DISTRUST

by TellThemNaegi

Summary

Too many secrets were kept buried underneath to contain. Yet too many in Hope's Peak Academy had eyes to see through deception, and the ambition to act.

The result was a foregone conclusion: From the embers of the first mutual killing game, the truths that should have remained hidden, would burst forth, seep through the cracks in the surface and surge like lava; Incinerating long-held beliefs, affections and loyalties.

In light of that inevitability...was it worth exposing the lies, if all the truth did was hurt others?

(Sequel to Layers)
October 12th 20XX

A storm brewed inside Hope’s Peak Academy, slowly but surely enveloping all within the academy’s walls...

No, that wasn’t quite correct. You can’t stop a natural disaster, after all. Hmm… a bomb might be the better analogy? Yeah, let’s go with that. A time-bomb placed in plain sight for all to see, steadily counting down to the end.

What could be done about it? A number of things, but that depends on the sort of person you are.

I grouped people in two categories. Those with sight and the blind.

Not literally blind, but in the sense that seeing isn’t the same as acceptance. Like the old men trying to obscure the bomb under a shroud of rumors. Others wished to ignore it outright and continue their daily lives. The slight differences aside, these fell into the blind group. That isn’t to say ignorance was a crime. You wouldn’t serve jail time for it and there are some truths that are better left in the dark. Like, say you’re on a crash course for a disaster with no hope for escape. Wouldn’t everyone prefer peace of mind over worrying about what you couldn’t stop anyway?

What I’m saying...is that I won’t judge. I do admit to thinking differently though, because Ignorance was scary! Following the earlier example; even if survival was 0%, you could still do a whole lot with that info outside of surviving. As for what? That also depends on who you’re asking.

Oh, what would I do in that situation? I’d like to keep that to myself or else you might get the wrong idea about me.

What I can say is that I belong to the first category; those with sight...and well, if you acknowledged a bomb before your eyes, there’s typically three things to do:

Run.

Diffuse it.

Or…

Time’s up. I’ll save the last option for later.

Now to introduce who you could call one of the major contestants of this game, in a manner of speaking. That forgetful girl running for dear life.

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*pants* *pants*
“Finally got away…” An exhausted, auburn-haired girl leaned back against the wall, scanning the halls and fortunately catching no sign of her pursuer...in addition to ignoring the very odd stares the students who passed by gave her.

Bunch of snobs!

Today started off just fine before he showed up! That might not have meant much from someone with chronic amnesia, but common sense suggested that giant scary men shouldn’t be chasing her! “Too scary, too persistent! what’s that freakshow want from me?”

No no no no, it wouldn’t matter even then. Even if he had business with her, Ryoko didn’t want anything to do with him. She had enough problems with this “Junko Enoshima” broad who was totally on her case.

Ryoko didn’t know when, but Enoshima had sent her a letter, with claims of having reaped all of Ryoko's memories and was holding them hostage. Enoshima then orchestrated a meeting. It turned out to be a very one-sided conversation where the demented woman spouted nonsense about killing.

Beyond that, the amnesiac didn’t know a thing about Enoshima...besides the fact that the illusive woman was off her rocker...but the part about her memories couldn't be ignored. She needed to talk to Matsuda-kun (whoever he was. She’d remember after meeting him!) and figure out a plan of action

But that was increasingly difficult to do thanks to her chaser. Whatever his deal was, it had nothing to do with Ryoko Otonashi. That was her name, and the one of the two things she remembered. The other being Matsuda! Who needed finding, asap.

With that narrow-minded objective in mind, Ryoko bolted down the hallway, lead by the notebook containing her thoughts.

“Matsuda-kuuuun!” Ryoko stormed into what was assuredly the correct room, her attention drawn to its sole occupant prior to her arrival. He’d jumped a bit into the air, eyes widened in surprise. He panicked as the laptop in his possession nearly fell out of his grip.

Not very coordinated overall.

Hmm, she wasn’t getting a fuzzy feeling. He was short, taking his appearance into account. The image of Matsuda in her head wasn’t so…mousey. “Hey, are you really Matsuda-kun?” She asked.

“Mhm” He replied

“Speak up. Which ‘mhm’ is that?”

“Erm…I’m not him?” He said in this half high pitched half husky voice. “Matsuda-senpai is out right now…I think.”

He’s not here!? Where else could she look!? “He has to be here! You’re not looking hard enough.” She whined gripping the boy by his shoulders.

“Uh, I don’t think searching around here will change anything. It’s not like there’s anywhere to hide…except the closet." He pointed to the closed cabinet. "...Matsuda-senpai doesn’t strike me as the hide and seek type.” He sounded familiar with the place…and he was technically right. “You don’t have to get so down about it. I’m sure he’ll show up in no time.”
He was awfully considerate, with that worried expression of his. “Suspiciously so.” She unintentionally blurted out, letting go of him.

“She was awfully considerate, with that worried expression of his. “Suspiciously so.” She unintentionally blurted out, letting go of him.

“Suspicious?” He blinked

Might as well roll with it. “Yeah, it’s weird. You’re weird. Why care so much about someone you don’t know…unless.” He was interested in her for other reasons reason. “S-Stay back, pervert!” Ryoko distanced herself from the impure fiend.

“H-huh? You’ve got that wrong. I was just worried.” The boy raised his hands defensively, the chain of events occurring too fast.

Ryoko squinted her eyes. “No ulterior motives?”

He shook his head. “But um…could I ask you something?”

“He was awfully considerate, with that worried expression of his. “Suspiciously so.” She unintentionally blurted out, letting go of him.

“Spit it out.” Ryoko said harshly. She wasn’t in a hurry since there was nowhere else to look and this was the only place she knew Matsuda would come to. Pressuring this guy was oddly fun. That’s the feeling she got from him.

“Did you, perhaps, forget me?”

....

“Am I supposed to know you?”

“I…think so.” What an indecisive person. “There’s a rumor about a student who…has amnesia.”

“That’s me! I’m Ryoko Otonashi.”

“Oh, then, I’m Makoto Naegi. Did that jog your memory a little?” The boy said.

Ryoko skimmed through her notebook in search of his name…and she found it, in bold letters and underneath was a warning: “Danger. Omnivore man. Stay away.”

That meant…he was dangerous after all.

She closed the notebook, gazing at him with immense suspicion. “Okay, Naegi, if that is your real name!”

“It is.” He said with surety.

“Don’t interrupt me!” Ryoko yelled at him. “What are you doing here?”

“I…came to return this to Matsuda-senpai. He dropped it in the halls.” Naegi showed her a black e-handbook.

“What is it?”

“You…don’t have one? It’s the school handbook, our identification’s on here.” He was right. The screen showed Matsuda’s name and talent in full.

That was weirdly nice of him… “Show me your handbook.”

“Eh?” He was reluctant. Suspiciosoous.
“O-Okay, n-no need to glare at me.” He handed her one from his pocket.

Makoto Naegi, Ultimate Lucky Student – is what the book had written down.

“…You’re a luck magnet? What the heck?” Was that a talent?

“T-That’s the usual reaction. I…won a lottery ticket to get in the main course.” His speech pattern was way too timid. He’s a total herbivore!

She read more of the contents in the handbook. Nothing stuck out above the mundane. It was kind of a letdown.

“Your talent’s kind of a rip-off, but you sound like a nice guy, Naegi.” Yup her notebook’s way off. Maybe Enoshima tampered with it at some point. It’s not very reliable now.

“Hey.” She heard Naegi’s squeamish voice but didn’t pay it any mind. She had a more pressing dilemma.

“Hey….”

Not now. She was thinking. If she couldn’t trust this notebook then she was in big trouble.

“Hey!”

“What!?” Ryoko snapped…and froze when she was exactly why Naegi had been pestering her. He was presently in a very uncomfortable situation. Someone else had entered the room during her ruminating. Long black hair, corpse-white skin, a snake-like disposition and unbelievably tall.

All of these traits were familiar to Ryoko. She’d just spent 30 minutes running away from him!

“Eeek”

“Do you know this guy?” Naegi shivered in place, rendered immobile by the giant’s (who stood behind him and leered over ominously) hands planted on his shoulders.

“Nope. Not even his name.” Ryoko said.

“Bastard…you’ve forgotten me already.” Their assailant snarled in this oddly dignified way.

“I forgot.” She admitted, sifting through her notebook “Who are you again?”

“…Isshiki Madarai.” He snarled…and wow, he pulled off that fodder goon aesthetic pretty well.

The name struck a chord with the small high-school student who lifted his head to get a better look at his attacker.

“Madarai-san? Aren’t you part of the student council?”

“What? This guy’s a student!?”


Ryoko blinked. “What’s with that phrasing?”

“You should know better than anyone else.” He threw her a murderous gaze.
20 unproductive seconds later

“…Was that s’posed to be a cool line? It doesn’t really work when there’s actually a gap in communication. It just kind of leave things awkward until you explain.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“T-The student council…there’s a rumor that all of them were killed over Summer break. T-The culprit hasn’t been found, if the rumor’s true.” Naegi’s face paled in fear of the older man’s applying any more pressure in his vice-like grip.

Well it can’t be a rumor if Snakey’s trying to kill me! “That’s why? I haven’t killed anyone! And if you’re in the student council, shouldn’t you have seen the culprit?”

“I…was not present. My comrades were lured and slaughtered. Perhaps those criminals did not consider me a genuine member…and merely the bodyguard.” He scoffed. “I, the Ultimate bodyguard…lost my chance to exercise my talent when it mattered most. Can you even understand the humiliation I feel? You’d better be able to relate!”

Naegi yelped at the intense pain from Madarai’s fingers digging into his flesh. They’re both pretty sensitive.

“Hm. Yeah, that kind of sucks. But at least you’re alive?” She said, half-heartedly.

“Yes…and I will use this immortal life of mine to repay this humiliation 100-fold. But first, I must find them.”

Ryoko singled out a word that stuck out. “Immortal?”

Madarai’s eyes narrowed. “Have you forgotten what you did to me earlier?”

That went without saying at this point. Not quick on the uptake, this guy.

“You dumped a shelve on me in the shed out back. Then escaped.” He said.

Ryoko’s eyebrows raised. “H-How are you fine after that?”

“As I said, I’m immortal.”

“Can I interrupt?” The hostage said boldly. “What’s this about revenge?”

“We were attacked, I shall retaliate in kind. What else would act as my motive?” Madarai explained in a voice that made it seem like he was speaking to a dullard. Ryoko shared the sentiment, it was a stupid question, even if it had nothing to do with her.

“…The student council is gone. There’s nothing productive about revenge. Instead, you should be trying to rebuild the council.” Naegi said.

Madarai sighed. “Why are you guys making me repeat myself? I’m a bodyguard, that was the only reason I was chosen to be among the council, and that reason has been smeared by the perpetrator of their deaths.” His grip tightened. “And even if I wasn’t their protector, the council were my comrades and classmates. Why wouldn’t I avenge their suffering?”

“Revenge won’t correct your failure. It’s meaningless.” Naegi said, not backing down from the man who’d scared him to death moments earlier. “And…you could also just call the police. Seriously, does nobody ever think of that option?”
“Materialistically-speaking, you have a point. However, only personal revenge will preserve their dignity; that is the greatest gift the living can offer the dead.”

‘They’re fighting. This is my chance to run.’ Ryoko plotted, already twisting her body to run for the exit.

“Oy, you better not be thinking of escaping again, girl!” Madarai caught her.

Ryoko groaned. “Leave me out of this, I’m just an innocent bystander! The student council, killings, all that junk has noooooothing to do with me!”

“…So it’s come to this.” Madarai said strangely, then looked down at Naegi. “Boy, I don’t think I’ve heard your name.” He said in a friendly tone.

That was a red flag if Ryoko ever saw one.

“Um…I’m Makoto Naegi. A first-year.” Aaaand Naegi tripped it without hesitation.

“Well then, Naegi-kun. For what is about to happen, I am sorry.” Madarai’s snake like arms motioned upwards, shifting from the lucky student’s shoulders to clamping on his head from both sides.

“E-Eh?” Naegi squeaked, his face turning blue.

It was kind of funny, in Ryoko’s opinion. He had so many expressions!

“Let us just say you have quite bad luck.” Madarai’s threat was obvious. Even a mule would realize that Naegi’s head would pop like a balloon if Madarai didn’t get what he was after. “Will you talk?” He posed the question to Ryoko.

“It has nothing to do with me.” Ryoko repeated.

“I will absolutely get my revenge, and I will do anything for it. Will you allow me to test my resolve on poor Naegi-kun here?” His voice oozed malice.

“It has nothing to do with me.”

“I-I think he’s serious.” Naegi was utterly terrified….and to be honest, so was she. All the more reason to bail and distance herself from any further involvement

“You…are really going to leave him? When he’s in this mess because of you? How heartless can you be?” Her decision to flee had only hardened Madarai’s negative opinion of her.

“It’s Naegi’s fault for being so unlucky. It has nothing to do with me. Nothing to do with me...” She recited her mantra as if already mentally distancing herself from the chaos before her body had caught up.

Naegi and Madarai stared at her with bizarre expressions. The latter’s face settling into cold indifference first. “I see. Then witness the extent of my resolve.” He clasped at Naegi’s head, making the boy wince and with all his strength he-

“That’s enough!” A figure ran into the room, dashing towards Madarai. Before the bodyguard could respond, the intruder’s fist was already planted into his face. Madarai staggered back, covering his reddened nose with his hands.

Another blow came in the form of a roundhouse kick to the dome, and before you knew it, the pain
in her butt was knocked flat out.

Naturally, this meant Naegi was free.

Meh

“Ikusaba-san.” Naegi beamed.

Ikusaba? Who was this? “Oh it’s a girl.” Ryoko noticed by the skirt. Ikusaba’s short hair, super flat chest and muscular arms made it hard to tell otherwise.

Naegi thanked the girl with fervor one would expect to give their savior. Ikusaba on the other hand returned the gesture with an embarrassed smile.

“I’m Mukuro Ikusaba. The Ultimate Soldier.” The freckled girl, who Ryoko had never met before, said.

“Ryoko Otonashi.” She replied. But soldier huh…you’d think Ikusaba would be a lot less… friendly. Stiffer. Well, not that she’d ever a person in the military to be sure. It’s just a feeling she had.

“What were you doing here, Ikusaba-san?” Naegi asked.

“I was passing by and heard all the noise.” Iksuaba gave a straight and direct answer.

How convenient. Was it Naegi’s luck?

…

The three engaged in an awkward and disconcerted conversation about what just happened, before another visitor appeared out of nowhere. This time almost literally. A small baby-faced boy, who looked like he belonged in elementary school was suddenly right next to her as if he’d teleported. Turns out his name was Yuuto Kamishiro, a student with no distinctive traits whatsoever; an attribute he weaponized into a talent.

He was The Ultimate Spy.

Apparently, he knew Ryoko from before, but she forgot about him too. He didn’t take it too harshly and was aware of her condition beforehand. With some protests from Naegi, Ryoko absconded with Kamishiro with the promise of reclaiming her normal life and leaving behind the mess with Madarai, which Naegi and Ikusaba would be left with clean-up duty.

All as well. It seemed Matsuda-kun wasn’t coming here anyway. If this guy was a spy, he might be able to lead her to him.

She stared back at Naegi just before leaving. There was something about that guy that seemed… off. Ryoko was predisposed to dissecting and analyzing her environment. Usually, she reminded herself that most of her surroundings were irrelevant and she should stop attending to them. Could it be that she was inquisitive by nature?

If so, it would explain why she was curious about this boy she’d never met before and most importantly, was not Matsuda-kun. Naegi was eerie. Her preconceptions was of an unreliable, meek boy, however, the look in his eyes had blown them away.

For a moment…a moment not even Madarai had noticed when the two argued…but Naegi had
stopped being afraid. Instead he challenged Madarai’s ideals with a mysterious strength, a resolve that didn’t waver even when the bodyguard subconsciously applied more force to crush his shoulders.

Maybe he was kind of suspicious, after all.

-Makoto Naegi-

Naegi and Ikusaba were left to themselves. The latter girl who’d improved in the art of emotional expression staring anxiously in the direction of their new acquaintances.

“Vous should go after her. I’ll take care of things here.” Makoto said, surprising Ikusaba.

“Why? She looked fine to me.” Ikusaba replied.

“Otonashi-san has amnesia apparently and I’m not too comfortable leaving her with Kamishiro-kun. Um…I guess I’m a little worried.” And she was too.

“What will you do about him?” Ikusaba’s gaze fell on Madarai’s unconscious form.

“I’II call security and explain. No need to worry about me.” His words that couldn’t be any more inappropriate. A potential victim asking to be left alone with their assailant.

Ikusaba looked like she was having an internal conflict between two equal and opposing decisions. “A-Alright, if you’re sure.” She settled on heeding his advice.

“I am.” He waved and showed Ikusaba a charming smile “Hurry before you lose them.”

Ikusaba (reluctantly) took off, leaving only two in the room.

Makoto’s warm smile thinned, as he placed one hand on his hip.

“Why do I have to be the one to say it if she’s that concerned in the first place?” Makoto chuckled affectionately. If Mukuro wanted to protect her sister, she should go for it. He won’t stop her.

He phoned security, telling them about Madarai’s crazed actions. Of course, leaving out details involving Junko- uh Ryoko now, I guess. One would think calling Junko by a different name would take some getting used to, but he was aright with it after a second. It wasn’t like he knew the fashionista all that well to begin with.

“What’s she up to anyway? First, she ditches class and now she’s lost her memory? I don’t get her at all.” Makoto mused to himself.

Yet someone answered anyway “Enoshima’s motivations – illogical they are – all begin and end with despair.”

The monotonous voice sent a shiver down Naegi’s back as he turned around in shock. His surprise quickly dying down upon taking in that absurdly long (and never brushed) hair. A tall male standing behind him with a face that looked like it had never worn a smile in his life. “…H-how’d you get in here?”

“What is the meaning of this?” Izuru Kamukura said in a no-nonsense tone. Makoto could tell he
wasn’t referring to Isshiki Madarai. He hadn’t spared a glance at the fallen bodyguard’s way.

“That’s his normal reaction, and I usually take the backseat in conversation so…force of habit?”

“Is that so? I presumed you had more self-control.” Izuru said. "How inconvenient."

“Not really, when you’re one of the only two people in the world who knows about me. He’s better at conversation anyway.” Makoto said fondly, as if praising the younger sibling who surpassed him. A gesture bordering on narcissism if taken in a certain context. Makoto had no brothers, he was referring to the other personality he’d cultivated at a young age. One that had taken on an adorable life of its own, separate and unaware of his.

“You know, when you told me Junko had messed with her own memory, I thought you were pulling my leg. Isn’t she planning something with the 77th class? Giving herself amnesia sounds like a huge self-imposed roadblock.” The baffled Luckster held the laptop to his chest.

Izuru stared intensely at the pc.

“Enoshima’s actions often lack sense. If life was a chess-game, she takes needless and disadvantageous risks to keep the game going. For this reason, anticipating her next move with logic is next to impossible. It is both her strength and weakness.”

“No idea how sabotaging yourself could prove to be a strength, but I won’t complain.” Makoto shook his head.

“...you are fine with letting her run free?” Izuru changed the subject.

“You mean Ryoko? Mukuro went after her, she’s probably safe.”

“Why are you not seizing this opportunity to capture her?”

Makoto stared at his senior with bewildered eyes. What’d Izuru think he was? “I’m not a kidnapper, and Ryoko hasn’t even done anything wrong, technically speaking.”

“I see. So you do not even perceive her as Enoshima.”

“We talked a bit and she seemed like her own person. A bit goofy but a good person, I say let her have fun.” He nodded, dismissing Ryoko’s predicament like it were no problem of his own.

“A good-natured person that would leave you to your death.” Izuru disagreed.

‘No seriously, when did he get here?’ Makoto thought but chose not to voice. “You saw that huh? Everyone makes mistakes. Self-preservation is hardly a crime.” And with Junko out of the way, he had an easier time bringing the remainder of class 77 to his side.

In turn Izuru chose not to voice Makoto’s hypocrisy.

“That said, if Junko was going to erase her memory in a spur of the moment, I really wish she’d have done it before killing off the student council.” And sending the whole school into a frenzy after uploading a video. Some doubted it was real at first, but well, the council kind of up and vanished when the semester began. Hard to disprove, in his opinion. But the school was damn sure trying their hardest to cover it up...even with all those protests from the reserve course.

What’d they call it again...oh right, the "parades".
He turned to Izuru with a weak glare. “And you shouldn’t have helped her.”

“The student council murdered one another. I killed but a single man, who initiated the confrontation.” Izuru Kamukura made no excuses for himself, and he couldn’t care less for justification. It was merely stating a matter of fact.

“Self-defense huh. Even so, you could at least have disabled him without killing him.” Makoto pouted. “I’m mad.”

Izuru arched an eyebrow.

“I...can try to be mad.” Makoto gave him a toothy smile. “Oh well, it’s all in the past now and you seem to have gotten a cool souvenir from it.” He referred to the very noticeable scratch on Izuru’s cheek. A baiting remark that received no reply. “That was a joke. Please don't hurt me.”

“Assuming Enoshima hadn’t interrupted by trying to flee...how would you have responded to Madarai’s resolve?” Izuru replied.

“Oh, you mean that stuff about the student council’s dignity?” Makoto reflected on the humiliated man’s hardened determination to protect the memory of the council and seek retribution against their murderers. Many could call Madarai’s fervor to see his friends avenged, an admirable goal... but honestly... “I can’t bring myself to care.”

The dead are dead. No need to tie down the living with their problems.

Satisfied...or unsatisfied (he couldn't tell), Izuru turned around and walked out of the room.

"Wait up!" Makoto tailed him, finding it difficult to keep up with the older boy.

...

Incidentally, that bomb analogy I made earlier? Refers to the student council’s killing game.

There were 3 options to choose from when dealing with a bomb. You can either run away. Try to diffuse the bomb or... make use of it. It’s not uncommon to see explosives used productively, like blowing up old buildings with dynamite for reconstruction.

As an opportunist with an aversion to ignorance, I chose the third option and planned on using this bomb for my purposes. Unpleasant right? In my defense though...

I’m hardly alone in that thought.

-Isshiki Madarai-

Isshiki Madarai recovered 46 seconds into Makoto and Izuru’s conversation but feigned unconsciousness. He’d heard every relevant word before their departure, his assumptions and excessive methods vindicated.

“I must tell...my brothers.” He struggled to stand after the defeat Mukuro Ikusaba handed to him. The information he now possessed was too vital. Ryoko Otonashi and Junko Enoshima were one in
the same. Thus, that woman who fought them earlier was a fake. Actually, it was likely Ikusaba herself. The fighting style gave it away, and furthermore, they were sisters.

Izuru Kamukura had killed at least one of their members.

Makoto Naegi was somehow involved.

Such was the information he'd gained. The hit list grew, and he would make sure they would be narrowed to none, when all was said and done. Once he and his brothers recovered, they would avenge the student council, that was their only reason for living. A task not given but set of their own will as the only way to atone.

Or so he thought.

Isshiki Madarai limped out of the room, completely unaware that he acted not his will but the machinations of another. An unwitting pawn in a sense, outwitted into believing nobody in the room had seen through his feint.

-Izuru Kamukura-

The steps of the Ultimate Hope echoed throughout the empty hallway after separating from Makoto Naegi. He had noticed from the very beginning and intentionally directed the discussion with the lucky student, revealing intricate details about the tragedy that befell the council.

Why?

‘Because it would be interesting. Why else do I do anything?’ Izuru, already having mapped out multiple uses for the bodyguard…among other potential pieces. “Time to pay my teacher a visit.” Yasuke Matsuda – The Ultimate Neurologist and the man responsible for rewiring Izuru’s brain – was his target. His little experiment was well underway.

...

Hm…there was also that one member of the council that should have survived – Soshun Murasame. He could be useful as well, supposing he still lived. Even Izuru couldn’t tell what fate would befall the sole survivor of the killing game. Despair was simply that unpredictable.

So a game of musical chairs to determine the whose hands the bomb would land, began.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. I never planned on a sequel to Layers, but by popular demand,
we're back!

Things to note:

-DISTRUST takes place around 5 months after the prequel.

-There will be relevant/semi-relevant developments and events that will occur or have occurred in the background.

-Expect a drastic change in tone compared to Layers, particularly concerning Naegi. As mentioned in the tags, there isn't a central protagonist and while Naegi remains a prominent figure, he may not appear as often as he did in the previous story.

-Where Layers was mainly a slow-burn breakdown of Naegi's psychosis, this will be closer to a fast paced, Quentin Tarantino-style B-movie, involving multiple perspectives, character developments and disconnected objectives.
Chapter Summary

October 15th 20XX

*Ryoko undergoes multiple fateful encounters, while Yasuke regrets ever meeting Junko Enoshima. Poor guy, maybe one day he’ll find happiness.*

*All he needs is a little helping hand.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Good Morning, Matsuda-kun!” She shouted the first thing after waking. It was far from normal to call out someone else’s name as she did, but she had a feeling he would be there.

Just then, something crawled out from her bed. The slovenly dressed figure rose to his feet, a magazine in hand as he walked over to a nearby chair. He didn’t reply to Ryoko’s greeting, instead fixated on the reading material

“This is the part where you greet back.” She briefly considered getting the wrong guy, but he felt right.

“Why do I have to greet such an ugly person?” He said, eyes still not leaving the manga.

“I’m not ugly! I’m cute. The cutest even!”

“Wrong. You’re so ugly that I felt like throwing up the second I saw your face.”

“You haven’t even looked at me!” She flustered, pointed dramatically at the rude boy. “You could at least put down that dumb book.”

“Manga is more important than you. Besides, my mind’s eye is enough.”

“Woah…”

“Ugly and stupid. That’s quite the grim future you’ve got.”

“Are you the kind of bully who makes girls cry?!”

“Enough…By the way, who are you?” Matsuda asked.

“Eh? I’m…” She stuttered…failing to answer what should ordinarily have been the simplest of questions.

She searched through her notebook, the only item she had with her and found “Ryoko Otonashi…”
Did that sound right?

“Oh, it’s you.” Matsuda said in mock surprise. Then that must have been her name.

“…You didn’t even know who you were talking to until right now?!”

“You’re whining but it’s not like you remembered your identity either.”

“I remembered you.” Ryoko glowered…or tried to. It probably came out as a child’s pout.


“Maybe my memory’s coming back. Oh oh, praise me!”

“Lie down. I have to check on your condition.” Matsuda slid along his chair to one of the many machines occupying the room.

Ryoko laid back down, holding her notebook on top of her chest. Her gaze wandered to Matsuda, typing on the computer. She had ample time to take in his silky hair, feminine eyebrows, masculine features before he opened his mouth.

“Stop looking at me, ugly.”

She giggled. His sharp tongue was easily his most defining trait. She made sure to write it down in her notebook before she forgot.

“You don’t have to put down everything in that diary.”

“My brain sickness won’t let me remember if I don’t.”

“…Brain sickness? Listen here, it’s a lot more complicated than that.” The neurologist explained the reason for her memory loss. Problems with the hippocampus resulting episodic memory dysfunction. Long-term personal experiences couldn’t be retained, but she did keep structural knowledge. In other words, Ryoko could remember knowing how to do certain tasks but she was unable to recall the context or the period when she learned of it.

“Your explanation’s too long.” Ryoko whined.

“I’ve explained it before. Why don’t you write that down instead of the trivial crap that goes in your head.” Matsuda pinched his forehead in frustration. His feature settling on bewilderment.

“You don’t even know if you’ll ever be cured. How are you taking your condition so well like this?”

Ryoko didn’t need to think to answer the question, it came naturally to her. “I can't remember anything from before I lost like memory, so it's not like I have anything to compare it too. That's why I don't see my forgetfulness as a disadvantage...it's just a part of who I am.”

“…There are many disadvantages. You don’t even know if you’ll ever be cured.” He argued.

“Don’t care. Actually, I might not want to be cured. That way, I can stay by you forever!”

“…How about your friends, family and loved ones. You remember me, but what about them?” Matsuda grit his teeth. It was a rhetorical question, because she had already answered it. “Most would panic in your position, but you don’t even give a shit, do you?”
“D-Did I do something wrong?” Ryoko shivered.

“…No. You haven’t done anything at all.” He sighed, then returned to his work.

Ryoko ruminated over any wrong word choices she’d made in the discussion…and couldn’t think of any. There was very little to work off. All Ryoko knew was that Matsuda was a childhood friend.

…

She didn’t know a whole lot about the world.

To escape the silence, Ryoko reached for a remote, foisting it at the television perched on the wall. At the click of a button, she was directed to the local news channel. A female reporter, red-hair, short stature. A formal attire and average looks.

Ryoko observed all these trivial details at a glance.

“-salvaged the remains of the aircraft days ago. For those tuning in, the plane was recently discovered near an uninhabited island in the Pacific-Ocean.”

“What’s all the fuss about?” Ryoko murmured.

“Ah. A luxury plane was hi-jacked by terrorists a little while back, but the aircraft’s signal went dark a shortly after the terrorists made their demands. Nobody knows why and the media’s made a big deal about it.” Matsuda replied.

Accepting the explanation, Ryoko returned to the TV.

“According to air-sea rescue, there was a single survivor, but as a minor, their identity has yet to be disclosed. Our hearts go out to the hundreds of grieving families and loved ones.”

Ryoko winced. What a body count. “I wonder how they felt before the whole world went to shit. Total despair I bet.” Sad…but no matter.

It had nothing to do with her.

Matsuda harshly snatched the remote from her hands and shut the Television off. “Hey, I was watching that!” She rubbed her hand.

“You think you have the time? Incidentally, how do you plan to stay here with your bad grades?”

…Grades? Oh riiight, she goes to school here. “I get bad grades?”

He gave her an incredulous look. “A scatterbrain like you thinks she wouldn’t flop? You never remember lectures so you’re always trailing behind. I did my best to keep you around, but if you don’t pick up on your studies, you’re getting expelled soon.”

…E-E-E-E-XPELLED!? “I can’t get expelled. Do something, Matsuda-kuuuun.” She grabbed his arm.

“Get off me. I already have an idea.”

Sparkles lit in her eyes “Tellmetellmetellme.”

His lips formed a nasty sneer.
“Glad you’re interested, because I promise you’ll hate it.”

---

Matsuda-kun was super smart, he predicted that she would completely hate his idea, and she did. Very, very much. Because the way to make up for her low grades was to participate in the weird study group that was still on-going.

Ryoko lamented her fate, skipping on one foot; a playful gesture contrasting her displeased features. She took her time on her journey to the library, which she was only able to make thanks to the concise directions laid out by Matsuda.

Naturally, with the neurologist’s personal touch.

“Go to the orange building once the main gates are in your sights… And don’t dawdle…you scatterbrain.” – Ryoko recited his instructions.

The odd girl stopped, landing on one foot while her other was static in the air. Her arms were outstretched to the side to maintain balance. The object of her newfound attention were the main gates, described by Matsuda. Off in the distance, to the other side, was the library.

Ryoko noticed a commotion near the gates. A large number of grown men in uniform were stationed on the outside, forming a wall, an extra layer in front of the iron bars. At a glance, she easily discerned they were security…which made it all the more confusing to see them opposing an even greater number of students. Unlike Ryoko’s brown school-wear, theirs were a formal black. Ryoko would daresay those students were smarter dressed, but the atmosphere in that area didn’t give off the impression that they were elite.

A guard roughly pushed a boy of similar age to Ryoko, back into the crowd. An unthinkable act for security, to lay a hand on the merchandise they were meant to protect. But with how openly and unabashedly he did so…

“Maybe they aren’t students.” Ryoko pondered.

“They are the reserve course.”

She twirled in a comical fashion to meet the person who’d addressed her inquiry. There she met a fair-skinned (almost corpse like) girl, with lavender hair, dressed exactly like Ryoko. All save her impressively detailed, purple gloves.

Ryoko deduced the gloves had to be custom-made; the leather used to fashion the pair couldn’t have come cheap either.

“You’re staring.” She said, moving her hands out of Ryoko’s vision, likely an attempt to draw attention away.

“Oh, s-sorry.”

“Don’t be, I have the same habit.” She said vaguely. “Are you interested in that lot?”

“Not particularly.” Ryoko answered honestly.
“As expected, little else besides Yasuke Matsuda concerns you.”

Ryoko blinked. Not just at the namedrop, but the implications that they were acquainted. “Who are you?” She blurted out.

The girl’s stoic mask remained unshaken by the question. By that reaction (or lack thereof), Ryoko concluded they weren’t very close.

“Your memory impairment must be severe, if you’ve forgotten me and what took place in your room a mere 24 hours ago.”

…Ryoko’s jaw dropped as she processed the other girl’s words. “Liar! There’s no way that could have happened between us.”

“Ah, so you do remember. Sorry, but I won’t let you sweep the events of yesterday morning under the rug. You saw as well as I did after you woke. You along with Matsuda-“

Ryoko stopped listening. Me, her and Matsuda-kun. When I woke up!? “No No No No No!” Ryoko screamed.

“…Excuse me?” She narrowed her eyes to slits.

“You m-may be gorgeous, but Matsuda’s the only one for me! There’s no room a third wheel in our relationship!”

“Stop talking.”

“Yes ma’am.” Ryoko stiffened at the malicious aura emanating from the girl.

“With an answer that stupid, I doubt you actually remember anything, after all.” She sighed. “My name’s Kyoko Kirigiri from Class 78. I’m currently investigating suspicious activities and I believed I could find leads using Matsuda…among other things.”

“I’m Ryoko. How do you know me, Kirigiri-san?”

“We met in the neurology lab, which you occupied and took as your room. I was interrogating you on murders-“

“Woah, stop right there. I thought this was about ‘suspicious activities’.”

“Which precludes the murders that have gone on in the school…particularly those of the committee. I had sneaking suspicions that Matsuda was involved.”

“I don’t know anything about killings. It has noooothing to do with me!” She closed her ears.

“I’m aware. I already interrogated you, and found you were an unreliable source.” Ryoko had a feeling Kirigiri-san meant to say, “you’re useless.”

“…Do you remember Madarai?” Kirigiri asked

“Who?”

“Check your notebook.”

Ryoko did exactly that. Inside was the name Isshiki Madarai…The Ultimate bodyguard. It seemed he was after her for the murder of the student council…and he was…immortal? No, there was
more. He wasn’t immortal, he merely gave off that misconception, when in fact he was one in a set of octuplets.

“Freaky.” Ryoko muttered. She hoped to never run into them.

“Madarai is convinced of your guilt. You’d best not let them catch you.” Kirigiri warned.

“Thanks for the heads up.” And here’s hoping Ryoko wouldn’t forget again. The amnesiac’s thoughts were interrupted by the loud protests of the ‘reserve course’ (or so Kirigiri called them).

“What’s their problem. Shouldn’t they be in class or something?”

“They’re a case similar to Madarai. They’ve been spurned on by the death of the council. Or that’s how the rumors go, supposedly.”

“Then they are students?”

“The reserve course are just that. A preparatory division for the main course. Unlike us, they have yet to display ground-breaking talent, and are kept in wait until they do. Until then, you could say they are ordinary people who’ve paid large sums to attend the academy. Currently, they have a problem with the education system.”

“So they’re a bunch of wannabes with a complex.” Wow, literally background fodder. No wonder they don’t even have faces.

Kirigiri didn’t react to Ryoko’s assessment. “Regardless, they have seen fit to host these ‘parades’ nonstop for days. From what I’ve gathered, their contempt is deeply-rooted and directed at a certain person. The Ultimate Hope, Izuru Kamukura.”

“Who?” Ryoko cocked her head.

Kirigiri studied her with eyes like a hawk. If she’d uttered a single lie, she had no doubt Sherlock Holmes stand-in would have seen through her.

“I see. So you’re useless on that front too.”

“You really said it!” Ryoko responded indignantly.

“Hmm, I’ll check on you later, Otonashi-san. If something happens, call me.” Kirigiri handed her a small sheet of paper with 10 digits written.

Once Ryoko took it from the lavender-haired girl’s hands, the other nodded and walked away. Kirigiri disappeared as abruptly as she arrived.

“That girl sure is demanding.”

…

What was I supposed to be doing again…oh right, the library!

---

“Ahem! Everyone, I have announcement to make.” Kiyotaka Ishimaru said. From the extremely
short period she’d spent with him, she had enough info to conclude he was an overly loud nutcase with a boner for educational correctness. His boisterous voice boomed the instant they entered, catching the attention of the small group of students, seated in a subsection within the library. “We have a new friend joining us.”

Uwaaah. He was like one of those super-strict and formal teachers.

“Hello…I’m Ryoko Otonashi.” She waved awkwardly at the group of 4 asides herself and Ishimaru.

In the middle of the room was a small boy with darker brown-hair than the school uniform, staring at her with curious eyes. Ryoko had seen him on the way. The boy conversed with two others. A tall burly man with a blue tracksuit with a very loud voice…who looked way too old to be in high school. The other companion was a thin dark-skinned girl, who looked like she was just coming off one severe diet. The two had parted ways with the boy before he’d entered.

Huddled up against him was an even smaller girl, her form barely visible behind a laptop, it was a cute picture.

On the other side of the boy was the pale, raven-haired guy with an absolutely dumbfounded expression. Doesn’t he know staring is rude?!”

Last was the blue-hair, distanced from the others and surrounded by a fair number of textbooks. In spite of a charming smile, her eyebrows ticked upwards.

“Otonashi? She looks just like-“ The girl with the pc began

“It’s just a resemblance, probably. Junko-chan and I are twins, we don’t have any other siblings.” The freckled one said. Ryoko was starting to doubt the assessment on their gender based on the feminine voice.

…Sister? Junko? “Hey, don’t say stuff I can’t understand.” Ryoko fumed.

Ishimaru coughed. “I believe introductions are in order. Starting with you, Naegi-kun!”

“Why does he always pick me first?” The spiky one moaned for a split-second before picking himself back up “I’m Makoto Naegi, from class 78. The Ultimate Lucky Student.”

Luck? Sounds like a rip. “How does it work?” Her question was met with brief silence.

“…You forgot huh?” Naegi looked downcast. Does he know me? “We actually met for the first time a few days ago and uh…had quite the talk.”

Not again. “What were we talking about?”

“You were looking for Matsuda-senpai.”

“Yeah, it probably happened then.” She double-checked in her notebook and wouldn’t you know it, there was a Naegi written down…and underneath were contradicting connotations. ‘Dangerous’ ‘Nice guy, but I don’t want to admit it’ ‘Suspiciously nice’

I don’t get it. Is he a decent person or not?

“Yasuke?” Said the short girl.

“Hey hey hey, who are you and with the first name basis?” Someone this adorable next to Matsuda
was unacceptable! Even she wasn’t allowed to call him that!

“I’m Chihiro Fujisaki, same class as Naegi and uh, The Ultimate Programmer. Yasuke’s my friend and colleague, kind of. But he’s hasn’t shown up to the lab in a few days…I’m a little worried.” She frowned.

“Fufufu. Well, I saw him just this morning.” Ryoko puffed her chest, entering a one-sided competition with the programmer.

“So he’s okay then. That’s good…I was worried something might have happened….” Fujisaki let out a sigh of relief. That’s some needless worry.

“Is Matsuda supposed to be in danger?” Ryoko recalled her earlier conversation with Kirigiri.

“N-Not really.” Tears welled up in the girl’s eyes. “There have been some really…terrible rumors going on and sudden disappearances would make anyone worried.” Naegi patted the girl’s head and explained in her stead. “I’m not too bothered though, we’ve got Mukuro to protect us.”

“I’m Mukuro Ikusaba, The Ultimate Soldier. You…met me with Naegi, but you probably don’t remember.” She said, cheeks flushed. Hmm, that was cute too, contrasting her rough talent… Is this what they called moe gap? These girls are trouble!

“Nice to meet you, Ikusaba-san. If there’s ever a threat to my life, I’ll point them your way.” She beamed.

Ikusaba nodded.

“Please be a little more reluctant.” Naegi sweat dropped.

These guys…look kind of fun actually. Save one, the girl isolated from the others. But Ryoko was here to study, so it wasn’t unnatural that she’d sit next to the person who looked like they were working hard.

“Hiya.” Ryoko sat down next to her.

The girl looked up from a sheet of paper immediately, sharply contrasting Matsuda’s earlier cruelty. “Hello. I’m Sayaka Maizono, class 78. I’m the Ultimate Pop Sensation. Nice to meet you, Otonashi-san.” Now there was a winning smile if Ryoko’d ever seen one. I hope Matsuda-kun doesn’t like girls like these. Begs the question…why was she sitting alone?

“Maizono-san’s famous all around the country and she goes on tours. Unfortunately, that means she misses classes a lot.” Naegi said, as if reading her mind. “I’d help her with catching up…but I’m not really all that smart myself and um, I might just be more of a distraction.”

Maizono shook her head “No, I’m mostly done with school work. I’m busy with my other job; my manager says we need ‘fresh’ songs to keep drawing in the crowd.”

Ryoko glanced at the paper and found no more than 3 lines written. Ouch must be a severe case of writer’s (singer’s?) block.

“I need to make up for missed lectures. Let’s help each other out.” Ryoko sparkled with amity.

“You’ve written songs before?” The idol asked
“Nope, but it can’t be *that* hard.”

If Maizono took offense, she didn’t show it. “That so? Then I’d be glad to have you.” She brought a finger to her chin. “It’s funny though…I’ve never seen you around. What year are you in?”

“First year…probably.” She said uncertain.

“Probably? Does this have to do with your memory?” The bluenette asked, piecing together the bits of info from her introduction and Naegi’s commentary.

“I’m a chronic amnesiac…apparently.”

“That must be inconvenient. Sorry for asking.” Maizono apologized.

“No problem.” Ryoko honestly didn’t care.

“I thought I memorized the names, faces and talents of every student in our year. It’s part of my job description…and I have never seen Otonashi-kun listed. What did you say your talent was?” Ishimaru questioned.

She shook her head. “No idea.”

“Not even your talent?” Fujisaki reeled back in shock.

Talent was a big deal at this school huh?

“Now *that’s* problematic. If only we could help. Unfortunately, I don’t see how.” Ishimaru crossed his arms.

“We might actually be able to help. Since you remember Yasuke, it’s not like your memories are gone, we might be able to drag them out.” Naegi beamed. What’s with the first name basis though? Was he Matsuda-kun’s close friend too? Ryoko couldn’t see them getting along at all. “And Chihiro’s an expert on the brain too.” He continued.

“N-Not in that way.” Fujisaki metaphorically hid from Naegi’s praise.

Ryoko tuned out their back and forth of compliments and self-depreciation.

‘This guy’s super optimistic.’ Was Ryoko’s opinion off Naegi. Infectiously so that it made her want to go along with him. Doesn’t look like everyone shared that opinion. Maizono, who’d remained quiet, seemed like she wasn’t paying attention to the on-going conversation. However, Ryoko caught a change in behavior when Naegi made his declaration. She closed her eyes and shook her head in exasperation.

Was she annoyed?

Ikusaba was also flustered at the proposition, as if wanting to join in or note something of importance. Was she always so awkward?

“Um…I look like your sister?” Ryoko asked Ikusaba. That seemed like a grounded assumption, judging from how Fujisaki confused them.

“Yeah…a little.” Ikusaba answered.

“More like a lot. The resemblance is uncanny, they could be twins.” Said the tiny, angelic girl.
I’m a little curious about her. This was out of character for me.

Ryoko was thinking about a lot of things that weren’t Matsuda-kun…but she has to in order to stay with him.

‘I wonder what Matsuda’s doing now.’ She rested her head on the desk.

---

Yasuke Matsuda rested on the bed in the neurogenic lab, manga covering his face and arms folded over his head. He was a man who only ever did what was expected of him, no more and no less. Some thought he was a hardass, but a shitty childhood does that to a person. He’d been raised by a single mother. A kind, naïve woman who got duped by the man she loved. That fact took its toll on her mental health and soon she started to forget…everything…even himself.

The doctors refused to complete the surgery because we didn’t have enough money. They only did as much as they paid for.

He didn’t hate them for it. Meritocracy is what keeps the world going and there was no fairer principle. The neurologist had no issue being one of the cogs in that machine.

Yasuke never exerted himself doing more than necessary because he owed nothing to nobody. He would fix his mother’s illness himself. Hope’s Peak Academy became a stepping stone to that objective. The Izuru Kamukura project’s initial success furthered his credibility and gave him clout with the committee. Oh sorry, the late committee; many of whom, Yasuke had personally disposed of - Their bodies anyway.

The neurologist spearheaded the mental development of the Ultimate Hope and his involvement meant he held sway over some important decisions. Keeping Ryoko in the school was trivial. However, he had done nothing the entire day. Not because he didn’t have work to do, but because he’d lost all drive to continue when everything just seemed so pointless.

He only did as expected, never going the extra mile for anyone…

Junko Enoshima was the exception to that narrow focus. His pretty and bitchy childhood friend. Yet it was only mere days ago that he finally realized the extent of her depravity. He always knew she had a few screws loose, especially with how she treated her sister…but he still loved her. He thought there was actually a caring person beneath the playful malice.

Then she murdered the entire student fucking council.

Even disregarding the murder itself, the whole academy could go under if that information was brought to light of day. That means he’d lose his prestige and his resources. He depended too much on the academy and losing it would set him back years from achieving his goal…saving his mother.

And Junko would go to jail.

She knew both of these things…and didn’t even care.

He was left with no choice…and tricked her, using the techniques he’d learned to erase Hajime
Hinata, to remove Junko Enoshima’s memories. Ryoko Otonashi was the fake identity born amidst the memory lapse. In a way, she wasn’t all that different from Kamukura. He only hoped she didn’t keep that annoying talent of hers too.

If he could keep Ryoko subdued, everything would work out. At the very least, things needed to blow over first. Keeping track of Ryoko’s memories and applying ‘treatment’ was all he could do…and it seemed to work.

Too bad he underestimated how much of a hopeless bitch Junko really was…

-Several hours ago-

4 bodies were sprawled on the floor in the old, decrepit school building. Each in differing condition. The first was a small boy, crumpled on the ground and unmoving. If there was one oddity, it would be the position of the boy’s head, 180 degrees from his front. His name was Yuto Kamishiro and his neck had been snapped and spun around.

The second and third were Ryoko Otonashi and Mukuro Ikusaba, still breathing, but unconscious state, courtesy of the sudden intruder still standing.

The last was awake…barely, a hand pressed to his stomach as a thin strand of blood cascaded from his lips.

“Do not waste my time. Among the few directly responsible for my creation, you know better than most how futile further resistance is.” The Ultimate Hope stared down at the neurologist as if he were no more than walking garbage.

“I wonder about that. No parent is ever ready for how much of a fuck up their kids just might turn out.” Yasuke retorted sarcastically “I can’t understand what the hell is going on in your head.” Yasuke had come to silence Yuto – The unremarkable brat from his class – who was hanging around the redhead idiot and looked too deep into the tragedy of Hope’s Peak. Yasuke succeeded in eliminating the diminutive nuisance…and felt like shit about it.

After a small talk with Ryoko, Mukuro showed up dressed like her sister for god knows what reason. And he didn’t get to find out before this pain-in-the-ass came from out of nowhere and kicked the shit out of them.

“Children often take after their parents. If you refer to my involvement in the murder of the student council, you should first consider your own.” Izuru said. “Nevertheless, I understand you quite well. Killing, while regrettable, is weightless when balanced on the scales with Junko Enoshima on the other end.”

“Fuck off.” Yasuke spat bitterly. What the hell did he know—fuck, Yasuke gave him Junko’s talent.

“She would have killed you.”

…Yasuke went silent, his mind reeling from what he’d just heard.

“W-What?” He muttered unintelligibly.
“Her ultimate agenda was to grant herself and you despair through betrayal and your demise.”

“Bullshit!”

Izuru pointed at Mukuro, as if there was some clear meaning about the soldier masquerading as Junko. “She’d long seen through your scheme and already drove you to the point of murder. Despite knowing Junko Enoshima since childhood, you doubt she’s capable of such atrocities?”

Yasuke remembered his elementary school days. Junko built a sandcastle – almost literally– of the Sagrada Familia Church. It was such an amazing construct that neighbours marveled over the month-long work. Yet, just before completion, the craft had been destroyed. Yasuke searched everywhere for the culprit in a rage. What kind of monster would destroy a work of art, that a little girl had devoted herself to creating?

And wouldn’t you know it, right when he’d given up, Junko confessed to having destroyed the sandcastle herself.

She’d used him as a toy.

“You believe you were special as her friend and thus, safe? It is the other way around. Because you are worthwhile, she would go to excessive lengths to bring you despair.” Izuru said.

…

“What do you want?” Yasuke said in a meek voice that disgusted even him. That’s what happens when the one you love turns out to be a cunt.

“Your cooperation.”

“…If you think I’m going along with some revenge plot, you’re dead wrong.” Yasuke snarled.

“You are free to see it as revenge if you wish, but I do not intend to harm Enoshima. I want her, at least for the mean time, to remain exactly the way she is. You may then monitor her progress.”

Yasuke’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You wish to protect Enoshima, but that is impossible, not as long as she has free will.” The greatest danger to that idiot is, and has always been, herself. Yasuke knew that better than anyone.

“This way you’ll be able to thwart her doomsday agenda and keep her safe…for the meantime. Isn’t that what you’ve been plotting all along anyway? With my assistance, you’ll have a greater chance of success this time around.” Izuru said.

“And if I refuse?”

“A minor inconvenience, for I am also the Ultimate Neurologist. However, if I exercised that talent…what would be the need for both of us?”

The threat was clear.

Yasuke sounded and felt just as he had during that moment in his childhood.

“You have a deal.”

He gave up.
Matsuda narrowed his eyes, dark outlines clearly beneath them, he didn’t sleep at all either.

All he could think about…was how ugly Junko Enoshima was. He wasn’t talking about her appearance…but her heart, damaged and repulsive beyond description.

He clicked his tongue getting off the bed. Just thinking of her eviscerated any chance of returning to a good mood. But that’s what a murderer like himself deserves.

…

There was one more thing… A problem that Matsuda had initially intended to get rid off but vanished at some point in time. He never got to find out how much that pitiful person knew.

The Student Council president and the sole survivor of the killing game, Soshun Murasame, disappeared days ago. Yasuke planned to kill him but was interrupted. By the time the neurologist returned, the council president had escaped.

Back then, Yasuke actually breathed a sigh of relief. Though Soshun’s disappearance was cause for worry, he was relieved that he didn’t have to kill a peer he’d met in the halls nearly every day.

Sadly, Yasuke wasn’t able to escape that fate regardless. The target had merely switched from Soshun to a classmate.

“Ha…hahaha. I killed because of a girl who’d intended on killing me…for no fucking reason.” A joke so bad, you just had to laugh. Poor Kamishiro.

Oh well. This entire ordeal only served to reinforce Yasuke’s most dearly held philosophy. No matter who you are, what you’ve done or what you believe in…

Life is suffering, and then you die.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter:

Muku reflects on her poor life decisions.
Chapter Summary

October 26th 20XX

That Mukuro, burdening herself with meaningless subjects like loyalty. 'Should I protect Junko or help Naegi?' She let herself be plagued by these thoughts, born of fundamental misunderstandings of character; her affections would never reach the two recipients, while they would only smile indifferently, regardless of her choice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mukuro Ikusaba was born into a highly dysfunctional family. Her parents were, for the lack of a better term, useless and irresponsible. She couldn’t think of a single instance of feeling genuine gratitude towards them. Besides giving birth to her little sister.

Junko was…perfect. Mukuro acknowledged this fact ever since they were children. She learned to speak fluently in under a year, completed any task assigned to her and even in elementary school, designed a scarily accurate model of a church using nothing but sand. It wasn't unusual to assume the elder sister would suffer a crippling inferiority complex, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth. Mukuro adored Junko and her talents more than anything in the world.

However, even she wasn’t deluded enough to think her sister was easily understood by others. She had a unique way of expressing herself. Unfortunately, Junko’s show of affection was dangerous. That’s when Mukuro decided her duty in life was to protect her twin. Rather than despairing over her uselessness, Mukuro wanted to help Junko anyway she could. Unfortunately she wasn’t smart, but she was athletic; talent in that field let her joining up with Fenrir to rack up experience until when there nothing left to learn from them.

From start to finish, Mukuro's entire life could be summed up as Junko’s protective older sister. Nothing else mattered… until Hope’s Peak Academy.

High school changed everything. Junko found herself in a new environment, filled with talents she could play around with. Just as Mukuro expected, everyone was taken with her. A number of seniors from Class 77-B were enchanted and joined their group in short time.

Of course, it didn’t matter how many loved Junko or were shown love in return. Junko-chan would always love Mukuro most. Nobody understood the fashionista like she did.

That’s why Mukuro was getting anxious. With Junko’s plans in motion, the school became more dangerous and she would need more protection. That was fine. Mukuro honed her skills in war for that very reason.

What she hadn’t trained for was Makoto Naegi. A boy who made her heart flutter in a way only Junko’s did. She didn’t know what made him so attractive…his kindness maybe. His smile was infectious, and he always, always knew just what to say.
Even after Mukuro confessed to killing in the past, he wasn’t afraid of her like everyone else. He forgave and accepted the worst part of herself and it…didn’t have to hurt like Junko’s love did.

