than she looked, so he thought he had a right to be proud.

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” Asahina said.

“You shouldn’t try to bench anyone though,” Owari said. “You’d probably snap in half.”

“Thanks for the mental image,” he said.

“If we’re not going to lift the squirt though and there’s no planes, what are we going to do?” Owari demanded.

Asahina thought for a moment. “What about the forklifts?”

“Wait!” Somehow, before they ran off, Naegi managed to get them to listen to him. “Instead of lifting really pointy and dangerous equipment, why don’t we do something a little more official. Like a . . . a decathlon! Do you know what events are in one?”

“Duh,” they both said.

“Great, because I don’t.” He tried to smile. “So, how does that sound?”

Owari shrugged. “Sure.”

“So, our run here counts as the thousand metre dash, right?” Asahina asked.

“What?” Owari whirled around to face her. “No way! If I had known that was official, I would have won.”

“We were already competing! Just not as part of a decathlon.”

The two started to argue and Naegi pressed down on the spot on his forehead where his headache throbbed. Finally, he exclaimed, “It doesn’t count! We’ll start from the beginning.”

Thankfully, they didn’t argue with him. So, the competition began anew. According to them, the first event was usually a hundred metre race.

“Okay, so you two wait here,” he was saying, “and I’ll go over there where the finish line would be. I’ll count down from three, okay?”

Grim-faced, already in pre-run stances, they nodded.

“Hopefully, nobody’s going to get murdered over this,” he muttered as he walked over to the finish line. He was including himself in that sentence because for all he knew, they were going to whip up a tornado that would throw him into the ocean. He’d seen Ultimates do crazier things.
He held his arm up. “Three! Two! One! Go!”

The first syllable of that last word had barely left his mouth when they took off. Yep, he had been right to worry about a tornado. Things hadn’t gone that far, but there was what appeared to be a stream of fire in their wake. He scrambled to press himself against the wall so he wouldn’t be caught by the shockwave as they finished.

Both women were athletic and keen, but this was a case where Asahina seemed to have the advantage. It made sense to him; swimming was just a race in water, wasn’t it? Whatever the reason, it was obvious that Asahina was pulling ahead. Thank god, because the last situation he wanted was a close match where it fell upon him and his questionable judgement to decide a winner.

The two passed the finish line, and an empty garbage can was blown away by the wake.

“Okay, that’s game!” he said shakily. “Congratulations, Aoi, you win.”

“Yes!” Asahina pumped her fist as Owari curled her lip.


They needed a soft-landing area for that, so they made their way down to First Island’s beach. It wasn’t much different than the beach by the motel: warm golden sand that squeezed between his toes; shade provided by the broad, fan-like leaves of palm trees; and crystalloid water glimmering with a thousand lights. They marked the running track as the wooden boardwalk leading from the parking lot to the beach, where the measurement would be taken from the edge of the last plank. Not that he had a measuring tape. He was planning to use their footprints to determine who had jump further.

“Alright, anytime you’re ready!” he called.

Asahina was first. All the speed and power that went into her hundred metre dash returned. Her powerful strides thumped against the boardwalk. The power pooled lower and then those legs, those legs trained by forcing her entire body through walls of water, propelled her into the air. The landing was hard. She slid across the beach, sending up a spray of sand not unlike the sprays of water her swimming created.

“There!” Asahina said, satisfied. She stared at Owari with her hands on her hip, her grin taunting the other.

The moment Asahina was out of the way, Owari charged.

Have you ever played a video game where the character could double-jump? That was the closest he could come to describing how Owari’s body twisted and moved in mid-air. He stared open-mouthed as she sailed over him. Her landing was the opposite of Asahina’s; light and steady, like a ballerina in a twirl.

“Holy shit,” Asahina said.

Owari turned. “That’s a win for me.”

Yep. Naegi looked at the distance between them. It definitely was.

“Shotput’s next,” Owari said. “There’s a market on this island. Want to toss the cash registers instead?”
“Uh...” He looked to Asahina.

“Sure,” she said.

Owari led the way. Naegi let his pace slackened until he was next to Asahina.

“How is she still so strong?” Asahina asked as she eyed the walking skeleton in front of them.

“She’s an Ultimate,” Naegi said with a shrug. “I bet you’d still be super strong if you were that skinny... Please don’t try to find out.”

“I won’t. I promise,” she said. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to lose.”

He wondered if Asahina had guessed part of his plan, or was speaking out of pride.

In all honesty, he wasn’t expected Asahina to win this next round. She was up against Owari, the Ultimate Gymnast, whose career revolved around supporting her body weight with her arms. He kept silent though, except to give Asahina encouragement when she asked for it. Thus, he watched the tosses with bated breath, and blinked in utter surprise when Asahina’s cash register flew further than the other.

“Ah, I guess it’s two-one in Aoi’s favour,” he said. He had been worried about how Owari would react, but thankfully she had been distracted by the discovery that the Future Foundation had left coins in the registers.

High jump was next. He didn’t think even Asahina thought she had a chance. This was Owari’s domain and Asahina and him watched together as she twisted and bounded to what should have been a physically impossible height. She leapt at least a couple of metres higher than what she needed to, just to show off. Once she was done, Owari walked up to Asahina with a grin and waited. Asahina glanced at the bar and started to move forward, but then quietly backed down without trying and handed Owari the win.

It was some relief that after this event that was clearly in Owari’s favour, there was an event clearly in Asahina’s favour. Naegi knew gymnast routines required stamina, but they only lasted for minutes. Asahina had completed swims that lasted for hours. And that endurance truly made its mark here as they ploughed ahead with a four hundred metre race. They had returned to the airport runways for this, and Naegi sat cross-legged at the finish line as they thundered toward him.

“So, how’s it going?”

He jumped with a scream. “Nidai-kun, don’t startle me like that.”

Nidai laughed. “Sorry! I thought you heard me coming.”

Naegi glanced at the contestants. They were far enough away. He had time to talk. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard my favourite athlete was competing against one of yours,” Nidai said. “I had to come watch.”

“It’s two-two right now,” Naegi told him, “but I’m sure Asahina-san’s going to win this one.”

“Looks like it,” Nidai grunted. “How they holding up?”
“They’re not having as much fun as I hoped,” Naegi admitted. “But they’re in way too deep to stop now. I guess we’ll see what happens.”

The winner wasn’t a surprise to anyone, except maybe Owari. She panted hard, one knee on the ground and Naegi wondered: was this it? Was Owari about to fall? But before his hopes rose too high, Owari staggered to her feet. Her ribs rose and fell with a deep breath and just like that, she was back to her regular self.

“Naegi-kun said you two were participating in a decathlon,” Nidai said. “You know, the four-hundred metre race is usually the last event for the first day.”

“We’re not stretching this out over two days,” Owari said with a scoff. “We’re finishing this today!”

“That’s what I was thinking!” Asahina said.

“Alright. I’ve been told that the next thing up. . . is another race,” Naegi said ruefully.

“Are you kidding?” Owari shouted.

“With hurdles.”

“Are you kidding?” Asahina shouted.

He wished he was. By the time the race was over, he really wished he had been. They didn’t have hurdles, so instead they had returned to the airport and lined up the tables in a rough approximation of a race track. Asahina was better at the running of course, but jumping slowed her down while it was a reflex for Owari. They were neck-to-neck the entire time, including when they crossed the finish line.

“So, who won?” Asahina demanded.

“I. . . Uh . . . Good question!” Naegi said loudly. “Nidai-kun, I’ll let you do the honours!”

The look he got was almost like betrayal. Nidai cleared his throat. “That was a close one! However, I think Owari-san nudged you out in the last second.”

Owari cheered, but Asahina wasn’t backing down. “Liar! You’re only saying that because she’s your friend.”

Naegi cut in before the fight went anywhere. “Aoi, do you really think I would let him lie to you like this?”

“. . . No,” she said eventually.

At least the next event involved throwing things (a manhole cover, this time) so Asahina could redeem herself. Having just won that event by a margin, Asahina strutted her way into the next one – at least until she realized what it was.

“That’s not fair! If we’re going to have a pole-vault, then we also need to include swimming!”

“Pole-vaulting and gymnastics are not the same thing,” Naegi said for what felt like the hundredth time. “I know Owari-san might have an advantage, but you obviously had one in all the throwing and running events.”

“Yeah, man up and let’s get going!” Owari demanded.
Asahina growled under her breath and picked up the pole. Of all the events he had seen today, pole-vaulting seemed like the one that was least intuitive. He was pretty sure that he wouldn’t be able to do it. But Asahina was both a natural and Ultimate athlete, so when she planted that pole and jumped, she managed – with a wobble – to rise into the sky. She approached the crude bar they had set up and Naegi found himself holding his breath.

But she tried to make the last push too soon. Her hip clipped the bar, and that was enough to keep her from going over. She tumbled down into the safety bed of straw they had borrowed from Tanaka’s farm.

“Asahina-san. . .” He didn’t know what to say.

“I’m fine,” she said. “That was practice. Now that I know what to do, I’ll make it.” And she did. But before Asahina could take the time to feel good about herself, Owari guffawed.

“Doesn’t matter if you made it the second time if I can make it the first time,” she crooned. Which she probably would. It wasn’t gymnastics, but it was the closest they would get.

Owari was a slower runner than Asahina, but Naegi felt like that didn’t matter so much in the pole-vault. It was probably more about manipulating your center of gravity and weight, Naegi thought, as Owari charged with the pole. Her ascent was definitely smoother than Asahina’s and Naegi found himself checking this event off in Owari’s favour already.

It was a good thing he hadn’t called it aloud yet, because suddenly, it happened.

Owari’s hands lost their grip and she fell.

She plonked right into the straw bed. Asahina was ecstatic, of course, because that meant she could win now. Naegi winced and edged behind Nidai, prepared to use him as a shield against Owari’s upcoming rage.

Only it didn’t come. Owari didn’t get up.

Owari didn’t move.

“Owari-san?” Nidai called. He took a heavy step forward. “You need to take a nap first?”

She didn’t answer.

“Owari-san?” Naegi scurried out from behind Nidai.

Nidai moved first. For a big guy, he could move quickly. He waded through the straw, to where Owari lay limp in her scratchy bed. He hovered there unsure, long enough for Naegi to catch up. Naegi immediately grabbed her hand and squeezed, hoping to feel pressure back.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Nidai laid the back of his head against Owari’s forehead. He touched her cheek, and poked her chin. Some drool spilled from her open mouth.

“Asahina-san,” Nidai said gruffly, “are you too tired for another run?”

“I need you get Tsumiki-san or Kamukura-kun,” Nidai said. “Don’t hesitate. Go for it!”

Confused, Asahina took a couple of faltering steps backward. Then she turned and those strong muscles were put to work once more.

“Nidai-kun, what’s happening?” Naegi demanded.

Nidai didn’t answer him. Naegi somehow shoved his hand aside and pressed his fingers into the pulse point on Owari’s throat. He could feel her heart beating – thank god, he could – but it didn’t feel right. It was fast and arrhythmic and even though she had just been competing in a decathlon, her skin was oddly cool. And pale, he realized suddenly. She was almost as pale as him.

“It finally happened,” Nidai said hollowly. “I didn’t think it would be her first.”

“What happened?” Naegi demanded once more.

Nidai opened his mouth but nothing came out. He shook his head, and squeezed his eyes shut.

“She’s cold. We should warm her up,” Naegi said.

Naegi stripped off his shirt and draped it across her torso. Naegi knew nothing about medicine or abnormal heartbeats, but warming her up was something he could do. Nidai’s jacket joined a few seconds later.

“It was too much for her,” Nidai whispered to himself. Still, Naegi overheard.

“Is... Is this my fault?” he said.

Nidai looked up sharply. “Don’t think that way, Naegi-kun. Owari-san is a fierce spirit with a will of her own.”

But Nidai didn’t know. Nidai wasn’t aware of what Naegi had been planning.

Once again, it’s all his fault.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
I hope you enjoyed your fluffy times while it lasted.
Asahina didn’t join them in the hospital. She waited on the sidewalk outside, ignoring the members of the other class that ran past her, and being ignored by them in turn. She can see the light from the room that they’re keeping Owari in. The curtains have been drawn, but the shadows of those inside are imprinted in its colour.

“Hey. Uh, I heard what happened. That kinda sucks.” Hagakure rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. She appreciated that Hagakure usually tries, but she can’t think of a time that he was that great at being comforting.

“We were in the middle of a decathlon. Guess I win by default,” she said without any enthusiasm.

“What happened?”

At his request, Asahina told him about how Owari collapsed in the middle of an event, about how she went limp at the zenith of her vault and flopped back to earth. She told him about the grey pallor to her skin, and how small Owari’s hand had been in Nidai’s.

“That sucks,” Hagakure said. “So, you feeling okay?”

Asahina clenched her jaw. It was sore from all the teeth clenching she has been doing, but it was the good kind of hurt. It was the kind of hurt that let her know she was alive.

“Did you know her well. Y’know, back in school?” Asahina asked.

“Owari? Nah, not really. I mean she was a great customer – barely questioned anything – but I didn’t know her personally or anything.”

“We used to train together,” Asahina said listlessly. “Sakura-chan and I would wave to her when we walked into the gym. Sometimes, she lifted with us. We’d spot for her when Coach Nidai wasn’t available.”

“Were you two friends?” Hagakure asked slowly. He inched away, as if ready to run.

“Yeah. I would have said so. Now look at her,” Asahina said shortly. “I barely recognize her, and she acts like she has no idea who I am. And I’m supposed to feel bad about it, aren’t I? I should be angry or hurt, or something.”

“You mean because she doesn’t still treat you like a friend?”

“Because of everything!” Asahina shouted, gesturing at the hospital. “This happened in front of me because of a competition I started. I saw her fall. She looked like she was dead. I was the one who had to leave her there to get help.”

Hagakure looked very confused now. “So, you’re mad because you think you mighta had something to do with this?”

“No, that’s the thing. I’m not mad. I should be angry, or crying, or feeling something. But I don’t. I was in there when they first tucked her into the hospital bed. I was right at her side. And I looked
down at her, and I wasn’t upset.”

Hagakure pursued his lip. For once, he thought over his words before he said them. “Asahina-chi, what is it you want me to say?”

“I don’t know! Just... Why am I like this?”

Hagakure repeated that last sentence, stretching it out like an elastic band. “Maybe you two were friends once, but that’s not like a permanent thing, you know? People change. Just cause you had something in the past doesn’t mean you have to keep it. If it did, Togami-kun probably would have left us to go restore his family’s honour or something. And, well, Ultimate Despair? They’re kinda awful. I mean, why should you care about them?”

She seriously thought it over. “I don’t know.”

“Exactly!” Hagakure said way too cheerfully for the topic. “We don’t have a reason to care about them, so stop worrying about why you don’t and just kick back and enjoy life.”

God, she could imagine Naegi’s dismay at hearing him. But it made sense to her. Naegi might believe in forgiving everyone, but that wasn’t how the world worked. That wasn’t how she worked.

When the next person rushed past her and into the hospital, Asahina was suddenly hit with a powerful urge to not be there. She took the long way back to her room, (Home, she thought with a trace of wistfulness), letting the sun’s gentle heat burn off the edge of her worries.

She walked through the door and flopped onto the bed without turning the lights on. There, in the dark, she began to think.

“How is she?” Kirigiri asked Kamukura as he walked into the hospital’s conference room. Togami is right at her side, listening intensely.

“She cannot recover naturally from this,” Kamukura said. “This was destined to happen eventually. However, I did not expect it so soon.”

“I understand the idiots were trying to hold a decathlon in one day.” Togami scoffed. “There’s a reason the events are spread over two.”

“What do we do?” Kirigiri asked Kamukura directly.

Kamukura looked away. “She needs medical treatment.”

“You’re the Ultimate Doctor,” Togami said. “You even have an Ultimate Nurse to assist you. Get to it, then.”

“Togami-kun, this hospital isn’t stocked,” Kirigiri said gravely.

Togami’s lips thinned as he finally registered the real problem. He glanced at the walls, as if one of them would hold a poster telling them what to do.

“Should we order a scavenger hunt?” Togami asked, although they could all tell that he already knew the answer.

“The type of supplies we need wouldn’t be found lying around,” Kamukura answered. “I memorized the geography around this area before we departed. I know where to go.”
He paused. They all dreaded what he had to say next.

“It would take a few days.”

“No,” Togami said immediately. “If they find out, they will kill us.”

“If we wish to save her, it is the only way. I cannot treat her with what we have,” Kamukura said.

There’s something in his tone she’s never heard before: hesitance. With a jolt of sick fear, she knows why it’s there; even Kamukura isn’t sure what will happen while he is gone. There are too many variables, starting with despair and ending with Naegi. For once, he is not giving them an order. This is an actual choice.

“Owari is their first distraction,” Kamukura said. “Naegi-kun will suffice as a second.”

“But that doesn’t mean they’ll stay distracted,” Togami pointed out.

“No. It does not.”

What would happen if Owari died now, when the mistrust between their camps was already too high? Surely, Ultimate Despair wouldn’t be bold enough to blame something like Owari starving herself on them. She would have been confident that they were safe, but Owari had been with Asahina and Naegi when the incident occurred. Nidai, too, had been there, but he had come in late. There had still been a long period of time where it was only those three, and Naegi was well known for his inability to acknowledge the darkness in others. She could see some members of Class 77 running with that, especially the more paranoid ones.

And Naegi, what of him? This chain of events had been initiated by Owari seeking him out – and of course, it revolved around him again. If he took on the mantle of Owari’s killer, what would that mean for his recovery.

“We have to try,” she said finally.

“This is a fool’s plan,” Togami said quietly.

“No. If it was hopeless, Kamukura-kun wouldn’t have suggested it in the first place.”

“I will leave within the hour,” he said. “In three days, I will return. Until then, you must keep my absence a secret.”

“Who’s going to take care of Owari while you’re gone?” Togami asked. “They’ll be expecting you.”

“Tell them I am creating a miracle cure in my secret laboratory,” he deadpanned. “Tsumiki-san will be able to keep her alive in the meantime.”

It’s a horrible solution, but it’s the only one that has a chance at keeping everyone on this island alive. She knew Togami didn’t like it, but pretended not to notice as they hammered out the details with Kamukura. Finally, they had some semblance of a plan, and Kamukura immediately left to prepare for his voyage.

“If this goes wrong...” Togami began.

“We’ll make sure it doesn’t,” she vowed.

In this kind of situation, Naegi would have expected to hear the steady beeping of a heart monitor.
Alas, they didn’t have one. They didn’t have anything except for Owari’s bed and some herbs Hagakure had gathered. He wondered if they were going to have to use some of Hagakure’s ‘natural’ therapies after all.

Even Mikan was at a loss of what to do. She’d gotten Owari tucked in and was keeping a close watch on her temperature to make sure she wasn’t cold, but that wasn’t going to make her wake up. Mikan was adamantly that the problem was malnutrition. Owari needed food, but due to the lack of information they had on Owari’s internal state, Mikan was refusing to force food down her throat. She said it was possible that Owari couldn’t swallow and she could choke on it. They didn’t have a way to safely feed her. Even if they found a tube somewhere, it would probably end up being an industrial one.

Nidai hadn’t left her side since he brought her in. He sat at the head of her bed, Owari’s head resting on his thigh. Mikan sat on the other side, two fingers always on Owari’s pulse point. The Imposter was the next closest, collapsed in a chair right next to the bed. He was pale, and his hand covered his mouth. Everyone else was in a rough semicircle around the bed, leaving a healthy space as not to crowd the patient.

And Naegi? He was at the back of the room, by the door, where nobody would see him.

What had he been thinking? He’d known she was weak. They had warned him something like this could happen. He had warned her this could happen. It had been just yesterday! And yet he had been so arrogant, he had been so selfish. . . He pushed this on her anyways, just because he wanted to prove he was right.

What kind of monster was he?

No one called after him when he slipped out the room. Good. He didn’t deserve their concern. He didn’t deserve their pity. He was a murderer. He’d killed one of them. He’d killed one of his friends and not even they – not even Ultimate Despair had done. . .

“Don’t,” he wheezed. A jolt of pain went through his body as he collapsed onto his knees. His arms wrapped around himself. “Don’t.”

Stop. He needed to stop thinking like this. He couldn’t do that to her. This sucked, but . . . He could still turn this into Hope. He could do it. Just like with the others. Like his classmates, and Kuma and Iwa. . . Like the other martyrs. He couldn’t buckle now and let all their work go to waste. He had to build them up again. He had to take this and make it a rallying point.

He giggled hysterically.

“It’s Hope,” he said aloud, as if he stood upon an imaginary stage. “It’s not despair. It’s Hope.”

It felt like he was spitting up blood when he cackled. Something wet and hot was in the back of his throat. He swallowed it down and slowly rocked back and forth.

“Naegi-kun?”

The rocking stopped. His slit-like irises snapped open.

He pushed himself up to one knee and looked behind him.

“Komaeda-kun?”

He was there. Komaeda was here, right in front of him. Naegi didn’t understand the strange, wide-
eyed look Komaeda was giving him, but he was here. Wearing that same sweater he remembered, with that same wild hair style.

“You left,” Komaeda said. “I thought you would have stayed.”

He giggled. Komaeda jumped.

“Sorry. I know it was rude, but I needed to collect myself,” Naegi said with a dismissive flick of his hand. “But I’m ready now. Let’s go back in there. We can do this together!”

Komaeda half-turned, as if listening. But then he paused. “Do what?”

“Make Hope!” Naegi shouted giddily. “They’re all wallowing in despair, but we can turn it around. We can bring Hope back!”

“You have to wait until it’s over,” Komaeda said absently. “Once they overcome this despair, I know their hope will shine brighter, but we have to wait for Owari-san to wake first . . .”

“No, we don’t!” Silly Komaeda. Had he forgotten this was the Ultimate Hope he was speaking to? “We can make them see now. Why would we make them go through all this nasty despair first? Don’t you see? This is just another guiding light towards Hope!”

He grabbed fistfuls of Komaeda’s sweater. The other teen yelped and frantically tried to push him away, but Naegi clung.

“You understand, don’t you? Despair is what did this to her. Now they have to see how awful it is. And when they turn their backs on despair, what else is waiting for them but Hope? And we can guide them.”

Komaeda was taking slow steps back. Naegi tried to follow, but his legs weren’t working right and he collapsed to his knees once more, still clinging to Komaeda’s sweater.

“We can finally lead them to Hope,” Naegi murmured. “Once I explain, they’ll see. We can finally rid the world of despair once and for all. The cycle will be complete. Enoshima’s world of despair will finally turn back to hope. Our mission will be complete.”

He twisted his fists, tightening his grip on Komaeda’s sweater. He waited for his praise.

“Is . . . Is this what I’ve always sounded like?” Komaeda’s voice cracked.

“Huh? No, it’s what Hope sounds like. But,” he looked away as his cheeks heated up, “you did teach me, so I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s similarities.”

Komaeda’s teeth were grinding together. “Naegi-kun, let go of me.”

“Oh, sorry!”

He let go and wiped his hands on his pants. Maybe they were dirty.

“Naegi-kun, this. . . This is a terrible time to try to spread hope.”

“What? No, it’s perfect. There’s so much despair and Hope is the natural next step. Despair breeds Hope. You told me that, remember?”

“I did, but . . .” Komaeda smacked his forehead. “It does, but . . .”
“So, let’s get in there and start working!” Naegi scrabbled to his feet, bouncing on his feet in anticipation.

“No,” Komaeda said as Naegi tried to run past him. He put his hand out to hold Naegi’s shoulder back and Komaeda touched him, *Komaeda touched him*.

“Naegi-kun, this isn’t something that’s going to bring them hope,” Komaeda said.

“Not if we don’t try,” Naegi shot back. “You don’t know what will happen.”

“Yes, I do!” Komaeda’s voice raised and Naegi cowered. With visible effort, Komaeda settled at his normal volume. “I do. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen this.”

“Owari-san’s fainted before?” he asked, confused.

“No, not her, but . . .” He was barely audible. “Nanami-san.”

“Nanami Chiaki?”

“I thought they would overcome it, too,” he whispered. “I thought I could help. But I didn’t, and there wasn’t any hope that came out of it. Only despair. Only *Ultimate* Despair.”

He listened, but had trouble understanding. Ultimate Despair was Enoshima’s fault.

“When Nanami-san died, Kamukura-kun left and never came back.” Komaeda laughed bitterly. “Well, he did, but when he did, it was so he could tear out hope by its roots. He never got over it. He still isn’t over it. All that time, he wallowed in despair until . . .”

Komaeda swallowed.

“Until you.”

“Of course. I’m the Ultimate Hope,” Naegi said.

“Yes, you were. You did it without me.” Komaeda’s voice twisted into something tight and almost needy. “And I was jealous. So I tried to break that. I tried to make myself needed. I didn’t care what I broke in the process, as long as I was getting what I thought I wanted.”

“I . . . I don’t understand.”

Komaeda took a deep breath. Then he spoke.

“Naegi-kun, you can’t make people just stop grieving. I know it hurts and it isn’t pleasant, but it’s important to them, too. When you try to ignore it and brush it aside. . . That’s how all of this happens.”

“But grief’s part of despair!” Naegi protested. “Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Komaeda said softly. “But I don’t think it is.”

Naegi frowns. He feels like someone who’s just been told that Christmas was canceled. “So, maybe later then?”

“Maybe. Come on, I need you get you back now.”

“Already?” Naegi asked. He was hoping they could spend more time together.
Komaeda’s hands were shaking. “I don’t want anyone to know I was alone with you.”

He tried to hold Komaeda’s hand on the way back to the room, but Komaeda quickly yanked it away. No one said anything when they walked in, so it looked like they hadn’t noticed he was gone. He looked up at Komaeda for further instructions, but Komaeda was already trudging ahead, paying him no mind.

Naegi frowned and then joined the crowd.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Ultimate Despair realizes some things need to change.
Although it was tempting, common sense eventually prevailed and they realized they couldn’t have a sleepover in Owari’s hospital room. Tsumiki shooed their classmates out, claiming that even though Owari was unconscious, she still needed peace and quiet. Personally, given Owari’s flair for action, Pekoyama imagined she would have preferred the opposite. However, Owari wasn’t awake to give that opinion. Additionally, their presence was likely to be a distraction to Tsumiki, whose skills were needed more than ever.

Naegi waddled outside with the rest of them. He didn’t seem to be grieving; she couldn’t understand that look of calm confusion he wore. But she wouldn’t pry. Naegi had been there when Owari had collapsed, and she could only imagine the painful route his thoughts had strayed.

Thankfully, one of Naegi’s friends were outside to pick him up, so she didn’t need to worry about how he would get home in that state. She stuck close to the Young Master instead, and waited for everyone to confront the elephant in the room.

That confrontation waited until they returned to the hotel’s gates, and then Kuzuryu shifted. He caught Hanamura’s eye and nodded in the direction of the hotel’s main building. Hanamura went ahead, bypassing the cabins. He was on his way to the kitchen.

“Hey, Mitarai-kun,” Kuzuryu called out.

The Imposter turned. This morning, he had come to breakfast dressed in the original disguise he had attended class in. However, that wasn’t to say it was without its flaws; the Imposter had managed to locate his wig, but many more of his supplies had been lost. He’d borrowed makeup from Nevermind and Saionji and at first glance, it was satisfactory. Stare too long and too close however, and it became evident what you were seeing wasn’t the whole truth. The Imposter wore a suit, but it was still a Togami-style one – the material too high-class for its supposed owner. He didn’t have the large contacts either and had resorted to what Pekoyama thought were his actual eyes.

No one spoke. Yet there was still a conversation. The Imposter shuffled his feet, just as the real, shy-hearted Mitarai would. Still, she had a gut feeling that this slip in body language was the Imposter’s own. After what he had seen in the hospital, he must have known what was coming.

“You can’t just... You know.” Kuzuryu groped at his collar to loosen a tie that wasn’t there. “You can’t go off to bed after that shit.”

“Please,” Nevermind said and although the tone was imploring, underneath there was a steel that said she would be willing to take drastic action. “Come with us to the hotel.”

For once, the Imposter didn’t fight; he knew this, too, was inevitable.

They weren’t foolish enough to try to serve the Imposter a full meal. Not only would it scare him off, but his body likely would cave under the strain. Hanamura had whipped out a quick stir-fry, something soft and easy to chew. The ingredients were mostly green vegetables. It wouldn’t be the most filling, but it would be nutritious and would at least help keep him alive.

“Kuzuryu-kun, we should ask the others to leave,” Pekoyama said, eyeing their lingering classmates. While she understood the need to have them nearby as support, she also feared their presence would
cause unneeded stress.

“You think so?” Kuzuryu considered it for a second and then turned to the others. “Alright, everyone, go home. Wait, not you, Mioda and Nidai. The rest of you, scram. We can handle this.”

There was reluctance, of course. But if seeing Owari’s frail form had done one thing, it had left her classmates too afraid to fight back. They left in throngs of twos and three, and Pekoyama moved to join them.

Kuzuryu grabbed her wrist. “You can stay. I was going to hang out in the back, anyways, so he won’t noticed.”

Although she questioned the necessity of her presence, she nodded. They walked to the darkened rear of the room together, and took a seat.

“Look at that,” Nidai was saying. He was sitting across from the Imposter. “Smaller than my hand. Of course, I got big hands!”

“Do you want me to eat some and make sure Teruteru-chan didn’t put anything extra in?” Mioda asked cheerfully from the seat next to the Imposter.

“He wouldn’t,” the Imposter said. Still, he picked up a piece of broccoli and handed it to her.

“Oh, he went all out!” Mioda said after she gulped it down. Foam built in her mouth from the excitement. “It melts in your mouth into pure deliciousness.”

“Good to know.” The Imposter speared a carrot with his fork. He raised the trembling thing toward his mouth. Nidai leaned back in his chair, eyes on him.

The fork was really shaking now. Mioda reached over and put her hand over the Imposter’s free one. He glanced at her and nodded. Those eyes turned back to the carrot. He was swallowing. It was impossible to tell whether they were dry swallows, or he was downing copious amounts of saliva. Pekoyama didn’t know if the Imposter looked so worn-down because he was imitating Mitarai, or because it was the truth.

“Let’s do this one step at a time,” Nidai urged. “First, close your eyes.”

The Imposter jerked and did so. His Adam’s apple bobbed.

“Now open your mouth.”

He did. His muscles spasmed once or twice and made his jaw chomp, but he kept it open.

“Now put it in your mouth.”

That was the command that wasn’t immediately obeyed. They could see his throat tensing as if it were tightening around something. A sound almost like a blech came from him. He missed his mouth on his first attempt, and the carrot hit his chin instead of disappearing into his mouth. At that point, he froze, and so Mioda reached over and gently redirected the fork up and into his mouth.

“You should take the fork out of your mouth,” Nidai suggested. “I don’t think you want to eat that.”

The fork slid out without the carrot. Was it the lighting, or was the Imposter pale?

“You should chew.”
She thought he tried. It looked like he was trying to crack a jawbreaker. Each clack of those teeth was accompanied by an expression of disgust, and his lips were beginning to roll away from each other, showing the teeth like a wolf’s snarl.

He swallowed.

“So, is it five stars?” Mioda asked.

He shook his head. “I didn’t . . . False alarm. I tried to swallow, but . . .”

Mioda patted him on the shoulder.

The Imposter tried again. And again. They could tell it didn’t go down even the third time because he squeezed his eyes shut and gripped the table.

The fifth attempt, they could see something different in the swallow and it appeared it would go down. But then the Imposter gagged violently, and they could tell by his panting that he had coughed it back up. They watched him shudder, forehead resting in his palm, fingers threaded in his hair. Then, the stress became too much, and he tore the wig away, exposing a head of black hair glistening with sweat.

“Take your time,” Nidai told him. “There’s no need to rush.”

The Imposter grimaced and nodded. Mioda put her hand on his. He squeezed it hard.

“We’re all rooting for you,” Nidai reminded him gently.

Finally, it went down. It seemed as though the worst was over, but then the Imposter gagged again and covered his mouth. Both hands were threaded in his hair now. Mioda flailed, asking if there was a bucket and Pekoyama looked away because damn it, if he puked then all was that was for nothing.

Somehow though, he kept it down. Even though his face was a horrible green color, it stayed in his stomach. The gagging stopped and, in its place, came the sound of soft sobbing. Kuzuryu shifted and glanced at her, asking how to fix this even though he knew she didn’t have an answer.

Nidai nearly leaned across the entire table. “Hey, take it easy. Take deep breaths and count to ten.”

If the Imposter was doing so, he was counting in his head. So Mioda took up the slack and counted aloud for him. On the sixth count, she managed to untangle his right hand from his hair and held it in her own.

“Ten,” she said, and the Imposter forced himself to open his eyes.

“You need a breather?” Nidai asked him.

“The longer it takes, the worse it will be,” the Imposter said hoarsely.

He had said it, but he wasn’t moving. Nidai reached across, picked up the fork and stabbed it into the next piece.

“You sure?” Nidai asked when the Imposter looked at the plate and violently flinched.

“Yes. It has to be now or never. I know I have to, but . . .” He looked away sharply, eyes tightly shut.

“Maybe it would be easier if you keep them closed,” Mioda suggested.
“I think so.”

Kuzuryu turned away as the process began again. Her Young Master had witnessed so much torture and death and yet, it was this that was too much for him to bear.

It took a full hour, maybe longer, before the fork clattered onto the table for the last time. The Imposter’s eyes were red from all his crying. Privately, she thought it was a miracle he hadn’t vomited. Because at points, even Nidai and Mioda had looked like they wanted to from the pure trauma they were witnessing.

“Let’s go home and sleep now!” Mioda said. Her usually chipper voice was shaking. As she tried to grab the Imposter’s shoulder, he put up a hand to stop her.

“Please. I need to be alone.”

Pekoyama didn’t know if that was a good idea, but how could they deny him? They left the Imposter upstairs and shuffled out of the hotel.

“That was...” Nidai didn’t finish that sentence. “Damn.”

“That’s what it does to you.” Kuzuryu laughed hollowly. “That’s the shit despair made us into.”

“What? No, that wasn’t despair!” Mioda protested. “Despair makes you feel all tingly inside.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Kuzuryu said flatly. “That’s what it tricks you into thinking. And then you wake up and realize how rotten and miserable it all is.”

“Hey, are we talking about the same thing? Because despair’s not like that at all.” Mioda stepped in front of him, forcing Kuzuryu to stop. “Despair is the number one trend in the world. All the cool kids are doing it!”

“Cool? You think that... that thing I used to be was cool? Do you think that was cool?” Kuzuryu pointed back at the hotel where the Imposter was by his lonesome.

“Of course, that wasn’t cool; that wasn’t despair!” Mioda’s voice rose in pitch at the end. “Ibuki knows despair. She creates it all the time for her fans and they love it. They’re happy. They smile and cheer and Ibuki knows they’re happy —”

“I thought I was, too,” he said coldly.

Mioda blinked. She stared at him, as if trying to figure out whether he was serious.

“Ibuki plays the music her fans like,” Mioda prattled. “She chooses the genres they like and plays the songs they cheer for. Everyone has a great time at her shows. Ibuki knows they do because she tries, and that’s all she wants. She just wants everyone to have a good time...”

Kuzuryu snorted. “Until they kill each other, right?”

Mioda was silent for a good few seconds. Then – the transition was so quick – she was gone. She had fled back toward the cabins, but not before Pekoyama caught a glimpse of her tears.

“That was a little harsh,” Nidai said.

Kuzuryu walked past him.