She’d saved him from Peko Pekoyama, one of Junko’s former despairs. In doing so, acting against Junko’s will. No matter how much Mukuro wanted to deny it, she betrayed her sister for a boy… and it tore her apart. Killing the council hadn’t helped one bit to remedy the conflict…and Mukuro hadn’t approved of it. She hated being the one to pull the first shot and murder the vice-president. They were strangers, she couldn’t care less about the girl…but Naegi would.

The killing game resulted in a snow ball effect. The fanfare hadn’t even receded before Junko proposed her craziest scheme yet. - going along with Matsuda’s plan of erasing her own memory. To say Mukuro was shocked would be an understatement. This was still the getaway phase of a crime and Junko decided to leave herself vulnerable? It went against the logic of self-preservation that the soldier indoctrinated herself in to survive the battlefield…but Junko’s words were absolute. No matter how illogical it seemed, Junko couldn’t be wrong.

The mission given was to target Yasuke Matsuda, a man Mukuro wasn’t especially keen on. She was confident Junko loved her most, but Matsuda was someone Junko had been with since childhood…and never thrown away. Until now, when Junko decided on his death.

Mukuro smiled when she heard.

Those instructions served as affirmation that she was the only one Junko wouldn’t leave behind. Maybe that’s why she went along with the scheme and disguised herself according to her sister’s orders. Everything had gone according to plan, save 2 setbacks. Mukuro showing herself in front of Madarai without a disguise wasn’t part of the plan, but if she hadn’t, the council bodyguard might have killed Naegi. This little interference would hardly affect plan, but it was the principle; Mukuro had gone outside the mission boundaries again…

The next interference had completely derailed the plan. Right at the climax, Izuru Kamukura appeared and dispatched with her. When she woke, Junko and Matsuda were gone.

Mukuro scowled as the images of that time, replayed.

“What did you do with her?” Mukuro glowered at the Ultimate Hope, as she woke from the school building. For some reason, he had remained there.

“Enoshima is resting in the neurology laboratory. Matsuda has seen to that. If you wish to see her, you may, soon enough…however, you are not to interfere with the experiment.”

“Experiment?”

“Yes. I’ve decided to make use of Enoshima’s scheme for myself and take it a step further. For that, I need her to remain as Ryoko Otonashi for a little while longer.”

“Junko-chan isn’t your lab rat.” Mukuro’s eyes widened, understanding the implications…and they were unacceptable. Just as she prepared to attack, Kamukura spoke again

“Every bit the disappointment I’d heard.” He said. “Have you really lost all ability to think for yourself with your sister no longer guiding your every move?”

Mukuro froze in place.
“You have already tried your hand in direct confrontation twice and failed twice. Everything you are, I am and so much more. But if you insist on a third attempt, I will accommodate...to the extreme.” He narrowed his eyes. “In this experiment, the more rogue elements, the better the results so I’m satisfied with you living. However, undermine the purpose of the project and I will eliminate you.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Then fear for your sister. After I’m done with you, I’ll reveal the extent of your crimes to the world.”

...

“With her memories gone, she will have no means to defend herself. And even if she could, I would make it so that she’d become powerless. There is no future for either of you if you oppose me, understand?”

Mukuro was faced with an ultimatum that only the worst scum would think up.

Even more than the neurologist, you need to learn to see the bigger picture. If Enoshima is incapacitated, less suspicion will fall on her. Let her roam free and she will create more chaos, drawing further attention to herself.”

“Don’t try to excuse your betrayal.” She bit back. Even if he was right, he was only trying to manipulate her.

“Interesting.” He murmured. “You speak of betrayal, despite having done so many times already.”

Mukuro let her knife drop to the ground.

She had never liked him, that Izuru Kamukura. It was a one-sided conversation with the course and conclusion long decided in his mind.

Now here she was, completely at a loss of what to do. She knew better than to fight against Kamukura. She wasn’t smart enough to outwit him, and she couldn’t brute force her way through him.

And besides...wasn’t Junko safer this way?

Mukuro’s head lifted from her desk, gazing at the miscreant trio, Naegi, Fujisaki and her amnesiac twin engaged in a heated conversation.

“I don’t believe it! There’s no way you’re a boy! Prove it right now!” ‘Ryoko Otonashi’ screamed at the top of her lungs upon figuring out Fujisaki’s gender...again. This had persisted for over a week. Each day Junko would lose specific, trivial memories and part of the group dynamic would begin anew. ‘Part’ because Junko did retain a substantial amount of knowledge about them, and even the forgotten memories didn’t provoke as strong a reaction upon relearning.

The first time Fujisaki revealed his gender, her reaction had been...much more extreme than this, the second less so...and so on.

“Ahaha.” Naegi laughed.
Mukuro smiled almost reflexively at the melodious sound. Dipping slightly when Fujisaki laughed in tandem.

Junko always said she lacked a shred of femininity, but even she retained a woman’s intuition. It was obvious to anyone with eyes that Fujisaki harbored great affections for Naegi like she did. The programmer was commonly seen by Naegi’s side, attached at the hip, practically.

If Naegi noticed, he hadn’t said anything. Then there was Maizono, who…Mukuro honestly couldn’t pin down. She was Naegi’s friend before they were and not unlike Fujisaki, were often in each other’s company. Maizono had separated recently though, distancing herself somewhat. Perhaps because her social status didn’t permit anything resembling illicit relationships boys. If so, the soldier was grateful for that caveat.

Mukuro frowned. She didn’t like rivals…and dogs were territorial by nature.

‘Not that I am a dog…then again, Junko-chan always called me one.’

Mukuro shook her head, wiping her little sister’s more favored insults away.

More on the topic of potential competition. She was thankful that Kirigiri was a non-issue. To put it out there, Mukuro disliked the detective, for many reasons. One being that she was a threat to Junko’s anonymity, with her sniffing around for evidence. Even now, she was probably looking into the council murders, and avoided their altogether. The second was for the opposite reason that she felt uncomfortable with Fujisaki and Maizono. Kirigiri openly disliked Naegi, ever since the start…and he’d been nothing but nice to her. How could she take his kindness for granted and spit on it like that?

“What a bitch.” Mukuro muttered under her breath.

“Excuse me?”

Mukuro stiffened, turning to face Maizono, who’d sat by her and overheard that little slip. Mukuro had ignored the idol’s presence until now because of how focused the bluenette had been on her work. She’d been in her own world struggling to write down whatever came into her head.

“It was nothing.” The soldier shook her head.

“Alright…but you’ve been staring intensely over there for the past 10 minutes. I thought I’d tell you before they noticed.”

“Thank…you.” Mukuro replied awkwardly. This was another person she couldn’t quite get along with. If the raven-haired girl disliked Kirigiri out of exposure to her attitude, the discomfort with Maizono was fundamental. A dislike for the person completely opposite to yourself.

“Bet I can guess what’s bugging on you…It’s those two right?” With both index fingers, she twirled her fingers at Naegi and Junko. “In some ways, Otonashi-san reminds me of your sister…and I’m not just talking about her appearance. Where is Enoshima by the way?”

…

“I’m not obligated to answer that.”

“Is she around, at least?” Why was Maizono asking all these questions?

Mukuro ran through a list of reasons.
Could she be snooping around about Junko? Kirigiri was one thing, and Junko specifically instructed her to leave the detective alone.

Maizono wasn’t part of the equation. If she got too close to the truth, then Mukuro was under no obligation to let her live- “Okay, then forget your sister for a moment.” The idol continued, as if she’d read Mukuro’s mind and glimpsed the danger lurking in her thoughts. “What about Naegi?”

…Huh?

Maizono giggled. “It’s written all over your face. It’s obvious you like him.”

It was?

“W-What about it?” Mukuro blushed. Maizono was the last person she wanted to be discovered by. But if her inquiries ended here, it was a much better alternative to snooping around for Junko. Mukuro didn’t want to get her hands dirty.

“I’m wondering why you haven’t made your move yet. You’re clearly worried about the two of them getting together.”

She was way off base…so much for intuition…but “Make my move?”

“Ask him out.”

The soldier’s face grew otter.

“You’re a lot more expressive nowadays, Ikusaba-san. I like it.” Maizono poked Mukuro’s cheek.

“Are you teasing me?” She lightly swiped her finger away, pouting.

“A little.” She extended her arms, locking her fingers together. “I am serious about the asking him out part.”

“I don’t think I can do that.” Mukuro said, dejected. Forget being forthright, she was conflicted just being friends with Naegi.

 “…You…Do you have a complex?” Maizono scrunched her face. A complex? Mukuro would agree with that. Self-esteem wasn’t particularly a strong area of hers.

“Junko-chan thinks so.” Among other, more scathing remarks.

“I’ll never get over a soldier lacking initiative; isn’t that fatal in war?”

It was. A moment’s hesitation and you were a corpse. This wasn’t war though and the battlefield was a lot easier than romance, from experience.

“But just goes to show what I know, and it's nothing new to have my expectations be wrong.” Sayaka faced forwards, her chin resting on her hand as she stared at the other three with a blank expression. “I don’t know about your sister’s opinion, but you’re feminine enough from where I’m standing. You’re cute and friends with Naegi already. On the other hand, wait too long and someone might snatch him up.”

An opening at last. “Like you? You like him too, right?” Everything Maizono said about her and more applied the to the bluenette herself.

Maizono thought the question over, humming to herself. “Hmm…to tell you the truth, I’m a little
annoyed with him right now.”

It wasn’t a direct answer but enough of one to earn Mukuro’s curiosity. “I didn’t expect that.”

“He can get on your nerves quickly, if you ask me. What do you think of Makoto?” She said, using his first name.

“He’s…really kind.” A basic description, almost childishly so for the matter, but with her limited vocabulary and Naegi’s openness, there was no other way for her to describe him. He was faultless.

Sensing Mukuro’s struggle with articulation, Maizono gave her an understanding smile. “I get you. He leaves that ‘unreal’ impression on people. Not many guys out there are like that.” Her lips curved downwards “But piece of advice, there’s a reason some things are called ‘too good to be true’.” She said, her tone signaling the conversation’s end. Maizono fingers circled her pen, hovering over the mostly blank sheet of paper.

The pop star uncharacteristically heaved a sigh of frustration and stood up, shoving the items on the desk in her bag.

Maizono stopped by the others, saying her goodbyes before leaving.

Mukuro’s attention returned to Naegi, who chatted with Fujisaki and Junko as if they’d been lifelong friends. Although, the latter girl wasn’t quite as receptive; instead she looked eager to get into an argument with him.

That might have a good thing all the same.

‘She’s already getting along with everyone.’ She thought of her sister’s newfound identity. Mukuro found herself grateful that Junko had her eyes locked down on Matsuda (ironically). If she, in her debilitated state, set her eyes on Naegi, Mukuro knew she wouldn’t have a chance.

But…could Mukuro be sure they’d remain that way? Matsuda would already be dead if Junko had her way. Then there was Fujisaki...

Could she wait? And for what? For someone to take Naegi away?

Thoughts of indecision swirled, leaving her dizzy. She clumsily stood up, walking towards the door.

“Ikusaba-san, are you okay?”

She heard Naegi’s voice.

“I um, have to go. See you guys later.” She said, not bothering to turn around as she ran out of the classroom. Maizono hadn’t left that long ago, she didn’t have much trouble catching up…for Maizono was hardly inconspicuous.

“Maizono.” Mukuro called from behind.

The other girl tilted her head backward at the call, stopping place.

“That was fast.” The idol joked, but the soldier wasn’t in the mood for it.

“What if you liked someone and thought…you shouldn’t date them? You had a prior obligation that stopped you from it.”
Maizono furrowed her eyebrows “Is this supposed to be a hypothetical? We’re clearly talking about Naegi here though, right?”

“Oh…yeah.” There wasn’t a need to be subtle…

“I don’t know what circumstances you’ve got so I can’t give a definite answer.” Maizono said “I would weigh the scales. Would you regret not being with that person or is your earlier arrangement more important to you?”

“Which would you pick?”

“…My dream is more important to me than anything else.” She said with a serious expression. After a moment of silence that felt like minutes.

Maizono would forsake her own feelings for her dream. Mukuro could relate with that…however what she wanted to know was “And…you’re happy with that choice?”

Her eyebrows twitched, and eyes darkened. “…Let’s talk again, Ikusaba-san.” Her smile returned a moment later, before she turned around and walked off.

“Is that a no?” Mukuro said to herself in the empty hallway. She reached for her cellphone, the luckster’s number showing on the screen.

She felt, he wouldn’t reject her.

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She texted Naegi later that day, with instructions to meet up with her. She’d kept her intentions vague. Largely because of how nervous she was. It’d taken no less than 1 hour just to work up the courage to call him. When he hadn’t responded immediately, she’d even thought about bashing her head against her dorm room wall.

Yeah, she had it bad.

Even now, outside the girls dorms, she fidgeted over Naegi being only a few minutes late. Her brain wracked over the possibilities that she lost sight of her surroundings

Until something poked her shoulder.

“Ikusaba-san, what’s up? You left in a hurry.” Naegi’s voice broke the soldier out of her stupor.

She moved from the wall to face him. “N-Nothing too much. I wanted to ask you-…” Mukuro’s words were caught in her throat as she took in the difference in Naegi’s appearance compared to a few hours ago.

“Did you need to ask me something? Ah, is it homework? Because I’m…probably not the best guy for the job.” He scratched his cheek. His pink-tinted, bruised cheek.

Looking like it’d been washed.

“Where’d you get those wounds?” Mukuro cut to the heart of the matter
“You wouldn’t believe me if I said I fell down some stairs, would you?”

She glared.

“What would you do if I told you?” He shrugged, dropping the charade.

“I’d make them pay.” His attackers would wish they were dead.

“That’s why I won’t tell you.” He wagged his finger. “Take it from someone who’s gotten beating up by Peko. It’s no big deal.”

True, compared to that time, his wounds were light, and beyond surface bruises, he seemed fine. That said, the memory of that night only soured Mukuro’s mood. She still hadn’t forgiven her upperclassmen for what they did.

“So why’d you call me out here?” He asked.

“Huh?” She froze, her murky thoughts vanished, and her nervousness returned. She shook her head.

‘Come on, Mukuro, you’ve been in battles before, you can handle this.’

“Naegi um…Do you have anyone you like at the moment?”

He tilted his head, before smiling brightly. “I like everyone.”

…This got off to the wrong start. “I didn’t mean like that. Is there anyone you like…more than normal?”

“No.” Naegi answered. If his reply had been delayed, it would’ve been due to confusion as to the purpose of her questions, rather than the response itself.

Mukuro sighed. Delicacy was never her strong suit anyway “I’m asking if there’s anyone you’re interested in dating.”

Naegi blinked in realization. “Oh…OH!…I haven’t really found anyone like that yet.” He said quickly, rubbing his neck.

Mukuro bit back another sigh (this one of relief), instead resolving herself to take the next step. “Then…what about me?”

“Huh?”

Mukuro overheated, her cheeks burned, her brain wracking to figure out what next to say “I’m asking if…” She held onto one arm, staring at the floor. “…you’d like to go out with me on the weekend.”

…

She took the plunge.

“No problem. I’d actually look forward to that.” He laughed.

“R-Really?”

Naegi nodded. “I was actually planning on checking out the new amusement park and thought
about asking a friend to come along. You don’t mind if we go there, do you?”

Mukuro shook her head. “It’s perfect.”

“That’s great! But…Just so we’re clear…is this a date?” He fumbled over his words. “I don’t want to assume, but I can be dense sometimes and I might get the wrong idea-“ He rambled on, with his hands flailing.

His bumbling made Mukuro herself chuckle at how silly her apprehension seemed. With a deep breath, she said the magic words.

“It’s a date.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter:

Naegi ships Kuzupeko.
I've always liked Peko, even if she's a little bit wary of me. There's so few people out there who know exactly who they are and what they want to be. I'm opposed to the self-deprecation and the whole tool thing, because she has so much potential. I'd like to hope her self-esteem changed after we met and she sees Kuzuryu-senpai as more of an equal, now that she's motivated to take down that Enoshima. Even if only a little.

...Yeah, I guess that's not very likely, huh?

Peko Pekoyama was 5 years old when her father once said that silence weighed more than gold. Was it an analogy of peace or did he imply that a tool should shouldn’t speak out of turn? Peko listened and obeyed yet failed to understand. She was silent by nature, often choosing to refrain from speaking unless prompted anyway. But over the past month, she may have found the answer. The mind wanders when left in silence. Introspection offers the opportunity to learn about oneself…and one’s weaknesses. As the young master’s bodyguard, she could no longer neglect strengthening her mind in favor of the body. Without so much as raising a blade, Junko Enoshima defeated them, using nothing but a few choice words.

Peko needed to be more flexible, more in-tune with others’ emotions, and to predict their actions in advance, even the outliers. She wished to discover the talent Makoto Naegi possessed and made use of at every opportunity.

“Good evening, Pekoyama-san.” Speak of the devil and he shall appear. Naegi entered through the dojo’s sliding door, wearing a carefree expression opposite to the moniker she’d given him.

Peko gave him a sideways glance of recognition, wondering if he’d timed his arrival in conjunction with her thoughts. A ridiculous prospect, yet she couldn’t put it past him. Naegi was dangerous, plain and simple and if she let her guard down, she would find herself once again, becoming a pawn. However, in contradiction to that very sentiment, she believed he was also harmless.

In either case, Peko planned to make full use of him to free all her classmates from despair’s grip, and freely collaborated with the luckster.

“Is there a special occasion, Naegi-kun?” She noticed he was out of uniform and in casual hoodie wear…and a few bruises on his face and bandage wrappings around his forehead, stealthily hidden by his bangs…Interesting.

“I have a date.” He said, bashfully.

“May I ask with whom?”
“Ikusaba-san!”

“…I see.”

He looked almost disappointed at her lack of reaction. “Eh? You’re not surprised? Or even a little worried?”

“If I’m worried about anything, it’s your face. Are you getting into trouble again?”

“Hahaha, that’s a story for another time.” He evaded the question. Very well.

“About Enoshima’s sister? I have nothing against her personally, if that’s what you mean.” And even if she considered Ikusaba a problem, she would be dealt with soon enough.

“Mukuro’s apparently helped Junko with some awful stuff. You’re pretty forgiving, or level-headed…but that’s what I like about you, Peko.”

Peko’s ruminated over one peculiar trait of the Lucky student she’d picked up on. His habit of frivolously alternating between given and surnames. At first, she detected no rhyme or reason behind the shift, but upon further observation, a pattern surfaced; a distinct shift in tone. When addressing formally, he was meek and unpresumptuous. Other times and he was confident and unreserved towards nearly everyone.

“Thank you for the compliment.” She intended to (secretly) learn whatever she could about him. Speaking of which. “How are you handling the brainwashing video I sent you?” She went through no small pains procuring it from Mitarai.

“I can’t really give any details since I’m out of my league...that’s why I’m having Alter ego look into it.”

"That would be the artificial intelligence Fujisaki entrusted you with?"

He nodded. "He never ceases to surprise me."

“If you say so.” Peko shook her head. “Have you heard any word from Enoshima?”

Naegi shook his head. “Not a thing.”

Junko Enoshima dropped off the face of the Earth. Peko only hoped it stayed that way, but she wasn’t raised to think optimistically. This was the calm before the storm. “I have noticed no further activity from the remainder of Ultimate Despair. Compared to their formerly hyperactive selves, they’ve become subdued.”

“Which?”

“Mikan, Yukizome-sensei, Sonia, and Kazuichi.”

Incidentally, these happened to be the core members of Ultimate Despair, disregarding the young master and the nurse. The other students were lacked the influence to greatly impact Enoshima’s plans.

“What about the others?”

“Nekomaru and Akane are doing well, thanks to your efforts. Akane is eating again.”

Naegi sighed. “That’s good. Can you believe how long it took just to get her accustomed to a
healthy diet?”

“3 and a half-week during the summer…and you would never have succeeded without Nekomaru’s aid.” The tall male had been essential to Akane’s recovery. Of course, he first needed to be the one saved.

He nodded “You’re right, I didn’t do too much. Nekomaru was strong to begin with. All I did was lend an ear and bounce back arguments for a little bit.”

“I believe your debate lasted the better half of the entire day, Naegi-kun. Not to mention all the prior research you did on Nekomaru background, his habits, passion…his illness.” All of which he studied, planning out exactly how to approach and manipulate her classmate. “I’m not sure if you’re aware, but you have the capacity of a professional stalker.”

He laughed. “That…was a joke, right?”

She looked away.

“Peko!”

“Partly.”

Akane followed suit having a strong connection with Nekomaru, like they were a package deal. They were not completely cured of the brainwashing, but they have become more docile and reasonable.

Ibuki, Chiaki, Hiyoko, and Mahiru were never affected in the first place, thankfully.

“I honestly still have a lot of trouble believing what you told me about Junko and Ultimate Despair. I’ve always thought Junko was a little wild, but you make her sound cartoonishly evil.” He chuckled. Despite being informed of Enoshima’s crimes and malicious nature, he found her actions comical, as if she’d pulled mere pranks.

Peko felt the need to remind him of the evil they were dealing with. “She killed the student council.”

“So I’ve heard.” Naegi’s smile barely wavered.

Just then, the door opened again, revealing Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu’s figure. The scowl and animosity he formerly radiated had faded after that night.

“Peko…” He called and stopped after glancing at Naegi. “Yo, Naegi.” He walked over to and smacked the brunet on the back.

“K-Kuzuryu-senpai.” Naegi winced at the friendly gesture.

Peko arched an eyebrow.

“What’re you being formal for?” The blonde chided the other boy amiably. The young master’s favor wasn’t won easily, but Naegi’d left a strong impression on him.

“N-No reason. How are you?”

“came looking for Peko. Am I interrupting anything?”

“Nothing important…I think.” He sounded uncertain. “We were talking about a date I have later.”
Fuyuhiko grinned “With Chiaki? Wasn’t that for tomorrow though?”

“No no no, please don’t call it that, we’re just hanging out at the arcade tomorrow…and then lunch, and then maybe the new amusement park. Or the other way around. I dunno. With Nanami-san, the schedule could be all over the place depending on how she feels.”

Peko mimicked a stone statue, holding back a sigh of exasperation. For many reasons, Peko pitied Ikusaba for a fatally poor taste in men.

“Sounds like a date to me, but fuck, I’m not getting involved in that shit. It’ll be on your ass if you get caught. You’ve never felt pain until you piss off a woman for real.” Fuyuhiko crossed his arms, giving Naegi an unimpressed look. “How’d you get booked for the park? Tickets must be expensive as hell.”

“I won a lottery and got a whole bunch.” Naegi said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Damn lucky assholes.”

The spiky-haired boy shrunk back under the blonde’s admonishment while Peko was fine observing the interaction. That arrogant personality of Naegi’s failed to surface in the young master’s presence. Not since what happened in the old music room.

Hardly surprising. Many who knew the young master’s identity normally feared him, and they were right to, in her personal opinion. However, it went without saying there was nothing normal about Naegi. Peko herself had nearly killed him in cold blood, yet he walks into this dojo almost daily, treating her like a friend he’d known since childhood.

That wasn’t the case, of course, they’d been acquaintances for only a few months.

“Chiaki holds a special position in the class.” Peko spoke up, drawing the boys’ attention. There was one important matter she wanted to make clear, regarding Naegi’s sudden favor for the Ultimate Gamer.

“She’s the class rep…right?” Naegi presumed.

“Yes, and she earned that spot through the approval of the entire class. Do you see what I’m getting at?” Peko issued a threatening glare. Though they had an unspoken agreement relating to helping her classmates, Naegi had shown an interest in Chiaki who was among the few unaffiliated with Enoshima. “I don’t know what your intentions are with Chiaki, but I want you to promise me that she will be unharmed.” Peko couldn’t hazard a guess at what went through Naegi’s mind, but what she did know was that he never did anything without purpose.

“…Peko chill. It’s Naegi we’re talking about. He’s not gonna snuff her or something.” Fuyuhiko said, taken aback.

Naegi was similarly shocked, raising his hands defensively. “I- I’d never let Nanami get injured if I could help it. And if that did happen, I’d do anything to make things right.”

She could believe that. Without hesitation, Naegi could dive in front of a bullet, if it meant saving someone else, even his enemies. Or rather, that meant he considered nobody in the world his enemy.

“See. What was that about? You doing a stand in for Chiaki’s old man?” The young master pulled at his collar.
However, he missed the point. Emotional scars run deeper than physical ones.

“Very well.” She relented, calming the room’s atmosphere. Though Fuyuhiko had missed the underlining connotation, he wasn’t wrong in his joking assessment of her behavior.

Peko’s duty was to see to the young master’s security…and only that. To accomplish her objective, she would root out despair from the academy, even if she had to make some sacrifices here and there.

“I almost forgot!” Naegi reached into his hoodie and bubbly pulled out a pair of tickets “These are for you!”

Both herself and the young master traded confused looks. “What for?” The blonde asked.

“I’ve got stacks of these, remember? Use them and go on a date some time? Hey, maybe you and Kuzuryu-kun could join us on a double date!”

“Naegi-kun. It has been some time since we last had a practise session. I would like to thoroughly check your progress.” Peko reached for her sword, feeling a few dozen whacks to the idiot, would provide much needed stress relief.

“U-Um, no. T-That’s fine.” He inched away slowly towards the door.

“The fuck are you trying to pull here, kid?” Fuyuhiko said, all too calmly. He was ordinarily…not quite so adept at controlling his emotions.

Peko thought he would have been outraged by Naegi’s insinuations.

“You…don’t like amusement parks?”

“Not the point…” The yakuza rested a palm on his forehead. “Ah fuck it, I’ll take em’ off your hands.”

Naegi practically glowed when Fuyuhiko accepted the tickets, the skip in the luckster’s step was also evident in his departure.

The room grew awkward.

“Young master…what do you intend to do with those?” She said after faking a cough.

“What do you think? It’d be a waste to not use the damn things.” He flipped the tickets in the air.

Peko immediately grasped his meaning. The young master didn’t wish to be rude in the face of Naegi’s generosity. Despite their underclassman’s nonsense. “You must be very fond of Naegi.”

“He’s got nothing to do with it.”

…She drew a blank. “Then why would you visit the park?” He wasn’t fond off of outings of that nature. As far back as Peko could recall, Fuyuhiko detested “childish” events. Mainly due to insecurities of his stature.

“Peko…are you really going to make me say it?”

That implied she would know why. She didn’t and that unsettled her. As a tool, she should be
“Looking like a deer caught in the headlights…” Fuyuhiko shook his head. “I’ve…got a lot to make up for.”

“Pardon me?”

“Stop asking questions! You want to come with me or not?”

“Of course. I would never refuse”

“Alright…when are you free?”

“At any time of your choosing.”

“…That can’t be right. You’ve gotta have other shit to do.”

“Nothing that would warrant a second thought were I to be denied use to you.”

“Godammit, Peko. Quit this tool shit, you’ve got your own life.” Fuyuhiko groaned.

This was not the first time he’d told her that and the gesture never failed to provoke uncertainties in the swordswoman. To have her sole purpose questioned made her feel inadequate. But not long after he met Enoshima, subconsciously, Peko feared she would never hear those words again.

That’s why…just this once, she didn’t argue against the young master’s misconceptions.

“I don’t practice on weekends.”

-Ryoko Otonashi-

Ryoko never had much to do in her spare time, not according to her diary. It was…a little depressing how little detail was written that didn’t involve Matsuda, who at the moment, was unresponsive towards her. That wide opening in Ryoko’s schedule left her free to do pretty much everything, but that didn’t mean she was gung-ho for anything!

Like – for example – she didn’t want to be tailing Naegi and Ikusaba on their date, and on a Saturday night!

“Why are we following them, Ishimaru?” Ryoko grumbled to her right, facing the mastermind who’d conscripted her for this little outing. He’d gotten tickets to the new amusement park somehow and dragged her along.

Ishimaru was clad in an all too conspicuous brown trench coat (likely believing it would have the opposite effect) and sunglasses. It hurt to look at this fashion apocalypse, and she made sure to keep a 3-meter distance at all times.

“They are still high school students. We have to make sure nothing unsavory occurs.” He explained.

“No, I don’t think we have to do anything. I mean, we’re at a fair, can’t we just have fun?” Ryoko argued “Right, Fujisaki?” She turned to her other partner in crime in desperation. Thankfully, he
was dressed normally in casual men’s wear. Although he wouldn’t have looked abnormal in women’s clothing either. It was so unfair.

Fujisaki made no attempt in answer, instead of focusing on the unsuspecting pair in front of them. Currently, Naegi was (pitifully) trying his hand at a shooting game, awkwardly holding a bb gun and failing to hit the target. Ryoko knew he’d never succeed with holding the gun that way. He’d need to place the rifle on an angle; a few inches downwards. Only then, would he hit the target.

Just when it looked like he’d run out of shots…Ikusaba switched places and hit the bulls-eye.

It was impressive, but at the same time, Ryoko wanted to deny it.

“I bet I could get it right in one shot.” She puffed her cheeks.

The owner of the station reluctantly awarded the soldier with a giant stuffed bear…which she promptly handed off to Naegi. The luckster beamed the gesture, holding the stuffed animal close to him.

Ryoko sweat dropped at the scene. “Shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

“Yes, that is…lame. If you pardon my language.” Ishimaru nodded in agreement.

Fujisaki on the other hand, simply stared with a scowl. An expression she hadn’t seen before and doubted was something the programmer often did.

Ryoko hopped over to the stall once the couple left. “One round please.” She chirped.

“Ha-ha. Give it a go. This one’s on the house.” The old man cheered.

Just before she could grab the gun, Ryoko was pulled away Ishimaru. “No time for games, we’ll lose them.” He said.

“Who cares? I want to play!” She struggled

“I agree with Ishimaru. We should follow them.” Fujisaki said.

“Now, Otonashi-kun!”

Majority vote won out…democracy blows.

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“Worst weekend ever.” Ryoko mumbled as she helped herself to a sandwich at the food court. For her anyway. Naegi and Ikusaba had that cute first date deal going. Ikusaba was stiff and awkward, but Naegi was smoother than she thought, he practically walked Ikusaba through the night. By the end, the raven-haired girl couldn’t help but smile. Ryoko couldn’t deny the sense of familiarity whenever she looked at them. Ikusaba, in particular, stirred up emotions she couldn’t pin down. They did, however, bring a smile to the amnesiac’s face, like she could tease the soldier relentlessly if doing so didn’t blow their cover. It totally wasn’t because Ryoko was scared shitless about a chick who’s probably killed a bunch of folks before.

So quiet and unassuming. Who knows what she’s capable of?!
“I wish I was here with Matsuda-kun.” Ryoko whined.

“Don’t be like that. You should be proud of yourself for securing the safety of our friends.” Ishimaru said.

“You’re crazy…and they’re not my friends.” She glared at him, they barely knew each other. What did he take friendship for? Actually, there were a lot of things off with this Ishimaru guy. He over-exaggerated and was way too forceful this evening. And he wasn’t the only strange one.

Fujisaki arguably stood out even more, barely touching his ice cream cone. The boy had a dejected expression the whole time. Ryoko stole a glance at him and found that he hadn’t even touched his fried.

If he didn’t eat in 5 minutes, she would.

“Hey, Fujisaki.” She called. “I’ve been thinking…do you like Naegi?”

All eyes were on her. Fujisaki was practically horrified. Bullseye.

“I-It isn’t like that!” He yelled defiantly, doing his stance more harm than good. He was too defensive.

“Hahaha, your jokes are amusing, Otonashi-kun.” Ishimaru said. “No matter how effeminate Fujisaki-kun may be, he and Naegi are both boys.”

Ryoko tilted her head. “So?”

“I-It would be creepy.” Fujisaki agreed with the prefect. He poorly faked a smile, a shadow looming from his bangs

“Absurdly so.” Ishimaru laughed.

Fujisaki didn’t, evidently.

“I don’t think it’d be that strange. There’s no rule that says Fujisaki can’t like boys.” She murmured. Was it just her, or was Ishimaru teasing Fujisaki a little too much?

“That’s naïve, people’s opinions aren’t swayed by logic during such matters; widespread tolerance towards same-sex relations is still far off.” Ishimaru spoke like a politician. “After all, it was only recently that Fujisaki-kun revealed he was a boy and there were some nasty rumors for a while.”

“For real!?” Ryoko’s jaw slacked.

Chihiro shivered, his eyes visibly wet. “Um, a few students used to for a little while…but they stopped during the new semester…after a new rumor overtook it.”

“Oh that’s good then.” Ryoko said.

“It was about the student council murders.” Ishimaru clarified.

“Not so good then.”

“So you see. It’s better for Fujisaki if there are no more unnecessary rumors about his sexual orientation.” Ishimaru faced the programmer “I’ve been meaning to say, you should stop spending so much time with Naegi-kun, for both your sakes. You wouldn’t want him to be ostracized just because the other students get the wrong idea.”
Chihiro stood up immediately. “I’m not feeling so well. I’ll be going back to the dorms.”

“Should I call an ambulance?” Ishimaru overexaggerated.

“It’s nothing extreme. I’ll see you on Monday.” He said, distilled.

Ryoko took out a pen and opened her notebook

“What are you writing?”

“What? Just that ice-creams might give Fujisaki stomach aches.”

“That may be the case.” Ishimaru said…only, it didn’t seem like he was paying much attention to her. No, he was focused entirely on Fujisaki’s retreating back. A thin but all too noticeable smile plastered on his face, and his red eyes almost glowed.

Ryoko gazed at Fujisaki a well. She knew that conversation had taken a wrong turn…but ultimately whatever was bothering the programmer had nothing to do with her. She didn’t have any obligation to help the boy.

But still…she felt like she wanted to anyway.

-Chihiro Fujisaki-

The programmer washed his hands with water in the men’s restroom. His eyes slightly pink from the tears shed moments ago. Ishimaru’s words had struck deep…because everything he’d said was true.

He…shouldn’t like Naegi, nothing good would come out his feelings…and it’s not like Naegi would reciprocate them.

“Keep it together, Chi. Hiding your true self is what you do best.” What he did best, until he came out to everyone. Why’d he do that? It hadn’t ended well at all. The others, the people who didn’t know him, treated him like a freak.

“If we’re playing hide-and-seek, then that makes me the winner.”

Chihiro’s eyes snapped to the exit. Otonashi stood in front, hands on her hips, her expression blank, contrasting her joking tone. “I found you.”

Chihiro froze as he mind raced, trying to figure out what she was doing here. Was he in the boys washroom…or did he revert to his old habit and walk into the girls’ on accident?

His question was promptly answered when a young man, slightly older-looking than them, walked in behind the red-haired girl, frozen and equally as stupefied as Chihiro was.

“Read the mood and scram!” Otonashi commanded, and so he did. This wasn’t something you saw everyday, even he didn’t know how to respond.

“O-Otonashi-san, this is the men’s room!”

“That’s irrelevant.” Otonashi dismissed his concern. Is she serious!?
“You like Naegi.” The forgetful girl said.

The first time was a question. This… it was a statement that left no room for derogation.

“I’m abnormal, aren’t I?” Chihiro’s eyes fell to the floor.

“You look normal to me. What’s wrong with being in love? It’s what makes the world go round.” Otonashi spread her arms wide.

“You heard Ishimaru. Everything he said is right. I’d be called an even bigger freak.”

“By people you don’t know? Why would they even matter?” A woman that self-centered and narrow-minded would not even begin to consider her surroundings.

“What do you mean? How would you feel if everyone started saying all sorts of horrible things behind your back?”

Otonashi merely raised one eyebrow.

It took a second for Chihiro to realize how ridiculous it was to argue public slander with the girl who stood in the center of the boy’s washroom without a care in the world.

Fair enough, then. But that only highlights the sheer difference in confidence between them. It did nothing for his situation.

“Do you mind what they think that much?” Otonashi asked.

“Of course I do. I’ve spent my whole life worrying about what people think of me!” He thought about it so much that it nearly drove him insane! “And even if didn’t mind, what about Naegi? He’d get dragged into my problems too!”

“Have you asked him what he thinks about it?”

“I-I can’t do that!” That’d be giving away his feelings for the luckster.

“Then how do you know he’d care about some nobody’s trash talk either?” Otonashi rolled her eyes. “You know the saying; all’s fair in love and war. Not ‘All’s fair unless you’ve got something an elephant trunk tucked between your legs’.”

Chihiro blushed at the crude analogy. “I-It’s not that big.”

Otonashi huffed. “I was just worried. I’m not going to tell you what’s right and I probably am the last person to talk about being self-conscious but… even I know you’re going to have a rough time finding happiness if you let everyone else drag you by the ankles.”

“If only I was stronger.” He frowned. That was the story of his life.

Otonashi brought a finger to her lips, assuming a thoughtful posture “You help me with studies, right?”

Chihiro nodded. He’d observed the amnesiac was something of a fast learner - perhaps even a genius - when it came to solving problems. Albeit she seldom remembered the trivial details. Only the important steps were memorized.

“Then I’ll repay the favor by taking you in as my apprentice.”
“Apprentice…of what?” That sounded kind of sketchy

The girl placed a hand to her bosom and stretched the other dramatically. “Ryoko-ism! By the time I’m done, a model could run down the street naked and you wouldn’t even blink in her direction!”

“H-How would you even teach that?” Chihiro inquired.

She wagged about fingers. “Leave the deets up to me and I’ll show you a new, carefree way of life.”

…What the hell. He had nothing to lose.

“Okay, let’s give it a shot.” Even before he answered, Otonashi was already writing in her diary. Guess she was serious about this after all.

She giggled and placed the book in her bag, walking closer to him with a satisfied smile. Before he could react, she’d already embraced and spun him around like he was a stuffed animal “A cute new apprentice. This is great.” She froze, then pushed him away. “Ah, but you’re still leagues behind Matsuda-kun, you know. I’m not a loose woman!”

What the… Chihiro giggled. She is so all over the place. “Yasuke’s a lucky guy.”

“You tell me about it. Matsuda doesn’t know how good he’s got it to have a world-class cutie like me chasing him.” Otonashi pouted.

“Maybe you should change tactics. Miaya says Yasuke’s a tsun without any of the dere.”

“The heck does that mean?”

“I don’t know either. But we could ask her…” Out of the corner of his eye, Chihiro someone else walk into the room, with a reaction all too similar to the last. “Erm…let’s talk about it outside. I know you said it doesn’t bother you to be seen here…but someone could call security?”

“Good point. I'll tell Ishimaru that I'm leaving.”

Chihiro followed the girl outside, his mood having lifted considerably. A miracle considering he’d just seen his not-so-secret crush go on a date with somebody else. Maybe there was some hope that his feelings could be reciprocated.

Now that Chihiro remembered, Naegi had called him, his favorite not too long ago.

With that fond memory, he walked home with the bubbly, and wholesomely weird, Otonashi.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:

Chiaki takes the stage.
Chiaki Nanami, sensing the disturbances in HPA and acknowledging her shortcomings, seeks out the assistance of an expert. Does that sound simple? Something any idiot could think up? Well then, you'd be surprised to know this executive decision already made Chiaki more intelligent than nearly the entire student body.

“Sure is windy today.”

Chiaki Nanami pulled her dark-green hoodie up overhead. Everyone else was crazy to frolic in this cold when they could be in their warm…soft…comfortable beds…zzz

The Ultimate gamer closed her eyes for a minute in vain, her admirable efforts at sleep thwarted by the cold winds.

“I should have picked a better day to go the amusement park.” Chiaki mumbled. To make matters worse, her friend still hadn’t shown up.

This was the first time she’d been the early arrival to an outing, having slept in a bit too late. Imagine her surprise when Naegi-kun still managed to be even later than she was. If nothing else, this was good ammo to use against anyone who berated Chiaki for being late.

Since sleeping was out of the question, Chiaki occupied herself with her next favorite thing to do in the world and pulled out a portable Gameboy from her purse. It wasn’t that she’d brought the console expecting Naegi’s tardiness, but that it was second nature.

Although… “Multiplayer games are always more fun.” She said out of the blue, remembering her other friend. A charming, but all too nervous, reserve course student.

A boy who vanished off the face of the Earth one day. “Where’d you go, Hinata?”

“Chiaki-senpai!”

Chiaki’s attention flew to the voice of the boy jogging towards her, stopping a few feet short to catch his breath…This would be the one who invited her. “You’re late, Naegi.” She said bluntly.

He wore a sheepish smile. “I…forgot you changed the meeting place and skipped the arcade.”

“No excuses. I know I called and switched ahead of time.” Naegi was but a student, while Chiaki had mastered the art of make excuses for not arriving on time.

He held his hands up in a prayer-like fashion. “Fair enough. I got held up this morning by Akane. I
forgot I made plans to join her and Nekomaru and uh, they didn’t let me bail. I ran back to my dorm to shower once I was done and…here I am.”

“…Sounds busy.” Chiaki felt a tinge of envy towards the lucky student. Makoto Naegi, who showed up in Class 77-B’s homeroom one day and enacted a scene that looked like it was ripped straight off a one-man-comedy routine. The unlucky boy scurried into their classroom, in the process of delivering a stack of papers to the classroom…only to trip over thin air.

Calling Naegi’s fall ungraceful would have been an understatement. Her junior was so uncoordinated that most of her class went into fits of laughter. Chiaki motioned to help Naegi when it seemed nobody else would but was beat to the punch by an unexpected person.

Fuyuhiko.

Though he grinned like the others, he was the only one who actually stood up to help Naegi with the mess he’d made all over the floor. Naturally, Peko followed suit, never willing to let the gangster undertake menial tasks.

Usually, Mahiru – being the symbol of all that was moral and just in the class – wouldn’t have hesitated, helped Naegi and then given him a stern lecture about carelessness. However, a quick glance showed the photographer staring at the trio with a conflicted and…frightened expression.

Chiaki couldn’t blame Mahiru, given how Fuyuhiko had changed for the worse. Even she worried he might have lashed out at Naegi.

Thankfully, her fears were proven wrong when the gangster helped Naegi.

Ever since Fuyuhiko’s sister died, he’d become a different person. Wounds were supposed to heal with time, but he only got worse. More violent and aggressive…and Chiaki had a sneaking suspicion why. Whenever something went wrong with her classmates, that person was never far away.

That’s why it came as a surprise to see him hanging around with a sheepish underclassman, and smiling, just like he used to.

Chiaki reasoned that Fuyuhiko had a falling out with some of her…altered friends like Akane, Kazuichi and Sonia; going by the dirty looks they shot him. On the other hand, Mikan – the nurse who caused Chiaki no end of worry due to her impressionable and damaged personality – was delighted at the sight of Naegi, Fuyuhiko and Peko together.

The fluctuations didn’t end there. Over the Summer, Nekomaru and Akane were slowly returning to their former selves…and she’d observed positive changes in a number of her other friends too.

Chiaki’s curiosity inevitable won out. She wanted to know who Naegi was and how could have such a positive influence on her classmates. From their first brief conversation, the pinkette could tell he had an attractive personality and sure enough, the two became fast friends. Maybe faster on his end than her own, seeing as he addressed her informally within days of getting acquainted.

Now, they were currently riding a Ferris wheel, and nearing the highest point. “Naegi-kun, you sure know all the best locations.” Chiaki praised the brunet who guided her through the carnival. He seemed intimately familiar with the stalls to attend or tricks to the games. Not that she needed any, to be fair.

Evidenced by how she was currently kicking his butt in multiplayer.
I came here yesterday with a friend, I know a little.” He said, attention shifting between her and the handheld game, demonstrating considerably more difficulty holding conversation and button mashing, compared the gamer.

“I could have rescheduled and followed you guys. Everything’s more fun in groups.” Chiaki said.

“I wouldn’t say everything…” He corrected her. “But speaking of planning… Peko told me you were the class representative.” The balance of the pinkette’s attention shifted somewhat, focusing more on what the boy had to say. His smile was off. He smiled often, but there was something different this time. “Isn’t that great, your classmates must like you a lot.”

“How’d that conversation come up?”

Naegi shuddered a bit. “I was teasing Peko a little and…let’s just say she might make a very scary mom one day.”

It might be better not to pry further…”I’d like to say Peko’s correct. Maybe if it was, I could help be of use to everyone.” Chiaki played with her hoodie, her gaze downcast.

“You mean your class? Is there something wrong?”

“I can’t really describe it. Ever since the start of this year, my friends started to change and…most of us drifted apart.” She grimaced. “I don’t know much more…because nobody tells me anything.” She was useless.

Not just to her classmates, but to Hinata as well. In the end, she couldn’t do anything for him. What was the point of being the class rep if she couldn’t reach out to anyone?

“I can’t say I relate.” Naegi started. “Setting myself aside, class 78 has very strong personalities and nobody to rally behind. We weren’t very close to start with.”

There was another reason why Chiaki wanted an audience with the luckster. He shared same homeroom as Her. “Hey, you know Junko Enoshima?”

“Mhm, what about her?”

Chiaki bit her lip “I think she’s responsible for the sudden change. Everything began when my friends started hanging around her.” This was her first time confessing these suspicions to anyone. “The first was Mikan.”

“The nurse?” He said with a thoughtful look on his face. “I’m not sure if I can help there. Junko and I don’t really talk much. Maybe you could ask Mukuro.”

That was disappointing. It meant Naegi didn’t quite understand the gravity of the problems plaguing her class if he thought she could just walk up and ask Enoshima’s sister. Ikusaba was like the model’s shadow. She’d be better off confronting Enoshima directly…assuming she could find her. “Never mind.”

Chiaki looked down to the console…only to see a blinking ‘You Lose’ was written in bold on the screen.

Slowly, her eyes drifted back up to Naegi, who hummed an innocuous tune, while staring at the fair grounds down below.

“That’s low, Naegi-kun.” Chiaki glowered
“What is, Chiaki-san?”

“I’m going home as soon as we get off.”

“K-Kidding.” Naegi laughed nervously. “B-But I wouldn’t be able to win otherwise. You’re just too good.”

“Slick line, Naegi. It won’t stop me from curb stomping you next time.” She pouted.

He gulped “I kind of took you for the ‘it’s all fun and games in the end’ type of girl…but you’re really fired up.”

“I live for competition.” Naegi’s about to learn what it means to underestimate gamers.

…

The two stopped by the shooting platform to sate Chiaki’s lust for revenge.

“You again?” The owner of the stall grunted at the luckster “But the girl’s different. What about the cute missy from last time?”

“I’m with someone else today.” He chirped.

Chiaki didn’t consider herself the most conscientious person out there, but even she could see Naegi had missed the man’s implications.

“You’ve got the wrong idea. I don’t think of him that way at all and we’re just friends.” Chiaki interjected.

“S’that right. Sorry, but nobody likes cheaters, kid.”

“I don’t cheat anybody.” He wailed.

“In games, you do.” Chiaki made a biting remark. “But you won’t win again.”

Naegi sighed. “I give up.”

She looked to the prizes on the corner. “What’s the hardest difficulty setting?” Her aim was the grand prize.

“You taking the challenge?”

“Yes. 2 rounds please.” She ordered, rubbing her arms for warmth as the wind picked up.

The owner gave her a pair of custom-made glasses designed to throw the wearer’s vision into disarray; mimicking inebriation. It was a cool gimmick and turned a relatively simple game into a test of memory and nerves.

Chiaki foisted the barrel of the gun at the blurry and swaying target. The goal was a hanging white cardboard with the basic diagram of a human on it. There was a red marking where the heart would be.

She steadied herself and pulled the trigger.

A steady applause sounded soon after. Chiaki took off the glasses, seeing her shot hit the mark.
“Well, I’ll be. You’re pretty good.” The owner clapped.

“Thanks.” She smirked. “You’re up, Naegi.”

The shorter boy daintily held the rifle in his arms. Chiaki loaned him the spectacles. “You should memorize the target before putting them on.”

“Gotcha.” He said, staring intently at the dartboard. “This is trippy.” He said, wearing the glasses. Chiaki stepped aside for him to get into position.

His form was steady, his breathing silent as he motioned to pull the trigger. A sudden gust of wind blew their way, smothering the sound of the shot.

Chiaki opened her eyes to see the ‘neck’ of the diagram had been pierced.

Naegi took off his glasses, his lips curved downwards at the result. “I lost.”

“Looks that way. It was a good try though, you almost made it.”

“I would have had it if not for the weather.” He complained

“Don’t be a sore loser. Luck’s all part of the game.” Ironic, considering he was meant to be the Ultimate Lucky Student. On that note… ‘I wonder what Komaeda-kun is up to.’ Chiaki thought. Class 77-B’s Lucky Student had been suspended for his alleged involvement in the school last year. Though the duration of his suspension ended long ago, Komaeda himself was nowhere to be seen and nobody could reach him.

“Senpai, you’re spacing out.” Naegi said.

“Did you need something?”

“The owner’s calling you to get your prize. Hurry so we can get to the next game.” He said, impatiently. For an unassuming guy, he appeared to have a competitive streak as well.

“Here you go, Missy.” The old man said. The prize was a giant pink rabbit. “Just between you and me, I didn’t think anyone could clear the challenge, but between you and that other girl from yesterday, shows what I know. You kids are something else.”

“I try. It was pretty tough, but I’ve faced worse. Don’t know about Naegi though.” The two gazed see Naegi stroking a dog’s fur with one hand (how he got permission from the owner was a mystery). However, his eyes were elsewhere, waving to someone else in the distance.

Chiaki couldn’t make it out either way.

“Surprised he did so well after last night.” The owner murmured

“Last night?”

“Yeah. He could barely hit the target on the normal run, but he damn sure came close this time. Was it luck?” He scratched his chin.
Chiaki and Naegi carried on their little contest, with her winning more often than not, but there were those games that couldn’t be won with skill alone. In those areas, Naegi had her beat.

Eventually, they ran out of steam and settled in the food court. Both ordered lunch that surprised the other.

“Tempura udon?” Naegi questioned the soup dish Chiaki bought.

“What were you expecting?”

Naegi’s eyes moved up and down, looking her over. “Fluffy, sweet and…hmm, let’s leave it at that.”

“I don’t exercise much so I have to watch calories.” Chiaki blinked. Was he implying something?

“In that case, we could join Nekomaru and Akane during their training.”

“I don’t think that’s happening any time soon.” Chiaki shot down his proposal before it took flight. She couldn’t keep up with those two in a million years.

On the hoodie’s end, he’d picked out a mixed salad and coffee. A simplistic dish.

She couldn’t resist the urge to tease him. “You’ll never grow big and strong if you don’t eat meat.”

“I’ll have you know my dad’s pretty tall…and I drank plenty of milk as a kid. I just…need to wait for the results.” He averted his eyes from Chiaki’s pitying gaze. “Besides…I’m a minimalist.”

Now that was an interesting detail. It might have been the first thing Chiaki learned about the boy since they met. “Naegi-kun. It’s been fun and all, but can I be serious with you for a second?”

He nodded, apprehensively.

“I’m glad you asked me out, but I had personal reasons for meeting with you today…and a few questions to ask.”

“I’ll do what I can…but can we dial the mood back down a bit. I’m not good with tension.”

“Me neither. Sorry.” Chiaki sighed. It was tiring going out of character.

“I know you said we should be serious…but maybe we can make a game out of it.” Naegi came up with yet another sudden proposal. “I’ll answer whatever…but in turn, you have to answer the same number of questions from me.”

“…You need to ask me something?”

“Yeah, there’s a thought that’s been on my mind and I’d be happy for you to clear it up.”

That sounds fair…and worked in her favor. She wouldn’t need to beat around the bush now.

“Okay, then I’ll start: How’d you and Fuyuhiko meet?”

“Where’s this coming from?”
“Is that your question?” Chiaki asked the tricky luckster.

“Can’t pull a fast one on you.” Naegi scratched his hair. “…I met him through Mahiru-senpai. The two of them were having a tiny disagreement and I helped mediate. That’s it.”

“You…mediated?” Chiaki couldn’t hide the bewilderment on her face. What Naegi had just described went against much of what she knew of Fuyuhiko, who – even at his best – was stubborn as an Ox. It was surprise to nobody that the photographer and Yakuza couldn’t get along, even before Enoshima came into the picture. Chiaki made many attempts to get the two to reconcile, but with little success. “I’m not trying to speak badly of Fuyuhiko but…he’s got anger issues, and those skyrocketed to 11 after his sister passed away.” Holding conversation with the baby-faced gangster without him going off in a fit of rage was much too difficult. Without Peko around, he might have even attacked some of the others.

“Mahiru warned me about his personality too. So?” Why Naegi spoke so intimately about the photographer was another issue, but one that took a backseat to what she needed to get out in the open.

“…Knowing that… you just talked to him?”

“Mhm.” Naegi nodded. “I’m not much of a fighter and I’m not very dependable either. We just had a conversation.”

“What did you say?” It must have been quite the cheat code to sway with Fuyuhiko with words.

“I cleared up the misunderstanding he had. We were cool after that…I think. To be honest, he still scares me a bit.” He laughed weakly.

“What else would there be? Kuzuryu-senpai wouldn’t back down from threats and I wouldn’t make any. I just did all I could.”

“And that would be…”

“Trying to make everyone happy.” He showed off a goofy grin in spite of that vague response.