“Are you okay?” Pekoyama asked him.
He laughed bitterly. “Okay? Who on this island is fucking okay other than you?”

“You are upset.” It was an obvious statement, but sometimes what Kuzuryu really wanted was a chance to vent and that was permission.

“You don’t think this whole shit’s fucked up?” Kuzuryu demanded. “Or maybe it’s all been so fucked up for so long that you just don’t talk about it anymore.”

“That was disturbing to witness,” she agreed.

“I’m going to bed,” he semi-snapped. She allowed him to pick up his pace and walk ahead of her.

How long have we stood in your shadow?

The door shut behind him. The lock clicked. He remained against it, half-afraid that Peko would break it down and refuse to let him be alone.

How long did we follow you like dogs?

He stripped off his jacket and shirt. He collapsed on the bed covers in his pants. And shoes he belatedly realized.

When was it you began haunting my thoughts?

He kicked the shoes across the room. Rolled up into a sitting position. He rubbed at his head, and his touch passed over the strap keeping the eyepatch in place.

He staggered over to the washroom. He tripped into the sink, and only kept himself from falling by grabbing either end. He looked up straight in the mirror, at that swirl-patterned eyepatch positioned so prominently on his face. He stared at it, and realized it was the ugliest thing he’d ever seen.

Untying knots he couldn’t see was usually something he asked Peko to do. It took him a few minutes and swear words before he did. The patch came off in his hand. There was a circular crust on the inside of the patch, and he really didn’t want to think about what it was made of.

And there it was. It had spent some time in a freezer before the operation, so it didn’t look the exact same as it had on her. However, the eye looked exactly as he remembered it when he had first put it in.

We loved you. We all did. We treated you like a goddess.

When it became too much to look at, he retreated into the cabin’s main room. He happened to look at the window to the cabin next to his; Pekoyama had drawn the curtain, but he could see her shadow moving behind it.

. . . But you never cared about us, did you? Instead, you tried to take away those who did.

He walked over to his bed and reached into the underside of the pillow case. He took out the item he had stashed there.

When we took pieces of you into ourselves, it wasn’t just to honor you. We hoped that somehow, it kept you alive.

He walked back into the washroom and stared at himself in the mirror.
I hope we were right. Because I want you to feel every bit of what I’m doing next.

He raised the knife to his eye.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Several people have things to say about Kuzuryu's actions.
The Young Master was absent.

Pekoyama loitered in the hotel lobby. When she had arrived for breakfast and he hadn’t been present, she had assumed he was delayed and thought nothing of it. But the hour had passed, her meal was devoured and the Young Master had yet to appear. She told herself he would come; he could be helping Tsumiki or Kamukura with Owari; he could be assisting Nidai with the Imposter who also had not appeared. (She suspected eating in front of the entire class would be too much for him.) There were valid reasons for Kuzuryu’s absence.

One by one, her fellow classmates passed her on their way outside, a few looking at her curiously. And still her Young Master did not appear.

She walked outside. She went straight to the Imposter’s cabin and knocked.

Nidai opened the door. “Pekoyama-san? Did something happen?”

“Is Kuzuryu-kun there?” she asked.

“Huh? No, just us. Was he supposed to drop by?”

“No, I was just looking for him.”

Nidai no doubt had his hands full with the Imposter. She didn’t need to bother him with this, especially since Kuzuryu was fine.

She tried knocking on Kuzuryu’s door next. There was no response. She almost turned away, but she noticed that his lights were on. That could simply be an accident, especially if he had been in a rush to leave. She moved back to the boardwalk and leaned so that she could peer in his side window. He’d left the curtain open and though the angle was awkward, she could see some part of the interior.

She went up on her tiptoes. Was that... was that his suit on the ground?

As the Yakuza’s heir, Kuzuryu knew plenty about suits and their care. He was religious about treating them properly – he wouldn’t have left one on the floor like this. Something was wrong and the world suddenly brightened as her senses sharpened, sniffing for danger. Two people coming up from behind – ah, not a threat. The water was too clear to conceal a body, and the edge around the cabins’ platforms were too small for someone to hide.

She kicked the door in. The Master’s room was messy. His clothes were on the ground, as was his pillow. If there had been a struggle, she couldn’t see any blood – they had taken him alive. She walked over quickly and lifted the pillow with her foot; the weight told her the knife Kuzuryu stashed inside was missing. She forced the fear down. There was still the washroom. Still one more room to clear.

She gasped aloud when she found him inside. Chest moving – still breathing. He was on the ground though. Injured? Yes, why else would be lying down, curled up? A gleam on the ground caught her attention: it was his missing knife. There was blood on the blade and some on the floor. He’d fought
back then, drove off his attacker by his lonesome because she hadn’t been by his side.

“Young Master!” she cried, rushing forward and reaching –

“Don’t call me that!” he roared at her.

She froze. Even her heart stopped.

“I . . . Fuck . . . Shit, I . . . I’m not your master.”

Even as her gut clenched, she told herself he didn’t mean it. He was troubled. She knew from personal experience how long it took his temper to cool after a struggle.

“Are you hurt?” she demanded. “Can you walk. I can retrieve help –”

She had knelt to better examine him, to turn him toward her and see the part of him that was hidden. But the moment she touched him and tugged, he swatted at her hand.

“Don’t!” he snapped. “Just . . . Peko, promise you’re not going to freak out first.”

This. . . This . . . Calm. Be calm. The Young Master was giving an order. Stop shaking. Be calm.

“Of course,” she said in a monotone. She looked away from him, just in case. There was blood in the garbage. Tissues covered in blood and a hint of black –

She knew that fabric. How hadn’t she noticed he was different? Why would he have taken the eyepatch off though? He hadn’t removed it since the day of the operation.

“Peko, don’t freak out,” he whispered.

And he turned.

She saw it immediately. How could she not, when the first thing she tried to do was make eye contact with him? His left eye – that devil’s eye – it’s gone. She knows with unerring certainty that there was no fight, there was no attacker. Because there is a clean slice down through Kuzuryu’s eyelids, splitting them in half. The skin around the cut is covered in cracked, red blood and there’s random drops of it on his cheek and chin under the missing eye.

“Kuzuryu-kun, you. . .”

He laughed bitterly with a trace of hysteria. “She’s gone. I’m finally rid of this.”

“You. . . You didn’t have to go this far!”

“Why does it matter? It’s not like I gouged out my eye,” he jeered. It was a vicious, nasty thing and with the blood dotting his jaw, he looked like a predator after the kill. “It was her fucking eye. I just cut off a tumor that didn’t belong.”

Why did he have to do this now? One of their own was already in the hospital and now he was going to force Tsumiki to deal with this, too? No! She couldn’t judge. She was sure he had a good reason for why he was adding this completely unnecessary stress to their class.

“We need to go to the hospital.”

“Don’t you dare . . .! I can walk myself!”
At least he isn’t fighting her command. That’s a relief. There’s been plenty of times in the past where she’s watched members of the Yakuza refuse medical treatment on account of some strange interpretation of manliness.

However, she’s misjudged her Young Master’s emotional state. For after she forced a shirt over his head and they staggered out of the cabin, they saw some of their classmates. That’s when the real reason for Kuzuryu’s easy agreement comes to life. His lips curled into a sinister smirk, and he abruptly shoved her away so he could approach their classmates without fear.

“O-oh my god!” Koizumi shrieked. Her eyes widened in horror as she covered her mouth. “What happened?”

“Justice,” Kuzuryu sneered as he – that old, despair-ridden version of himself – infused his voice.

Saionji said, “You’re kind of a creep, you know?”

Kuzuryu just laughed, not proving her wrong.

“Young Master, we need to get to the hospital,” Pekoyama hissed, grabbing him by the arm.

“Why? I’m not injured. None of this shit belonged to me!”

“This is not up for discussion!” she snapped at him.

Kuzuryu blinked. His wild sneer flickered. He suddenly looked like a young boy as he shuffled his feet and glared at the ground.

She nudged him, urging him along. Koizumi followed them, hands still over her mouth. Saionji thought about it and when they were right about to turn off the boardwalk, decided to join as well.

All was quiet in the hospital. The lobby was empty, as were the corridors. There were two people in Owari’s room: the patient and her nurse. Tsumiki had rolled in a bed from an empty room to sleep in. The Nurse was fast asleep, knees curled up against her chest, the blanket haphazardly strewn across her torso. Drool had created a damp spot in her pillow.

In contrast, Owari’s blankets barely had a wrinkle, betraying the lack of movement during the Gymnast’s long sleep. Her mouth was open, slack as if in death, and if Pekoyama hadn’t trusted Tsumiki, she would have thought that’s what it was. There were no tubes or IVs or wires attached to her unconscious classmate, but that made the sight worse because she knew there should be.

She shook Tsumiki gently. “Tsumiki-san, you need to wake up.”

“H-huh? What . . .? Is everything okay? Did something happen to Owari-san?”

If Owari had only been asleep, Tsumiki’s high-pitched shriek would have woken her. (Pekoyama glanced over, just in case.) “It’s Kuzuryu-kun. He needs your help.”

Tsumiki looked confused, but she struggled out of bed. Impatiently, Pekoyama just hauled her onto her feet and out of the room. The other two girls turned to look at them as they stepped into the hall. Kuzuryu was slower; he savoured the seconds between their emergence and letting Tsumiki see what was wrong.

“Kuzuryu-kun!” Tsumiki gasped. “Why did you . . .?”

“Something wrong?” he leered.
“D-did you cut it out? You didn’t have to do that!” she cried. “It wasn’t attached to any of your nerves or integrated with your body. You could have scooped it out with a spoon!”

“A spoon? Are you kidding?” he exclaimed. “What kind of man mutilates himself with something as lame as a spoon?”

“What kind of person mutilates themselves to begin with?” Koizumi cut in.

Kuzuryu glared at her. “You seriously going to ask that considering who your friends are?”

“Are you talking about. . .? That’s completely different!”

“Pl-please stop fighting!” Tsumiki shouted. She was pulling at her hair in stress, much like the Imposter had yesterday. “Oh, you’re not bleeding. That’s means. . . How long did you wait to find me?”

Kuzuryu shrugged. “I dunno. A night?”

“Why?”

If this kept up, they were going to lose their only trustworthy nurse to a heart attack. Pekoyama stepped in, figuratively and literally. She stepped between Koizumi and Kuzuryu, breaking their eye contact. Yet she stared directly at Tsumiki and demanded, “What do we need to do first?”

“We need to clean the wound. I don’t think there’s any disinfectants around here. . .”

“I had hand sanitizer in my washroom,” Pekoyama said. “Could we. . .?”

“No, that’s horrible! You don’t use hand sanitizer on a wound.”

“Oh, sorry.” Stupid. She should have known that. She was the Master’s first line of defense; in times like these, it was her duty to treat him and buy time for the medical staff.

“Soap and water,” Tsumiki concluded. “Follow me to the washroom.”

They did. She wished Kuzuryu would walk faster, but he was too busy strutting around like a peacock. She shouldn’t think this way about him, shouldn’t be annoyed with him. but he was being very frustrating right now.

They gave Tsumiki and Kuzuryu their space in the washroom. Pekoyama lingered just outside the door, hovering anxiously.

“What happened?” Koizumi asked in a hushed voice. “Where did his eye go?”

“Her eye,” Pekoyama corrected instantly. Remembering the bloody tissues, she said, “I believe it’s in his trash.”

“The trash . . .” Koizumi looked like she was about to have an aneurysm. “O-okay, but it should still be fine to. . .”

“Absolutely not!” Pekoyama said. “That thing is not going in his head again.”

“But it’s Enoshima-san’s. . .”

“Yeah, it’s hers, not mine,” Kuzuryu muttered, walking out of the washroom. She examined him; the blood on his face was gone. That was good. The dried blood on his split eyelids had been cleaned,
too, but now the edges glistened as if they were going to bleed anew.

“Are you okay?” Pekoyama demanded.

He waved her off. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just a couple of cuts.”

“Just a cut? You ripped out her eye!” Koizumi shouted. “What were you thinking?”

“That I don’t need her anymore,” he growled.

Both Despairs stepped away from him. Tsumiki gasped loudly, although Pekoyama couldn’t tell whether it was because of what Kuzuryu had said, or because she was afraid of everyone’s reactions. Pekoyama could defeat them all in a fight; she knew that. She didn’t want to fight them, however, if it could be avoided.

“What do you mean?” Koizumi said. “We haven’t given up. We’re still Ultimate Despair!”

“Fuck that!” Kuzuryu shouted. “I don’t need her telling me what to do anymore.”

Saionji said, “Uh, did someone drop you on your head? Enoshima-san is the Ultimate Despair, not you. You’re just a little boy who thinks swearing makes him edgy.”

Kuzuryu didn’t seem to be listening. “I am done with her. I am done with her being inside my head. Now, it’s time to be me.”

“What does that even mean?” Saionji complained. “So, you’re going to shoot people for giggles instead of for despair? That’s the same thing, dummy!”

“Shut up. You don’t know anything about me!”

“What’s there to know?” Saionji asked. “You’re a crook.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. ‘Sides, I was born into it.”

Pekoyama watched him curiously. She had always suspected that he longed for the normal lives of others, but never had he admitted it out loud – not even to her. Was even this part of him changing?

“You rob people, you sell drugs, you kill people. . .” Saionji shrugged. “It’s the same thing.”

“Shows that you don’t fucking know anything,” Kuzuryu said. “The only person I killed before Despair was that bitch who killed my sister.”

“. . . Huh? Didn’t they arrest that pedo?” Saionji said.

“That was just a shit-job of a coverup,” Kuzuryu said. “I bagged that stupid classmate of hers – the real killer.”

“That. . . that was you?”

They all looked at Koizumi.

“Wait, is that about that Sato chick?” Saionji asked. “That was your best friend, right? Are you saying she wasn’t killed by a pedo?”

Kuzuryu was silent. Pekoyama could tell that he had already decided the conversation was over. Seeing she wasn’t getting a reaction from him, Saionji turned to Koizumi.
“Did you hear that?” Saionji jeered. “It wasn’t just bad luck, after all. Your best friend got murdered because she was a murdering little bitch, too!”

Saionji cackled. Her eyes were swirling madly. She stood right in front of Koizumi, slowly backing the other woman into a corner.

“How does that make you feel, huh?” Saionji demanded. “Doesn’t it feel good? Huh? Doesn’t it?”

“Oh-of course!” Koizumi was saying, but something was different. Her eyes were swirling, but they were odd. They swirled, and then stuttered, and then started up again. “It’s amazing. I never ever knew it was him.”

“She deserved it,” Kuzuryu spat.

“And she’s dead,” Koizumi was saying. “You just killed her.”

“She knew Kuzuryu-san belonged to the Yakuza,” Pekoyama said though gritted teeth. “Those are the consequences.”

“Oh, is this about the big secret you couldn’t tell me?” Saionji asked. “You know, the one between you and your bestie Sato?”

“Secret?” Pekoyama said sharply. “Koizumi-san, did you -?”

“Did you help?” Kuzuryu hissed.

“No! I didn’t know she was planning to . . . I only found out afterwards.”

“Does that make it better or worse?” Saionji asked.

“Worse . . . No, better. It was great. It was wonderful! Like . . . almost as good as when my father . . .”

Time had tamed Pekoyama’s rage, as had the fact that the Master’s younger sister was not the Master. It was enough that she could view this through not apathetic eyes, but controlled ones. Koizumi and Saionji had their swirls and those stapled-on grins that were the hallmark of despair. She looked at them and felt disgust and pity; she understood the Young Master’s ire.

“Um, what are we talking about?” Tsumiki asked shyly.

“Don’t you remember that loser Reserve Course friend of hers?” Saionji asked. “The one that got her head smashed in? Turns out Kuzuryu was the one who knocked her off.”

Pekoyama reached for a non-existent sword –

“She killed my sister!” Kuzuryu snarled.

“Eek! Kuzuryu-kun, you’re going to reopen your wounds. I need to take another look at them.” Before he could protest, Tsumiki shoved Kuzuryu back into the washroom. Pekoyama blinked. How would yelling at that brat reopen his . . .? Oh. That was surprising. She hadn’t thought Tsumiki had it in her to intervene like that.

“Tsumiki-san’s so considerate of everyone’s happiness,” a swirly-eyed Saionji said, staring at the closed washroom door. “Oh, what were you saying, Koizumi?”
“She wasn’t a loser just because she was in the Reverse Course,” Koizumi muttered. There was a weird grimace on her face, like she hadn’t wanted to say that aloud.

“Uh, yes she was. She was a nobody who used mommy and daddy’s money so she could try to pretend she was important like me. That’s literally the definition of loser.” Saionji sneered. “And of course she was your friend. You weren’t famous performer like me or Tanaka. You were just some dumb girl in charge of a Photography Club.”

They were silent. Koizumi giggled.

“That’s... That’s so true!” Koizumi said, but her voice seemed to waver. “Yep. Sato was just a loser and... I’m so boring compared to the rest to you. That’s probably why we were friends in the first place.”

“Koizumi-san?” While Pekoyama wasn’t over the revelation about the murder of Kuzuryu’s sister, she wasn’t quite comfortable with the way Koizumi was standing.

Koizumi waved her away. “No, she’s right. I... I’m just going to go now.”

She staggered off. Saionji stuck her chin up and crossed her arms over her chest. After a couple of minutes, the door to the washroom slowly open. Kuzuryu strode out first, and nodded for her to follow.

“Hey, Saionji,” Kuzuryu called right before he walked off. “You feeling good about that?”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Oh darn what a mess. Better send the hope boi in.
Someone was knocking on his door.

Blearily, Naegi rose. He stumbled to the door and wrenched it open. Kirigiri, her hand still raised for another knock, stared back at him.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No, but it’s noon and you had yet to appear. I wanted to check on you.”

“I’m fine. I guess I slept in,” he said, as if his dishevelled hair and pyjamas didn’t give that away to the world’s greatest detective.

She nodded. Gently, she said, “Komaru saved you a plate in the dining room.”

“Oh! Uh, tell her thanks. I’ll be there, but I need to get changed first.”

Naegi closed the door and lumbered back into his room. He’d come home late last night, having stayed at the hospital for as long as he could. He didn’t remember returning to his room, but obviously he had been pretty tired when he did because he had apparently thrown yesterday’s outfit on the ground. They weren’t too badly wrinkled, so he shook them out a couple of times and put them on.

“Oh, so you are alive,” Komaru teased gently as he trudged into the dining room.

“Hah, hah.” He took the seat with the untouched plate of food in front of it, and shovelled breakfast into his mouth. Cold, but he wasn’t in a state to complain.

Because of the late time, most people had finished and left already. Komaru was here, as was Fukawa, who was reading as she kept his sister company. Kirigiri was, too, and she was quietly watching him... Oh. She wanted to talk. Probably about Owari. Should he eat faster, or slower?

He decided on faster. He nodded at Komaru afterwards in a last thanks and walked out of the room. He sensed Kirigiri standing up as he left.

If she was surprised that he was waiting for her, she didn’t show it. Whatever was going on, she didn’t seem tense, so it probably wasn’t serious. Although it was always hard to tell what Kirigiri was thinking.

“I imagine Class 77 is very upset,” Kirigiri said to him.

Something itched inside him. He suddenly wanted to start lecturing – nay, sermonizing – but he held the urge back. “They’re worried about her.”

“I understand,” Kirigiri said. “I know you are upset, too. If you want to go over there to spend time with them, I understand.”

Naegi peered at her. “You do? Are... are you coming with me?”

“I don’t think I would be welcome,” she said.

He... Something about this seemed odd, but he wasn’t about to question why Kirigiri was suddenly okay with him visiting his other friends. He latched onto the opportunity before she could take it
back and went straight for the hospital. In retrospect, he should have asked to borrow a forklift as well, because he was covered in sweat and gasping by the time he reached the building. He collapsed against its wall, waiting to cool down before he entered so that Mikan wouldn’t see him and have a panic attack.

It turned out his precautions didn’t matter because she was already preoccupied with someone else. That’s what Nidai told him when he walked into Owari’s hospital room. He was there along with Tanaka, who was tracing odd symbols on the walls in red.

“Tanaka-kun, wh-where did you get that?” he spluttered.

Tanaka stopped in the middle of his painting, confused. He mimed picking something with two fingers, and then popping it into his mouth.

“Oh, so. . . Like fruit?”

Tanaka made a small circle with his hand.

“Berries?”

Tanaka nodded.

“Oh. Okay. It’s j-just berries.” Naegi wandered over to the side of the room, where yesterday’s visitors had stashed their chairs. He ran his hand over the back of one, and then dug his nails into the plastic top. Tanaka was just using red berries. Perfectly natural. Perfectly harmless.

Tanaka finished up his latest symbol and then moved to the floor.

“What is it for?” Naegi asked.

Tanaka pulled his coat up so that it covered his head like a hood. He hooked his right arm and waved it around like the claw of a praying mantis.

“Oh. Warding off the grim reaper. I see,” he said quietly.

He suddenly felt guilty. He should have brought flowers or something. He had no confidence that Tanaka’s arcane symbols would work, but it was the thought that counted. And here Naegi was, with nothing to give after pushing her into this state in the first place.

He walked over to her bedside and stood there.

“It hurts seeing her like this,” he whispered to Nidai. “She’s supposed to be the strong one. But now she’s just . . .”

“She’ll get better,” Nidai said.

How can you say that? Naegi instinctively wanted to say, but he didn’t because . . . because that wasn’t very hopeful. Not at all! What was he doing? He should be the one reassuring Nidai, not the other way around. What was he thinking?

“I know it looks bad,” Nidai was saying. “But I was once the kid in a bed. I bet you can’t tell now by looking at me.”

Naegi blinked. “Huh?”

Nidai made a breathy noise, like he was trying to laugh. “Guess nobody ever told you. I was born
with a serious heart condition. Spent years in a hospital bed trying not to put my body under any stress, otherwise my heart might not be able to handle it. That’s what the doctor said, at least.”

“But you...” Naegi reached out to grab Nidai’s triceps, but stopped himself. “How do you become this strong without stressing your heart?”

“You don’t.” Nidai said. “And if I had decided to listen and give up, I would still be in that bed. I was there for a long time, but then someone else was moved into my room: a baseball manager named Daisuke. He used to play ball for his team, until he was diagnosed with the same condition I had. But he never gave up! He couldn’t play for his team anymore, so he supported them as their manager.”

“And that’s why you decided to become a manager, isn’t it?” Naegi asked. He could tell. He could see the blazing light of hope in Nidai’s eyes.

“When he died, he left his team behind without anyone to guide them,” Nidai said. “Something in me wouldn’t let that happen. So, I stood up and walked out of that bed to take his place. I looked into myself and found the same willpower that I see in the heart of every Ultimate, even those who are born into it like Nevermind. Owari’s got that drive, too. She’ll get better.”

“That was a pretty good speech,” Naegi said that with a smile, but something inside him was hissing.

“Hah! It’s a manager’s job to inspire.”

“That’s Hope’s job, too,” Naegi said, his facial muscles aching from his smile.

Nidai really did laugh this time. “Everyone’s well aware of that.”

Naegi relaxed. It felt like he was sheathing invisible claws.

“Nidai-kun, you said that friend of yours...” He couldn’t get the word out.

“That’s a very serious disease,” Nidai agreed. “The doc said I wouldn’t make it to twenty.”

“But you’re older than twenty now, aren’t you?” Naegi said. “So, he was completely wrong.”

The smile Nidai gave him was soft, but wobbled somehow. And suddenly, they both jumped as Tanaka grabbed their shoulders. He patted Nidai’s shoulder very deliberately, and very forcefully.

“I’m not worrying about it,” Nidai insisted.

Tanaka looked at him like a preschool teacher deciding if their student was lying.

“I’m fine,” Nidai said. “Go back to your magic.”

Tanaka snorted in insult and made it clear that it wasn’t magic; it was a hellish ritual.

“As long as you make sure the demons are on our side,” Naegi said, playing along. It made Tanaka happy when they did.

As Tanaka manically (but silently) laughed behind them, Naegi asked Nidai, “So, where is Mikan?”

“Apparently, Kuzuryu-kun got himself into some trouble. She’s taking care of him upstairs.”

His stomach flipped over. Trouble could mean so many things and although it was probably harmless, much had happened recently and he assumed the worst. He got to his feet and scurried out
of the room. Just as he stepped outside, Koizumi suddenly hurried past him. He didn’t get a good look at her, but it looked like her eyes were swirling.

“Guess I know where I need to go next,” he mumbled.

He ran into Kuzuryu and Pekoyama on the stairs and... Oh. That’s what he meant by trouble. Because Kuzuryu... his eye was gone. Again! Naegi just stood there because he didn’t know if this was a good or bad thing because there was a hole where an eye should be, but it hadn’t his eye anyways.

“What happened?” he asked, sending out the question like feelers.

Kuzuryu scoffed. “The head of the Yakuza decided he didn’t need to take shit from anyone!”

That didn’t make any sense, but sure.

Nervously, he followed them. Kuzuryu looked okay, but he’d just... He’d lost an eye. And Yakuza were renowned for hiding weakness. Who was to say he wouldn’t collapse, too, the moment Naegi looked away? So, he followed them. He followed them through the hospital and right to Nevermind.

“Fuyuhiko!” she gasped. “Your eye, what happened to it?”

“Y-you?” Kuzuryu tugged at his collar. “Uh...”

Before, when Naegi had seen him, Kuzuryu had boasted about his missing eye and silently dared him to complain. But with Nevermind, he seemed hesitant. Naegi wouldn’t say that Kuzuryu seemed regretful, but obviously he hadn’t planned to have this conversation with her any time soon.

“Did it fall out?” Nevermind asked. “Perhaps the substance you used to secure it has begun to rot. Quick, tell me where it is!”

“In my trash,” he mumbled.

“The trash? What a truly dreadful place,” Nevermind cried, and Naegi could imagine anxious sweat running down her temples. “And to think you just left it there.”

“The Young Master needed treatment,” Pekoyama said.

“But surely you could have spared a second to place it somewhere more suitable. Like a pillow,” Nevermind hugged herself and trembled. “At least you didn’t lose it. If we combine the resourcefulness of our classmates, I’m sure we can find a more permanent solution!”

The cry was on the tip of Naegi’s tongue. But Kuzuryu’s full-body flinch, so unusual for his character, beat him to it. Pekoyama hovered just behind his shoulder, awaiting instructions on how she was supposed to react.

“Is something wrong?” Nevermind asked.

“The eye didn’t work out,” Kuzuryu blurted out. “Let’s just forget about it.”

“No way! That is one of the few gifts Enoshima-san left us with. It must be treasured and preserved for future generations.”

“Well, putting it back in my head isn’t going to help with that,” Kuzuryu deadpanned.

Nevermind looked at Kuzuryu like she was seeing him for the first time. And she wasn’t impressed.
“Fuyuhiko, are you saying you do not want her eye? Could it be that... that you purposely got rid of it?”

Kuzuryu snorted and looked away.

“You... traitor!”

Pekoyama’s hand whipped out, catching Nevermind’s arm by the wrist right before her slap would have hit Kuzuryu’s cheek. Kuzuryu didn’t move. He kept eye contact with Nevermind the entire time as if he had known this would happen. Maybe he did, or maybe it was that Yakuza grit rearing its head.

“I can’t believe it. You, out of all people. You, who I trusted. I will not let you defile our Queen’s gift like this. If you will not accept, then I will!”

No.

The arm she had tried to hit Kuzuryu with – the one with the dead hand – twitched. Pekoyama looked at it with disgust.

No.

“If you want it so bad, fine! Take it!” Kuzuryu said.

No!

Naegi ran right past them. He heard them call his name, but he didn’t slow. He shouldered his way through the hospital doors and took off for First Island.

It was too long a distance to run the entire way, but he at least kept up a jog. The door to Kuzuryu’s cabin was already open, so he elbowed his way past Soda and charged inside. He kicked over the first trash can he saw and shifted through the rubbish.

“Where is it?” he cried. Kuzuryu had said it was in the trash, hadn’t he?

A light from the washroom caught his attention. He ran in and saw another trash can. That one, too, met its fate on the floor. There were bloody tissues and rather than repelling him, it only fixed his focus.

There is was. He could see a bit of the iris peeking out at him. There she was. Naegi stared at it for a good five seconds, his mind frozen. Then he ripped off a strand of toilet paper and threw it over the eye. He wrapped it around and around until there was no chance of it ever peeking out to see the world again.

As the last stand fell into place, exhaustion fell over him. God, he needed a shower. His hair was clumped and sticky, and he felt like he had just pulled himself out of a barrel of slimy water. His shirt stuck to his skin, nearly see-through, and he had to roll up his pants because the small cushion of air between them and his legs was that stuffy. As little aches crept up his shins, he leaned against the sink counter and just thought about breathing.

“Naegi?”

He stiffened. That was Soda. Soda still had red eyes – still had despair eyes. Naegi grabbed the wad of toilet paper containing the eye and stuffed it under his shirt.
“Err, what are you doing?” Soda asked. “Man, Kuzuryu’s gonna kill you for this.”

Naegi didn’t think about that; he was eyeing something at Soda’s waist . . .

“Soda-kun, can I have the wrench?”

“Eh? Uh, sure. You building something?”

Naegi was silent and very still until Soda tossed it over. The moment his fingers wrapped around that warm metal, he hurled the wrapped eye onto the floor, needing to get it away. He slammed the head of the wrench on top of it. Again. And again.

Finally, he sat back. The wad wasn’t flat, but it had definitely been flattened. The tissue had darkened too, having absorbed moisture of a type he didn’t want to think about. It still wasn’t enough. He grabbed the wad and threw it into the toilet, and practically fell upon the lever to flush it.

The sound of the swirling bowl was the greatest thing he had ever heard.

“What was that? Was there a giant spider or something?” Soda asked as Naegi washed his hands thoroughly.

“You could say that there was a giant cockroach,” he spat. He handed the wrench back over.

“C-cockroach?” Soda squeaked and then took off, as if one had just flown at his face.

Naegi stood up, straightened his spine and shook his arms out. There. It was done. Enoshima’s eye would never haunt them again. He didn’t know what Nevermind would do when she couldn’t find it, but it couldn’t possibly be worse than what she would have done with it. Now, what was he supposed to be doing?

Right, he had been visiting Owari in the hospital. And... Oh, there’d been that other thing as well. He walked out of Kuzuryu’s cabin and went for Koizumi’s. Her door wasn’t open, but it wasn’t locked.

He pushed it open. “Koizumi-san?”

Back in their old home, Koizumi’s room had been bare, except for the pictures of death on her wall. He was glad to see this time was different, though he suspected it was because a lot of the furniture was too big to move or bolted to the floor. Koizumi herself was on the other side of the room; it looked like she was gnawing on her knuckles.

“Koizumi-san!”

She screeched. She whipped around, falling back against the wall in relief when she saw it was just him.

“Seriously? Don’t you knock?” she scolded. “Just like you irresponsible men to startle a girl like that.”

“Sorry,” he said with no real conviction. “I saw you running earlier. Are you okay?”

“Of course, I am. I’m great! It’s just... They didn’t pack any of my stuff.” Her red eyes flickered; it wasn’t quite swirls, but starting to get there. “They left all my photos at home. Why would they do that when I’m the Ultimate Photographer?”

“Maybe they were worried that they would get them dirty,” Naegi said. “Photos are a snapshot in
“time, right? You can’t take them again, so it would suck if they accidentally ruined them.”

She nodded, looking distracted. Her hand hovered near her mouth, as if she really had been chewing on herself before and was considering doing it again.

Naegi took a seat on her bed. “Why are you looking for them?”

“How? Oh, it’s... It’s silly. I just... Do you remember what I told you about Sato?”

“That was your best friend, right? She... died,” he said vaguely, not addressing what he remembered to be the real cause of her demise.

“Right. I finally found out what happened to her. I know who killed her. So, I was looking for my pictures of her to remind myself how... how great it was.”

“You don’t sound very confident,” Naegi pointed out gently.

“That’s why I’m looking for the photos!” she hissed through gritted teeth. “Although I don’t know why I’m bothering, because I know they’re not here.”

She kept looking though, like it was some physical twitch she couldn’t shake.

“Are you happy Sato is dead?” he asked.

“Of course, I am! She was my best friend and she died because she killed someone for me? Don’t you get how despairful that is?”

He chose not to address that part about Koizumi’s friend apparently being a murderer. “You don’t seem very happy.”

“You wouldn’t understand. You were never a Despair like we are.” Secretly, Naegi preened over her recognizing that. “The death of a friend is always wonderful, and the closer you were, the better it is.”

“Then why are you so upset about Owari-san?” he asked.

“That’s... That’s different!” she cried.

“Not really. They’re both your friends.”

“Ugh! Just stop! You don’t get it.”

“Koizumi-san, just because something gives you despair doesn’t mean it has to be a good thing,” Naegi murmured. He hopped off the bed and approached her. “It’s okay to be upset when people die; Komaeda-kun told me that.”

“Why are you listening to what that weirdo says?” she spat out.

Naegi ignored the jab. “Koizumi-san, if Sato’s death upsets you then... just be upset. You don’t have to feel a certain way about it just because Enoshima told you to.”

Her back was to him. He couldn’t read her expression. Was she despairing, or hoping?

“Naegi, could you...? Can you give me some time alone?”

That didn’t answer his question either. He couldn’t say no to her though.
“I’ll see you around,” he said as he left the cabin.
“Can you believe it? The trash! He said he threw it in the trash. How disgraceful! What an ungrateful, foul little thing. He does not deserve his place alongside us.”

On the dining room chair next to hers, Tanaka nodded in fierce agreement. His legs were crossed at the knees and his arms were close to his body, as if he was holding himself back from lapsing into his version of a rant.

“When I searched his cabin, I could not find it,” Nevermind said. “I fear it is still lost. All by itself, cold and alone. Oh, such tragedy!”

She buried her face in her hands, as if overcome by sorrow. A couple of seconds later, she peeked through her fingers to see if Soda, across the table, was paying attention to her.

“Man, no wonder Naegi was so twitchy earlier,” Soda said. His chair was tilted onto its back legs, while he propped his feet against the table to keep it that way. “He must have heard about it from someone and went looking, too.”

“Naegi-kun? Wonderful! Perhaps with his luck, that darling boy recovered it. Did he find anything?” Nevermind’s eyes were filled with a hopeful light.

“He found a cockroach,” Soda said with a shrug. One of Tanaka’s hamsters poked its head out and licked its lips. Tanaka gave it a sunflower seed as a consolation prize.

“How disappointing,” Nevermind sighed. “It is unfortunate that Naegi-kun found out like that. I hadn’t planned to involve him in the search.”

“Yeah, poor guy. Say, Tanaka, can’t your little guys sniff it out or something?”

Tanaka paused. A sunflower seed shell fell onto his jacket. He tapped his chin, then paused again. And then he leapt to his feet and threw himself at Soda in a bone-crushing hug.

“Alright, alright. Great idea, I get it. . . Ugh, do you have to kiss my cheek like that? Okay, get off!” Soda shoved Tanaka aside, and wiped his cheek with a grimace. “Come on. Let’s get looking before you become any freakier.”

Soda walked off. His baggy jumper developed new wrinkles with every step. There were dirt stains on his back and grease stains on his sleeves.

“Isn’t he dreamy?” Nevermind sighed.

Blushing, Tanaka covered his face with his scarf and the two swooned together.

Getting into Kuzuryu’s cabin was easy, as Pekoyama had kicked down the door down earlier. In the cabin’s main room, there were clothes strewn on the ground and trash scattered around the bathroom. A true mess only befitting the boy after the deed he had done.