Chiaki felt the tension drain from her shoulders. After being given such a simplistic and silly answer, what else could be expected? “Maybe I’m overthinking things.” She sighed. But if so… what did she do wrong?

“Just so we’re clear, you asked a whole bunch of questions.” Naegi said.

“That was the deal. It’s your turn.”

Naegi twirled his fork on one finger. “Ever thought about what Mario and Princess Peach’s relationship is like?”

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……

“You really love throwing curveballs, don’t you Naegi-kun?” Chiaki said after a period of stupefaction.
“It’s not *that* weird.” Debatable. “I’m curious and you’re the Ultimate Gamer, I’d like to hear your opinion.”

If…that’s what he wanted, it’s not like she wasn’t equipped to answer. “What part about their relationship, specifically?” She articulated.

“You know how Mario always has to overcome Bowser to save Peach in every game? Don’t you think that’s such a bother?”

“…You want me to self-insert into Mario?”

He nodded.

“I…guess it would be bothersome having Peach captured all the time.”

“That’s what I think too. Quite the wonder why he’s still at it to this very day?” Naegi folded his arms.

‘Because the game developers designed it that way and you’re not supposed to think twice about it?’ Chiaki thought, but knew that wasn’t the answer Naegi was looking for. “I can only think of 3 reasons. Obligation, a sense of adventure or…love.”

Naegi ruminated over her answer, his finger steady on his chin. “What’s the most likely reason…among those three?”

“Obligation doesn’t carry well for over 30 years. Adventure’s also out when the ‘adventure’ itself has become routine. Love’s the only reason that would persist for so long…and you know how that’s overplayed in fiction.”

“You think so? I’ve never been in love, so I can’t say either way.” Naegi murmured. "What you’re saying is that If you were Mario, you would – for 30 years – risk your life to save Peach?”

“No question.” Chiaki said plainly.

“So fast…”

“If it was someone I treasured that much, I don’t even need to think about it.”

“…Even if the script writers are forcing you to act that way?”

Now the game designers are relevant? What a strange guy. “It wouldn’t change anything. My feelings would be real to me, and that’s the important thing.” She replied.

Naegi stared wordlessly, his eyes flickered with an indiscernible emotion. “I…think you’d make a great protagonist, senpai.” His praise came from the heart. “I hope you rescue that troublesome heroine of yours someday.”

“Thanks.” Chiaki replied, not entirely sure what he was getting at. “I think you’d make a fine hero yourself.”

“I appreciate the thought…but I don’t have what it takes.” He waved his hand dismissively.

Was he being modest? “After what you’ve done for Fuyuhiko, I don’t know how you can say that.”

“That’s kind of the reason, Fuyuhiko helped himself, I just supported him.” He rubbed his chin “…If I were in a story, I would play the support role. The friend who’s around to make the protagonist
shine brighter. Although if I did get a major role, it would probably be…” He trailed off. “Never mind. The bottom line is that I’m just not cut out for heroics. I can only help others act for themselves, I can’t do anything by myself.”

“That way of putting yourself down reminds me of Hinata-kun.” She blurted out, projecting the reserve course’s image over Naegi.

“…Who’s Hinata? Is he a friend of yours?”

“He’s my best friend…was my best friend. Hinata always talked about how he wasn’t good enough, even though talent wasn’t everything.” He was special regardless…to her at least. “But he was obsessed, and he wouldn’t listen to me. Nobody does.” Chiaki gripped her skirt. That’s what it came down to in the end. “I’m powerless to help anyone and it wasn’t like they couldn’t be helped.” Naegi had proven that face right to Chiaki’s face. “I don’t know what words you used to persuade Fuyuhiko, but you were clearly far more effective than me.”

“I get it Chiaki-san, I get it! Nobody likes to listen, even when you’re only looking out for them and offer better, more productive alternatives!” Naegi replied to her plight a little too enthusiastically.

“They’re selfish…but I suppose that’s just how things are.” Just as her friends had good qualities, they also had negatives…and Chiaki had no intention those aspects of her classmates out of personal convenience.

What she should get angry at, is the one who exploited those negative traits.

“I agree, that’s just how things are. Everyone always thinks they’re right…and that’s especially bad in Hope’s Peak. Remember what I said earlier about my classmates having strong personalities? That goes for most in the main course. If they’re adamant about something, talking might not be enough.”

Preaching to the choir here, Naegi. Chiaki understood that better than anyone.

“…then what.” Naegi asked.

“…Come again?”

“You couldn’t talk things out normally…so what did you do about it?” Naegi tilted his head.

“…Nothing.” Chiaki said. When her words fell on deaf ears, she turned to the teacher. Yukizome-sensei listened to the pinkette’s worries, but otherwise persuaded her that everyone was just going through a phase. Such lax advice was so odd to hear from the maid. Yukizome-sensei was instrumental in bringing everyone together. Even Chiaki hadn’t been able to escape the maid’s diligence and supervision.

No…it was because that respected Yukizome said it, that Chiaki believed the problem would resolve itself. Thus she only watched, keeping to herself.

“I didn’t do anything.” She repeated.

“That doesn’t sound right. You already figured out that Junko was the cause of the disruption, you must have at least done some research of your own.”

“I just paid attention to my surroundings.”
“You’d be surprised how few can be bothered to do even that.” Naegi said, his lips thinned. “It’s not that you did nothing…you just didn’t do enough to get your desired result. If you suspected Junko, you should have brought your worries to the teachers.”

“I did.”

“The headmaster then…and if he couldn’t help, you should have gone to the students. Rather than talking to me, I think Kirigiri-san would have been much more helpful to your cause.” Kirigiri was the detective from the class below. Chiaki had never spoken the girl, but even she’d heard the rumors surrounding the lavender-haired girl. Thus she couldn’t refute those words. Quite the opposite; she felt that way all along. That’s what brought her here - To learn what she could have done better.

“What’s your secret, Naegi?” If her attempts were only platitudes, then he must have gone farther to succeed where she failed.

“A secret huh…I guess I can tell you, since we’ve been in similar positions.” He folded his arms. “Back them into a corner using the resources you’ve got. How you go about that is up to you but give them no other option but to listen.”

Chiaki arched an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I could be that ruthless.”

“I-I’m not either.” He said, defensively. She must have gotten the wrong impression. “Aggression isn’t the same as violence; be persistent and smart about getting what you want. It’s like making a sales pitch.” He said with a pointed finger.

… “And that’s how you…helped Fuyuhiko.” For a lack of a better word.

“Yes. No bribes. No coercion. No blackmail. I showed him that he couldn’t run from the truth…in my own way.”

“…What way was that?” Chiaki asked.

“It wouldn’t help you…and you don’t need it either because you’ve got something I don’t: Their approval as the class rep.” Naegi rested his chin on his palm. His expression dazed, as if his consciousness was elsewhere. “There are three ways to earn that position. Either you’re liked by your peers, you were handed it because nobody else was qualified…or there could be an overlap. Which were you?”

Was she liked? Did they drop that position on her because only she could do it?

If it were about qualifications, there were others much better suited.

Chiaki remembered their first year. “I-I think it was because they liked me.” She said, sounding self-conscious.

Like I thought, you’re the third type.” Naegi continued. “Peko spoke really highly of you, and take it from whose still trying, that girl’s approval can’t be won without merit. If she likes you that much and you’re not Kuzuryu, then you must be exceptional to warrant it.”

“What did Peko say?”

Naegi gave her a cheesy grin as an idea must have popped into his head. He coughed, crossed his arms and with the most neutral expression he could muster…“Chiaki holds a special place in the class and she earned it with our approval.” Said all that in one of the worst attempts at mimicry the
gamer had ever witnessed.

Chiaki partly blushed “That was awful.” Second-hand embarrassment aside, his statement…or Peko’s made her heart flutter. Chiaki wished she could have been there to hear it.

“I might have missed the implicit bits about stabbing me all over if I made you cry, but you get the point. I think more about how much that means before you write yourself off, otherwise you’re doing for friends a disservice.” He reverted to his normal voice.

“I will.” Chiaki giggled.

“Aha, I got a real laugh this time. Mission accomplished!” Naegi cheered, childishly. Chiaki noted how the gesture made him look much younger than he was.

“Mission?”

“Yeah, I’ve been trying to get a smile out of you all day. That’s one of the reasons I invited you.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve noticed you were a little down and it’s not good to bottle up your emotions. I’d been thinking about what I could do help. Then I heard about the amusement park and figured I could bring you here, to lighten your mood. I even had Mukuro steak out the place with as a trial run. She was a great help.” He folded his arms, looking deep in thought. “Huh…did I tell Mukuro about that caveat or did I forget?”

Chiaki didn’t bat an eye to the mention of Enoshima’s sister. Instead her attention was gripped by the general insinuation Naegi made. “You…saw me?”

He responded with moderate surprise. “Why wouldn’t I have? I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I take a liking to others easily. Although the reverse isn’t always the case” Understatement, but sure, she saw that clearly. Where was he going with this though?

“The first time I walked into your class with Kuzuryu-kun. You were sitting in the back, all by yourself and looked a little lonely. There were others like Mioda-senpai, but…you stood out.”

Chiaki’s eyes widened. Her mouth moved “In what way?”

“You smiled the least, and I decided to change that.”

…That black, heavy emotion she’d felt for too long. Like the people she cared about were leaving her one by one, abducted by Enoshima. When everyone else had all but forgotten her…someone noticed?

“Hmm. My eyes are kinda watery.” Chiaki said, wiping the tears she didn’t even know were kept in.

“Didn’t get enough sleep?” He offered her his handkerchief.

“I slept plenty. I think…I’m happy, right now.” She rubbed her eyes. Crying wasn’t something she did often, and she didn’t like it. Eager to shift the subject away from that embarrassment, she pressed on. “What was the other reason?”

Naegi blinked. “Oh…that was me helping out my junior.”
“Huh? I thought you were in the 78th class?” Chiaki furrowed her eyebrows. This might have been the most head-turning comment yet. “Or are you a Naegi imposter?”

“Remember when I said we were in the same position? I was a class rep too, back when I was a kid. I don’t think I looked the part then either…but what are you gonna do?”

Chiaki stared in awe, sensing a kindred spirit in the lucky student. If Naegi’d been helping others all the way back then, it explained a bit. So Chiaki posed the question. The one he’d thrown at her earlier. “Which type were you?”

…

“Do I look popular? They forced the job on me.”

“You’ve been acting weird. What’s got you so riled up?” Yasuke Matsuda was off his game, for reasons that simply needed no explanation at this point. Tired and out of his wits, he simply allowed himself to get walked over by Kamukura.

And now Ryoko. Because why the fuck else would he have foregone his research and let the suppressed psycho bitch drag him to the fair?

“Look, look look!” She said, pointing in the distance. A few minutes ago, she ran off on her own (because that always ends well) and now she’s acting like a total creep…more so than usual.

Yasuke followed the trail of her finger to a ruckus around a young girl, carrying a large stuffed animal. From the item and small applause, Yasuke assumed she’d won quite the prize. As expected, of Chiaki Nanami, who he discerned at a glance. Very few had such unique hairstyles.

“Not too surprising to see Nanami in a place like this.” The park wasn’t far from school either.

“Not her. Him!” She wagged her finger like a child in a candy store. “Wait, you know her, who’s this Nanami?” She probed.

He ignored her, instead focusing on another not far off. It was a boy leaning down to ruffle a dog’s fur. Not an uncommon sight – is what Yasuke would have liked to say, but the person was a different story. “Makoto Naegi? Why are you interested in him?”

“I asked first!”

“Answer.” He growled. Nothing good could come from getting involved with the lucky student. Especially in her case—why does he even bother?

If Junko wants something, she’ll get it and he'll dance to her tune, no matter what.

“N-Naegi’s the guy Chihiro likes.”

“Fujisaki?” A puzzled look formed on his features. It wasn’t a stunning revelation or anything. What he wanted to know was why she cared.

“Yeah, and Ikusaba-san too. She and Naegi were out on a date, last night. Now he’s here with a new girl!” She sounded like one of those bitches reading about the latest scandal.
“Good for him.” Yasuke shrugged.

“Don’t you get it, Yasuke? Naegi’s a cheat! A philanderer! I knew he was waaay too nice!”

“I don’t think you have the right to talk shit about him leading on other people on. That’s your specialty.”

“…W-Why would you say those mean things about me?!!”

He clicked his tongue at the idiot, his gaze returned to Naegi,

Matsuda felt a shiver down his spine.

Naegi was looking at him, waving.

Yasuke remembered the tests he’d run on the brunet, and the results.

He was just like them.

Junko had brought him to the brink of insanity.

Izuru pushed him off the edge yet kept him from falling by stranded using a tether so small that it could snap at any moment, sending him plummeting.

Yasuke knew those two, perhaps not as much as he’d like to, but he knew enough. Naegi, on the other hand, was a complete enigma. One that Yasuke knew had stolen his files on Izuru. Nobody else could have done it.

"To hell with this." Yasuke turned around, ignoring Ryoko as he walked in the other direction, not daring to look the younger male one more second in the eye.

Hope’s Peak was already powder keg with those two monsters alone, and he was stuck in the middle of them.

If Yasuke got involved with a third…then that would really be game over.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter:

Curiosity blew up the cat.
October 31st 20XX

“What’s with the weather lately?” I complained, not really caring about the grey skies or thunder. I said that to vent out the tedium of driving alone.

But those are the breaks of working as a cab-driver.

Was it a terrible job? Some might say so, but not me. I was what you’d call a social butterfly. I’m only bored right now because my shift just started, and I hadn’t gotten to the sweet spot; A taxi was a vehicle in more ways than one. It was also an excuse to meet people and in my honest opinion, the best part about this job was the people. I’m a stranger, so they didn’t think twice about chatting up a guy who’d never have an impact on their precious lives, save taking them where they needed to go. It didn’t matter if they were good-looking, smug assholes, or depressed. The thing is, everybody’s got a story to tell and the customers un-winded when they entered the car, especially if they were drunk.

If the job didn’t pay enough, their anecdotes made the difference. So if someone were to ask me if I loved working here? How could I answer no?

But, even I’ve got preferences, dos and don’ts. Unlike some drivers who avoided the eccentrics, I welcomed them. The wilder they are, the better the memory…and right now, nobody on the airport block could begin to compete with the kid hailing for a cab.

Just one look and I knew I’d hit the jackpot. His ghostly white hair clashed with his tanned skin. If I was a betting man, I’d say he wasn’t born with that skin tone and picked it up overseas.

How could I tell? The clothes - A pink, floral-themed Aloha shirt, white shorts and sandals. Overall, the attire mixed poorly with the surroundings and he stuck out.

“Where to boss?” I stopped by him. Normally I’d open the trunk for customers to place their luggage, but this guy only had a guitar case strapped to his back. “Baggage goes in the backseat.” I offered

“Thanks.” The white-haired teen replied curtly. After setting his luggage, he sat up front. “Hope’s Peak Academy, please.” He replied, eyes hidden beneath sunglasses.

The car moved, and I whistled at his opening. There wasn’t a Japanese man alive who hadn’t heard the name ‘Hope’s Peak’, but I’d never been anywhere near the area. Knowing about HPA and going there was the difference between day and night; only the real special folks got to. “You go to school there?”
“Yes.”

“Then you’re one of those Ultimates?”

He took off his sunglasses, revealing his dull gray eyes. “Not really, I wouldn’t compare myself to them, but I do attend school there. If only because I got lucky.”

“That’s some fine luck, pass it onto my kids why don’t ya? They’re just in elementary and Ultimates are all they talk about.” I laughed.

He smiled for the first time. “They’ve got good sense. This world runs on talent, if they understand that much, they’re already ahead of the curve at their age.”

“You’ve got a point there. If I had a shred of talent, I wouldn’t be working here.”

“Of course.”

This guy wasn’t one for conversation. That just means I have to try a little harder.

“You play guitar?”

He gave me a strange look, then the shift in his expression indicated something clicked. “No chance of that, I’d probably break the strings with one touch. What I’ve got back there is a souvenir I brought back with me from my trip.”

“Where from? Somewhere nice like Hawaii?”

“Yes and no. I did stay there, and it was one of my stops but…ah, it’s a long, complicated and mostly unpleasant story.”

“That’s the best kind!” I chuckled. “We’ve got a while before get to Hope’s Peak, so why not entertain me?”

He shook his head. “I usually don’t bother with your types, but the weather’s gloomy enough. No reason I have to be.” He looked deep in thought “To begin, do you believe in luck?”

I ignored the insult. “Who doesn’t?” There was some impossibilities and coincidences in the world you couldn’t explain with anything but luck.

“Good, that’ll make explaining easy. I’m Nagito Komaeda, The Ultimate Lucky Student.” He introduced himself. “I’ve been on a year-round trip.”

“Sounds nice…and expensive. Coming to this weather must be a downer.”

“I don’t mind that much.” He leaned back into the seat, drowsiness overcoming him “And I didn’t pay a cent. My talent is luck and I happened to win a lottery.”

I couldn’t help it…there were…roadblocks.” He said, vaguely “Not like I could have returned earlier. I’ve been on suspension.”

“Still, pretty late in the year to time your arrival, don’t you think?” The school year should have been more than half-way over.

“I couldn’t help it…there were…roadblocks.” He said, vaguely “Not like I could have returned earlier. I’ve been on suspension.”
“Blowing up the school gym.”

My body tensed at the nonchalant answer and I’d accidentally run a red light.

The incident Komaeda alluded to had been on the news, but the culprits were named and promptly expelled…and this guy said he’d just been slapped with a suspension.

...

It wouldn’t be the first time a customer lied, it was kind of a downer. Stories were only interesting when they were real.

“So, what roadblocks did you meet on the trip?”

“It was near the end of my trip but…Ah. I’m not too sure what the outside knows, so I’ll need to ask. Does an airplane hijacking a little while ago ring any bells?”

“You kidding? It was the buzz for weeks. All those dead, how awful.”

“Thanks for your condolences.”

I winced at the implication. “Did you have family or friends there?”

“No.”

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“It was tedious. The terrorists kept yelling out orders, but I’m sure almost nobody on the plane actually understood the language. You’d think they’d have the courtesy of bringing a translator or someone fluent in that regard…but what more could you expect from the talentless masses?” He said in an exasperated voice.

My hands were gripped to the wheel, and I missed the oncoming turn, my body moved on autopilot as the rest of my faculties were converted to processing Komaeda’s dreaded words. “You were there?”

“That should have been implicit.”

“B-But, everyone died!” And he was so bloody calm about it.

“Not everyone. I was the sole survivor. Wouldn’t be the first time this had happened. Honestly, it was a lot more tolerable the second time around.”

Is he bullshitting me? “In that case, what happened to the aircraft?”

“If you must know….”

“Ah that’s right. Just carry over the 4 and you’ll get 28. Problem solved.” Nagito muttered to himself, his pencil moving in accordance with his fingers.

His headphones barely blocked out the crack of lightning. The blue tint of mother nature’s deadly
cries illuminated the view; he suddenly regretted choosing to sit by the window. With his chin resting on his arm, Nagito faced the freak weather storm. Lightning strikes were frightening to be caught in, even when on land.

On air, it was positively nerve-wracking...for most people, he assumed. But Nagito had one-of-a-kind gift.

He was lucky, of the Ultimate pedigree.

For the past year and a half, Nagito had experienced some terrible strings of bad luck. All originating with the death of Natsumi Kuzuryu, the sister of the Ultimate in Nagito’s class. Fuyuhiko had a legendary temper on the best of days, and it multiplied 10-fold with his sister’s murder.

Nagito had half-a-mind to tell the yakuza to forget his talentless sister and face the future...just kidding, he wasn’t an idiot. Kuzuryu-kun wouldn’t let him escape with just a few fingers if he’d said that. But something had to be done about the classroom atmosphere. That’s when Nagito decided to take matters into his own hands at the day of the practice exams. His friends simply weren’t ready to perform, and he wished to postpone the exam. Complications aside, Nagito succeeded. Now if only he could have pulled it off without getting caught in the act.

But this was all part of the deal. In exchange for his achievements, he received an extraordinary stroke of misfortune. That meant he was in for some good luck any time now.

In sum: His luck was a natural cycle; thus, he had no reason to fear or bother with nature.

However...however...humans, on the other hand, were a different story.

“W-What are you doing?” A portly man next to him whispered, harshly.

Komaeda frowned and turned to face him. “Homework. I’ve been away from school too long. I’ll be in trouble if I don’t try to keep up with my studies.” Nagito said.

“A-At a time like this? Aren’t you afraid?” Annoyed more like. The man had been fidgeting the whole time, much to Nagito discontent. He looked like he’d burst out of his seat at any moment.

Nagito sighed. It wasn’t quite so easy to shut out noisy people. “Scared of them?” He finally chose to recognize his situation. The other passengers were strapped to their seats, fingers clutching the arm rests. Many were also holding-hands. Others saying prayers.

A whole lot of nonsense, but what united them was fear.

Fear of the 2-armed men occupying the aisle like guards. They were the opposite; terrorists, whose goals were unknown. Or more like unheard. At least Nagito didn’t have a single clue what they were saying. Even he’d bothered to learn English.

Whatever. They were also irrelevant, as far as Nagito was concerned.

“There’s no need to be worried.”

“How do you know?” The man looked at him, signs of relief evident, but largely buried under anxiety.

“I just do.”
“Hmpf. Damn Japanese. I wonder if you even understand what I’m saying.” It appeared he didn’t approve of the albino’s optimism.

Nagito looked in front. Near the door to the other classes was the flight attendant, her face a stone mask, even as a masked man aimed at her with a rifle.

The luckster was impressed. She served as a reminder that not all talentless people were worthless. Some had potential as stepping stones for hope. “Why don’t you be more like her? She’s still got her composure.”

Komaeda genuinely said this for the man’s own good. Fear was many things. A defense mechanism and a powerful motivator.

Fear also made people behave in certain ways, based on his experience: You could a) shiver in terror b) retaliate in a terrifying manner

And the last, which Nagito found was most prevalent…cause people to do very stupid things. Nagito had a sneaking suspicion this man was of the third caliber.

“They’re going to kill us.”

“You don’t know that.” Although they would at least try. The survival rates of hijackings were pretty low, to memory.

“I do. I used to be a marine.” The man said.

Komaeda shrugged.

Minutes passed, and the situation remained unchanged. It probably wouldn’t until they landed. That was plenty of time.

One of the men spoke in whatever native language that was supposed to be. Next, he went through the door, closing it behind him.

Komaeda felt the sudden increase in space. He glanced at the man who formerly sat down, now in the process of standing, his eyes trained on the lone guard.

If Nagito was a good person, he would probably try harder talking sense into him. But if the fluffy-haired teen was morally inclined…he wouldn’t be here.

Nagito weighed his options. The man had decent odds, and if he could turn things around here, that would surely be hopeful.

The next second decided fate. The so-called ex-marine jumped out of his seat and charged. Nagito eyebrow rose. He was fast enough, despite his size. Before their captor could prepare himself, he had already grabbed the gun, engaging in a struggle.

Nagito winced as they yelled profanities at each other-

Just then, he felt his hand weighed slightly less. His pencil had fallen to the floor. Nagito leaned over, his back folding to pick up the item.

*bang*

He heard the gunshots and smelled smoke.
Nagito lifted his head up to see the passenger who’d sat besides him on the floor, a pink liquid forming around his body.

His killer poking his corpse with a rifle.

Pity

The terrorist made eye contact with Nagito, his gun now pointed at the luckster as he spoke incomprehensibly.

Well, not like Nagito couldn’t understand without words. His assailant sat right by Nagito. Of course, the first thing he’d do in the other man’s position was search there for more trouble.

What irritating bad luck.

Nagito took off his headphones. They weren’t much use anymore.

“Sir, I implore you restrain yourself. He’s just a child.” Said the flight assistant.

How kind of her. Not that their captor thought much of it, as he practically spat in her face.

Now that provoked an irritated reaction in the white-haired boy. As a self-styled feminist, he couldn’t overlook violence towards women.

Just as Nagito motioned to speak, lightning struck.

Literally.

The room went white and an explosion could be heard from the back. For a moment, nobody spoke. Even the gunman lowered his weapon.

Everyone looked between each other and they heard it again.

*Boom*

The terrorist spoke to the very woman he’d just spat on. His tone, distinctly meek.

“What was that?” He asked.

Confusion spread across Nagito’s features as the man spoke crude, but understandable English. “What the hell?”

“Remain calm, this is not uncommon when passing through a storm, but just in case…”

Light shone once more. This time, it wasn’t lightning. It was an orange tint. Nagito turned to look outside the window. There he saw it

The fire.

“Hmm.” He turned to the attendant, her eyes squarely on him. “I’m pretty sure the engine blew up.” He informed them. “I’m not Souda-kun, or anything resembling an expert but…can planes fly with one gone?”

He received no response, just looks of horror directed his way. Talk about rude.

The aircraft itself must have agreed, for it promptly answered in their stead...by banking in his
direction. The passengers screamed and all leaned to the left involuntarily. The ones standing, just barely held onto the rails.

The corpse hit the window and fell to the ground, right in front of him. Leaving a pink trail from the glass onto the floor.

“Ladies and gentlemen, sit down and fasten your seatbelts. Open your pamphlets and read how to prepare for emergencies.” The flight attendant expertly evaded the word “crash”, never once confirming they were on a collision course for the sea below.

The fear of the terrorists had all but vanished from the minds of everyone. Arguably the invader himself, as he looked for the nearest seat.

There was only one open. The passenger seat of the very man he killed. Shamelessly he ran and sat on it, right next to Nagito.

The gunman chattered in his language and took off his mask, revealing short blond hair and unremarkable face, save his chapping lips and frightened eyes.

There was some kind of irony to be found in the act. How his expression exuded the very same terror Nagito had seen in the ex-marine.

The plane shook, tipped, and then speared downwards.

“Shitshitshit!” He heard.

“This is all your fault!” A middle-aged woman from behind screamed at the terrorist

"Murderer!"

“You bastard.” A pair of hands clutched the blonde man’s neck. Nagito turned his head to see an elderly man leaned over, his face crazed and teeth grit as he performed the deed.

“Sir return to your seat! You’re a danger to the passengers.” The attendant said professionally, cleverly and reasonable hinting that the terrorist was in fact, not a passenger, but the old man was still a hazard. To Nagito himself.

“Stop.” Nagito wasn’t a good person, but he didn’t care to see people die in front of him. Not unless it was for hope. But nothing like that would be found here.

That’s why he pried the old man’s hands off.

“All of you. There’s no need to be worried.” Nagito repeated the very words he’d spoken earlier, properly resting on his seat, arms folded behind his head, as if he were relaxing at the beach. The calmness he exuded made him an oasis in a desert. Everyone could only stare.

“How do you know?” The terrorist coughed.

Komaeda closed his eyes, choosing to elaborate this time. An indiscernible and exhausted emotion seeped into his words, as he remembered the day he lost everything. “Because this is entirely out of your hands. If you survive, you’re lucky. If you don’t, then you were either unlucky or ordinary. Do yourselves a favor and at least think happy thoughts. I promise. it’ll be a better use of your time.”

He put his headphones back on and turned the volume up to maximum

“Brace for collision!” said the captain, his voice emanating from the intercom.
“It was a miracle I survived, but that was the worst of it. It was my good luck that the island I was stranded on, was inhabitable. From there, I just had to wait to be rescued.” Komaeda finished.

No words were spoken. Silence permeated too long for an on-going conversation.

“…Ha...hahaha. D-Don’t you think this is in bad taste? It’s not funny to joke about a tragedy.” I laughed. My hair standing up. At some point, I’d started sweating all over.

A puzzled look crossed his features.

What I was about to ask went against the spirit of the driver-customer code. Or really, any customer service occupation. An employee wasn’t to ever discourage or belittle the customer, no matter what they do. That’s why I made a point to just listen on the occasion the customer lied. But even I couldn’t keep quiet after such an absurd tale of an incident that fresh “You got any proof, Komaeda-san?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“It’s not like that.” I lied “However, that’s a wild story. After such an adventure, I thought you’d have something to show for it.”

“Oh that’s what you meant.” He pointed to the backseat. “In the case. There’s a souvenir I got for my classmates.” He beamed.

Whoever these guys were, he seemed to like them a lot.

“Souvenir? From the trip. How’s that prove anything?”

“Oh no. It’s a souvenir from the terrorists. Well, the parts that washed up on the island to be precise. I thought it’d be a waste to leave ‘it’ there.”

I looked back at the guitar case. Sweat fell down my brow. The container was…awfully large – enough to make any attentive viewer question if it really did hold an instrument.

“What’s in there?” I asked. I shouldn’t have.

“I’d rather not spoil the surprise. See for yourself…or maybe you shouldn’t? In retrospect, this might make it look like I was one of the terrorists. Even if you made that sort of accusation, I don’t think I could disprove it, driver-san.”
It couldn’t be…”You’re lying right? You couldn’t have brought something like that after a rescue operation and through the airport. The scanners would have caught you on-site.”

Komaeda gave me a hard look. A stone-cold expression that could only belong to a man who had no qualms ending another’s life.

Come to think of it…didn’t he say he blew up the school gymnasium, with people inside?

W-Who the hell did I let in my car?!

“…Obviously. None of that actually happened.”

“…WHAT?!” I screamed.

Komaeda broke out into half-hearted laughter. “You should have seen the look on your face. How could you believe such an outrageous story?”

I gaped. As my adrenaline slowed down, I felt the urge to laugh along with him. I felt it, but I couldn’t act on it.

“Take this little prank of mine as a lesson. Don’t play around on the job.” He rested his head back on the seat and said nothing more.

Neither did I.

---

I dropped Komaeda off at his destination early in the morning. It seemed he hadn’t been lying about being a student there, at least.

“I can’t believe I let him psyche me out like that.” As proof, I was still drawn to his guitar case even as he left. As if there were something else I was missing.

Any pointless thoughts about the white-haired boy was drowned out as I got a call to return to the airport. Unusually, I wasn’t up for another ride. The last one had been more than enough excitement for one day; I was already drained.

But that’s work. You got to do it, even when you feel like shit.

I picked up the next customer, opening the trunk for a portly, middle aged man to place…his…luggage.

…

I shook my head to ward off a frightening train of thought “Where to?” This one was typical, much more ordinary…and I didn’t mind one bit.

“Shinjuku.” The man said in a gruff, irritated tone.

And with that, I took off on another long trip.
“You’re not one for talking huh?” The man said.

“No no. I’m just a bit disgruntled is all. It’s been a strange morning.”

“Ha! That’s an understatement!”

I squinted “Did something happen?”

“The airport held all the passengers back, and now I’m late for my appointment!” He bellowed. That must have been some meeting he’s tardy for.

“What happened?” I let my curiosity get the better of me once again.

That was another mistake.

“The airport scanners suddenly malfunctioned! Nobody could get through thanks to security. I had to pay to get my luggage checked manually.”

His luggage. He had never been able to get a strange thought out of his mind once it settled in. Komaeda said he’d come back from a round trip vacation for over a year.

I don’t think he lied about that, his tan and clothing proved his claim. But…if he’d left for that long, where was his luggage?

All he’d brought with him was that case, and no matter the size, it couldn’t hold the necessities for a trip that long. And to begin with, why not settle for a more conventional travel bag instead of lugging that guitar case around?

Unless, he didn’t have any at all, but how…

The older man rambled all on his own “Under normal circumstances, I’d consider suing for delaying my arrival, but…it is a dangerous time. With the scanners offline, just about anything could be brought in and out. I can understand why the airport would apprehensive about security. Especially after that hijacking.”

That cold sweat returned.

“A-About the terrorist hostage situation. I heard everyone on board died.”

“A sad tale, but I don’t believe that’s quite right. Apparently, a school boy survived. How lucky he must be.”

“Lucky…yeah. You might be right.”

I dared not say anymore…yet even that silence proved meager, because Nagito Komaeda wasn’t finished with him yet.

Later that evening, after returning home, the kids were chained to the television…and watching the news. It became clear why, after reading the headline. It told of another tragedy, one not unrelated to the strange boy I’d met earlier.

Breaking News: Hope's Peak Academy's biggest, most awful event
Nagito walked through HPA’s main gates with a shining grin on his face, like everything was finally right with the world. Except the rain, but what was that compared to standing on the hallowed grounds of the greatest harvest of talent in the world!

“It’s probably presumptuous of me to say, but I should go tell everyone I’m back.” He briefly wondered if they’d missed him. What a silly thought! As if anyone would take notice of walking garbage. Still, he’d at least be thrilled to see them again.

Turns out he didn’t have to with that long didn’t have to travel long before a certain nurse caught his eye in the distance. “Tsumiki?” She was the only person he knew who had messy tendril-like hair. But what was she doing walking around this early in the morning. Day hadn’t even broken yet.

Just as he was about to wave and call out to the bandaged-clad girl, she turned around the corner.

Nagito picked up his pace, following after his classmate. But, what he found was just the Izuru Kamukura statue in the clearing. “Where’d she go?” The ashen-haired Ultimate muttered. Seeing no sign of the nurse.

He looked around and there was nowhere she could have gone too so quickly.

“It must be jetlag.” He stifled a yawn, dismissing Tsumiki’s appearance as a figment of his imagination. His fluffy-white hair caught droplets of rain.

“Oh darn it.”

The lucky student didn’t waste another moment dawdling. The dorms were still quite a distance away and getting caught under the rain was just asking for trouble with his health.

Unfortunately, he didn’t make it very far when the downpour worsened. Nagito was forced to take temporary shelter inside the old building. He’d put down his belongings in front of the door, while he slumped down against the wall. The only accessible light was the thunder outside.

“What bad luck.” He spoke softly, his tone dancing with joy. For luck was a cycle, for misfortune he was experiencing, he would be repaid with even greater fortune later on.

Everything balances out.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:

Kiriegi and Naegi on a united front
"Soshun Murasame has been expelled." The headmaster announced.

And with that, the day got off to a fantastic start for Kyoko Kirigiri.

"Isshiki Madarai as well."

"On what grounds? And when my investigation is still running at that?" She asked

"It was the committee’s decision."

"The steering committee have all been killed." She saw one die right before her eyes. A pile of desks and equipment fell on top of him right before Kyoko could begin her questioning. When she searched for the culprit, the body had been taken away.

Kyoko felt the calm before the storm. Something was happening in this school, and she wasn’t just referring to the parades. No, what she was currently investigating was as malicious as it was subtle.

"The new board. Isn’t it convenient?" He grit his teeth, as displeased with the outcome as she was.

"What about Izuru Kamukura?" The actual reason she began her investigation was to search for them. A person who shared the same name as the Academy’s founder. Unfortunately for her client, all evidence pointed to him as the culprit behind the worst tragedy to befall Hope’s Peak.

"The Izuru Kamukura case is also closed. You’ve done enough."

"I’ve done nothing. I don’t even know their gender."

"You misunderstand. I’m saying there is nothing left to find. If I’m allowed to be clear; you could say this was all a wild-goose chase from the start."

Kyoko narrowed her eyes. “It seems there’s nothing I can say. Do what you want.”

Jin furrowed his eyebrows. “You’re dropping the case... just like that?”

“Did you want me to resist?" Kyoko arched an eyebrow, already having her fill of this ‘wonderful’ father-daughter talk. “You were the one who dragged me out of another investigation. I’d gladly go back to that.”

“Oh? You never did give me details. I didn’t hear about you getting any other clients either.”
Why would he know about her clients? – She wanted to ask but kept it to herself. There were more important things that needed to be said. “You…have no idea where they are, do you?”

“Excuse me?”

“The expelled students. I’ve been unable to contact Madarai after he got away from me, and Murasame was kept on lockdown. The story was that he needed medical attention. But in reality, the council president was a key witness, if not the possible culprit himself. He knows far too much to be given leave.” What she was getting at should have been clear at this point. “The only reason you’re telling me about their expulsion, is they are no longer in your reach…and I would find out anyway.”

“Well now…that’s quite the theory.” Jin crossed his fingers.

Of course it was. “Piece of advice. Don’t be surprised when the dam bursts, headmaster Kirigiri.” Kyoko closed the door behind her, leaving Jin to himself.

…The headmaster crossed his fingers and with a bright smile… “That’s my little girl.” He laughed, admiring his daughter’s talent and how she had discovered so much with so little to go on.

Kyoko was his daughter. It was his obligation, nay his right to be proud.

…

Outside the door, the lavender haired girl hadn’t quite left. Her ears peeled to the door to see if she could learn anything once her father believed she was gone.

Waste of time.

“What an idiot.” Kyoko sighed…then straightened herself, moving away from the door as campus security approached, a student in formal black being dragged by the arm.

“Keep struggling and I’ll beat the crap out of you again.” Juzo Sakakura threatened the squirming reserve course student.

The restrained boy seethed, even moreso when his eyes locked onto Kyoko. “Don’t think you can lord it over us forever.”

For some reason, he chose to direct that thinly veiled threat towards her.

“That is supposed to mean?” Kyoko recognized determination when she saw it, and generally, that sort of confidence had some backing.

“Forget about this idiot. I caught him hopping over the fence. He’ll be out of this school before the day is done.” Sakakura said.

Now why is it that those words did nothing to comfort her?

Out from the frying pan and into the fire, one might say.

It was 6 in the evening and the sun was setting. Kyoko passed by the halls, deep in thought. With
her search of Izuru Kamukura suspended indefinitely, she was free to focus on a problem closer to home. Namely Makoto Naegi. At the moment, he wasn’t a pressing concern…but potentially, he may become a threat to this not-so-quiet daily school life as of late.

“Kirigiri-san!” A friendly call from an all-too-friendly individual. Kyoko locked eyes with Naegi jogging up to her.

What awful timing.

“Good evening, Naegi-kun.” She greeted him…and then kept walking without a second glance his way.

Naegi failed to take the hint, or just didn’t care.

“Cold as ever…” He laughed, walking by her side.

“And this amuses you?” Kyoko cocked an eyebrow. There were boys who preferred the sadistic treatment (Yamada came to mind whenever Celes was involved), but she didn’t peg Naegi for one.

“Yeah.” He shamelessly admits “Cold is definitely your default, and that means everything’s normal on your end. I hadn’t seen you since your birthday.”

“You don’t have to be. I was working on a case.” And she didn’t feel the need to continue engaging in their clique.

“What kind of case?”

“I’m not under any obligation to discuss that with you.” Kyoko sped up, but he kept pace nonetheless. She sighed and stopped in place. “You’re full of energy. Have you gotten over your cold already?”

“Yup. A while back.” He beamed. “Oh. Wait a sec.” He reached into his bag and foisted a notebook. “Here. These notes should cover what you missed in class. My handwriting isn’t the best, sorry.”

Kyoko paused. While it was true that she was falling behind in her studies, she thought it best to refuse. “Thanks for the offer, but it’s unnecessary. I don’t need the help.”

He actually looked hurt by her rejection. However much of that she could believe. She knew from prior experience that he was skilled at feigning and manipulating emotion.

“You don’t need the help…or you don’t want my help?” He drooped.

“Think whatever you want.” She shrugged.

“…That’s not right.” He shook his head. “I take it back, you’re being unusually cold…Did something happen?”

Kyoko motioned to answer but stopped prematurely. Their path was being blocked. A very tall man with pale white skin and lizard-like features stood meters in front of them. Despite his slender form, the detective felt his guard encompassed both sides of the hallway.

They weren’t getting passed him.

“Isshiki Madarai.” Kyoko stated, bluntly revealing the man’s identity was no secret to her. They’d met before, after all.
“Hmpf. Kyoko Kirigiri. Allow me to pose a question. Were you involved with the murder of the student council?”

Ah, here we go. His motive is as clear as day.

“No and you won’t find anything tying me to the crime.” She answered plainly.

“Correct. Not a shred of evidence points to you, but I felt I should ask regardless. You may pass.”

Kyoko narrowed her eyes at that oddly specific phrasing. ‘I may pass?’ That implies she was free to leave…but Madarai would still be standing guard. But against whom and for what purpose?

“We meet again, Naegi.”

“Huh? We’ve met before?” Naegi replied. As confused as Kyoko was.

“Did you take up Otonashi’s habits?”

“You guys are still after her. She didn’t kill the student council.” Naegi replied. How he spoke assuredly about an incident that should have been buried under rumors and exaggerations, provoked a cautious reaction from Kyoko.

“I know.” Madarai said, yet his enmity didn’t let up one bit. “However, she was involved all the same, whether she knows it or not.”

“Haven’t you learned your lesson already? Otonashi evaded you many times before, and from the looks of it, even during our previous meeting in the neurology lab.” Kyoko’s eyes narrowed to slits when she recalled their earlier skirmish. “Thanks for the good time, by the way.”

“So you met my brothers.” Madarai stiffened, his attention rerouted back to the detective. “Where are they?”

“You…weren’t among the five I met, were you?” Kyoko surmised. The pains of dealing with twins is that you could never tell them apart without close familiarity.

“Only 5? Misshiki, Yoshiki, Goshiki, Rosshiki, Shichishiki and Yasshiki…left after Otonashi while we recuperated from our wounds. None of them returned…and from the sounds of it, you know their whereabouts.” His tone was belayed an accusation.

“One, Rosshiki I believe, attacked me while the other four chased after Otonashi. I managed to get away from him, and that was the end of it.” Kyoko replied, never having met the third brother. “I hate to break it to you, but you may want to consider the worst-case scenario.”

“Any good reason?”

“Precedence. You should know better than I that many connected to that incident, have found themselves in unfavorably circumstances. And nobody’s jumping into the fire quite like you brothers.”

“Fair enough. So it’s possible that my siblings are dead…in that case, we shall avenge them as well.”

“This again…” She heard Naegi groan in displeasure “Aren’t both of you jumping the gun? And why are you writing off your own brothers when they could still be alive?” Naegi pointed at
Madarai.

Madarai cocked his head. “And what would you suppose happened?”

“I dunno. They could have been captured and held somewhere.” Possible, but Kyoko wouldn’t bet on it. Madarai has no value as a hostage, however she may have missed something and Naegi was—“Or maybe they’re passed out somewhere, having a good time. It IS a Friday night.”

Or Naegi was an idiot. How could he joke at a time like this?

To her surprise, Madarai laughed regardless. “I’ll take you up on that optimistic chance. And who better to trust for information than one of the perpetrators.”

“Eh?”

“Yes, please elaborate.” Kyoko pressed. Subtly distancing herself from the luckster.

Madarai chuckled. “Pretending won’t do any good, Naegi. My brother overheard your conversation with Izuru Kamukura…you knew everything about the death of our comrades, and that Enoshima was the culprit.”

The lavender haired girl couldn’t maintain her stoic mask at that reveal. She stared at Naegi with shock. Her mind switched into full gear. Kyoko long theorized that Izuru Kamukura and the council murder were connected; that he was the culprit…but Enoshima?

At most, Kyoko believed the timing for the sudden memory loss and emergence of Ryoko Otonashi was odd, but this went too far. It was a reveal that overshadowed Naegi’s supposed involvement.

Kyoko hated not being in the know, which is exactly why she’d get to the bottom of what the hell was going on here.

“Ah…I thought Izuru was being a little talkative. Here I believed he was finally warming up to me.” Naegi wore a wry grin, not bothering to deny Madarai’s claim.

Kyoko had a million and one questions to ask but chose to voice any. Not yet. The more raw, unfiltered testimonies she heard, the better before a thorough interrogation.

“You’re finally being honest. I like you more than Otonashi already.” Madarai sneered.

“Uh, thanks…so what do you want from me?”

“To make you divulge every last bit of information on Enoshima and Kamukura.” Madarai’s lips twitched upwards into a malicious grin “That is, after I’m finished breaking every bone in your body.”

And that is where she drew the line. “I’m afraid that isn’t going to be happening.”

“You’ll get in my way?”

“Had you only intended to question Naegi, I might have looked the other way – after I was through with him.”

"Kirigiri-san, I don't think that's how that line works." Naegi interjected

She ignored him.
"But, you’ve made it clear that you’re more interested in torturing him than the answers he would give.” Kyoko replied. “You’re not getting away with that, on my watch.”

“He is involved and told nobody. That is enough to face judgement.”

“On whose authority? As far as I know, your jurisdiction only extended to defending the student council, not issuing vendettas to outside parties.” Kyoko flicked a strand of hair. “Or rather, it did.”

“Excuse me”

“You didn’t get the memo? As of earlier this morning, you’ve been filed under expulsion.”

Madarai gave a look of pure outrage “So that’s how it is.” He placed a hand on his forehead, sneering contemptuously at all that environed him. “Not just the students, but the corruption extends to the board itself? No matter. All this means is that I don’t have to hold back in fear of regulations.”

“You won’t quit?” Kyoko frowned. A confrontation was steadily becoming unavoidable.

“Not until we have our revenge.”

“…We?” Madarai’s inclusion of plurality took a very literal meaning, as an arm latched onto the back of her lapel. She couldn’t brace herself in time to be flung and sent crashing into the lockers.

Kyoko grunted from the impact to the back of her skull. It hadn’t been a casual throw; the collision was enough to dent the metal plate. The searing pain in her head was stripping her of consciousness. With her remaining strength, Kyoko lifted her head to see multiple Madarais surrounding Naegi. It wouldn’t have been unlikely to presume it was a symptom of deliriousness, if not for the fact that they were identical siblings.

“Stay out of this.” Madarai(s) gave their final warning in stereo.

…

Kyoko woke up to a lethargic sensation. Her body felt warm and unusually light, like she were moving on air. Contradicting that discovery was the pressure she felt on her head, impairing the detective from coherent thought, for the moment.

She started small, working her way up from what she could remember last. She was attacked by… Isshiki Madarai…and…there was someone else.

Creases formed on her forehead as Kyoko squeezed her eyes closed and swayed her head, struggling to recall the bits of memory she was missing.

“Q-Quit it. That tickles.”

…What?

That no quite feminine giggle, the frustrating tonality.

Kyoko’s eyes snapped open, pulling her head back to discern exactly where she was. The reason for the lightness of body, was because she was being carried on somebody’s back.
Her arms were draped over his front and she had (formerly) been nestling on his neck. Now she could only see the unkempt and wild brown hair.

“O-oh, you’re awake.” Naegi chirped.

“**Put. Me. Down.**” The urgency in her voice was far too weak for her liking. Her normal reaction would have been to snap, but the searing pain in her head overpowered the indignation.

“D-Don’t squirm, you might hurt yourself.” He groaned, and she hated that he was right.

Damn it.

“Where’d Madarai go?”

“I evaded them.”

“You’re lying.”

“How can you tell?” He asked.

“I’m not an idiot for one. We’re in the same PE class so I know your physique is sub-standard. You could never outrun Madarai, and you couldn’t hide from three of them tailing you.” That he was carrying her was the icing on the cake. How did he get away?

“I-I could have outrun them…if I wanted to. I was the star of my elementary school’s track team, you know.”

“And how long ago was that?” Kyoko raised her eyebrow, skeptical of even that statement.

“…I talked to Madarai and got him to leave before he did any more damage.”

“That’s an even more incredulous lie than the last.”

“How else would I get them to leave? And why does nobody ever believe the peaceful solution works?” Naegi’s voice rose.

“Because people aren’t built to have their convictions swayed in moments by sweet-talk. Especially those hell-bent on revenge.”

“It worked with Kuzuryu-kun.”

“If I recall correctly – and I do – that skirmish left you with multiple severe injuries-“ Kyoko trailed off. “…Naegi, put me down.” She hit his shoulder.

“J-Just wait a bit, we’re almost at the infirmary.”

“No!”

“No! You might have a **concussion**, I’m not putting you down even if you yell at me.”

Kyoko grit her teeth. She really hated to admit it, but he was right. Her thoughts weren’t as jumbled now, but she still felt nausea and dizziness. “I won’t let you get away with this.”

“Please don’t spite me even more. You’re heavy enough as it is, surprisingly. I can guess why.”

Kyoko’s gloved fingers slowly, menacingly curved around his neck.
“…Care to repeat that?” She said slowly. With all the sudden, unexplained murders going on, it wouldn’t be too shocking for Naegi to be found strangled to death in the morning. She could even pin the kill on Madarai.

“I-I said I want 5 kids!” He said in a high-pitched voice.

…”Pardon me?” Kyoko asked, after a period of silence, sporting a rare dumbfounded expression. Of all the...

“Later, when I’m older…haha.” He did not sound the least bit convincing, but she wasn’t about to argue…or continue this conversation at all.

Idiot.

“Tsumiki senpai’s not here.” Naegi stated the obvious as they entered the infirmary. Despite her protests, he was adamant on carrying her all the way there. If that wasn’t enough, he’d made her sit down and took it upon himself to wrap bandages across her forehead.

What a persistent guy.

Looking up at Naegi from while he went about his imposed duty, she could see he wasn’t too beaten up. A torn white shirt. A thin cut on his lips were thin pink residue fell…and a blow to the head seemed likely, judging from the bruise in that area. Comparatively speaking, Pekoyama and Kuzuryu inflicted much worse injuries.

“Tsumiki should be on duty.” Kyoko murmured. Just their luck that Tsumiki would be absent at a time like this.

…”Here’s a thought.’ Kyoko looked the luckster square in the face.

“As an alternative, we should go see Gekkogahara instead.”

He dropped the white tape, leaving it to roll on the ground.

Well…there was an interesting reaction.

“Gekko…gahara-san?” His words nearly a whisper. "We probably shouldn't."

“Why? It doesn't seem like a bad idea with no other options.” Kyoko feigned ignorance.

“Even I can do first aid.” Naegi assured her.

Kyoko scanned the boy for further signs of apprehension, but to no avail. So she pressed him. “I have little experience in that field, and even assuming you did, I doubt you're in the right state to apply it. We need a professional to make a proper diagnosis.”

“My injuries look a lot worse than they are. They didn’t hurt me that badly.”
“Really? From what I remember, Madarai threatened to break every bone in your body.”

“Lucky me then.” He nervously scratched his cheek…

“Lucky you, but I may not be. You’re the one who insisted on carrying me because it was too dangerous for me to walk.” She glared.

…

"Fair enough." Naegi's lips slanted into a faint, almost unnoticeable smile. "Should we go now?"

"You're sure?" Kyoko arched an eyebrow.

"It's no problem at all. I'll even carry you again."

Kyoko closed her eyes in disappointment. It was clear from what she knew (but he didn't) and his outburst that meeting Gekkogahara was the last thing he wanted, and he's lying right to her face.

When didn't he?

Could he be honest with anyone? “Really, you are the worst.”

Naegi twitched. For a moment, Kyoko was positive he’d glare at her. But it was only momentary. His expression morphed back into his usual non-aggression. “What is it about me you hate so much?” He spoke with a fond curiosity.

Nevertheless, Kyoko didn’t miss the edge in his speech.

His question was sudden, but one she could easily answer. “I don’t recall mentioning I hated you.” Though so many were under that presumption.

“Actions speak louder than words.”

“And just like words, actions can be deceiving and do not always carry intent.”

“You’re dodging the question.”

“You are insincere.” Kyoko stated.

Naegi blinked and tilted his head. “I..insincere? You can’t be serious.”

Was she? In light of Naegi going out of his way to carry her to the infirmary to treat her wounds (despite his own), could she call him insincere?

Absolutely. Because she had an inkling that there was something much more sinister beneath the smiles. “I’m not keen on jokes, and I understand your frivolous personality well enough by now.”

He shrugged. “Okay, I won’t argue with the detective, but what’s your reasoning?”

Kyoko’s lips thinned. “What do you see in Fujisaki?”

“Chihiro? He’s a good friend.” So he said, but to be that surprised at the mention of the programmer, it’d be little wonder if Fujisaki was someone Naegi hadn’t thought about in years.

As for his textbook answer…well, that itself was another problem.

“Just a good friend, hmm? I see…so Fujisaki would not even qualify as your closest companion,
much less a subject of romantic interest?"

“Romantic?” He giggled. "That's a joke right?"

That reaction said it all.

“He’s obsessed with you, you can’t seriously pretend to haven’t noticed.” Kyoko shot him an unimpressed look. “But even if you haven’t, that only proves my point. Even though you were the one to break through Fujisaki’s shell…you haven’t given any serious thought to his feelings.”

She pitied Fujisaki, for his blatantly obvious display of affections hadn’t even broken through the uppermost layer of Naegi’s surface.

“The problem also works in reverse. Just like with Pekoyama and Kuzuryu, you intentionally put yourself in harm’s way for reasons that I still can’t understand.”

“I was just trying to help. If Kuzuryu kept allowing himself to be haunted by his sister, he’d keep doing horrible things.” He argued. Objectively, she couldn’t disagree.

She also couldn’t argue with the results he achieved that night. There’d been a remarkably positive change in gangster. Though Kyoko doubted she could see eye-to-eye with the criminal.

Nevertheless, the ends don’t justify the means and not everything ran on logic.

“Regardless of what you tell me, you should consider what I’m about to tell you and then decide if you agree with my assertion.” Kyoko countered. “Your family or even friends…did you once consider how they would feel to know about the extremes risks you put yourself through? Did you even tell them?”

The confounded look on his face said it all. ‘Family. Why are they relevant?’ Kyoko understood the sentiment well, having pronounced familial disputes herself.

“If yes, then there’s no need to pay attention to a shred of what I’ve told you. However, if you didn’t think about your loved ones at all…then you’re a hypocrite.”