Tanaka walked into the washroom and gave it a once-over. Immediately, he grabbed the bloody knife on the floor and Kuzuryu’s razor and handed it to the other two, getting them out of the way. Then, he cleared his throat and coughed into his fist. He grabbed one end of his scarf and yanked on it hard enough to unravel it from around his neck. The scarf’s free end flew high into the air, and he brought it down with complete control so that the scarf unrolled against the floor like he was
unveiling a red carpet at the movies. Somehow, as the scarf unfolded, Tanaka’s hamsters appeared upon it, standing on their hind legs and striking tough poses.

Tanaka clapped. As the hamsters watched, he pointed to his eye and then did a sweeping gesture to the entire room. The hamsters nodded and a few of them instantly scurried toward the door. They stopped in the doorway and pointed at Nevermind’s face – at her eyes.

Tanaka shook his head as his shoulders bounced in silent, but fond laughter. He gestured again to the bathroom. The hamsters looked at each other, shrugged just as their owner would, and set to work.

They were adorable. Nevermind squealed with delight as they wriggled their way into the counter’s drawers, or else scurried up Tanaka’s pants and then reappeared on his shoulder to hop onto the counter itself. One of them bit through Kuzuryu’s toothpaste tube, and then Tanaka had to scramble to stop his hamsters from having an impromptu snack. The shampoo didn’t fare much better. The hamsters didn’t like the taste of it, but they spilt it all over the shower tiles.

Finally, they all gathered near Tanaka’s feet, empty-handed. Or empty-pawed, in their case.

“Nothing?” Nevermind said.

Tanaka looked at her sadly.

Disheartened, they walked out of Kuzuryu’s cabin. To add another plank to their worst day ever, they saw Kirigiri talking to Nidai. Only a second passed between them spotting the two, and Kirigiri looking over to meet their eyes. If the detective was surprised to see the three of them emerging from Kuzuryu’s cabin, she didn’t betray it. She still came over, however.

“Were you able to recover the eye?” Kirigiri asked.

None of them answered her, too ashamed to admit their failure.

“I see. I’ll look myself, then.”

“You? You’d probably flush it down the toilet if you found it!” Soda said.

“Then accompany me, if you wish,” Kirigiri said. “Like you three, I’d rather know its exact location.”

Before Soda could respond, she walked past him into the cabin. Soda hesitated, and then ran after her.

“Hey, guys,” Nidai said. He walked up to them with his hands in his pocket. “Have you seen Naegi-kun?”

“I saw him last at the hospital, but he ran off. Is something wrong?” Nevermind asked.

“No. . . Uh, maybe. I was hoping he could give me a hand with you-know-who.” As Nidai whispered that last part, he pointed back at the Imposter’s cabin.

“Is he alright?” Nevermind asked as Tanaka growled anxiously.

“He’s still up and awake,” Nidai assured them. “But. . . I think he might be reverting to old habits, if you know what I mean.”

She and Tanaka instantly looked back at Kuzuryu’s cabin. If only Soda was here. Brave, smart Soda would surely know how to salvage this situation!
“Oh, there he is!” They turned to see Naegi closing the door to Koizumi’s cabin. “Hey, Naegi-kun! You got some free time.”

“Uh, yeah. What’s up?” Naegi asked. He padded across the boardwalk to them.

All Nidai had to do to explain was look in the direction of the Imposter’s cabin. Naegi nodded in understanding, and then a visible change swept over the boy. He had always been small and not physically imposing, but his body seemed to harden as if he replaced his skin with tough leather. He held himself straight, shoulders square and barely moving as he marches towards the Imposter’s cabin. Though they know this intervention is necessary, they can’t help but feel sorry for their classmate and what they’ve unleashed upon him.

“Alright, we’ll take it from here,” Nidai told them. “By the way, what’s going on with Kuzuryu-kun’s place.”

They told him. Nidai’s face became an interesting shade of green.

“That’s... What was that kid thinking? A player should never make a move like that without consulting his team.”

“I fully agree,” Nevermind said.

Nidai shuddered. “Well, I’m going to give Naegi-kun a hand. Make sure you two don’t do anything crazy, too.”

With that, only her and Tanaka are left. Nevermind looked at the Imposter’s cabin, then at Kuzuryu’s. After the mess that was this morning, all she wanted to do was something fun and relaxing.

“Tanaka-kun, let’s go to my cabin. We can admire my secret photo collection of Soda-kun together!”

Tanaka enthusiastically accepted.

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Naegi wasn’t sure what he had been expecting. A dark, broody hole, perhaps? A stinky man-cave? Something that would express the torment the Imposter must be going through. Yet, the Imposter’s cabin was meticulously clean. He had more clothes than anyone else on the island, yet they took up half the space. All were factiously labelled with material, designer, and country of origin. Naegi didn’t care about that stuff when faced with his own clothes, but he could see why the Imposter would if he was trying to mimic someone as affluent as Togami."

*How did he afford these clothes in the first place?* Naegi wondered as he stared at a hanging full-piece suit. He only stared because he was mortified at the thought of getting fingerprints on anything.

As for the Imposter himself, he was in bed. It was a rare time where he wasn’t wearing a disguise. Without that layer covering his skin, he looked even worse and skinnier than before. His proportions seemed distorted; eyes too big for his head and arms too thin for his shoulders. His skin looked rough and flaky, though maybe that was due to covering it so often. He was a pasty white, too. Who knew when his real skin had last seen sunshine?

Naegi stepped lightly enough not to rouse him, but when Nidai entered, the Imposter moaned. He put an arm over his face as if to shield it from the light.

“I told you, I’m not hungry,” the Imposter said.
“That’s because your body is so used to you ignoring it that it’s decided not to say anything,” Nidai said. “I got cereal. Whole grain and with twelve different vitamins.”

“I don’t want it,” the Imposter said.

“I also brought Naegi-kun.”

“Naegi-kun?” The Imposter lifted his arm and stared at him. Then, he settled back down with a groan. “That’s unfair!”

“There’s no foul if the ref doesn’t call it,” Nidai said heartily.

Naegi put up his hand. “Uh, am I the ref?”

Nidai laughed and ruffled his hair.

“I ate yesterday,” the Imposter said. “That means I have more time. I can skip today.”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Naegi said. “I don’t know that much about medicine, but I think it’s more dangerous to start and stop again then it is to never start. Because now your body has to start up all these things it shut down, and that uses more energy than it had been using before.”

That made sense, right? He had no idea. He was talking randomly, babbling in hopes that it made enough sense for the Imposter to pay attention. Not that Naegi was sure he was in a state to. The Imposter’s eyes were open, but they were bloodshot from exhaustion, and his face was likewise slack.

Naegi said. “You could take a few bites, can’t you? Just to make up for that extra energy. It would be a net sum of zero, and that’s basically the same as not eating.”

“I don’t understand where you come up with these ideas,” the Imposter said.

“Am I wrong?”

“I feel like you are, but I can’t figure out why.”

“Maybe that’s because your brain doesn’t have enough energy.”

The Imposter sighed, as if conceding that he had given Naegi the perfect leadup for that. Nidai put the bowl of milk-less cereal on the mattress near the Imposter’s head. The Imposter stared at it. He mumbled about a net sum of zero.

Gosh, the Imposter’s hand was skinny. There was a thick, almost leather-like quality to the wrinkled skin. The wrist created a strange bulge between the arm and the hand, before it narrowed into the width of a limb stripped of fat and muscle, making his hands look swollen.

The Imposter breathed heavily.

“Naegi-kun, you might not want to look,” Nidai murmured.

Naegi’s gut churned in sympathy. “What if we try something else? Something with low calories?”

“It’s not about calories,” the Imposter gasped. “It’s about food.”

“Why?”
“Food is constant,” the Imposter said. “It doesn’t matter who you are, food is the same.”

“It’s a constant,” Naegi repeated, feeling like he understood. “It’s familiar.”

“Fast-food in particular. Although I doubt there’s any of that around anymore.”

Naegi asked, “So, what does that mean for us?”

Both the Imposter and Nidai blinked. The Imposter asked, “What do you mean?”

“Aren’t we a constant, too, now?” Naegi asked. “You always see us, and that’s not going to change anytime soon.”

“I didn’t used to,” the Imposter protested. “It’s not the same. People are constantly changing.”

“Well, what if this changed, too?” Without asking, Naegi took a handful of cereal. He laid it out on the nearby counter and then hammered it with his fist a few times until he’d crushed it.

“What are you doing?” Nidai asked.

“Removing the constant,” Naegi said as he swept the cereal bits into his hand. He approached the Imposter and offered it. “That doesn’t look anything like the cereal you know. Is it still familiar to you?”

He poured the contents of his hand into the Imposter’s. The Imposter blinked at the crumbs owlishly. His fingers twitched, as if to close over it.

“It has to be easier this way, doesn’t it?” Naegi pleaded.

The Imposter stared at his palm. He brought it closer to his face, and nearly blew a chunk of it away when he exhaled.

“You could close your eyes,” Naegi offered. “Pretend it’s dirt. That’s not actual food.”

The Imposter did as he said. Or started to, but before he could take the plunge, he plaintively reminded them, “I ate yesterday. Isn’t it better to ease into it?”

“That’s why you’re only having one thing for breakfast,” Naegi said.

Either the Imposter accepted his reasoning or accepted that Naegi wasn’t going to back down. He made no more complaints. Instead, he breathed steadily, as if following the beat of an imaginary metronome. Naegi hoped the Imposter’s palms weren’t sweaty or that was going to be very disgusting cereal.

Then, the Imposter raised his hand at once, basically slamming it into his face. Naegi winced as crumbs spilled onto his bed. The Imposter huffed and worked his jaw, but the cereal already crushed so there wasn’t anything to chew.

“So?” Naegi asked, too anxious to wait.

“. . . It’s easier,” the Imposter admitted. “Not having to chew.”

“Hmm, I wonder if something liquid would work, too,” Nidai said thoughtfully. “You don’t have a problem with medicine, right? We could get Hanamura-kun to whip up something with that taste.”

“That could work,” the Imposter said.
Naegi grinned. If it did work, maybe the Imposter could eat more than one meal a day! Not that Naegi was going to say that aloud, of course; he didn’t want to scare the Imposter into a regression when they seemed to be getting somewhere.

“Then let’s go talk to him! Come on, Naegi-kun,” Nidai said.

“But...”

Nidai pushed on his shoulder and whispered, “Come on. Let’s trust him.”

Part of Naegi wanted to protest that this was the Imposter’s life and they didn’t have the luxury to rely on things like that. But he understood Nidai’s point, too. If they didn’t trust him and the Imposter realized that, then he might get sneaky. That was even more dangerous.

Naegi closed the door as they left. He tried to glance through the window, hoping to see the Imposter eating. However, he wasn’t in sight. Sighing, he padded after Nidai.

“He must have been lonely,” Naegi said to himself.

“Hmm?”

He jumped; he’d forgotten Nidai was right in front of him. “The Imposter. If he thinks food was his only constant in like... Plus, he’s always in disguise. Even when he’s making friends, they’re not truly making friends with him. They’re making friends with the role he’s playing.”

“Most Ultimate are lonely, Naegi-kun.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s pretty common for Ultimates not to have friends before Hope’s Peak,” Nidai said. “Or at least, friends that aren’t associated with their talent. I told you that I spent most of my early life in a hospital. When I was allowed go to school, a lot of kids picked on me for being ill. It wasn’t until I met Daisuke and took that first step that I made friends. And those kids I did befriend always ended up becoming my players.”

“They picked on you for being in the hospital? That’s awful!”

“It’s what kids do,” Nidai said with a shrug.

Naegi frowned. “And the others?”

“Soda-kun was bullied a lot,” Nidai said. “People like Nevermind-san and Kuzuryu-kun? I don’t think kids in their positions can make real friends. I know Tanaka-kun, Saionji-san and Na... Nanami-san were alone, too. Those are all off the top of my head.”

“What about my class?” Naegi asked quietly.

“I don’t think Kirigiri-san, Togami-kun or Fukawa-san had any close friends when they arrived at Hope’s Peak,” Nidai said. “Honestly, people like you who did have a social life outside the school and their talent were the odd ones.”

“Koizumi-san had an outside friend, too, right?” Naegi asked carefully.

“She did, but that girl died.” Nidai looked away. “Even if her friend had lived, their friendship might not have lasted long.”
Oh? Nothing Koizumi had said indicated their relationship had been rocky. Despite feeling like he was prying too deep, he asked, “Why not?”

“Hope’s Peak didn’t encourage those types of friendships, not unless it was related to your talent. You got away with it because you were the Lucky Student. But when it came to the rest of us, they worried that if we spent too much time with the others, our talents would suffer. There put a lot of barriers between us and the regular folks, and that made it hard to maintain those relationships. Plus, after Koizumi-san’s friend was murdered, they used that as even another reason to keep us apart. . .”

Nidai spluttered profusely. Naegi waved him off and said, “It’s fine. Koizumi-san already told me she was murdered.”

“Hah! Glad to hear it. Giving away a secret like that isn’t very team-friendly.”

“Yeah.”

They walked towards the hotel. The pool they passed was still green and full of plant matter, but someone had thought to at least throw a cover over it. At the least, it helped blocked out the smell.

“Hope’s Peak really wasn’t as great as everyone said it was,” Naegi said, staring off into the distance.

“What makes you say that? Most of us made all our friends there.”

“I’m not saying it’s the worst thing ever, but it also doesn’t sound like it was that great. You know, Kamukura-kun told me that a couple of times, too, but I didn’t understand what he meant back then.”

“But Hope’s Peak, it. . .”

“It’s partly responsible for this, isn’t it?” Naegi gestured vaguely in the direction of the cottages. “I can’t remember those days, but Kamukura-kun implied that much.”

Nidai said, “I thought it was a great school.”

Of course. You were an Ultimate, he didn’t say. He doubted Nidai had the objectiveness to understand Kamukura’s point. Few Ultimates would. This was something he would have to talk to Kirigiri, or Komaru about.

Their talk had slowed their pace, so Naegi nudged Nidai. “Come on. The sooner we get to Hanamura-kun, the more time he has to think about what he’s going to make for the Imposter.”
Cooking of Corruption

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

This was familiar: standing guard outside the Young Master’s door, turning away those who sought entry. She thanked him silently in her head for the task. Only silently however, as he would reject any appreciation spoken aloud.

On guard she stayed, a bulkhead against the ire of their classmates. A couple offered condolences, but most were distraught over the Master’s actions and their consequences. She treated all visitors the same; with cold indifference and an empty stare.

Kirigiri received the same greeting when she approached. The detective didn’t appear bothered by it. Of course, that was only natural when Kirigiri, by default, greeted others with that same cool indifference.

“I’ll let you know that I couldn’t find it either,” Kirigiri said with distaste. “However, the trash can was on the floor when I entered, which implies that someone did.”

“No one has informed us of its discovery,” Pekoyama said.

“Unusual, isn’t it?”

Kirigiri said that with the tone of one dropping a hint. Except the flippant way she brushed her hair back afterwards suggested it wasn’t so much a hint she had given as it was the actual answer. An answer that Pekoyama couldn’t interpret. She kept her expression neutral.

“Do you know what provoked Kuzuryu-kun’s actions?” Kirigiri asked.

“I cannot say for certain, but . . .” Pekoyama looked away. She should have stayed with him that night. “This happened the night that one of his friends lapsed into a coma and another had to overcome some very crippling mental demons.”

Kirigiri exhaled. “I see. Please understand that while I am glad to see that Kuzuryu-kun has rid himself of that thing, I believe I am perfectly reasonable in saying his timing could have been better.”

“I understand,” she said.

“Will he attend dinner, or should I ask Tsumiki-san to bring him something? She’ll want to check on him, anyways.”

“That would be best. He’s had enough of being in the spotlight.”

With only a slight dip of the chin as a goodbye, Kirigiri turned away.

Pekoyama called after her. “Could Kamukura-kun examine him? It would be comforting to know that his condition will lead to no more surprises.”

“Tsumiki-san says this doesn’t require his intervention,” Kirigiri said after a slight pause. “Additionally, if Kamukura-kun thought this was dangerous, I am certain he would have let us know by now.”

Of course. Kamukura only did what was logical, not what was right.
Pekoyama heard a faint sound. She couldn’t hear enough to determine the voice’s gender, but the direction it was coming from told her enough. She excused herself from the conversation and walked into Kuzuryu’s cabin.

He didn’t look much like a Yakuza heir right now. Not when he was pouting and sitting up in bed with his pyjamas on even though it was well past noon. He knew it, too, as it was the first thing he complained about when she walked in.

“No physical exertion,” he whined. “Why does that even matter? I don’t exercise using my eye!”

“It’s a standard precaution,” she told him.

“One that doesn’t make any sense! And why do I have to be in my pyjamas for this?”

*Because if you aren’t, you’ll try to disobey her out of spite,* Pekoyama didn’t say. Instead, she chose a more diplomatic phrasing. “I thought it would be more comfortable. It is best to avoid stressing your body during this time.”

If she had been someone else, he would have pointed out that being – as he would put it – grounded was itself stressful. But it was her, so he simply muttered about it and sunk a little deeper into the mattress.

“Or maybe it’s because nobody wants to see my face,” Kuzuryu said. “Fuck, if I put the eyepatch on, will they be happy again?”

“Does that matter to you?”

“Yeah. I mean no! Of course not. Why would I care what anyone else thinks?”

“Please do not take this the wrong way, but I would like to remind you that this is not the Yakuza. You shouldn’t worry so much about maintaining your image.”

“So, I’m supposed to be all sappy like the regular folks, huh?” Kuzuryu grumbled.

“If it pleases you.”

He muttered something again, so quietly this time that she had to ask him to repeat himself.

“I s-said it’s hard to remember that when you’re calling me Master all the time.” He pulled at his collar; the pallor of his face was turning an interesting pink. “I mean what I am supposed to think when you keep saying that?”

“Then what would you have me call you?” she asked.

“Just use my fucking name. That’s what a name is for, right?” He asked that in a rush, refusing to meet her eyes. Sweat dotted the fringe of his hair.

“If that’s what you wish. . . Kuzur –”

“Not that! Fuck, if the princess gets to call me Fuyuhiko, you do, too.”

“Fu. . . Fuyuhiko.”

There was no way to pin down what followed next. No simple word to describe the atmosphere that descended upon them. All she knew for sure was that suddenly, neither could look at the other. That her throat had closed, and she couldn’t breathe. Yet she couldn’t conjure up the slightest hint of
alarm. Her words felt like sacrilege. She felt like a prophet who had slandered her own god while standing in His most holy of places. The damnation was complete; the agony, ethereal. Yet she embraced it. Yet she craved it and desired more. She wanted to take this dagger in her heart and push it through until it emerged on the other side.

“That... That’s my name,” Kuzuryu said. “Damn. It... It sounds so different when you say it.”

“Does that bother you?” Without thinking, she looked at him. She let his name slip from her lips again, “Fuyuhiko?”

He met her eyes, too. There’s something weighing down his stare, something she can’t name. “No. I mean, I call you Peko, don’t I? So, we’re l-like even.”

“Yes,” she said softly.

There is something in their mutual stare that she can’t name. Whatever it is, she knew it wasn’t supposed to be there; that it was a betrayal of everything the family had moulded her into. She can hear those whispers in the back of her mind, telling her that she’s a traitor, that she’s disgusting, that she doesn’t deserve this. She ignored them all.

“Do you trust me, Peko?” he asked.

“With my life,” she said instantly.

He patted a space on the bed next to him. “Come sit with me.”

“With you?” she repeated hoarsely.

“It’s just sitting,” he said hastily. “I’m not going to do anything weird. I promise.”

In the end, there’s only one answer she can even conceive of giving him.

Naegi sat on the kitchen counter, heels knocking against the cabinet doors beneath it as he watched Hanamura ferry an armful of fruit from one side of the room to the other. The Chef set them down next to a few measuring cups filled with stuff that he claimed would be, ‘Completely nutritious but have the taste of that terrible cough syrup your mother always made you drink.’

“You know you can always ask for help, right?” Naegi asked. “I think it’s a bit unfair that you’re always stuck cooking for everyone.”

“You act as though it’s a chore!” Hanamura waggled his finger at him. “Do you think Nevermind-san complains when she’s telling everyone what to do, or that Tanaka-kun complains when he’s taking care of the farm?”

“But that’s different,” Naegi said. “Nevermind-san only has to talk to people, and Tanaka-kun gets to hang out with the animals. I know taking care of a farm isn’t easy, but they’re not working the way you are.”

The rhythmic chopping of his knife against the wooden cutting board filled the kitchen as Hanamura thought his statement over. “It isn’t work. That sort of drudgery isn’t suitable for a slick city-dweller like me. What I do is an experience.”

“I’m not arguing about the quality of your food, just how much time you put into it.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” Hanamura sighed. “Well, let me ask you this, Mr. Ultimate Hope: do you
complain when you get to talk about hope?”

“No, but that’s . . . .”

Hanamura tsked at him. “Ultimates have always been obsessed with our talents. Why, how else do you become the best in the world unless you live and breathe that life? You can’t reach your full potential until the very thought of performing makes your nether regions quiver.”

“Half of what you do isn’t cooking. It’s prep. Back home, you had a bunch of robots and helpers doing that for you.”

“I was feeding an entire base back then, not two classes. You know I’m not a virgin at this,” Hanamura said. “Before Hope’s Peak, I was the head chef of a little old family diner. It was tucked away in the backcountry, but once those tummies starting rumbling, you bet that place filled up quickly. It’d be non-stop until an hour before closing, and sometimes not even then.”

“I thought you came from the city,” Naegi said.

Hanamura coughed. “Err, of course. Didn’t I say so? I came from one of the most popular restaurants in Japan. Why would you think . . . ? Alright, you got me. I suppose pretending I’m a big city chef doesn’t have the same prestige anyways when Tokyo’s a toxic wasteland.”

It was what? He. . . decided not to think about it. Changing the topic as fast as he could, he asked, “Did you tell the rest of your class you were from the city, too?”

“Or course. I told everyone that.”

“Why?”

“Have you ever turned on the television and seen one of those handsome chefs at work? How many of them have a country accent? That kind of world-class acts don’t come out of the back alleys like I do. If I was ever going to achieve that kind of success, I needed to be as slick and sophisticated as them, which meant coming from the right neighbourhood.”

“But the world loves an underdog story! Yours would be perfect. I can already hear the movie trailer: a poor boy from the country goes to a world-class cooking academy full of posh, upper-class chefs who are obsessed with fame and glory, and has to use his unique perspective and experience to help them rediscover the passion that led them to become chefs in the first place.” Naegi swept his hand in a half-circle through the air, his fingers wiggling like he was dropping sparks from them. “All you need is the guy who discovers you and sees the potential that no one else did.”

“You mean Kizakura-kun?”

“Who?”

“The talent scout of Hope’s Peak. You must have met him. All the Ultimates are scouted by . . . That’s right, you got in by a lottery.”

Naegi grinned. “Isn’t it crazy? They use a lottery to try and get a regular student, but they just end up choosing someone who actually had a hidden talent all along.”

“Fate is a wonderful bedfellow,” Hanamura said.

Naegi shook his head, remembering what they had been talking about. “Anyways, there’s lots of people here. I’m sure someone of them can cut vegetables without cutting off their fingers.”
“When you beg to help like that with those innocent little eyes, how can I deny you?” Hanamura crooned. “Get over here. You can get started peeling these mangos.”

Sure, easy enough. He didn’t even have to use a knife.

“You’ve been eating your fruit and vegetables, haven’t you?” Hanamura asked him. “It’s a source of vitamin C and without that, you could get scurvy.”

“Of course. I eat whatever you give me. Scurvy’s what sailors used to get, isn’t it?”

“It is. We should all be fine, though. We’ll be eating plenty of fruit on this island,” Hanamura said.

“What about Owari-san and the Imposter?” he asked quietly.

“Well, Owari-san looks alright,” Hanamura said. “Although I don’t stare at her nearly as much as I used to... I’ve only seen the Imposter a couple of times without his mask. Although when I did, I did notice his skin had these awful scales.”

“I saw that, too,” Naegi said. “Good thing he’ll be getting vitamin C today.”

“Only if he drinks it.”

“He will,” Naegi vowed. “I’ll make sure he does. And maybe this method would work on Owari-san, too. Do you know why she doesn’t eat?”

“She loves food. Loved food,” Hanamura corrected quickly. “Giving that up gave her plenty of despair.”

“But she doesn’t have anything against medicine, right?” When Hanamura confirmed that, Naegi pumped his fist. “Yes!”

“She has to wake up first.”

Well, there went that victory. “I know. Hey, do you still eat garbage?”

“Naturally. H-hey, don’t you think of using that medicine trick on me!”

“I wasn’t thinking anything like that,” Naegi lied smoothly. “I was just curious why you did. It is because you’re letting your talent go to waste?”

“Go to waste? My innocent little boy, where are we right now? How can it go to waste when I’m feeding an entire island?” Hanamura suddenly grabbed a second knife and started juggling them.

Naegi inched away.

“Does your talent also give you a proficiency with knives?” Naegi asked, eyeing the way one blade glisten as it tumbled through the air.

“Cooking isn’t just an art. It’s a performance,” Hanamura said. “A master chef such as myself picks up all kind of tricks along the way.”

“Okay. So, if I’m wrong, then why do you eat garbage?”

“To deprive myself of those memories,” Hanamura said with satisfaction. “The taste of my family’s cooking is the only thing I have left from that diner. Let my food rot for a day or two, especially in this heat, and it never tastes the same again.”
“Aren’t you scared of getting sick?”

“Au contraire! With my palate, I can detect tainted food with a whiff. Everything I eat is pathogen-free.”

“Can you tell me about that diner?” Naegi asked. Slyly, he added, “I mean you must get a lot of despair from remembering things you don’t have anymore.”

Hanamura giggled like an anime schoolgirl. “How true! Well, there isn’t much to tell. My mama opened and ran the diner. Didn’t even stop when me and my siblings were born. We all helped, of course, but my siblings never took to the job like I did. They went instead with the family good looks and – you might have heard of them – become the Ultimate Male and Female Escort. Of course, they were only into their careers for the money. They would have sold the diner to all those bigshots that came after us.”

“What bigshots?”

“Celebrity chefs,” Hanamura said with pride. “And some big chains, but my mama would never sell to one of those corporate hounds. Once a place is acquired by one of those, it’s never the same.”

Naegi said, “Your diner must have been super successful to grab all that attention. No wonder Hope’s Peak found you.”

“Yes, he did.” Hanamura sighed fondly and absently brushed back his hair. “I knew he was someone special when he walked in. Someone with that rugged, devil-may-care glint in their eye can only come from a place of status.”

“How does it work?” Naegi asked. “I don’t remember anything about how Hope’s Peak chooses its students.”

“Hmm. Well, I’m not sure how they find us in the first place,” Hanamura admitted. “That talent scout just shows up one day, and I guess he watches for a while to make sure you’re the real thing. Next thing you know, he’s in your living room talking to you and your parents about Hope’s Peak.”

“That must have been exciting.” Had it been like that for him? Had Hope’s Peak sent their talent scout to tell Naegi’s family, or had they just sent a letter and assumed they would accept without any questions? They had been Hope’s Peak, after all, and Naegi had been an average boy ignorant of the corruption lurking within.

“I guess,” Hanamura said. “I tried to turn him down.”


“In a regular story, I would have, but my mama was ill,” Hanamura said. “It was getting harder and harder for her to run Hanamura’s Diner, and I worried about what would happen if I left her all by herself. But she promised me she would be fine.”

Naegi couldn’t help but think of Owari in that hospital bed. With a surge of will, he banished the image from his mind.

“She’s the reason I went to Hope’s Peak,” Hanamura said. “I told her I would become the best chef in the world, and they she wouldn’t need to work anymore.”

“You wanted to become so famous that everyone would beg to work for you,” Naegi finished. “So, what happened to her?”
He realized too late what a stupid question that was. It was self-explanatory, wasn’t it? Hanamura’s mother had been ill in the middle of an apocalypse. There was only one way it could have ended. And none of that considered that her son had become one of the Ultimate Despair.

Oh no.

Hanamura was giggling. He was rocking back and forth, arms clutching each other, one of the knives kissing his skin. He could see a few lines of tension around the blade as it pressed into his skin, although it didn’t seem to be drawing blood. Yet.

“She’s gone. Gone, gone, gone. Never coming back. I made sure of it. Hanamura’s diner is a pile of rubble, just like the neighbours.”

Bile rose in his throat. Hanamura had hinted at murdering his own mother before, and it never got any easier to hear. Especially now that he had more context behind their relationship. Like all the times before, Hanamura’s eyes were swirling a deep red. He muttered to himself, seemingly oblivious to Naegi’s presence.

Naegi took a deep breath and hugged him.

That stilled the rocking. Hanamura mumbled, “Wh-what?”

“I’m sorry,” Naegi said.

“Sorry?” Hanamura repeated like a lost boy. He didn’t say anything else. Naegi thought about it, but he couldn’t think of a way to turn this one around, like he had with Koizumi earlier. He patted the portly chef on the back.

“Sorry?” Hanamura repeated again. “For what?”

Naegi remembered the half-sane mutterings from the times before. “I think you know.”

Honestly, he wasn’t sure if he was helping or not. And, uh, sometimes the swirly-eyed Despairs could get a bit dangerous.

Hanamura patted his shoulder. “You’re quite the character, Naegi-kun. There’s nothing I need to feel sorry for.”

“No, maybe not now,” Naegi said. “But Hanamura-kun? You loved her. I can hear it. I want you to know that what you did wasn’t your fault. And when you change your mind about whether you regret it, I want you to remember I said that.”

Hanamura blinked. “. . . Huh?”

“Come on,” Naegi said with a sad smile. “Let’s peel those mangos!”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
I think I’ve set up all the dominoes I needed. Let’s have fun~
She understood Naegi’s point. She couldn’t disagree with it either. Eventually, their two classes had
to come to terms and small doses of mingling, such as the expedition Kamukura had launched to
populate their fledging farm, would be crucial to that. Still, she couldn’t help but cringe at Naegi’s
recent suggestion. While she was open to developing the bonds between their feuding sides, doing so
in a room full of knives was not the situation she had envisioned.

Although she doubted that Naegi had thought that far ahead. That disaster on the ship had opened his
mind to the danger of his older friends, so she was sure trying to place both in a room full of
weapons was not his intent. She suspected he hadn’t thought beyond food and eating when he
suggested assisting Hanamura in the kitchen. Besides, Naegi wasn’t a great actor and the way he had
spluttered and flushed when she pointed out the flaw suggested plenty.

Given the problem she had presented, she hadn’t expected anyone to take up his suggestion.
However, the next morning when she walked into the dining room, she found Asahina
conspicuously absent. The most logical conclusion was that she was out for an early morning swim,
but Naegi walked in shortly after and cheerfully confirmed he had seen her setting off for First
Island.

“Can I come, too?” Naegi asked when Kirigiri announced her intention to check on their friend.

“You may,” she said. Naegi would be a buffer against those members of Class 77 who’d rather not
see her. She needed that extra layer of protection now that Kamukura’s omniscience no longer
shielded them.

There were a couple of jeers and dirty looks when she walked into Hotel Mirai’s second floor, but
without breakfast or coffee to fuel them, they lacked force behind them. She and Naegi walked into
the kitchen without being challenged. Hanamura glanced at them and then made a point of getting
very distracted by his stove. Asahina was filling bowls near a large pot of soup. She barely held back
a scream when Kirigiri cleared her throat next to her.

“What are you two doing here?” Asahina asked.

“If you’re helping out, I should, too,” Naegi said happily. “Do you want me to take that tray out for
you?”

“Oh, sure. Go ahead.”

Once Naegi was on his way out, Kirigiri gave Asahina a look.

“What? You think I can’t cook?” Asahina snapped. “Makoto was asking for volunteers. He didn’t
say there was any criteria.”

“I’m not upset,” Kirigiri said. “I’m surprised. I didn’t think any of us would be comfortable here.
However, if I did have to choose someone who wasn’t a retired serial killer, it would have been you.”

Asahina shrugged. “Yeah. I can defend myself from a short little chef.”

They looked at Hanamura, who thankfully still appeared to be ignoring them.

“We just wanted to check on you,” Kirigiri said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t, it’s just…” Asahina rubbed her upper arm. “I have everything handled. You two don’t need to be here.”

Kirigiri squinted. “…Asahina-san, is there something you’re trying to hide from me?”

The spark of defiance confirmed it.

Before she could press any further, Naegi came flouncing back in. “All ready for the next tray!”

“Right. Here, take the ladle.” Asahina handed it off to him, all the while keeping Kirigiri’s gaze. There was no doubt now that something was going on here, but least Naegi didn’t seem to be involved this time. Kirigiri turned away to watch Hanamura for a few seconds. Seeing nothing suspicious, she turned back to her friend.

“Mm, it smells great. Did you two want some?” Naegi asked. “There’s no way that class is going to eat all of this. I’m sure Hanamura-kun won’t mind. Especially if we don’t tell him!”

Asahina said, “Let’s finish giving it out first and then. . .”

As Asahina spoke, Naegi leaned over the pot and took a large whiff. He licked his lips. With a sly smirk, he brought the ladle to his lips –

“Don’t eat that!”

She smacked the ladle out of his hands. It skittered across the floor, leaving a trail of white liquid and potato lumps. Naegi, tongue still peeking out of his mouth and fingers still curled around an invisible handle, just stood there. On the other side of the room, Hanamura ceased cooking and looked at them.

“Aoi, what’s wrong?” Naegi asked.

Kirigiri already knew. She saw the quiver in Asahina’s lips, that defiant glint in her eyes that had only sharpened, and she knew.

“Makoto, dump the soup,” Kirigiri commanded.

“What -?”

But she was already pushing her way into the dining room. She charged in. The sound of her heels hitting the floor cut off all conversation even before she raised her voice and shouted, “Stop!”

They all stared at her. She held her breath to control her expression.

“The cream in that soup is curdled. We didn’t notice until now,” Kirigiri lied. “The last thing we need is a mass case of food poisoning, especially when your classmates are dealing with their problems with food.”
Koizumi shoved her soup bowl away, shuddering.

Keeping her voice level, Kirigiri asked, “Did anyone eat the soup?”

She kept her gaze even. She needed to keep them calm. She needed to prevent this from spiraling into anything dangerous. She tried to inspect their utensils, but the distance was too great.

“No one?” She prayed they weren’t lying to her. “Good. Please discard it. We’ll have something else for you to eat.”

As she turned to the kitchen, Naegi rushed over from where he had been rinsing out the soup pot. Frantically, he asked, “Kyoko-san, what’s wrong?”

As that, his eyes darted sideways to where Hanamura was. She understood; Naegi knew that something was very wrong and was looking for a cover story.

“I noticed that some of the ingredients Asahina-san was using were expired,” Kirigiri said. “I acted swiftly to avoid anyone getting sick.”

“Expired?” Hanamura burst out. “Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“It wasn’t any of your ingredients. Asahina-san had added some cream to the soup. Isn’t that right, Asahina-san?” Kirigiri’s gaze bore into the woman.

“Right,” Asahina said grudgingly.

Of course, that didn’t make Hanamura feel any better. Foaming at the mouth, he muttered, “You tried to improve on one of my recipes? Miley Cyrus! In most countries, that’s a legal classified as attempted murder!”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re not in any of those countries,” Kirigiri said quickly. “I’m sorry if this inconveniences you, but I will be taking Asahina-san back to our island now.”