Their conversation progressed no further. The door flung open, revealing a huffing Tsumiki who looked like she’d just ran a marathon.

“Naegi-san? You’re injured again?!” The nurse screamed

Kyoko returned to the dorm room, after Tsumiki’s assessment. Neither she nor Naegi had spoken another word to each other for the rest of the evening and she hadn't been able to interrogate him further about the Madarai confrontation. The nurse advised that she go back for checkups, in case of abrupt complications.

Kyoko insisted her injuries were nothing serious…for her anyway. You couldn’t be a detective without braving mortal danger—

The lavender haired girl stopped just short of opening her room door.
Light poured out and Kyoko’s instincts shifted into overdrive. Madarai’s assault hadn’t crippled Kyoko’s mental faculties, she still clearly remembered turning the lights off when she departed in the morning, and nobody was allowed in her room.

“Breaking and entering.” The detective whispered. What could she do? Run and signal security? Or assess the threat herself?

Kyoko only took a moment to decide. She was done being helped by others for one evening, and the problem with asking others for help, is that you’re compelled to share the ‘rewards’ with them. Take for example, if she enlisted the police’s aid to catch a suspect, they would butt in on her interrogation. It happened too many times for her liking.

Hope’s Peak was even more secretive and corrupt from what she’d seen. In times of turmoil like this, Kyoko needed to take risks if she wanted rewards.

That…and the fact that the lights being left on, meant one of two things: If the intruder was an idiot, then they turned on the lights unintentionally. That meant they were careless (and trapped) fools she could probably deal with.

But, if the lights were left for her to see, then the intruder is confident and wanted her to know the room was compromised.

She’d see which was the case after entering. Not bothering to feign silence, she opened the door. It was a mere dorm room, so they whole space was available to her at a glance, barring the bathroom…which after a quick check, was also empty.

…Was this a prank?

It was an elaborate one to pull, given the consequences for breaking in. Next, the detective searched for a possible motive. The most obvious being theft, but Kyoko was a minimalist. The objects in her room worthy of value were practically none.

Normally, they should have gone through Maizono or Nevermind’s room if they wanted valuables.

Amidst this strange night, Kyoko did find something. On her bed, was a file. Not hers…nor was it here when she left. Kyoko opened it, seeing two photos in the dossier. One being a picture of a man she had never seen before, but whose name she could recognize at a glance.

The other was a girl, both whose name and appearance Kyoko recognized instantly.

“Izuru Kamukura and Junko Enoshima.” And a profile beneath their photographs. Measurements, names (obviously), ages, affiliations etc.

Kyoko scanned the paper, stopping at one peculiar phrase that caught her eye. An alien moniker left her mouth.

“Ultimate…Despair.”

Chapter End Notes

December 23rd 20XX
Kyoko Kirigiri, in a miniskirt and heels unbefitting the cold, snowy night, meant business.

The door opened, revealing a lime-haired woman wearing a long scarf that covered her mouth. Her most distinct feature, was the unorthodox – yet no doubt advanced, judging from the screen on the helm – wheel chair she was strapped to. “Kirigiri! have you finished preparations for tomorrow, already?”

The ambiguously defined breed of animal in Miaya Gekkogahara’s screen asked the tumultuous question.

“Have you seen me working a stall?” The detective huffed, making herself at home inside the other girl’s room. Couldn’t be helped, she was having one of those infamous moody days.

The therapist’s fingers danced on the wheelchair-installed keyboard. “That’s a dereliction of duty. Everyone’s been working very hard with the reserve course!”

Kyoko scoffed. “I’m one of the supervisors; I’m doing my job as long as I check in on the other establishments every now and then.”

“Still not too enthusiastic about the idea, huh?”

Kyoko would have offered the older girl a word of praise; few people could see through her so easily. Similarly, few things annoyed her as much as her thoughts being read so openly.

“After what happened, I believe the reserve course should have been disbanded outright, but I’m not opposed to the headmaster’s alternative decision.”

“Sure sure. After all, what you dislike is whom the idea came from.”

“That goes without saying.” It really didn’t, but the detective wasn’t about to let Gekkogahara have the satisfaction of besting her twice in a row. “I expected this attempt at reconciliation to fall flat on its face…but empirical evidence leans in the opposite direction. The students are getting along.” Which was far from a bad thing, but it was also abnormal given they were at each other’s throats not long ago. “There was too short time for the animosity to disappear. How’d Naegi do it?” Kyoko rested her chin on her glove.

“I don’t think it’s so outlandish, if you consider the season.” Gekkogahara mused

“What season?” Kyoko spun around.

“The holiday season…and we’re orchestrating a Christmas party. We’re kids, Kirigiri. We’re supposed to get excited over things like this.”

“Christmas is mere propaganda once you’ve removed the religious context. I fail to see what’s worth celebrating.”

“You’ll get coal from Santa, Kirigiri-san.”

"If Santa did exist, I'd have caught him for breaking and entering already." She wore a sinister smirk
The rabbit cowered in fear of her expression. Gekkogahara was unphased. Kyoko thought it was curious how her green-haired upperclassman let the animation emote for her.

“Your circumstances aside, it’s not hard to see why this plan was met with success. The school read the mood and picked the right time for this event.”

“The school did?” Kyoko repeated with skepticism.

“Would it change anything if Naegi was responsible?”

“Quite a lot, actually. The board is transparent, but Naegi’s a different story. You know that.” As a detective, Kyoko could never overlook the motive. Even objective evidence in a case can gain new dimensions of meaning upon learning what the culprit’s aim was.

Kyoko was right to distrust Naegi’s intentions along with this party he was running. But she was one voice among many. Many who supported him.

Like Kuzuryu.

The lavender-haired girl’s disposition grew worse recalling their last conversation.

“I wish I didn’t.” Gekkogahara finally answered. “Is that why you came to me?”

“Partly, but my request is even more…personal.”

“I’m all rabbit ears!”

Rabbit confirmed. There was one mystery solved.

“I may need to re-evaluate myself.” Kyoko said, hesitantly.

“…I didn’t think you were the kind for self-doubt.” Gekkogahara guessed smartly.

“I’m not, but some people seem to think they know me better than I know myself.” A blue-haired idol came to mind. “I’d like a second opinion to prove them wrong.”

Gekkogahara shook her head in exasperation. “I’ll do what I can. Come sit down.”

Kyoko sat across Gekkogahara, her fingers crossed on the table separating the two. A habit she’d inherited from her father.

That alone was enough to make her hate it.

“How this conversation goes hinges on whether you agree with what I’ll ask.” Kyoko said tersely. Gekkogahara was correct that she wasn’t one to doubt herself, but she also wasn’t one to ignore her own weaknesses. Right now, there was a chink in her armor.

“I’m listening.”

“The truth - regardless of how painful it might be to learn - isn’t something to run away, wouldn’t you agree?”
Chapter Summary

October 26th 20XX

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

13 Students occupied a single the classroom in the old school building. An ordinary sight one would see anywhere, but nothing short of unnatural findings were present in the face of several key details. First, they were Ultimates of Hope's Peak Academy, that fact alone made them extraordinary. Second, it was the first night of the new semester...indeed, it was night, at 9 pm to be exact. Students would not be permitted to lounge in classrooms. Yet, the classroom itself formed the third oddity; a place meant for fostering the growth of youth looked like it’d been hit by a miniature storm. That wouldn't have been an inaccurate description of the disaster that occurred within those walls. However, nothing was more out of place than the students themselves. None spoke or recognized each other, they sat, slept, stood, or gazed out the windows.

They were an unproductive bunch, unfit for their position as Hope's Peak Academy's Student Council, and why they should they be anything but indolent? They had nothing left. not so much as a shadow, nor would their reflections appear on the broken mirrors in the room. Their existence itself would be seen as unnatural by anyone else...if they could be seen by anyone else.

The dead couldn't interact with the living. A fact that had driven the council to mass hysteria when they first learned of their deaths. Now, they were despondent, having resigned themselves to their fate. Worse still, is that not one of them could seek solace in their peers. Not after they had betrayed and murdered one another out of fear, envy and hatred.

Even confronting each other was meaningless.

Everything was meaningless.

They earnestly believed they would remain this way forever...until...a miracle appeared.

The door crudely slid open, and in walked a figure they'd never seen before; their curious gaze scanning the room

Half the council were drawn to the new arrival. Others didn't care, expecting nothing but disappointment like all the others who happened upon the abandoned room by chance.

"Are you...the student council?" Their most notable trait was a strand of hair shaped like a bent antenna.

The 14th person had become most unnatural of all, to be able to see them and address them.

After what felt like minutes of shock and silence, the vice-president, Kotomi Ikuta did her acted out her role for the first time in months. She aptly represented and conveyed the council's mixture of
emotions in both speech and voice. "Who are you?" Those three words had never held so much weight for the 13. It went beyond a request for an introduction, but what this person would, could do for them.

The abnormal one brimmed with fierce determination as they answered.

"Call me Naegi."

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*September 9th 20XX*

“Wow, he looks just like me.” Makoto awed at the computer screen.

“Right? I designed him that way.” Chihiro chirped, exuding pride for the A.I modeled after Naegi’s features.

Makoto and the boy – who he formerly recognized as of the opposite sex – were having lunch in the classroom.

“What can he do?” Makoto asked

“As long as I’ve got access to a system, I can perform all sorts administrative functions.” The floating head responded in Chihiro’s stead.

“This is a little weird.” Makoto laughed nervously. Hearing those words in his voice? Would take some getting used to. “Just don’t hack into any dangerous places wearing my face, okay?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” The A.I said.

Wouldn’t, huh? Then he hypothetically could?

“I’m still working out the bugs with him. It’ll be a while before he’s ready for the Turing test.” Chihiro interjected, he’d once described the exam as an evaluation of Alter Ego’s ability to fluently read human thought processes and emotions.

“Alter Ego needs improvement when it comes to human interaction…which is why I wanted to ask if you could…babysit him for a bit.”

The luckster hummed in thought. “You couldn’t do it yourself?”

“I programmed him with your personality in mind, so it’d be easier for him to learn directly from you.”

“He’s really…happy.” Makoto mused. The face on the laptop screen glowed with mirth. It was the kind of smile that people would playfully say could bring world peace.

“At least I got that part down right.” Chihiro said closing the pc.

…
“So what do I need to do here, exactly?”

“Just talk to him or leave the PC on and let him observe you. If I didn’t screw up royally in his coding, he’ll learn like regular humans do.”

What the heck… “Amazing. Technology’s really something… or you are.” He sneakily hugged the shorter boy from behind and spun him around. “Ahaha.”

S-Stop it.” Chihiro pleaded, embarrassed. He wobbled when Makoto let him down, steadying himself on the desk.

“I’m serious. You’re my favorite, Chi.” Makoto stepped to the computer, his fingers drifting on the cover’s surface.

“…R-Really?”

“You don’t believe me?” He joked.

“…Even more than Ikusaba-san?”

Makoto gave the other boy a confused look, failing to see the reason behind the sudden comparison “What about her?”

“…Never mind.”

“Hm?” Ignoring Chihiro for a bit, the echoes of outrage grew loud enough to be heard in the room, they were cries that would immediately bring sour the mood of all who heard them. Makoto peered outside the classroom window to see the reserve course protesting outside the main gates.

“The parades again.” Chihiro observed their cries with fear. “We’re safe here, right?” He looked to Makoto for confirmation.

“Probably.” The luckster said.

October 13th 20XX

“Alter-ego, you there?” Makoto sat facing the desk in his dorm room.

“Yeah, Makoto?” That’ll never not be weird… to hear a doppelganger reply back with his name and in his voice no less! But it might be strangely fitting considering there were so many ways Alter ego could be of use.

For example, with a certain brainwashing video. A footage of arbitrary events that had been tampered with and layered with techniques to control the mind. Courtesy of The Ultimate Animator.

Makoto wondered if Chihiro loaning his digital clone was a sign; the timing had been so perfect.
Peko had lived up to her promise of providing him with a footage of the brainwashing clip that Kuzuryu was in possession of.

Junko Enoshima used the brainwashing video to break the last vestiges of Class 77’s sanity and make them fanatical with despair – is what he’d learned from Mahiru and Peko. The former of whom was currently not on speaking terms with him…and made sure to keep her distance whenever he walked by.

Makoto sighed. Though he couldn’t fathom the logistics behind seeking out pain, he decided to believe the swordswoman, seeing as she had no reason to lie.

Unfortunately, Makoto himself did not know the very first thing about cinematics…and could do nothing with the video…until now.

“What’s the progress on the brainwashing video?” He asked.

“I’ve decoded it and…haha, it’s not really brainwashing.” The A.I replied.

“That’s not what I heard.” Makoto said, Puzzled.

“In layman terms, it’s similar to how teachers ‘brainwash’ students with education. At the core, it’s not really mind control or anything that strong. The techniques stimulate the brain, nudging the viewer’s thoughts and emotions in a certain direction. Like how putting on fitting designer clothing raises the wearer’s attractiveness.”

…I see. Less brainwashing and more suggestion.

“Could you play it for me?” He asked.

“The video? It’s very graphic so I’ll put on filters.”

“Ah, don’t bother yourself with the small stuff. Just give me the original version. I want to confirm something.” If Alter Ego was correct, the brainwashing shouldn’t be strong enough to affect him.

“I don’t advise this.” The program shut him down.

Chihiro asked him to educate Alter Ego, so why not give the A.I a lesson?

“I get you’re being obstinate for my sake, but…uh, you like learning don’t you?”

“Umu! It’s been a pleasure having you as my teacher, Naegi.”

“Ditto. But I can only teach you because there are things I know that you don’t…and that’s very little already.” Alter ego was magnitudes more intelligent than himself. It’d be a waste if the A.I hindered its potential. “The information you’re hiding from me could be useful in the future and being ignorant of it might have even worse consequences.”

If Makoto allowed himself to be scared off trivialities like corpses, he’d never get anything done. He only got this far because he took risks to learn everything he could about his surroundings. “I guess, the general principle is that you’ll have firewalls in your way at one point or another…but if there’s something you really want, you’ve got to take heart and break them down. You’ll lose, otherwise.”

The humanlike program gave him a confused look. “I’ll lose? Is there a competition?”

Makoto laughed “Okay, first thing you’ve got to remember, even if you forget everything else.
There’s always competition. If you want something, you might have it swiped from under you if you’re not proactive.” Even now, Makoto was in a competition of sorts with his fellow students. One he needed to win.

“Competition is…good then!” Alter ego said in awe.

Makoto blinked. What’s with the abrupt rise in excitement? “What gave you that idea? Competition means adversity. It’s a bad thing, other me.”

“Then…why are you smiling?”

Makoto let out a surprised noise… “Hey, I smile a lot. Your dad even said so.”

“That’s true…but we’ve been acquainted for 34 days and I’ve been watching you. Your lips were more…relaxed than usual.”

Relaxed…spin those words around and “Are you saying I’ve been forcing myself?”

“I…didn’t mean it like that.” Alter ego panicked, assuming he’d insulted his caretaker.

“You don’t need to hold back for my sake. I don’t mind at all.” Makoto smiled. “In fact you should always speak your mind. You won’t be heard otherwise, and you might say something others need to hear.”

“I…see. I’ll take that into consideration, Naegi-san.”

“Good. Now…about the video.”

“Okay, I’ll play the video now, but…are you sure?” Alter ego asked slowly.

Makoto nodded.

With his permission, the disembodied head was replaced by a replay device that showed footage of…quite a gruesome incident. Fresh too.

It was the student council killing game. A horrific display that lasted only 15 minutes. It began with Mukuro shooting the assertive vice-president (Makoto frowned at this)…after that, all hell broke loose, and friends quickly turned on each other.

Oh, there was Izuru…right on camera. “He’d fit right in a Friday the 13th movie if he emoted a bit more.” Makoto giggled. Just then, one of the students approached the Ultimate Hope was a chainsaw.

It did not end well.

“Huh…so it was self-defense.” Makoto frowned as the student’s face developed an intimate relationship with the deadly weapon.

“How do you feel?” Alter ego came back online.

“Bummed out.” Makoto’s expression was a mix of pity, disgust and disappointment. That tragedy was completely avoidable. The council president made the right call by telling everyone to remain calm and work together. Points deducted because he wasn’t assertive enough in his role.

But even disregarding the overreaction from the others, Makoto struggled to discern the point of all
of that bloodshed.

What did Junko gain from it?

“Is…that all?” Alter Ego asked

“Yeah, should there be more?”

“N-No, I wanted to test my analysis and I was correct. This ‘brainwashing’ is more like strong subliminal advertising.”

“That’s…weak.” And confusing. It meant that Junko didn’t brainwash his upperclassmen and call it a day. They first needed to like despair, of their own will.

“I…think you’re the incredible one, Naegi.”

“In what way?”

“The brainwashing is strong if you’re inclined to the content; you would already need to be in a dangerous state of mind for it to have major results. On the flip side, if you were averse to the material, you’d experience considerable revulsion and disorientation thanks to the dissonance between your emotions and what the brainwashing is trying to make you feel.”

“I think I’m following but…what are you getting at? Should I be sick or something?”

“Well…it’s just that the content of the video itself also affects the severity of the hypnosis. I um…thought you might experience some powerful negative reactions from watching the k-k-killing unfiltered.”

Makoto gave the ego’s words a bit of thought. Junko had shown him the brainwashing video - a different one – in the past and, it wasn’t nearly this gruesome. The council murders were being used to elicit a stronger effect.

If that’s the case…why didn’t he feel anything?

He pondered that inquiry for a moment…and stopped when he got bored. Introspection never got him anywhere.

“Alter ego, you can reverse the brainwashing by now, right?” He inquired.

“Yes. I can negate its effects immediately. You need to prepare a neutral video and use it on someone under the brainwashing and I can return them to normal.”

To normal. “No…make it stronger than that.” He said. “If this video makes people go crazy with despair, couldn’t we polarize it in the opposite direction and make people feel….hope?”

“Yes, in theory, but…your request will take a few days.”

“That’s fine. Just tell me when you’re ready…Oh one more thing. If Chihiro ever asks for a debriefing of what we’ve been up to…don’t mention anything about the brainwashing video. Lie if you have to.”

“Alright.”

Makoto showed him a cheesy smile, shut the laptop and placed it into his bag, pleased with the report. He’d give Junko a hug if he didn’t think she’d poke his eyes out with nails.
“I’m beat!” Makoto whined as the sun set. He roamed the halls after an intense study session, combined with playing around with Chihiro and Ryoko. He was exhausted…but at least he wouldn’t have to worry about the upcoming practical exams thanks to Chihiro’s tutelage.

“I’ve got great friends.”

Who was he referring to? Nobody in particular. He considered every single living person on the planet his friend, whether they reciprocated or not.

And nobody failed to reciprocate quite like the lavender-haired girl that just crossed his sights.

With a big grin, he jogged over to “Kirigiri-san!”

At this point in the school year, Makoto was sure the detective hated his guts, no clue why, but he didn’t mind either. It was preferable to be liked but having at least one person around who hated him offered additional perspective.

Simply put, Kirigiri’s brutal candor made her refreshing to be around. However, the ice queen had been MIA from classes for an extended period. That’s why he bothered her with his presence whenever they met to make up for lost time! And as he hadn’t seen Kirigiri since her birthday, he was going to do exactly that.

Sadly, it didn’t last too long before they were…violently interrupted. As Kirigiri found out when Isshiki Madarai(s) rendered her unconscious. The Ultimate Bodyguard was in fact a set of octuplets, each with nigh identical features and voices. Makoto was faced with 2 of 6 brothers, the others ‘apparently’ killed.

There was no proof yet, so there was still a chance the other brothers were alive. He made a mental note to investigate that detail. If they needed rescuing, Makoto had to do something.

Neither Makoto, Kirigiri or the present Madarais could have known the other siblings had been eliminated and disposed of by Mukuro, according to Junko’s instructions.

“Talk.” Isshiki said after roughing him up a bit.

“About? It sounds like you already know everything.” Makoto let out a nervous laugh. He’d been shoved him to the ground. His skull met concrete when he fell to the floor.

The pain on the backburner of his mind, Makoto let his head fall on the side, gesturing towards his stoic friend. How hard was she hit for her to lose consciousness?

He knew little about medicine, but even he could tell she’d need to be looked at by a nurse. “Kirigiri-san’s hurt. We need to take her to the infirmary.”

One of the brothers tapped their foot onto the back of his head, pressing down painfully slowly.
“What is this Samaritan act? We won’t be suckered in by one of the villains behind the tragedy.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you that you’ve got the wrong guy. I just know about the murders because Izuru told me.” His speech was greatly hampered thanks to his face practically kissing the floor. Said Ultimate Hope was also responsible for his current predicament, most likely.

‘Is Izuru trying to kill me?’ He genuinely questioned the possibility and his estimates were about 50/50.

“And how is it that you know of him? We have done extensive research and the name Izuru Kamukura does not exist inside the school. Why would an ordinary student like yourself be in contact with him.” The other continued. They were doing this act where they pick off each other’s lines, like they all shared one brain.

It was a little…cool.

“Oh. There’s actually a good explanation. See, long story short—“ He was cut off by the pain of Madarai pressing more weight onto his skull

“Now now, let’s not say too much, too fast. We need to savor the moment.”

Bullying. This is bullying!

“Go on…” He let up, giving Makoto room to breathe

“Are you…going to hurt me if I keep talking?” The luckster winced, feeling strong déjà vu vibes.

“Who knows? I definitely will hurt you if you don’t.”

Very unreasonable. “Izuru is the school’s secret experiment. They took a reserve course student and poured all their talent research data into his body. They’ve lost control of him though.”

“The school? They’re responsible?”

“Every talent? That…would explain why we haven’t been able to find him despite constant searching.”

“Or maybe it was fortunate we haven’t encountered him.”

“What about Junko Enoshima?”

They chatted amongst each other, disturbed by the new piece of information. The man finally got off Makoto. The spiky-haired boy took the hint and scrambled onto his feet.

“She’s my classmate and…that’s pretty much it. We’ve talked a few times, but I never learned enough to tell what she was like. Ignoring the mindgames she plays with me, anyway.” He scratched his cheek.

“Spit out everything you know, including their weaknesses.”

“We’re aware that Junko Enoshima is suffering…memory loss. Conveniently timed for us…but we cannot touch her so long as Mukuro Ikusaba is on constant watch.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” Makoto muttered. “Scratch that. What makes you think I’d even know their weaknesses?”
“You’re at the center of it all.” The one who’d decided to use his body as a footstool remarked. “Kamukura, Ikusaba and Enoshima. Even if these three were not linked through each other, they all associate with you.”

Huh…when he put it that way, I’m a very suspicious guy.

“Don’t you know I’m the Ultimate Lucky Student? Coincidences happen to me all the time.” Makoto said in his defense.

He was knocked back to the floor from a blow to the face. The force was enough to cause bleeding…but his teeth were fine, thankfully.

How did he get himself into these messes? “You can hit me as much as you want – and don’t take that as an invitation! – but do you really think an average guy like me knows how to take down walking talent and someone who orchestrated a massacre right under the school’s nose?”

“How did you come to learn of Kamukura?”

Makoto frowned “Didn’t I just explain that?”

“Only that you knew he was an experiment…not how? If you are as ordinary as you claim, how did you happen upon that secret?”

“Isshiki-san, you’re more intelligent than I thought.” Makoto said, instilling confusing the man “With that kind of insight, your numbers and talent…I wonder why Nisshiki said you couldn’t remake the council by yourself.”

….The brothers were left in a momentary state of surprise.

“How did you know the Madarai you met in the laboratory was me?” The second squinted his eyes.

Disregarding the 6 brothers Isshiki mentioned by name…“That punch you just threw should have hurt a lot more seeing from how you tossed Kirigiri earlier. You even recoiled just before you finished. You’re still injured there aren’t you?” He thought it was a bit unlikely for him to recover so easily from the severe beatdown the soldier gave him. Then that would make the first brother in front of him… “I’m guessing Isshiki’s the one Ryoko dropped the shelf on.” It would explain why he decided not to join in on the beating, despite how bloodthirsty these guys are. He must still be recovering.

Not like he had any right to talk when he was hurting all over. The brothers had become slightly withdrawn, not even attacking him for the sudden assertiveness. Might as well take this wind before they recover and start beating on him again.

“Fine, I admit it. They do have weaknesses, but I’m not telling you.” He was working on them. “Instead…I want to make a deal with you.”

The unison between the brothers finally showed a crack. Before, they coordinated their movement and speeches as if rehearsed prematurely, but now, they were actively looking towards each other for confirmation on what to do.

“…That depends on what you have to say.”

“What I have to say depends on what you want. Is it avenging the council, or are you just looking for self-satisfaction? If it’s the latter, then I understand perfectly. Your end goal doesn’t matter if
you enjoy yourself in the process. That explains why you’ve been happily assaulting me.” Makoto beamed. “If that IS what you want, then go right ahead and vent your frustration out on me. It’s not like I’ll die or anything.”

The Madarais remained silent, questioning the words that had come out of the boy’s mouth. “Nisshiki, I told you to hold back. He’s no good if you’ve given him brain damage.”

“I restrained myself appropriately.” The more violent brother replied.

“I have all my mental faculties working, thanks.” Makoto pouted at the rudeness. “Glad to know I was on the money. You don’t have what it takes to kill me.”

“Are you mocking us?”

“I’m not, because your conviction isn’t about murder right? I kind of figured it out back in the lab.” Makoto pointed to Nisshiki “Your hands were shaking when you threatened Ryoko.” Despite his boasts, Madarai wasn’t a killer, not yet. “But you know what I think, the council itself is about… 40% of the reason you’re doing all this.”

The only reason Makoto didn’t have a face full of fist right now was only due to Madarai’s anger being offset by unease.

“You can’t remake the council, you’re a bodyguard. Not only that, but you kept going on about being disgraced and having your talent trampled on.” The luckster shook his head. “Hey, is it just me, or are you a little too bothered about not participating in that killing game?” Makoto crossed his arms. “I get it, I really do. Talent is everything to some people, even more important than their own lives.” Or maybe it’s more accurate to say, their talent is their life. “You’re capable guys and I’m sure you’ve trained a lot to get this far. Which is why it’s too painful that you never got to put that effort into practice, right?” Judging from their reaction, he hit a bullseye.

“The Ultimate Bodyguard. That’s the only reason we were selected for the council and Junko Enoshima denied that existence. We will not forgive her.” Nisshiki said.

If that’s how they really felt… “Then help me. I’ll give you satisfaction you’ve been looking for. You’ve assumed I’m allied with Junko and Izuru, and that’s plain not true. Actually, it might good we met like this, because you see, those two are seriously problematic. They’re not helping themselves with all the trouble they’ve been getting into.” He smiled. “Ah, and if you help me I’ll have your expulsion rescinded, then I’ll re-instate the student council. We both win.”

“You expect us to believe a mere ‘average’ student like yourself can accomplish this?” Isshiki said mockingly.

Oh, so now I’m average. These guys… “Just hang around me for a little while, and you’re bound to see for yourselves. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

If they could still think rationally, they wouldn’t reject his offer. Makoto wouldn’t tell them what they wanted to know. If he told the Madarais about Junko and Izuru’s vulnerabilities, they would definitely make a mess of things and get in the way of his plan.

No, it was better if everything was solved cleanly and peacefully. An outcome where nobody gets hurt was his ideal.

“An interesting proposition.” Madarai only had to gain from a partnership….which is why their decision was all the more baffling.
"I refuse!"

The 2 brothers said in unison. Their self-assured tones told him there was a reason, but…

“…What?” Makoto tilted his head. “Don’t you believe me?”

“Belief is not even a factor.”

“Not giving me a reason here.” Makoto said.

“Self-satisfaction was it? I’ll admit to that, but we aren’t so twisted to dictate every aspect of our life by following our desires.” Said Madarai #1

“The first rule in our profession, is to remain loyal to one client. What kind of bodyguard wags their tails for another boss while still mourning the ones we failed to protect? That’s inhumane.” Followed by #2.

“If you knew the meaning of the word respect, you would have phrased your terms in a different way.”

“In sum, what we mean to say, is that you lack any semblance of pride or respect. We’ll not ally with a villain like you.”

Makoto twitched.

“Pride?” This again? Why does any of that matter when they could get results? “No deal?”

Makoto asked cautiously.

“No deal.” They flashed malicious grins, but before any could make a move on him, they were frozen in place by the ring of his cellphone. Makoto procured the smartphone from his pockets, his attention never fully leaving the brothers.

He faced the screen towards them. The caller ID revealed Mukuro’s name.

“Do not answer it.” One ordered.

“Sure. I’ll just shut it off.” He pressed down on one of the side buttons, and suddenly, a blinding flash of light emanated from the screen.

“So I think we got off on the wrong foot a little here, so let’s try again.” Makoto said as the Madarais stared intently at the phone, their eyes glazing over with pure white. “I didn’t lay a finger on the council and I am not working with Junko or Izuru. I’m just a guy trying to lend a helping hand to everyone I meet. Just making daily life brighter for everyone, is enough…but I can’t do it alone. That’s why I need the help of my friends, and that includes you two. So…you’ll protect me and my friends, won’t you?” He asked, sweetly. A request that was no less an order they couldn’t disobey.

“Of course.” The Ultimate Bodyguard answered without hesitation.

“Thanks.” Makoto’s arms slumped. If he was tired before…then he was on his last legs at this point. “I’ll have to take Kirigiri-san to the nurse. You can go now.”

They dispersed almost immediately…the only trace of their presence were his injuries.

Speaking of which…
“80% complete and the hope video is that effective?” Makoto said to himself, walking over towards Kirigiri. He brushed a strand of her over her face and felt her stir uncomfortably.

She was cute when not glaring at him.

The luckster carried the detective onto his back. A troublesome task given the injuries he’d sustained. But it could have been much worse. With a huff, he traveled down the hallway.

For the most part, he could have called that skirmish a victory. Only a few bruises here and there, but on the flipside, he’d acquired a strong ally…and more importantly, tested out the video and it worked well enough.

But he wasn’t happy. He can’t remember the last time he ever felt happy. Alter Ego was right implying that.

This time however, was directly related to the way the Madarai brothers admonished him. They made him feel lesser, like he was missing something fundamental as a person.

Makoto shook his head. ‘Nope. None of that junk matters.’

The important part was that the brainwashing worked. Although he’d feel a lot better not resorting to it. Seeing how easily Madarai broke down to it, coupled with how Alter Ego explained the brainwashing’s mechanics…meant the bodyguard was a good person at the core. The hope video wouldn’t have worked otherwise.

Which made it all the more disappointing that he couldn’t convince the duo with words

“I wonder what Mukuro wanted.” He reached for his cellphone, pushing back the pessimistic thoughts that plagued him.

Brainwashing was efficient…but is it truly happiness when you’re forced to feel that way against your will?

No, the video was a tool at best. His ideal necessitate permanence and natural solution.

After a tiresome night, Makoto was fully ready to let his other self handle the rest, but Kirigiri inadvertently had other plans

As an alternative, we should go see Gekkogahara instead.”

That single sentence forced him to the surface. He was overcome with an odd sensation, just like he had when Yasuke Matsuda had abruptly brought up the therapist months ago. Was it because Gekkogahara served as a reminder of the most horrifying period of his life? He didn’t know, but Kirigiri was adamant they pay the green-haired senior a visit.

Combined with the detective’s injuries, he really couldn’t refuse. If that’s what Kirigiri wanted, he’d go along for the ride.

Yet even that, wasn’t enough to satisfy his classmate, who returned his compromise with scorn. Even for Kirigiri-san, she was being unusually cruel and unaccommodating.
“What is it about me you hate?” He’d asked.

She called him insincere, a hypocrite who never considered the feelings of those he environed. Not even his family’s.

It wasn’t the first instance he heard that criticism; Izuru practically made ‘hypocrite’ his favorite word when Makoto was involved. Even Sayaka said it from time to time. But Makoto didn’t understand. Why did sincerity matter?

Don’t get him wrong. Makoto valued honesty and it came easy to him, but the truth didn’t always make people happy. All too often, people rejected the truth out of convenience. Makoto knew that truth better than anyone. His insistence on being genuine about his curse had nearly driven him insane.

As far as Makoto was concerned, it was just as important to know when to lie, as it was to tell the truth. And fortunately for the luckster, lying was just as easy.

“Your family or even friends…did you once consider how they would feel to know about the extremes you put yourself through?”

Indeed, he hadn’t given his family one thought in months.

He reached on his phone, contemplating calling his little sister. And like the world itself wanted to warn him about what a bad idea that was, his phone’s batteries looked to have died sometime earlier.

“Lucky me.” He whispered, at least grateful that he’d texted Mukuro earlier about a rendezvous.

On a more relevant point. He’d rarely spoken to Komaru since the start of the school year…and he made a habit of ignoring her calls. He overlooked his family whenever he could and put up a mask in front of them when he couldn’t.

Makoto had never quite forgiven them for sending him to the asylum. I mean…what parents do that?

“W-Why are you shaking? D-Did I hurt you somewhere?” Mikan Tsumiki squealed, catering to his wounds. According to Peko…this was one of Junko’s Ultimate Despair members. He’d never have guessed with how nice she was. He’d love to talk with her, but he could barely keep himself awake.

“…Sorry.” He mumbled. Thinking back, Kirigiri’d heard Madarai call him one of the instigators behind the council murders and he hadn’t strongly denied that assumption. It’s not surprising she’d be pissed off and snap at him.

And the mention of Gekkogahara was probably an accident. It’s not like Kirigiri would know about his relationship with the therapist.

“Alright. I’ll wait for her to calm down, then smooth things out with a nice, long chat.” He planned.

“Naegi-san…y-you’re talking to yourself.” Mikan said, wide-eyed.

“…Sorry. I’ll keep quiet.” He blushed, hoping the nurse didn’t think he’d suffered brain trauma like Madarai had.
In short, Kirigiri’s criticism had not reached him.

As he thought, introspection was a waste of time.

After thanking Mikan, he’d left the infirmary to meet Mukuro. The soldier was a big help, all but volunteering to help him scope out the amusement park for his outing with Chiaki. That good bit of news was a silver lining to an altogether bad day that was thankfully over.

By some miracle, Naegi managed to return to his dorm-room. He charged his phone, setting it at the top of his desk. His eyes drifted to the medicine next to the device. Insomnia, a highly addictive narcotic, but ultimately necessary. He wouldn’t sleep otherwise and would probably already have been crippled from sleep deprivation. The drug was supposedly meant to cause dysfunction in the brain over prolonged use…but he had never suffered any abnormalities in several years.

Thankfully, Makoto may even be outgrowing the need for the medicine. Recently, (much like right now), Makoto had nights where he reached the point of exhaustion even without the need for his medication; likely due to all the running around he was doing and the many new additions to his social life.

It was tiring managing them all at once.

Naegi plopped onto his bed and pulled his covers up. His fading thoughts trailed off at a single, insignificant comment he’d made when speaking with Kirigiri. Before Madarai’s interruption.

“I-I could have outrun them…if I wanted to. I was the star of my elementary school’s track team, you know.”

There were a number of lies he could have told to escape Kirigiri’s inquiries, but he’d chosen that insignificant truth. Why would Kirigiri care about what happened that far back? Why would he care?

…

“Competition…huh?” He recalled Alter Ego’s words.

…Then closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

No better way to end the prologue than with a riddle

Next chapter: "Who was Hajime Hinata?"
Chapter Summary

October 30th 20XX

Izuru Kamukura is a monster of logic - That is to say that he did nothing without reason, not unlike the other players on the board. However, you could say he took his obsession with logic a step farther, like a machine striving to decode and understand everything around him, no matter the cost. Or rather, he should have been born understanding everything, but 2 important concepts were missing in his programming and he wanted to correct the error.

The irony here is that if he did that, he'd just end being bored again. Or maybe he doesn't care? Regardless, he's a peculiar guy...and tough to deal with too. I might've been in a bind if Chiaki wasn't here to lend a hand. Lucky me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hajime Hinata was 8 years old when he learned that talent was everything. In this regard - much like all others – he was hardly exceptional. Talent was worshiped by the nation, his parents included. Even if he wasn't born with talent, perhaps he could still acquire it.

The reserve course was a newly instated department in the prestigious Hope’s Peak Academy. Even normal people could get into the school for a large sum. It was the opportunity of a life-time. Being surrounded by the nation’s best and acclaimed researchers of talent could only work in his favor.

Hajime carried that hope in his heart when he applied to HPA, using his parents’ hard-earned money. He received no shortage of criticism from his peers for that choice, but who cared for the jealousy of talentless fodder who never even attempted to scale the mountain of mediocrity.

That choice came with setbacks. Who was he to know that the reserve course was segregated from the main course? There was an unspoken rule that it was a waste of time for the two groups to interact. Reserve course students waited for openings in the main course to be granted entrance, while the latter category saw them as parasites. The teachers were no exception, scorn and dissatisfaction were rarely removed from their disposition. The classroom atmosphere was stifling.

But there was a silver lining at the end of that dark tunnel. Hajime had been scouted for an operation called the Hope cultivation program. They could artificially give him talent. It was like a dream come true, and after having his hopes dashed once, he was skeptical. Cynical even. What made him special enough to become a candidate? Did he have some hidden talent nobody knew about?

“If you had a shred of potential, you’d be worthless.” A gruff, sharp-tongued man said. He was in the same grade as Hajime, but from his disposition, was far more accomplished. “It’s the other way around. You’re so devoid of standout characteristics that you’re perfect for the role. Congratulations, guinea-pig.”
“Guinea pig?” Hajime gawked at the backhanded comment.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what ‘they’ see you as. You should probably give this a lot more thought before you accept. It might not end up as you expect.” He gave Hajime a knowing look, before shrugging. “But what do I know? I’m just the Ultimate Neurologist.”

It was odd. Despite being given this chance of a lifetime, he had a feeling that others averse to him taking it – none of which were his parents, ironically - though they never directly stated so.

Take for example, the former headmaster of the academy who subtly conveyed to Hajime that there was nothing improper about being normal.

Or from Chiaki Nanami, who had been his only friend in the whole school at the time. The Ultimate gamer was like a culmination of everything nice and fluffy in the world, all kept in one stacked body. He never understood why Chiaki paid him the slightest bit of attention.

“You’re fun to be around with. Isn’t that enough?” is what she said. Even after explaining, it still hadn’t made sense. The only thing remotely interesting about him was his richboy status, and she didn’t even know about that. He’d given her the hints, that there was a way for him to gain talent, but she maintained her stance, saying she liked him just the way he was.

He was satisfied by that strange, unnatural acceptance.

That is, until Natsumi Kuzuryu’s murder. The crass but excitable student who joined later in the term, parading around the school with the open intention of stealing a spot in the main course. She was found dead nearby the music room. Hajime had interacted with Natsumi enough to feel the impact of her passing, but it seemed few others shared that sentiment.

And it wasn’t just that Natsumi was hated, but the students and teachers simply didn’t speak of her at all. Usually when murders occurred nearby, it becomes central gossip, but he heard nothing like that. As if the girl’s very existence in the school was being systematically erased. There weren’t even updates on the killer’s status!

He ran to the main course to discover exactly what the hell happened.

He didn’t even make it past the main gates. Juzo Sakakura, the head of campus security, made sure of that and – in all his benevolence – gave Hajime a very hands-on lesson.

That confrontation smacked the reserve courser right back into reality.

Talent was everything. If you didn’t have talent, you were nobody.

He wanted to become somebody.

He chose to become Izuru Kamukura.

Izuru Kamukura was .04 seconds old when he learned talent was boring. As was essentially everything else, but the fixation on talent was especially noxious. His teachers devoted all their efforts to cultivating him, simply because they could not reach the plateau he now stood otherwise. They said their actions were to benefit humanity. But he did not care one bit about humanity, much
less feeling a desire to lift a finger for them. Does that not make me the very crystallization of their failure?

No matter, they would learn of their folly either way when all was said and done. Izuru stalked the familiar halls of the reserve course building, pulling a large cart in front. It was time for a major play, courtesy of both Enoshima’s aid and absence. Izuru shifted at the memory, when the opportunity first presented itself.

“**Izzy-baby, nice to see you finally leaving your room!**”

“What business do you have with me, Enoshima?”

“**Could at least play along.**” The manipulative woman hung by his shoulder, filling his nostrils with toxic perfume. Izuru hadn’t seen Enoshima in weeks. He wished it had remained that way. “**But that directness is cute too. I’m going to be MIA for the next little while.**”

Now this was unexpected. “**Have you given up on your takeover of the school?**” Right after orchestrating the killing game…he doubted it. However, this girl’s nature was fickle like none other.

“Nope. Just working on a little kink with my boyfriend, you know him don’t ya?”

He didn’t dignify that with a response.

“He’s going to erase my memory!” She spoke like a child experiencing their first Christmas. “It’ll be like we’re meeting again for the first time, isn’t that romantic?”

It was foolish to ask, but he did anyway. “Why place yourself in that vulnerable position?”

“**Just planning ahead. Memory loss would be great for the next killing game I have in mind. No better way to test its success than on myself.**”

Was that all?

He didn’t normally question himself like this, there was never reason too. Except whenever Enoshima and Naegi entered the equation. He needed to prod for more information using sources he did understand. “You do not believe Matsuda might betray you?”

“**Honey, I know he will.**”

“…**I see, you anticipate exactly that. Meaning this is yet another gambit borne of despair.**”

“**Busted! Yasuke’s been so good to me, but I’ve gotten a little tired of buttering him up soooo…time to cash in on the juicy despair I’ve been fattening up for the past 13 years!**”

She was insane. Yasuke Matsuda was an invaluable ally, not solely for his exceptional talent – which the school feared to part with – but for his fixation on Enoshima herself.

Destroying him for the sake of a temporary high was counter intuitive. And that was the end goal, the process of erasing her own memory to do so, was even more foolish.

…”

Regardless, this could work in his favor. It was abundantly clear that Enoshima had been granted too strong a hand early-on in this game, that is why she could make careless decisions time and again. The scales needed to be tipped in the other direction, to match her budding rival, Naegi.
Izuru made it a light hobby to compare the two deviants in his mind, having so little else to do. Enoshima conveyed a fatalistic amount of care in the detail of her plans. She once said that despair cannot be exist without hope. Therefore, to attain the height of despair, she was paradoxically forced to cultivate hope. Her relationship with Yasuке Matsuda had been the prime example. The affection she gave the neurologist for over a decade had been no more than a means to an end.

On the other side of the scale was Naegi, who did not care one single bit about the methods, so long as it did not oppose his stance against violence. He would lie, cheat and manipulate others, thinking only of the end result. Despite that directness, he was no easier to predict than Enoshima. The reason? His luck. Recurring, unpredictable happenstances that Izuru couldn’t predict. To make matters worse, they provided Naegi with opportunity. Odds that may be non-existent to others would present itself in front of Naegi…and he would grab that chance without hesitation every single time. Combine the Ultimate Luck with Naegi’s ruthlessness, one could say that as long as the boy’s will went unbroken, he was altogether invincible.

If Enoshima was Despair, would Naegi be hope? Izuru didn't know-

Error - Lapse in information. Must rectify.

Even if Naegi wasn't hope, he was an incomprehensible extreme on the other side of the spectrum. Thus, he was close enough.

Izuru wished to compare luck and despair and have them war against one another, on terms he saw fit. He would drive them to the extremes to squeeze out every ounce of their potential for him to assimilate. To nobody’s surprise, Enoshima had done a fine job of backing herself into a corner with barely any ‘assistance’ on his part. He had merely interrupted her scheme and had Matsuda spared. His motivation? To observe how Ryoko Otonashi would act outside of the closed circuit Enoshima had prepared using her analysis. Even if Enoshima were to return the very next second, her foothold has crumbled. Most of her Ultimate Despair had either been converted or been rendered impotent without her benefaction.

Dealing with Naegi required much more interference. Izuru both tested his progress by manipulating Isshiki Madarai into hunting him and his companions down. Providing that the bodyguard failed to be enough of a challenge, Izuru had a contingency to shake things up more.

And he would begin here.

The Ultimate Hope opened the passage into a ‘secret society’. Or at least that is what these lowly dregs called themselves. They were reserve course students who were dissatisfied with the academy’s discrimination towards the mundane. It went without saying that Izuru found them boring and stupid. “I am the one who scheduled this meeting.” Izuru took his place in front of a room large enough to hold several dozens worth of students. Behind the Ultimate Hope, was a large projector, one of the reasons he'd sought out this particular location.

The crowd quieted down in confusion upon noticing his form. “You lot have been seen frequently protesting at the gates and have been even more violent than the norm.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is unimportant, but I can tell you who I used to be. None of you but I remember some of your faces well. Even if it was only for a few months, we were classmates.”

One of them appeared to recognize him “That voice…are you Hinata?”
“I was Hajime Hinata, yes.” The meaning was completely lost on them, but now he had their complete attention. By affiliating himself with one of ‘their comrades’, his words now held more sway.

“Dude, what the hell happened to you?”

“I was offered a way to gain talent by the school board.”

“How?” An inquiry…but what he truly meant was ‘how can I attain it as well?’. This is why he hated fools. Instead of responding to the question, Izuru hand slid up his scalp, folding the lock of hair backward. Horrified gasps filled the room and soon reduced it to silence.

“I strongly dissuade any notions of following the path Hinata took, for this is the end result.” Izuru let his hair fall down, his eyes shifting between the frightened boys “To clarify, I am not Hajime Hinata. For talent to be stored in this body, they needed to reset the body’s personality to zero. He was promised talent but was used as an experiment by the academy and eliminated. That was the caveat the academy failed to mention. To put in another word, you would die.”

"So it's true. The school really did spend our money on human experiments!"

Izuru was faintly surprised to learn rumors of his origins had spread this far. Courtesy of Enoshima, no doubt.

“What the fuck!?” Their shock quickly turned to anger. Not for Hajime, of course not. Why care about a stranger? Someone that worthless?

No, their spurn was inherently selfish. They projected themselves as a hivemind. Hurt one, hurt them all. Despite not particularly caring about the one who’d been accosted. The irony was too mind-numbing for words. If Izuru had his way, stupidity like this would be quarantined and euthanized.

“I called this meeting to ask…why have you done nothing after all the indignation you’ve suffered at the hands of the academy?”

“Are you been living under a rock? We march down there every single day.”

“And do nothing. There are only a handful of security…but you lack the will to take that extra step and seize retribution.” Izuru set the laptop on the desk and flipped it open facing them.

“I am here to remove those inhibitions.” Said a digital copy of Izuru’s face appeared on the screen and the projector. It was his Alter Ego. Every single student was then subject to a vivid red light as the student council’s killing game played. By the time the clip finished, the reserve coursers were like drones - their irises replaced by red swirls.

The light died moments later, and the laptop promptly switched off.

Now, let us begin the show.

Izuru had no more reason to speak. Alter ego did the talking for him. “Tomorrow at the end of the school bell, you will break down the main gates and siege the main course. Feel free to take your revenge on whoever crosses your sights...however, your main targets are…” The projector showed multiple rows containing the images of Ryoko Otonashi, Makoto Naegi, Yasuke Matsuda, Kyoko Kirigiri, Chihiro Fujisaki, Sayaka Maizono, Mukuro Ikusaba, Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu, Peko Pekoyama.
and Kiyotaka Ishimaru. “Torture or maim them slowly if you wish, but **these targets are the only ones deserving of your full anger, and they must die.** Make use of these helmets to hide your identities.”

The cart lodged Monokuma designed head gear. An artistic flare Enoshima was taken with, for reasons he could not begin to understand. Still, it would set the atmosphere for the upset to come.

“**Tis the season.**”

The reserve coursers moved one by one, putting on the helmets.

Enoshima would have taken great pleasure in the irony of her own devices being used against her.

His work finished. Izuru took the laptop and left without further fanfare. His plan was already set in motion. He didn’t care for most of the ones on that list barring the effects their deaths would leave on the two subjects of interest.

Although, it’s entirely possible that Naegi and Enoshima may be killed in the process. Izuru didn’t mind that outcome, it would just mean that was as far as the Ultimate Despair and Lucky Student could go. He needn't expend any more effort and time.

…He looked to tomorrow with rare anticipation.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter:

The Tragedy of Hope’s Peak begins.
December 24th 20XX.
11:50 PM

“So bothersome.” One Byakuya Togami remarked, after expending much of his energy this day. Even his leg was heavier than usual. Having finally escaped the crowd but even on one of his top floors of the academy, he could still hear the noise, especially that loud singing.

Byakuya quietly lamented the weeks wasted on preparations for the Christmas gala and ordering his slaves classmates around. He was exhausted and wanted a break, so he migrated to the place most fitting for an heir to relax.

The headmaster’s office, for Kirigiri was elsewhere and there was no other room that exuded the same atmosphere of authority in the academy. It was a mildly rare opportunity the blonde wasn’t ready to pass up.

With a smirk he opened the door and not a second later, his hopes plummeted but not quite as far down as the drop he wished Asahina, Kuwata and…the other Asahina would fall…right out the window.

He counted three, THREE cockroaches that should have been anywhere but here! And just like those disgusting cretins, he worried there were more around the corner.

With a glare, the heir spoke “Why are you here?”

“Same reason as you, I guess. I’m beat and wanted to scope out this place.” Kuwata replied, sitting in the headmaster’s chair, which Byakuya fully intended on commandeering, at least for the next hour or so. The athlete was currently writing on a baseball, held by…the younger Asahina whose name currently escaped him. Regardless, the boy was getting an autograph signed.

“I don’t like that tone, Kuwata. It sounds like you brainless lot had the good sense to snoop around here before I thought of it…and that just can’t be.” Byakuya seethed.

“Nice to see you too, Byakuya.” The swimmer said, lacking the proper manners to look his way. Her attention largely directed at…

“Are those dominoes?” Byakuya said, eyes squinting behind his glasses. Of all the unfathomable hobbies….she could have picked worse, honestly. This was Asahina after all.

“Yup, I’ve been at this for the last 2 hours. I found them in the game room, isn’t it neat.”

‘Then play with them there!’

With a huff, the affluent progeny scanned the room. Indeed, most of the area had been occupied by domino blocks, each lined immaculately across the floor in a pattern that could only be revealed after the pieces were toppled.

‘Impressive. It’d be a shame if someone tipped them over prematurely.’
Just as Byakuya motioned to take one foot, he caught something in the swimmer’s words that shouldn’t have been present. “…2 hours? Do you mean to tell me, you ditched your stall early on?”

“Hehehe.” She laughed nervously, her body still crouched in an alluring position as she tiled on the domino pieces.

“Leave my sister alone. She’s been working harder than I’ve ever seen her. Normally Aoi’d have ditched after a quarter way through.” The younger Asahina interjected.

“If I wasn’t scared of spilling these dominoes over, I’d pound you, Yuta.” Asahina glared and gave Togami a name to the face.

“It wasn’t just us either. The senpai from the above class disappeared. Even Kyoko and Mukuro bailed on us.” Kuwata said.

“That many?” Byakuya’s eyes widened a fraction. He almost pitied Naegi, but that’s what happens when a commoner with no experience tries to manage an event.

On that note, he hadn’t seen Naegi in some time either. The slackers…

“Yea…” The baseball twit finally looked his way…only stumble in his sentence. Was speaking Japanese too much for the braindead buffoon? “Du…dude. What is that on your leg?”

Kuwata’s bewildered tone spurned Asahina to do the same, and just like him, her eyes practically shot out of her head.

Byakuya followed the trail of the tanned girl’s finger to his right leg, where a pair of tiny arms were wrapped around it.

With a contemptuous sneer, he returned his gaze to the befuddled trio. “I wholly understand and pity your lack of intelligence, but surely even you lot have seen children before.”

A little girl, no older than 9, strapped herself to the heir’s leg, her large beady eyes blinking at the television screen hanging on the side of the room.

“I-Is she your sister?” Yuta asked.

“Perish the thought. I have no idea where she came from. She’s just been following me the whole time.”

“I-I…Did you look for her parents? They must be worried sick!”

“Why would I do something so tedious?”

Everyone stared at him, appalled.

“Don’t look at me like I’m some fictitious demon. I entirely planned on calling security…but since you’re here, I’ll pay ten thousand American dollars if you detach this creature from my person.”

“Unbelievable.” Asahina got off her knees and carefully stepped over the dominoes until she reached the heir. There she crouched to meet the girl.

“Um…hello, I’m Aoi. What’re you doing here?”

The girl wasn’t quick to answer, deliberating over whether she should talk to strangers, and ignoring that she had followed one, having no other choice between the Togami heir or solitude in
a dimly lit and haunted halls of the academy. Deciding that Aoi didn’t seem like a bad person...“I-I got lost in the school.” She whimpered.

“Aw, don’t worry. I’ll help you look for them.” Aoi offered her hand...but the girl shook her head, peering past the swimmer and shifting between the television and the maze of dominoes. Eventually, she settled on the TV.

On the screen was a live recording of the concert going on outside.

“I’m surprised you two aren’t at Maizono’s performance. What good friends you are.” Byakuya snickered.

“Can it, dude.” Kuwata barked.

“There wasn’t even a place to stand, we might as well have been watching by the gates with that huge turnout.” Yuta frowned, kicking at the air.

“It’s all because we had to work while everyone else got the seats. It’s not fair,” Asahina crossed her arms. Her lips formed a pout.

“Sayaka!” The girl raised her hands happily, poorly mimicking the idol’s dance.

Leon, ever being the ladies man, reached for the remote and increased the volume, much to Byakuya’s displeasure. The office was immediately filled with a melodious voice.

While Byakuya couldn’t berate the singer’s talent, the genre however, was utterly repulsive to him. There goes his quiet. On the other hand, the child had the complete opposite reaction and was practically bouncing.

“Hey, hey, you’ll tip over the dominoes!” Asahina warned, as she reached for the girl and carried her. Slowly, Asahina returned to her former position, right at the end of the string of tiles.

“I presume you made that pattern to commemorate the occasion.”

“Yup. Oh, what’s the time?”

Togami checked his golden watch “11:58.” He said, succinctly.

“Sheesh, talk about cutting it close!” Yuta sweatdropped, joining his sister. Kuwata did as well.

…Giving Byakuya the opening to maneuver around them and take his rightful seat in the office. Maybe this evening wasn’t so bad after all.

“Big sis, what are you playing?” asked the girl.

“Right before midnight, we’re going to push these dominoes down.” Hina explained. Byakuya held back the vital information that countdowns to midnight were saved for New Years Eve.

It wouldn’t surprise him if Asahina mixed the date up with Christmas Eve.

“Why knock them down after setting them all up” The child cocked her head. Byakuya watched over the hundreds of tiles strewn across the room. He didn’t really have an answer himself, so he waited on the swimmer.

“That’s a tough one.” Beaming brightly with cheer and innocence to match, Asahina’s mouth moved.
Everyone seemed to accept the energetic teen’s explanation, but Byakuya alone scoffed.

Leon and Yuta crouched besides the two girls, wide, excited grins on their faces as Aoi grabbed their diminutive guests fingers and pressed lightly against the dominoes.

‘For a reason like that.’ Byakuya mused over Asahina’s answer.

…

“What a farce.” He said, as the dominoes fell one by one.

October 31st 20XX

“What’re you doing with that cat?” Chihiro asked Ryoko. The amnesiac had invited him outside, saying it was for training. Currently, the auburn-haired girl was standing next to a kitten, who has highly distracted by a bowl of milk that Ryoko had gotten for it.

The animal probably wouldn’t stay long. Chihiro’s looked to the skies. The dark grey clouds heralded a shower of rain soon enough. Whatever they were doing here, better be quick.

“I’ll kick it while you watch.” Ryoko said with a smile.

…What!?

“Don’t do that!” Chihiro wailed.

“Why?”

“Because it’s innocent!”

“Tch tch tch.” Ryoko wagged her fingers. “Remember your training, Chi. If it has nothing to do with you, then screw its circumstances. Now stay put and watch!”

Before any further protests from the teary-eyed Chihiro, Ryoko motioned to kick the unsuspecting feline. But right before contact, she stumbled onto one vital and fatal flaw in her planning.

Ryoko liked cats.

That sudden realization led to her stopping mid-kick, the awkward pause resulting in lost balance as she fell on her back.

“A-Are you okay?” Chihiro wasn’t even granted time to check the forgetful girl’s condition before she crawled over and embraced the shocked kitten.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I should’ve gotten an ugly dog to kick insteaaaaaad.” Ryoko sobbed and rubbed her cheeks against the furry animals, rolling with it on the floor.

Chihiro’s worry quickly turned to befuddlement, and finally, amusement. “Y-You’re so weird.” He
laughed. “N-Not in a bad way, I mean.”

“Why would I be offended? Matsuda calls me worse things all the time.” She said with a bright smile.

“Hm…that’s probably true.” Chihiro wouldn’t doubt the neurologist’s tendency to curse at everything with a pulse. “I think I’ll pay him a visit later. It’s been way too long.”

“Good luck with that. He’s been down in the dumps for days.” She puffed her cheeks. “Forget him, we’re moving onto plan B. This one turned out pretty bad.”

“I’ve been thinking. Why are you helping me?”

“You’re my friend.” She said simply.

“T-Thanks for that, really. But I meant why? I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t think you care about others easily.” Again, Ryoko wondered why the boy felt she’d be offended by a simple truth. Isn’t the whole point of this montage of theirs about how she doesn’t care about irrelevant others?

“What you getting at, Chi?”

“What traits do I have that made you like me?”

“You’re cute.”

He spluttered, turning beet red. “Don’t tease me. I’m serious.”

“Boo.” Ryoko stuck out her tongue. “I’m serious too. You’re cute, so I thought you were a threat to my chances with Matsuda-kun. Oh, this was back when I thought you were a girl.”

“Me…and Yasuke? That’s terrifying!” He gave her a horrified look.

“Not as terrifying as I would be if that turned out to be case.” She deadpanned.

“…You’re joking, right?” Chihiro gulped

“…”

“Y-You don’t have to worry on that front. I only like Naegi.” He waved his hands back and forth, defensively.

Ryoko rested her chin on her palm, sporting an impassive expression. “Would I be wrong in saying that your question pertained to what traits that would make Naegi like you?”

After a moment, Chihiro nodded.

“What do you see in that guy?”

The smaller boy’s head snapped open, staring at her like she’d grown a second head. “What’s not to see in him?”

Ah, love is dangerous. He’d go on and on about the lucky student if she didn’t stop him. “He’s creepy, Chi.”

“In what way?”
“Have you ever listened to him?”

“…I don’t follow.” Chihiro said, non-plussed.

“I haven’t known him long, but he bugs me. He’s a bit too…good to be true.”

“I know right?” Chihiro beamed, completely and painfully missing the point.

“Not what I meant, Chi.” Ryoko rolled her eyes. She’d listened to and analyzed Naegi’s conversations with Ikusaba and the others. Sometimes, Naegi was a bit too…perfect. Not only nice, but he knew exactly what to say and at what time. Despite Naegi’s pretenses, he was calculating.

“I think he’s fake.” Ryoko concluded. “Guys that suspiciously nice always have hidden motives. Like just looking to score. Naegi’s a massive flirt, you know.”

“That’s not true!” Chihiro rebutted. “It might be for others, but Naegi’s different. He’s always nice to me and never asked for anything in return.”

Jeez, she didn’t want to make him cry or anything. She should stop before. “Did you know Naegi went out on a date with Nanami senpai on Saturday?”

Only the looming thunder could be heard as the two went silent. Not just from Chihiro but Ryoko as well, who looked equally as shocked as the programmer.

Ryoko had planned to at least delve more into that little detail before passing judgement or telling Chihiro.

She definitely had no intention of revealing that information at the worst possible time…quite like right now.

So… ‘Why did I say that?’

“T-That can’t be right.” Chihiro said, almost breathless. She couldn’t blame him. Naegi went on a date with Ikusaba just the previous day, after all. This would just pour oil into the wildfire.

“I might have been seeing things or maybe they were just having fun…as friends!” She made sure to clarify.

“Y-Yeah, that’s probably the reason. Both Naegi-kun and Nanami-san are very friendly after all.” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than anything else.

‘Come on Ryoko, fix your mess!’

The red-haired girl slapped her cheeks. “I’m sorry! I’m an idiot, a ditz, useless, ugly.” She recited words heard so very often from Matsuda.

“Otonashi-san, calm down! You’re none of those things.” Chihiro retorted, so overwhelmed by the sudden self-deprecative commentary that he’d temporarily forgotten his own sadness.

“No! I have to do something about this.” She clasped Chihiro’s hands. “You’re a great guy, Chi and anyone would be lucky to have you as their boy friend.” With that, she sprinted off.

Ryoko processed the situation, thinking clearly of what action to take next. Chihiro was a sweet guy, dedicated, passionate…and easily hurt. If Naegi turned out to be the wrong guy for him, then she wouldn’t just stand by and let the programmer be hung up on a scumbag.
Of course, she couldn’t ask Naegi himself…because that’d be giving away that Chihiro likes him. She couldn’t go for Ikusaba either…because frankly, that girl scared the shit out of her! Ultimate Soldier? Ryoko pictured she’d get a bullet in between her eyes for pissing Ikusaba off.

That left one easy choice. She’d find the truth out from Chiaki Nanami.

Chihiro couldn’t keep up with the change in gears.

“W-Where are you going!?” He called out but she was already gone. “That erratic personality…she really reminds me of Enoshima-san.” The Ultimate Fashionista who disappeared. Nobody could find her. But Ryoko said she lost her memory…and her appearance wasn’t too far off. “Could it be…”

His musing was caught off by a stroke of thunder, followed by the drizzling rain. “We should get out of here.” ‘We’ referring to both himself and the adorably friendly feline, who didn’t even mind as he picked it up into his small arms.

“Looks like it’ll be a stormy day.”

“Young master. Does something concern you?” Peko said, placing her hand on Fuyuhiko’s shoulder, who, for the past half-hour had stared outside the dojo’s window, with a puzzled look on his face.

“Holy sh-” Fuyuhiko spasmed, creating distance between them and roughly pulling on his tie. “Goddamn, Peko. Warn a guy before you get in close.”

‘Contact never bothered you before’ Nevertheless, the young master had been uncomfortable with her for some time…ever since their outing at the amusement park.

Peko took a step closer. Fuyuhiko took one back.

“…have I done anything unseemly?”

“Huh? It’s got nothing to do with you?” He said, not looking her in the eye.

“Then why were you unresponsive?”

“You trying to be Sherlock Holmes 3.0?”

Peko could only assume 2.0 referred to Kirigiri from the class down below. “No, I am merely inquiring.”

Fuyuhiko turned, pointing out the window. “Where are they?” Fuyuhiko asked. His question wasn’t directed at Peko, because she doubtfully had an answer. It was merely a reflection of his confusion.

“Who do you mean?”

“Those reserve course students and their parade. Where are they?” He repeated.
The swordswoman took notice as well. The main gates were empty, save security. “It is raining heavily, perhaps that deterred them?”

“…You think so?” Fuyuhiko remained unconvinced, for good fucking reason in his mind. “Those no-life losers have been marching out there like they owned the damn place for weeks. It rained before and windy as shit but they just kept coming. I was starting to think the school would need to bring the army in just to shut those bastards up once and for all.” And more violent each time, and nobody knew violence for more than the Ultimate Yakuza “Why’d they take a break today?”

“Yes…it is strange.” Peko agreed. Not out of obligation to heed her master’s whims, but a genuine understanding of the situation. She was first and foremost a bodyguard. She’d honed her instincts to detect oncoming threats…and right now, she felt…concerned.

She also briefly mused over whether her skills had dulled for her to be late in recognizing…or the young master’s had improved.

Fuyuhiko’s face contorted with displeasure and uncertainty. He had been on edge for a long time, ever since Natsumi’s death. While he was dickering around with his friends, his sister had been running for her life and killed in cold-blood.

His indolence scarred him to this day. Ever since then, he kept an eye out for everything in his surroundings…and right now, he was getting a bad fucking feeling.

“Peko…do me a favor.”

“Of course.”

“Peko…do me a favor.”

“Of course.”

“What do you want?” Yasuke Matsuda said to Kyoko Kirigiri. The detective had given him a very…tempting invitation to meet him in front of the old building. “Couldn’t you have picked a better place? This rain is killer.” He complained, despite not a drop getting on either of them thanks to their respective umbrellas.

Kyoko handed him a yellow folder.

Yasuke opened it and found…some incriminating evidence of Junko (as well himself) exploits, in scary detail. They even added the part where he’d erased her memory.

Oh hell, even Kamukura’s information was here.

“I’ll tell you now there’s no point destroying that, I’ve already made plenty of copies.” Kyoko said.

“Don’t you worry, I don’t even give a shit.” He showed her a defeated, rueful grin. “Still…I gotta know where you got these?”

“You think I’ll reveal my sources?” Kyoko lied. The sender of the file was unknown. They’d manage to break into her room and left no trace of their presence.

“I just said I don’t give a shit. I’m asking this for your sake. If you dug up this info on your own, then pat yourself on the back and walk away while you’ve got the chance. But…if this was handed
to you, then know you’re in a shitload of trouble.”

Kyoko arched an eyebrow

Her apparent confusion was almost enough to make him laugh. “Getting involved in this mess is
more trouble than its worth, girl. You’ve been collared and somebody’s yanking your chain.” Ah,
what the hell, he laughed anyway. This comedy’s bad enough for even the most cynical bastard on
the planet to enjoy. “Just like that bitch yanked mine…for 13 fucking years.” His voice rang
hollow, like he doubted the meaning for his own existence.

“You’re referring to Enoshima.” Kyoko stated, matter-of-factly. Naturally, she hadn’t taken the
information in the file at face value. She did her own research, most of which corroborated the
information she’d received. “I’m hardly a stranger to betrayal, so I can sympathize with you to an
extent.”

“That right?”

“Yes. That’s why I know your emotions right now will only lead you on a path to destruction. You
may feel empty now, but you’ll eventually fill that gaping hole in your heart with spite and
hatred…assuming you haven’t already.”

Wow, she did know her stuff.

“I won’t let you kill Enoshima but help me and we can bring her to justice.”

Yasuke staggered. Kill…Junko? He…couldn’t.

No…he could. That girl he’d sworn to protect from the world…and from herself. Right now, he
could strangle her to death with his own hands. He’d almost done it to Ryoko, regretfully. But
now, he wondered if he’d feel a thing. But one part of that sentence was laughable. “Justice? You
think a court…a prison can hold Junko?” He mocked.

“If we expose the truth, I don’t see why not.”

Fucking hell, she is so out of her league. “You want to know what happens if you put that psycho in
jail? The first thing she’ll do is fuck her cellmate and make slaves out of them, from there she’ll
work her way onto the rest of the inmates, then not even the guards’ll be spared being wrapped
around her finger. By the end of the month? The entire penitentiary will either be one giant orgy or
will be killing each other in her name… probably both, simultaneously, and nobody will have any
goddamn clue why or how the fuck this happened. Meanwhile Junko slips out under the radar after
having one hell of a vacation. Then she’ll go and pay you back for the good time by putting a bullet
in your head. That’s the kind of monster you’re going up against here.” Yasuke wished he was
exaggerating, but he wasn’t.

“I see. Truthfully, the information said exposing Enoshima would be terribly unwise.” Kyoko took
on a thoughtful pose, neither doubting nor perturbed by Matsuda’s outburst.

“Hold on…” Yasuke narrowed his eyes. Something’s not adding up here. “Why haven’t you
leaked this to the police? Why come for me?”

“Because this is more than Junko…and we need your help.” A familiar voice answered his query.
Out from the doors was a green haired girl in a wheelchair, staring at him with disappointment and
worry.

“Miaya? What are you doing here?” Yasuke’s jaw dropped.
“We need your neurological expertise.” Miaya said.

“With…Junko?”

“No. With Makoto Naegi.”

Chiaki’s day had been mostly normal…It was in the afternoon, and she sat by the bench in the middle of the school grounds. A routine she followed every school day, in small hopes that Hinata would return here.

It was a normal day…until now, when an unfamiliar girl ran up a storm towards her…and Chiaki wasn’t referring to the actual weather. The girl kicked up water as she sped over to Chiaki’s location, and unlike the gamer who was dry thanks to the roof overhead, she looked like she’d been by a tsunami.

The stranger’s hands were planted on her bent knees as she recovered her breath.

“You’re…Chiaki…Nanami…?” She wheezed.

“Yup and you’re…seriously out of breath.” Chiaki remarked. “Were you out for a jog?”

“No! Who the hell would jog in this weather!? Do I look crazy to you!?” Ryoko screamed. She was tired and soaking wet! What’d she do to deserve this?

“Why not just bring an umbrella?”

“W-Well why couldn’t you have played video games inside? I ran all over the school looking for you!”

“Really? You’re incredible, I’d never pull off lapping the school.” Way too tedious.

“Mhm, I am pretty great.~” The girl puffed her sizable chest out in pride. “Uwah! I almost got sucked in by you!” Doesn’t she mean ‘suckered in’? “I want answers!”

“To?” Chiaki said, already itching to get back to her game. But before any of that. “Want a towel?” Chiaki held out a white towel she’d brought out of her bag.

Ryoko seeing the dry cloth, slowly inched closer, eyes shifting between Chiaki and the towel, like a cautious animal deliberating over biting the bait.

Once Ryoko got within arms distance and brought her head down, Chiaki rubbed the other girl’s hair and face gently with the cloth.

“Thanks.” Ryoko smiled brightly afterwards, removing her soaked blazer. “Much better. I’m Ryoko Otonashi. Nice to meet you!”

“Likewise, and you already know my name, somehow. What can I do for you?”

“Hm?” Ryoko tilted her head, forgetting the reason she came here until her senior proc’d her memory. “I got sucked in after all!” She said, dramatically jumping away from the gamer. “What is this comfy field around you!?”
Chiaki smiled. “You’re a funny person, Otonashi-san.”

“I give up.” Ryoko raised her arms in the air and sat besides the pinkette, a small distance separating them. “What’re you doing here by yourself?”

“Is that what you wanted to ask me?” Chiaki blinked. That was a whole lot of wasted effort if so.

“You really think I’m an idiot huh?” Ryoko folded her arms, looking away while pouting. “So insensitive. I’m making small talk right now since I’ve lost the initiative. You could at least play along.”

“Oh, you should have just said so.”

“No normal person would ever come out and say that without making things awkward. You’d look like an idiot!”

“But…you just did…”

“You’re picking a fight with me, right!?”

“No, just trying to figure you out.” Chiaki responded honestly. “But if you want a fight, we can settle it the good old patrician way.” Chiaki held out a game.

Ryoko held the gaming platform gingerly in her fingertips.

“Ever played Steel Fist?”

Ryoko shook her head.

“I hope you’re a fast learner then, because I don’t hold back, even against beginners.”

“Makoto, I need to talk to you.” Sayaka said, her head peeking out from the classroom’s door and looking outside.

“Hm, sure. What’s up, Maizono?” Naegi replied, standing across Ikusaba.

“Alone.” The bluenette stressed, stepping outside.

Mukuro reacted negatively, glaring at the idol. “I don’t see why there’s a problem with me being here.” She said.

Sayaka’s lips twitched upwards. Cute. It was like a dog marking its territory – she thought.

Just then, Leon strode out of the classroom, standing behind the pop sensation. “Yo, Ikusaba. I saw your sister with Chihiro out the window holding hands. Didn’t know Chi was her type.”

“You saw Junko-chan?” Mukuro’s eyes widened in surprise. To be perfectly honest, Mukuro had lost all control of the situation regarding her sister, including whether or if she could regain her memory. All she could do was watch over ‘Ryoko’…which…she currently was not doing!

‘Shit’ The soldier swore under her breath.
“Like I’d ever mistake a babe with a body like that.” Leon whistled.

Mukuro kept a mental note to punch him when she got back.

She sent Sayaka a knowing look, before running off.

“Oh man.” Leon said after a time slapping his forehead “I totally forgot there’s that new redhead with a killer figure like Enoshima’s. Even the best mess up once in a while.” Leon laughed.

“She’ll kill you.” Sayaka smiled.

“Taking one for the team. You two talk it out.” The athlete shrugged and returned to the classroom. The loud voices could be heard from where Sayaka and Naegi stood.

“What’s this all about, Maizono-san?” The boy asked.

…

“Why are you calling me by my surname? There’s nobody else here.” Sayaka mused.

“Don’t I always call you that way?” Naegi cocked his head.

What the… oh.

Sayaka flicked him on the head.

“Ow, I hate it when you do that.” He whined. Sudden shocks to the head usually worked.

“Why were you so slow to answer?” Sayaka asked

"My bad." He apologized.

…“Okay, forget that. What happened at the amusement park?” The idol inquired.

“…On Saturday or Sunday?”

Sayaka stared blankly.

“Kidding!” Makoto chirped. "Mukuro and I went to the amusement park and…well, I let the other me handle everything.”

“And…you know everything he does, right?” Including anything that would make the soldier that possessive?

“…Yeah, it’s like auto-pilot. Even if someone else is driving, you still know where you’re going. It’s kind of like that.”

“About that. Ever since I returned, you’ve been acting strangely and aggressive, then there’s those injuries you had.” Not long ago, he looked like he’d been mauled by a bear. He’d given her a half-assed excuse that she just knew was a lie. She decided not to press but then he was injured again on the weekend.

…

“Oh I get it. You’re worried about me.” Makoto smiled. Water is wet. When it rains, it pours. Tune in for more news at 11.
“Of course I am, you blockhead. I’m your friend.” She gave him a stupefied look. “Tell me that you’re not involved in anything dangerous.”

“You don’t need to be concerned, Sayaka. Everything always works out in the end.”

The bluenette ticked her eyebrow upward “That’s…not an answer-“

“You guys, we got trouble!” Leon stormed out of the class, panic stricken as he pointed to his phone.

“What’s wrong?” Makoto asked.

“The reserve course has gone fucking nuts!”

“I won.” Chiaki whispered, unable to believe what occurred. At first, Ryoko was a pushover like any noob, but she was doubtlessly a fast learner. Early on, Chiaki spared a glance at the red-haired girl and saw caught her focused on the game. By the end, she didn’t have that opportunity. There hadn’t even been a winner in their last game, Ryoko timed her moves perfectly with Chiaki’s and the timer ran out while the latter had a smidgen more life left than her opponent.

…Who looked like she was about to cry. “I was close…”

“Been a while since I’ve been challenged like that. You’re pretty good.” Chiaki said.

“Mhm. You’re right.” She recovered.

Chiaki had already picked up on one of Ryoko’s quirks. This girl was weak to praise.

“Nanami-senpai. Are you going out with Naegi?” Ryoko asked out of the blue.

“No.” Chiaki remarked. She didn’t know what brought that on though… “Why?”

“Just someone I know is really into him, and I wondered if you were already a couple.”

“Naegi’s nice and all, but I don’t think about him that way.”

“He’s nice? Like fake nice or actually nice.”

“Actually nice. He puts in way too much effort to be anything else, and it’s not like he made a move on me.” Chiaki pointed out. “The whole time at the carnival, he did everything I asked and helped me out a lot. I couldn’t remember the last time I enjoyed myself that much…but…” Chiaki held her hoodie tightly. “I wonder if I was the only one who felt that way.”

“You mean you might have bored him?” Ryoko said.

“I have no idea, because he made the day about me.”

Ryoko shifted in her seat. Wasn’t that a good thing? For someone to pay attention to you?

“I only noticed it after I got back to my dorm…but…Naegi-kun directed the entire afternoon.” Chiaki frowned. She’d drowned in her own problems that she hadn’t thought about his feelings at
all. “All I can say is that Naegi looks like a really happy guy.” He never stopped smiling, for one.

Chiaki’s words made something click in Ryoko’s mind, as if she was awarded a missing piece of the puzzle. “He’s nice.” She repeated after the gamer. That compliment…was all she ever heard when Naegi was described. Chihiro, for how much he adored the luckster, could only use the term incessantly and it wasn’t because the kid had a small vocabulary.

It might have been a strange thing to say coming from a girl whose life experience dated back weeks at most, but Ryoko was starting to think she knew more about Naegi than his supposed friends.

That is to say, she was aware that she knew nothing at all and Naegi was kind of creepy.

The amnesiac opened her notebook to the page with the lucky student’s name, and below read the notice that survived even her own memory. ‘Makoto Naegi was dangerous’ it said, calling him an omnivore; an animal that eats anything and everything.

Could Ryoko say…that this had nothing to do with her?

“Otonashi-san, you know these guys?” Chiaki’s voice broke her out of a stupor. Ryoko’s attention was turned to a group of students in jet black uniform, standing in the rain. But above all, were the imaginative helmets they wore. The sides were white and black, with the latter half conveying a sinister outlook. A squad that would not look out of place on Halloween.

“These are those reserve students, right? I don’t know em at all…their costumes are kinda cheap though.” Ryoko stated. Even with their eyes masqueraded, the eccentric could tell they were staring at the girls intensely.

“What do you guys want?” Chiaki asked

_The pinkette, disturbed by the silent reception and unaware of their dark intentions…Ryoko, on the other hand, had opened her notebook earlier._

_The amnesiac, unaware of her talent as the Ultimate Analyst couldn’t have grasped what stroke of good fortune it was. It was only thanks to that coincidence that her mind reverted back to its perfect state. The mindset she had while outmaneuvering Madarai._

_The reserve course students were seldom allowed on these premises, yet no less than 8 appeared before them._

_Their oddity of their presence here was magnified by the increasing tension between them and campus security._

_There had been no protests today._

_Their muscles were tense, and their faces blank and finally, the question they would pose next_  

_All pointed towards an unfavorable outcome._

_Threat assessment: Extremely dangerous_  

_You’re Ryoko Otonashi.” One said._

_Verdict: Flee._  

Before the gamer could seal their fate, her right arm was strung along and dragged into the air by
Ryoko. The Ultimate analyst sprinted off with dexterity and acceleration that surpassed earlier. Like the unruly student Ryoko was, she’d begun sprinting before the signal.

“Kill them!”

Not even the beating rain drowned out the concert of footsteps behind her

The race for dear life commenced.

“I just got a message from one of my buddies that got cut mid text. They’re storming the school and attacking anyone they see!” Leon roared.

Sayaka gasped.

Makoto gazed outside the window to verify the athlete’s claims. There he saw the chaos, dozens of black-suited teenagers running amok.

‘Why were they wearing masks’

He doesn’t have time to be surprised. “Is everyone still in class?” Makoto asked Leon.

“Wasn’t lying when I saw Chihiro walk off together with that redhead. No fucking clue if Ikusaba found them. Kirgiri never showed up, remember?” Leon clawed his hair, trying to think of whoever he’d missed. “Shit, I think Ishimaru’s doing patrol.”

Makoto took off.

“Where are you going!?” Sayaka screamed

“Go back to class with Leon!” Makoto yelled and waste not a moment later. Stopping the insurgency was a priority, but he also needed to make sure the others were safe. Without a doubt, Ryoko would be a magnet for trouble, he at least had to go there personally, but as for the rest?

Well…good thing he had a backup plan.

…

“Is he crazy?” Leon gaped at Makoto’s retreating form. The baseball’s star’s intention had been to rally everyone and hide behind Sakura or something, not run right into the danger!

Sayaka straightened up, a cold expression on her face. “Let’s take cover inside.”

Leon gaped. “Fuck that, we’ve got to stop him.”

“You heard what he said. Makoto’s not a child. He can take care of himself.” She wasn’t giving the baseball star any room for argument. In fact, she didn’t wait for his answer, instead walking into class. “If you’re not coming, I’ll lock the door.”

“Have both of you lost it!” Leon screamed. After a moment of deliberation and a worried look to the direction, the ahoge escaped in…he joined the idol.
Ryoko managed to buy time running, but there was only so much she could have done while also dragging Nanami along. The older girl, despite her figure, had not been one for exercise, and tired too quickly.

The chase only lasted 10 minutes before they were trapped. All directions were sealed by dozens of reserve coursers.

“What do they want from us?” Chiaki asked. In spite of her situation, the gamer retained her composure.

“I don’t know why, but I think it’s me they want, but I seriously doubt they’d let you go either at this point.” Ryoko replied calmly. On the run, they’d seen other main course students like themselves, piled and mauled. Pink blood spewing out from their bodies.

She couldn’t confirm whether there were deaths per se, but the sight was gruesome enough to tell these guys meant business.

Ryoko considered the possibilities of breaking the encirclement. She came up with nothing. “Hm…this is kinda bad huh.”

“Nowhere to run.” Their attackers said.

“Then they just need to fight their way out.”

…!

A figure fell from the sky (Well, more like dropped from the third-floor window of a building if her calculations were accurate)

“Who are you?” Ryoko asked the pale-skinned man

“Isshiki Madarai. Your shamelessness knows no bounds to have forgotten me already.” The revulsion in his tone was evident…and yet. “I have been tasked with your protection.”

“By who?” Ryoko asked.

“A rule in this profession is to never reveal our client’s identity.”

Huh…someone was looking out for them.

How nice…but Ryoko hoped it would be enough against the miniature army of unjustifiably angry second stringers.

“G-Get away.” Chihiro’s back hit the wall of the school building as he was entrapped on all sides by a gang of freakshows.
The cat he’d brought with him jumped from out of his arms and hissed at his would-be assailants.

“Stop right there!” came a voice. Due to Chihiro’s small size and the crowd, he couldn’t see who was on the other side, but the loudness in his voice was recognizably “Ishimaru!”

The reserve students took their attention away from the programmer and focused on the prefect who stood behind them, a wooden sword in hand as his bright red eyes glared. “Cowards. Ganging up on the weak, let’s see you take on someone your own size!”

“A protector of justice. I see. I think we could get along.”

The mob whose focus was stolen by the proud Kiyotaka had lost sight of their original target, who – not of his own volition – had been quietly stolen and freed from the ambush by a tall man. So large, that the way he’d hid is presence was miraculous.

“You are…Isshiki Madarai!” Kiyotaka marveled at the other newcomer. It was only natural he’d know the identities of the student council. “What are you doing here?”

“Not quite, but no matter. I’m abiding a contract…and on your side here, so let’s make nice.” Madarai said, dropping both Fujisaki and the cat.

‘The more allies, the better.’ Kiyotaka supposed.

Though Kiyotaka would like to say the man got one thing wrong. There was no justice in Kiyotaka’s motive. Under normal circumstances, the limits of his jurisdiction would cap at mere discipline. He was meant to guide, not beat others into submission…and that’s why the prefect would enjoy this little diversion greatly.

Even as the mob of crazed students charged at them, the broken moral compass was overcome with gratitude, for whoever it was that provided him an excuse to let break his code again!

“You called these guys in?” Yasuke said as he, Kyoko and Miaya suddenly found themselves surrounding by reserve coursers with some stupid looking gear, walking about in the rain like they owned the place. “Don’t these idiots know that’s how you get sick?”

“Was that a joke, or didn’t you happen to notice that they’re armed?” Kyoko narrowed her eyes at the students blocking the front of the building, each one carrying some makeshift weapon like pipes or pick-axes.

‘So it’s come to this, after all huh?’ If they were to run, they could only go inside behind them.

“Kyoko Kirigiri and Yasuke Matsuda.” Their names were called out.

“Judging by that tone, I presume we’ve made someone’s list.” Kyoko surmised, already calculating the optimal strategies to get out of this mess.
The instigator of the afternoon’s chaos was perched on the roof of the tallest building in the academy. Izuru gazed down from an overlooking view. With vision as potent as a hawk’s, he could observe every detail of his insidious scheme with the uttermost clarity. But why strain his eyes when he had technology? By his side was a laptop. The alter ego had hacked into the cameras around the school.

He briefly considered if this is what his teachers felt when performing their experiments. Already, Izuru was met with factors that exceeded his calculations, albeit slightly.

But that was enough. As long as he witnessed the unforeseen, the experiment was succeeding.

The collateral damage involved may be considered morally questionable…but what about his inception wasn’t? Izuru merely continued to the research his teachers started. He was born out of the hopes of a single human acquiring everything in the world.

Yet Izuru was incomplete, he could admit that now. Hope, despair, and perhaps more. These were concepts he had insufficient knowledge of. That he cared to understand them, meant he was not perfect. Thus, his duty should be to attain those qualities, through any means necessary.

Saying that, the fatalities were likely to be kept to a minimum, as per the indirect consequence of his orders. Only the identities given to the reserve course were to be killed, the uninvolved parties would just be superficial casualties. However, Izuru didn’t organize this ‘parade’ in that fashion out of kindness or lenience. He was merely being efficient. If the reserve course went fully berserk, murdering whatever laid in their path, they would lose sight of his true goal. Giving them priorities, targets for them to exert the full extent of their anger was much more effective.

Once again, Izuru felt his blood boil and knew what he felt in his breast was excitation.
Makoto heard the screams in the distance, even amidst the ongoing thunderstorm. He passed the hallways, his back clinging to the walls as to not give himself away if trouble was, literally, just around the corner.

He made several observations on his way out the building. The classroom doors were closed shut, whatever stragglers remained were dragged in, regardless of whether they were in the appropriate class; their only pass was the brown uniform of the main course that signified they weren’t part of the reserve course. The classroom building was clear of any insurgents, the luckster presuming they hadn’t made their way here yet.

The outside presented Makoto with another scene entirely. He was drawn to an orange glow in the distance, melding with smoke.

Fires and vandalism weren’t exactly unheard-of during riots…but far from the worst that could happen. Property was replaceable, people weren’t, that’s why he took off in a hurry. His small legs kicked against puddles of water, carrying him as fast as he could go and only stopping for the screams nearby.

Gulping, Makoto headed for the direction of the noise. A blood-curling sight awaited him. Lightning flashed, blinding Makoto for only an instant. The next moment revealed his fellow ultimates crumpled on the wet ground. Some squirmed, others didn’t move at all. In the middle of the pile was the person responsible for their injuries, a strange helmet obscuring their faces. Their hand gripping a metal pipe that looked like it could have been found in any junkyard. The sharp jagged end of the weapon was glazed in pink, gradually being washed away the falling rain.

The luckster let out a growl of disapproval. One the attacker overheard, as their body turned to meet his.

Neither made a move, at first, opting to size each other up.

What was with that mask over his face? A strange disguise for an even stranger day. “I…get that you’re angry…but this is going too far.” Makoto began, as always attempting to reach a peaceful solution even in these turbulent circumstances.

“…”

His enthusiasm was met with chilling silence.

“Not in the mood for talking?” Makoto asked. Even if the black suited teenager wasn’t, Makoto had ways to make them talk. A subtle yet effective armament in the form of the brainwashing video in his cellphone. One press of a button an-
“Are you Makoto Naegi?” They finally spoke.

The brunet made an intrigued hum at hearing his name called by the male voice. “Who wants to know?”

The reserve course took his response as confirmation and approached, his steps picking up speed until he broke into a sprint.

The sudden change in pace from his name uttered left Makoto too slow to react.

With the pipe raised into the air, the assailant tried to close the distance. Tried to.

In hindsight, he should have thought his actions over a bit more, but it could also be said that what happened next couldn’t have been predicted by anyone.

A loud crash of lightning left everyone in the vicinity deaf. All Makoto could see was white as a freak accident literally befell the reserve course.

Lightning struck, the metal weapon acting as a homing beacon for its advent.

When Makoto’s vision returned, a few feet away stood the charred and burned body of his would-be-attacker, who gracelessly fell.

The luckster ran to the boy’s side, ignoring the heat from touching the boy’s chest, his pulse irregularly slow. Makoto went straight for administering CPR after taking off his blazer and using it to remove the boy’s helmet.

In what was essentially a raid on a major school, it was safe to assume someone among the thousands alerted the police. There wasn’t a need for him to go out of his way when another had done it for him.

However, it wouldn’t be surprised if the upper echelons of staff didn’t alert the authorities in fear of having the chaos be brought to the public’s attention. He also wouldn’t be surprised if the students were lax enough to think the adults would take care of everything and wouldn’t take any proactive measures at all.

Trusting others never got him anywhere, so he thought to get things done himself. The downside meant for the meantime, he couldn’t leave this position.

With one free hand, he dialed 911 to get expert advice, meanwhile he wordlessly cursed his bad luck.

Ryoko had no memory of Isshiki Madarai.

His reluctant greeting indicated she was acquainted with them. The hateful stare Ryoko received, made her conclude their relationship wasn’t a positive one. Could she rely on him?

Logically, no. Even if he proved himself trustworthy…
Possibility of defeating the threat in front of them: 3%

That meager percentage was impressive in its own right given how stacked the deck was against them. Too bad it didn’t change their losing circumstances. Ryoko running off by herself was little better as an alternative. She didn’t have enough information…and she’d be caught just like last time.

Ryoko took a sidelong glance at her partner, Chiaki, who could only stare at Madarai’s losing battle in trepidation.

“They need help.” Chiaki stated, unsure of how to provide said assistance.

“If he loses, we’re finished. If you have plan, I’d like to hear it.” They weren’t fast enough to evade their chasers either. It was Madarai’s victory or bust.

“What could I say? It’s not like this was a game.” That was Chiaki’s sole talent and it was pretty useless right now…or so it seemed.

Ryoko’s thoughts spun quickly.

A game…there was an idea.

“Madarai-san, dodge to the left and throw uppercut!” Ryoko yelled at the top of her lungs

“What are you blabbering about?” The bodyguard yelled, up against an enemy swarm of 5.

Instinctively, he heeded the words and moved his body to the side, there he witnessed one of his attackers swinging a metal pipe at empty space. He capitalized with the exact move Ryoko ordered, sending the brainwashed teen flying into the air. “…!?” His eyes widened at the sequence of events.

“Now throw the closest one behind you in exactly 2 seconds.” Madarai was quicker to adapt this time, he gripped the reserve courser’s wrist and flung him behind, sending him crashing into two others, thwarting an attempt to strike from his blind spot.

He didn’t even need to look at them.

Madarai recalled the information given about Ryoko’s strange abilities, that allowed her to anticipate their actions and constantly elude them.

“Heh, you won’t even let me to do my job properly…whatever.” Begrudgingly, the accepted that her help would be necessary. “I leave the commands to you.” Despite his protests, Madarai was wrought with glee.

Right now, he was using his talent when it was needed most. What more could he ask for?

Chiaki stood by the analyst’s side, amazed at the sight. Ryoko gave out commands freely and offering Madarai the best possible response. A feat that required precise understanding of her opponent’s patterns, but also the limitation of the bodyguards’ physical capabilities.

If Chiaki could sum up the scene before her in a single phrase, it was like Ryoko orchestrated a live-fighting game in front of her eyes.
“This is your final warning, surrender and face judgement!” Kiyotaka had always wanted to say that.

“I believe you’re supposed to wait for a response before bashing their heads in?” Nisshiki noted, his back facing the moral compass as he threw one of the rioters with far off to the side.

“It’s not like he was actually going to stop. My warning was just common courtesy.”

Just because he was despair didn’t mean he was a savage! - Kiyotaka thought as he stomped on the head of one of the rebels.

“You are different from what I’d heard, Ishimaru.”

“Oh?” The red-eyed boy murmured with fascination, ducking to narrowly avoid an incoming blow. Then followed up by planting his fist into the reserve course’s stomach.

All the while, the prefect wondered if Madarai’s words had meant anything positive. He looked to see the bodyguard fending off several of those thugs with enough ease that he had room to engage in conversation.

“You were the foremost prospect for the future student council. A man with a spotless academic record, top grades and no absentees. Color me surprised to see you so accustomed to violence.”

That was an amusing statement, to be considered for the council…yet he worked alongside the one who orchestrated their deaths!

Kiyotaka wanted to laugh at the irony but seeing how inappropriate that action would be in this predicament…settled for basking in the joy of slamming his bokken against the enemy’s ribs, not batting an eye to the sickening squelch of broken bone.

“I don’t particularly like violence, but I do believe in meritocracy; seeing one’s efforts bear fruit. That’s why I’m not entirely displeased at putting all my training to the test for once.” He spoke in half-truths.

“I understand that feeling quite well.” Nisshiki agreed. They too, despite the hardship they faced, experienced the delight of having their talent vindicated. This was one step in redeeming themselves for their failure.

Time was just as much on their side as it was against them. While it could be said that the enemy vastly outnumbered them…that was only temporary. The longer they spent, the more reinforcements arrived…they also had reinforcement in the form of the police. No matter how volatile the rioting was, it would be quelled in minutes once the authorities arrived. All they needed to do was hold out.

But that was easier said than done.

“Help!” They heard a familiar voice. Chihiro’s to be exact, his words muffled as a reserve course placed his hand over the programmer’s mouth…and held a knife to his neck.

“He didn’t run away!” Nisshiki growled.

“I imagine he did, but Fujisaki is a very slow runner.” If their PE classes were anything to go by. “Would you unhand him? He doesn’t look very comfortable.” Kiyotaka said calmly.

“Get on the ground or he dies.” The rioter brought the blade closer to Chihiro’s flesh.
Kiyotaka had nothing but respect for the boy, who retained enough sense to negotiate, unlike the rest... but did he seriously think that would work here? They’d just kill Kiyotaka and Nisshiki, then Fujisaki.

“No deal.” The prefect said.

“You’re going to do that anyway, won’t you?” Madarai added... Actually, Kiyotaka had half-a-mind to see that. Now that he thought about it, just how would the class react to learning Fujisaki was killed here? The despair would be incredible!

Curse his impulsiveness for passing up such a chance!

“Don’t worry, Fujisaki. We won’t give in to terrorists!” Kiyotaka said exaggeratedly, ignoring Fujisaki’s horrified stare.

The reserve course seethed, his hands beginning to move. Kiyotaka almost smiled... until he saw a gloved fist impacting the reserve courser’s face through the Monokuma gear, forcefully separating him from Fujisaki.

The hostage situation had been salvaged (*sigh*) by none other than Mukuro Ikusaba. Her features stoic as ever even when entering the battlefield. No, the soldier was more relaxed in such situations than anywhere else.

“Ikusaba-san!” Kiyotaka greeted his companion... in more ways than one.

“It’s you.” Madarai glared at the new arrival. Ikusaba returned it with passivity, as if he wasn’t worth the time. Instead, she faced to Fujisaki with concern.

“This is where you went.” The soldier picked Fujisaki up. “Where’s J-…Otonashi?”

“I don’t know. She left b-before these guys showed up.” Fujisaki whimpered.

Kiyotaka watched as Ikusaba clicked her tongue. Naturally, he was also aware of Otonashi’s true identity, and knew quite well that they were all footnotes compared to securing her sister’s safety. Really, she would probably abandon them the first chance she gets now that she knows Enoshima isn’t with us.

For that reason, the moral compass felt like he should assist... in his own way. Kiyotaka turned to the remainder of the stunned rebels. “You delinquents, you better not have harmed a hair on Otonashi’s head.”

“Where is she?” The soldier growled.

“How should we know? We haven’t caught her yet.”

“What will you do on the chance you find her?” Kiyotaka dropped the bait

“If we catch Otonashi, we’ll kill her, after we’ve killed you.” Famous last words of a dead man.

‘And mission accomplished!’ He internally squealed.

Someone as short-sighted as Ikusaba will never allow an affirmed threat to her sister escape if they were right before her eyes.

The raven-haired girl’s muscles relaxed, her eyes glazed over in cold fury
Ikusaba didn’t even speak. She just attacked.

And their numbers dwindled ever so swiftly.

Miaya was knocked off her wheelchair and unable to stand, whereas Kyoko and Matsuda were pinned to the ground.

Matsuda had spent his youth strengthening his mind, at the expense of his body. It was unwise to expect any miraculous achievements from him. Although she was in just as dire straits, the absurdity of her current situation fell outside of her detective training.

Kyoko wasn’t one to show fear. It was an abnormality born of how she was raised. Instead she re-purposed her efforts to figuring out how she ended up like this, futile it may have been in the present.

The riot was, not entirely unexpected. The persistent protests, the discrimination towards the untalented and the strange deaths circulating the school all contributed to this outcome. Kyoko herself had been threatened merely days before.

Everything added up to now…yet this turn of events still felt unnatural…or should she say artificial? They had named Kyoko and Matsuda specifically, indicating they were targets.

That was off.

Their hatred should have been directed to the prejudicial system of the school itself, not any student or staff member in particular. Even if you were to extrapolate Kyoko’s status as the headmaster’s daughter (a fact known throughout the school), there was no need for Matsuda’s name to come up. Much less to specify him and leave out Miaya.

This wasn’t a desperate retaliation by the reserve course. No, this smelled like a carefully constructed plot, her suspicions bolstered by exactly what Matsuda was involved in. The neurologist had also expressed a few coarse words, suggesting he knew what was going on.

As the reserve course above her brought down the weapon on her head, Kyoko begged the question…

‘What kind of monster would jeopardize the entire student body just to target a select few people?’

Izuru was temporarily amused by Enoshima’s innovative tactics, and even more interested in what was going through the revenger’s mind to be protecting her. But his fascination waned as fast as the technique’s effectiveness. The plan it required Madarai to maintain the upkeep. Unfortunately for them, he lacked the stamina to keep up with Enoshima’s commands. At best, they could only fight defensively now.

Perhaps that would have been adequate resolution…had the bodyguard been fighting for himself,
but he also sacrificed mobility for the sake of protecting the two girls.

Izuru estimated 2 minutes before Madarai would fall. Even less for one to break through their guard. Unless Enoshima had other plans – which he doubted – this would be the end for her. But, at the moment, the Ultimate Hope wasn’t focused on the amnesiac at all. There was one particular person who caught his attention. In the midst of the chaos lied one insignificant speck, unable to even minimally contribute to their ruinous state of affairs.

She was the pinnacle of mediocrity and impotence, who could only stand and watch as her world fell apart in front of her. The sort that should be far removed from his areas of interest. So why… couldn’t he take his eyes off her?

…

Izuru visibly twitched when he saw her struck, sending her tumbling to the ground. The others, having been knocked down and apprehended themselves.

Although, it appeared their resistance might not have been for nothing.

Izuru squinted as one of the reserve-course was acting differently from the rest.

It took a moment to realize why.

“Ah the main guest finally arrived at the scene.”

‘Out of the frying pan, and into the fire.’ Makoto lamented as he arrived at the most chaotic scene in the school. He’d done all he could for the pitiable guy struck by lightning. All Makoto could do was remove the reserve courser (and the other students) from the rain and into shelter.

From thereon, he’d taken the available helmet and used it to blend into his surroundings, now he’d made it just in time from the looks of it. Was it good, or bad luck? Who can say anymore?

His new partner, Madarai was already down. Makoto counted 10 of the rioters jumping the bodyguard. Slowly, his head turned to side, affirming Ryoko’s similar poor circumstances. From how the amnesiac failed to respond to her hair forcefully pulled as she was beaten, Makoto surmised she had lost consciousness. Another glance showed her favorite notebook drenched and rendered unusable a small distance away.

…What to do? There were too many for a talk to be feasible. But he had to try.

“Can you let go off my friends?” Makoto said, taking off the head gear. His stone was neither angry or vengeful. To anyone who heard, it would have sounded like a genuine request.

Chiaki, kneeling on the ground, stared at him, frightened upon recognizing his face. Unlike the others, the gamer hadn’t received much attention.

“Naegi…” One growled at the luckster like a dog.

“Oh, you know me too? Am I famous?” He replied.

“Kill him!"
A quick execution sentence not unlike the last time. It was fairly obvious that was someone had it out for him and…given the familiarity of these circumstances, he could only think of one guy.

If he was right…‘This is going too far, Izuru.’ But not far enough to stop Makoto.

Naegi was annoyingly persistent – He was sure there were others, like Peko, who thought that of him. Hell, he believed that about himself. But so what? That perseverance was the only reason he’d gotten this far. Makoto would stop at nothing in the pursuit of his happiness.

Often that meant deceiving others, but he didn’t mind too much once he looked at the bigger picture. Much like right now, when he held his cellphone protectively in front of the rebels.

“What’ll you do with that?” They mocked.

“That depends on whether you guys want to keep going.” Despite the thinly veiled threat to his life, Makoto shrugged indifferently. “But I can’t wrap my head around why we’d need to. We’re all students at this academy. Why can’t we just sit down and talk about things?” In a perfect world, Makoto’s proposition may have been sound, but the chaos having progressed this far – evidenced by the beaten bodies of his proclaimed friends – his words came across as a bad joke to all who heard. Even Chiaki couldn’t hide her skepticism.

“Strange way of begging for your life.” One said, walking in front of the others. “The time for peace talk is over.”

Makoto frowned. “I’m not too sure about that. Ever think you just haven’t been talking to the right people?”

A genuine inquiry was utterly insensitive from the perspective of the other party. “And who would that be?

Makoto arched an eyebrow. “Anyone who’d be willing to listen, like petitioning with students from the main course, or looking for advice.” Through Mahiru and Sato, Makoto knew that strong relationships between both groups could be established. “In my case, I might have been able to help you from the inside. I still can if you just let me.”

“You’re just a kid like the rest of us, what can you do convince those rotten, money-stealing assholes that we can’t? What makes you Ultimates so great anyway? All you have is talent, while we have to work and pay our asses off just to stay here.”

“That makes even less sense. If you really think students are powerless to influence the school, why are you even attacking us?” Makoto posed the question, a finger on his chin. “Actually, you’re using Ultimates either way to get through to the committee…so what made you think it was better idea to attack us instead of working together with us?” Makoto smiled. “Or should I say, ‘who was it that gave you the idea’?”

The black-suited students went silent. That by itself, was an answer. They were put up to this by someone.

“There’s another thing I don’t get; say you maim and kill whoever you like…what then? You guys can’t really think you’ll just get away with it, do you?” Makoto crossed his arms; his tone weary with exasperation when he didn’t receive a reply. “Think about it. With all the parades, your faces have already become known. And if they haven’t, your identities can easily be discovered by cross-checking repeated absences from classes. The police will definitely snuff you out.”

The band of insurgents tensed at the cold, calculating logic. While Makoto remained unaware, the
brainwashing administered by Kamukura released inhibitors and suppressed rational thought that would normally have deterred the reserve course from their current course of action.

“Let’s end this.” Makoto said, arms spread wide. “This situation is bad but not hopeless! If you guys stop right now and turn yourselves in, we’ll let bygones be bygones. Then you can atone.”

His speech was wrought with egotism, where he not only decided their fates, but presumed he would speak for the victims and judges. They were words of a fool that no sane man could take seriously, yet his confidence…it was enough that nobody doubted that Makoto really believed his delusions.

Nevertheless, words alone would not undo the brainwashing. “Are you done?”

…

“Good grief.” Makoto lowered his head; the boy’s disappointment was clear as day. Without another word, he raised his arm with his phone pointed at the rioters.

The fact that they could still see with those helmets meant there were openings for light to seep in. That also meant Izuru didn’t know Makoto had the video. The same light that entranced the Madarai brothers was unleashed on the reserve course, blinding them for a moment.

Only for a moment…before the light died out much too fast.

…

His lips morphed into a comical smile he processed what just occurred. “You’ve…got to be kidding me.” He whispered, realizing he just ran out of batteries.

How can he be so unlucky?!

A single blow to the head made him black out.

“It has nothing to do with luck.” Izuru commented, bewildered as if he were in Naegi’s shoes personally.

The human’s experiment’s eyes widened a fraction when he observed the shine from the phone, for the mere seconds it lasted. Without a doubt, that was the despair video. No, the color of the light was different, and it wouldn’t suit Naegi’s purpose.

Originally, the brainwashing video was a product Enoshima stole and repurposed from the Ultimate Animator, but due to her callous nature, never made full use of. Izuru took the opportunity to do exactly that and strengthen the brainwashing to the level where it would instantly cause the hateful reserve course to despair.

“How explains how he acquired Madarai’s aid.” Izuru deduced, the bodyguard’s hatred for Enoshima would have been hard to do away with otherwise. Makoto Naegi had evidently, thought along the same lines but the effects were polarized.

That was interesting.
The end result even more so. Naegi had not realized exactly how much energy the video required. Izuru had needed to modify his own computer to withstand the drainage. A run of the mill cellphone would have its batteries depleted in minutes after a single use. The next 2 or 3 times? It went without saying what would happen.

Unfortunately for Naegi, his adversaries weren’t so indolent that they’d give him a chance to recharge.

“He’ll die.” The result now was obvious with or without his analytic capabilities. That very eventuality was beginning to take place, as the spikey-haired boy was surrounded.

“Was it over already? How bori-“ Izuru held his tongue. Just as Naegi met his fate, the unremarkable girl threw her gaming platform at one of the student’s heads, protesting against the unprovoked violence.

“How foolish. What could she hope to accomplish?” He found himself snarling.

Izuru moved, surfing through the stairs like a shadow. That location had already gained his full attention, all the main players were there (including one extra), and if the game would end with them, he would observe its conclusion up close.

He convinced himself there was no other reason.

The last thing Naegi remembered was a brief conversation with Maizono outside the classroom. Now he was soaked in the rain.

Naegi didn’t question what happened during that gap in memory. To him, it was a perfectly natural occurrence that persisted since the day he was ‘born’. Like a mask, he never worried nor even recognized the face beneath.

A normal, average boy and the convenient stand-in – That was Naegi’s role, though he didn’t realize it himself.

Yet here he was, petrified under the murderous advances of men he’d never seen before. Blood cascading from his head as an earlier wound was reopened and made worse. There was nothing convenient about his presence yet the question “How did I get here?” never crossed his mind.

He guarded his head with his arms, unable to see anything. After the 10th or so hit, the reserve course relented. Why?

Naegi hesitantly looked up to see his attackers gazing behind, from the opening between their legs, he made out a Gameboy on the floor. He recognized it, barely.

“Leave him alone!”

That voice… “Nanami-san?” He called out weakly.
‘That was enough!’ Chiaki’s mind screamed.

She’d panicked when Naegi showed up abruptly, and wished he’d run as far away as possible. But after watching the reserve course attack her friend, something inside her snapped. Chiaki did the only thing she could and tossed her Gameboy at one of those jerks. The device bouncing off his skull and onto the ground. He turned around slowly, boiling with anger.

But not remotely as angry as she was. “Leave him alone!” She yelled.

-Who’s going to make us?- The words were left unsaid, and Chiaki didn’t need to hear them. Even beneath those masks, Chiaki knew they were laughing at her.