“Yes! Get this defiler out of my kitchen!”

They were chased out. That was fine. Whatever got them out of there quicker. Naegi and Asahina both kept their mouths clamped shut, recognizing the severity of the situation but in different ways. Only when they were out of the gated community of Hotel Mirai did Kirigiri let any reaction express itself. And so it did, in an angry twist of her glove at the wrist. It was small, but it was enough for that emotion to burn itself out.

“Kyoko-san, what happened?” If Naegi had been a dog, he would have asked that with ears flat and tail tucked between his legs.

She didn’t know how to answer. She couldn’t predict how he would handle the truth.

“Asahina-san made a mistake while she was cooking.” It wasn’t a lie. Just a massive understatement.

“I didn’t make a mistake,” Asahina muttered.

“Yes, you did,” Kirigiri said sharply. “Do you have any idea what you could have done?”

“I know exactly what would have happened,” Asahina said.

“Aoi?”
“. . . Makoto, please leave us alone,” Kirigiri said.

Wide-eyed, Naegi looked to Asahina, but thankfully she agreed with Kirigiri’s command. Kirigiri didn’t try to delude herself; Naegi was no fool. He would come looking for answers later, and history proved he would likely find them. But at least she could delay the reckoning.

“What was it?” Kirigiri asked Asahina when they were alone. “I know there was something, so tell me what it was.”

“. . . Pufferfish.”

The Ultimate Swimmer. That meant Asahina had access to all the resources in the shallows, including its inhabitants. Including their poisons. Everyone in Japan knew the tales of those who had died eating improperly prepared pufferfish. She should have seen this as a possibility.

“Why?”

“Seriously? You can’t think of a single reason?” Asahina scoffed. “You’re the Ultimate Detective. Tell me why. Or better yet, tell me why not?”

“If they had found out. . .”

“They wouldn’t have. They would have been dead!”

Her shout echoed across the island. A few birds burst into flight, squawking in alarm. The high morning sun shone down on them, burning them from the outside in.

“I’m tired of pretending we’re some happy family,” Asahina said. “We’re not. We’re trapped on this island because of them. If it had just been Naegi-kun, I know you and Togami-kun could have said something really smart to make the Future Foundation back off, but now we can’t because we’re stuck with them. We’re busting our asses trying to help them and they don’t even want it.”

“Asahina-san –”

“Why are we even helping them? Why do we have to forgive them after everything they’ve done? They helped Enoshima murder our friends, and our families. And we’re . . . just sitting here pretending like that didn’t matter. Well, it matters to me! I don’t care if the Future Foundation would kill them. They deserve to die! Everything would be better off if they did.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. They’re the reason the world’s like this. If we just got rid of them, everything could go back to normal.”

Kirigiri took a breath. “You know that isn’t true. The world’s too far gone to go back so easily.”

“And who’s responsible for that?”

“I know they’ve done terrible things. . .”

“No, you don’t.” Asahina shifted away from her, as if regretting her words. But then she shifted back and lifted her chin slightly to meet Kirigiri’s taller gaze. “You were a Division Head. You spent most of your time in your office doing paperwork or giving orders. I was on the front lines. I saw what was out there. You can’t even begin to imagine how awful it is. They caused so much pain, and they’re the ones that get to live happily ever after.”
“No one’s arguing that it’s fair,” Kirigiri agreed quietly. “I know the world wants them dead, and I
don’t fault them for it. However, Ultimate Despair was Enoshima’s plan, not theirs.”

“So? They helped. They’re just extensions of her. That’s what you called them in the Future
Foundation, isn’t it? Limbs of the Ultimate Despair.” Asahina grabbed her hands and pleaded, “If we
had to take Enoshima out to stop despair, then why can’t we get rid of them, too?”

A desperate plead in desperate times. Asahina squeezed her hands. Kirigiri worked one free and
would have let it drop to her side, but something like compassion stopped her. She laid it atop
Asahina’s hands instead.

“Asahina-san, what does it take to drive someone to this?” Kirigiri asked. “Most people aren’t born
criminals; certainly, not an entire class of Ultimates. You know what Enoshima did to us, and that
was just to make us commit murder. What do you think she did to them?”

“We don’t know she did anything to them!” Asahina protested.

“You don’t mean that. You don’t find a group of people willing to architect this kind of chaos unless
you’re specifically looking for it, and Hope’s Peak wasn’t. We knew them once. Would you have
thought those people were capable of this?”

“No, but I didn’t think Enoshima was either!”

“Point taken,” Kirigiri said as her hand fell away from Asahina’s clasped ones. “But looking back,
something about her was off. I can’t say the same about Class 77. At least not at the beginning. I
don’t know what she did to them, but she changed them.”

“They’re not the people we used to know. They’re strangers.”

“They don’t have to be. Naegi-kun can fix them. He has been fixing them.”

“And look how they thanked him,” Asahina said bitterly.

Words alone weren’t going to fix this. Not with someone as stubborn as Asahina. But she didn’t
know what would. Kirigiri crossed her arms over her chest and said, “You’re not going to attempt
this again.”

“Guess I can’t now that you know to watch for it,” Asahina said.

They departed on those less-than amiable terms. Kirigiri stared off toward the distance, where the
jewel-crusted waves lapped at the shoreline, and wondered how much of her own argument she truly
believed in.

She should have seen this coming. They’d all known after that fourth trial that Asahina had the
potential... Yet she had overlooked the possibility of her acting. Foolishly, she had been focused on
the threat outside and blinded herself to the one within. Asahina might not mean to be a threat to
them, but by violating this fragile peace, she had become one. And naturally, it had to be when
Kamukura was absent –

... That was a factor worth consideration. Because that was the reason she hadn’t seen this coming.
Kirigiri had overlooked this because Asahina shouldn’t have acted. Kamukura’s impressive display
of omniscience on the ship had left them all cowed. Asahina should have assumed that he would stop
her, so why had she gone ahead and tried to poison the Remnants?

It had to be because Asahina had known. That was the only answer. Asahina had known Kamukura
was gone, and that led to one other inescapable conclusion.

She stormed back to their island. Head high, she headed straight for her target’s door and let herself inside without knocking. As the door closed behind her, they stared at each other.

“Why?” she asked.

Togami grunted. Despite her sudden entrance, he was perfectly composed, as if he’d been standing in the middle of his room for ages, waiting for her to appear. “I’ll assume that you stopped her.”

“Why would you tell her Kamukura-kun was gone? You knew she would act recklessly.” Kirigiri grimaced. “That was the point, wasn’t it? Was this her idea, or did you feed it to her?”

Togami shrugged. “Does it matter?”

Not really. The intent was the same.

“You know what the consequences would be if she had only partially succeeded. Why would you risk this?”

“You of all people should know the benefits of risk-taking,” Togami said flippantly. “And this is the only time that bastard isn’t breathing down my neck.”

Laced in there was another confession. She pressed it. “How long have you been waiting for this chance?”

He was silent.

“Fine. Let’s begin with my first question then. Why?”

He turned, presenting his back. She couldn’t be sure whether he was scorning her or trying to hide from her. “I said I’d rebuild this world, wouldn’t I? Sometimes, when a tree is diseased, the only way to save it is to prune the diseased branches. Don’t try to tell me they’re anything but parasites. They’ll never be anything else. The world will never accept them or their talents back. The best they can hope for is to hide on this little island while the world believes they’re dead and forgets them. They have nothing left to give back.”

“That’s awfully utilitarian,” she said flatly. “None of what you said, however, means they had to die.”

“Why do you care?” Togami asked and she paused, unsure. “Has the great detective decided they’re the protagonist and needs to do the right thing? Or have you listened to too much of that nonsense Naegi is spouting?”

“His methods are unorthodox, but even you can’t deny he’s getting results.”

“None of that matters. Naegi is living in a fantasy world where if he just believes hard enough good will prevail. The real world doesn’t work that way. People don’t stay down because you beat them. They’ll come back again and again for revenge until you put them down. That’s the world we live in. A world where weak people are devoured and justice only exists when you make it.” He looked over his shoulder, and some weird cross of a smirk and a snarl peeked at her. “And this is justice.”

“Since when do you care about avenging the world?”

Togami looked forward again. “You really have fallen for his platitudes.”
“Don’t say that!” she said, suddenly reminded of a certain former boss of hers that had loved that word.

Togami scoffed.

“I don’t believe this is for the good of the world,” she said finally.

“It’s not. This is for me.”

“For your upcoming empire? Why? It would rise regardless of whether Ultimate Despair is dead.”

“A king-slayer isn’t rewarded with mercy. They’re hung and quartered.”

“And that’s what you want.”

“Of course it is!” Togami whirled around, the lens of his glasses flashing in the room’s light. “They razed my empire. That walking skeleton made a laughing stock of my family’s name and my name. A death by poison would be a mercy compared to what they deserved.”

“This is personal for you,” Kirigiri said.

“Yes. I said that.”

“Not the way I meant. This is actually personal.”

As it always did, Togami’s lip curled at the implication of weakness. But unlike the times before, it smoothed out again. Shoulders dropped.

“I knew you wouldn’t understand. What did you lose? A father whose murderer you had the pleasure of watching die. That’s it. You still have that grandfather of yours, and a detective’s a detective regardless of how stable the world is.”

“Togami-kun, I . . . I’m sorry.”

“That’s all you have to say? Hmph. Naturally. You will never understand what they took from people like me.”

She had apologized, and she meant it. For as long as she had known him, Togami had always put up this indominable show of power. Unlike most, it hadn’t been a farce. The only time she had seen him weak was a few, broken moments after he had realized his family had fallen. But even those times had been overshadowed by vows of vengeance that seemed to be uttered out of obligation. His front had been a success and they all assumed that he wasn’t hurt, that he couldn’t hurt.

Exhausted, out of cards to play, Kirigiri said, “I hope you’re ready to face the consequences of your actions.”

“If you handled it properly, there won’t be any,” Togami said simply.

And he would try again. That she knew. Not today, not tomorrow because she was ready, but next time Kamukura’s gaze was turned elsewhere, it could happen.

Kirigiri left his room, closed the door, and slumped against it.

Chapter End Notes
Next Chapter:
Togami said if Kirigiri handled everything properly there would be no consequences.

But what if she didn't?
For What She Had Done

Chapter Notes

It is late, but here, have a longer chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The announcement that the first dish of the day had been spoiled was met with titters and lackluster complaints. It was first thing in the morning after all, and only Mioda had the energy to complain about such things. In fact, if the Imposter had decided to take breakfast with them, his glee would have been the most prominent emotion. But like he had the day before, he was cooped up in his cabin where presumably, Nidai was trying to goad him into eating.

When Hanamura walked into the dining room empty-handed, they assumed they would hear a lifetime’s worth of apologies. Never before had he been forced to take away a dish. Even if that other girl was to blame, no doubt he felt that it chipped at the stellar reputation he strived to uphold. After all, in his career, one unfortunate mistake could be enough to hit the news and sink the liveliest business.

But Hanamura did not apologize. He walked up to the nearest person, Koizumi, and said, “Can I see that?”

She handed her steaming bowl over. Hanamura lifted it with both hands. His nostrils widened as he inhaled deeply. He took her spoon next and stirred slowly.

“There’s no cream in this,” Hanamura said. “The consistency is completely wrong. Only an amateur would make that mistake.”

“So, we can eat it?” Soda asked. He licked his lips and reached for his spoon -

“No!” Hanamura said. Soda yelped and the spoon clattered back onto the table. “There is something else in this. I’m not sure what, but I can smell it.”

“Was she mistaken?” Pekoyama asked.

Still stirring, Hanamura looked deep into the swirling liquid. “I don’t think so. Kirigiri-san knew something was in here, but I don’t think she thought it was cream.”

Nevermind’s chair creaked. The former queen daintily removed the white napkin she had spread across her lap in preparation for a meal. She laid it back on the table and folded it in half, then into quarters so that it was a neat square. She didn’t clear her throat. She didn’t shout. Yet when she spoke, she commanded all attention in the room.

“If it is true that Kirigiri was lying about the cream, then we must question why she still thought it fit to stop us,” Nevermind said. “What reason could she have to make that decision?”

“. . . Did you eat any?” Pekoyama suddenly demanded of Kuzuryu.

“No, I didn’t. Why, what do you think the problem is . . . ? Fuck.”
“Hey, this is a secret-free zone,” Mioda chirped. “What is it?”

“Poison,” Nevermind said primly.

They had yet to eat and thus, had no energy from food, but nothing was more rousing than a spike of adrenaline. Saionji knocked her bowl onto the floor in her haste to get it away from herself.

“P-poison?” Tsumiki said. “But we don’t have many supplies here. I don’t know if I can make an antidote!”

“Well, nobody ate any, right?” Soda said. Everyone looked around, and it seemed to be true. “Hey! What about the Imposter and Nidai. They ain’t here, so . . .”

“They don’t have any soup,” Hanamura said. “I personally prepared that meal.”

Koizumi stood up. “I’m going to check on them, just in case.”

She rushed to the stairs. On the way, she passed by Komaeda who was letting a spoonful of soup slowly drip back into the bowl. He watched each drop curiously, like Hanamura had announced the soup was stuffed with some newly discovered spice rather than a killer.

“Where did she get poison?” Komaeda wondered.

“Who cares?” Saionji said. “Those chicken-shits tried to poison us!”

“Where are our guards?” Nevermind demanded. She was standing, bracing herself against the table with both arms. It seemed at first that she had forgotten where they were, but then she clarified, “I was under the assumption that Kamukura-kun meant to keep the peace.”

“Maybe that’s why Kirigiri-san came,” Tsumiki said quietly. “Kamukura-kun told her –”

“That’s dumb. What if somebody had tried to eat some?” Soda said. “Was he gonna throw a baseball all the way from his cabin and break the bowl to stop us? Why’d he even let that chick help out if she was gonna do this?”

“I demand that he explain himself!” Nevermind slammed her palm on the table. “If he is indeed keeping such secrets, then he must be punished accordingly.”

“Yeah? And how do you plan to do that?” Saionji asked.

“Um. . . That is something we shall come to a decision on later!” Sonia tittered. “But for now, we must confront the dragon in his den.”

Tanaka raised his glass, as if to toast. Nevermind proudly swaggered to the front of the group and they, not having anything better to do, followed her lead out of the hotel. Kamukura’s cabin had always been an eyesore: brown walls where theirs had white. Logs instead of concrete. Positioned so deliberately away from the rest, letting everyone know they were separate, that he was on the outside looking in.

“That was a quick breakfast,” Naegi said. He stood on the sidewalk between the path leading to the cabins and the pool. Head cocked to one side, he studied them.

“Makoto-kun, is something the matter?” Nevermind asked.

“No. . . I don’t think so,” he admitted.
“Do you know why Kirigiri said my food was contaminated?” Hanamura asked.

“No. Actually, I was wondering that myself.” Naegi rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ll take it you don’t have answers.”

“No, but we are going to the source of all answers.”

There was a particular sneer to Nevermind’s lips, as if she was calling out a vassal on a broken vow. As one, they turned their gaze to Kamukura’s cabin. The window blinds were drawn, as if Kamukura was trying to shut them out.

They swarmed the door. Or at least the steps to the door. Taking that final plunge into Kamukura’s territory was another matter entirely. As it would, Nevermind was the first to find her resolve. Each step echoed as she made her way to the front door.

She knocked.

Nothing.

She frowned and knocked again. “Kamukura-kun, my friends and I request an audience!”

Nothing.

“Maybe he isn’t home,” Naegi said. “He could be at Third Island.”

“With your friends? That’s where he decided to spend his time when they attempted to murder us?” Nevermind huffed. “That would be quite telling when it comes to his priorities, wouldn’t it?”

“Attempted to murder you?” Naegi blinked rapidly. “What are you talking about?”

“There was something rotten in that soup,” Hanamura said.

“Poison,” Soda finished.

“Wh-what? No way! They’re the ones who hid you from the Future Foundation. They’ve been trying to keep the peace this entire time. Think about it: why would they turn around and try to kill you?”

“I know a rat when I smell one,” Soda said. Next to him, on Tanaka’s shoulders, a couple of hamsters nodded in agreement. “They tried to kill us!”

“Hey, slow down, guys!” Kuzuryu cut in. “We don’t know that yet.”

“I think we do,” Nevermind said. “Pekoyama-san, why else would food be dangerous?”

“Pekoyama-san?” Naegi asked – begged.

She sighed and looked away.

“Kamukura-kun!” Even when Nevermind was shouting, she managed to sound completely neutral like they were discussing the weather over a hot cup of tea. “Open this door immediately!”

When the door didn’t budge, Mioda asked, “So, does that mean he isn’t home.”

“He certainly doesn’t appear to be,” Pekoyama said. She moved aside for Koizumi, who was rejoining the group.
“Third Island it is, then.”

“But I didn’t see him there either,” Naegi said. “Maybe he’s occupied with something completely different. He could be working on something to help Owari-san.”

“Then what you are suggesting is that Kamukura-kun is oblivious to this, and that we are unprotected,” Nevermind surmised.

“Well . . . No, that isn’t –”

“So be it.”

The path cleared before her as Nevermind descended the stairs once more. Something was happening; Naegi could feel it.

“If we cannot trust Kamukura-kun to protect us, then we shall have to take matters into our own hands,” Nevermind declared.

“What does that mean?” Naegi asked warily.

Nevermind gave him the smuggest of looks. “Kamukura-kun favours them. He will not be moved if we were to perish. I would rather not trust our wellbeing to his fickleness. It is time we take matters into our own hands.”

Naegi’s eyes widened. She couldn’t be suggesting . . . but she was. She held herself like a revolutionary leader, evaluating who came before her and their value to the cause. But the banner she wielded was not one of freedom or change, but one of bloodshed and death.

“Hold on!”

To Naegi’s surprise, he wasn’t the one he had spoken. No, that honour belonged to Kuzuryu of all people. He looked so small among the crowd of Despairs, like they were about to swallow him up.

“Maybe there was something funky in that soup,” Kuzuryu said, “or maybe that dimwit did try to add something extra and fucked it up. But you know that if we make a move like this, then it’s the end. This ain’t gonna be a vacation anymore. It’s going to be war.”

“Yes, it will be.” Nevermind slowly walked around him, turning her attention to the others. “How strange it is that much of the modern world rejected the notion of violence. Yet, all great empires were created from a seat of power: from warlords who united the squabbling tribes under their banner, to the partition of a once-great power by its foes. There comes a time in every nation’s history when the call for revolution rises.”

“Can you can it with the war talk for a minute?” Kuzuryu snapped. “We still don’t know if they did anything. ‘Sides, we tried the same thing on the boat, so we don’t exactly have the fucking moral high ground.”

Nevermind idly examined her hand. “Why should any of us trust you?”

“Huh?” Next to Kuzuryu, Pekoyama also blinked in surprise. “The fuck does that mean? You think I’ve been going around snitching or something?”

The look she gave him was perfectly calm: a queen neutrally receiving a visitor. “Your recent actions suggest that your loyalties have turned elsewhere.”
“Do I have to repeat myself? The *fuck* does that mean?”

“It means *that*.”

Nevermind pointed at his right eye where his eyepatch laid. The eyepatch that everyone knew was hiding only an empty socket. Mioda actually gasped and swooned into a startled Mikan’s arms, but that may have just been for the dramatic effect rather than out of emotion.

“Would you care to explain how Enoshima-san’s gift to you ended up in a trash can?” Nevermind said.

Oh, those were real gasps. There was one from Koizumi, who looked as though she was about to throw up. Soda had rolled up his beanie, and had it clenched between his teeth. Naegi peeked at Komaeda, whose mouth was open slightly, as if this were the first time he was hearing about it.

He shook his head and turned his focus back to the conversation. Kuzuryu had yet to answer. Two of his fingers grazed the bottom of his eyepatch. He had his chin slightly turned, turned away from her. Naegi didn’t think Kuzuryu did distress, but this was pretty darn close. Pekoyama was beside him, stiff and silent.

“Sonia, I . . .” She didn’t appreciate Naegi’s interruption and made that known quietly. Although he quailed, he kept going. “It was part of a corpse. You couldn’t have expected it to stay forever. Especially in this kind of heat . . .”

“Does this look like it is decaying?” She thrust that red-taloned hand into his face. He squeezed his mouth shut and refused to breathe. “We anticipated such problems and took the appropriate precautions. Fuyuhiko’s action was a *choice*."

He could hear the ball drop.

“You have betrayed us,” Nevermind said. If she felt any kind of sadness about that, she wasn’t showing it. “My friends, is it time we dismissed him from our ranks.”

“You can’t do that!” Pekoyama said.

“I was under the impression this was a democracy,” Nevermind said. “Even if that were false, it is time we usurp the tyrant! We cannot trust a leader who is not loyal to us. It is time for Ultimate Despair to chart a new path. A better path.”

“What does that mean?” Naegi demanded. “You’re going to go back to killing everyone for no reason?”

“It means we no longer need to fear,” Nevermind said. “We will no longer cower in Kamukura’s shadow. Our nation will one of proud, strong people who are not ashamed to admit who they are. We will take our place on the world stage.”

“A-are you sure about this?” brave Mikan asked. “Owari-san hasn’t gotten any better, and the Imposter isn’t well enough for intense activity . . .”

“That class failed this time, but what about their next attempt?” Nevermind demanded. Mikan cried out and shied away, and Nevermind softened her stare. “Consider this a preventative measure.”

This wasn’t hope. Related, maybe, but this wasn’t the hope that he breathed. This . . . *Oh*. That was a monarch’s job, wasn’t it? To inspire the people. To direct and give her people something to dream about. It was about energy, and he could feel it: rising against his class, turning on Kuzuryu and
Pekoyama; it wouldn’t be long before it reached a boiling point. And where was Kamukura? If anyone could douse this, it was him. Was he occupied elsewhere? Could Owari have taken a turn for the worst?

He didn’t know. But Kamukura wasn’t here, and everything Kuzuryu said seemed to make it worse. He was the only shield left. Which was a great thing to say when you wanted to feel good about yourself, but didn’t actually help him figure out what to do. In another time, maybe his words would be enough to combat Nevermind’s raw talent, but the odds were already skewed; the resentment ran too deep.

“You still don’t know what really happened,” Naegi pointed out. “This is probably a misunderstanding.”

“This is a reminder,” Nevermind said. “Even if it was not what we fear, it is still true that we are under the rule of Kamukura Izuru, and he does not care about us.”

“That’s not fair! He made Kirigiri-san and the others take you guys. They could have left you back home for the Future Foundation,” Naegi said. “You don’t understand him. I know what Hope’s Peak said he was, but it’s not true.”

She scoffed. “And who is to blame for that? Kamukura made it very clear what he thought of our companionship.”

Ouch. There was no way to counter that, especially without his memories. He wasn’t making headway. He could tell by the way they watched her greedily. If there was a time for a bolt of brilliance, now was the time. That or a stroke of luck or . . .

A stroke of luck.

How could Naegi have overlooked him? It was just a month ago when he would turn to Komaeda for everything. Komaeda would know. Komaeda, who knew all the little quirks and twists of his talent, would save him.

He tried to find Komaeda, but he was too short to effectively scan the crowd. Someone – Soda – bumped into him, knocking him back into Tanaka. He straightened and saw Soda separate from the crowd on the way to the cabins.

Without a second thought, Naegi followed. He trailed Soda to his cabin and walked inside. The Mechanic was halfway under the bed, doing who-knew what. There was quiet chattering in the room, not from the outside where Nevermind continued her spiel, but from a radio on the counter.

“Here it is!” And to Naegi’s horror, Soda crawled out from under the bed with a couple of pipes. “These will leave a dent.”

“Soda-kun, what are you doing?” Naegi spluttered.

“Just tilting the odds.” With one hand, he swung a pipe like a bat.

“No!”

Naegi sprung, grabbing one of the pipes and trying to tear it away. They scuffled over that, falling onto the bed, where Soda got a knee on his stomach and used the leverage to claim the pipe anew.

“Look, I get you’re a pacifist and all, but we’re not going to sit here and wait. It’s time to strike back!”
“No, wait!”

He slipped on the blankets when he tried to run after him. Soda left, shutting the door behind him as Naegi watched from the floor. He staggered to his feet, and peered out the window to where Soda was rejoining his friends. What now? Last time something like this had happened, he had failed to defuse it. He wasn’t even sure how that incident hadn’t erupted into bloodshed.

Alone in the cabin, the only sound was his pounding heart and the chatter from the radio. It was inevitable then that he would begin to make sense of what the announcer was saying.

“. . . What?”

His ears strained as he stepped towards it. Was he hearing things correctly?

“. . . and now that we have excised the rot within Novoselic . . .”

He listened in quiet astonishment. Already? Unlike the former queen, Naegi hadn’t held many illusions that Novoselic would hold without her, but that was faster than he had expected. He supposed that when she left, she had taken their morale with her.

He peered back outside. That was how it was done, wasn’t it? Cut off the head of the snake, and you no longer had to worry about being bit. Naegi grabbed the radio and ran outside. His feet slapped against the wooden planks as he approached the group from behind. With his free hand, he grabbed the radio’s dial and cranked it up.

“. . . with the new leadership in Novoselic, we have finally turned the page on this dark era of humanity.”

The very name of her country was enough for Nevermind’s head to snap his way. It seemed to be instinct for her; he doubted she understood the context. The sudden redirection of her focus made everyone else look his way, too. One by one, the smiles dropped as they listened to the voice on the radio.

“Lies,” Nevermind said calmly before turning away.

That was not the reaction he had been expecting. Yet, he wasn’t defeated because his mind, already in a spinning frenzy from the stakes had already found the contradiction.

“Why would they lie about this?” Naegi asked. “Everyone would know if they were. The Future Foundation would just make themselves look like fool and liars.”

“What they claim is impossible,” Nevermind said. “I have been absent for . . . has it been a month? Not very long. For centauries, every woman and man in my country was trained in the art of warfare so that my people could defend themselves from foreign threats. My people are their own army. The decimated, scattered force that the Future Foundation relies on could not defeat them in years, let alone weeks.”

She said that as she stood in front of him, looking down at him like a parent would at their dim child. He looked down instinctively; even though he was the Ultimate Hope, she had a way of making him feel humbled.

But even now he was not done. He said, “What if they didn’t have to fight?”

She didn’t blink. “Hm? Please, explain.”
“Maybe you’re right that it would take them years to defeat your people, but what if they didn’t have to? Because your argument assumes that they fought back. But if they didn’t, if only a fraction of them did, then it isn’t impossible, is it?”

“It is also possible that we would be struck by lighting at this very moment. Should we take that into account?” A couple of people edged away from Komaeda after she said that, mindful of his luck.

“It’s not as unlikely as you think,” Naegi said. “You told me that you’ve been dealing with internal unrest and revolts since you destroyed the world.”

The radio was still speaking in the background. He twitched as the horrible voice of Munakata came on air, but kept his eyes on Nevermind.

“There were rebels. But we eliminated all those who took up arms against my country,” Nevermind said, still completely calm.

“But there’s more to a rebellion than fighters,” Naegi said. “They have to have people who will supply them, and shelter them, and contacts who can find them more recruits. If you only hung the people who fought you, then you’ve missed all those other people. I mean if you were still having that many problems with rebels even at the end, then there’s obviously a large base of them that you didn’t catch.”

“There is always insurrection. Even during peace, there were those who would have seen me overthrown,” Nevermind said tiredly.

“I’m not denying that. I’m saying you don’t realize how big the rebellion was.” He took a deep breath. “Sonia, what if you were the minority?”

And the mask cracked. He had never seen Nevermind angry before and immediately hoped he would never have to see her that way again. She channelled all his dead ancestor’s fury in that moment and it weighed own on him in a need to throw himself to his knees and beg forgiveness. Somehow, he kept his legs from buckling. He concentrated on his goal, on the ember of hope that always burned within him.

Once again, the voice on the radio changed.

“*My comrades! Now that the bloody tyrant has been driven into the waste, it is time to reclaim this country. We will burn her memory from our history. Never again shall our children fear her name.*

“That’s a lot of mean words,” Mioda remarked as the voice, presumably one of Nevermind’s very own countrymen, continued speaking. “Maybe we should turn it off —”

“No!” In that moment, Naegi wasn’t the only one to realize that Nevermind’s mask had broken. She realized that too and with incredible speed, composed herself. “I want to listen.”

And she did. She listened beyond the point where more than Mioda hinted at turning it off. Or was she listening? They had taken her silence as assent for the radio to remain on, but Naegi was getting a feeling that it was less that and more that she couldn’t hear them.

“We shall never forgive the traitor and her hounds for the darkness they brought upon our great nation. But the long night is over. Let us become a country that we can be proud of once again.”

He tugged her sleeve. “Sonia.”
She shoved him.

The boardwalk didn’t have railing, and he would have went over if Mikan hadn’t caught him. Koizumi and Tanaka, alarmed by the uncharacteristic violence, tried to go over to her. She rejected them all, lashing out at them the way she had at him.

“Get away from me!” she shrieked and there was rage there, yes, but something more.

“Hey, are you okay?” Koizumi asked. She held her slapped wrist close to her chest.

“Leave me alone!”

Abruptly, she fell to her knees. Koizumi was quick to follow her down, although she still kept a safe distance. Nevermind’s hands were tangled in her hair, pulling. Her lips were parted, her eyes tightly shut. She hunched over, so that her forehead was nearly at the same level as her thighs.

“Stop it! Make it stop!”

To his surprise, Tanaka was the first to reach for her. He, too, fell to his knees in front of her. The reaction to his touch was immediate; she seized his coat but instead of throwing him away, she pulled him closer.

“It hurts! Make it stop!”

“I’ve seen this before. . .” Pekoyama murmured. Suddenly, she turned on the others and barked, “Everyone, go back to your cabins.”

Aghast, Koizumi protested. “But . . .”

“You’re getting in the way. Go!”

“You heard her!” Kuzuryu said after a beat. “Scram!”

Even though he had apparently been demoted, they were used enough to listening to him that they left without much struggle. Only Tanaka, rooted in place by Nevermind, and Mikan stayed behind. Poor Mikan wasn’t much help. She fluttered about, rattling off a dozen different diagnosis.

“Please, just make it stop,” Nevermind begged.

“Tanaka-kun, can you take her to her room?” Pekoyama asked.

He looked like she had asked him to fight a bear. He wrapped his scarf around his unbandaged arm, making the hamsters that had been sleeping there scurry off to somewhere safer. Picking her up looked awkward since she was already clinging to him, but somehow he managed. They escorted the two back to Nevermind’s cabin, where Tanaka fumbled with the door and finally cranked it open.

“It is always this awful?” Pekoyama whispered to him as Tanaka helped Nevermind onto her bed.

“Huh?” Naegi asked.

She shook her head. “Never mind.”

“Hey, you just gonna stand there?” Kuzuryu asked Tanaka.

Tanaka gave him a helpless look, and then pointed at Nevermind.
“Alright, fine. Just don’t do anything inappropriate!” Kuzuryu said, blushing. He shut the door, and left the two inside.

Naegi looked around. Just the three of them. The three he knew for sure wouldn’t try to raise a mob to go after his class. The atmosphere was thick and its pungent taste told him that any fervour Nevermind had stirred had been erased by her breakdown. He’d done it; he cut the head off he snake. And although it left him with a bitter aftertaste, he knew it had to be done.

Suddenly, a door opened. They all prepared for the worst.

Nidai poked his head out. “Hey, what was all that yelling about?”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Sonia is on a razor's edge.
The cabin was dark. He wondered who was responsible for that: Nevermind in her painful broody mood, or Tanaka being... himself. It wasn’t dark enough though that he couldn’t see. The blinds on the sun-facing window had only been partly drawn, allowing sunlight to pool on the floor. It was bright enough that he could easily pick out Tanaka’s black hair and trench coat from the shadows.

Like a loyal hound, Tanaka had stuck close to the cabin’s owner. He sat on the end of Nevermind’s bed, one leg hanging over the side of the mattress, the other folded beneath him. His bandaged hand rested on Nevermind’s back in silent comfort. Nevermind herself was sprawled on her stomach, chin resting on a pillow that nearly swallowed her face.

“Hey,” Naegi said. He did not ask if she was okay, because the answer should be no. He was hoping it was no.

“Makoto,” she said flatly. “Why are you here?”

“Why not?” he countered easily. “Does it still hurt?”

The muscles across her shoulders tightened, as if by asking, he had brought the pain back anew. “No.”

Naegi walked into the center of the room. His small stature blocked most of the sunlight. “What are you going to do now? About Novoselic, I mean. You always said you would go back one day.”

“So I did. Makoto, do you enjoy doing this?” she asked. “You’re always picking at our weaknesses and trying to be right. Does it give you pleasure to hurt us like this?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“Because it’s a friend’s job to point out when they’re doing something wrong,” Naegi said. Over his heart, his hand clenched into a fist. “Friends help each other become better people. They want what’s best for each other.”

“And this is what you think is best?” Nevermind asked quietly. She didn’t have to remind him of how she had been screaming in pain outside not long ago; its ghostly memory already lurked in the darkness around them.

“There was a time where the world didn’t wish you dead,” Naegi said. “That past you is better than what you are now.”

Tanaka looked at him, seemingly offended on Nevermind’s behalf. Nevermind didn’t move, however.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because that old you understood her people. She wasn’t constantly fighting her own countrymen so she could pursue the dream of someone else. That old you was loved by the world and could travel
anywhere. She was happy. And I mean she had real happiness, not what despair brings you. I . . . I want you to be happy again.”

“Is that what Komaeda-kun was to you? A friend that made you happy?”

He hoped it was dark enough that she couldn’t see him blushing. The way she had emphasised that word. . . he thought only Komaeda and Kamukura were aware of that kiss.

“Yes,” he said. “Without him, I wouldn’t be the Ultimate Hope. Well, I still would be, but I wouldn’t have understood how to use my talent properly. I would have just been stumbling into it, like I did at the end of the Killing Game and – Hey!”

Tanaka had reached over and flicked him in the temple. He wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was because he was referencing you-know-who’s death.

“What is the real question you entered to ask?” Nevermind asked with a heavy exhale.

“I want to know where you stand on Novoselic.”

“What options are there?” she said with a harsh laugh. “The revolution is complete. If you are correct, I wouldn’t find many loyalists to support me if I returned.”

“Do you want to return?”

“Novoselic is my home,” she said bitterly.

“If you did go back, what would you do?” Naegi asked. “Would you kill everyone who refused to fight the Future Foundation.”

“Naturally,” Nevermind said. On her bed, Tanaka growled in accord.

“Even though that’s the reason they turned on you in the first place?”

Finally, she moved. She twisted enough that she could glare at him. “What do you want?”

He took a step closer. “I want you to understand what you’ve done to everyone. I want you to realize Enoshima was wrong. I want you to be better.”

Tanaka growled. Naegi brushed off the threat. Tanaka wouldn’t hurt him.

“That goes for you, too,” Naegi said to Tanaka. “I might not have memories of Hope’s Peak, but I know you weren’t like this before. Do you really think that staying silent somehow made her like you better?”

Tanaka snapped his jaws and shoved his thumb into his own chest.

“No, it wasn’t your choice! She made you do it. Like she’s made all of you do stupid things!” Naegi snarled. “How can you still think she cared about you guys when she’s the one who talked Owari-san into that hospital bed?”

Tanaka winced.