However, those jeers were cut down in one swift stroke, replaced by screams of pain and the loud smacks of hard wood meeting flesh. Behind Naegi’s fallen attackers was the silver-haired Peko. The ultimate Swordswoman, with sword in hand.

“Peko…” Chiaki had never been happier to see the bespectacled girl.

Then she suddenly noticed there were even more people in the area now than before. As usual, wherever Peko was, Fuyuhiko was never far behind.

“I would listen to her if I were you.” The gangster approached, walking in the rain with umbrella in hand.

This time he heard Kuzuryu and footsteps, lots of them. The reserve course who’d encircled him, backed off. Naegi tried to stand pushing off his arms, failing when he plopped back down. His arms were almost numb.

Seeing his struggle, Pekoyama picked him up and slung his arm over her shoulder. “Thank you, Pekoyama-senpai.”

The swordswoman threw him a puzzled glance, like he’d addressed her incorrectly.

Naegi suddenly felt the drizzle of rain finally stop. “Yo, Naegi.” Kuzuryu strode in and stood by his side. The yakuza was the sole individual who’d bothered to bring in an umbrella this afternoon and placed it overhead Naegi.

Naegi noticed the reserve course was frozen, but their eyes lingered past the trio. The spiky-haired boy followed the trail and gaped. His body shivered, not due to the cold, but the battalion of menacing adults brought by Kuzuryu.

Naegi didn’t dare look even one in the eye. “W-Who are they?”

“Had a sneaking suspicion there’d be a hell of a party today, so I invited my boys, just in case.”

‘Then these guys were yakuza too?’ He gulped at the thought. At least they were on his side.

Fuyuhiko stared down the shaken rebels “Your move. Get on the floor right now and we’ll only break a few bones. Resist and we’ll break all of em. You have until 3.” Kuzuryu said as calm as it was cold. A contrast to his regular countenance and evidence that he was beyond pissed. “Please resist.”

Against overwhelming odds, the reserve course stood defiant. In their defense, they didn’t have a choice.
“And 3. Alright boys, it’s Halloween so give them Hell and sweep the whole fucking school. If you see anyone in black and holding a weapon…beat them within an inch of their lives.”

Kiyotaka was almost disappointed by how quickly the mess was cleaned up. Between the enraged Ikusaba, himself and the twin, the matter was resolved in short order. Ikusaba had taken extra care to incapacitate their adversaries to…beyond normally acceptable limits before running off in search of her sister.

He genuinely wondered if any of them survived.

“Ikusaba-san…sure cares a lot for Otonashi.” Fujisaki gulped, looking away from the brutality.

“Why wouldn’t she be concerned about her sister’s welfare?” Kiyotaka said out of the blue.

“…Huh?”

Hm, this is a problem. Me and my big mouth. “Well, haven’t you seen how Enoshima and Otonashi-kun look alike? Judging by Ikusaba fervor, I thought it was a simple deduction.” Kiyotaka excuse himself, passing off his slipup as a theory.

“Ah…” Fujisaki didn’t sound convinced. Kiyotaka didn’t blame him when Enoshima and Otonashi actually were one in the same.

“Let’s get to the classroom building. I’m sure the others must be worried to death!” Owada would be especially jealous for missing the action!

Fujisaki narrowed his eyes in confusion and cupped his left ear. “Ishimaru…do you hear something?”

The Yakuza army didn’t make a sound, save the marching of their footsteps and the weapons dragged against the watery concrete. The task ahead of them was just business, and they completed it without fanfare.

“I’m alright.” Nanami told Pekoyama, who tended to her injuries.

The swordswoman had left him to Kuzuryu while she tended to the others. “I’ll check for Madarai.” She said.

“That’s a face I haven’t seen in a while. D’you know him, Naegi?” Kuzuryu asked.

Naegi shook his head. “I’ve never seen him before.”

“Works for me. I’ll have someone call for a stretcher.” Kuzuryu said. “You alright with this though?”

“Hm?” Naegi glanced at him.
“You hate fighting, don’t you?”

The injured boy pursed his lips. “I’m not sure I hate it. It might be necessary sometimes.” He gave an average, ordinary response.

Kuzuryu blinked. “Really? Huh…you’ve always struck me as one of those obstinate types.”

“I don’t have that kind of strong personality.” The luckster replied.

Kuzuryu eyed him from the side, choosing to accept the timid statement. Although he disagreed heavily based on personal experience.

The moment of reprieve was interrupted by a bang.

Kuzuryu was intimately familiar with the sound. “Gunfire?” He said lowly.

“K-Kuzuryu-kun!?” It wasn’t like he wanted to accuse Kuzuryu, but he was a crime boss in the making. Guns went hand in hand with that picture.

“Don’t look at me like I’m a fuckin’ animal.” Kuzuryu spat

“The young master forbade firearms of any kind. It would be…inconvenient for the family if any were traced to us. Not even considering potential fatalities to minors.” Pekoyama explained

“It’s not like we knew anything was actually going to go down today. I just had a hunch.” Kuzuryu frowned. “Peko let’s go. If those punks somehow landed a gun, I want to know about it.”

“Of course.”

Kuzuryu ordered his men to get him and the girls somewhere safe inside the school. Then the blonde took off with his trusted partner.

“Need a shoulder to lean on?” One of the yakuza asked.

Naegi politely declined. Partially out of fear, but mostly to regain his bearings. He felt like an outcast in this all this violence…and he couldn’t tell if it was escalating or declining. The spiky-haired boy scanned his surroundings, eventually landing on Otonashi being helped by Kuzuryu’s crew. “Is she oka-” His inquiry was cut off.

The ground rumbled. A sudden *boom* had Naegi falling onto his knees and clutching his head.

…

“What happened!?” Makoto said in a panic. He blacked out for a second, only recalling his phone’s batteries dying at an inopportune moment.

“No idea.” Said this older stranger standing next to him, who looked nothing like the reserve course and had the wrong idea as to Makoto’s question. His eyes were glued to the black smoke in the distance. Whatever blew up, it was enough to trigger Makoto back into the driver’s seat. He observed his surroundings, seeing the reserve course groaning on the floor, with more men hovering over them, menacingly.

Karmic. They need to learn that they can’t get away with this stuff.

More importantly… “Excuse me…but who are you?”
“How hard did they hit you?” The man furrowed his eyebrows, then hollered over to more strange men. “Hey, get this one a stretcher too!”

He missed a lot, but from the sounds of it, these guys were safe. “I’m fine.” Makoto assured him… but he was having second thoughts himself, when the pain in his arms and…pretty much everywhere finally registered.

Getting beat up was nothing new. In fact, it was something he expected at least once a week at this point, but not remembering getting to this point at all? That was new, and it was a problem.

Not just for the prospects of Makoto losing his grip on his own body, but for his other self, who probably experienced the pain firsthand. “Poor guy.” He felt a pang of sympathy for the identity he created.

“So uh thanks for saving us. What’ll you do with them?” Makoto asked, fishing for information.

The man shrugged. “The young master only said we shouldn’t kill them. Anything else is fair game, but I doubt these kids are going to be walking straight for days.”

Young master….ah, they’re with Fuyuhiko. Makes sense.

‘What the heck was Izuru thinking? Talk about a disaster.’ The destruction of property and assault charges will be through the roof. And any notoriety from the media will reflect poorly on the school. Worse case scenario is that the secrets they’ve attempted to hide all the way since Natsumi’s death would come to light.

Nobody got anything out of this whole mess. The school can’t sweep the reserve course under the rug or ignore their parades anymore after this. The headmaster would have to take serious action…

……

“Naegi-kun.” Chiaki said, breaking him out of his thoughts. Seeing the girl in the rain, Makoto immediately thought to share the umbrella (which he got…somehow) with her.

“Chiaki, they didn’t hurt you too badly, I hope.” He looked his friend over, searching for injuries.

“I should be the one asking that. You got it the worst.”

“Oh that’s good.” Makoto sighed in relief.

……

“That’s…good?” Chiaki repeated his statement, questioning the inappropriate phrase.

“If I got the worst of it, then you and the others should be fine. I was scared for a moment.” He giggled. Stopping upon realizing Chiaki wasn’t laughing with him.

“Huh, why’d you go quiet? Come on, laugh.”

“How can you laugh? They nearly killed you.” Chiaki said, a stern expression on her face.

“I’m still here, right? That means everything turned out okay.” For the mean time, assuming there were no more surprises this day had in store.
“Okay? Otonashi and Madarai are seriously hurt, and so are you. What part of any of this, is okay?” Chiaki reprimanded.

The luckster blinked. “…This isn’t like you at all, Chiaki. You’re not hurt anywhere, are you?”

“This isn’t about me. I want to know what you were thinking jumping in front of those guys!” She narrowed her eyes.

“I needed to talk them down, before they hurt anyone else.” He said simply

“I can’t believe I’m the one saying this, but read the mood, Naegi-kun. Anyone could have told that changing their minds wasn’t possible. Not then.” Exasperation was evident in her tone.

“Just because something is thought to be impossible, doesn’t mean it actually is, and it’s definitely not a good excuse not to try.” Makoto replied. “It’s fine if you disagree though, I’m just a little more optim-“

“That’s not optimistic. You’re just being reckless.” Chiaki cut him off. Makoto knew that look. It was the intensity the pinkette showed when gaming. In other words, she wasn’t going to back down.

Makoto sighed. “Like I said, it turned out alright.” it always does.

The gamer gave him a distrustful stare before continuing. “I think you really should let them take you on a stretcher.

’You're not thinking straight’ was the undertone.

Makoto suddenly handed Chiaki the umbrella, then turned away, arms crossed and back facing the girl. Out of the umbrella's reach, the rain fell on his already drenched hair. "Fine, I'll do just that." He conceded in a fashion expected of a child. Though Chiaki couldn't see his face, she could imagine him pouting like one too.

“You never answered my question though.” Makoto spoke again.

“… I was injured the least.” Chiaki said after a time.

“More good news then.” The luckster practically spun around in glee, facing her once again.

Chiaki winced. “That’s only because I didn’t do anything, unlike you and the others. I just stood there and watched. Those guys didn’t even care about me.”

“Hmmm, that doesn’t sound like you.” Makoto tilted his head “I figured you’d do something crazy like jump in the way of danger if your friends were hurt. But if it’s like you say…I’m glad.”

Chiaki’s furrowed her eyebrows. “What?”

“If you’re just a bystander, there’s less chance of getting involved anything dangerous. That’s the best-case scenario for everyone who cares about you.”

The gamer shook her head furiously. “That’s…I don’t want that. I want to be useful too.” Someone that her friends could depend on in times of need.

“You’re like a ray of sunshine, Chiaki.” Makoto chirped. “You help everyone just by being around them, and by being yourself. You’re fine as you are.”
Chiaki froze. “I’m fine as I am?” She’d said those very words to Hinata, so many times before. Despite Makoto’s intentions, those words sounded so cruel. Is that what she’d been doing to Hinata? Telling him to be satisfied when he felt so useless?

Makoto formed a crooked smile.

“I don’t know what you mean, miss, but you did plenty.”

The teens turned to the yakuza, who’d listened in on the conversation, wearing a bemused expression. “Standing up to that gang for your friend here took guts.”


The man laughed. “She stole your thunder, boy. Looks like you don’t get to be the hero of this story.”

“I don’t really get it, but it sounds like I owe you one, Chiaki.” Makoto laughed.

Unbeknownst to the boy and girl, a dark figure stalked them, hidden from plain sight.

The game ended with Naegi’s victory – Izuru concluded. Kuzuryu was a chess piece he won from Enoshima. The efforts from that time bore fruit here.

Yet Izuru found himself not caring about that, his initial goal. Instead he stared at the two interacting amicably and felt something.

He couldn’t put this emotion into words, but it was unpleasant.

"How goes the cleanup?" The yakuza, who'd stayed by the pair of wounded teens addressed his boss.

Fuyuhiko put aside his phone call, staring at the much taller man. "We're done here. The cops are coming, that means you scram."

"Gotcha. Can't say beating on dumbass kids wasn't fun, but what was that explosion earlier?"

"No fucking clue. Whoever was responsible was gone by the time we got there. A small chunk of this school might've been up in flames if it wasn't raining. Lucky us." Fuyuhiko frowned. "No scratch off my back, this is the academy's fuckup. More importantly, how's Naegi and Nanami?"

"No more stretchers and ambulances will probably be packed. I escorted them to the clinic."

"Good work. I'll go see em."

"Hey...boss."
"What?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"I might get his name wrong, but...Naegi, was it? Is he a brother?" The term referring to a friend trusted enough to be one of the family. In other words, the yakuza was asking if the gangster and luckster were well acquainted.

"Why the fuck are you asking? Did anything happen?" The question earned an anxious look from the blonde.

"I don't know if it's worth talking about, but that Naegi kid..." The man paused, recalling the lover's quarrel.

He'd amused himself by watching Naegi and Nanami from start to finish. When the boy turned away from the girl, he'd moved out of her line of sight, but not the yakuza's own...that's how he was able to see it.

"...is it normal for his eyes to swirl black and white?"

Chapter End Notes

The heavily load being too much for Naegi's phone was foreshadowed back in chapter 8. Too bad the egg didn't connect the dots. XD

Next chapter: What happened to Kirigiri, Gekkogahara and Matsuda?
Nagito sat on the floor, resting his back against the wall right in front of the old school building. The torrent of rain and thunder audible amidst the silence. "Just my luck." The white-haired youth yawned.

For the past year and a half, Nagito had experienced some terrible strings of bad luck. All originating with the death of Natsumi Kuzuryu, the sister of the Ultimate in Nagito’s class. Fuyuhiko had a legendary temper on the best of days, and it multiplied 10-fold with his sister’s murder.

Nagito had half-a-mind to tell the yakuza to forget his talentless sister and face the future…just kidding, he wasn’t an idiot. Kuzuryu-kun wouldn’t let him escape with just a few fingers if he’d said that.

But something had to be done about the classroom atmosphere. That’s when Nagito decided to take matters into his own hands at the day of the practice exams. His friends simply weren’t ready to perform, and he wished to postpone the exam.

Complications aside, Nagito succeeded. Now…if only he could have pulled it off without getting caught in the act. All part of that good luck bad luck deal, he supposed.

Nagito closed his eyes.

His eyes opened wide to the noise outside. He turned his head to the nearby window the door with a frown. The jeers of a crowd in large number; it was a disturbance impressively more unpleasant than the thunder, in his humble opinion. Nagito rubbed his sore neck and sluggishly stood, his sandals squeaking as he took small steps towards the door. He peeked outside from the small, opened gap to see what the fuss was about.

From the soreness, Nagito discerned he’d slept for hours at least, but not much changed where the weather was concerned. The sun remained hidden by the clouds and the rain hadn’t faltered. In contrast, the scenery was different.

Nagito tipped his sunglasses upwards, rubbing his eyes to make sure the scene playing out before
him wasn’t a mirage like Tsumiki had been. That is to say, Nagito ‘thought’ he was seeing Yasuke Matsuda and Miaya Gekkogahara, both peers (in the loosest sense of the word, as he would never really compare himself to them) from class 77-A, pinned down by a mob of reserve course students.

There was another in the main course uniform, but he didn’t recognize her.

Of course, a mirage in this turbulent weather was impossible, therefore what he perceived was no doubt real. After ascertaining that he was not hallucinating, Nagito steadily opened the door. The creaking hinges were loud enough to alert the garbage and steal their attention away.

There was an awkward silence, not unlike the flow of an ill-conceived and its actors harshly disrupted by an unforeseen intrusion. Matsuda tried lifting his head to face him, showing signs of confusion, then mild surprise. Gekkogahara couldn’t afford the luxury from her position. He couldn’t get a read on the lavender-haired girl’s emotions.

‘What was going on here?’

Nagito spoke slowly. “There’s...still a possibility that I’m misunderstanding what's hopefully an elaborate Halloween stunt. If so, I’d very much appreciate you clearing up why you’re piling on these Ultimates.”

“Who are you!?” was the unintelligent response given.

“Can’t even answer a single question.” He sighed.

“They’re trying to kill us, idiot.” Matsuda cursed.

“Hahaha, you still have a way with words, Matsuda-kun.” Nagito laughed, gave a greeting of his own. He’d only ever spoken to the neurologist a few times in the past, usually around Kimura-senpai. Anti-social was probably an understatement when describing Matsuda...But he was no more foul-mouthed than Kuzuryu.

“Now then…what was that about killing?” Nagito jovial disposition took a nose-dive when his attention returned to the tens of blue-skinned, background mob characters.

They returned his disgust with anger. Though he couldn’t see their faces with those horrid masks in the way, their brandished weapons conveyed the message clearly.

The summer-tanned boy shrugged. “If that’s how you want to play this game…I can fight fire with fire.”

“He’s not on the list, but kick his ass-“

The insurgent’s order failed to follow through, a piercing pop blotted out all other sounds. The boy’s body flew back and hit the ground, pink blood flowed from his punctured shoulder.

Nobody paid attention to the reserve course’s writhing and tortured screams. Instead they were all shocked to the core by the weapon in the newcomer’s hand. Even the girl who’d remained stoic throughout the interaction, gave way to bewilderment.

“Gunfire that is.” Nagito smiled as smoke seeped out from the barrel. “A souvenir I brought from my trip.” He chirped, like a child bringing a toy to show and tell.

"Long time no see, Gekkogahara-san...oh, I guess you still can't see me just yet." Nagito's pleasant greeting soured when faced with the reality of the blue-haired girl victimized by the garbage. The reserve course gripping her skull and planting her face against the cold ground. "Let me help you with that." Nagito pointed at Gekkogahara's attacker.

"No! Don't shoot anyone!" The therapist yelled. The boy pinning her down took the opening and scrambled off Gekkogahara, distancing himself as far as possible from Nagito's gun.

"Ah...such benevolence. You're as hopeful as I remember!" A blush sprayed on the lucky student's light brown cheeks.

"Bastard hasn't changed one bit." Matsuda wore.

In that time, the rebels had been able to regroup, focusing their attention squarely on the armed sociopath.

“He’s only got one pistol. He can’t take all of us down. Let’s swarm him.” A reserve courser said. ...

“That’s...oddly well assessed.” He gave a genuine compliment. The usual reaction to a gunman is to flee in the opposite direction. What the reserve course just proposed was sound. He only had a few bullets, he’d only hit a few before they reached him.

However...normal people don’t think that way. Self-preservation interfered with such rational, robotic thought patterns...and for the reserve course to make that judgement call so quickly at that. “I kind of want to praise your dedication...but I’m curious. What spurned this on? Going against your betters like this?” Nagito stepped back, fingers on his chin.

“That’s right there. That condescending attitude you pricks show us. We didn’t pay to get into this school, just so you could look down on us like garbage!"

“But...that is exactly what you paid for.” Whatever admiration the luckster felt went down the drain after that asinine response. Nagito expressed genuine difficulty understanding the logic. “We Ultimates have our talents cultivated and assessed by researchers for the years we are in this academy. You, on the other hand, do not have talents at all, only money.”

This fact rattled them, again for reasons the luckster couldn’t fathom. Wasn’t this totally obvious?

“Didn’t I just say that? Some of us traded a fortune just to be here.”

Nagito cut him off. “You were deemed useless and expendable the moment you paid that ‘fortune'. You can’t possibly have been so deluded as to not realize this.” He gave the outraged boy a pitying look. “But I don’t even see why you’re all so banged up on that. All you reserve course have to do is piggy back off the academy’s name, built by the efforts of the Ultimates. The masses have got it made, nobody has any expectations of you lot at all, and you still reap the rewards!”

‘What more could they ask for?’

“Roundabout way of calling them parasites.” Matsuda bristled. He was the sole man in the vicinity who’d resigned himself to the absurdity of the situation.

“Then they're the lowest class then, because they more often that not, parasites know better than to kill their hosts.” Nagito scratched his head. “I can’t even imagine what you all hoped to gain from this. Though, being honest, I also find it difficult to care.”
He backed enough to reach his guitar case, gun still pointed at the pack of wolves encroaching on him.

“This is my last warning. I advise you lot to back away and leave the premises…now.” Nagito said.

He took their lack of cessation as his answer.

“Everyone has to do things the hard way. What despair.” Nagito lamented. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Nagito dropped the pistol and held the black container, flicking it open. The sudden action – that could only be interpreted as surrender – further confused the crowd.

“The fuck are you going to do, play for them?” Matsuda asked, arching his eyebrows at the oversized guitar case.

“Huh? Why would I?” Nagito’s blinked in confusion. “Oh. This isn’t a guitar, this was the only place I could put it in.” The ashen-haired boy opened the case, procuring what laid within. It was a memento from the plane crash. The item had miraculously found its way to shore.

Nagito’d thought It was pretty cool and wanted to share the excitement with his classmates. 'I bet they'll be surprised.' He'd thought, and that would be correct.

Time came to a stop for everyone but Nagito, who, naturally already knew what was inside. It was a perfectly sensible reaction to what they were faced with.

If the shock of seeing a firearm in a Japanese school rated a 7 out of 10, this broke the numerical scale.

Nagito foisted the rugged, black, tube-shaped weapon on his shoulder; its body was plain and inspired, but the warhead attached to it struck everyone with fear.

"Yeah..that sounds about right for him.” Matsuda, largely desensitized to the insane was the fastest to recover, escaping his stunned captor’s loosened hold. The neurologist rolled out of the line of fire

Similarly, the pink one swiped the feet of the reserve course in the way, then made a break for Gekkogahara. She crudely carried the therapist, for there wasn’t the time for a gentler approach.

None of the other brainwashed students retaliated, still flabbergasted. The brainwashing that bound them – unbeknownst to everyone else – began to falter at the sight . For the reserve course, this wasn’t a matter of survival, nor an issue of attacking the other boy. No, it was a deeply rooted and all-encompassing curiosity.

The overwhelming curiosity to find out if that RPG-7, Nagito had casually lugged around, was genuine.

“I-It’s fake.”

“You’re bluffing. That can’t be real.”

They could neither take one step forward or one step back. They remained frozen in the rain, just outside the door.

“Fake?” Nagito cocked his head, then beamed “Oh I see. You’re trying your luck. Well, I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes. It’s not much of a talent…but I am the Ultimate Lucky Student.” He
laughed, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. They were stale, unforgiving and merciless.
Instinctively, the reserve coursers knew...as men driven by an explosion of repressed anger
themselves, they could discern an identical emotion in another.

"Wait...the Ultimate Lucky Student...you're Nagito Komaeda?" More than a few of the masked
boys shook. Others remained confused.

"Hmm...You know me? Am I famous?" Nagito cocked his head, entirely unaware that a similar
‘conversation’ was taking place on the other side of campus.

Nagito Komaeda wasn't one of the names written on the target list...but there wasn't a senior
student in the academy that didn't know the name. That the rumors extended to the reserve course
was proof of that. Rumors surrounding one of the suspects behind the bombing of the gymnasium,
the previous year.

They were not dealing with someone of a sane mind. “Ah...aaaah..."As that truth, finally registered
in earnest, the hunters realized they’d become the hunted.
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

They fled, pushing against each other to escape in any direction outside of Nagito’s line of fire.

"Running away? Oh well, let's leave your fates to luck, shall we?" Just when it looked like their
chances of dodging seemed about fair, Nagito decided to make good on his threat and pulled the
trigger.

The warhead tore through water and wind at breakneck speeds.

A violent explosion resulted from the missile crashing into shed in its path.

The tiny building burst into flames, all in the vicinity were practically deafened amidst the smoke.
The mob didn’t stop running or screaming, never so much as looking back at him.

…

“Even after I said I wouldn’t miss, I didn’t hit a single target. So lame.” Nagito murmured, setting
the rocket launcher down and stepped outside, looking around for the actually important people.
“Are you three alright?” Nagito called out.

The designated trio were on separate sides of the building, staring at the fire in amazement.

“Chill out guys, nobody got hurt.” But he arguably wanted to. They’d angered him to such an
extent.

Nagito went for Gekkogahara’s wheel chair, lying on its side in the rain and returned it to proper
form, wheeling it to where the therapist and her friend(?) (who kept glaring at him) were.

“Hi, I’m Nagito Komaeda, from class 77-B. Nice to meet you.” He brought the wheelchair as a
cordial greeting.

“…Kyoko Kirigiri.” She introduced herself hesitantly. With Nagito’s help, they seated
Gekkogahara back in the chair.

“Kirigiri? Are you a relative of the headmaster?”

“Is that a problem?”
“Nope, just wondering.” He said, looking around…’Hm?’ Wet papers sprawled on the floor caught his eye. It was probably useless to pick them up now, but he did so anyway. Not like he had to let them waste any more of their precious time.

Dropped on one knee, Nagito looked over the documents. The damp sheets were still legible enough to be read. It was a profile on…Junko Enoshima, a freshman.

‘The model?’ Nagito thought…and his interest was piqued as he read more. “Student council murders…Ultimate…Despair?” Nagito said, in a monotone voice. On the other paper was information on a student named…Izuru Kamukura.

“The Ultimate hope?” The boy’s reaction was much less subdued. His eyes left the documents, moving upwards to the trio staring at him.

Nagito stayed silent for a moment before proposing. “Let’s go inside for now. We don’t want to get involved in anything sketchier, do we?” He stood, waving the sheets of paper and walking slowly towards the entrance. It was a gesture, more than requesting they accompany him.

The others looked between themselves and followed his trail, having their fill of the cold.

“Where did you acquire those weapons?” Kirigiri asked Nagito, unable to fight her looming curiosity.

“No…before that…what the hell are you wearing?” Matsuda pointed at Nagito’s pink floral shirt. “I barely recognized you.”

“Hahaha. Funny you should ask…”

Nagito laughed, but his thoughts were elsewhere. The day's events had piqued his interests, leaving himself wondering 'Is it alright for me to be this lucky?'

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter:
HPA deals with the aftermath of the tragedy. And there might be a plot twist

With that aside, I have news. It's THAT time of the year again. That means exams, so I'll unfortunately have to break from this fic for a few weeks after the next. Currently, I've got chapter 13 mostly done, save one section I'd like feedback on.

Minor characters are going to appear in a flashback, but I'm hung up on whether to make them OCs or canon characters. If canon, then they'll be V3 characters, from as many as 2 to 5 depending on how I feel. I'd normally go V3 100% but here, I get the feeling including that cast would break the immersion of the HPA saga hence my dilemma. So I thought I'd leave the decision to you.
Hope’s Peak Academy was known far and wide, its fame extending to the far corners of the globe. A feat credited to over a century of academic excellence and research in the field of talent. It’s said that alumni from the academy had grown up to become some of the influential individuals in the world. In sum, it was a faultless institution that assured graduates a promising future.

This is what the public believed, and to be fair, most of that is actually true. The only deceptions were facets that didn’t show outwardly. The experimentations, the extortions, the bribes. All the dirty little deeds concealed from the everyman’s eye. Not very well, but sometimes you get lazy. Like whenever you pretend your room’s clean, even though all you did was stuff the dirty laundry in the closet.

Things go south real fast on the off chance that your folks pulls the closet wide open and everything comes falling out.

Is that what happened to Hope’s Peak? Nope, they’re not faring that badly. The closet only opened slightly…and made a little bit of a mess, but that was enough to get the public to notice…and wonder what other skeletons were in there.

Incidentally, that mess was called “The Tragedy of Hope’s Peak Academy.” An elderly man of no import sat cross-legged in a diner, reading the newspaper’s headline aloud

“Absolutely terrible.” Replied a younger male situated on a barstool, his comment made in passing as his attention was gripped by the television hanging in the corner.

“Hm” The old man grunted in agreement, however his eyes never left the paper, because the topic of discussion had been the same in both media outlets. This wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. Similar conversations were taking place across the world. Even the previous Halloween night was boycotted by the news. A night where children and guardians frolicked the streets in costume had been replaced by people remaining indoors to watch the news unfold.

“There were explosions?”

“Aren’t these kids?”

“Back in my day, we worried about grades. Nowadays, they worry about staging mini-coup d’etats? What’s the world coming to?”

“There’s a reserve course?”

“I heard a rumor the school was running out of money.”

“Were they being swindled by the school?”

“That doesn’t sound like Hope’s Peak I know.”
“If those scumbags even touched Sayaka-chan, I’m going in there blazing!”

“Haha, a freakin’ riot? Think Boss Mondo started it?...Oh right, he’s on the main course. Bet he kicked ass either way.”

,“Who are the bad guys here? Has to be the ones who were armed, right?”

“As a corporate slave, lemme tell you that I’ve thought about bashing the management’s skulls in every day. Some people are real dicks, you can’t blame the oppressed just because they start a little fire.”

“Hear me out for a sec. Don’t you think a rebellion’s like…kind of cool?

November 5th 20XX

Hope’s Peak Academy was turned upside down in a span of two hours. That was how long it took for the reserve course to be subdued and for the rioters to be fully rounded up by campus security. The grunt work already having been done by the mafia.

Charges were filed against the offenders, but ultimately, the school held too much responsibility for negligence of student minors.

Classes were cancelled indefinitely while the school staff toiled over the matter and what they should do next. Students were either given the choice of returning home or remaining at the dorms. Most selected the former, opting to visit their families after the scare.

In Kyoko’s case, her ‘family’ was here, and none too pleased.

“That bad?” She asked her father. The shadow over his eyes suggested he hadn’t slept a wink. That wasn’t hard to imagine given the burden on his shoulders.

“Very…but not undeserved.” Jin answered with a self-deprecating gesture “We’ve had this coming for too long.”

Kyoko didn’t disagree. “No reason for me to say, ‘I told you so’.” The truth always comes to light, it was only a matter of when. “Still, it’s a shame about the injured.” While there hadn’t been any recorded deaths, a few of the students were in critical condition. An especially bad case belonged to one of the offenders. Kyoko heard rumors along the grapevines saying the boy had been caught in the explosion. Others mention that he was electrocuted.

Kyoko could confirm the former wasn’t true. She was a witness at the scene. “It’ll only get worse from here. The media’s all over this.”

“That’s one of the reasons the school had the children go home. The last thing they need is to be preyed upon by those vultures.” Jin said, and no, the irony wasn’t lost on him. The board had been the very first to extort its students, and this was the consequence. “That is also why I couldn’t meet with you anywhere other than my office. I’ll be flooded with cameras if they catch a single sight of me.” The headmaster forced a tired smile. “Honestly I’m a little relieved. All this hush hush
business ever since Natsumi Kuzuryu, has never sat right with me.”

“Odd thing to say. With the previous committee…gone, you would be the scapegoat if all the incidences this past year come to light.”

“Like I said, that’s not entirely undeserved. It may not have been my decision to hide the truth, but I played my part in it.”

“Very well. You’re old enough to clean up after yourself…and I must admit. I’m slightly pleased to see you’re not running away this time.”

“Kyoko…we’ve been over this. I didn’t mean to leave you.”

The lilac-haired girl bristled. “So you’ve told me.” Kyoko crossed her arms, a displeased look on her features. Her father explained the reason behind his departure when she was a child. “How do you plan to remedy the situation?”

“Now that is the question.” Jin crossed his fingers, his expression hardened. “A public apology can’t be avoided, and the school’s reputation will take a hit.”

“Don’t dance around the question. What’ll you do about the reserve course?”

“That has yet to be decided.”

Of course it hasn’t.

“A count of 229 students were among the rioters, which is less than 1/10th of the total number of reserve course students. Large, but not enough to punish the entire system. As you know, we depended on them for income and the current board isn’t ready to lose out.”

“So you’ll do nothing?” Kyoko’s eyebrow ticked upward.

He shook his head. “I’ve yet to figure out what to do. If you have any idea, I’m all ears.”

She could see the dilemma. “If you want my advice, I’d say you should actually listen to their pleas and address them. It’s quite simple once you think about it.”

“Simple? Sure. But impractical. Upholding and prioritizing genuine talent is one of the school’s foundations. We fail to separate the talented from the less talented, and we lose our edge.”

“Then you should never have had the two occupy the same campus in the first place.” Kyoko scowled. “You need to make sacrifices.”

Jin nodded grimly. “Oh well, let’s leave the gruesome matters for later. It’s not every day we have lunch together…I’m happy to see you were unharmed.”

“Thank Nagito Komaeda for that.”

Jin’s eyes widened in surprise. “Komaeda returned? Where has he been all this time?”

“…You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

She still didn’t.
“Hm. You’re not as banged up as I expected. Pity that, now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

Those cold words left Ryoko in a rare bad mood, one that had yet to fade with the passing of time. Surprisingly, the cause wasn’t just the reserve course attack, but even more heinous – The Aftermath of that brush with death.

When Ryoko decided to remain and receive treatment in school, she expected that it would be under Matsuda-kun’s delicate care…but…BUT, he dared to step on a cute, innocent and fabulous girl’s heart. It was every girl’s dream to be pampered by the guy they liked…only the neurologist had barely even come to visit.

What was more important, his research or herself? Ryoko would have asked, but she didn’t want the answer.

Depressing. Her life was Super-Ultra-Magnum D-E-P-R-E-S-S-I-N-G. However, there was a ray of light, in the tiny, mousey form of her most recent visitor.

“Not going home, Chihiro?” Ryoko said.

“About that…I got into a fight with my dad about that. He wanted me to return, but I didn’t. We don’t uh…usually argue, so I don’t know what to say to him now.” Chihiro stared the floor, regretfully.

Ryoko wanted to give him a giant, bear-crushing hug to cheer them both up. And by ‘wanted to’, she was already doing that!

Chihiro burned red as Ryoko squished his cheeks against her own. “O-O-Otonashi-san!”

“Ah, much better.” Ryoko beamed, releasing the boy from her grip once she got her fix. “I’m happy you stayed over…Just curious but…why don’t you want to go? There’s kind of nothing to do here, ya know.”

“Um…Naegi said he wasn’t going home, and he got injured during the riot. I thought I’d keep him company here.”

The amnesiac pouted at Chihiro’s blatant favoritism of that cheat over herself. “I don’t think you needed to bother there. It’s not like everybody left.”

“Huh?”

“Naegi gets around. As long as there’s someone else with a beating heart, I don’t think that guy will ever get bored.”

Chihiro cringed.

“It doesn’t have to be you.” Ryoko realized only after speaking the words (that came out automatically) that they didn’t express Ryoko’s intent at all. “I-mean it doesn’t have to be you looking after him.” What’s up with me lately?

“Uh-huh…I guess you’re right there.” He didn’t sound entirely convinced and changed the subject. “Are you going home?”

“No point.”
“What about your family?”

“I don’t have any, apparently.”

“…Are you sure?”

“Yeah. That’s what Matsuda told me. I’ve been all alone~” Ryoko said in a joking tone, to diffuse any awkwardness that would come with the truth. She didn’t want Chihiro to think he’d stepped on a landmine when he really hadn’t.

“I see…How is Yasuke anyway?”

Ryoko shrugs. “He keeps to himself and doesn’t want to see me.”

This time Chihiro had practically detonated a landmine and knew when to back out. “…Sorry to hear that.”

Ryoko reached for the nearest pillow to embrace. “It’s not a big deal. It just means I have to try harder in the name of love.”

Chihiro smiled a bit at her resilience. “Who else has come to visit you?”

“Just Ishimaru and Ikusaba. I don’t know anybody else…and I’m pretty sure Ishimaru came out of some weird obligation.” Ishimaru seemed like an upstanding guy, but he needed to chill!

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” Chihiro laughed nervously, having understood Ryoko’s plight. “…What about Ikusaba-san?”

Ryoko puffed her cheeks. “I’ve deduced that she’s very quiet.”

Chihiro giggled. “She’s gotten a lot better. Before she hardly spoke until Naegi came into the picture.”

“S’that so?” It was amazing how irritating that name was becoming.

“But you know, Ikusaba still doesn’t get along very well with others, even if she’s improved. I’m…surprised she came to visit you. Have you two…talked before?” Chihiro sounded like he was implying something.

“Barely. Unless I forgot about it.”

The programmer narrowed his eyes. “When was the last time you forgot anything?”

Ryoko tilted her head to the side. “Weeks.” Maybe she was cured.

“And you don’t remember anything from before then?”

“Sheesh, what’s with all the questions? I’ve told you I don’t remember.”

“Are you…Enoshima?” The chestnut colored-haired boy said out of the blue. His curiosity and concern outweighing all else.

That name again…

Ryoko heaved an exasperated sigh. “My name is Ryoko. R-y-o-k-o.”
“Yeah but, you can’t say you’re not Enoshima if you don’t remember.”

“How would I go by a different name? Even if I forgot, Matsuda-kun wouldn’t. He said we’ve known each other for a looong time~” She poked Chihiro’s chest playfully.

Chihiro paused, shifting his gaze between her and the floor like a guilty child, like he was hiding something.

“Are we that similar?” Ryoko asked.

Chihiro nodded. “Appearance-wise, you’re like…twins.” This was taking to account that Ryoko resembled Junko more than her actual twin.

“Even if she was as gorgeous as I am, can she mimic my winning personality?”

“Were you competing?”

“Oh Chi, you may be as pretty as a girl, but you’re ways off from understanding them.” Ryoko patted the boy’s head condescendingly.

“Uh…thanks...or maybe not?” He stuttered with uncertainty.

Satisfied, Ryoko retracted her hand, saying “I’m heading out. Want to come with?”

“At this time?”

Ryoko nodded. “Not like I’ve got anything better to do…and I want to know more about this Enoshima chick.”

That person had nothing to do with her…but if her name’s come up this much, then Ryoko didn’t need to remain ignorant about her.

If nothing else, maybe Matsuda-kun could clear up this misunderstanding.

"A total 60 injured in yet another unfortunate incident this year…”

“For a tragedy, they sure seem happy to talk about it.” Makoto sat on a backwards chair, watching the news with vitriol. As someone who was personally involved in similar incident, he felt he had that right. He wore the cast on his right arm to prove it. But that was enough about him. What really mattered was the media coming down hard on the school.

Makoto whistled. For every comment made about feeling compassion for the victims, there was an equal backhanded criticism of the academy’s handling of the situation.

He didn’t want to be in Headmaster Kirigiri’s shoes right now. From the sounds of it, there were some who actually sympathized with the rebels’ motives. Like they were just looking for an opening to sink their teeth into the school and mount propaganda against the system that favored Ultimates over the common folk.
“But weren’t the Ultimates the victims here?” He’d like to think so. Makoto had his own problems in the aftermath, with the police no less. The police interrogated just about every able staff and student to learn about the tragedy from eye-witness testimonies. Makoto’s case was just more bizarre than the others. He’d rang 9-1-1 directly in hopes of saving one of the reserve course. Despite their disbelief at the convenience of lightning striking as such an opportune moment, they’d quickly accepted it after learning about his talent.

Luckily, the police was as intrusive as their circumstances got. The academy had managed to keep him and most of the victims away from the media.

…

If that wasn’t enough, over the past few days, there’d been protests against HPA in select areas around the country, as if parroting the reserve course’s ‘parades’…and they were just about as peaceful too. In other words, not at all. The broadcast earlier was about the most recent riot, which ended in a few dead.

HPA was taking the blame for that too, as if the academy controlled the instigators via remote control or brainwashing.

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‘Wow, that’s actually more likely than It sounds’ the world where majority rules was in tip-top shape as usual.

His cynical train of thought was interrupted by the ringtone from his cellphone.

Makoto grunted. His phone had been going off incessantly. The school was under obligation to inform his family of his injuries and his parents insisted he returned home.

He ignored their pleas, of course. Why would he want to go back there?

Because it would make them happy – would normally by the ideal answer. That was enough to get Makoto to do just about anything for everyone (mostly) within ethical limits. But his parents weren’t ‘everyone.’

Makoto scratched his hair.

Never mind them, they weren’t even the ones on the line. The caller was Komaru. His little sister who, much like his parents, Makoto had no idea how to deal with. He relegated that task to his other self, but that would be a bad idea right now.

“Makoto speaking.” He answered

“Pick up your phone, Big bro!” A scolding, but preppy voice said.

“I just did…”

“Not for me. Mom and dad said they couldn’t reach you.”

“Ah… I figured they’d give up eventually if I stopped picking up.”

“Or, they drive up there and drag you back by force?” Komaru whispered. From her tone, he doubted that was a hypothetical…and that was an alternative he hadn’t thought about.

“Do your brother a favor and call me beforehand so I can hide if that ever happens.”
“Only if you tell me why you’ve been so distant! Call once in a while.”

“I’ve… got a lot on my mind.”

“Like~” He could practically see her teasing smirk.

“Stuff. Real important stuff that I can’t give you the details about.” He said vaguely…but the thing about failing to elaborate means others can fill in the blanks with their own weird notions.

“You got a girlfriend?!”

Like right now. “…Yeah, that’s exactly what I meant.” He went along with it.

“Liar.” She responded, monotone.

“How could you tell?” Makoto droned sarcastically.

“I’m your little sister, Makoto. I think I’ve earned the right to say I know you better than most. There’s no girl in Hope’s Peak who’d date a dork like you.”

“You really think so?”

“Not unless you live up to that lucky business, but um… I think we both know you’re on the other side of spectrum, big bro. But don’t feel too bad, there’ll always be someone who loves you as much you love them.”

Makoto furrowed his eyebrows “Who?”

“…What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m the one who asked.”

“…” The line went quiet for what seemed like minutes. “You’re kidding, right?”

Makoto immediately realized he’d said something very wrong. In cases like this, it was better to subtly move the conversation along in a different direction. Usually by smoothing the current topic over with a nebulous lie. “Yup, it was a joke.”

“…Jeez, you actually had me worried there. That’s a pretty mean joke.”

He laughed it off. “But you shouldn’t doubt me being able to find a girlfriend. Sayaka even said one of my classmates really likes me!”

“Is Sayaka-chan alright? You know, after the riots.”

Makoto sighed in relief. “Uh yeah. She was safe in the classroom.”

“And why weren’t you in class with her?”

“Uh, I wandered off somewhere searching for someone before. I just happened to get caught by the reserve course. Just my luck, huh?” A half-lie, but those were always the most effective.

He heard the smack of her forehead even from here. “Makoto, we both know you’re unlucky, but ever stop to think you’re also… stupid?”

How could she say that? “How was I supposed to know they’d lose their minds and attack us?”
“It’s not just this time. You’re always getting hurt because you leave everyone behind. Just like at the amusement park—…”

“…What amusement park?” Makoto asked, trying to recall their last outings of that nature. They hadn’t visited carnivals since…

“…Forget it.” Komaru said quickly. “Ugh, I’m just telling you should take care of yourself and stop worrying mom and dad to death. Those ‘protests’ are still going on you know.”

“Yeah. I get why the reserve course attacked, even if I don’t agree with it. But that has nothing to do with anyone outside of Hope’s Peak.”

“M homeroom teacher explained it to the class. Saying that it’s just a trend. People are only mimicking what happened at the academy.”

“Well, Komaru? I heard some have died. These acts of violence are a bit…extreme to be called a fad, I think.”

“Sometimes, Makoto…I really don’t think you understand just how incredible you are to be attending Hope’s Peak Academy.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. If you did, you wouldn’t be asking why everyone going nuts right now. It’s not just a fad. Anything that involves Ultimates is the biggest deal. You guys could become vegetarians and the country would quit meat within the week!”

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“Bro…you there?”

“Oh?” Makoto mused, tapping his desk. “I’ll check this over with one of my friends. Thanks, Komaru.” He said slowly, his attention quickly leaving the conversation.

“…What’d I do?”

“Good night.”

He hung up, ruminating over the knowledge he’d just gained…

Makoto dialed one of his contact numbers. “Hi, Chiaki. It’s Makoto.”

Yawning could be heard from the other end. “Do you know what time it is?” Chiaki’s voice exuded a rare degree of annoyance.

“Uh…7 in the evening?” He raised his eyebrow.

“Exactly. We’re at prime bed time hours.”

“For you, maybe.” He chuckled. “You’re staying over, right?”

“Yup. Most of my friends aren’t going back so I thought I’d hang out here. Plus Mikan’s talking to me again.”
“Mikan…” He shivered

“What?” Chiaki heard the wavering voice.

“Nothing much…it’s just…” He remembered his last conversation with the nurse after treatment.

‘Naegi-san…are you a safety hazard?’

The luckster rubbed his arm, shuddering at the ominous implication. “I…don’t know if I’ll ever be able to leave the infirmary if she catches me injured again.”

“…” Chiaki stayed quiet on the other end.

“Anyway it’s great that you’re friends again!”

“Yeah, she practically insisted I hang out with her all the time. Kind of like you.” She said drowsily, but the hint of affection wasn’t lost on him.

“Does that mean you’re busy tomorrow? It’s fine if so, but I want to hang out sometime.”

“I’m free in the afternoon. When do you want to meet?”

“How about…3, at the recreation room?” Makoto suggested, yawning soon after.

“Gotcha. Now get some sleep.”

Like he could! – Makoto ended the call, then switched conversation partners with the words “Alter ego.”

His visage was reflected in the laptop besides him. “Good evening, Naegi. Did you need something?”

“I have a question.” Maybe Komaru was right…and he didn’t understand just how influential the academy could be. The brown-haired boy rested his head on his arms, eyeing Alter Ego sideways.

“I’ll do anything within my capabilities.”

“Can I make everyone in the world happy?”

Anyone else would have mocked the question or interpreted it as a riddle, but Alter Ego being a machine (regardless of how fluent it was in humanese) considered his inquiry a literal one and replied with sincerity. “Based on historical data, it’s not possible. I know I’m still young, but I’m equipped with the necessary information to know that every person has their own set of values and rationales. Counting 6 billion humans on the planet, one person’s happiness will definitively make at least one other unhappy.”

Alter Ego was by leaps and bounds one of the most intelligent beings Makoto had ever encountered. In terms of knowledge, he was practically an archive of information…or could at least access one. If he said something was impossible then a high-schooler who averaged Cs on his grades thinking he could overturn the conclusion of that intelligence was the height of optimism.

And yet a light sparked inside Makoto. “Want to make a bet?”

“A bet?” Alter ego said curiously, seeing Makoto’s proposal as an invitation to a game.

The luckster stood, taking a marker from his desk. He stopped at the calendar besides his bed. His
expression uncharacteristically neutral as he circled a peculiar holiday in red. “Then let me be the first to prove you wrong.”

Optimism was his defining trait…and starting from Christmas day, it would be everyone else’s.

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Makoto’s fingers traced the words on the open textbook, stationed at a chair and desk that were too small and outdated to belong to Hope’s Peak Academy. He would hardly have minded that knowledge, as his body was smaller to accommodate the downsize.

Makoto stole glances at the only other person present in the classroom. A girl was seated a few rows to the side. She was taller, with mid-length hair colored a deep-sea blue. He noticed once again that her eyes were a matching color as they stared back at his own.

He gasped lightly, quickly turning away and returning to his book.

“Yooo Makoto, you going home?” A voice filled with child-like glee called him. An older boy stormed into the room, closing in on the spikey-haired child like a homing missile.

“Kotaro-kun…not yet.” Makoto replied, his voice both younger and devoid of ulterior motives.

“Eh, studying, I see. You braniac.” Kotaro Sakakibara said. His chocolate-brown hair was much cleaner than Makoto’s. In contrast, his uniform was disheveled, albeit intentionally. Whenever asked, the boy claimed it brought out his bad-boy charm.

Generally, his explanation was quickly followed by mockery and amusement from whoever heard.

“I thought I’d find you here, Makoto.” A girl with rose-hair styled into a side pony-tail called, walking in after Kotaro. Her features could only be described as typically girly, especially when her uniform was accentuated by an assortment of bright-pink accessories. She put on an innocent smile when her gaze landed on the smaller boy, approaching gingerly before settling behind him. The others watched with suspicion but couldn’t prevent her from placing her hands underneath Makoto’s, wrapping around his waist and forcefully pulling him from his chair. From there she spun him around, the spikey-haired boy’s legs lifting off the ground.

“S-Stop. Put me down!” Makoto flushed.

“Back off, Takizawa. I called dibs.” Kotaro snapped.

Nana Takizawa did just that, stopping in place (but not letting go of the frantic Makoto) and facing Kotaro. “Haaa? Why do I gotta let my adorable Makoto put up with a slimy dipshit like you?” Nana’s gentle voice and features turned harsh, her expression contorted into a sharp glare, as she looked upon the delinquent with disdain.

“Why you…” Kotaro didn’t relent, instead directing his attention to the subject in discussion. “Hey, you’re not ditching me for this psycho, are you?”

“Why don’t you say that to my face, pansy-ass!” Nana seethed, before returning to Makoto, her formerly pacified demeanor switching back on like a flicker of a light. “He’s wrong, right? We’re going going riding on my bike today.”
Were this impasse to have taken place a few years into the future, Makoto would have either compromised and met the arguing duo half-way…or selected an alternative that everyone would be satisfied with. He wouldn’t have left anyone unhappy.

“No way.” This Makoto wasn’t that person, so he turned them down. “I’ve got to look after my little sister today. “

The other two blinked at the rejection. Not entirely unsurprised.

“Come on, I bet she can take care of herself.” Kotaro started.

“She’s only 6.”

“And you’re 9, dude.”

“7.” said the 5th grader

“Not the point, genius.” The older boy said. “Don’t sweat the small stuff. Just come hang with me.”

“You mean me, right?” Nana glared.

Makoto sighed. “Know that new karaoke that just opened up? Why don’t you two go together and check it out for me?”

“Eh? B-but I’m terrible at singing.” Nana suddenly lost confidence.

“You can’t be worse than he is.” Makoto smiled, pointing to the other male.

“I’m a great singer, way better than the thug who pretends to be a girl!” Kotaro mocked.

“Oho, those are some damn right famous last words, Ko-chan~” Nana finally let go of Makoto, cracking her knuckles.

“Bring it!”

*cough* - The hoarse sound disrupted the antagonistic flow, drawing their attention. Standing in front of them was their instructor. A middle-aged man with glasses and silver hair.

“Takeda-sensei…”

“You two… instead of playing around, shouldn’t be getting ready for the makeup test?” The older man said.

Makoto’s ears perked up. “Makeup test?”

“Geh!” “Crap.”

The teacher frowned. “Yes. They barely got a passing grade on the last test.”

“Ahaahaha-wouldn’t you know it, I’ve got to babysit my little sis too.” Nana laughed suspiciously, beads of sweat falling from her face.

“Same. Later.” Kotaro tried to excuse himself

“Wait right there.” Makoto said, his tone devoid of playfulness as a shadow was cast over his
face. “You ‘only’ children are coming with me.” Neither of his friends could move with his grip firmly holding their arms.

“This is bad. He’s gone full class rep mode!” Kotaro freaked.

“What about Komaru-chan?” Nana tried to think up an excuse.

“No problem, she likes when people come over.”

“That ain’t what you said before!” Kotaro argued.

“I changed my mind, we’re hanging out. All 3 of us at my house, and we’ll have lots of fun… studying.” Makoto glowered.

“Sensei, do something! He’s kidnapping us!”

“I’ll entrust them to you, Naegi-kun.” The bespectacled man motioned to the frightened children. “I’ll also be informing your parents where you are.”

“No need, I’ll call them myself.” Makoto said, earning a few confused looks. “I was at the PTA meeting 2 months ago and got to know everyone’s parents.”

“…”

“I have their moms’ contact info.”

“…”

“I… I’ll leave that to you then.” The instructor coughed, breaking the silence.

“Wait wait wait. Makoto…you so don’t need to study!” Kotaro wasn’t quite ready to admit defeat.

“I got an A on the test.” The spiky-haired boy said, sullenly.

“….And?” The brown-haired boy stared at Makoto like he’d grown a second head.

Makoto cast him an indignant look.

“So it’s the reason he’s still here. I got an A+” A voice, not belonging to the named four spoke aloud. It was the blue-haired girl, now packing her bags, not even looking at the bizarre scenario unfolding in the background.

“I didn’t notice you there, Shirai-chan. Speak up, why dontcha.” Nana said with a toothy grin.

“I didn’t want to interrupt.” Shirai Hayase smiled back amiably.

Naegi scowled at the girl’s earlier assessment. His expression failing to go unnoticed by her

“Still trying to compete with me huh?” Shirai’s smirk was nigh inerasable

“You’re only ahead because I caught a cold.” Makoto looked away.

“Just like the last time when your dog ate your test notes or the time when auntie’s car broke down the morning before the exam…or…pretty much every single time.”

“It’s just bad luck.”
Shirai shrugged. “True. Then, I guess it’s also bad luck that you moved up to the same class as me, Makoto Cheeky-kun.”

“Naegi. You know that.”

“Uwah, they’re at it again.” Kotaro remarked.


Shirai reacted to the label with a professional tone. “If I were his older sister, I’d be a lot stern with him. For example, where do you get off hounding your classmates like that? If you want them to study with you then be honest about it.”

‘She’s scolding him like his sister anyway…’ Kotaro thought. “It’s not a big deal. We don’t mind that much. Right, Takizawa?”

“Umu.” The pink-haired girl nodded.

“You shouldn’t spoil this kid, he’ll walk all over you.”

“Yes ma’am.” They saluted.

“I’m not ma’am.” Shirai sighed, putting her bag over her back, stopping by the instructor

“Thanks for your guidance, sensei.” She bowed.

“Your achievements is purely due to your own efforts, Hayase-kun.” Takeda replied.

“Thank you.”