“I don’t understand. How did she talk all of you into doing these things?” Naegi cried. “I know some of my friends killed people, too, but only Genocider enjoyed it, and she’s crazy. I refuse to believe that you guys were like this before, so what did Enoshima do?”
He didn’t care how desperate he sounded. Because maybe if he finally understood, he could understand how to make them better. Sure, he made progress by fumbling around in the dark, but it wasn’t enough. Time was only proving that each day that ticked past only brought another day where they had a chance to murder each other.

“She opened our eyes,” Nevermind murmured.

“She’s not from Novoselic. Why would you listen to her over your own people?”

“She was a genius,” Nevermind snapped. “You wouldn’t know. You can’t remember her.”

Well, he couldn’t deny either of those points. He turned to Tanaka instead. “What about you? Maybe she knew a lot about animals, but so do you. You told me you speak to them.”

Tanaka mimed reading a book.

“Oh, so there’s always more to learn. But from her? Think about it. Enoshima only cared about despair. She never cared about your animals; she’d rather kill a puppy before she’d play with it. Is that the kind of person you want to learn from?”

Tanaka rose. Naegi took a step back, and then held his ground.

“Enoshima would have killed your hamsters if she got her hands on them,” he said.

As if they understood, a crew of hamsters poked their head out of Tanaka’s collar and chittered at him. Tanaka pulled his collar up higher, hiding them.

He frowned. “Tanaka-kun, did she ever touch your hamsters?”

Tanaka bared his teeth. He turned his head away sharply in a distinct snub.

Naegi stepped forward. Without thinking about why, he locked eyes with a hamster. “What did you guys think about her?”

Tanaka flicked his hand right in front of Naegi’s nose, like he was swatting away a wandering hand.

Well, it wasn’t like he could speak hamster anyways. He turned back to Nevermind. “Sonia, where are you going to go from here? You said all those terrible things you did was for your country, but they’ve rejected it. What does despair offer you now?”

“They don’t understand!” she said. Her upper body was propped off the mattress as she yelled at him. “They can’t see the beauty of despair.”

“Why not? They adored you before. You were their idol. If despair is so good, then how could you couldn’t make them understand?”

He worried at his lower lip. Those spidey senses that had served him through trial after trial were tingling. There was a thread dangling in front of him, waiting to be pulled.

“What was your vision for your country?” Naegi asked. “Where were you trying to lead it?”

“We would have dominion over the land, sky and sea.” As Nevermind envisioned her paradise, she brought her legs in close and sat up. “My people would go where they pleased whenever they pleased. Yet they would still be united under a common banner of brotherhood. They would walk without fear through the night. They would know plenty, and safety.”
“Sounds like a stereotypical utopia,” Naegi said dryly. “Except. . . It doesn’t make any sense.”

Seemingly against her better judgement, Nevermind groaned, “And why is that, Makoto?”

“You said it yourself; well, implied it. You want them to understand despair. But I’ve seen what a world led by despair looks like, and so have you. It’s a world where everything was burning or ruined and people attack each other because they’re afraid. Does your vision involve your people killing each other? Because that’s what a world of despair looks like. A world of despair is horrible, and filthy and. . .”

Tanaka suddenly grabbed him by the throat. He tried to tell himself it was just the man’s bestial tendencies coming through, that Tanaka was scooping him up like a dog would by its puppy’s scruff. It got harder to maintain that illusion though when Tanaka pinned him against a wall.

Naegi worked his hand between his neck and Tanaka’s grip, giving him enough space to rasp, “This isn’t making me wrong.”

Nevermind’s breath hitched. They both heard it, and Tanaka’s grip slackened as he turned to check on his friend.

“. . . Let him down,” she ordered.

He hadn’t even noticed his feet were off the ground, which meant he had a little stumble when he landed.

“Go, both of you. Leave me be.”

He could see her closing off. Arms crossed her chest, back to them, she was sealing herself away bit by bit. He didn’t think she would listen to anything else he had to say right now. But if she was reacting like this, it meant he had sparked something, didn’t it?

“Sonia,” he said as he turned the doorknob, “whatever you decide, you know you can’t continue like this.”

He and Tanaka left one after the other. He turned to say goodbye to the other, but to his surprise, Tanaka lurched forward and growled at him. As Naegi tried to make sense of it, Tanaka whipped his scarf over his lower jaw and stalked away all mysterious and broody.

Now what? Back to Third Island, he supposed. Kirigiri had triggered this, however accidentally, and he should warn her. Plus, at this point he felt it was only right that he was told why any of this had happened in the first place. The truth couldn’t be as bad as what Nevermind had thought. Tight?

***

The ocean was rough today. Although the sky was clear, a strong wind had picked up and whipped the water into a frenzy. It crashed upon the shores in white-crested waves, eating at the sand around Naegi’s legs as he sat on the beach. The waves came again and again, sliding across along his thighs with a cool touch before retreating to the ocean between his toes. He wriggled them, trying to make sure the water took all the sand with them.

“Aren’t you glad we packed you a bathing suit?” Komaru said.

Naegi tilted his head back. Komaru grinned at him, dressed in her own bathing suit. She sprawled out next to him and when the next wave came, it played with her hair.
“This is the best,” she said. “The sun’s super nice but too hot, but the water evens it out. Still think I’m going to get cold eventually, though.”


“Stalking Togami-kun,” Komaru said flippantly, the sardonic edge making it clear she wasn’t actually sure. “Why? Have a crush?”

“Jealous?” Naegi teased.

“I -  Hey! I’m too young for that.”

“It’s the apocalypse.” He punched her in the shoulder. “You can do whatever you want. Even date.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Do you think Mom and Dad would freak out if they knew I was hanging out with her?”

“She’s not that bad. Not bathing for days is a bit weird – and smelly – but she takes care of herself enough that I wouldn’t consider it a deal breaker.”

“I’m talking about the serial killer part, dummy.”

“Oh. They would have a problem with that. But it’s not like that matters anymore.”

She grunted.

“Feels like old times, huh?” Naegi remarked into the silence. “Do you think about the old days?”

“I was locked in an apartment for months,” she sighed. “I didn’t have much else to do.”

“I feel like it’s been a while since it’s just been the two of us.”

“I think this is the first time since we’ve reached the island. Although that wasn’t very long ago.”

“Feels like it. I guess all the fighting and drama make it feel like a lot longer.”

She gave him a sympathetic smile.

“. . . They tried to kill each other again today.”

“Huh?” With her skull still resting on the sand Komaru cocked her head.

“Kirigiri-san told me that. . . Asahina-san tried to sneak poison into their food. She wasn’t going to tell me, but Ultimate Despair already figured it out on their own. . . You can guess how they reacted.”

“D-do I need to sleep in Touko-chan’s room?” Komaru squeaked.

“I headed them off,” Naegi said. “Maybe you should though, to be safe. I don’t know how long this peace will last.”

He sat up. He scooped up a handful of wet sand and watched it trickle through his fingers.

“I don’t know how to make them stop,” he whispered. “I’m the Ultimate Hope, so I thought I could figure it out, but I’ve realized this isn’t despair. It’s hate. They don’t understand each other. They look at each other and it’s like they’re seeing an entirely different species.”
“I can’t blame them,” Komaru said. “Ultimate Despair did really bad things, and they don’t care about all the pain they caused.”

“That’s not their fault. Enoshima made them into that!”

“Yeah, but your classmates don’t care. They’re hurting and Ultimate Despair isn’t, and that’s why everyone’s so angry.”

“But they are hurting!” Naegi protested. “I’ve seen them hurting.”

“But none of us see that.” She sat up, too. “Like, they’re so happy about everything and about what they did, so why would your classmates think they’re hurting?”

“I don’t know if I would say they’re happy about it…”

“Then how would you describe it?” Komaru asked with genuine curiosity.

_Sick. Wrong._ But that was on the inside, wasn’t it, buried underneath Enoshima’s poison. He tried to put themselves in his classmate’s shoes, see what they saw. And what he saw was that Komaru was right. Maybe he shouldn’t be surprised. She was Hope’s little sister.

“Were you always this smart?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah. That’s why I always call you a dummy!”

“Funny. Your teachers always said you were average for your class.”

“Then maybe my class was super smart!”

Naegi nodded, smiling. It wasn’t long though before that smile faded away. “So, what do we do now? How do we show them that Ultimate Despair aren’t made of these unfeeling monsters?”

“I dunno,” Komaru said. “Maybe you can’t. Cause it’s got about something your friends understand, and Ultimate Despair’s super crazy so I don’t know if there is anything.”

“They’re not… Some of them aren’t crazy.”

He could use Mikan, or maybe even Pekoyama. Would that work? No, probably now. Those two were had progressed enough that they wouldn’t be seen as being in the same boat as Ultimate Despair; in fact, Pekoyama was broadly accepted by his friends.

“Makoto?” Komaru brought her knees in closer. Her chin rested on them. “I know everyone’s putting a lot of pressure on you, but it’s not your job to help them. You didn’t ask for any of this.”

“I’m the Ultimate Hope. I’m the only one who can help them.” Helplessly, he asked, “If I don’t, then who would I be?”

“My big brother,” she said promptly. “You’d be you.”

“And what I am is Hope.”

Komaru sighed and changed the subject. “Have you been to the other islands yet?”

“No, I’ve mostly been sticking around the motel or Hotel Mirai,” he said. “Why, you want to go exploring?”
“I’ve already been to Second Island with Touko-chan. I had to drag her out of the library.” Komaru added a dramatic pause, pretending to think about her next words. “But we can go check out Fifth Island!”

“What about Fourth Island? It’s closer. . .”

“Not that one!” she exclaimed with a shudder. “It’s covered in graves and. . . oops.”

“Oh, that’s where they are.” When Komaru stared at him, Naegi said, “They had to be somewhere. Kirigiri-san mentioned they had a few battles here.”

“Oh. I thought you’d take it a lot worse and . . . A-anyways, Hagakure-kun said there’s a lot of them. And he. . . he. . .” She grabbed his shoulders. “He said the island is super haunted! He saw ghosts everywhere.”

“He might have just been high,” Naegi said.

A part of him, the part of him that was still an average teenage boy who liked to watch horror movies and tell ghost stories around the campfire, morbidly wondered how many graves there were. Lots, probably. In this day and age, everyone had lost at least a few people they cared about. Even Mr. I-Don’t-Need-Anyone Togami and Mr. I-Have-No-Feelings Kamukura had something they mourned and –

Oh.

Oh.

“I got it,” he whispered.

“Huh?”

“Of course. How didn’t I see it before? It’s why the Future Foundation has been able to stick together: loss. We all understand the pain of loss.”

“Um, maybe I’m wrong, but I heard Ultimate Despair killed their own families,” Komaru said as she squirmed uncomfortably. “I don’t think it counts if they did it and enjoyed it.”

“I know,” Naegi said. “Komaru, did I ever tell you about Nanami Chiaki?”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve struggled these last few weeks to get these out on time. Unfortunately, I think I’m going to have to drop down to a bi-monthly schedule after this chapter.

Next Chapter: Naegi pitches an idea.
“That is a horrible idea.”

“Not one to mince words, huh?” Naegi said. “Hear me out. I . . .”

“I listened to you before. Your idea is terrible,” Kirigiri said.

He bit his lower lip. “I know you guys already got your, but I didn’t. Wouldn’t it be nice if we had been all there? I don’t blame you for doing it without me, but . . .”

Kirigiri cut over him. “I don’t have a problem with having a funeral for our friends. I think that’s a good idea. However, I have several problems with the suggestion that we invite Ultimate Despair.”

“We’re not inviting them as spectators,” Naegi said. “I want them there as participants.”

“And again, that’s a terrible idea.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “What do you think they’ll say if they see our friends crying?”

“They’ll say nothing,” Naegi said. “It’s a joint funeral, Kyoko-san. They’ll have their own people to mourn. I’ve seen them at a funeral before. It was weird and had a lot of despair, but that’s because it was what Enoshima liked. This will be different.”

“Ultimate Despair has worshipped Enoshima Junko since their inception. That loyalty overrides any tragedy they have experienced.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Naegi said. “I know that’s not true. I can see it every time they look at him.”

“At whom?”

“Kamukura-kun.” He studied Kirigiri, head tilting to one side. “You’ve got to know who I’m talking about by now. If even Kamukura-kun mourns her, then they must, too.”

“Kamukura-kun doesn’t,” Kirigiri said. She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear and she prattled away. “I’ve read the files on him. Kamukura-kun no longer has the capacity to feel —”

“No, that’s wrong!” He stamped his foot. “I don’t care what Hope’s Peak said about him. I know him. I’ve seen him. He cared about Nanami-san more than any of us did. And the rest of her classmates did, too. Otherwise, they wouldn’t hate him so much.”

“Are you aware of the circumstances surrounding Nanami Chiaki’s death?”

“It’s not true,” he said fiercely. “She didn’t do it. They were friends.”

“Okay,” Kirigiri said.

He blinked. “Uh, aren’t you going to ask for proof?”

“That’s no need,” she said, turning away from him. “I never believed the story Hope’s Peak presented.”
“Do you... do you know what happened?”

“I only have theories,” she said.

He swallowed. His hand twitched at his side, wanting to reach for her. “So, about what I was proposing—”

“No,” she said immediately. “It’s not happening.”

“Then what’s your plan?” Naegi demanded. “We can’t keep sitting around waiting to see if they’ll kill each other.”

“It’s under control. Don’t you trust me?” She turned slightly, and her eyes bored into his.

“Of course, I do. But you don’t know them like I do.”

“You’ve always been a hopeless optimist,” she sighed, and he couldn’t tell whether it was a compliment.

Naegi shuffled out of her room, hands in her pocket. He had expected a little more debate before she would shut him down like that, but she had barely bothered to humour him. Now what? Going to Togami wasn’t an option; Togami might laugh at him even if he had suggested a funeral with just their class. Yet he needed to do this. He could feel it: this was a way out.

“So?” Komaru asked. She was hanging by Kirigiri’s door and leaning against the wall.

“She won’t go for it,” he said. “Don’t say it--!”

“Told you so!”

He groaned. “Wow, thanks. That really helped. I still want to do this, though.”

“I could bring Touko-san,” Komaru said casually. “Cause if they try anything, she can slice them all up. Don’t look at me like that! She doesn’t show it, but she cares about you guys, too.”

That wasn’t why he was staring at her. It was because of the simple idea she had offered. Naegi had assumed that he would need Kirigiri or Togami’s backing. Did he though? Maybe one or two of his classmates attending would be enough.

“Talk to her, please,” he said. “I’m going to ask Hagakure-kun, as well.”

“. . . There’s no way he’ll say yes.”

“He will if he thinks their angry ghosts will haunt him if he doesn’t,” Naegi called back as he went to Hagakure’s door.

HE knocked on Hagakure’s door, but no one answered. Alright. He could take the time to do other things, like figure out how he was going to run this. He had only been to a couple of funerals in his life for distant relatives and hadn’t been very old back then.

But who here knows their traditions? There was an answer staring him in the face. He hadn’t wanted to bring his proposal to Ultimate Despair’s attention so quickly and not to her first, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Thus, he made his way to First Island, where he wandered around the now-drained pool until he found Saionji lounging in the sun.

“Hi. Are you busy? Can I talk to you?”
She pulled down her sunglasses and peered at him. “Sure. Just stop blocking the sun.”

There weren’t any chairs next to her, so he sat cross-legged on the ground instead. “You’re into Japanese customs, right? Do you know anything about funeral rites?”

“Lucky for you, I do.”

“Great! Do you think you can guide me through how one works?”

“Why do you want to know that?” Saionji sneered. “Are those dummies planning to try something else?”

“No, no!” he said hastily. “It’s just that I haven’t gotten a chance to say goodbye to anyone I lost since the Tragedy. It’d be nice to send them off. Plus, uh, if you guys want, since it’s for my classmates from Hope’s Peak, I could include Nanami-san, as well.”

Nanami Chiaki was not a topic often breached with Ultimate Despair and when it was, it was usually in the context of a serious discussions. That weighed on him and he looked away in a rush of sudden self-consciousness, even though he didn’t remember Nanami. From what he understood, they got along but they weren’t best friends.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up any bad memories,” Naegi said. “You guys must have had a really nice funeral for her, especially if Nevermind-san helped with the planning.”

“We didn’t have a big one for her,” Saionji muttered. “We did some stuff in class and... Mahiru and me made a memorial, but Hope’s Peak took it down.”

“Well, funerals don’t have to be big to be nice,” he said with a smile.

Her nostrils flared. “I don’t know. We weren’t invited to the wake.”

His smile half-froze, leaving him with an awkward expression where his teeth showed. “Oh. That’s terrible.”

“Nobody was invited,” Saionji said. “Her parents invite anyone who wasn’t family.”

Naegi couldn’t remember Nanami, let alone her family. However, nothing he had heard about her indicated that her family were snobs or recluses. Plus, some of the people they would have denied would include an actual princess and the future head of the Yakuza – not people you turned away lightly.

“Is there a reason it was private?”

Her lip curled. “Aren’t you supposed to be smart?”

“Hey! I’m just asking. It’s not like I remember what Nanami-san was like.”

She huffed. “Hope’s Peak told some really stupid lies about her death that everyone lapped up like dogs. Those idiots couldn’t tell their face from their butts, so they all blamed Nanami. Her parents told everyone to stay away because they didn’t want some edgy losers crashing their wake.”

“Kamukura-kun,” he breathed. It was exactly the wrong name to say aloud and as Saionji began to sit up with fire in his eyes, he blurted out, “I mean Kuzuryu-kun told me that Hope’s Peak said Nanami-san had tried to kill Kamukura-kun.”

“It’s so stupid!” Saionji exclaimed. “Why would anyone think a cute, little girl like that could hurt a
guy twice her size? They all deserve to have their kneecaps broken.”

He appreciated the threat. Not that he approved of violence or anything, but he understood the
affection layered behind it. Nanami’s fate was always a curiosity to him, but he didn’t think this was
a good time to pry. He changed the subject back to funeral processes.

“You know a lot about funerals,” he remarked after she paused for breath. “Were you taught this?”

“Uh, duh. I know all our country’s traditions cause my family ran the best traditional dance school in
the world. Plus, I have a lot of experience with funerals.”

“Experience? I can’t see why you would perform at a funeral,” Naegi said warily.

“Obviously, I don’t. But I’ve been to a bunch,” she said with a shrug. “My family was super
important, so people tried to kill us a lot.”

He blinked. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. Kids would play ‘pranks’ that nearly got you killed, and then say it was just a joke when you
yelled at them. The only people you could trust were family,” she said firmly. “Everyone else is
spying for their parents.”

“That sounds like an awful way to grow up,” he said. He was careful not to sound too sympathetic
because Saionji was proud and likely wouldn’t take it well. “You didn’t have many friends, did
you?”

“Were you listening to a word I said?” she demanded. “I just told you that we all wanted to kill each
other.”

“Right, right!” He held his hands up in surrender. “Anyways, about funerals. . .”

He listened as well as he could. It became apparent very quickly that this was going to have to be
very informal, makeshift and almost trashy. Still, the Ultimate Hope wasn’t a person to just roll over
and surrender.

“Say, Saionji-san, is there anyone outside Hope’s Peak you wanted to include in the funeral?” Well,
that was an awkward way to phrase things. Hastily, he clarified, “If we try to hold separate funerals
for everyone’s lost ones, we’re going to be hosting non-stop funerals for at least the next year. I
thought we should honour them all at once.”

She thought about it. “I guess we can throw in my dad. He was assassinated while I was at Hope’s
Peak.”

“I’m sorry that happened,” Naegi said.

“It was weird. He was only a commoner, so I don’t know why they bothered. Grandmother hated
him,” she added offhandedly.

Was it weird? Hadn’t he heard something like this before? Another student in her class and another
dead father. . . Ah, that was Koizumi. He was willing to bet his life that Saionji’s father was yet
another check on Enoshima’s list.

“We obviously don’t have bodies to cremate,” Naegi said. “There’s not enough time to make
effigies, either. Do you think burning drawings will be enough?”
“. . . Ugh, this really is going to be a pauper funeral,” she groaned.

Naegi kept his side of the guest list small. Asahina and Kirigiri were out for obvious reasons, and he expected Togami would try to sabotage him, so he wasn’t invited. Fukawa was though, and she didn’t put up much of a fuss beyond the usual on the condition that she could bring her taser. In truth, he felt better knowing she had it; Ultimate Despair should be less likely to act when there was a dangerous serial killer within a stone’s throw. Naegi managed to persuade Hagakure into attending as well, which was why he had spent the past few hours wearing a necklace of corks he swore would stop spirits from following him home.

He set the time for the next day after dinner, so that everyone would arrive with full, happy bellies. Anything to tilt the odds in favour not fighting. Hopefully, the open beach he had chosen as the venue would reduce any feeling of claustrophobia or being trapped. The weather was nice, too, and he thanked Komaeda’s luck for that.

Still, it didn’t stop certain people from complaining about the situation.

“Aw, what are these guys doing here?” Soda groused as he glared at Naegi’s classmates and sister.

“I told you, this is for everyone,” Naegi said. “Everyone’s lost people.”

“They could have had their own,” Soda said. “Two funerals ain’t a lot harder than one.”

“They knew Nanami-san, too,” Naegi said. He was speaking to Soda, but locked eyes with Tanaka, who lingered close behind him. “This is for you guys, but it’s also for Nanami-san. Don’t you think she would have wanted all of her friends, here?”

“What about your sister?”

“She’s my sister,” Naegi said. Quietly, as if upset, he lied. “She’s here to support me.”

That was enough to embarrass the Mechanic into backing down. He looked around quickly, as if afraid someone else from his class had overheard. Then he skulked off. Tanaka, however, remained.

He walked up to Naegi and held up five fingers.

Where are the rest of your classmates? he was asking.

“You know what Togami-kun and Kirigiri-san are like,” he said evasively. “And Asahina-san. . . she’s helping Kamukura-kun with something. She’ll drop by sometime later, though! Like, maybe tomorrow.”

A bold lie, but he didn’t have many options. It’s not like Tanaka would ask Kamukura about it, and Asahina probably couldn’t understand his sign language. Speaking of Kamukura, Naegi was surprised he hadn’t made an appearance yet. He was sure Kamukura was watching somewhere from the shadows, but this was a funeral featuring Nanami. He thought Kamukura would want in on that.

Or maybe he thinks it’s better not to show his face, Naegi thought glumly as he watched Pekoyama and Kuzuryu approach.

They’re not very fond of him.

“Kuzuryu-kun.” Naegi took note of the paper he clutched to his chest. “You brought someone.”

“My sister,” he grunted. He turned the paper over. The drawing was in black and white, so it was hard to tell how similar it looked to the real thing. “I took a photo of her and traced over it. . . Don’t laugh! It’s not like I’ve ever done this lame artsy stuff before.”
“Of course,” he said good-naturedly. “Put it over here.”

He led Kuzuryu and Pekoyama to the centerpiece of the set. Like everything, it was a mashed-up product of whatever Naegi could find. In this case, a shelf he and Hagakure had dragged from an abandoned store. He had lined the shelves with fancy cloth napkins that had to be rolled up at the far ends. Wildflowers he had collected with his sister had been placed at regular intervals; they were the best-looking part, if he did say so. And finally, between the flowers were – for now – empty picture frames he had liberated from a souvenir shop. They were cheap and he could snap them in half with his bare hands, but at least they wouldn’t blow away.


Kuzuryu leaned on the table in front of the shelf. He extended an arm, and then hesitated when he realized he could only reach the frames on the lowest shelf. Without a word, Pekoyama took one from the middle shelf for him.

“What about you?” Pekoyama asked him.

Naegi said, “Yeah. I got other people, too.”

Kuzuryu looked away sharply. Naegi didn’t think those two personally had anything to do with his parents’ deaths, but he understood why they might act as though they had.

“Tanaka-kun?” Naegi said when he saw the mute Supreme Sorcerer of Darkness creeping closer. “Are you adding a picture?”

He nodded and presented his. It was hard to tell because of all the dark-purple swirls, demonic symbols and flames, but Naegi was pretty sure that was supposed to be a hamster.

“What happened?” he asked.

Tanaka mimed walking with a cane.

Naegi nodded. “They don’t live long, huh?”

With a frown, Tanaka tickled the chin of a plump hamster and agreed.

Class 77 trickled in one by one. Saionji brought a very childish scribble of a man that Naegi was careful not to laugh at. Nidai brought a picture of his parents. Mikan didn’t bring anything and he almost asked, but he had only started the question when Nidai gave him a look that told him to stop. In all, Naegi was surprised at the lack of pictures. He had figured that most of them wouldn’t bring their pictures of their loved ones – as many of them had died while they had been consumed by despair. But he thought Hanamura would have brought one of his mother. Instead, the portly chef seemed uncharacteristically giddy.

He’d have to work on that later. He approached the Imposter, who was resting in a chair Mioda had dragged along. Although it had been less than a week since he had agreed to eat that first meal, Naegi was still disappointed to see him so skinny.

“Are you okay?” Naegi asked him.

“I’ll stay awake. I promise.” The Imposter dragged a hand through his mousy brown hair. “This is an ambitious idea you have.”

“Thanks. I hope it turns out the way I want it to,” Naegi said.
“H-hey!”

They all looked over at Koizumi, who was running through the sand towards them with what appeared to be a book. She skidded to a halt in front of Naegi, sweating and panting.

“Sorry, I was just finishing up some things,” she gasped.

Naegi said, “We weren’t going to start without you. You’re the last person.”

She continued to breathe harshly. “I brought something for the service.”

She opened the book’s cover, and a photo nearly slipped to the ground. Only her quick action prevented it from touching the sand. It was a picture of Nanami – not a hand drawn illustration like the rest of them, but an actual picture.

“Koizumi-san, you know we’re going to burn these, right?”

“It’s okay,” she said. “We’ve got copies, and I still have the original.”

They replaced the center frame drawing of Nanami with the photo. It was a little strange to have one photo and a bunch of drawings, but maybe it was fitting somehow since she was the focus of this event.

“I . . .” Koizumi nudged the book into his hands. “There’s a bookmark.”

And so there was. Naegi opened it to the marked pages. He looked and was silent.

“That’s our yearbook,” Koizumi said. “There’s pictures of everyone in there, so I thought . . .”

He smiled. “Thank you. Really, thanks.”

He tore the pages carefully, keeping a generous margin between them and the portraits themselves. The frames were already oversized, so the pictures of his classmates fit easily.

“Koizumi-san, did you bring any for yourself?” He didn’t get any more specific, unsure of how she’d react.

Hesitantly, she slipped a piece of paper and held it at arm’s length, as if it could come alive and bite. He’s sure about who it is: he only associates one adult man with Koizumi. He does feel bad that she had to leave her photos of him behind, but considering how she had mooned over them, maybe it was for the best.

“Could I have that back?” Koizumi asked. After Naegi handed the yearbook over, she started flipping through the pages. Unlike their classmates, the person she was after this time didn’t have a picture to herself. Instead, Koizumi carefully mutilated a group photo of her and some other girls instead.

“Is that Sato?” he asked.

She nodded. Careful fingers opened a picture frame and fit the photo snugly inside.

They stepped back. The photographs took out compared to the drawings, and it didn’t take long for the others to take note. Naegi’s muscles tightened along his spine; he can imagine Ultimate Despair complaining about how his classmates get real photos while some of the people they put up did not. However, it wasn’t the photos of his classmates that brought complaints. Instead, Kuzuryu went straight for the photo of Sato. Naegi wasn’t sure what the relationship between Kuzuryu’s sister and
Pekoyama had been like, but apparently, they had been close enough that Pekoyama felt the need to pick up a large stick. A large, thin, wobbly stick whose tip caught on the edge of the cabinet and embarrassingly snapped in half.

“What is she doing here?” Kuzuryu demanded. “Is this a joke? I’m not sharing my sister’s memorial with her murderer!”

“Kuzuryu-kun, let’s not do this today,” Naegi said.

“I . . .” Koizumi began.

Naegi held up his hand. “No, it’s okay. This is for everyone and she was important to you. You might not like it, Kuzuryu-kun, but that’s how it is.”

“There’s a big fucking difference between having a funeral for a person and a funeral for a murderer . . .”

“If we’re going to exclude murderers of the people here, then you should leave, too!” Naegi retorted, frustrated. “You were one of the commanders for Ultimate Despair. You weren’t there when my friends died, but you helped make it possible.”


“It doesn’t matter what’s fair. This isn’t about Sato, anyways. This is for Koizumi-san, and she didn’t kill your sister.”

“That’s . . . Ugh, fine!” At Koizumi, he shot, “Just keep your shit short if you’re going to say anything about her later.”

Fuming, he stormed off. Koizumi glanced at the framed photo of her friend.

“He might be right,” she said. “We’re asking a lot of him.”

‘No, I meant what I said,” Naegi said. “Besides, they’re both gone, so what’s the point of holding onto that anger? If you live in the past, you can’t change.”

“I can’t blame him for hating her. Hey, do you hate anyone?”

*Enoshima.* He said, “It’s not the same.”

He looked off towards the distant silhouette of the beach house. He had hoped to see shadows there on the horizons; part of them had truly believed the others would come. But the hourglass had emptied and only those two same classmates were present. It was time to add the final touch.

“Hey, Komaru. Come over here!”

She jogged over. Naegi handed her a piece of paper and the kept the other in his own hand.

“I know it isn’t very good, but I think they at least look like people!” he said, trying to make up for his drawing skills with cheer.

“Who is this?” Komaru asked.

“ . . . That bad? It’s supposed to be dad.”

She nearly ripped the paper in half. “Dad? Why would you draw him?”
“It’s a funeral for everyone,” Naegi said. “Did you think I was going to forget us?”

“Funerals are for dead people. Not people that we don’t know where they are.”

“They are dead, so what’s your point. . . ? Didn’t you know that?”

Komaru took two shaky steps back. “You don’t know that.”

“I do. I . . . I saw the pictures.”

Nothing happened. Then she shoved him. It was so abrupt that he fell onto his backside and before he could get up, his sister was running away, ignoring him, Fukawa and everyone else.

“Komaru, wait!”

She made it to the beach house before she tired. Good thing, too, because his legs felt like jelly. As she panted and leaned against the wall, he staggered up to her.

“I thought you knew,” he said. Obviously, he had been wrong. “It’s okay. Trust me, we’ll be fine. Just try not to think about the bad side so much and. . .”

“And think about the good side? There is no good side!”

“Komaru!” His yelp was cut off quickly, when he had to dodge what seemed like a punch. “I know it hurts, but that’s how it has to be. You can’t become hope without loss.”

“I don’t care about your stupid hope!” she screamed at him and his heart throbbed. “I want mom and dad! I want them back.”

He wasn’t sure if she was trying to push him again, or if she really was falling into his arms, sobbing.

He didn’t know what to say. It was like a thick sludge was choking his insides. He felt . . . confused?

“T-takin advantage of a crying girl. I knew you were like the others.”

“Fukawa-san.” Once she was close enough, he mouthed, Can you take care of this?

She looked confused for a second, but let him pass Komaru off to her, no matter how uncomfortable she looked. After a minute, Fukawa began to lead them back towards the others. Naegi watched. There was still that distinct lack of feeling inside him.

He tossed his head. It didn’t matter. It wasn’t going to help with what he had to do next.

Just . . . think about what he had to do. Nothing else.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:

Naegi puts his plan into operation.
Naegi feared that when he returned to the others, he would find them amid an uproar. He did just send his sister back crying, after all. However, he’d forgotten that Komaru wasn’t high in Class 77’s affections. So it was that Fukawa was the only one that confronted him. Even she did so less harshly than he had expected. It was like being interrogated by Asahina when he had prepared for Kirigiri.

“She didn’t know our parents were dead,” Naegi explained.

“That’s why she’s crying?” Surprisingly, Fukawa seemed to understand her mistake a moment later. She pushed her glasses up her nose and muttered, “I guess it is her mom and dad. It’s . . . difficult for me to understand.”

_Are you glad your parents are dead?_ he wondered. He wondered what the answer would be. If she said yes, he didn’t think that counted as hope.

“How you find out about them?” Fukawa asked. “Are you sure they’re dead?”

“I’m sure. Ultimate Despair showed me pictures,” Naegi said.

“Bet that skinny bitch with the camera took them,” Fukawa said. “She’s always complaining about how she’s so plain, but I know she’s trying to make me jealous!”

“You know that’s not true.” As he spoke, his gaze roved over the crowd. Ah, there. Komaru was with Hagakure, hugging him around the waist as his hand rested on her shoulder.

“You should let her have some time to cool off,” Fukawa said. “Just do what you came here to do.”

He nodded. “Right.”

He looked back at the shelves he had set up. There was Nanami, framed in the center, and fanning out from either side were the classmates that Naegi had lost. The bare-frame shelf seemed to shudder as the wind picked up, as if nature herself was threatening to bring his vision to a crashing end. He wished he could do more. He wished he had a real memorial with real decorations and real heart behind it.

There was no struggle to get anyone’s attention. They knew why they were here, and that alone was enough to tame them. He kept his eyes away from Hagakure and his sister. He didn’t have time for distractions.

“Hi, everyone.”

It was unexpectedly alarming to have all those eyes turned on him, like he was a lamb that had fallen into a pit of ravenous lions. Silly. These were his friends. He was as precious to them as Nanami. He wasn’t in any danger. Still, he sought out Komaeda’s eyes. He was easy to find: standing away from the rest of the group, refusing to mingle with them because they never _let_ him. And what was that about? Komaeda worshipped his classmates. He spent his days alone because he knew they didn’t want him around and he accommodated them. Yet even doing what they asked seemed to turn them against him further. Wasn’t that hypocritical given the way that Kuzuryu occasionally flinched when
Pekoyama called him master, or how everyone looked awkward when Mikan begged to help and –?

“Hey, Makoto-san!” Mioda called, hands cupped around her mouth. “Are you done staring into space?”

He blinked. “Sorry. Thank you for coming. I know that the setup is lacking, but I hope you understand that there isn’t a lot here to work with. This isn’t going to be like the ones you attended back at home.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda like having a party in a garbage dump –”

Soda yelped when Koizumi slapped his arm. “Don’t be so rude. He’s trying his best. Besides, it’s not like you helped.”

“Thank you, Koizumi-san!” He spoke loudly and quickly, hoping to head off a fight. “It shouldn’t matter where we are or what things look like though. What matters is that we remember and honour the people we’ve lost, that we let them know that we’ll be okay without them. We don’t need a royal venue or fancy picture frames to do that.”

 (“I told him that,” a smug Saionji whispered to Koizumi.)

“We’re going to be skipping some steps and start straight with a wake. I guess for this case, we all count as immediate family. That’s okay with everyone, right?”

He didn’t expect otherwise and indeed, a chorus of agreement greeted him. Naegi turned towards the faces of the dead. It only made sense that he would go first. He cleared his throat and tipped his hand towards Hagakure, hoping that would be enough of a signal. It took the older man a couple of seconds, but eventually he caught on and plucked a bundle of incense sticks out of his hair.

“Why do you have incense in your hair?” Mioda asked.

“That makes sense!”

The twine binding the sticks was easy to untie. With thick fingers, Naegi peeled one stick off from the rest and put it in the glass jar on the table. Now what? The ground swayed as he realized he had forgotten to bring anything to light the incense with.

“Here.” With a flick of his wrist, Kuzuryu – who had come up behind him at some point – chucked a lighter into his chest. “Thought you might miss that. You never struck me as a guy good with small details.”

. . . That didn’t sound like a compliment.

Naegi stepped back. The thin wisp of smoke from the incense was quickly dissipated by the wind. The dead watched him, waiting.

“I won’t forget, he vowed. I won’t stop until I erase every bit of despair from the planet.