Just as the Shirai was about to leave, a mumble, barely audible, reached her ears.

“What was that?” The bluenette tilted her head back to the source.

“You…can come too.” Makoto said, not meeting her eyes.

“Repeat.”

“You can come too.” He said louder this time.

“No thanks.” She shut him down, sparing Makoto not another glance.

“Harsh. We’ll be fine without her though.” Kotaro said, trying to cheer the boy up.

Makoto nodded, his smile returning. “Yeah, let’s go.”

“Later, Takeda-sensei.” Nana waved the teacher goodbye.

The older man nodded, watching the trio depart.

…”

On the outskirts of Black-root Elementary school, Makoto and the others caught a familiar face waiting for them.

“What took you so long?” Shirai scowled.
“Eh? You’re coming after all?” Kotaro furrowed his eyebrows in confusion.

“Yes.”

The similarly confused Makoto added “But you said…”

“I didn’t feel like accepting that kind of invitation. I’m going because I want to see Komaru-chan again. She’ll be lonely while you’re studying.”

Makoto accepted that bureaucratic reply…but “Aren’t you going to study?”

“Of course I am. Some of us actually need to work hard to excel.”

The instructor stayed behind, assorting stacks of papers. He looked up from his work at the sound of footsteps.

“Was that him?” A blonde-haired man in a white suit stepped into the classroom. His attire was much too gaudy to not stand out in a reserved elementary school.

Takeda brushed against his eyeglasses at the arrival. “Mr…Kizakura, was it?”

Koichi Kizakura tipped his fedora in recognition “That’s my name. I’m a scout from Hope’s Peak.”

“It’s a pleasure. And count my surprise to see an envoy from that prestigious school.” The elementary teacher stared in awe, motioning to shake the scout’s hand.

Koichi reciprocated the gesture. “Yeah, we usually scout from second year of middle school, but some kids are just too talented to ignore. From up coming idols, to therapists to…”

“Prodigies.”

“Well, I’d like to think all our prospects are geniuses, but the case here is peculiar enough.” Koichi held out a file. “Makoto Naegi. Age 7, skipped 2 years and is now in 5th grade. Star of the track team. Class representative.” So many achievements at such a young age, but Koichi spoke as if they were mundane. In his line of business, they arguably were.

“I’d appreciate you add secretary to that list. With Naegi in the classroom, my workload has shrunk in half.”

“Ah, living the dream.” Koichi smiled. “I’ve got a few questions to ask, it’s fine if we stand. It won’t take long.”

“Go right ahead.”

Koichi accepted the invitation. “How smart is the kid, really. Compared to the other students.”

“Naegi-kun has never fallen below 80 points on assignments or test material and consistently ranks second in the class.” Takeda answered.

Koichi tapped his cheek with a pen. “Second? That’s no good. Or rather, should I be looking to
“scout number one instead?”

Takeda shook his head. “Hayase is one of the brightest students I’ve ever taught. Her work ethic is second to none as well.”

“I’m guessing there’s a ‘but’ in there somewhere.” Koichi said.

“…I don’t want to play favorites with my students, but…if Naegi-kun were a prodigy worth scouting as an Ultimate, Hayase is just bright. He has been gaining on her as of late…and take the age gap into account…”

“I see…I guess I’ll overlook the second fiddle bit.” Koichi jotted down his notes.

“Next question…how social is he from your observations? “I can’t imagine it’d be easy for the other kiddies to accept a bra-…the little guy.”

Takeda gave a wry smile. “It seemed that way at first. As a teacher, I wasn’t sure if my help would make things better or worse…you know how kids are.”

“My friend does.” Koichi said in understanding.

“I was worried Naegi was bullied when the class pushed the representative seat onto him…but he didn’t seem to mind or complain. Not where I could see at least.” Takeda rubbed his chin.

“Yikes.” Koichi whistled. Kids could be as cruel as they were innocent.

“I didn’t have to worry too much though, and I would it say it was all for the best. Naegi took an active role in caring for the welfare of the class and everyone appreciates him…Actually…take Naegi-kun out of the classroom and I’m sure I’d hear nothing but complaints and whining from the others. Now it’s like only Hayase treats Naegi his age.” He scratched his head.

“That’s exactly what I needed to hear.” Koichi smiled with satisfaction. “Sounds like he’d make a perfect fit.”

“For the Hope’s Peak Academy?”

“Yeah. If he keeps this pace up for the next 5 years…or less if he keeps skipping…We’ll welcome him with open arms…” The scout flipped over his notes, a red circle over the scouted talent. “As our Ultimate Student Council President. What’d you think?”

The instructor laughed. “If Naegi-kun’s good at anything, it’s getting his classmates organized.” Then he recalled the interaction between his three students minutes earlier.

“Honestly…it’s a little scary.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter marks the end of part one.

For more Naejunko parallels, Makoto gets a second talent, the same as Munakata and
Murasame. This was a development I thought about when writing an outline for the sequel. It fit well enough as Chapter 4 and 11 of Layers already alluded to Makoto's genius.
We are back! Two things to note.

First I thought it over and decided to change the name of this fic to better suit the themes of the latter half of the story. Second, I'll be dumping chapters weekly on Wednesdays to fit my schedule.

July 13th 20XX

“I brought dinner.” Mukuro delivered takeout all the way down to the basement underneath the Kamukura statue. Her own cooking skills were non-existent, slop not worthy to serve pigs – according to her sibling. The girl in question didn’t respond, back facing the soldier.

Ordinarily, Junko was exceptionally receptive to detail. Even if she chose not to answer, that didn’t mean she wasn’t listening. But this was different, as was Junko. The model’s appearance was disorganized, her skin less perfect without makeup and her hair containing visible split-ends.

“Junko?” Mukuro called again.

Junko held a black piece, twirling the rook between two fingers. Casting a long look at Mukuro, she placed the rook down besides the white bishop.

Junko had no opponent, her gameboard was unconventional. Instead of the standard wooden board, she artificially colored on graph paper, large enough to encompass the wide table. The setup for the pieces were no less bizarre; chess was a game between two factions, but Mukuro didn’t see an alignment here. The pieces were scattered without any semblance of unity to their respective sides.

Mukuro began thinking it might have been easier to list what did follow the norms of game design than what didn’t. It needn’t be said that the strangest fact of all…that Junko was engaging a 2-player game by herself. As the older sister, Mukuro felt it was right to be worried.

“It all comes down to how he moves, huh?” Junko said talking to herself. Her nails tapping on a black king

She’d been like this since the start of the summer break. Mukuro didn’t know what was going on in Junko’s head, never having seen the diva like this before. Was planning the killing game for the council that difficult?

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Mukuro asked.

“Don’t worry, nee-chan. You’re free to go play around.” Mukuro was started by the longest sentence Junko had spoken to her in weeks. “Even when sneaking around my back, everything you do is for my sake. You’ll always come back to my side.”
A bright smile crept on Mukuro’s freckled cheeks. “Yes, Junko.”

Never clueing in on the misunderstanding.

Junko hadn’t acknowledged Mukuro’s presence in the room.

November 6th 20XX

“Hmmmmmm” Chiaki buzzed in the infirmary. A comically deadpan face as the whimpering Mikan circled all over her, still searching for potential injuries that she might have missed…for the 10th time in days.

“Mikan, I’m bored.”

“I-I’m sorry, but you never know what complications could come up.”

“You’re only going to make me anxious about everyone else.” Considering the light wounds she sustained compared to Otonashi-san and Naegi. “I don’t like coming to the nurse’s office either. We should go somewhere more fun.”

“S-Sorry for boring you!” Mikan wailed, and probably had, stopped listening at “don’t like coming to the nurse”.

It was classic Mikan and Chiaki missed that. They were talking like old times. “What have you been doing these days?” The gamer asked.

Mikan played with her fingers, half-nervous and half-pleased at the show of concern from the pinkette. “I’ve been caring for a patient, and they need a lot of supervision.”

“That sounds bad.” For both of them. If nothing else, Mikan was dedicated to her profession. Chiaki doubted the nurse would tell her specific details even if she asked. “I hope you’re not overworking yourself. You know, with all the injured from the riot.”

“Most of the wounded were admitted to general hospitals, not here. A-And I’m taking good care of myself, I can’t keep others healthy i-if I’m not healthy.”

Chiaki smiled. It sounded like she had it under control

Mikan said she had other matters to attend to, so Chiaki left her behind. She wasn’t supposed to meet up with Naegi for few more hours but…there was nothing to do at school. Classes were cancelled and nearly all the students had returned home.
The academy was a total ghost town. “Sure is lonely.”

“Only if you disagree with silence.” Chiaki wasn’t sure when exactly…but before she knew it, there was a boy walking alongside her. In terms of height, she barely reached his chest.

“Who are you?” Tall, dark and super-long hair inquired.

Chiaki tilted her head. Shouldn’t this be the other way around? “You walked up to me…” She started, recoiling when she took in his clothes. The rest of his appearances had been startling enough to distract her from everything else. “Are you with the reserve course?” Her heart beat faster, memories of the riot flooding in. “You’re…not allowed to be on these premises.”

The boy drew his hands out of his pocket, languidly speaking the words “That wasn’t a problem for you before.”

Chiaki stared intently at the boy. “Have we…met?” There was a vague familiarity, but from where? Chiaki might have been a bit…inattentive to her surroundings, but a guy with that hair would be unforgettable.

“In a matter of speaking, yes. I cannot recall the details, however.”

“Okay…how about you start by telling me your name?”

He thought it over a second. “Izuru Kamukura.”

…

“Are you a relative of the school’s founder?” Chiaki creased her forehead

“No. That is what my creators, my teachers, named me.”

“Weird way to call your parents.” Chiaki was beginning to think he’d get along great with Gundam.

“My terminology was neither incorrect nor inappropriate.” He said monotone of those computerized audio-books that never put emotion into their words.

Shame, because he had a nice voice. It reminded her of Hinata.

Actually, he sounded…exactly…the same?

Chiaki analyzed the stranger with newfound curiosity. The eye color was wrong…and the hair was a total no. But if she disregarded those traits… “Are you, Hinata-kun?”

“And if I was?”

Her eyes gleamed with joy “Where have you been?” The anxiety and suspicion melted away as she was reunited with her friend.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Oh…your voice gave it away. Then I pictured you without the long hair. What’s with that anyway? Doing soul-searching?” She asked, happily.

“I’d hoped you were capable of carrying on a more intelligent conversation than this.” His expression remained static, his tone unchanged. Yet there was an unmistakable disappointment in
there.

“I always talk this way, when was that an issue?”

“I am not Hajime Hinata.” He corrected her.

Chiaki furrowed her eyebrows “But, you admitted it.”

“That was your conclusion, I never verified it. My name is Izuru Kamukura. As for Hajime, that was my former self.”

“Former self?” Chiaki’s brows shot up. “What does that mean?”

…I’m out of practice. The individuals I usually associate myself with, tend to be above average intelligence, and it appears I am finally paying the price for having been graced with that ‘privilege’ thus far.”

“I don’t get it…but was I called stupid just now?” Chiaki’s lips thinned.

“If that is how you wish to interpret it.” Neo Hinata said, then turned around, his feet already moving. The boy hadn’t given an invitation to follow him.

But Chiaki did so anyway. She’d found him, and she wouldn’t let him get away again.

---

“May I help you?” Mukuro asked, struggling to maintain eye contact with the comically furious-looking Ryoko.

“Do you know where Matsuda-kun is?” She replied, hands at her hips, lips forming a frown.

She…really has a one-track mind. “I haven’t been paying attention to him, sorry.”

“Fine, forget him.” Ryoko threw her hands into the air.

“Jun-Otonashi, did you just dismiss Matsuda?”

“Well, he can’t help me now, so I’ll ask for your help instead.” Ryoko’d met the soldier by pure coincidence, in the outskirts of campus.

Anything for you, Junko-chan. “W-What do you need?”

“Who’s Juno Enoshima, what’s she like? And most importantly, where is she?”

Mukuro couldn’t tell if the amnesiac’s interest was a good or bad omen. “Junko-chan is my sister.”

“Tell me what I don’t know. Why does everyone keep bringing her up around me?!” Ryoko scratched at her hair.

Because she is you? “Who’s ‘everyone’?” Best to scout potential threats.

“My diary, Madarai…and Chi-chan too.” She bit her nail.

Fujisaki? In hindsight, it was hardly a well-kept secret. The original plan was entailed a short-lived
memory loss, with Junko only interacting with a handful of those who knew them. Needless to say, the original plan had gone completely off the rails.

Mukuro didn’t have the slightest clue what to do about it. But she doubted Kamukura would let it slide if she told Junko about her true identity. She needed to pretend, for her sister’s sake. “About Junko-chan…she’s independent but caring. Even when she’s having fun, she always tries to include others and have them share her joy. If you catch her eye, she’ll go the extra mile for you.”

“So where is she now?”

“I don’t know where Junko-chan is. She’s free-spirited that way.”

“That’s…cold. She could be anywhere, and it sounds like you don’t even care…”

“We always find our way back to each other. Like I said, Junko-chan’s independent.” For better or worse.

“Eh? The caring and independent part aside, she sounds nothing like me!” Ryoko admitted shamelessly.

“Well yeah, Junko’s a one-of-a-kind.” Mukuro laughed nervously. She was a terrible actor, thankfully Ryoko knew nothing about her.

“Why do you care about me then?” Ryoko asked.

“Huh?”

“Chi and Ishimaru said you were looking for me during the tragedy.”

Of course Junko-chan would catch on. Mukuro felt both pride and trepidation for her forgetful twin. “You look alike, so I feel like I’ve got to protect you.”

“Superficial resemblance huh. I get it.” Did she really? “Just remember that I’m not your sister. I’m Ryoko.” She pointed to herself.

“Got it.” Mukuro nodded.

Ryoko wiped some imaginary sweat off her brow, smiling in full force at her achievement. “Whew, I’ve finally got that pain in the butt dilemma over with. How are things on your end, Ikusaba?”

The name was unsettling to hear coming from Junko. Fake identity or no. “You can call me Mukuro, I’m fine with it.”

“Okay, you can call me Ryoko to be fair. Now answer the question already.” She said in her usual nasally tone that reminded the soldier of her former personality.

“Nothing much.” She shrugged.

“Then what about that Naegi guy? You two seem close.”

Mukuro paused. How would she describe it exactly. “I’m not really sure. We’re not dating, officially. But we’re more than friends.”

“For real?” Ryoko’s jaw dropped.
Mukuro nodded.

“Wow, I really didn’t need to hear that” Ryoko groaned, covering her face with her hands. Was she unhappy? Well, Junko probably wouldn’t approve either. She never had a high opinion of the luckster. “Wait, what do you mean more than friends? Gonna need more details, girl. How’d you bag him?”

The soldier tilted her head. “I asked him out on a Friday night.”

“And?”

“He said ‘Sure, whenever you want.’ It’s a bit vague, but I can’t see what else Naegi-kun could have meant by that.”

“...Sounds like he’s leading you on or he might not have understood. Boys are dense.”

“R-Really? Should I have be clearer?”

“Duh- I mean, of course Not!” She backtracked. “Naegi’s a smart guy, he probably figured out your feelings without you saying a word. Actually, you’re pretty obvious so that likely is the case.”

“A-Am I really?”

Ryoko deadpanned. “Girl, who are you fooling?”


“Hinata-kun.”

“You are fond of that name.” He expertly deduced, upon listening to her utter the name constantly, despite his many attempts to inform her that he was not Hajime Hinata. Irritation was one of the emotions Izuru recently discovered he retained and he hated to express it.

“You should be too. It’s yours, after all.”

Much like right now. She was intentionally baiting him, believing that he was merely going through an exaggerated phase. Being fair, he’d yet to explain his origins in detail. He felt an indescribable attraction to Chiaki Nanami, yet she lacked ability and did not approach Naegi or Enoshima in character. A test was necessary, to see if there was more to Nanami that meets the eye.

Or he was wasting time.

“I really do think we should cut your hair though. It works in fiction, but it’s a little jarring in real life.”

She was failing spectacularly, on all counts.

“It’s so quiet around.” She said, after breaking from her deluge of questions for him.

“Should that not be the logical conclusion after the tragedy?”

Nanmi nodded, then voiced a personal question “Hinata-kun, were you-“
“All who participated in the raid have been detained. I was not among them. Does that answer your question?” Izuru knew in advance, of course.

“That’s good to hear.” She smiled.

“It was a boring question. The reserve course retaliated out of an inferiority complex.” That he fed. Though he’d admit to having brainwashed a sizable number, he only sped up the process that would inevitably lead to their raid on the main campus. Naturally, he had no reason to reveal the extent of his involvement to Nanami.

“You don’t have a complex then?”

Would you feel jealous of ants? “No. Compared to them, I am special.” Or so his makers told him endlessly.

“You always were, Hinata.”

Izuru’s halted, facing the girl. “In what way?” He was led to believe Hajime Hinata was the epitome of mediocrity. He had no special skills, which made him the perfect blank slate for the program. The chances of that information being incorrect were slim to none.

“You were my friend.”

“And? What demonstrated abilities made this friend ‘special’?”

Nanami pouted. “He just was. There’s no putting words to it.”

“How boring. If he possessed outstanding characteristics, then you ought to tangibly describe it.” Even luck was an element that could be coded into his being. He wouldn’t accept such an abstract excuse.

“Hinata was a person I just wanted to be around. That’s all.”

“A charismatic presence? Unlikely.” Charisma belays confidence, which he evidently did not have if he was so crippled by inferiority that he sacrificed his own body to become something else. Something better.

Him.

“I have wasted my time.” This was turning out to be an impressive disappointment. “I will make one thing clear. Hinata was worthless.”

Nanami took offense. “You’re wrong.” A simple statement, but one backed by a complexity of emotion. “I’m know that something happened to you, but you were never worthless…and I’m not sure the new you is any better.”

...What?

How was he inferior?

No, the better inquiry was why he felt anything from the remark of an uninformed party. He was superior to Hinata in every way. Anything that trash could do, he could achieve by leaps and bounds.

"What's with the question? There wasn't anything ambiguous in that phrasing; both you and
Hinata-san can kill me. Although It's a bit ironic that you're parading about something your former self could accomplish. Do you even remember him? The 'talentless reserve course student' as he often called himself, who traded his dreams, finances and eventually his own identity, all for the sake of talent. Just so he could become you."

Izuru made a dissatisfactory grunt at the memory. “You and Hinata have competed before, correct?”

“In video games, yeah.” She tilted her head, confused as to the direction this conversation was heading.

“I take it you were undefeated.”

Her answer was a predictable “Yes”.

“Very good. I’ll demonstrate just how wrong you are, and you will take back those words.”

Error. There was nothing that needed proving. His existence itself was sufficient evidence of his superiority.

This was juvenile and unbecoming. But he was going to do it anyway

“Huh, where are you going?” Nanami asked.

“You have consoles in your room, yes?”

“Uh yeah. But-“

“That’s all I need to know.”

“You don’t know where my room is.”

“I do.”

…

A moment of silence, then Nanami continued. “Okaaaaay…but you’re not allowed in there.”

“I’m not permitted to be walking these premises either, yet here I am.”

“I’m still not sure if that’s a good idea. It might be bad if someone saw you.” Nobody will. He was the Ultimate Lucky Student.

“The restrictions imposed on me occurred long before the incident. I am not permitted to leave the lab, however there is no longer any point in following their orders.” The steering committee were dead and gone.

“No way.” Nanami mouthed. Her body stricken with shock.
Izuru scoffed. “Before you ask, this is my first time playing this game. Yet it took me a single attempt to beat you.”

“No way…”

“Are you satisfied?”

“No way…”

“I’m leaving.” Izuru stood, only for Nanami to grip his sleeves, an indignant look on her face.

“Nuh-uh. We’re playing again.”

“The outcome won’t change. I’ve analyzed your patterns and will intercept accordingly.”

“I don’t care.”

I see. This was what they called ‘a sore loser’.

3 rounds of effortless victories later…

“Are you satisfied now?” He repeated his earlier question

“One more.”

“Enough.” Izuru stressed. “This is heading down a road paved with your losses. Now live up to your end of the deal.”

She pouted, facing away from him.

Incorrigible.

“You…do you dislike losing that much?”

“Not just that, but I’m mad at how you’re not even enjoying yourself.”

“…Excuse me?”

“We played 10 rounds. Did you have fun?” Nanami asked, with a stern expression.

“I cannot say I did.”

“Then why didn’t you suggest switching games? I wouldn’t have minded.”

“I fail to see the point, my objective-“

“Was to beat me.” She cut him off. “Doesn’t that sound a little mean-spirited to you?”

“Not in the slightest.” He said.

“Hinata never beat me, but we always had fun together. Right now you’re so…cold.” Nanami gripped her arm.

Once more…he was compared unfavorably despite his blatant superiority?

“That’s because I lack emotions.”
She blinked. “That’s a little edgy, don’t you think?”

“You continue to assume I am embellishing the subject. I will say it one, final time. I am not Hajime Hinata.” Izuru lifted the hair around his forehead.

Nanami dropped her controller to the floor, her eyes lost in the scar that would not seem out of a place in Frankenstein’s novel.

In reality, that may be more of an apt comparison that intended.

“This is the result of the Hope Cultivation program. An experiment engineered by the researchers in the academy, with the hopes of creating one vessel to house all the known talents in the world. To achieve their ambition, they needed an empty carrier. Those with talent will already be geared in one direction or another, but Hajime Hinata was a perfect candidate, not only in body, but in mind. A person so desperate for talent that he would do anything.” He pressed on without any emotional attachment, not unlike a professor lecturing his students.

If this particular student were wrapped with shock, that is.

“How could they do that to you?” She balled her hands into fists.

“It was his decision to make.” He placed his hands into his pockets.

“Even so, I can’t accept that. We…we have to get them to change you back.”

“This isn’t a game with an infinite number of returns. Hinata is gone.” He would not say ‘dead’, because that terminology was incorrect. Even in death, there is something left behind. A corpse. In this particular case, the reserve courser was completely wiped out.

“I can still try.”

Denial…how boring. “Against whom? The men your ire is directed at have already passed away. Only a handful of people are even aware of my existence and none would be in the position to aid you. Nor would I allow them to. Your friend isn’t here anymore, accept it.” So he could finally end this farce and be on his way.

“If Hinata-kun’s really gone…then why’d you talk to me?”

“Because…”

Because…

Izuru was left speechless.
The gamer raised a point, a nauseating one. He had no reason to approach this girl. But ever since his scheme went underway, he hadn’t been able to get her off his mind.

Why?

That’s what he came here to find out. But the only logical explanation was that he was still tethered to Hinata’s feelings.

_Error._

And that was the most illogical explanation of all. He’d just gone to great depth explaining why that _wasn’t_ possible.

He didn’t have an answer...this needed rectifying.

“Well?” She looked at him expectantly, practically assured that he didn’t have a response in wait.

It annoyed him that she was right. “I do not know.”

“See, there’s hope that you’re still Hinata!”

“_I am_ Hope.”

Nanami’s cell phone blared. The pinkette checked the caller ID. “What time is it?” She asked.

“I believe there should be a timer on the phone.”

“4 PM. This is kinda bad. I already had plans before this.”

“With whom?”

“Naegi-kun. One of my juniors.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter:

_Q: What happens when a fanatic, a yakuza, an idol, a therapist and a neurologist get invited to an abandoned school building?_  
_A: Kirigiri drops the truth bullets, that’s what._
Of the four...five central players, Kirigiri was most grounded in reality. That gave most of the others a head start while she was stuck playing catch up. Not like she could complain; the detective only enters the scene after the crime. However, anyone who thinks the lavender-haired girl would accept that handicap for long didn't know her at all. Just like Kamukura and Naegi, it was time for Kirigiri to make her move.

Beginning with poisoning the well, as a gathering of the most unlikely individuals took place in the backdrop of Hope’s peak Academy.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I called you here.” Kyoko Kirigiri said, back facing the black board. Overseeing the meeting alongside her was Miaya Gekkogahara.

“I want to know why we’re in the old building. Couldn’t have picked a spot that didn’t feel like a horror flick waiting to go wrong?” Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu tapped his finger on the desk impatiently. He clicked his tongue as dirt stuck to his fingernails.

“Less chance of interruptions here.” Kyoko explained.

“Yeah, that’s what you say when you lure someone into a trap.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Fantastic. Then before we get down to business, I got another thing on my mind.” Kuzuryu rested his elbow on the back of his chair, turning around to glare at a skittish Komaeda, who looked torn between praising the ground the yakuza walked on or running away for his safety. “I got a million questions I wanna ask, but I’m sure every answer will end with my foot planted up your ass!”

An ordinary man would cower.

Komaeda was hardly ordinary. “You remembered me after all this time, Kuzuryu-kun. This might be the happiest day of my life!”

“Where have you been, Nagito?” Pekoyama interjected. Things might actually go a little smoothly if she continued act as a translator.

That aside, this subject…

“Let’s not over this again?” Nearest to the door, Yasuke Matsuda complained, irritation seeping through every word. Kyoko was sympathetic as Komaeda’s explanation was unsettling if true.

Naturally, Kuzuryu wasn’t compliant. “Who the hell asked you?”

“Use your inner voice, baby gangster.” Matsuda retaliated with equal contempt.

Kuzuryu fixed the neurologist a heated glare.
Kyoko frowned, supposing some level of friction was unavoidable. Both boys were distrusting and antagonistic. Put them together like this and the result was obvious. Thankfully, there was one more personality in the room, antithetical to their own.

“Komaeda-senpai, would it be alright if we could hear your story later? I’m sorry for being selfish, but I’m really busy at the moment.” Maizono cut in. Without entering Kuzuryu and Matsuda’s field, she drew attention back to Komaeda.

“That’s not selfish, only appropriate! You’re the Ultimate Pop sensation. That I could indirectly waste even a second of your time is a crime I couldn’t forgiven for, even if I worked every day for the rest of my life to atone!”

“Buy my CDs and all is forgiven~” Maizono giggled. The socialite didn’t miss a beat, even when faced with Komaeda’s irrational fervor for the first time.

“Oh good, he’s still a fucking creep. I don’t know why I bothered.” Kuzuryu ranted. The tension in deflated. Now they could finally get somewhere.

“I called you all here to discuss Naegi.” Kyoko crossed her arms, taking in the reactions.

“Hmm, my underclassman, huh? We’ve never been acquainted, but I wonder if he takes after me.” Komaeda leaned back on his chair.

“He’s nothing like you, idiot!” Kyoko noted Kuzuryu’s urge to defend her classmate. After the events in the old music room, his affection for Naegi wasn’t unfounded, but would he feel the same way upon learning what really happened that night.

“Wonderful. Less chance he’ll end up a complete failure like I am.” Komaeda laughed. Nobody else did.

“He isn’t a failure, however you could say I failed him, as his therapist.” Gekkogahara spoke up. Not exactly how Kyoko would have dropped that bomb, but it worked all the same at capturing their intrigue.

Matsuda wasn’t his stoic self, instead he had a disturbed expression….not the reflex you’d have to an unrelated party and Kyoko hadn’t provided him any details concerning Naegi’s mental history.

Kyoko took down a mental note.

Naegi and Matsuda had met once. The Neurologist had shown up to detention, taking a suspicious interest in the luckster and disappeared with him for the remainder of the afternoon.

Komaeda was neutral, as expected. He’d had the least contact with Naegi – That is to say, likely none at all.

Kuzuryu conveyed a more natural reaction, showing all the right signs, however…not an ounce of shock appeared on Pekoyama’s face. Either she rivalled Celes…or she’d known from the start. That was dangerous. If she knew about Naegi’s insanity and did nothing, then she may even be inclined to side with him.

But none of their reactions would be quite as tested as Maizono’s, who was by far the closest to Naegi among everyone in the room. Arguably the school, asides from Kuwata. The idol was the first to hint that the spiky-haired boy was not the innocent person he first appeared to be. Not that Kyoko ever believed he was. Her instincts had never failed her.
“What’d he need a shrink for?” Kuzuryu’s gruff tone belayed a strong curiosity.

“It’ll be faster if you all read the truth for yourselves.” Kyoko held 5 documents, walking along the desks to hand them down. She and Gekkogahara had no need for them. “These are all copies of Naegi’s psychiatric examinations I stole from Gekkogahara. I assure you they’re accurate.”

They read at a slow pace.


Kyoko’s initial reaction had been one of revulsion and horror.

The swordswoman’s trained fingers pinched her forehead as she let out a sigh of exasperation.

Maizono was tight-lipped.

“Explains the test results. I’m so done with these freaks.” The unsettled Matsuda quietly mumbled.

The biggest changes occurred in Komaeda and Kuzuryu. The first, who’d shown apathy now skimmed the file again with a thoughtful look. Meanwhile Kuzuryu exuded an eerie calmness, a stark contrast to his usual behavior.

“Well?” Kyoko prodded.

“That was…a fucking awful experience. Thanks.” Matsuda said, eyes turning to Gekkogahara. “I’m disappointed. Never thought little miss perfect would bend one of the most important rules in medicine. Don’t break confidentiality. You could have your license revoked.”

“Assuming I deserve to have a medical license at all. I failed him.” Gekkogahara replied.

“Yes, you did…and severity falls in line with my expectations.” Pekoyama started. Kyoko noted how rare it was for the swordswoman to speak out of turn. Perhaps she was more than just an appendage of Kuzuryu. “I am not passing blame on you, Gekkougahara. I am stating facts. The obsession with ‘helping’ others in particular has not changed for Naegi-kun, speaking from experience. He lied to you.”

Gekkogahara sank her head low.

“Don’t beat yourself up. The kid’s a damn good liar. Trust me, I know.” Matsuda said.

Gekkogahara shook her head. “That’s not an excuse. I was supposed to be his overseer, I wasn’t allowed to be fooled by my own patient. I should have seen through his lie. I could have.”

“Kyoko, sharing this information is nice and all, but I think it’s time you tell us what you really want.” Maizono cut to the chase, as if the knowledge didn’t affect her all.

“Naegi is dangerous. He needs treatment and we only have grounds for that if we can expose him.” Kyoko folded her arms.

Maizono quieted, fixing her a cold gaze.

…”

“Is that a joke?” Kuzuryu broke his longstanding silence.
“I don’t see the problem. Even you’re taking it well enough.” Matsuda said, offhand. His obscure motive was to get rid of whom he perceived as a threat.

“I’m pissed beyond belief. I’m just holding back from saying something I might not be able to take back.” That spoke volumes given how unrestrained the yakuza’s vocabulary was. “Let me get this straight. You messed up Naegi’s head by feeding him your crappy therapy…and the solution to the mess, you caused…is to put him back in that loony bin?!”

Gekkogahara remained expressionless, allowing the rabbit to speak for her. “No, that would only make him worse. I have a better grasp of his illness. We can treat him regularly without taking him back to an asylum.”

“That’s not the point! You locked a kid up because you thought he was lying about ghosts?!”

Kuzuryu roared.

This was getting them nowhere. “As I recall, Kuzuryu. You didn’t believe his supernatural abilities and reacted poorly. It should be clear after reading his file…that he did lie.” Kyoko brought up the conflict in the music room, stunning Kuzuryu into silence “You remember what he told you about his injury correct?”

She didn’t expect his answer.

“Tell me what I don’t know, Sherlock.”

“Young master…you knew?” Even Pekoyama couldn’t hide her surprise.

Kuzuryu facepalmed. “Even you, Peko? I’m a hothead, not a dumbass.” He folded his arms, looking away. “I didn’t notice right away because of how riled up I was, but I couldn’t get that scar on his chest out of my head. I’ve seen you swing that sword of yours dozens of times, and I’ve seen my dad torture assholes before. There ain’t no knife or sword that can leave gashes like that.”

Kyoko tried her very hardest to ignore the criminal overtones in Kuzuryu’s speech in favor of acknowledging she might have some potential partners here.

“And his story with Natsumi? I don’t know how or if he talked to her, but saying she just gave up on revenge was too convenient. Natsumi was a fucking idiot who never once learned from her mistakes. If I couldn’t get revenge out of my head, how could she?” Kuzuryu swore.

“You’ve known about his deception…why didn’t you say anything?” Kyoko inquired.

“Because it didn’t matter. All Naegi did was tell me what I wanted to hear the most. Fuck, I’m glad I didn’t kill Sato and that I got out of Enoshima’s gang. Even if he pulled some suspect shit to make it work, I ain’t complaining with the results.”

To his side, Maizono cocked her head, puzzled, but listening intently to the ongoing conversation.

“…Is that your answer, then?” Kyoko interrupted. “You’ll overlook his methods and approve his results?” Disappointing. But what more could she have expected from men who only care about their personal profit?

“You bet your ass it is. You fucked with Naegi once, I’m not letting you do it again.” He pointed at Gekkogahara.

“Naegi saved us from Enoshima. My answer is the same as the young master’s.” Pekoyama naturally supported Kuzuryu.
Not just a refusal to aid, but opposition? Kyoko anticipated those risks and would working around them if need be. However, if they were really Naegi’s friends, there was a chance she could still convince them to care about his well-being.

*giggle*

Kyoko and the yakuza duo turned to the source of the laugh. Maizono’s shoulders shook, trying and failing to suppress her laughter.

“Something funny?” Kuzuryu asked.

The bluenette nodded rapidly. “What…you just said…is hilarious. He did it again. And like everyone else, you fell for it.” She laughed bitterly…and then, her smile vanished. All traces of amusement followed as she confronted Kuzuryu with hollow gaze “Kuzuryu-senpai…a few months ago, before the summer, Makoto came to school injured all over and his hand bandaged. You’re responsible, right?” She accused the gangster without fear.

“Yeah, so?” Kuzuryu looked away, crossing his arms.

“I’ve caught you two together recently, and seeing your concern just now, I’m guessing you’re friends with Makoto…but where you friends before fighting?”

“No.” Kuzuryu answered bluntly. His meek defense a result of the idol stabbing at a shameful section of his past. Kyoko fought the urge to point out his hypocritical behavior. Accosting Gekkougahara for inadvertently causing Naegi harm when he had intentions of outright murder. However, that wasn’t Maizono’s aim. “Hey, after all that, how can you be so clueless? Makoto didn’t save you. Why should he in the circumstances you put him in? People that nice…they don’t exist anywhere.” The pop sensation’s pessimism left no room for argument. Finished with Kuzuryu, she focused on the detective. “But don’t get ahead of yourself, Kyoko. Yes, Makoto is selfish…but who isn’t?”

Kyoko’s forehead creased.

“He’s just like everyone else.” Maizono giggled. It was too out of place to come across as genuine here… unless that laughter was directed inwards.

“On that we agree.” Kuzuryu spoke up. “I’ll give props for anyone trying to become a saint but fuck me if you think I’ll disparage anyone for not being mother fricen’ Teresa.” Kuzuryu splendidly missed the point as he jerked his finger towards the quietest of the group, Komaeda. “If you want to talk fucking crazy, take one good look at this psychopath that we let walk free. Do you have any idea what he’s capable of?”

… Kyoko, Matsuda and Gekkogahara winced. “…We can make a guess. However, Komaeda is not the object of discussion here.”

“Kirisugi-san, answer me this. Is Naegi hope or despair?” Komaeda said, bringing up the strangest topic yet.

“Elaborate.” Kyoko said, having not the slightest clue as to what the ashen-haired boy meant.

Kuzuryu on the other hand, understood fully. “Now’s not the time for your fucking rambling.”

“I’m not rambling. Kirigiri-san wouldn’t request our aid without good reason. Actually, as the ultimate detective, it stands to reason that her intuition should outstrip ours.” It would be dangerous
to accept his praise at face value. “Makoto Naegi… he must have talent himself, and he is technically an Ultimate. But I can’t get a read beyond that. His actions appear hopeful, but if they’re brought on by despair...” Komaeda groaned, leaning back in his chair. He was like a boy having trouble solving a math problem. “I usually have a knack for telling the two apart, but I’m stumped.”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Matsuda spoke for most of them.

“Komaeda-senpai has a way with words, but I think I get it. It’s tough to decide when we don’t know if Makoto’s a danger.” Maizono said. “And It’s not surprising he thinks Makoto’s contradictory. Multiple personality disorder tends to give mixed signals.”

…The idol’s comment had her draw confused and bewildered expressions from every party.

“Huh? What…all that research and you didn’t even know that?” Maizono deadpanned.

“W-Wait, there was nothing in the treatment that so much as registered a personality disorder.” Gekkogahara argued.

Maizono pressed her lips with a finger. “Makoto first experienced it 3 or so years ago, or so he says. It must have happened after the asylum.”

“Maizono-san, if you’re playing around...” Kyoko let her arms fall to the side as she traded a serious glare with the idol. She knew of the bluenette’s fondness for mood switches and teasing.

“I’m not joking. It looks to me like you’re the one playing around, Kyoko.” Maizono bit back. “I hate to admit it, but you’re a lot smarter than I am. If you haven’t noticed the gaps by now, it means you haven’t been paying attention.”

“A split personality...it couldn’t be.” Pekoyama’s eyes widened.

“You know what these broads mean?” Kuzuryu asked.

“I...can’t say for sure, but I’ve spent a good deal of time with Naegi and I can attest to there being...inconsistencies in his behavior. At times he is subdued and meek. In others, there is a definite, aggressive strength that lurks beneath. There is a way to distinguish the two.”

Maizono nodded. “Yup, the ‘real’ Makoto’s a lot more intimate, he’ll generally call you by your given name.”

“Fuck me.” Matsuda flashbacked. “I thought he was a shameless creep.”

Kyoko frowned. “He’s never addressed me as other than my surname.”

“I’ve noticed that too. I wonder if there’s something special about you.” Maizono joked.

“I don’t really care about the kid, but for the ones that do...isn’t this kind of bad?” Matsuda spoke up.

“How?”

“It means Naegi’s gotten worse. He didn’t originally have a split-personality disorder, and the time at the asylum should have been the most stressful period, as far as his psyche was concerned. How did he get worse and why wasn’t it reported?” Gekkogahara replied in his stead.

“Bingo. I’m the Ultimate Neurologist. This is my field, and I can tell you Naegi’s head is messed
up. I’ve run tests.” He gazed at Kuzuryu “The brainwashing didn’t work.”

“Brainwashing?” Maizono’s eyes widened. She knew the least about the matter with Enoshima and the eeriness that plagued the school.

“It’s nothing worth worrying about. From what I’ve read, that problem has already been taking care of.” The silent Komaeda said ominously.

“Maizono-san, did Naegi ever tell you how he developed…that other self of his?” Gekkogahara addressed the idol.

“He’s never gone into great detail. I doubt he even knows. I doubt even more that he’d care to.” Matsuda threw the therapist a concerned look. “You’ve got that troubled look on your face, Gekkogahara. Know something.”

“No. I thought about something but…it’s not feasible at this point.”

“I believe we may as well leave all our cards on the table.” Pekoyama suggested.

…

“Naegi had night terrors. Sleeping was so difficult that he was sedated or given sleeping supplements. This was even before his isolation. His parents confirmed that, as did his caretakers at the institution. These supplements are called Insomnia.”

Matsuda brought a finger to his chin. “A highly addictive narcotic, with unexplored but harmful side-effects. Although this is only in the long-term. It can’t affect the brain that badly.”

“Yes…depending on how long he used it. But…no, Yasuke’s right. Before a disorder of this magnitude developed, he would…”

“Die. Yes. There has never been any complications like split-personality disorder, because anyone who takes these pills consistently for more than a year would die.” Matsuda replied.

“It’s not feasible.” Gekkogahara said.

“…Are you sure?” Komaeda asked, his tone suggested they’d overlooked something. “I would never tell Gekkogahara or Matsuda-san how to go about their business…but I believe we’ve now entered my field. I can guarantee you that it is possible for Naegi-kun to have survived this long.”

“You don’t even know the guy.” Kuzuryu rolled his eyes.

“No…but I know his talent.” His face was unnaturally serious. “If he’s truly the Ultimate Lucky Student, than he could easily have done it. I’m the same way. You can check my medical records if you want.”

“Luck?” Matsuda furrowed his eyebrows. “I suppose that’s nice and all, but it doesn’t prove anything.”

“Peko…” Kuzuryu grunted.

“Yes, young master, I remember as well.” The silver-haired woman recalled that case. “Naegi once said he drugged our classmates and put her to sleep. He never told us what he used however.”

“Why give him this…Insomnia?” Maizono asked tersely.
“They tried other methods, but nothing worked. If Naegi didn’t sleep, he risked exhaustion…and in his state, that could have lead to the worst-case scenario.” Gekkogahara said.

“Alright then.” Maizono accepted the explanation.

Kyoko had just about reached the limit of withholding her curiosity. “Maizono-san, it’s increasingly disturbing how you’re unphased by this. Have I been wrong to assume you and Makoto are friends?”

The bluenette waved her hand back and forth. “We are, and I’m shocked myself. Just a little, because Makoto behaving recklessly Isn’t news…and I know better than to expect otherwise.” She claimed to be his friend, but each and everyone in that room thought her response was ice-cold.

The idol stood from her seat. “It’s asking too much to get our cooperation right off the bat, Kyoko. Give me time and I’ll get back to you.”

That was a start. Kyoko turned to Pekoyama and Fuyuhiko. “Are you satisfied with that proposal?”

“You think our answers’ gonna change?”

“Perhaps not. But if you’re his friends, you won’t leave him like this. You may not think Naegi is a threat to others, but you should know better than anyone else that he is a danger to himself.”

After Naegi all but threw himself in front of their war path.

Kuzuryu swore. “Peko, we’re leaving.”

“Your answer?” Kyoko pressed, they wouldn’t be leaving without her getting that information.

“I’ll fucking think about it!”

At the moment, that small concession was enough. More than she’d hoped, really.

“Kuzuryu-kun, could you stay a little longer?” Komaeda said out of the blue, only after Maizono had departed.

“What?” The blonde gave a stern response.

Komaeda turned to Kyoko. “It’s about the conditions for my cooperation. I want you two to tell me more about this Enoshima.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Komaeda pokes the hornet's nest.
Sayaka banished the details of the meeting to the back of her mind, learning very little she already didn’t know. The odd mention of Enoshima was…well odd and she wanted nothing to do with it.

The celebrity already had more than enough on her plate.

“Kyoko must have a lot of faith in me to give me a choice, with no ultimatums.” So naïve. The detective had only herself to blame if she paid the price for believing in others. Not this time however, as Sayaka had a soft spot for honest people. But she wasn’t going to betray Makoto either. She’d ignore everything related to him. That’s been the plan for the last little while.

The plan wasn’t going too well.

“Come on, girl. Focus on writing that new song.” She had her own dream to chase. Makoto can deal with his own problems…

...Really?

Sayaka frowned when the boy in question came into vision. Makoto was out of his school uniform and in a green hoodie beneath a black blazer.

‘Ever the fashion statement.’ She thought, and acknowledged it fit the luckster. He unraveled and crudely forced his way into others’ lives, yet concealed himself underneath so many layers.

If hypocrisy had a face, his would be it.

“Sayaka!”

…and he just happened to cross paths with her. Of course he would. In this over-sized campus, with so few people remaining, he’d pick the right time to catch her when she didn’t want to be found.

Darn luck magnet.

The pop sensation wore the smile that often warmed the hearts of the many thousands of her fans. This particular instance just happened to be faked for the sake of convenience.

“How’s your afternoon been, Makoto?.”

“Wouldn’t say it’s good. One of our seniors stood me up.”

“What, who?” Sayaka asked.

“Chiaki, the gamer from class 77-B. She made me wait forever to tell me she couldn’t make it. Something about a surprise visit from an old friend and lost track of time. On a text.” He pouted.
“That…*really*…sucks.” She said in between the laughing fit. That was a typical Makoto story. His accidents had put many a smile on her face. Even the one she’d faked was…all of a sudden less fake. Until she realized that fact – That she was getting caught up in his pace…as usual.

“You probably deserved it.” She said.

“Huh? I’ve been on my best behavior, thank you very much!” He placed his hands on his hips. “And I wouldn’t stand a girl up that way for someone else.”

“…Yeah, you’d try to fit both of them in your agenda at once.”

“…Guilty.” He shamelessly admitted. “It’s boring out here by myself.” All save Makoto, herself, Kyoko, Mukuro and Chihiro had gone home.

Huh, if Kiyotaka remained, that would have been a very convenient cast…oh well. She wished Leon at least stayed. He was a good person to talk to when stressed.

“Maybe you should have gone back home yourself. What about that cute sister of yours?” Who she heard was an avid fan.

“I don’t feel like it.” Without hesitation.

Ouch. He’d made it no secret that his family was a sore topic. Makoto…probably hasn’t forgiven them.

The idol envied Kyoko and the Naegis, to be the ones treated differently. In a way, they were special.

“What about you?” He questioned.

“There’s nobody waiting for me, my dad’s on a trip and my sister’s in boarding school. They might as well, I’d be swarmed with paparazzi and fans if I actually went back home. I need to concentrate on my job right now.”

“About that…I kind of need a favor.” He cut to heart of the matter.

“Of course you do.” Sayaka smoothly replied, not one bit taken by the change in direction. Makoto…probably hasn’t forgiven them.

He was using her. Just like everybody else did.

“Uh…is everything alright?”

She nodded. “Not counting the slump I’m in, everything’s right as rain.”

“Soooo…you’re not mad at me?”

“What gave it away?” Sayaka bristled, not bothering to keep up the act one second longer.

“The smile.” He said, as if that was enough.

Being seen through so easily was unsettling. Sayaka’s career was centered on her image, and if she could be caught feigning happiness, she might as well get out of the idol business right now. But Sayaka doubted anyone else, aside from her father or idolmates could so easily unravel her true
feelings.

“I…take it you’re still mad about me running off.” He kicked the air like a guilty child. The average student would fall for it.

“Hm? You mean when you – against my warning – went right for the bloodthirsty creeps trying to kill us? I’m not that mad, honest.” She was but not at that specific detail. His danger seeking was only the latest entry to the overarching problem.

“…Sorry.” He gave her that puppy-dog look.

So not going to work.

“You’re not sorry, Makoto. You’d do it all over again to get what you want.” Sayaka couldn’t stop him, she learned that a long time ago. ”So what’s this favor you’re asking about? I’m busy at the moment, so it can’t be big-“

“Forget that for a second.” He waved his hands, defensively. “If I’m the reason you’re unhappy, I can’t just ignore it.”

…

She was no stranger to being manipulated. That was business. But Makoto didn’t leave it at business. The way he faked kindness was better than most genuine displays of affection. Chihiro could attest…even if he doesn’t know it himself.

“It’s alright, Makoto.” She attempted a real smile but was certain it came out crooked.

Makoto wasn’t satisfied with that answer but decided not to push it out of consideration.

Sayaka hated that about him, yet she couldn’t bring herself to hate him.

However, there was one thing Sayaka knew, and probably only her. At one point, the idol believed Kyoko might have been able to see it too, and the fact that the detective didn’t live up to those expectations, is the reason Sayaka didn’t give the lavender-haired girl her full support.

Makoto may be dangerous depending on the framing, but he was weak…even weaker than she had been once upon a time.

“Just tell me what you need. It might help clear my head.” For all his faults, she saw a little bit of herself in him.

A kid who couldn’t stand a second of loneliness.

That was half the core of Makoto’s pathology, and if it only that, Sayaka wouldn’t have been at a loss. What made things so difficult was the other half of the problem.

Anyone who thinks they can help Makoto without seeing the full picture, can’t do anything. Then again, if they did understand…would they want to help him at all?

Maizono left.

Kuzuyru and his bodyguard remained at the behest of Komaeda. The room of 6 had Kyoko,
Gekkougahara and Matsuda paired, facing opposite of the yakuza duo, whereas Komaeda sat by his lonesome. The eager smile he wore suggested he was perfectly content with that arrangement.

“I’ve heard interesting rumors that I’m hoping aren’t true. Something about Junko Enoshima subduing our classmates – yourselves included – and engaging in some…questionable activities.” Komaeda said.

“I’ve got nothing to do with that bitch anymore.” Kuzuryu snarled, the repugnant tone was very convincing.

Komaeda waved his hand, dismissively “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not disappointed in you. The Ultimate Despair wormed its way into the institution of hope and poisoned the Ultimates one by one, but you two were able to overcome her. How splendid! If I’m disappointed in anything, it’s that I missed the cataclysmic climax when hope triumphed over despair!”

Kuzuryu scoffed “Yeah, have fun with that, but if that’s all-“

“I want to know if she’s contacted you at all after that. Not just Kuzuryu-kun, but all of you.” Komaeda cut him off.

All shook their heads. Matsuda tensed.

“Understood. But you see, there’s something I can’t get out of my head. It might be due to the incomplete information in here. Haha, not too much was legible after the water got in.” Komaeda flipped the crinkled sheets of paper in the air.

Kuzuryu marched up to him and snatched the papers out of his hands. He skimmed through the sheet. “Nothing but basic junk in here. Just your luck.”

“A file on Enoshima? How did you come into possession of it?” Pekoyama inquired.

“I took it from Kirigiri-san and the others.” Komaeda answered, putting them on the spot. Kyoko had no doubt it was intentional.

“Enoshima is incapacitated.” Kyoko said smoothly.

“I’d assume so. For you to be more concerned with a mere lucky student.” Komaeda laughed. Quieting down at Kuzuryu’s threatening glare. “But tell me, is it true that the student council members were killed?”

“Who can say?” Kyoko replied, regardless of her suspicions, there hasn’t been confirmation yet. Save for Naegi, Enoshima and Izuru Kamukura’s involvement. She wouldn’t speak of that, not yet. Kyoko wanted to test if Komaeda would arrive at that conclusion himself. The boy was an enigma, potentially dangerous, but could also be a useful ally.

“It’s funny. For Enoshima to disappear around the same time as these rumors. I’ve no doubt she was involved, but never mind her for now. Among the student council, there were a few names missing; Isshiki Madarai and Soshun Murasame. Has anyone heard from them?”

“Madarai is alive and well. He was with the others during the reserve course attack. He protected Nanami.” Pekoyama stated.

“Ah yes…that debacle.” Komaeda’s smile faltered. “But I wasn’t aware of that last bit. If nothing else, it’s wonderful that he could still use his talent after the death of the council.” Komaeda interlocked his fingers. Kyoko didn’t miss how he stated the rumors as fact. He reminded her of
Naegi, misleading and directing the conversation…but unlike her classmate, Komaeda was overt, barely trying at subterfuge. All as well.

The monster you can see is preferable to the one you can’t.

“Enoshima is someone called the Ultimate Despair, after all. I can hardly imagine she’d be dismissed so easily. That would be too disappointing for words, so I’m covering all the bases. Where’s Murasame?” Komaeda continued.

“If you must know, I was told that he’d survived the killing, but was under intensive care. I was later informed that he’d been expelled along with Madarai.”

Komaeda blinked. “That’s…obviously a lie.”

“Of course.”

“Where is Murasame now? He’s an eyewitness to what could have been the greatest tragedy to befall the school, and he dropped off the face of the Earth!”

“Who can say?” Matsuda interjected. Out of the corner of her eye, Kyoko could see he was rattled. He was most involved with Enoshima after all.

Komaeda sighed. “Okay, allow me to rephrase my inquiry. Kirigiri-san, who gave you those documents?”

“There was no sender ID. Someone broke into my room and handed me those papers.”

“In short. There’s an unknown party out there, with a clear image of what’s been going on. Does anybody have a clue who that is?” Komaeda folded his arms.

He was met with silence.

Kyoko knew what he was getting at, and she’d long come to the same conclusion. “It isn’t Enoshima. That much I can guarantee.”

“How? I can’t imagine for a second that the Ultimate detective could work without facts. That means you know more than you’re telling us. And if you don’t, there are far too many holes in this picture.” Komaeda waved his hand, presenting her with an innocent smile. “Let’s make a deal. Tell me what happened to Enoshima and I’ll help you with Naegi, no questions asked. I’ve got some good advice to give you on that matter.”

Kyoko weighed the scales. Komaeda’s aid would be useful. Kyoko didn’t know much about luck and she had listened enough on the white-haired boy’s conversations to know he operated on a wavelength as twisted as Naegi’s. Bring a criminal to catch a criminal.

Kyoko would leave them to decide whether the saying was literal in this context.

Kyoko glanced at Matsuda. It wouldn’t be right to forego get his consent on this. Trust was imperative to building a unit.

The neurologist shrugged haphazardly.

Kyoko nodded. “Enoshima has lost her memory and is operating under another identity.”

“What?” Kuzuryu arched an eyebrow.
Pekoyama’s reaction was more direct. Her dislike for Enoshima was clear as day. “Amnesia? You can prove she’s not faking?”

“I can. Because I’m the one who erased her memory. Twice.” Matsuda replied.

Komaeda clapped his hands joyously. “Fair enough. If Matsuda-kun’s behind the operation then I’m sure it was a success…but, twice?”

“I was asked to, the second time.” Matsuda sighed. “By the Ultimate Hope.”

“Izuru Kamukura?” Komaeda glowed. Sounding every bit the fanboy he claimed to be.

“You know that freak?” Kuzuryu added, uncertainty and a tinge of fear in his voice.

“Not personally. Only what was written in the files. Do you?” Kyoko asked.

“Enoshima has spoken of him…highly. We have never met Kamukura…but we know enough to consider him dangerous.” Pekoyama scowled.