He felt heavy when he bowed, like the ghosts of all he carried with him sat on his back. Naegi was the vessel unto the new age, and their souls were the golden coin the world paid for its passage. A sacrifice of the world’s small hopes for a larger one. Whatever anxiety he felt after his conversation with Komaru fell away. Sometimes, tears and pain were the only way forward.
He moved aside and cleared the way. He left the bundle of incense and lighter on the table; surely, his friends would figure out what to do.

Nevermind went first. There wasn’t even a debate; Kuzuryu and her never looked at each other, as if they had already discussed this telepathically. Did a queen outrank the Yakuza? Or maybe, just maybe, Kuzuryu had truly accepted he had left Ultimate Despair behind. He shivered with glee at the thought.

Nevermind was a queen of bright white, so the black kimono she was wearing must have been borrowed from one of the others. It gave a strange essence to her platinum-blonde hair, like a ghost’s faint glow. It made him think of a female Tanaka, or at least someone their mute sorcerer would date. Gone were her gloves. She took the incense bare in hand like Naegi did, took a minute to say whatever silent prayers she needed, then lit the incense and placed it in the jar with the others.

Ultimate Despair went about their task with solemnity, more so than they had at Enoshima’s funeral. Or maybe that was because this time, Mioda wasn’t playing music and her accompaniment wasn’t a bunch of ridiculous robot bears pretending to cry. There was one slight concern though: Hanamura, who had seemed to cover a giggle as he lit his incense. It had been a muffled sound, but it checked enough boxes that Naegi made a note to keep an eye on him.

Whether by accident or by purpose, the Imposter was the last member of his class to walk up. He looked the same as he had a week ago, when he was strutting around as Togami with his chin high and poise sculpted to perfection. Now, stooped at the neck, knees cracking, he moved like someone decades older than he was. Owari’s collapse had been an awakening not just for his mind, but for his body.

Then, it was time for Naegi’s class. Hagakure shoved Fukawa forward, unwilling to be the first. Surely, the surly writer was thinking mean thoughts in her head, but managed to keep them there where they belonged. She stayed at the table briefly, perhaps the shortest time of anyone, and Naegi quickly checked that the others weren’t getting offended.

Luckily, with his size and general ineptitude, Hagakure made for a wonderful distraction from Fukawa. He lumbered forward, lit his incense, and then fell to his knees in front of the memorial. His hands were held in a prayer pose above his head, like a goddess had descended from the heavens to smite him. Naegi politely looked away; just watching him was embarrassing.

And then it was Komaru with her puffy red eyes. Ironic. A Naegi to open the ceremony, and a Naegi to close it. But should... should he be there with her? Technically, he had already paid his dues, but family should stick together, shouldn’t they? For the only two Hopes in the world, that rule might be even more important. Still... he had upset her quite a lot. It was only a matter of time until that grief morphed into wrath towards him.

He shuffled over to her. She turned her head sharply – he flinched and curled into herself. Don’t look her in the eye. That would only invite conflict.

“I’m sorry,” he said. Nice and soft. Gaze fixed on the ground. They were less likely to get mad that way. “You shouldn’t have found out that way.”

“Was it quick?” she asked quietly.

_I don’t know._

“Yes,” he said.
She sniffled. He had half a mind to find her a tissue box because there was snot under her nose. Naegi had already lit an incense but he took another anyways. He lit both of theirs. They had a couple of false starts, but finally, they coordinate their arms long enough to place the incense in the jar at the same time.

“We don’t have anyone to recite a sutra,” Naegi told them. “So, that’s it for the wake, I guess. Now we have the vigil.”

“Of course, today’s feast was prepared by moi,” Hanamura said. “Everyone, let’s head back to the hotel.”

Hanamura began to march off, arms swinging at his side like a cartoon soldier. Naegi took his sister’s hand and led the way after him. He was conscious of his every muscle and how they relaxed and contracted as he moved.

“What happens now?” Komaru asked, and Naegi realized that the only funeral his sister had gone to was their grandfather’s. That was long enough ago that she wouldn’t remember.

“We go back. Eat. Talk. Then we rest,” Naegi said. “It’s a bit weird because all the same people from the wake will be there at the funeral, but I don’t feel right skipping an entire day of tradition.”

“Four meals today?” Komaru poked her stomach. “You’re going to make me fat.”

Well, at least her mind seemed to be off their dead parents.

He felt obliged to take a seat with his sister and classmates. Thankfully, Ultimate Despair didn’t seem offended. They began to break off into their usual groups: Pekoyama and Kuzuryu, the girls, Komaeda all alone. . . On second thought, Naegi called out to Komaeda. Nobody should be alone today, and he told his friends that when Fukawa looked like she wanted to say something.

“Naegi-kun, you’re making a scene,” Komaeda hissed, back arched like a cat.

“I’ll continue making a scene until you pull up a chair,” he said blandly. “Nanami-san would say nobody should be alone for this.”

“Hey!” Soda barked reflexively. “Why are you dragging her into this?”

“You were Nanami-san’s friend, weren’t you?” Naegi said to Komaeda. “You tell me whether she would want us to take care of each other.”

“. . . Just sit the fuck down,” Kuzuryu said, saving Kuzuryu from answering. He tapped his lone eye. “but don’t forget where you are and who’s here.”

Timidly, Komada took a seat and then pushed himself far enough away from the table that his feet weren’t under it.

Hanamura came out of the kitchen, chatting animatedly with Nidai who hauled along a bag. Apparently, the chef’s love for his profession was enough to counter whatever effect the wake had had on him. Naegi took his eyes off the pair and tried to meet Komaeda’s eyes.

“Are you okay?” Naegi asked. When grey eyes flitted to his, he hastened to backtrack. “Not that anything looks wrong, but we were just at a wake and Nanami-san was your friend. . .”

“I’m fine,” Komaeda said shortly. Damn. Two words again. Naegi was about to go for a second attempt when Hanamura swept in.
“And what are we feeling today? French? A touch of Italy? Gold old traditional sake?” Hanamura lifted his fingers to his lip, as if about to twirl a nonexistent mustache. He stood there with a sculpted smile, awaiting their order.

“Are you talking about the food?” Hagakure asked.

“Ah! Before the food comes the beverage, mon ami.” Hanamura gestured to Nidai, and Nidai tilted the bag over to let them see the bottles inside.

“Awesome. . . Naegi’s footing the bill, right?”

“We’re drinking?” Komaru said uncertainly.

“Uh. . .”

That had not been the plan. Naegi looked around. Their table wasn’t the first Hanamura had dropped by. He’d gone to the girls first. Nevermind was just lowering a glass from her lips, and the one in front of Mioda was suspiciously empty-looking. Koizumi and Saionji had a glass, and even Pekoyama was taking a sip of something. Amusingly, he noticed a grumpy-looking Kuzuryu hadn’t been served yet.

Hanamura winked. “Ladies first.”

“Am I allowed?” Komaru blurted out.

“Having a little drink is perfectly normal after a wake. You can ask our guru of traditions herself, if you don’t believe me.”

He wasn’t wrong. Saionji had mentioned this to him. Naegi had dismissed it at the time though. Seeing as Kirigiri and Togami oversaw the trip, he’d simply assumed that alcohol hadn’t been brought along. But even if they hadn’t planned to bring anything, Hagakure and Asahina must have also assisted with the packing . . .

That was that, then. Naegi had been wrong, and it was too late to stop them now. If he tried to force them to stop drinking now, it would probably encourage them to drink more.

Fukawa sighed and pulled out her taser.

“Fukawa-san, wait! You don’t need to . . .”

“If I’m going to drink, she’ll come out anyways,” Fukawa said resigned. She pulled the trigger,

Naegi hadn’t seen her change like this before. He expected her to fall over the way she had when Togami had revealed her at Fujisaki’s trail. All there was though was a sharp pop, some frizzy hair, and then a long, slippery tongue that had quadrupled in length.

“For me? Don’t mind if I do.” Genocider stuck her tongue into the glass, which somehow began sucking up sake like it was a straw.

“Oh, my, Genocider,” Hanamura purred. “For you, I’d spend all night brewing moonshine that tastes like liquid heaven.”

“Kill me now,” Naegi said to Hagakure.

“Are they drunk?” Komaru asked desperately.
“Nah, it takes more than one glass to get drunk,” Hagakure assured her. “If everyone’s only drinking a little bit, then we’ll be okay.”

“He’s right. A couple of drinks doesn’t hurt anybody,” Hagakure said, speaking with the experience of years. “It’ll help mellow them out. C’mon, Naegi-chi. Cheers!”

He clicked his glass with Hagakure’s, but didn’t drink. He watched Hanamura serve the last people, before moseying over to his place, which lacked a plate.

“Hanamura-kun, what are you going to eat?” Naegi demanded. Loudly.

“I put aside some leftover from two nights ago,” Hanamura said. “They’ve been sitting in the corner of the kitchen for all that time, so I thought I’d pick through…”

“You can’t do that!” Naegi said, standing up. He pointed dramatically. “It’s wrong. This is the food for the wake, not what you made two days ago.”

“Hey, he’s right!” Saionji said. “You can’t bring in outside food.”

“Alright, alright!” A red-faced Hanamura said. “I won’t eat –”

“You can’t do that either! Eating after the wake is part of tradition.” He looked at Saionji for support.

“You can’t go changing things just because you want to,” Saionji said. “We’ve been doing it like this for hundreds of years, and we still do it because thousands of people smarter than you saw something good in it.”

“Fine, I’ll sit down and eat!” Hanamura said.

Naegi leaned back in his chair. Hanamura’s case wasn’t a fraction as severe as Owari’s or the Imposter’s, but eating rotting food couldn’t be healthy for him.

Even if everything else was a bust, at least Naegi would claim this victory.

Why had he listened to Hagakure again?

Technically, Hagakure had been right that one drink was fine. But then Hanamura offered seconds. Then thirds came out. At that point, Naegi put up enough of a fuss that Hanamura stopped serving alcohol, but that didn’t stop people from walking into the kitchen and getting their own. Even Naegi standing guard in the middle of the doorway didn’t help because he wasn’t strong or scary enough.

At least nobody seemed to be very drunk. Tipsy, though? Definitely, and he was stunned by how widespread it was. He understood why Komaru was, because she hadn’t understood that she couldn’t drink beer like water. But cowardly Hagakure had somehow let his guard down enough to drink, and his volume had noticeably grown over the evening. Kuzuryu, too, was laughing much more easily than usual while occasionally hanging off Pekoyama’s shoulder, and there was a red flush to Komaeda’s cheeks. The only person who was completely sober was the Imposter, and that was because every time something alcoholic got near the guy, someone literally knocked it away from him.

Naegi sighed as he sat with a little group of people who had managed to control themselves: Mikan, Mioda, and Genocider. He hadn’t expected that either.

“Why are you so surprised?” Mioda asked. “Don’t you know that people like to drink when they’re
“Is that what’s going on?” Naegi said. “It is because of what we’re doing tomorrow?”

“Nah, it’s a bit of everything,” Genocider said. “There’s a lot of people with killer instincts trapped on these islands, and a lot of helpless victims for them to choose from. I got nothing to worry about, but sometimes when I wake up, Gloomy’s back is still sweaty from her nerves.”

“You’re not stressed?” Naegi asked Mikan skeptically.

She tapped her fingertips together, one at a time. “I’m worried about Owari-san, but I asked your computer friend to watch her while I was here. He’ll call me if something bad happens.”

Smart. They should have installed Alter Ego in hospital’s security system from the beginning.

“May I propose a toast? To Class 77!” Nevermind was suddenly saying to great cheer.

“Class 78, too!” Hagakure said. He received a lot of _eh_ noises in response.

“Who is Nanami-san?” Komaru wondered aloud. Naegi turned sharply towards her, but his sister remained obliviously unaware of the potential minefield she had wandered into. “I saw pictures, but never met her in person.”

“Huh? You mean Naegi didn’t introduce you? Naegi, how could you!” Soda cried and . . . Were those tears? He was that upset?

“It’s not my fault,” Naegi said without thinking. “I can’t remember anything, so I barely know her either.”

Soda was sniffing. Hagakure, at Naegi’s former table with Komaru and Komaeda, leaned forward suddenly and draped his arm around Komaru’s shoulder. He reeled her in close, like he was about to take a chunk out of her.

“Ultimate Gamer!” Hagakure crowed. “Man, she was always a tough sell. Kept asking about ‘crafting recipes’ or ‘buffs and modifiers’ whenever I tried to show her something.”

“Hah!” Kuzuryu burst out into high, hyena-like laughter before slamming both fists on the table. “She was too smart to fall for your illegal crap!”

“Nothing illegal about what I do!”

“That’s what you think! All that stuff we let you sell for us? We were using you as a fence!”

“You mean all that stuff I got from him, I could have gotten from you?” Mioda said. “I could have avoided the markup!”

Kuzuryu began giggling. He punched Pekoyama lightly in the shoulder, and then kept doing it when she didn’t laugh with him.

“Nanami-san was a gentle soul,” Nevermind said with the tone of a wise old grandmother. Her cheeks were a faint red. “Quiet, but wondrously kind. She wasn’t burdened by grudges or resentment. . . Ah, what a peaceful existence she led.”

“Not like you guys at all,” Komaeda sneered. The awful silence that followed only make his sneer curl into something more sinister. “I’m only saying that none of those words are anything I would associate with Ultimate Despair.”
There was a dark flush on his face. Komaeda hadn’t gone light on the drinks. Naegi wasn’t sure if that was good considering he was chronically ill, but Komaeda knew best.

(Kuzuryu was still punching Pekoyama’s shoulder.)

“Pathetic is the word I would have gone for,” Komaeda continued. He lurched forward, dark eyes focused on the queen of despair.

“You’re not innocent yourself, Komaeda,” the Imposter said.

“What Komaeda-kun is trying to say,” Naegi said, because he understood and Komaeda was just doing it wrong because he had a bit too much to drink, “is that you’ve changed. You all have. Enoshima sucked the hope right out of you. But it’s okay. You have the Ultimate Hope on your side.”

“Just shut up!” Komaeda said.

Komaeda couldn’t have been talking to him. He must have been talking to the Imposter.

“Komaeda-kun, if you’re going to be mean to him, then you shouldn’t say anything!” Mikan snapped with her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

Komaeda snorted. “It’s not like he cares.”

“Guys, not tonight!” Naegi cried. “Tell me more about Nanami-san.”

“Eh, a bit too moe for my liking,” Genocider said. “Just pull up the hood and stick a video game in your hands, and you’re basically her with a lot more talking.”

“You knew Nanami-san?” Nevermind gasped.

“You didn’t think it was just Gloomy hanging around all day, did ya?” Genocider shrugged. “Enoshima had to get that secret somehow.”

“We all knew her,” Hagakure said lazily. “She and Fujisaki-chi hung out together all the time. Honestly, he was probably her best friend, other than that Hajime guy.”

Naegi startled at the sound of that name.

“Y-you take that back!” Soda shouted. He sounded hysterical, on the edge of tears. “That’s not true.”

“Well, who was it, then?”

“Uh... Well...”

“Not Ishimaru,” Hagakure said. “She and Fujisaki used to torment the poor dude. Something about exploits.”

“Weren’t those two secretly in love?” Genocider asked. If she was aroused by the idea, for once she wasn’t stating it.

“You’re thinking about Owada and Ishimaru. Him and Fujisaki were best pals, but the kid thought like a computer, so he loved finding ways to get past the rules.”

“Guess Nanami-san wasn’t so innocent either,” Naegi said.
“You take that back!” Soda shouted.

“I-I’m sorry! You can be mischievous without being a bad person, you know.” Truthfully, Naegi was taken aback by how quick they were to defend her. They seemed to idolize her almost as much as they did Enoshima.

“I remember,” Hanamura said. “She used to follow Fujisaki-kun around begging to be his beta tester. How could he say no when she was looking at him so earnestly?”

“Hey, hey, Teruteru-chan! Don’t be a creep!” Mioda chirped helpfully.

“We should invite Alter Ego to the funeral!” Nevermind suggested brightly. “All her friends should be there.”

“Then I shouldn’t be here!” Genocider said cheerfully. “I hardly knew the girl.”

“That’s perfectly alright, Genocider-chan!” Nevermind said. “Given the circumstances, it is completely understandable that you were not able to reveal yourself freely.”

Hagakure shrugged. “I mean we could bring a phone with Alter Ego on it, but it wouldn’t be the real thing. He’s dead. They’re all dead.”

“No need to look so glum,” Hanamura said.

“Hey, it’s not like you’re all cheery about Nanami dying!”

Another one of those awful silences descended. This one felt more hostile, like Hagakure had taken a bullhorn and dared them to celebrate Nanami’s death.

“You lost a friend. That sucks but like, we lost. . . Uh. . . One, two. . .” Hagakure counted to four on his fingers, and then gave up. “We lost a bunch of friends, so whatever you guys are feeling, it’s that many times worse for us!”

“Hagakure-kun?” Naegi said, peering at the older man. Despite his words, Hagakure still looked and sounded cheery like Santa Claus. Must have been the alcohol.

Soda said, “It’s not the same –”

And Soda cut himself off with a squawk when Genocider’s scissors plunged through the bottom of his glass. Golden-brown liquid spilled out over the tabletop and onto the floor.

“Now, you wait a second!” Without prompting, Genocider slithered off her chair and into the center of the floor. “I might not have been there all the time at Hope’s Peal, but I was there enough to know that lie’s dirtier than your dreams. Hell, I was there during the afterparty when the Future Foundation did some magic hooky-poky to give them their memories back.”

“With all due respect, Genocider-chan, it is different,” Nevermind said desperately. “The perpetrator of Nanami-san’s murder is still at large. In fact, he has been among us and –”

“Put a sock in it!” Genocider said, and Nevermind immediately shut her mouth. “You know, most of them blame you guys for their murders, and I get it. You don’t have to be the one holding the scissors to be a killer – although it’s much more professional that way! So, you think you’re feeling bad? Guess what, everyone else does, too!”

“Then why aren’t they here?” Koizumi demanded. And that tone, that entitlement, that complete
disregard for Naegi’s friends and what they needed was enough to send him over the edge.

“Because you guys are complete jerks!” he snapped. “Why would they come when you keep celebrating that people are dead, and you’re happy to rub it in? Koizumi-san, would you like it if Kuzuryu-kun kept boasting about Sato’s death, or if I kept bringing up Nanami-san?”

He kicked a chair. It hurt and didn’t go very far. God, he was just... angry. Angry for no reason and every reason, at everything and nothing. Like a kettle left on the burner too long, that had been boiling long enough that there was barely any water left and now the metal was starting to burn.

“Don’t you see? You guys are exactly the same!” Naegi continued. “But you’re so determined to hate them for stupid reasons that you won’t see it. Yeah, they took you to an island without asking, but what do you think being locked in a school was like? Or whatever went on in Towa City? We didn’t like being locked up any more than you.”

“You guys chose to lock yourself in that school,” Koizumi scoffed. “And don’t say it doesn’t count because you forgot!”

“Yeah? Well, you kidnapped my brother!” Komaru was on her feet, held back by Hagakure. “And then you did all that stuff to him.”

“That was Komaeda!” Kuzuryu immediately snapped.

Naegi bristled. “Take that back!”

“Alright, everyone CALM DOWN!” Nidai, also on his feet, threw his arms out, as if he planned to grab them all in a bear hug and silence them that way.

“. . . We’re all sick.”

Huh? Naegi, along with mostly everyone else, turned to Mikan. The Nurse had her hands in her lap, and she was twisting the bottom of her apron into a chord.

“I-I’m trained to look for signs of mental distress. We’re hurting. They’re hurting. Everyone I see is hurt,” Mikan whispered. “Everyone’s sick.”

“I know,” Naegi said. “That’s why we’re here. That’s why they brought you here. I don’t understand why so many of you can’t look past what they did to you and see that. You’re exactly the same. Hope’s Peak failed you, the Future Foundation wants to lock you away and throw out the key, and you’re all hurting. We’ve all lost people. We’re all in mourning. And we. . . we were friends once. All of us. Why do we keep trying to lose more friends?”

“Despair -!”

“Did losing Nanami-san feel good?” Naegi said before that word could get any steam. “Because that’s what you’re making other people feel, not this euphoria you feel when you create despair. Is that how you’re trying to make everyone feel.”

No. The answer had to be no. He believed in them. They did such awful things because Enoshima had brainwashed them. They weren’t like this. They were good.

. . . Was someone laughing?

Chapter End Notes
Next Chapter:
The night isn't over yet. There's still a conversation to be finished, and others to be had.
Give him a crown, and Hanamura would have looked like a boisterous king as he stood there and clapped. He stared at Naegi as if he was a show dog performing a special trick just for him. Naegi’s jaw dropped open. Hanamura’s offensiveness was so beyond anything he had prepared for that it almost crossed the line into humorous absurdity.

“You’re such an innocent little babe,” Hanamura cooed. “It’s like you crawled out of the womb.”

“Can I throw a bottle at him?” he asked Mikan. She shook her head. Drats.

“To answer your previous question: yes, this is what I want everyone to feel,” Hanamura said. “It’s freeing. You should know, Naegi-kun. Don’t you remember your despair when you realized you had no family left?”

“I’m right here!” Komaru shouted.

“You were with the Future Foundation. You didn’t count,” Hanamura said without a look in her direction. “But you felt it, Naegi-kun: freedom. Freedom from those strings that tied you to that old life, so that nothing remains but the glorious future ahead. The past is such a burden. Why bother moping about it?”

“Because I like the past,” Naegi said. “I like it better than whatever you call this future.”

“You haven’t let go,” Hanamura said. “You’re clinging to the memory of a world that used to be. This is a new world, and we can do whatever we want whenever we want. As long as you let the past weigh you down, you’ll never experience that freedom.”

“Good! If freedom means forgetting, then I never want it,” Naegi cried. His hand curled into a fist over his heart. “I hold the hopes and dreams of everyone who died to bring me here, and I’ll never turn my back on them. If I have to sacrifice my future for them, then that’s fine. I’m not a coward who runs away when things get hard.”

“Coward?” Hanamura repeated.

“Yes, coward. It’s easy, isn’t it? Every time someone confronts you about what you’ve done, you brush it off by saying it’s for despair. Do you even think about it, or is it just a reflex?”

Hanamura shook his head, tsking all the while. “Ah, you poor depraved soul. You know so little. Of course, if you’re eager to learn, you and I can always have a little one on one time. . .”

“No!” Mikan and Pekoyama said at the same time.

“Hm? You two lovely ladies want me for yourself? Well, how can I refuse?”

“Hey! You’re insulting Peko’s honour!” Kuzuryu tried to slam a butter knife into the table. He tried again a couple more times when it didn’t work, until a sighing Pekoyama took it away like she was punishing a toddler.

“You’re not answering the question!” Naegi said before Hanamura could get into an argument with
Kuzuryu. Because that was how it worked, wasn’t it? Distract. Deflect. Change the topic. Claim it was despair and brush over the subject. Claim it was despair with swirling eyes and a smile so rapturous, a glee so sickening that the topic was dropped; so that no one ever scratched the surface to see what was underneath; so that no one could ever understand – so that no one ever wanted to understand. Because if no one wanted to understand, it was too easy to dismiss them as monsters, to label them mad dogs to be shot on sight. There was no treatment for a mad dog, and a mad dog had to keep moving, had to keep fighting, had to keep his foes scattered and unbalanced. Because if he allowed his enemies to group and catch their breath, they would kill him.

That was Enoshima’s vision. A world of perpetual war. A struggle for survival from both sides, where to hope for peace meant a bullet in your head. She’d dug the world a hole and shoved them inside with the expectations that they would never find a way to climb out. Well, she had overlooked him. And while he had staggered through the darkness, unknowing of what he was, he had found the ladder out. Now, with Enoshima no longer guarding the cliffside, it was time to use it.

_I can show the world a better way._

_I will show them a better way._

“How much thought goes into it?” Hanamura scoffed. It was different than his usual, haughty sounds. The pitch had dropped half an octave, and it was short and rough like the snort of a lion about to roar. “Plenty. More than you can imagine. Do you think I’m ignoring you when we talk about this? That couldn’t be further from the truth. I think about it every day. I bet I think about it more than you think about your parents.”

“Don’t drag them into this!” he snapped, although he couldn’t quite say he was angry.

“Maybe we made a mistake,” Hanamura said. “We weren’t in charge of your parents and had nothing to do with what happened to them. But maybe we should have gone to Towa-san and insisted that we take over custody of them. It would have made sense. The hostages were kidnapped for the purpose of keeping you guys in line.”

Komaru looked like she wanted to throttle someone. Like she could see this Towa girl in front of her. Still, Naegi found he couldn’t share her rage. His parents had died for him, yes, as they all had. But it was needed in the end. Every sacrifice made his hope burn that much brighter.

“Maybe you should have been there when they died,” Hanamura said. “Then you might understand.”

Pekoyama stood up. “Hanamura-kun, that’s enough. This isn’t helping anyone.”

“We shouldn’t be talking about killing his family. Not at a funeral. Wh-what if their spirits hear us?” Mikan said worriedly. Hagakure perked up at that. He slid under the table, using his plate as a helmet.

“Although that wouldn’t have worked,” Hanamura was mumbling. “She killed them right after Enoshima-san died. Honestly, I’m surprised she let your sister live.”

“That’s why they died?” Komaru said, slurring slightly. “It wasn’t because of. . . ?”

But as always, Hanamura ignored her. “There’s nothing like the despair of watching your parents die. Although you don’t have to be there to experience that kind of despair! All that matters is having a chance to save them and failing, no matter how hopeless it is. The agony of loss and failure in one delicious bite – it’s the gift that keep giving. You remember it for the rest of your life, and the pain.
doesn’t ever truly go away –"

“SHUT UP!”

Hanamura fell silent. They all turned toward the source of the shout.

Naegi cocked his head to one side. “Koizumi-san?”

The red-haired photographer was panting slightly. Her hands were over her face as she hunched over the table, shoulders rising and falling with each breath. She dragged her hands down her face, and then whipped them to either side of her head as she exclaimed, “What is the point of all of this? Nobody wants to hear this.”

“Naegi-kun needs to hear it,” Hanamura said.

“Then do it somewhere else,” Koizumi said. “The rest of us don’t need to deal with stud this just because you two can’t control your testosterone.”

Genocider cackled. “Big Mac has some?”

“He’s the one who wanted to have this conversation now,” Hanamura said dismissively. “If you don’t like hearing about it, then why don’t you help lay this to rest? After all, you know what I’m talking about. You might not have had the chance to finish the job yourself, but the end result’s the same.”

To Naegi’s surprise, Koizumi flinched. “Nobody needs me to talk about my dad when you talk about your mother every day. It’s like she and food are the only thing you can think about.”

Hanamura ignored that statement. “Your situation’s closer to Naegi-kun than mine is, isn’t it? Both of you only saw pictures of the aftermath. Before that, you both clung to the hope that you would find them alive again, only to succumb to the allure of despair when you discovered the truth. Why don’t you tell us what that felt like?”

Koizumi looked away sharply, staying silent. That only egged Hanamura on.

“I have to say I’m a wee jealous,” Hanamura said. “The anticipation between sending those photos and receiving Enoshima-san’s reply... I can only imagine how beautiful it was. You really do have to share someday.”

Weren’t faces supposed to turn red from drinking? He didn’t remember hearing anything about paper-white.

“So, are you going to say anything?” Hanamura asked Koizumi. “You’re awfully quiet. Of course, like they said, it’s the quiet ones you have to watch out for.”

“Stop it. Just stop,” she said softly.

“But we’ve hardly discussed anything!” Hanamura said.

Without a word, Koizumi suddenly turned away from the table and headed towards the door, accidentally pushing past Nidai on the way. Naegi didn’t think; his feet moved in time with hers, tracking her to the exit. Then, as he passed the threshold, as if a leash had been snapped, he picked up his pace and ran after her.

“Koizumi-san!”
“Leave me alone!”

She did not run to her cabin. She left the hotel’s complex completely. Their feet produced splashes of sand as they made their way closer to the shoreline. It didn’t take long for Koizumi’s run to slow into a fast walk, but still she continued, and still Naegi kept his distance. Until a cliff blocked her chosen path of retreat. There she remained, a few feet back from the ledge, seated with her knees against her chest upon the rocky ground.

“Koizumi-san!” His shout came out in a pant. He was relieved for the chance to drop to his knees beside her. “Are you okay?”

She was silent as her chin rested atop her bunched legs.

“Well, you know how it is with alcohol,” he said. “Sometimes, people have a hard time filtering their words. I’m sure Hanamura-kun feels bad about what he said.”

“He would have talked about it anyways,” Koizumi mumbled. “Maybe not as aggressively, but he always does.”

“Does he know it bothers you?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous. It’s despair. It’s wonderful.”

He didn’t bother calling out the lie. It was pretty obvious, even to her, he assumed. He sat there, watching the clouds with her, until he noticed her ragged breathing.

“You okay?” he asked again, tapping her shoulder.

She grabbed him suddenly, wrapping her arms around his neck and reeling him in. Something wet touched his neck and slithered down to his collarbone. The grip she had on his shoulder tightened, nails digging in, as if she were in pain.

“I want them back,” she sobbed. “I just want to speak to them, one last time.”

Her grip on him grew until it ached.

By the time he returned, Hanamura had gone quiet again. Whether it was because his verbal opponents had left or because something else had happened remained a mystery. All Naegi knew was that a pall had set over the room, although both Hagakure and Kuzuryu greeted them joyfully when he entered.

“Well, that happened,” Naegi said, doing his best not to sound like a disappointed father. Honestly, these guys seemed to teeter from one crisis to another. “I have an idea. Since Nanami-san is the main subject of this funeral and I don’t remember her, you guys should exchange stories. Then I won’t feel as left out.”

“What a marvellous idea!” Nevermind clapped her hands, and then waited for servants that didn’t show. Not that she seemed to see a difference between them and Tanaka filling her glass.


“She’s retired for the day,” Naegi sighed. “Someone seems to have upset her.”

“Really?” Hagakure lurched forward. “Who?”
Naegi sighed.

At least his other suggestion seemed to have gone over well. Apparently, all Ultimate Despair had been waiting for was permission. Add in some curious questions from his Ultimate-shenanigan deprived sister and Naegi relaxed enough to loosen the death-grip he had on his pants. He snuggled up to Mikan as Nidai regaled the crew with a story of a time where Nanami had decided to take one of Soda’s battle robots for a joyride and Hope’s Peak ended up calling Ikusaba and Oogami to take her down.

Genocider’s tongue flicked like a lizard. “Hey, Big Mac? We got company.”

There, at the top of the stairs, was indeed a new arrival. Cold, hawk-like eyes surveyed all they saw, judging, weighing all within a glance.

“Uh oh,” Naegi mumbled as Kirigiri finished her initial examination of the room and frowned. “I’ll talk to her.”

He sidled up to a very unamused Kirigiri, who was already staring at him with a demand for answers.

“Hi. What are you doing here?” he asked as if nothing was wrong, buying time.

“I was patrolling the island and couldn’t help notice all the noise coming from here,” Kirigiri said. “Now it’s my turn. What are you doing here?”

“Just having a late-night snack with my friends!” he said with a cheesy grin.

“Really? And Hagakure-kun spontaneously decided he was okay with eating alongside Ultimate Despair?”

His mind went blank. Somehow though, his lips managed to form a sentence. “It was the alcohol!” Kirigiri blinked. “What?”

“They found alcohol while they were looking through the ship for supplies,” Naegi said slowly. “We saw them on the way back and, uh, Hagakure-kun couldn’t resist.”

“... Are you telling me they’re drunk?”

“Really? And Hagakure-kun spontaneously decided he was okay with eating alongside Ultimate Despair?”

His mind went blank. Somehow though, his lips managed to form a sentence. “It was the alcohol!” Kirigiri blinked. “What?”

“They found alcohol while they were looking through the ship for supplies,” Naegi said slowly. “We saw them on the way back and, uh, Hagakure-kun couldn’t resist.”

“... Are you telling me they’re drunk?”

“Reliving the glory days!” Hagakure crowed, stretching out the vowels longer than necessary. “Hey, do you remember when Nanami-san guessed the culprit of that mystery movie before you did, cause she saw a similar plot in one of her games...?”

“She was lucky!” Kirigiri snapped. “She had no evidence backing up that guess, only a gut feeling based on a different medium. She would have been laughed out of court... Why are we talking about this? Get up!”
“But Kiri, I’m listening to the story!” Hagakure whined. Despite the size advantage he held, he seemed helpless to prevent her from hauling him halfway to his feet.

“He’s missing the best part!” Kuzuryu, Hagakure’s fellow drunk and jolly comrade, complained. “Man, you need to lighten up.”

Kuzuryu hadn’t said anything about offering Kirigiri a drink, but she took it like that, glancing at a half-empty bottle and cringing.

“Those were secured,” she said, and Naegi couldn’t be quite sure if she meant to speak aloud. “How did anyone get to them?”

Komaeda stirred. “Oh, you mean that locked door? I punched a random number into the keypad.”

Naegi laughed in delight. Oh, Komaeda!

Kirigiri looked at Komaeda like she had never seen him before. Naegi, having already accepted that he was going to have to leave early with her, waited for her to badger Hagakure and the rest into following. But instead, she wrenched her arm away from Hagakure like she had been burned.

“Don’t complain to me when you get skinned alive,” she warned. She turned on her heels and walked off.

“Kyoko-san? That’s not an exit; that’s the balcony!” Naegi called. She didn’t alter her course, yet Naegi couldn’t think of a reason that she would want to hang out there. He went after her.

He wasn’t trying to consciously bring those types of thoughts forth, but Naegi had the unreal sense of being in a romantic movie as he approached her. She faced away from him, preferring to gaze at the horizon as she leaned on the railing. It was dusk, and the heavens were awash with pink and red-orange streaks. Her lilac hair fluttered in the wind.

“Nice night,” Naegi said, confused why they were out here.

“Aren’t you supposed to be lucky?” Kirigiri asked with no heat. “Then why is everything happening now?”

“It’s just a bit of alcohol,” Naegi said after a beat of hesitation. “There’s only been one fight – just verbal – and it was between two members of Ultimate Despair. Koizumi-san left, too, so it’s not going to be continued.”

“It doesn’t matter how many fights there were. What matters is that this happened at all,” she said.

“It’s okay.” He joined her at the railing.

“It’s not okay. Everything is an inch from falling apart.” Her voice cracked.

“Kyoko-san?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “This isn’t for you to worry about. We shouldn’t have had this conversation.”

“Wait!” He almost grabbed her wrist as she started to leave, but stopped himself just in time. Still, those few inches between them crackled with a tension so strong that it might have been better had he actually touched her. “You’re not okay.”

“I’m not sure if anyone here is okay,” she admitted, her back facing him now.
“I know I messed up. Multiple times, maybe. Definitely that time on the boat. But... I was that person you decided to trust once. Has it changed that much?”

“Your heart has always been in the right place,” Kirigiri said. Her face was turned slightly to the side, and the dusk light traced out the contours of her profile. “But in some stories, good intentions aren’t enough. Evil triumphs, regardless... And maybe I’m not enough for this.”

“That’s fine. That’s why it’s not just us,” Naegi said. “There’s Kamukura-kun, and Togami-kun and...”

He bit his tongue. He’d seen the flicker in her expression, brief, but enough to let him know he’d screwed up somehow.

“It only takes one,” she said. “One slipup. One miscalculation, when these people are already beyond logic. Then everything will turn to dust.”

“Not me. I’m always on your side,” Naegi said.

“You fell, too.”

He didn’t understand. Not at first. Then, it came to him in a monochromatic flash, like a glimpse of a nightmare: a world of too vibrant colour where the orange-coloured scheme had only made the purple tresses of her hair pop out that much stronger. Where the glint of light on his knife had burned his eyes like a sun, like the same one that had burned bright in his mind and belly, hot enough to hurt yet warm and encompassing like a mother’s embrace—

He shook himself like a dog. It probably looked weird, but Kirigiri still had her back to him, so he didn’t lose any points.

“Did we ever talk about that?” Naegi said. “I’m sorry. That was during a really rough time and I’d barely gotten any sleep that week, so I wasn’t in my right mind...”

“It’s not your fault, Makoto-kun,” she told him. “Despair had gotten to you.”

He shook his head instinctively. “I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Despair does that to you.”

“No. I wasn’t despairing. I don’t do that.”

“And who told you that?” Kirigiri asked. She turned slowly. “Of course, you can despair. If you couldn’t, we wouldn’t be here.”

“I’m the Ultimate Hope!” he argued, flustered. It felt like all the food he had ate had chosen this moment to start doing jumping jacks in his stomach.

“I know you are,” Kirigiri said. “The cure to despair, as Kamukura-kun calls you. But if you had never known despair, then how could you sympathize with these people? How could you connect with them the way you do?”

“I...” He looked down at his own palm, his rattled brain hoping to see an answer written there.

“The Ultimate Hope isn’t the Ultimate Despair. They aren’t immune to their opposing emotion. They feel it as keenly as everyone else, but then they get back up again. They refuse to give in. That’s who you are. One of the strongest people here and yet, the most human.” She smiled gently. “That’s how
Kamukura-kun and I have failed, is it not? We cut ourselves off from emotions and in return, we are alone.”

“That’s bullshit,” Naegi said. “You have me. You have our class. Kamukura-kun has me, too. I won’t give up on either of you.”

“You might be the only one here who won’t.”

“That’s fine. Someone has to lead the way. If that falls to me, then I’ll be honoured.”

He stepped closer, bringing his arm up to his chest as he did. Her eyes tracked the movement of his hand and his skin went hot, like he had whipped off his shirt or something.

“Kyoko-san, I’m . . .” His voice cracked, too, fiercely enough that he couldn’t keep going. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said again.

“But it still happened.”

She looked past him. “It did.”

He didn’t know how to fix this. It wasn’t despair, at least not of a type he was used to. It was a muted sadness, a weariness more suited to an ancient horror that time had left no choice but to come to terms with.

“I’ll get Hagakure-kun home,” Naegi said. “I’m sure Komaru will follow us.”

He shuffled away from her, fearing his presence was making things worse.

“Makoto-kun.”

Her hands found their way into his while he was in the process of turning. Their fingers laced together, thick leather rubbing against pale skin.

“So I can know where they are and what they’re doing,” she said, and he understood. She guided his hands away from her, their fingers still locked together, and maneuvered them behind his back. And as his hands moved further back, she moved in closer until Naegi had to start tilting his head back to look her in the eye.

His hands met behind his back and hers glided up to hold his wrists. Her body shuffled in closer. They were touching. Her chin grazed the curve of his shoulder; her hair tickled his cheek in this almost-hug that still struck as intensely as one.

“I hope that one day, we can go back to the way we used to be,” she whispered, eyes closed.

“We will. I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Time for another funeral! Let's hope it goes better then the last one <3
Naegi rose early that day. Skipping breakfast, he ran straight to the beach, eager – nay, desperate – to check on their shrine from the night before. Thankfully, no sudden storms had sent the pictures across the beach. He wasn’t sure if Ultimate Despair would forgive him if that had happened. There had been enough wind to throw sand all over the place though, so he put Alter Ego on the table and set to brushing each shelf with his hands. Maybe he should replace the flowers, too? A few of them were looking worn.

“It looks very nice,” Alter Ego said. The little avatar’s head bobbed on the phone screen.

“You don’t need to lie,” Naegi said. “A lot of it is made from trash that I pieced together.”

“But it’s the thought that counts, right?” Alter Ego said. “Everyone knows you had to put this together all by yourself, and that takes more work than hiring someone to do it for you!”

“I don’t think that counts when there isn’t anybody to hire,” Naegi teased. “If Kamukura-kun had shown up, I would have tried to hire him to help. Here, how does it look now?”

He grabbed the phone and then backed up several steps, giving the camera a good view of the scene.

“If it’s not too much trouble, can you turn me to the right? A little more. . . Oh, okay. Wow, it’s almost symmetrical!”

“Almost?” he whined.

As he fruitlessly tried to work out how the display wasn’t symmetrical, Alter Ego spoke up. “Naegi-kun, you shouldn’t be skipping breakfast.”

“I am going to eat,” he said dismissively. “But people could arrive at any time, and I need to make sure everything is perfect for when they do.”

“I guess, but would anyone be up this early?”

“They shouldn’t be. That’s why I’m here now,” he said cheerfully. He let his gaze rove over the empty beaches and –

Oh, someone was here. Someone was moving in the distance, too far for him to be confident who it was. He jogged towards the distant figure, and once he was close enough to tell, he broke into a joyful shout of the person’s name.

Komaeda was very still. With those dark, puffy bags under his eyes, he looked like he hadn’t slept well the past couple of days. There was something thin and brittle about his hair, like it was made of dry pieces of straw that could be snapped in half.
“Why are you up?” Komaeda rasped.

“I had to make sure everything survived overnight,” Naegi said. “I’m done with that though; I’m free now. Why are you up?”

Komaeda shrugged. “It’s sunny. No one is supposed to be awake. It’s a good time for a walk.”

“You’re right, it is. I mean I ran here, b-but I’m sure I would have liked walking here, too. I didn’t though because I was a little too excited to get here. If that makes any sense.”

Naegi blushed. Oh, he was babbling. How embarrassing! He puffed his chest out and tried to slow his speech to a more dignified speed, but it was impossible when his brain was jumping from word to word without taking a breath.

“Are you looking forward to today?” Naegi asked shyly. His chest felt hollow; he’d ripped out his heart and offered it to Komaeda on a silver platter with that question.

“People look forward to funerals?” Komaeda asked, seeming genuinely confused.

“No, I . . . I wasn’t trying to imply anything. You’re right. People don’t look forward to funerals, because people have to die to have a funeral and like you said before, that’s bad. Sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight. . .”

“Naegi-kun,” Komaeda said with a great sigh. “That wasn’t. . . The others do like it. They think it’s a nice tribute.”

“Great!” He laughed, mood bouncing back with Komaeda’s praise. “It is a nice day, isn’t it?”

“Yes. They’ve all been nice.” Komaeda said that with a muted wariness. “So far, the weather’s been perfect. We haven’t had a single storm. . .”

Naegi glanced at Komaeda, and quickly tore his gaze away as heat rushed to his skin. It was his own fault things seemed a little awkward right now. Komaeda was just trying to have a nice conversation and while Naegi was trying to keep it light, serious questions bubbled under his skin. Without an outlet, they grew and grew until he was afraid of rupturing from the pressure.

Finally, something had to give. He asked, “Komaeda-kun, why haven’t you come to see me? I know you’re busy and you don’t have to see me, but. . . I miss you. We used to spend so much time together.”

Komaeda stuffed his hands in his pockets. With the height difference between them, it was too easy for the older teen to look at the horizon above Naegi’s head and hardly see him at all. Naegi stood on his tiptoes, desperate to make eye contact, but it did little.

“What are we?” Komaeda finally said.

“Whatever you want us to be!” Was that too desperate? That was too desperate. What had he been thinking? He sounded like a floozy and . . . Oh, crap. The way he had said that could be taken so many ways! Which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing because Komaeda could take it any way he wanted.

“What if I want us to be nothing?” Komaeda said.

The back of his neck was sweaty. He tried to laugh, but what came out was high-pitched and yet croaked like a toad.
“You’re funny,” Naegi said. “I know that isn’t true. You love me. You said it yourself!”

Naegi fell silent afterwards, throat closing on itself. Was he supposed to say it back? He didn’t know what Komaeda meant by love, except... There was that one time...

“Things change,” Komaeda said. “People change. Sometimes, friendships just break.”

“No. No. That isn’t what happened. You haven’t even tried!” Naegi complained. “How can you say that things are over when we haven’t talked in ages. If you don’t see each other, how do you know that nothing’s there?”

Komaeda shifted as if to turn away, and Naegi seized him by the hoodie.

“I know you care about me!” Naegi said. “You and I, we created hope together. That isn’t something that can be washed away.”

Still Komaeda wasn’t looking at him and it was just so frustrating. What had he done wrong? Komaeda hadn’t scolded him or expressed his outright displeasure; he’d simply faded out of his life like it was time for them to go their separate ways. Komaeda... Komaeda couldn’t do that. It wasn’t allowed. Not after everything. Not after what they had been through. Not after everything Komaeda had done.

There’s still one thing. One way to make sure he can’t ignore me, Naegi thought feverishly. A vein in his throat pulsed against his neck. And it was with that frenetic abandon that Naegi hopped high enough to get his arms around Komaeda’s neck, to bring his saviour down to his height with his weight and slam their lips together. Komaeda tried to jerk back and Naegi wound his arms around tighter and curled his fingers into the fabric.

Komaeda’s fingers were curling into the fabric of his shirt, too, on his chest. But Komaeda didn’t pull him in closer; instead, Naegi was sharply shoved away. One shoe sunk oddly into the sand when that happened, causing his ankle to twist painfully until he shook it free. That, however, was nothing compared to the hurt running along the grooves of his soul.

“Stop it,” Komaeda snarled, more breathing the command than speaking.

“I’m sorry for springing that on you, but I’m not stopping,” Naegi said. “I don’t know what’s up with you, but I’m going to fight for us. I’m never going to stop fighting—”


“Then what do you call what we had?” Naegi demanded. “You felt something for me. If it wasn’t love, then what was it?”

Komaeda loomed above him. His face sharpened into something terrible. “It’s called hate!”

“Hate?” he echoed. He had to admit that this answer had been at the bottom of the list; Komaeda was so unpredictable. Seriously, why bother saying that when it was an obvious lie?

“It’s ironic, isn’t it?” Komaeda laughed. “Come on, Naegi-kun, you know everything’s decided at birth. Ultimates are born different. They are different. But then there’s you. Average, boring, unremarkable Naegi Makoto.”

“It’s pretty crazy, isn’t it?” Naegi said cheerfully. “Nobody saw it coming.”

A muffled voice came from Naegi’s pocket. Alter Ego was trying to say something. Naegi bit his lip;
ignoring his friend wasn’t nice, but he didn’t want Alter Ego to interrupt this conversation with Komaeda.

“Why did it have to be you?” Komaeda murmured. “Of all the pitiful nobodies, it was you. Kamukura-kun was wrong. It was because of luck. It was my bad luck!”

“I don’t understand,” Naegi said warily as Komaeda erupted into gales of laughter. “Bad luck?”

“That it was you. The last person in the world I would have wanted it to be, although it’s not as if someone like me gets a say in the matter,” Komaeda said. “We are only meant to be props for the Ultimates to climb higher; but I’m always standing in your shadow.”

“I’m Hope,” Naegi said. “It’s only natural. But you don’t have to stay in the shadows. I want you up there with me.”

“You are Hope,” Komaeda said flatly. “But before that, for so long you had me thinking I played second fiddle to the most insignificant of insignificant people. I guess you found it pretty funny, huh?”

“Not if it hurt you. I’m sorry! I . . . I don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

Komaeda put another hand on Naegi’s shoulder and sharply pushed him away. “I don’t want anything to do with you. There is nothing between us.”

Catching his balance, Naegi had one last thing to say. “Komaeda-kun, the whole point of being Hope is that I don’t give up. That includes –”

“I hate you. Why can’t you understand that!”

Hi words curled up in his throat. Komaeda didn’t mean it. He couldn’t.

But he couldn’t find anything to say before Komaeda gave him one last disgusted look and walked away.

“I-is he gone?” Alter Ego hissed from his pocket.

“He’s . . . Yeah, he is,” Naegi choked out. He took the phone out and cradled it in his palm.

“Komaeda-kun seems like an unpleasant person,” Alter Ego said. “He scares me.”

Naegi was silent,

“Naegi-kun, are you okay?”

That was the worst possible question he could be asked right now. The moment Naegi considered it, everything he had bottled up sprung a leak. An acrid scent clawed its way into his nose as a wave of heat hit him and sweat dripped down his back. He needed to sit; his vision was blurring.

When the dizziness subsided, he got to his feet and stumbled his way off the beach. His tight chest made it hard to listen to Alter Ego, let alone respond to him. He was aware of his destination, but it was in a faint, instinctive kind of way, like someone had embedded a compass in his head with its arrow pointing in the right direction.

“Naegi-kun, a-are you okay?” Alter Ego asked as he found his way to Third Island. He nodded and staggered forward.
The hospital held the same musty smell as always. Small echoes shadowed his footsteps. Owari’s room was on the first floor, first from the lobby, unlocked. He squeezed his way inside.

If there was a change in the unconscious woman, it was that a paleness had set over her and hadn’t faded. Naegi bit his lip and looked away. Owari’s bed was at the back of the room but near the front, shoved against the wall to be out of the way, her nurse slept in a second bed. Mikan drooled and curled around her pillow in slumber. Naegi hesitantly slipped off his shoes. He began to creep his way onto the bed.

But the small vibrations were enough to rouse her. Her eyes snapped open. Blearily, she blinked, and then upon seeing him, was startled into a half-seated position.

“M-Makoto, am I late? Has it already started? Oh no, I’m so sorry!”

“You’re fine,” he said. “It’s still too early. Can I crash here?”

“Um, s-sure.”

He crawled under the blanket and curled up, his lower back pressing against her shins. She stayed sitting for a little while, but eventually laid down again. Naegi arched his back once she did and pushed the back of his torso against her. He remained stretched out like that until a slender arm draped over him.

Maybe ten minutes later, the room’s door opened once more. Naegi caught a flash of lilac hair and a glove clenched around a cellphone. He shut his eyes tight and pretended to be sleeping.

“Is he okay?” Kirigiri asked.

“I-I think so. He seemed upset, but I didn’t see anything wrong with him,” Kirigiri sighed. “Have you seen Komaeda-kun?”

“No.”

The door shut again as Kirigiri left, and Naegi relaxed.

“Are you okay?” Mikan asked him quietly.

He turned into her as his eyes watered. “No.”

“You’ve been watching me all afternoon,” Naegi said.

“Is it that surprising? You are the one in charge,” Kirigiri said.

“You usually watch everyone.”

“I am watching everyone.” Kirigiri smirked. “The greatest skill a detective can have is watching without anyone noticing.”

“Okay.” He had no idea whether she was telling the truth or placating him, but let it drop. The fact that she was here and not mad was already a major step from what he had anticipated. By now, she had to know what was going on. She had to have connected it to the drinking last night and known that Naegi had completely disregarded her command. But she was here and although she kept staring at him, she hadn’t said anything against it. He wasn’t going to push her goodwill any further.
With that conversation settled, he returned – to Hanamura’s envy – to his girls. A sleepy, or perhaps upset Komaru laid her head on Fukawa’s shoulder as they waited, and it was Fukawa today. They’d agreed that Syo could cause more trouble than it was worth, but Naegi could see the imprint of her taser in her skirt pocket, just in case. Mikan hovered anxiously nearby and her company was Pekoyama, who was fondly observing Kuzuryu, who had sprawled out on the sand in his suit and tie.

“How are you feeling?” Naegi asked him.

“Like a truck hit me. Worth it though,” Kuzuryu said. “Haven’t been able to get that drunk since Despair shit.”

Naegi patted his head and moved on.

It seemed like everyone was here: Nevermind and Saionji in their black kimonos; Koizumi who wore thick sunglasses for some reason; Tanaka, who appeared to be babysitting the Imposter; Hagakure covering his eyes as he slumped against a rock with an equally hung-over Soda; Mioda draped over Nidai’s shoulder as she teased him and Komaeda in Nidai’s broad shadow.

Naegi’s shoulders rose, as if to hide his head. Kirigiri suddenly stepped in front of him and he blinked.

“When would you like to get started?” she asked.

“So, you do know what we’re doing,” Naegi said. His unspoken question echoed.

Kirigiri tucked her hair behind her ear. “There’s really no point in scolding you right now. You’ve already started it; there’s little choice but to finish.”

“But later?”

“We’ll see.”

It was the closest he’d get to a go-ahead. Naegi lurched to his feet, clapped his hands and waited until all eyes were upon him.

“If anyone wants to say something, now is the time,” he said softly.

Naegi wasn’t sure what he had expected, but no one stepping up wasn’t it. Maybe it was the spotlight? Otherwise, they seemed to love droning on about their late classmate. He automatically looked to Komaeda for answers - no! As his legs shook, he bit deep into his cheeks as a distraction. He had to keep it together. At least for today. At least for this.

“If there are no volunteers, then I will.”

“Kyoko-san?” He could hear mutters behind them. “Are you sure?”

Are you sure this is a good idea? went unsaid. Kirigiri said, “It’s fine, Makoto-kun. No one from our class has said anything about her yet, so I think it’s proper.”

He wasn’t sure about this at all. But Kirigiri… She seemed confident. He stepped aside.

“Thank you.” She spent a moment examining the photos on their shelves. “I won’t insult you all and pretend that we were particularly close. She was quiet and rarely got into trouble, so it was rare that our paths would cross. But it was my job to know everyone, and I knew her. She was quiet and
certainly opiniated about her gaming preferences, and yet she was more open-minded than most attendees of Hope’s Peak. Including myself, in the end. She was a good person. She died too soon. They all did.”

Oh, so she had moved onto talking about everyone. Naegi didn’t mind at all, but he was worried that Ultimate Despair might be. They could be oddly possessive, and it was certainly possible that extended to their dead friend’s funeral.

“They suffered such pointless deaths,” Kirigiri said with the detachment of a detective examining a body at the morgue. “They never should have happened. But the world has always been too cruel.”

“They weren’t all innocents,” Kuzuryu said, apparently unable to contain himself.

“No, they weren’t. But they were all victims of the same corruption.” Kirigiri looked Nevermind right in the eye. “Nanami-san didn’t deserve to be memorialized as she was.”

“. . . So, you’re admitting it,” the Imposter said. “It was a lie.”

“Of course, it was. Someone who would be willing to attempt a murder on Kamukura-kun would fit a specific profile, and Nanami-san was not it. I always knew it was a lie.”

“And why did you keep this to yourself?” Nevermind said. “I demand you explain yourself at once!”

Her royal voice rolled over the crowd like a bulldozer. Kirigiri remained unmoved.

“When you stood up in front of your people, was everything you said real?” Kirigiri asked. “A detective gives truth a voice, but what use is a voice when no one listens? As we discovered, when your family’s legacy is kept hidden from the public, you consequently have little credibility with that same public.”

Saionji scoffed. “So? It’s not like you tried.”

“You have no idea what I tried,” Kirigiri murmured.

That seemed to catch Saionji off-guard enough to silence any other digs. Naegi nervously looked between the two girls and seeing Nevermind step up didn’t help his anxiety.

“I’m sorry,” Nevermind said. Naegi gaped – was she apologizing to Kirigiri. That was . . . Wait, she was looking at Nanami’s picture. “Maybe if we had all stood together, we could have found the truth. Surely, the world would have listened to a class of Ultimates, especially with Novoselic behind them.”

“Maybe not,” Kirigiri said. “Hope’s Peak was more powerful than you understand.”

“But what about two classes?” Naegi said as he popped up between the two.

Nevermind glanced sideways at her as Kirigiri considered it. “Maybe.”

“Y-you said you know it wasn’t true,” Mikan said. “Then do you know what happened? Was it him?”

“. . . The true enemy always was Hope’s Peak,” Kirigiri said. “However, I can say with certainty that Kamukura-kun was present when Nanami-san died.”

“He didn’t do it!” The silence after Naegi’s outburst was deafening. “Kamukura-kun wouldn’t hurt her. He loved her. Err, it might have been platonically, but enough that there’s no way he would
“We talking about the same guy? Kamukura doesn’t care about anyone,” Soda said.

“No, he doesn’t,” Kirigiri said. “That was the point of the operation. Just another life destroyed by Hope’s Peak toxicity.”

“That’s not true! You don’t know him. Komaeda-kun, tell them!”

Komaeda was silent.

“Well?” Nevermind pressed. “What do you have to say, Komaeda-kun?”

Komaeda shrugged. “Kamukura-kun has no friends.”

Kirigiri put a hand on Naegi’s shoulder. She looked into his eyes. He could understand her: let this be. Let us have a common enemy. But not this way. Not like this. He wanted these two classes to come together, but not like this.

“He has me,” Naegi said firmly.

“No!” Kirigiri snapped. “You have no idea what he did to you. What he allowed to happen for the sake of his experiment. He’s no friend of yours.”

“If things like that mattered so much to me, I’m not sure I would have any friends.”

Kirigiri removed her hand; obviously, she hadn’t expected him to bring up her betrayal like that. Yet she wasn’t the only one his words had affected. Mikan and Pekoyama fidgeted uneasily, and several others looked similarly subdued.

Naegi sighed, suddenly tired. “Does anyone else want to speak?”

There was, thankfully. Following the lead of the other two, the speeches were kept short and sweet, mostly focusing on apologizing to the girl that had once been their friend. Funerals were supposed to be sad, but this seemed more so than most. He’d always sensed a melancholy and longing when they spoke about Nanami, but he hadn’t realized her classmates had carried around so much guilt. It was like Nanami had been one of their victims as Despair. But she hadn’t been. Right?

“Naegi-kun?” Nidai nudged him. “We think you should light the pyre.”

“Okay.” On his way to the torch, he stopped by Komaru. “You sure you don’t want to say anything.”

“Not in front of them,” she said hoarsely.

“Okay. We can have our own private thing later.”

Somewhere along the line, Soda had found a container with a suspicious skull and crossbones sign that he said was flammable. He was proven very right when Naegi held Kuzuruyu’s lighter to the tip of the torch, and it caught fast. As the heat blasted his face and the flames swayed dangerously in the wind, he took the torch in hand and approached the memorial. The little bit of smoke coming off the incense was going to be nothing soon.

The pyre – prepared by Soda – also caught fast. Naegi stepped back quickly, surprised. He tried to douse the torch in the sand. Eventually, he gave up and threw it somewhere it wouldn’t light anything else on fire.
“Now, we’re supposed to burn them,” he said through a thick throat.

He spoke loudly enough that everyone should have heard him, but no one moved. They all stared at the burning pyre, transfixed.

“It’s really happening, huh?” Fukawa said in a whisper.

“What do you mean?” Naegi asked, equally quiet.

“Nothing! Just... Honestly, this might be the closest we had to a real funeral for them”

“What about the Future Foundation?”

“They threw some big public spectacle. It wasn’t the same.”

Even though he was a safe distance away, the fire felt like it was burning his eyes. He turned away, and found he wasn’t the only one. Komaru and Kirigiri also had their backs to the pyre as they watched something in the distance.

Naegi frowned. His palms began to sweat.

“He did say he was supposed to come back today,” Kirigiri muttered as Kamukura walked towards them.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
I’m sure this won’t be awkward at all!
Kamukura was here. This was fine. Komaru was looking sideways at him, a question on her lips. Yes, this was fine. Even if he didn’t want Kamukura here, it wasn’t like he would be able to tell Kamukura to go away. Kamukura did what Kamukura needed to do.

Nevermind coughed. “Makoto, I do not mean to sound impatient after all your wonderful work, but are we...?”

After Nevermind turned around to look in his direction, she trailed off. Naegi recognized the royal, neutral expression she adopted when she saw Kamukura. Her half-finished sentence caught the attention of others, too. It seemed like they all turned at the same time and spotted the interloper on their peaceful funeral.

“Um, Makoto?” Komaru said.

“Stay here.” It was an order meant for everyone, but he thought only Komaru and Kirigiri heard him. He rushed towards Kamukura to intercept.

“Naegi-kun.” Kamukura was looking over him at the crowd. “What is going on?”

“Well, it’s, you know.”

“Explain.”

Alright, so Kamukura wanted to hear him say it out loud. He could do that. He cleared his throat and said, “It’s the cremation for our classmates. Plus, some guests of honor.”

“Well, you know that it’s working out,” Naegi said, cheeks a little warm. “And Kirigiri-san showed up by herself.”

Kamukura’s gaze drifted from his classmates to the memorial Naegi had set up. His brow quirked in the way a fashion scout’s might after watching someone with truly horrendous taste walk by. Naegi wasn’t offended; Kamukura must have at least ten talents that protested at his crude display.

“Oh, no. No. I don’t give a shit for what you have to say this time, Naegi, I’m vetoing this!”

“Kuzuryu-kun?” Naegi turned around to face the irate teen.

“I don’t care if you set this up. I am vetoing this addition right now!” Kuzuryu crumpled his fedora in his hand and wrung it. “You want me to let Koizumi mourn the bitch who murdered my sister? Fine, I’ll let you get away with that nonsense. But this is way too far. I am not allowing the guy who fucking murdered Nanami to be at her funeral!”

“Yeah, that’s seriously messed up,” Soda agreed. “I bet Kirigiri’s never seen a guy attend the funeral of someone he killed.”

“Actually, it’s quite common in accidental deaths or when the killer is trying to evade suspicion,” Kirigiri said.
“But those guys don’t know everyone knows they did it, right?” Spit flew from Soda’s mouth as he ranted.

“I wasn’t disagreeing with you. Just correcting an inaccurate statement.”

“I must agree. This would break the rules of conduct in every country I’ve studied,” Nevermind cried out.

“You hear that? No one wants you. Get lost!” Saionji stuck her tongue out fearlessly at Kamukura, like he wasn’t a metaphorical demigod that could rip that tongue out in a dozen different ways.

“Guys, come on! Just take a few breaths.” Although he couldn’t offer any real protection to the Ultimate Fighter, Naegi edged in front of him anyways. “I know what this is really about how Hope’s Peak lied and made Nanami-san out to be the villain. But that isn’t his fault. You should be blaming Hope’s Peak administration!”

“Not even them. The Headmaster had nothing to do with this.” Kirigiri crossed her arms. “This comes from an authority even higher than he was.”

“Maybe we are pissed about the lie – and we are! That doesn’t change that she’s dead and you’re about to let her murderer go tromping around the place,” Kuzuryu said.

“Naegi-kun, enough.” Kamukura squeezed his shoulder. “I shouldn’t be here.”

Naegi whirled around, knocking that hand away. “Yes, you should be! This is for everyone who misses her.”

“They don’t want me here,” Kamukura said. “I will only cause strife. You can do this without me. I will place my trust in you and attend to Owari.”

With that, Kamukura turned. Hands clasped behind his back, the man began to walk the same path he had used to arrive. Each footstep landed perfectly in a footprint he had created before.

“You know what’s going to happen if you leave like this. How is that going to help anyone?” Naegi shouted after him. His shaking fists were clenched tightly at his side. “Why do you let them blame you for this?”

“Because he’s guilty, that’s why!” Hanamura crowed.

“No, he isn’t!”

Kirigiri narrowed her eyes at him. “Do you have proof of that?”

“Nothing physical, but it’s the only thing that makes sense if you look at the facts,” Naegi said.

“Facts? Which facts are those?” Pekoyama asked.

“That she was his best friend!”

Pekoyama stared at him like he had morphed into a leprechaun. Kirigiri was giving him a similarly blank expression. Saionji choked violently, perhaps overwhelmed by potential comebacks. And not far away, Kamukura had stopped moving.

“Are you high?” Kuzuryu asked. “Hey, you freak with the weird hair, what did you give him?”
“I don’t remember giving him anything!” Hagakure said that in a way that expressed that he wasn’t sure about his own answer.

“I’m not high,” Naegi said. “What I said is the truth, and I’m not going to hide from it.”

“That’s not possible. Kamukura doesn’t make friends,” Koizumi said. “Wasn’t that the whole point of that experiment?”

“Technically, it was to create a superior human being with all the talents in the world,” Kirigiri said. “In doing so, however, they decided to excise all that which they seemed unnecessary. In this case, his heart.”

“Maybe. But they failed,” Naegi said. “Nanami-san was one of the only friends Kamukura-kun had, which is why he wouldn’t have hurt her.”

“Naegi-kun. . .” Kamukura still had his back to them, making his voice sound soft. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do. . .”

“I’m not trying to do anything. I’m stating the facts, or did you think I wouldn’t notice?” Naegi marched up behind Kamukura. His body felt tense and coiled, like he was nothing more than a ball of anger. “I can see it in the way you react when someone brings her up, or when we talk about her. The way you talk about her with me, the things you say, you don’t do that unless you care about that person. You don’t collect mementos about strangers.”

“Your class were friends once, were they not? They killed each other,” Kamukura said. Naegi must be getting to him, because Kamukura wouldn’t normally present an argument with so many holes.

“But we forgot we were friends. And I’m sure that Enoshima and Ikusaba don’t count,” Naegi said. “You don’t have despair as a crutch, so what’s your excuse?”

The look Kamukura gave him almost made Naegi feel like he was too dumb for Kamukura to bother arguing with him.

Naegi swallowed. “Kamukura-kun, answer one question: did you kill her?”

“Haven’t we had this conversation already?” Kamukura looked away. “No, I suppose I didn’t answer you back then. There is absolutely no doubt that Nanami-san would be alive if I hadn’t come into her life.”

Kuzuryu clapped slowly. “There we go. Mr. Ultimate Truth Guy said it himself. Now make like a tree and fuck off!”

But Naegi knew Kamukura, perhaps knew him better than most of his class. He held his ground.

“Interesting choice of words,” Naegi said. “I can’t help but notice that it completely avoided the question.”

“It answers everything,” Kamukura said in that signature drone. “Without me, Nanami-san would be among the living. Ergo –”

“It’s a simple yes or no question, Kamukura-kun. So, did you stab her?”

“She wasn’t stabbed,” Kamukura said immediately.

And in response, Kirigiri’s attention sharpened. “How do you know that? I happen to know the
cause of death was kept sealed.”

It seemed to Naegi that Kamukura hesitated before he said, “You are not the only Ultimate Detective.”

“Fine, no stabbing. Did you shoot her? Poison her? You haven’t given me a yes or no. You’re the Ultimate. . . Everything. You know what I’m looking for in an answer. This shouldn’t be so hard for you.”

“You don’t have to wield a weapon to be the murderer,” Kamukura said. “Shouldn’t Kirigiri have introduced you to terms such as manslaughter?”

“Quit it with the wordplay. You know exactly what I’m referring to!”

“I did. I killed her.” While Naegi did intend to challenge that, Kamukura’s hyper-predictive talents finally kicked in and he countered a nonexistent argument. “Yes, it does count as murder when she died because of your existence.”

“That still doesn’t sound like you delivered some kind of killing blow,” Naegi said, deliberately crude.

“It doesn’t need to be a physical bullet,” Kamukura said again. “All it needs to be is poisoned bait.”

“So, you did poison her! Ha, way to go Naegi-chi.” Hagakure gave him a big thumbs up. “Not even ten minutes and you already got him talking.”

Kamukura gritted his teeth. “Why don’t you ask your detective what she thinks of that theory?”

“If this is how it’s going to be, if you’re just going to take the blame like that, then why don’t you tell us what really happened. They deserve that, at least.” Naegi gestured to the watching Class 77.

Kamukura scoffed. “I don’t owe them anything.”

“Yeah, you don’t. Because you’re a selfish little prick who only gives a fuck about himself,” Kuzuryu’s hand swiped through the air. “Fucker like you only ever cared about lording it over the rest of us. Can’t be bothered to mingle with the guys beneath you. I don’t know who you got that from, cause it definitely wasn’t me or Sonia.”

“Probably Togami,” Nevermind mused. She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “However, although Togami’s attitude is something to be desired, I will admit that he has earned the right to brag. Togami wielded his power with great effect. You, Kamukura Izuru, are a waste of a miracle.”

“Some of us wanted to get to know you,” Nidai said, and he almost sounded genuinely hurt. “You blew us off like we were flies.”

“That might have been for the best.” Hanamura shrugged carelessly, smiling. “Since according to Naegi-kun, this is what he does to his friends.”

Kamukura moved. He turned on his heels, shoulders flared, head moving before the rest of him did. Hips locked into place; his weight shifted to the balls of his feet as his body braced itself to . . . Then he settled back, weight spread evenly again; the transition was so smooth that Naegi wouldn’t have noticed anything amiss if he hadn’t been so close.

“Then we’re in agreement that I do not have to answer Naegi-kun’s question,” Kamukura said, hands locked tightly behind his back. “Good.”
“. . . We were friends once.” At that low croak, Kamukura raised an eyebrow. But that dropped quickly when he realized it was Komaeda speaking. “That’s what you told me. Does that mean I get a say?”

“Why would you care? She became a steppingstone for my hope; that’s all that matters to you.”

His tone was waspish and that itself was unusual. Kirigiri met Naegi’s eyes and mouthed, *What was that about?*

“You’re not doing anyone any favours by holding it in like that,” Naegi said. “That’s what Hope’s Peak wanted to, isn’t it: to keep what really happened under wraps. After everything, I’m surprised you’re okay with playing along with them.”

“Why would I care? Hope’s Peak doesn’t matter to me,” Kamukura said.

Naegi cocked his head. “Did Hope’s Peak never find an Ultimate Liar?”

Kamukura frowned a little. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you’ve been doing a terrible job at lying today.”

Naegi squeaked at the sudden burst of pressure around his collar. Kirigiri began to move but stopped herself, wary of provoking any further action. Everyone else had frozen, although Pekoyama was eyeing the longer sticks in the still burning bonfire.

Very carefully, Kirigiri said, “Kamukura-kun, please put him down.”

Kamukura’s eyes widened slightly, as if he somehow hadn’t been aware that he was holding Naegi up in the air. Naegi barely kept his balance when he was abruptly dropped.

“You’re awfully touchy,” Naegi said, unable to keep his mouth shut to Kirigiri’s obvious dismay. “Why?”

“You’re annoying,” Kamukura said.

“I’ve been told that,” Naegi said cheerfully.

Naegi stretched and took advantage of the motion to check on the others. Kamukura’s outburst had cowed them, although he couldn’t count on that lasting forever. And when it faded, they were bound to be angry. He had to move fast.

“Kamukura-kun, what happened?” he pressed.

Kamukura looked him in the eye. “I killed her.”

“No. You didn’t –“

“Yes, I did! I played along. I indulged her. I gave her the information that Hope’s Peak used to judge her and declare her a threat. All because I was a stupid, arrogant nobody who thought he could become more.”

Kamukura turned his head and furiously wiped under his eyes. And then did so again when it wasn’t quite enough.
Looking freaked out, Naegi’s sister started to speak. “Is he - ?”

“I’m fine!”

Kamukura wiped his eyes again and this time, when his hand dropped, the light caught it at just the right angle to make it shine. Kamukura stared at the teardrop lying on the blade of his hand. He touched his cheek one last time.

“What . . . is this?” Kamukura asked aloud. “This can’t happen.”

Naegi locked eyes with Kirigiri. She looked uncertain, but gave him a quick, permissive nod.

“Kamukura-kun, what happened?” he asked.

His gaze was distant, as was his voice. “She knew me before I became Kamukura. And when she realized what they had done to me, she sought to reverse it. Hope’s Peak caught her. They attempted to subdue her, but . . . the gun went off.”

“How do you know that’s what happened?” Kuzuryu demanded.

“I was there. I saw it happen.” His voice was but a whisper. “I watched her bleed out. I should have known better. If I had just accepted my place, she would have stayed among you. Everything would have been different.”

“You must be so confused,” Naegi said. He touched Kamukura’s hand, but went no further, unsure how he would react. “They manipulated and took advantage of you when you were alone and vulnerable and they never really stopped, did they? I think that’s why you still believe that holding yourself back like this is a good thing.”

Kamukura touched his cheek again, as if in shock.

Naegi nudged him. He tugged Kamukura forward by the wrist. “Come on. The fire’s going to go out if we don’t get started.”

Soda raised his hand. “We still don’t know if he’s telling the truth.”

“Do you have any proof that he isn’t?” Naegi countered.

Soda thought about it, and then put his hand down. Naegi pulled Kamukura close enough that he would be included, but not close enough for others to feel like he was invading their personal space. He left the silent man there and went for Nanami’s picture.

“So, who gets to do the honours?” Naegi, cringing as he already knew what a loaded question that would be.

Sure enough, no one had any idea. Naegi half-expected Kamukura to claim the right and reveal himself as ‘that Hinata kid’, but he remained quiet – perhaps for the better. There was a lot of scuffling afterwards as Class 77 couldn’t agree which one of them would have been closer to Nanami, or indeed if any of them had been closer than the others.

Kirigiri finally cleared her throat. “I have an idea.”

“Um, are you sure this is okay?”

“Your creator is the one person everyone can agree was her best friend,” Naegi told the little fretting
program. “You’re the closest thing we have to him.”

“Well, if that’s what everyone wants, then I’ll do my best!” Alter Ego said with a proud smile.

“That’s what I hoped you say. Go get ‘em!”

Alter Ego nodded solemnly. The cellphone he was inhabiting lay flat on Naegi’s palm, pinning the corner of Nanami’s photo in place. It was the sole thing keeping it from floating away in the next breeze.

Alter Ego took a virtual breath. The cellphone vibrated. They all waited in hungry silence until the cellphone shifted enough that it no longer held the picture in place. Nanami’s face dropped into the reaching flames, where it quickly blackened and became lost among the charcoal.

“And that’s it.” Naegi backed away from the fire and placed the cellphone on the table where it would be safe from smoke. “We can burn the rest now. It doesn’t matter what order we use, but how about we start from the top just so there’s less confusion?”

That suggestion was accepted without problem; in fact, they seemed grateful that they didn’t have to decide for themselves. Naegi watched his sister, waiting for their inevitable moment, when Touko tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey. You need to go handle that,” Touko said, pointing with her eyes into the distance.

Naegi turned. Just as Kamukura had been not long ago, someone else was approaching in the distance. Someone with a very familiar height and ponytail.

“Oh no,” he sighed. As stealthily as he could, he detached himself from the group to cut Asahina off, an action which immediately caught Kirigiri’s attention.

“What’s going on?” Asahina asked warily as they got closer. The sight of the black smoke and crowd appeared to alarm her.

“It’s a symbolic funeral. . .” He trailed off, realizing how that sounded. “I’m sorry! I know you’re not on the greatest terms with them, so I assumed you wouldn’t be interested.”

“A funeral? Did Owari die?” Asahina asked.

“No, for everyone. It’s a general funeral.”

She squinted at the sight over his shoulder. “They’re so quiet. Are they . . . mocking normal people?”

“No! They’re sad. That’s how things are at a funeral. So, if you could keep it down. . .”

“This is a joke,” Asahina muttered. “Makoto-kun, you know who they are. People don’t get that way unless they’re seriously messed up and don’t care about anyone. They’re playing you.”

“No, they’re not!” Naegi said. “I know them better than any of you, and I know they can feel, too.”

“If they could feel, they never would have become like this,” Asahina scoffed.

“Aw, you’re only saying that because you don’t understand.” That last word rose and then oscillated in pitch like a song. Oh no. He’d forgotten about Mioda’s great hearing! The Musician popped up behind him like a jack-in-the-box. “If you did, then you would totally understand why we love despair.”
“Is that so? Then fine, explain it to me!” Asahina demanded. She took an aggressive step forward, a move that someone like Pekoyama and Tanaka would have rightfully identified as a threat. Mioda merely treated it as a twitch, however.

“Uh, so the thing is it’s kinda super hard to explain,” Mioda said. Her index fingers tapped together. “It’s more like something you show. Hah! If only we still had the Despair Video, right, Makoto-chan?”

“The what?” he asked.

“The Despair Video! You know, the video that makes everyone understand despair.” She cocked her head to one side. “Well, except for you apparently.”

“Are you talking about that weird thing Kuzuryu-kun showed me?” He scrunched his nose up. He didn’t remember it being about despair; then again, he could barely remember anything about it, other than the fact that he had watched it.

“What are you two talking about?” Kirigiri asked.

“You know.” They all jumped as Kamukura appeared out of nowhere behind Mioda and Naegi. “You investigated Mitarai Ryota. You know what she’s referring to.”

Kirigiri hesitated. “What?”


“You’re not wrong. I had every intention of investigating all the Division Heads,” Kirigiri said, “but I was never able to complete that task due to certain distractions.”

“What kind of distractions?” Kamukura said, as if the thought of Kirigiri being distracted from this task was impossible to imagine.

“His kind of distractions,” Kirigiri said, pointing at Naegi. “As you might recall, I was busy because I had to organize a breakout and later, a break-in. Now, what’s this about a Despair Video?”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Some big claims came out this chapter, and everyone takes a moment to digest them.
The Thunder Mutters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first rain had fallen upon Jabberwock Island. It was light, little more than a misting. The gentle pitter-patter tapped out a soothing rhythm to sleep to, if one was inclined to do so at this early time in the evening. For most on this lazy island however, that time lay in the future.

Kirigiri was one of those people. Her last couple of nights had been nearly sleepless, as required in the absence of Kamukura’s protection and Togami’s betrayal. Kamukura had since returned but still her mind remained leery, justifying its restlessness with the reminder that Kamukura hadn’t been back long and that last time she had seen him, he hadn’t been on top of his game. For Kamukura had, too, fallen prey to Naegi’s uncanny ability to draw the best out of others. Unfortunately, Naegi often gave little thought to whether he un-stabilized his victims during that process.

A door shut nearby. Asahina emerged from her hotel room in a tank top and shorts. The woman seemed uncharacteristically subdued as she held her hand out and felt her favourite element soak into her palm.

“Looks like he was right about the weather,” Asahina said, offering Kamukura some rare credit. “Glad Makoto-kun made everyone stop delaying the cremation.”

“It was a nice thing he did,” Kirigiri remarked. “I was wrong when I told him to abandon the idea.”

“. . . Did you tell him about what I did?” Asahina asked. As her fingers curled around one of the wooden pillars supporting the motel’s eaves, her nails dug in. “Is that why he didn’t tell me?”

“No, I didn’t,” Kirigiri answered. “I didn’t need to. He obviously can tell that something is wrong. I can’t fathom why he can act like a fool, but Naegi-kun is smarter than he appears.”

“Isn’t it obvious why? I can’t imagine those guys liked him smart.”

“That isn’t fair. He’s always been like that,” Kirigiri said. “You can’t say you would have expected someone as passive and soft-hearted as Naegi-kun to stand up against Enoshima Junko. If it makes you feel better, he didn’t tell me either. He ran the idea past me, but when I told him it wouldn’t work, I had no idea that he intended to go through with it anyways.”

“So, would you say his plan worked?”

She shrugged. “Nobody’s dead. No one was injured. While I’m not sure whether Kamukura-kun is better off after that, there were others who I believe needed the closure. It ended better than I would have hoped for, in any case.”

Asahina’s jaw tightened at the mention of Kamukura’s name. Kirigiri understood the sentiment; she, herself, held little affection for the aloof puppet master pulling their strings.

Asahina said, “He’s the Ultimate Actor, right?”

What was Asahina asking for? Reassurance? Denial? If it was anything but the truth, then she was about to be thoroughly disappointed.

“Undoubtedly. However, I cannot say whether what we saw today was an expression of that talent.”
Asahina growled, frustrated by the non-answer. Although she should had have known that would be the result. Kamukura was inscrutable to all. Except, perhaps, Naegi.

“A brainwashing video. That’s what they’re going with,” Asahina muttered.

Ah, there it was. Most likely, this is the reason Asahina had initiated a conversation with her in the first place. Heavily, Kirigiri admitted, “There were rumours circulating about . . .”

“I know. I know!” Asahina’s teeth grinded together. “We heard those rumours in the field, as well.”

“When rumours are that insistent and widespread, there’s usually elements of truth to them.”

Asahina paced a little. The tie keeping her ponytail in place came loose as her fingers dragged through her hair, and the loose strands fell around her face.

“All of this for nothing,” Asahina said. “Just a stupid brainwashing video the entire time. What’s the point? What was the meaning behind any of this?”

Nothing. Well, despair may be the most proper answer. But just like Enoshima’s other plots, it was to simply to sate her hunger. An empty purpose.

“I hate her,” Asahina sobbed. “I wish he hadn’t killed her. I wish she was still here so I could kill her!”

Kirigiri remained silent. Personally, she’s glad that Naegi was the only to drive Enoshima to the grave, if only because the burden didn’t appear to have stuck with him. It should be alarming that her empathetic, soft-hearted friend had yet to express any trauma from taking a life, but perhaps his nature as the Ultimate Hope meant that he always knew it would end this way.

“We can’t continue like this,” Kirigiri said to her. “It’s not sustainable.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Asahina shouted. Kirigiri glanced at Komaru’s door, hoping that the two siblings inside hadn’t been disturbed. “I can’t forget. What would I tell the families of the people they killed? I can’t say it’s for nothing and that they can’t hate the guys who did it. You don’t get it.”

“Don’t be so sure. I know what it’s like to hate,” Kirigiri whispered. She toyed with her braid, the same one she’d worn ever since she was a child.

Asahina’s glare softened. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Kirigiri said. “You could say it’s my fault. When you forget to show others you have emotions, it’s only natural for everyone to forget you do have them.”

Asahina frowned a little, no doubt working out whether Kirigiri was truly talking about herself.

“What do I do?” Asahina asked again.

Kirigiri took a moment to consider. “I can’t give you an answer. You have a right to hate them.”

“Aren’t you all about justice and fairness?”

“Nothing about this is fair.”

Naegi shut the door behind him. With the silence haunting the rest of the room, it quickly drew everyone’s attention. Mikan gave him a small smile, albeit one tinged with unease and nervousness.
The Imposter, half-asleep on his chair, glanced his way. Nidai half-looked in his direction as an acknowledgement, but otherwise kept his focus on Owari. His large hand kneaded her shoulder, as if to rouse her.

“Are you sure you want to be here?” the Imposter asked him. “Your sister was upset after the funeral.”

“She is. But they’re gone and there’s nothing we can do about it,” Naegi said. “But we can do something about this.”

Naegi didn’t know much about medicine, but he could guess that the I.V. in Owari’s arm, one that certainly hadn’t been there yesterday, was supplying her body with much-needed nutrients. How Kamukura had been able to whip that up, he didn’t know, but he wasn’t about to go questioning how Kamukura performed miracles. Still, although Naegi knew it was helping, he still balked at the sight of the needle in that too-thin arm. Owari was so thin it was a wonder that Kamukura had found a vein thick enough to inject.

“Did Kamukura-kun give an estimate on when she’d wake up?” Naegi asked.

Nidai shook his head. “She’ll wake up when her body thinks it’s got enough energy to support itself. That’s all he said.”

“I don’t mind standing vigil. There’s nothing else planned for the day.”

They were nothing but gracious hosts. Naegi pulled up a chair next to Nidai by Owari’s bed. The Imposter sat on a chair by the wall, occasionally jerking his head up as he repeatedly lapsed into momentary sleep. Naegi hoped it was the hour, and not his body struggling. Poor Mikan felt compelled to clean everything in the room. He watched as she crawled under the bed with a duster, emerging afterwards with scruffy hair and a desire to go for the legs of their chairs next. He didn’t think it was necessary, but if keeping busy helped Mikan keep her nerves under control, he wouldn’t stop her.

“How are you?” she asked him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m not like my sister. I already knew they were dead, so there weren’t any big surprises for me.”

They settled in for the long haul. It was indeed far into the next morning when the door opened once more and Kamukura wandered inside. Naegi, exhausted, but the only one awake, straightened up instantly, taking Kamukura’s arrival of a sign of the inevitable.

“It’s time?” Naegi yawned.

Kamukura let his presence speak for itself.

“Are you okay?” Naegi asked. “Yesterday, you…”

“Let’s not talk about this now.”

Kamukura’s razor-sharp gaze fixed on Owari, as if he intended to will her awake. Naegi stared, too, only to settle back with a pout when she failed to arise.

He’d nearly dozed off again when they heard the first stirrings of life. Instantly, he grabbed Nidai’s shoulder and shook the larger man awake. The other two he roused with a shout. It wasn’t just them affected; Owari, too, twitched with a moan that sounded like the tail end of a snore.
Nidai sucked in one deep breath and then held it. He hovered over Owari’s frail form, at least until her nose wrinkled and she grumbled, “Ugh, try brushing your teeth.”

Naegi cried, “Owari-san! Are you . . .?”

How was he supposed to finish that sentence? Obviously, she wasn’t okay. Not if the sallowness of her face had anything to say about it. Good old Owari, known for the quick, decisive movements of a world-class athlete, was instead struggling to sit up so much that Nidai hurriedly told her to stop.

“I’m in a hospital,” Owari said.

“You, um, had an accident and fainted,” Mikan said. “How are you feeling?”

“How long was I out?” Owari asked slowly.

“A few days.”

“You feeling okay? Not going to pass out again, are you?” Although Nidai’s tone was jovial, there was a real concern expressed in the lines of his forehead.

“I’m fine,” Owari said dully, waving him away.

The Imposter shuffled over. Naegi fought with himself not to compare the two, not to look for improvements in the other emaciated man.

“I’m glad to see you awake,” the Imposter said. Owari didn’t answer.

Naegi exchanged a look with Mikan. Time for business. He slid off his seat as quietly as he could, and followed Mikan out of the room, knowing that she would have stashed food for Owari somewhere she couldn’t destroy it. That somewhere else appeared to be a mini fridge which, when she opened it, appeared to be where she was storing all their meagre supplies. She moved aside a couple of unknown bags, and then handed Naegi a small cup. It wasn’t much; only a mouthful. However, both Hanamura and Kamukura had said that although the I.V. was providing nutrition to her body, that didn’t mean her stomach could handle anything more than a little food.

“Let’s hope she doesn’t put up too much of a fight.” He tried to say that with some humour, but was pretty sure he failed.

The Imposter looked up first when they re-entered, and quickly adverted his gaze. It was hard to say whether it was because he wanted to keep Owari from spotting what was in Naegi’s hand, or for his own sake. Either way, it made it so that the first time Owari laid eyes on the cup was when Naegi retook his seat.

“You were really sick,” Naegi began. “Uh, I got medicine. . .”

“Give it.”

His grip tightened around the cup as he struggled to understand. “Huh?”

“Just give it.”

He did. She fumbled a bit with the handover, as if it weighed too much for her. But she swung it to her lips afterwards with enough speed that some of it spilt and landed on her neck.

She drank about a quarter of the obnoxiously pink smoothie before she needed to rest. Or, given the way her arm flopped onto the mattress, that was all the energy she had to spare. Nidai took the cup
from her shaky fingers, watching her carefully as he set it on the nightstand.

“So. I died, huh?” Owari said.

“Almost,” the Imposter said uncomfortably.

“She told me that as long as I ate a little bit, I couldn’t starve,” Owari said. “Was... Is this what she really wanted?”

The Imposter merely put his hand on hers. “You’ll want to sleep a lot. Don’t fight it unless Tsumiki-san tells you otherwise. Try... to keep everything down.”

A ragged exhale was her answer. Owari turned her attention next to Mikan and said, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Just don’t do it again!” Mikan demanded, puffing up like a bird.

“You’re going to be okay,” Naegi said. “You have two of the best medical talents in the world looking after you.”

“Hey. Don’t worry about me, Squirt,” Owari said, and even her tired grey eyes seem to be smiling a little.

Kirigiri was outside when Kamukura and Naegi returned under an umbrella. Once they were close enough, Naegi slipped out from under the umbrella’s shelter, nodded at her happily and then skipped into his room.

“I take it that Owari-san survived,” Kirigiri said.

“She’ll live,” Kamukura affirmed. “What happened in my absence?”

“Plenty. We’ll need to discuss that in private,” Kirigiri said.

“Tension between Naegi-kun and Komaeda,” Kamukura remarked as they walked away from the motel. “Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I noticed it, too, but chose not to press him. I can talk to him later, but I can’t promise results. Naegi-kun is both incredibly secretive and desperately eager to talk about their relationship.”

“He is more likely to open up to me,” Kamukura said. “Nevertheless, with the pattern of interaction between them that I observed before departing, my hypothesis is that he pushed too far and Komaeda lost control.”

“They’re a ticking time bomb,” Kirigiri said.

“Yes. His sessions with Gekkogahara need to become a constant. Every two or three days. Daily would be too much and stress him.”

“Have you given up on Naegi Komaru, then?” Kirigiri asked.

“No. They are to play different roles. The sister is the role model, but Gekkogahara is the confident. She is not tied directly to any of us, so Naegi-kun shouldn’t feel as pressured to deceive her.”

“If everything goes as you plan,” Kirigiri sighed.
“Indeed. Regardless of how it can go wrong, Naegi-kun’s mental state needs to be addressed. As I requested earlier, tell me what I missed.”

What he heard about Togami couldn’t be described as a surprise. Even with the despair video destroyed and Naegi as a bulwark, that didn’t mean anyone was immune to despair. The obvious affliction affecting Ultimate Despair also made it easy for Class 78 to miss the turmoil boiling within their own ranks. With Naegi too placating and mentally comprised to point it out, Kamukura himself might have to integrate that therapeutic role. How boring.

“So, Naegi-kun has not lost his appetite for grand gestures in the name of hope,” Kamukura said dryly.

Kirigiri raised a brow. “He did that with you, as well?”

“Occasionally, particularly when he was feeling frustrated with a Despair’s perplexing behaviour.” Kamukura flipped his hair back. “Nevertheless, so long as they are not as aggressive as his scheme on the boat, his plots have a surprising success rate. He is notably sharper than he looks.”

“You think so, too? Good. Now I don’t have to feel guilty when I say that.”

Their walk had taken them to close range of the hospital, enough to make out the people running through the doors. Kirigiri evaluated them, no doubt checking they were headed back towards Center Island and not further into Third Island and where her friends rested. When she was satisfied, Kirigiri asked, “How is Owari-san faring?”

“Tsumiki or I will be at her side at all hours of the day. Although Owari is awake, she is far from danger; it may be prudent to induce a medical coma to allow her body more time to recover.”

“Why haven’t you? That would have been my first instinct.”

“Because . . . We may not need it. Owari hasn’t refused food. It appears her near-death experience has brought her out of despair.”

“That’s certainly welcome news,” Kirigiri said, gazing at the hospital. They were at the fore of its courtyard now. “How do you break the brainwashing?”

“It appears that when the emotions and desires produced by the videos clash enough with the natural wants of the host, the brainwashing is broken,” Kamukura answered. “Generally, this situation is induced by Naegi-kun.”

“And once it’s done, it’s done? There’s no possibility of a sleeper agent.”

“I’ve seen no evidence that once a Despair has manifested red eyes, they are able to return to a hidden state. As in the case of Yukizome Chisa however, a Despair that has yet to manifest red eyes can hide it indefinitely.”

Kirigiri’s expression shifted. She wouldn’t have forgotten that Yukizome was a traitor, but had not thought about it for some time thanks.

“What about Naegi-kun?” she asked sharply. “Has he ever manifested red eyes?”

“Naegi-kun was never brainwashed. I ensured it,” he said firmly.

His word was enough for her. She nodded and then they stepped aside as Koizumi and Saionji made their way past –
Kamukura did a doubletake.

“When did that happen?” Kamukura asked. He was sure he hadn’t mistaken those eyes.

Kirigiri glanced at Koizumi’s back. “I don’t know.”

. . . He’d only been gone three days. Naegi truly was a nightmare to work with.

Chapter End Notes

And that is the end of the second arc. Third arc starts next chapter and... oh boy.

To give you a hint, I'll tell you that the main characters of the third arc are Naegi, Kamukura, and Komaeda.
Devotion to Duty

Chapter Notes

I know, I know. I'm late. Long story short, I had this chapter pretty much done last week, but this is the first day I've had access to a computer since then.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Knock, knock.

Kamukura opened his eyes. Nine in the morning. There were few awake at this time, even fewer who would see it fit to disturb him. Probability of a disaster: high.

He sighed. He slipped out of bed, grabbed the sheets and tossed them in the air. The sheets floated back onto the mattress, settling perfectly around the edges. He pulled off his nightshirt with one, smooth yank and replaced it with a similar single move.

His pants were shed and changed on his way to the bedroom door without breaking stride. He combed his hair with his fingers once and the strands untangled themselves all on their own. Any tiredness was washed away with closed eyes and a deep, meditative breath. There. He was prepared for whatever awaited him.

He opened the door to a yawning Naegi.

“H-hello, Kamukura-kun!” Naegi said. His eyes were remarkably blue when he was wearing those sky-blue pyjamas.

“Naegi-kun.” He leaned out of the doorway and looked around. “. . . You came alone?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” Kamukura said slowly. “Why are you here?”

“Kirisu-san said I was supposed to see you,” Naegi said.

So she had. Well, he had told her he wanted to move forward with Naegi’s therapy. A little warning would be better next time, however.

“You didn’t think to change first?” Kamukura asked.

Naegi looked down at his loose sleeves and shrugged. “I thought it might be an emergency.”

A fair assessment. There were few reasons that Kirigiri would ask someone else to knock on his door, especially at this hour. Kamukura stepped aside and silently invited him in.

“Things have been pretty exciting these last few days,” Naegi remarked. “I’m glad Owari-san woke up. I know she’s going to be okay, but it’s great to finally see things moving forward.”

“You’re awfully confident,” Kamukura said.

“If there was no chance of her making it, you wouldn’t have helped her,” Naegi pointed out. “So,
I’m reasonably sure I’m right.”

Naegi no longer seemed tired. Apparently, just being in the presence of someone willing to talk with him was enough to bring out all that pent-up energy. Because now Naegi was prancing around him like a puppy whose owner was holding a ball hostage.

“How did you do it?” Naegi asked. “What did you do?”

Could he tell the truth? No. Naegi would panic upon realizing Kamukura hadn’t known he was planning a funeral. Given the success of that event, that would be detrimental. He didn’t want to discourage Naegi from such acts. Thus, Kamukura shrugged and vaguely said, “I scavenged and created some medical supplies.”

As Kamukura knew it would, Naegi was satisfied. He wasn’t really interested in the technical details after all. Letting people talk about themselves was simply one of Naegi’s favourite ways of bonding.

“So, did you like it?” Naegi asked slowly as they walked towards the office. “I mean what happened yesterday.”

Ah, now that was an interesting question. The whole truth was out of the question. If he admitted surprise, Naegi would piece together that he hadn’t known about the funeral. But what should he say instead? Admit anything positive, and Naegi might try to cram a repeat into one of his next hope schemes. Admit anything negative, and Naegi could work himself into a frenzy. Hope was one of the two sources of unpredictability in his life and unfortunately, Naegi embodied it. There was, however, another way he could deflect.

“It was an acceptable tribute,” Kamukura said, avoiding any talk of emotion.

Naegi worked at his lower lip, unsatisfied. But he was smart enough to avoid asking his real question directly.

“Hey, Kamukura-kun, did I do something wrong?”

“Why do you ask that?” Kamukura said, unsure what Naegi was referring to.

“. . . I think Komaeda-kun’s avoiding me.”

Of course, Naegi didn’t really think that; he knew that. He wouldn’t risk his heart as such if it were a mere suspicion. No doubt that whatever spurred Naegi to ask this question was tied directly to the tension he had observed between the two yesterday.

“What did he say to you?” Kamukura demanded.

“He said. . .” Naegi smacked his lips. “He was saying things that didn’t make sense. He said that we. . . that we were never. . .”

Kamukura understood. This was dangerous. He could naturally explain in a hundred ways how the relationship Naegi perceived was a façade, but grief was such a powerful fuel for irrationality and despair, and this especially would be potent. Kamukura needed Naegi’s goodwill; he couldn’t afford this disaster.

How ironic. Even when Komaeda tried to do the right thing, he always ended ruining someone else. He truly was the worst person alive.

“Why don’t you discuss this with Gekkogahara Miaya?” Kamukura said. He opened the door to the
office, compelling Naegi to enter and implicitly accept before he could think about it.

“Would she even be awake?” Naegi mulled.

Kamukura shrugged. “If she isn’t, then she’s going to be.”

“What’s the first word that comes to mind when you think of Komaeda-kun?” Miaya asked.

Naegi let out a short bark of laughter. His face flushed, and he had to look away. He could remember a time where he watched cheesy girly films with his sister and would roll his eyes at how the teenager characters mooned and gossiped about their crush’s every move. But now he got it. There was such joy in talking about the one you had fallen for, such a rush at finally being able to express all the little things no one else cared to mention. It was a release, like a tap being opened on a pressure valve

“Hope,” he answered primly. “It’s his favourite thing in the world. That’s why he noticed me.”

“Yes, he told me plenty about how much he likes hope,” Usami said, nodding. Miaya’s head tilted a little to the side. She rarely moved much more than that.


“There’s nothing to worry about. As part of Hope’s Peak research, I speak to all the students that are admitted. I’ve even spoken to you before.”

“Why? Back then, nobody knew I was special. That seems like an awful waste of time.”

“I don’t think talking to anyone is a waste of time,” Miaya said. “We might not have known you had a talent, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t anything I could learn from you. After all, Ultimates tend to be eccentric, and it’s always interesting to see how others handle that.”

“You act like you wouldn’t be considered eccentric,” Naegi said dryly as he flicked the laptop screen in front of the rabbit’s face.

Miaya waved as Usami spoke for her. “I’ll have you know that some of my patients prefer Usami to me!”

He laughed. “Are they five?”

The rabbit kicked at the ground. “They might be. Anyways, why does Komaeda-kun like hope so much?”

“You don’t know? Weird. I thought he would have told you.” Komaeda wasn’t exactly shy about his love for hope, after all. “I think the better question is why wouldn’t he? We’ve seen what a world of despair is like, and hope is the solution. Komaeda-kun just figured that out before everyone else. He’s really smart.”

“Yes, he is very intelligent,” Miaya said robotically. “He made some interesting plans while he was at school.”

“But all for hope though, right?” Naegi said. “Komaeda-kun’s already thinking about ways to make hope. He’s like hope’s archangel.”

“That’s a very nice metaphor coming from Mr. Ultimate Hope himself,” Miaya said. “Are you speaking from personal experience? How do you feel about Komaeda-kun?”
“He’s the best friend the Ultimate Hope can have!” Naegi declared. “He gets it. No one else really does, not even my sister. They don’t know how to pick themselves up like we do. They’re all so... sad all the time.”

“Sad?” Usami put a paw over her mouth. “Are you talking about despair?”

“No, not that!” he exclaimed, revolted. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think about how that sounded.”

“It’s okay,” Miaya said. “I’m just a little confused.”

“They spend so much time moping,” Naegi explained. “Like Asahina-san and Hagakure-kun talk a lot about our missing classmates, and Nevermind-san hasn’t come out of her cabin much ever since she heard that Novoselic doesn’t want her anymore. It’s like they’re stuck in the past. They don’t move on.”

“Everyone expresses grief differently,” Miaya said. Some of the playfulness had faded from her tone, and Naegi knew he had hit upon a subject that she regularly discussed with her patients. “It’s more than Nevermind-san not being allowed to go home; her entire life has changed because of that. Don’t you remember how lost you felt when you walked out of the school for the first time?”

“Yeah, but... they need to move on,” he repeated, struggling to find the right words. “I mean it’s insulting to keep moping over it.”

“Why do you think that’s insulting?”

“Because it’s such a waste!” Naegi said. “They died for this and instead of taking their gift, my friends are letting all that hope rot.”

“Hope?”

“Okay, it’s not hope right away,” Naegi admitted. “But it can become hope so easily; they gave their lives for hope, after all, so if you’re not using their deaths for hope, then it’s like ignoring their sacrifices.”

“From the shadow of despair, hope will bloom,” Miaya murmured.

Naegi eagerly leaned forward in his chair. “You heard that, too?”

“Komaeda-kun said something similar when I spoke to him at school,” Miaya said. “He has one of the most interesting views on hope I’ve ever heard.”

“Isn’t he amazing?”

“He’s very special. Say, can I ask you a question? You seemed really surprised that your sister didn’t understand. Why did you expect her to?”

“She’s my sister. She shares most of my genes. She’s the closest the world has to another Ultimate Hope. Plus, she started following in my footsteps without me doing anything so hope must run in the family,” Naegi said. Heh. Maybe Miaya had been playing with that rabbit avatar for so long that she had forgotten how genetics worked!

“Following in your footsteps, you say. Is Komaru interested in becoming an Ultimate Hope?”

“Don’t you know?” Naegi asked. Wait. Miaya worked for the Future Foundation. Well, she didn’t really – or at least she wasn’t loyal to them, otherwise they wouldn’t be talking right now. But it
explained the confusion Naegi was reading. It would be just like the Future Foundation to do something as horrible as suppressing the good news about his sister!

“Komaru defeated the mini Ultimate Despair, Towa Monaca, in Towa City!” Just thinking about his sister’s great deed made his chest puff out. “Towa was trying to make her despair, but my sister’s hope was too powerful. That’s just going to be the beginning. I started off like that too, and now I’m . . . this.”

He looked down at his hands. Such powerful hands they were, capable of creating and tearing down countries. Yet they were so strikingly ordinary. No gnarled scars like the ones that covered Kirigiri’s hands, nor any thickness from hitting a punching bag a thousand times. His hands were pale ones with nails he seriously needed to cut, nothing extraordinary at all. But that was why the tiger had stripes, and why the shark was dark on the bottom and light on top: camouflage, to hide from the prey until it was time to make the kill.

“Have you spoken to your sister about this? Miaya asked.

“I speak to her all the time.”

“Oh, that wasn’t the question,” Miaya teased. “Good communication is key for any relationship. You should talk to her about becoming an Ultimate Hope first.”

He thought he had discussed this with Komaru, but maybe he hadn’t been clear enough. After all, he’d been confused when Komaeda had tried to explain to him.

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

Kamukura knocked on the door. “Naegi-kun, it’s breakfast.”

“Allright,” he said, popping the t. “I’ll see you later, Miaya-san.”

“Bye, bye, Makoto!” The rabbit waved with both hands. “Say, Kamukura-kun, can I talk to you before you go.”

“Of course.” Kamukura stepped inside and then nudged Naegi’s shoulder. “We won’t keep you. Go have breakfast.”

Sure, sure, he’d do that. But he had important Hope duties to attend to first!

Apart from her impending Ultimate Hope designation, Komaru was an ordinary girl, which meant she was utterly predictable. Naegi knew that despite yesterday, she wouldn’t say no to breakfast. She would, however, be mopey enough to spend the rest of the day holed up in her room. That meant plenty of time for a nice private chat.

Still, better sooner versus later. Thus, he stalked Komaru with his gaze all through breakfast. He was obvious enough to get a doubletake from Kirigiri. However, she’d obviously dismissed his interest as harmless, for when he followed Komaru out of the room, Kirigiri did nothing. Naegi followed his sister right back to the motel and slipped in the room after her.

She jumped when she turned around. “H-huh? Ugh, why are you so creepy now?”

“Creepy?” he echoed, adding a whine to the word as if hurt.

“You are! You keep being all sneaky and . . . Never mind.”
“Can we talk?” Naegi asked.

Komaru looked uncomfortable. She took a seat on the edge of her bed and kicked her legs, “I’m sorry I got mad at you yesterday. I didn’t know you thought I knew . . .”

“Oh, I’m over that,” Naegi said flippantly. “I need to talk to you about something really important though: Hope.”

“. . . Um, what?” Heh, his sister did look adorable when she was confused.

“You know, Hope. Ultimate Hope. The thing you and I are made of.” He eagerly took a seat near her on the bed, bouncing once or twice due to his excitement. “We need to talk about your education.”

“Am I being pranked?” Komaru checked each corner of the room for cameras.

“No, no! This is really serious. I’m sure you could be an Ultimate Hope, too, but you don’t know anything.” He held up his hands in a placating gesture. “Not that I’m blaming you. I started off not knowing anything either. I guess that’s how we work. But the world can’t wait forever for us to figure it out on our own. I mean, you know what the mainland is like. They need us ready as soon as possible.”

“That’s crazy. I’m not even an Ultimate!”

“That’s b-bullshit and you know it! I wasn’t supposed to be either, but here I am. And besides, you defeated Towa Monaca, didn’t you?” He jabbed his finger right into the center of his sister’s chest. “If that isn’t a sign that you’re an Ultimate Hope, then what is?”

“It’s not like I did it by myself! Touko-san was there.” Komaru folded her hands over her heart. “If I didn’t have her, I probably wouldn’t be here.”

“I had Kirigiri-san!” Naegi countered. “It doesn’t matter who else was there. You’re the Ultimate Hope, and you can’t keep running away from it.”

When had he stood up? He didn’t know. What he did know was that his fists were tight at his side, and his snarl drawn so far back he worried his lips would tear. Komaru had her back to the bedpost, and it dug into the groove of one of her shoulder blades.

The door opened.

“Naegi-kun, what are you doing?” Kamukura asked in a flat tone. It was amazing how that was some of the most emotion Naegi had ever heard him use.

“I’m trying to tell my sister to stop ignoring her responsibilities,” he said, frustrated.

Kamukura said nothing. Naegi mentally shrugged and redirected his attention to his frustrating sister —

“Naegi-san, tell your brother what happened before you were rescued from your apartment in Towa City.”

Towa City? Naegi perked up and turned immediately. Whatever this was, it had to be good. And hopeful!

However, his sister didn’t seem to understand. “Um, some masked people broke into our house and
“kidnapped me?”

“After that. A certain visitor you had,” Kamukura urged.

She thought about it for a bit. “Oh, you!”

“You?” Naegi said. “You saw Kamukura-kun?”

“And what did I tell you?” Kamukura asked.

“Uh, you told me that Ultimate Despair had my brother. And about Shirokuma and Kurokuma.”

Kamukura raised his eyebrow.

“And that I needed to go after them!” Komaru finished triumphantly.

“I did.” Kamukura shifted his attention to Naegi. “Do you see? Your sister’s actions were merely a required step in a larger step.”

“So, it was you? Komaru only defeated Towa because you rigged the fight?” Words couldn’t describe the disappointment that he – nay, the world felt. A blossoming Hope snatched away from right under his eyes. Yet, Kamukura couldn’t be completely right. Komaru and him were related, like it or not. Plus, there had to be a reason Kamukura chose her. Maybe Komaru couldn’t become an Ultimate Hope, but she still could become a hope with a small ‘h’.

“Yes. Now, leave your sister be. You are frightening her.”

That was an order. Another time, Naegi promised himself. Promised the world. He wasn’t selfish. There was room to share the glory of his title.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:
Naegi can be quite stubborn when it comes to things he cares about. And he really cares about Komaeda.

Why does it seem like no one else understands that?

Works inspired by this one
Reconciliation by DeathPunkin

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