“Yeah…and let me tell you he’s a real piece of work. But one I’m partly responsible for.” Matsuda explained the inception and purpose behind the ultimate hope.

“All the talents…” Komaeda shook.

“And he made you erase Enoshima’s memory? So you both betrayed her, huh?” Kuzuryu sneered.

“She betrayed me first.” Matsuda snapped, slamming his hand on the table.

Kuzuryu chuckled. “Don’t sweat it one bit. No way am I giving you grief for putting that bitch out of our misery.”

“Don’t be so complacent. It’s possible she can still regain her memory, like before. Though if that happened, we’d know for certain. Junko could never pull off acting like Ryoko for more than 5 seconds. She can’t go without caking her face for 3 seconds. If she came back, she wouldn’t hide it.” Matsuda explained.

“Yeah, I can buy that. Hell of a relief too.”

“Is it safe to say the files were delivered to you by Kamukura?” Komaeda asked, suddenly.

“Matsuda and I discussed it and considered it the most likely possibility. There was nobody else with inside information of that magnitude that had no allegiance to Enoshima.” No one but Naegi.

“That asshole’s just looking to have fun. Pitting us against Junko is exactly what he wants.” Matsuda spat.

Komaeda rubbed his chin. “The Ultimate Hope. I want to meet him.”

The mention of Izuru Kamukura left Komaeda enraptured. He repurposed his efforts on learning as much as he could about The Ultimate Hope.

Like all the rest, he’d prematurely abandoned his initial line of questioning.
What happened to Soshun Murasame?

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter:
When was the last plot twist this story had?
Every game needs a wild card to spice things up. The bigger the game, the bigger that joker has to be.

Ever since The Tragedy that befell the student council, silence was all Soshun Murasame knew. He escaped the ordeal alive but his mind was in pieces, not unlike the bodies of his friends.

He laid on a bed, wires from high-tech electronics plugged into him. He stared blankly at the ceiling of this dimly lit and barren room. Though his dull brown eyes were wide awake, he remained perfectly still. Combined with his pale skin and listlessness, it wouldn’t be strange to mistake him for a corpse. That wasn’t too far from the truth.

Even now, he barely hung on to consciousness.

It was quite the change of pace from when he was the student council president. Back then, there was barely any free-time, what with the many apologies to the higher-ups whenever the students damaged school property, or were responsible for outrageous, borderline illegal misconduct.

The job would normally overwhelm someone like him, who’d been mocked as too righteous and forthright, much like his honest appearance suggested. Those attributes made him respected among his peers, but they weren’t qualities for a man in a position of leadership; he was bound to be taken advantage of. However, the load was bearable thanks to the carefully selected, capable and trusted friends by his side.

Now he was alone. The only survivor of the killing game. If they had only listened to him, maybe nobody would have had to die. But maybe it was inevitable. Was the bond and trust they’d built over the years worth anything if – in a matter of seconds – it could be trampled on by E-E-E-ENO-SH---

…

……

The memories of his friends were painted over, juxtaposed by the gruesome ways in which they betrayed one another and were killed.

Kotomi who was shot face first by….by….Iku……m……ro

Ryota didn’t even get the chance to avenge her before Karen ran a sword through his body.

Kiriko tried to murder Sosuke. Unfortunate, given his long-time crush on her. Doubly unfortunate as that quickly festering despair was taken out on Taro and Tsubasa. Impaling them in a manner unfit for even vampires in those novels Shoji read.

Sosuke didn’t live to regret or revel in his madness before Karen slaughtered him like cattle with a chainsaw.
Those were the deaths he remembered. The others were a blur. Either he missed them, or he forgot due to the concussion he received from a blow to the head.

What was certain was that the game carried on this way. Kill and be killed.

…

Soshun heard footsteps draw near. He didn’t look to see who it was. It could only be one of two who visited. Most of the time, it was a girl, unkempt black hair, a well-endowed physique underneath the uniform. A student. Her name. He knew it at one point, but he couldn’t recall. If he’d put in a modicum of effort into recollection, he could have remembered. But it was so far beneath the surface of relevance, he chose not to.

“You’re awake, aren’t you?” Her voice was sweet, meek and venomous all at once. She asked that every day, certain he was pretending to be unconscious, yet he never responded. He felt she’d made a game of it.

“You don’t have to pretend. I-I’m your friend.”

He was awake. He was always awake. From the worst tragedy to befall Hope’s Peak Academy to now. He never slept, for he would return to that moment; running through the barricaded school in fear of his own life. And from his closest friends, no less.

When was the last time sunlight touched his skin?

Ever since the killing game, he’d been trapped in one dark room after another, without even a window. Thus, he couldn’t tell day from night - His internal clock was broken, and his sense of time had been completely lost.

He’d first been transferred to the infirmary. An isolated one used for emergencies. He’d overheard that much from the physician who’d failed to see through Soshun’s pretense.

One day, another boy came. He called himself the Ultimate Neurologist. They’d met several times before but exchanged words of minor substance.

They hadn’t spoken long, before he was called elsewhere.

It was then that they took him away. This girl and one other. Another student, who carried Soshun over his back. The council president was also familiar with that loud boy, whose name he could not recall.

They clearly weren’t with the school, but Soshun didn’t know what they wanted. They simply left him here, paying visits daily to feed and watch over him.

“There’s something I want you to watch on the monitor. You can take a peek when I’m gone, okay?” Her words were thick with poison.

As promised, she departed not long after, leaving a video playing. His head fell to the side, viewing the multi-screen platform containing several camera angles of…the….

Aaahh…

It was the massacre. A clear, omniscient record of the killing game.

He no longer had to rely on spotty memory to see his friends die.
After the 65th replay, his eyes returned to the ceiling, as he fell back into his subdued, isolated world.

“Murasame-san, I have something for you.” She returned, though he made no response to her presence, as usual. How long had she been gone for? Who could say.

“It was a tough job recording, I had to hide in a closet to get it. I hope you'll praise me.” She rambled on.

“And you shouldn't have helped her.”

...The recorded voice was distinctly different than any Soshun’d heard in a long time.

“The student council murdered one another. I killed but a single man, who initiated the confrontation.”

Soshun’s eyebrows ticked ever so slightly, enough that the untrained eye wouldn’t notice. The giggle that escaped the nurse implied she was far from undisciplined.

“Self-defense huh. Even so, you could at least have disabled him without killing him. I’m mad.”

It was a conversation between 2 males he didn’t recognize, he pieced together that much. Although this one, with the lighter voice. Contrary to his words, he discussed the killings almost cheerfully, as if he were speaking of the weather.

The proceeding discussion even included Madarai…come to think of it, they sounded like students. Was the news about the student council already public?

"Oh, you mean that stuff about the student council’s dignity?…I can’t bring myself to care.”

…What?

She came by the next day. Yes, he discerned that a whole 24 hours had passed, as the nurse alluded to it. It was the first reference to the progression of time she made. Although it proved unnecessary with what she’d brought for him this time. Stacks of newspapers. Once trivial items, now worthwhile.

It took time and effort to regain the feeling back in his numb arms. He turned the newspaper when he was sure the purple-haired girl left.

He scanned the date on the top - September 7th

The day of the killing game was at the end of summer vacation. He flipped the pages, searching for details of the killings. He found nothing.
The news underneath was September 14th and equally as useless as the last. Perhaps the killings hadn’t been discovered quickly enough. He didn’t understand how long these processes took but… shouldn’t their families have mentioned something?

The next was November October 19th. Nothing.

Soshun waded through the sheets, reaching the October 29th, revealing no more information than all the rest. That is to say, nothing.

With the papers scattered all over the ground, he returned to his sleeping posture. Not even caring that it would confirm that he’d been wide awake.

“Good news, I’ll be here with you all day~” She announced. He thought nothing of it, not even mildly entertaining what made today special.

“Y-You should be grateful. I’ll be missing a f-fun party above, to look after you.”

Then leave.

“But I don’t mind. You’re sick and I get to take care of you. That’s the only thing a useless pig like me is good for.” She spoke of her duty as if it was a pleasure rather than an honor. But once more, she stayed true to her word. This was the longest he’d spent in the presence of another person in 2 months. He motionlessly stared at the ceiling, making him unable to see what the nurse was doing.

All he had to go on were her joyful hymns.

“So many people will depend on me soon.” She giggled. “But maybe we can still watch the show using footage from the security cameras.” She spoke to herself just like this for the passing moments.

“It d-doesn’t look like the ‘parade’ will start very soon. We could be here a long time.” More pointlessness, time had lost all meaning for him. “Oh, you shouldn’t know yet, b-but the ‘parades’ are the reserve course, protesting against the school. T-They’re getting really violent too.”

I don’t care.

“Y-You probably aren’t interested…but that’s fine. I’m sure they care even less about you. Just like everyone else.”

Soshun twitched.

“Hey…why didn’t you die?” She voiced her inquiry with childlike innocence. “The rest of the student council died like they were supposed to…all except you. Did you want to live so badly? Even all alone and forgotten?”

…No. He didn’t care about living. He didn’t want to die because…because-

“I know what that despair is like; to have nobody love or care for you. But my beloved saved me and now, I want to repay that kindness.
Even if you’re worthless garbage, you’re not alone. I’ll be right by your side.”

The phrase was in total contradiction to everything she’d said prior.

“Oh it’s starting! Look!”

Wordlessly, his eyes turned to the screen. It was dark and raining outside, but what captured his attention was the sight of men dressed in black formal wear and strange helmets, harassing another student. Their clashing uniforms and the information the nurse gave him beforehand allowed the ex-council president to piece together the premise.

The brutes cheered as they stomped on the girl’s battered form. Once they had their fill, they left, likely in search of a next victim. Other screens on the wide monitor conveyed similar scenes, but he was mainly interested in the bodies.

The nurse clapped her hands, drool escaping her lips. Soshun couldn’t fathom what captivated her. There was nothing stupefying about this level of violence. However, Soshun’s reasoning differed from the ordinary man’s. Perhaps weeks ago, he would have been disgusted by such acts…but now, he only noted how clean the victim’s bodies were.

He knew death; it was cold and unfeeling. He knew the students still lived from the way they twitched and groaned in pain.

“Hope’s Peak Academy’s biggest, most awful event.”

Soshun saw red at the news headline.

“Ehehehe…it’s practically on every news channel~” The purple-haired girl smiled. One would almost think her succeeding words were entirely harmless. “But maybe that’s expected. Everyone pays attention to Hope’s Peak. T-The public can’t pass up a tragedy of this scale.”

Soshun could only gaze in wonderment. Even the frozen expression he’d cultivated for thousands of hours gave way.

A tragedy?

The most awful event?

That is what the news called that skirmish that happened only yesterday?

“T-haat…is…a trage..dy?” His voice came out hoarse.

“You talked. You talked!” She leapt out of the chair, skipping to his bedside. “Yup, it’s a tragedy. You know, when innocent, good people are victimized.”

His breathing quickened.

“Nobody…died.” A debacle where nobody was sacrificed reached the news in less than 24 hours.

The nurse nodded. “Kamukura-san was playing it safe.”
Soshun convulsed at the name.

“It doesn’t matter if the students weren’t killed. People react to just about anything nowadays. Even small-stuff like bullying can make the news if you’re loud enough.” She giggled at an inside joke. “But you’re wrong about nobody dying. There are riots in many parts around the country, copying the reserve course. All because of the parade yesterday.”

“Then…why?” It needn’t be said what he referred to. If he’d voiced it, then that would spell his defeat.

“Why hasn’t anyone said anything about the real biggest tragedy in the school?” She singsonged. “Weren’t you listening? Nobody cares.”

W…hat?

“Everyone knows the student council died. There was a video spread to the campus, but it was quickly buried by the school. Nobody talks about it, because they’re all safer pretending it didn’t happen and you’re all on vacation. I’m sure even your parents were bought off or told some fake story to keep them quiet. Ah, incidentally Murasame-san. You were expelled by the board not too long ago, when they decided they couldn’t find you.”

He clawed at the bed.

“The committee must be soooo happy. They didn’t want you to come back, because you were a witness. You revealing what happened would have brought them down for sure. Why do you think they locked you up instead of sending you to a general hospital?”

Stop. Please stop.

“I feel bad. I-I really do. Which is why I’m surprised you haven’t tried to kill yourself.” She brought up an outrageous topic as if it were perfectly natural. “I wouldn’t let you, of course. But I thought you’d at least have tried something? You really want to live, huh…or maybe you like despair?”

“Shut up…I won’t die…I won’t let them win.” That was his only reason for living. He wanted to spite them. As long as he was alive, the killing game was a failure.

“…Who is ’them’? The other participants of the killing game?” She cocked her head to one side.

“I’m talking about—about Her!” Her. It was always Her! “She did this to us!” Soshun struggled against the wires, the beeping machines by his side crashing to the ground.

“That’s still too vague. I can’t help if I don’t know her name~”

“H-How could you help me?”

She looked at him like a parent would an ignorant child. “I’ve been helping you this whole time. Watching over you, feeding you and making sure you don’t expire one way or another. I’m on your side.” Poison melted his core. “Actually, I’m the only one who’s cared to do that, huh? The only one in the world who is your ally.”

Her words went in one ear and were drowned in a pool of confusion. One thing Soshun did understand was the fact that this girl had done more for him than the school…than the world.

“And I can also help you in other ways.” The nurse panted, a pink blush on her face as she forced
him down on the bed, sitting atop him.

Her red eyes, gazed down at his. But where Soshun’s were a dull void, her’s sparkled.

“I can help you get back at them. On Ikusaba and Kamukura.”

Soshun gritted his teeth.

Mukuro Ikusaba and Izuru Kamukura. She killed Kotomi and he killed Hino.

With one hand, she reached into her dress shirt and pulled a photo stored in her chest. In it was a girl with short pink-hair and a sluggish demeanor, like she was standing half-asleep.

Soshun knew the girl in the picture. They had met several times, formally. She was…a class representative.

“This is Nanami-san, if you remember. She is one of them. One of the conspirators behind the killing game. Chiaki Nanami, and like everyone else in the class, she is The Ultimate Despair.”

Ultimate…Despair. A name all too appropriate.

“We can use her, and with it, we can erase Ultimate Despair and Kamukura-san.” She brought forth another picture, this one of a girl he did not immediately recognize. The standout feature was tomato-red hair and fair skin. “But that’s not enough to satisfy you, is it? The one you really want to take revenge on is-“

As if preparing for the inevitable end he foresaw, Soshun closed his eyes from the exhaustion. His heart and all other bodily functions shut down. That ephemeral moment ought to have lasted forever. It would have been better that way for everyone involved. However, that possibility became a far-off dream the moment the nurse broke the unspoken taboo and uttered those two, reviled words.

“Enoshima Junko.”

Like jumpstarting an engine, Soshun’s body revived. His teeth gnashed against each other, his eyes snapped open, bright red orbs - matching the woman above him – replaced his natural brown ones.

Blood rushed into his head as he screamed that accursed name like a rampaging demon. Soon his vocabulary was reduced to but a single world.

“Kill.”

Tsumiki cackled, overwhelmed by her state of euphoria as he sang; one word to convey his intentions, actions and his newfound reason for living.

In reality, Soshun Murasame died the moment he closed his eyes. No, it may have been more poignant to say that The Ultimate Student Council President died two months ago, along with his companions.

As he writhed on the bed, the monitors glowed red. A figure appeared on the screen.

“Upupu~”

Chapter End Notes
Don't we all just love Mikan? She's such a hard worker.

Soshun is the last relevant character that'll be introduced and second to last that'll be put up in the tags. I've been building him and this chapter up in the background, but it was one of the first plot points in the outline for this story. I had to re-read DR0 to get Soshun's reaction right and boy, Junko did a number on his guy.

Next chapter: Chihiro starts suspecting there might be something off about Naegi...finally.
The door burst open without so much as a knock. “Headmaster Kirigiri!” A boy with mousy brown hair waltzed in.

“Naegi-kun.” Jin studied the cheerful teen, recalling this particular student for three reasons. The first being the help offered with patching things up with Kyoko. The second because he was a hero; a boy who saved one of the victims in the riot. The last was that he was among the few who weren’t filing lawsuits against the school. By all means, Naegi’s firmly placed himself in Jin’s good books. “I’m happy to see you’re moving around.”

“I’m sorry, we should have knocked.” Said his blue-haired partner, who followed behind. Maizono was as immediately recognizable.

“Well yes, but I’m more curious as to how you got through my secretary.”

“We asked nicely.”

“I see…” He felt there was more to it but decided to leave it be. They wouldn’t have come all this way without a purpose. “I’m afraid we’ll have to keep this visit short. I’m very busy at the moment.”

It went without saying what was taking so much of his time. However, he still needed to do the bare minimum of his duty as headmaster and attend to his students.

“It’s about the reserve course, right? We have an idea that might help…if you haven’t already thought of anything.” Maizono said.

“I’m listening…” Advice was wonderful, but Jin was cautiously optimistic. The turbulence the school was faced with had himself and the board turning heads. A situation this dire was unfounded…at least one that made public. “But do you understand the position the school staff is in right now?” If they didn’t comprehend the core issue, then no advice would help.

“I think the fundamental problem is figuring out what to do with the reserve course. Are you going to disband the program?” Naegi’s question was legitimate. Pity he couldn’t answer.

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that with students, unfortunately. But I will say, you’re correct on the first point.”

“Okay, then let’s speak hypothetically.”

Jin smiled. These were smart kids. “I suppose it’s possible that the board is considering that option very closely.”

“If you were considering that, there might be another way to deal with the reserve course, without expelling anyone.” He proposed.
A bit late for that, as the students behind the attack were long gone. But… “I sincerely hope you’re not pulling my leg here.”

Naegi and Maizono shared a look “We’re thinking of planning a Christmas event for both the main and reserve course. With mandatory attendance.”

After letting the idea sink in, Jin rested his elbows on the desk, crossing his fingers. A Christmas… party. It was such an immature plan that none of the staff had probably discussed it. “It sounds like a nice idea in theory, but I can list several problems in practice, right off the bat.”

“There will need to be compromises here and there, but I think Makoto’s plan can work. I can vouch that he’s got a lot of experience taking care of other people’s problems.” Maizono said.

“Is that so? I’ll hear you out, but keep in mind that you need to address and overcome three problems. Scheduling, motivation and finances.” Jin wore a serious expression; proof that he was taking their proposal into consideration.

“Firstly, I was thinking that this all started with the reserve course’s dissatisfaction with how the school treated them. Would you say that’s fair?”

“That may well be the case.”

“That’s why I think the best course of action is to integrate them into the school.” He gingerly fumbled with his hoodie, but Jin thought that was a bold proposition. It was no secret that Hope’s Peak believed talent was first, and everything else, a far-off second. “The reserve course was mostly ignored; their protests and hopes of joining the main course weren’t answered. That’s why we have to make them feel like they have a place here. A reward more than just getting the school’s name brand.”

“Students must demonstrate a degree of talent to enter the main course. Integrating them is not easy, not without stepping on the principles the school was built on.”

“I see. I’m not managerially skilled enough to look that far ahead in the future, but I can help point the way.”

Ultimately, Naegi offered to help for the short-term, and leave the rest to the school to mend its ways.

Fair enough.

“And that foundation is the Christmas event, I presume.” Jin was already calculating the minimum costs in his mind.

“Yeah. I was thinking we make the reserve course feel wanted by holding a huge party on Christmas day.”

“…How big? The reserve course numbers in the thousands.”

“The whole school. We’ll…eh, turn the grounds into a festival.” Naegi proposed.

“That’s an ambitious undertaking.”

“It’s necessary. The school, the entire school has to convey openness to normal people, even if it’s just temporary. That’s why I think the invitation should extend to everybody, but the main and reserve course must be there.” Naegi pressed.
“On Christmas day? You’re aware this is a time people take to be with their families. I can’t think of anyone who would want to be in school at that period. Much less, be given no choice after everything that’s happened.”

“You should see this from a different angle.” Maizono interrupted. “If you make attendance mandatory, and add in a penalty…doesn’t that make it seem like you want them to be there?”

… “Fair enough. I can see the charm in that mentality, at least to the parents. However, there’s still the matter of motivation. A reason that the students would absolutely want to show up on that day. I can’t assume the main or the reserve course would be all too fond of one another.”

“That’s where Sayaka comes in.” Naegi chirped, stretching his arms like a magician drawing attention to his assistant.

“We can draw people in using my group to host a concert. We’d need somewhere with a lot of space though…” Maizono said.

“That’s impossible.” Jin declared. “I agree that Maizono suffices as incentive…but the expenses would be through the roof.”

“I did say you’d have to make compromises. What I can offer is that HPA would pay only 30% the usual rates.”

Only 30%? In that case, it may not be a total dead end. “That’s quite the discount. I must admit, I’m not too knowledgeable on the idol business, but would your agency readily agree to it?”

“Under normal circumstances, definitely not.” The idol shook her head. “But there’s an opportunity here. The academy’s getting a lot of attention from the media. If my manager announced that we’d be holding a concert here, on Christmas, it’d be great publicity.”

“And you’ve discussed this with him?” Jin scratched his chin.

“Yes. He said it was a bit of a gamble, but the payoff could be what the girls and I need right now. And if it helps mend the conflict, all the better.”

Jin furrowed his brows, thinking deeply.

This went beyond the advice he’d expected. Their suggestions were indeed practical. It would take some convincing the board members, but…it could work. The current board are inexperienced, looking for quick solutions to a problem they barely have a grasp on.

“Naegi, could you bring me a manifesto?” Jin asked.

“A…what?”

“Your notes, dummy.” Maizono nudged him on the shoulder.

“O-Oh. I’d have to go back to my room.”

“That’s fine. I’ll put in your request in the next board meeting this afternoon.” Jin smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll make them approve it…assuming you’re ready to put in the work.”

“Eh?”

The headmaster laughed. “Come now. You didn’t think you would just hand in a directory without seeing it through yourself. Actually, I’ve been meaning to have a long talk with you about your
enrolment here.”

“Isn’t this great, Makoto? You got exactly what you wanted.” Maizono said, ignoring the boy’s horror.

Jin nodded. “Don’t you worry, Naegi-kun. If this succeeds, you can guarantee to have the school’s backing in whatever future endeavor’s you undertake. Heck, this might count for your practice exams for the duration of your time in school.”

“Right. Oh well, I’m used to sleep deprivation.” He convinced himself.

Jin chuckled at the joke.

Maizono didn’t.

“You know it’s funny. Kyoko gave me similar ideas. I hope you both get along with her.” He’d make a very good influence. He’s certainly been a lucky charm for the headmaster.

“I think that ship has sailed, Headmaster.” Maizono cringed.

Naegi laughed awkwardly. “Kirisu-san kind of hates me, I think…and she has a very um…direct way with words.”

Ah. “Now that, I understand perfectly. Don’t let it get to you too much.” He consoled a kindred spirit.

“That was nerve-wracking.” Makoto said, as he and Sayaka entered his room. He searched for the rough notes he’d made of his plan. Hopefully, the headmaster wouldn’t be too put off by his handwriting.

“Headmaster Kirigiri was nicer than I thought.” Sayaka said, making herself at home, sitting on Makoto’s bed while the owner Makoto rummaged through drawers.

“No kidding…I was thinking he’d be a scarier Kirigiri-san and nothing I said would get through.” Makoto frowned. His repeated failures with the detective were like a black spot on his record.

“You and Kyoko are irreconcilable, huh?”

“It’s not my fault. She’s hated me from the moment I spoke to her. It’s annoying.” He said.

“It’s way out of character for you to talk about someone like that. I’m envious.”

Makoto squinted at the odd phrasing “In what way?” He asked, raising his voice slightly to be heard while his head was currently below his bed.

Seriously, where’d he put those notes?

“Who can say?” She replied in a vague roundabout way. “You’ve got a quaint room, not too many posters or decoration. It’s fitting.”
What a strange thing to say. It wasn’t like this was her first time in his room. “What can I say? I’m a minimalist, I’m used to plain rooms.” He also couldn’t sleep in the midst of too much clutter. His eyes wandered too much.

“At home?”

“Yeah. Where else?” Makoto answered without missing a beat. It was a lie, but he took care not remembering that horrible place.

“Jeez.” Makoto groaned, having decided to give up and just write new points to give the headmaster. He gripped the surface of the bed and used it to stand. He blinked a moment, surprised to see Sayaka not stationed there, but standing by his desk, holding a unique capsule.

His medication.

“Sayaka? W-What are you doing with that?” Makoto berated himself for stuttering.

“I was just curious about what boys hide in their rooms and found this.” She shook the container. “I’ve taken a few sleeping pills myself when on tour.” Her smile belayed a shadow. “Not too much of course. I’ve seen girls who get addicted to the stuff…they’re narcotics you know.”

“Y-Yeah, I know. I take them sometimes when I stay up too late.” Makoto hurriedly snatched the bottle from her hands.

…Ugh, that was weird. Calm down, Makoto – He thought, acknowledging how immensely suspicious that was.

“I know the feeling…” She answered his earlier comment “but…wouldn’t it be better to see a doctor?”

“No!” He cut her off immediately. Thankfully, the walls were soundproof. “I-I mean, what makes you say that?” He looked away from her, clutching his shivering arm.

“I read the label and think I heard about Insomnia from a friend a while back. It was a long time ago, so I might be wrong.”

Crap…

“All drugs are dangerous if used improperly. These were prescribed to me, you probably are remembering wrong.” He made up an excuse.

Only for short periods…but he’d gone this long without any problems.

“When did you first start taking these?”

“A few weeks. Not too long.”

“I see.” Sayaka beamed. “Whew, I was a little worried there, but it sounds like you know what you’re doing.”

Makoto knew that smile. It was the one she regularly put on and showed him earlier. “Saya-“

“I’ll be going now. Since you’ve put me on the spot, I’ll have to really work on that song.” She dusted off her skirt.

He read the mood. “Right…thanks for helping me out.”
Chihiro ventured towards Naegi’s dorm, a concerned glint in his eyes when Maizono walked out of his door.

What was she doing there? – His mind raced through the (scandalous) possibilities. But they were all washed away when he caught the blank look on the idol’s face.

A shiver crawled up Chihiro’s spine as he instinctively stepped to the side when she walked by. She didn’t offer him so much as a glance in his direction.

“W-What happened?” The boy had never seen the idol where that face. He didn’t even think she could look scary even if she tried.

Just then, he felt a finger tap his shoulder. He shifted nervously but settled when he caught sight of Naegi’s figure. “Chihiro. Nice seeing you…did you meet Sayaka on the way?”

“Um…I’m not really sure myself. It could’ve been a totally different person.”

Naegi flinched, catching onto the programmer’s meaning. “I’ll…deal with that later. For now, I was just on my way to see the headmaster, and maybe Mukuro later. Want to come with?” He asked, regaining his winning composure.

“Hm…no thanks.”

It pained Chihiro to say, but he considered Ikusaba a rival. Which, to him, was utterly insane – Ikusaba was a soldier, w-who’d probably killed people before.

Yet here he was trying to compete against her. Chihiro didn’t know if he was crazy or Ryoko’s disregard for…pretty much everything, was finally reaching him. Or because Ikusaba had saved his own life.

“Oh, I get it. You’ll be hanging out with Ryoko again, right?” Naegi wore a teasing smile.

“Oh…I don’t want to ask, but what do you mean by that?”

“You don’t have to hide anything from me. I can see how Ryoko’d be your type.”

“You’ve got it wrong. I don’t like Ryoko that way.”

“Huh, really? I’ve seen you two a lot together, so I assumed.” Naegi scratched his cheek. “Sorry about that, my inner Leon must have come out.”

“I thought you were a little forward.”

“What can you do?” Naegi laughed. “I kind of wish Leon stayed back. We could’ve had a guy’s night out.” He sighed.

“Are you bored?”

“Just a little, but I meant more like we could have a ton of fun before I get buried under work.”

“Work?” Chihiro cocked his head to one side.
“Ah…it’s a long story, but things are going to be busy here for the next while.” Naegi explained the meeting he had with headmaster Kirigiri, along with the responsibility he’d unknowingly assumed.


“And I’ll get to plan it.” He didn’t sound so enthusiastic.

“I see why you’d want Kuwata-kun to be around then.” Chihiro hadn’t spoken to the athlete personally, but he admired the redhead’s strength. In Naegi’s case though, Kuwata was a gateway to escaping responsibility. “Say, will you have time for Alter Ego?”

“Oh right. Hmm, I’ll have to see first. If I’m too tired, I’ll hand him back to you.”

“N-no need. I was actually interested in his development. C-Could I see him?”

Naegi relaxed after a moment of thought. “Sure. Let’s go over to my room, the door’s open.”

Chihiro’s heart skipped a few beats, as his face flushed. He'd never been there before.

Naegi left Chihiro to his own devices, staying only for a few minutes to write down an itinerary. He explained what he had in mind with the headmaster in the meanwhile.

A Christmas party.

That could be good…or disastrous depending on where the die landed. But if anyone could make it work, it was Naegi.

…Onto his more pressing concerns, Chihiro assessed Alter Ego’s development from the comfort of Naegi’s desk. The owner having left him to his own devices.

The ex-crossdresser wasn’t sure if Naegi trusted him that much or was just really laid back. The answer was probably a little of both.

“Been a while, Chi”

… Chihiro paused at the greeting. On one hand, he was glad to be remembered. On the other…“Hey, Alter Ego. Your speech pattern is…really different.”


“No, this is fine. Good even. It shows you’ve developed informal speech.” That was what Chihiro wanted after all. Now, how to see what else he’s learned.

“What do you think about Naegi?”

One of the main reasons Chihiro handed Naegi the A.I was to discern how it would form opinions of other humans. If it acted like any kid their age having a change in environment…or -for a lack of a better analogy – switching roommates, then this mini-experiment was a resounding success.
“He suffices as a career. I report no malfunctions or errors in my processing.”

Chihiro sighed at the mechanical response. Still some bugs that needed to be worked out, it seems.

“By the way, where is he?”

“He’s out right now.”…Just a second…”You’re inquiring about him?”

“Yeah, this is his room.”

That was a massive breakthrough! Curiosity in the program meant Alter ego was more than just a databank and could think for itself.

“One of the programs he asked me to oversee just reached completion.”

“What program?”

“The hope video.”

Chihiro arched his eyebrow. “Hope video? What is that?”

“It’s…” Alter ego made a surprised face…and then shut off.

That’s never happened before!

Just as Chihiro motioned to reboot, the disembodied head returned to the screen.

“What happened?”

“Just a tiny glitch, so to speak.”

“Okay. What was that about a hope video?”

“It’s…a motivational video Makoto’s been working on. I offered my services.”

Huh, I’m kinda curious. “Can I see it?”

“No.”

…”W-What?” Chihiro let the ramifications of what HIS program just said, sink in. “You’re refusing a command?”

“Wasn’t that a question?”

Chihiro frowned. “Show me the video.” He restructured his sentence into a direct statement.

“No can do.”

…So he wasn’t dreaming.

“Why?”

“I need Makoto’s authorization.”

“…Why do I need Naegi’s permission?”

“He said never to show anyone unless he gave permission first.”
“Alter ego. What’s the chain of command?”

“Chi first and Makoto second, as a temporary substitute.”

So he gets that my command overrides Naegi’s? Chihiro was actually relieved to hear that. For a moment, he was worried that Alter ego was somehow hacked and had his order of priorities tampered with. But that posed another problem.

“Then why are you rejecting my orders?”

“The hope video is his property. I don’t want to expose his privacy that way.”

“That’s…true.” Chihiro breathed out. His reaction was a perfectly normal one…and that amazed the programmer. It was like he was talking to an actual person who’d forged a legitimate connection with another.

Chihiro approached this development with the tact of an experimenter. “I’ve received Naegi’s permission. Can you show me the video?”

“R-Really? Could you confirm that?”

That’s not what Chihiro wanted to hear. “No.”

“…I need some evidence.”

“Like a password?”

“He didn’t make one and left the security clearance up to my discretion. If you could bring him here, I’d be happy to show you.”

“That’s alright. I’ll check the video out later….good work, Alter ego.” Chihiro closed the laptop, certain of one thing.

Alter Ego didn’t trust him. Not to the absolute degree that it once did. Only a few weeks ago, Alter ego would have done whatever Chihiro requested. Now the programmer had lost quite a bit of control. He had mixed feelings. The A.I was growing at an impressive rate, but he felt estranged from to his own creation, even if it was only a little bit.

This day was full of surprises.

“Huh…I wonder if this is how every parent feels about their kids growing up.”

Maybe I should call dad and apologize for their fight earlier.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Makoto and Ryoko mix like oil and water.
In a way, this occasion could be celebrated as Ryoko’s first fall/winter vacation. If A) It was a vacation instead of an unplanned intermission in the school curriculum. B) She had anyone to celebrate it with.

Sadly, her sphere of friends currently amounted to…just one. Chihiro Fujisaki.

“That’s way lame.” Ryoko lamented…and then remembered she didn’t actually care that much. Besides, Chihiro was cute enough to make up for at least 10 friends!

“What is?” Oh, there was someone else, but Ryoko wouldn’t consider a friend at all. Barely an acquaintance…who’d taken it upon herself to accompany the analyst. One Mukuro Ikusaba.

“Hey, I said you can follow, but that doesn’t mean you can just interrupt my monologues!” Ryoko puffs her cheeks.

“But you barely said anything.” As expected, Mukuro just didn’t get it.

“Mental monologuing!”

“Sorry, Ryoko-chan.” Then there was the familiar way the soldier addressed her.

Ryoko chalked it up to sisterly projection. Despite Mukuro’s supposed indifference, she sure was a softie underneath. The initial anxiety Ryoko felt towards the freckled girl had largely diminished.

“So what do you do for fun, Mukuro?”

“Huh?” She perked up as if a question of that sort had never been thrown at her before. “I’m not sure.”

“Jeez, can’t you keep up small talk, girl? There’s gotta be something you like.”

“Taking care of my weapons; putting them together and disassembling them.” Okay, definitely not what Ryoko would call a good time. This one was an odd ball…but eh, everybody’s got their quirks. She wasn’t one to judge.

Still. It was almost…disappointing.

“I also love dogs.” She smiled.

…There was a more normal response.

“Yeah, I get what you mean. Dogs are dumb, but they’re super cuddly and attached.” Every pore in Ryoko’s body compelled her to conclude with “Cats are way better though.”

“N-No they’re not.” Mukuro was taken aback.
Ryoko narrowed her eyes. Oh this was sooo not happening. “Listen here. I could give you verbal, mathematical and scientific reasons why cats are better than dogs. It’s just nature.”

“Dogs are more reliable and receptive to their owners.” Mukuro crossed her arms and stiffened her posture.

“Yeah, cuz they’re morons who can’t think for themselves and act on self-preservation.” Ryoko rolled her eyes. “Cats are way smarter, always looking out for Numero Uno. And unlike dogs, their affection is harder to earn, making the times when you can pet them all the more rewarding.”

Mukuro didn’t look impressed. “Save that for when ‘Numero Uno’ leaves you to die, while a dog would risk its life to save you.”

Sparks flew between the girls.

“Uh…is this a fight?” Came another voice. Ryoko changed the focus of her discontent to the intervenor.

“Naegi…good afternoon.” Mukuro greeted him with a soft smile.

Ryoko wanted to puke. Not just from the raven-haired girls transparent affection, but that she’d seen the exact same transition of emotions in Chihiro too. Talk about head over heels.

“I was eavesdropping, and while I’d like to say dogs and cats are great. Bears are the best by far.” Naegi voiced his totally unnecessary opinion!

“Bears? Like the cubs?” Were those cute? Baby animals usually were so…

“Nope. Just bears. I’ve thought they were cool ever since I was a kid.”

“I think you’ve got a few screws loose, little guy.” Ryoko sweatdropped.

“Ahahaha. Thanks but I’m managing just fine.” His laugh was strained. His eyes shifted between the two. “It’s unusual to see you two together. It’s like you’re stealing all my friends away, Ryoko.”

Ryoko smirked shamelessly, taking his words as evidence of her, blatant, superiority. “I am enthralling. If only some people could recognize that.”

Even with little elaboration, Naegi clued in to who she was referring to. “Don’t be angry with Yasuke. I’m sure he cares for you in his own way. Love comes in all forms.”

“He does?! Of course he does. I am world-class adorable, after all.” Ryoko beamed. Maybe Naegi wasn’t so bad.

“Too true, and with a personality to match. I’d love to see it more.” He complimented.

“*cough*” A harsh noise from Mukuro interrupted them.

“Did you catch a cold?” Ryoko asked.

“Just a passing cough.” She said, her lips a straight line. Mukuro was giving Ryoko kind of a half, uncertain glare. Why would she-

“Whoa!” Ryoko’s eyes widened as she remembered who it was she’d been talking too and distanced herself from the lucky pervert. “Nice try, but you’ll need better lines to get through my
maiden heart!"

That was close! Compared to Mukuro, Chi and even Matsuda-kun, Naegi was more adept at socializing. She’d been sucked into his pace before she knew it.

How terrifying…

Naegi tilted his head. “I’m not following…but I’m not complaining or anything. It’s better if everyone’s friendly with each other.” He turned to face Mukuro. “I was actually looking for you, but it can’t be helped if you’re keeping Ryoko company.”

“Y-You can join us, i-if you’d like.” Mukuro phrase spoke of an offer, but it came out as a plea.

“Actually no.” “No thanks.” Naegi and Ryoko said simultaneously. The two exchanged odd glances.

“Ah, you didn’t want me here anyway? I’m striking out all over the place.” Naegi scratched his hair, disheartened. “I just had a long talk with the headmaster. I’ll be… occupied for the next few weeks with a Christmas event. The headmaster will message all the students, but I’ll be giving everyone I meet a heads up but I wanted to give you guys a heads up. And to say I’ll probably be busy for the next little while.”

Mukuro nodded enthusiastically. “I’ll help anyway I can.”

“No. I’m pretty much fine. Until then…avoid any trouble..” Naegi said with a blank stare.

Ryoko placed her hands over her head, a bored expression on her face. “No thanks. This event or whatever doesn’t have anything to do with me… unless the attractions are fun.”

Naegi tilted his head. “I’m not too sure on that yet since the headmaster needs to sort out the planning stage. I was thinking we’d get the Ultimates to showcase their talents for the others. Like talent booths. Speaking of which, did you ever recall your talent, Ryoko?”

“…Others?” Ryoko zoomed in on that tidbit.

“That would be the guests. The school’s going to be open to the public.” He explained, not seeming to mind that the redhead ignored his inquiry.

“You mean…the reserve course is invited.”

“Wow, I was trying to stay vague, but you saw right through me. I’m impressed. Maybe you’re one of those genius Ultimates like Chihiro.” Naegi said. Ryoko wouldn’t say he was far off. During that stormy afternoon, Ryoko’d felt like her mind was connected to a supercomputer. Information flew in her brain at a glance and she used that advantage to outmaneuver her attackers.

“Why do we have to entertain those jerks?”

“Don’t be like that. Nothing will get solved if we all hold grudges…and it was only a small fraction of the reserve course anyway.”

“Isn’t the reason you’re planning this shindig to stop them from flipping their shit again?” Ryoko ignored the stares that said “did she really just say ‘shindig’?” “Looks to me like they’re still dangerous. Just because some didn’t show up doesn’t mean they’re not conspiring.”

“I agree with Ryoko-chan. We shouldn’t keep dangerous elements near us.” Mukuro backed her
up. Atta girl. She especially liked that beaten look on Naegi’s face.

“You too, Mukuro? I can’t deny there’s some truth to what you’re both saying…but we can’t let that stop us?” Naegi folded his arms, disappointed. “Otherwise, what else are our options? Annex the reserve course? That’s one solution, but the school’s going under with the reparation fees they’d need to award to the students. The bad blood between the main and reserve course wouldn’t disappear either. We need to do our part to mend the rift between students.”

Way too optimistic.

“You’re really too nice, Naegi.” Mukuro praised.

“N-Not really.” The boy scratched his cheeks.

It looked like they were having a moment, but Ryoko couldn’t care less. Something Naegi said bothered her “Yeah real nice. Everyone’s happy…but I gotta ask: what happens to all the victims from the attack?” Like Numero Uno/Her/Ryoko Otonashi/Prettiest girl on Earth.

Naegi grimaced. “Huh? Oh…yes, that was a tragedy. A large number of them are still in the hospital… That’s why we have to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

His smile returned too quickly for her liking.

“Yeah, you said that. But what about them? What do the actual victims get from this plan of yours? Lying on hospital beds or struck in comas, while we dance for the group of assholes that put em there?”

Naegi took on a thoughtful look. “True, I don’t think they would take it too well when they return. The families may be outraged too.” He paused “Though I think that’s still within acceptable levels for the headmaster to handle.”

Ryoko twitched. This guy…did he even care? “If the reserve course gets what they want, that means they win. It’s totally cruel. Do you even understand how that feels?”

“Of course. I was a victim myself. But moping around and wallowing in the past won’t solve anything. What’s done is done, we should plan for the future.”

...“And what about the ones who’ve had their future ruined. Nobody may have died, but there were some serious injuries.” Ryoko lied, not actually knowing if there were injuries as severe as that, having paid no further attention to The Tragedy beyond what afflicted her personally. But seeing how bloodthirsty the reserve course had been, it was expected.

“Nothing that time won’t fix. Nobody died, the situation is pretty salvageable.” Naegi argued, pressing his hand to his chest. Like the two-timing jerk had a heart.

Ryoko finally understood what about this guy was so unnerving.

He was her exact opposite in every way.

“Okay, Naegi. Let’s use an analogy. Say this once super cute girl got disfigured horribly in the riot. What would you say about that?”

He rubbed his chin with a finger. “I’d call it a shame. But there’s always a chance she can rebound
and move on with her life. There’s always a future.”

Easy for him to say.

“And what if her looks were her future? What if she’d dreamed of being a celebrity since she was little, was just able to touch that dream and had that future stolen away. Now her assailants get everything they wanted instead of being put behind bars. Is that fair to you?”

“That’s an extreme example.”

“But it could have happened. Hope’s Peak is filled with beautiful and talented people. What if it happened to that Maizono chick you’re with? I’d say her future as an idol would be toast.”

Ryoko smiled triumphantly as vexation flashed on Naegi’s face, if for a moment.

As a person, Ryoko was selfish to the core; always looking out for the number one person in her life. As such she was aware that there was nothing more important nor irreplaceable than the individual. Naegi talked about what’s best for everyone, while overlooking the individual feelings of those involved…which just so happened to include Ryoko herself.

That hypocrisy seriously pissed her off. I’m not a statistic, asshat!

“Um, please don’t fight.” Mukuro said meekly, caught in the middle like a child pacifying their parents.

“We’re not fighting, only sharing a difference opinion. Unfortunately.” He said, waving his hand dismissively at Mukuro. He returned his attention to her “Well, I’m still certain what I’m doing is right and I’m confident you’ll come to see things my way one day.”

“Nope! I’ll reject anything you do out of spite.” Ryoko stuck out her tongue out at him.

“Ain’t you a bastion of maturity?” said a gruff sounding voice, drawing closer to the bickering couple.

“This place may be a fucking ghost town, but that just means your voices carry farther.” Fuyuhiko shook his head. “Then again, like I’ve got any right to tell someone to watch how they speak.”

“Should you be moving around like this, Naegi?” Peko said

“I’m right as rain.” He said, as if he hadn’t participated in a heated debate and had one of his closest friends used against him.

“You appear to be developing a strong tolerance for pain.” She gave a chastising smile.

He rubbed his nape. “Thanks. But my injuries don’t really compare to practising with you.”

“Did you really just say that?”

Their discourse had intended to be just that; friendly (tentatively) banter. However, Mukuro to Naegi’s side snarled at the two newcomers. Just now, the soldier placed herself in front like a wall. The Yakuza duo met her with equal displeasure.
“Naegi and I need to have a talk, alone. Buzz off.” The young master spoke.

“You think I’ll let you after what you did?”

“You still hung up on that?” The blonde clicked his tongue. “I was talking to Naegi. Get lost.”

“Let’s not fight, you guys.” Naegi pacified them. She really was starting to think he hadn’t been involved in a similar engagement, moments before. “Kuzuryu and I made up.”

… Ah.

Naegi placed his hand on the standoffish’s Mukuro’s shoulder, getting the soldier to relax her stance.

The swordswoman observed the interaction with a keen eye, eyes trailed on Naegi even as he left with Fuyuhiko. Once they were out of sight, she turned to the others, particularly the red-haired girl, with the eyes of a predator stalking their prey. Peko could tell the young master had deliberately avoided looking Her way. He likely wouldn’t have been able to retain his composure as well as he did.

“What are you staring at?” Enoshima…or rather Otonashi, cowered, lending credence to Kirigiri and Matsuda’s claims. Otonashi lacked Enoshima’s eerie presence. More surprising still, was that this was the same girl who’d protected Chiaki during the riot. If all of that was an act, then it was an elaborate one. Unfortunately, Enoshima was nothing, if not elaborate. Even if this Otonashi meant no harm, that didn’t mean she wasn’t dangerous.

It was good enough that her enemy was visible once again. All Peko could do for now was watch closely and nothing more, unless prompted. Those were Kirigiri’s terms.

Without so much as a word accompanying her analytic gaze, Peko turned and marched off, leaving the girls behind…or so she would have preferred.

“Don’t walk away from me.” Ikusaba stopped her outside the library. Peko could make a fair guess as to why she waited till this point to do so. “What do you want? Haven’t you caused Makoto enough trouble?”

Peko wasn’t keen on carrying what would be a less than civil conversation with Enoshima’s sister. “My desires are the young master’s desires, and he stated his intentions openly. If anyone in this room is a threat to Naegi, that would be you.”

To some surprise to the silver-haired girl, Mukuro was strongly offended by the accusation. “Care to repeat that?”

“I thought you – as Enoshima’s closest subordinate – would feel more inclined to bringing Naegi harm than anyone else.” Why Ikusaba feigned innocence was beyond Peko’s understanding. “He’s been converting your allies. The young master and I aside, many of the others have returned to their normal selves with Naegi’s influence. In other cases. Enoshima’s sudden disappearance and lack of guidance have left those like Yukizome-sensei and Sonia, no choice but to return to their roots. While, I’m not complaining in the least, I can’t imagine why you would sit back and allow all your sister’s hard work to be undone so easily.”

All Mukuro did was glare, like she knew nothing else. “I don’t have a reason to share Junko’s plans with you, traitor.”

What a poor defense. Ikusaba was a fantastic fighter, but Peko could tell she had little
inexperienced with thinking independently. Without Enoshima as a guide, she was like a weathervane, blown in any direction by the passing winds.

“My loyalty has always been to the young master and I have loathed Enoshima from the beginning. Neither of those points were ever a secret.” Pekoyama glared, exuding considerable irritation at the notion of serving the ultimate despair. “I can’t deny associating myself with Enoshima, however, it’s because of that unfortunate relationship that I know, you’re lying. Enoshima’s plan went off the rails months ago.”

With that alone, Ikusaba froze. “Did Kamukura tell you?”

Ikusaba’s response seemed genuine…enough to corroborate Matsuda’s testimony. That meant Kamukura did betray Enoshima. If so…what was he doing now? The enemy of my enemy wasn’t always a friend.

Peko chose not to reveal her source. “You’ve let the situation spiral out of your sister’s favor. Do you feel a sense of freedom, now that she’s lost her memory?”

As expected, Ikusaba would take her elaboration on the memory loss and come to conclusions herself. So naïve. If the young master was in a vulnerable position, Peko would have taken steps to eliminate any potential threats who knew of that weakness.

“I…just want to protect Junko.”

The swordswoman shook her head. “Even if you slaved your entire life on that endeavor, you would fail. Enoshima does not ‘just’ invite danger, she thrives on it.” Peko was a yakuza. She’d seen more than her fair share of nails that stuck out, only to get hammered…and Enoshima was more self-destructive than them all. “The only way to protect your sister would be to imprison her indefinitely.”

Mukuro hugged her arm, averting her eyes. “I know that, which is why I don’t mind if she stays this way—even if only for a little while.”

Though Peko had marred her words with spite, she didn’t anticipate Ikusaba had considered the possibility. However, (assuming it was truth), there was a fundamental misconception that she felt compelled to correct. “That’s the definition of betrayal. A tool exists to serve their master. On occasion, this may involve taking independent action to assure their commands are met with success, but we are never to act against their wishes.”

“I said it before – I am not a tool. Junko’s my little sister.”

Ikusaba didn’t see the irony of how she failed in even that role. As the older sibling, she should have stopped Enoshima and corrected her mistakes long before it came to this.

"Do you feel a sense of freedom, now that she’s lost her memory?"

Those words replayed intrusively in Ryoko’s mind as she distanced herself from the two girls. She had quietly followed Mukuro, eavesdropping on their conversation. Nothing they said made sense. and Ryoko warded off the silver-haired girl’s curse with a timeless remedy that held her together, as far as she could remember.
It has nothing to do with me.

It has nothing to do with me.

It has nothing to do with me.

It has nothing to do with me.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Fuyuhiko confronts Naegi and sets the record straight.
“Yeah, tell her to fuck off…Okay, *politely* tell her to fuck off. Then come over.” Fuyuhiko dropped the call, his attention now squarely on Naegi. “That was Peko. I told her to tell your girl squad to beat it while we hung out.” The blonde snuck off with the brunette out of the library. If they were going to talk, it had to be private.

The yakuza’s dorm room was probably one of the most well off and expensively tailored in the school; at least twice the size of the average academy student’s. It was like a miniature replica of his own room back home; the floors were wooden and unlike other students, his windows were replaced by authentic shoji.

The kid had a deer-caught-in-the-headlights look when he walked in, He probably thought he’d be shot like one too when he spotted the hunting rifle on the shelf, among other things. Fuyuhiko had to calm him down, clarifying that they were just props.

“They’re all fake.” He says, sitting cross-legged on a leopard printed chair that matched the carpets.

“R-Right.” Naegi jitters, his gaze shifting between the portraits of previous Kuzuryu heads that hang on the wall. He absentmindedly sits across Fuyuhiko, his hands planted on his knees.

“Besides, that redhead you were mouthin’ off too’s a lot more dangerous than a firearm.” Junko fuckin’ Enoshima herself, or what’s left of her if Kirigiri wasn’t bullshitting him. At this moment, Fuyuhiko didn’t have a clue what to do about that chick so for now? Let sleeping lions lie.

“Redhead?” Naegi squints like Fuyuhiko gave him a riddle. “Do you mean Koizumi-san? Was she there?”

Fuyuhiko’s brow ticks upwards at what he’d normally consider a dumb fucking question. “Oi… don’t you know who you were arguing with before I showed up?”

Naegi shakes his head. “I only remember trying to stop you and Ikusaba-san from fighting.”

“…Any reason you’re calling Freckles by her surname? I thought you two were *real* cozy?” For reasons he couldn’t imagine. Then again, Fuyuhiko had tried to kill the guy and look where they were.

Crazy bastard.

Naegi flushes, his hands swaying back and forth “…I wouldn’t do that. Not without permission.”

With utter disbelief, Fuyuhiko asked “…When’d you start caring for permission? You even called me by that horrid fucking nickname.”

“…What?” Naegi tilts his head.
“You know…*Fuyu.*” He pulled at his tie as he spouted that nonsense.

Now Naegi was looking at Fuyuhiko like *he* was the fucking crazy one. Quit it! “K-Kuzuryu-kun. That’s not possible for me. Just no way.” He said, horror stricken and embarrassed.

Holy fucking shit. “Literally the second time we met.” The yakuza grits his teeth, doing his very best to keep the profanities in his mind.

Naegi presses his finger to his chin. "I’m drawing a blank. It happens from time-to-time. I could be in one place first, and myself in another, the next. Like I’m sleepwalking.”

Now Fuyuhiko was *not* expecting such a clear-cut answer. “First I’m hearing of it. Ain’t ya being a little too callous? Have you at least told someone?”

Naegi answers with crystal-clarity. “It happens all the time, ever since I was born.”

“…When was that?”

“16 years ago?”

Fuyuhiko waits for the punchline to that shitty joke. None came. Time for a new tactic. “Not what I meant but … who was talking to Ikusaba and that redhead a few minutes ago?” If Naegi was going to be frank about his messed-up head, maybe he doesn’t care about keeping this split-personality crap a secret. He told Maizono after all.

“Huh? I don’t know. Maybe you got the wrong guy?” The brunet tilts his head.

“You’re the one I grabbed.” Fuyuhiko grunts, placing his arm down on the table to distract himself from the budding irritation.

“Really? I guess they were talking to me after all.” He scratches his cheek.

…

“And?” Fuyuhiko’s fingers tap on the table’s surface.

“And…what?” Naegi sees nothing fucking wrong with what he just told me.

“Who was talking to me and the girls a few minutes back?” Fuyuhiko repeats, his finger speeds up.

“I was…according to you, apparently.” Naegi said plainly.

“You denied that! Are you fucking with me?! Because if you are? You might have forgotten but I do *not* like getting fucked with!” Fuyuhiko blows his gasket. Naegi recoils backwards into his seat. He manages to stabilize himself before the chair’s legs tips and falls.

“S-Sorry, I-I wasn’t trying to make you angry.” Naegi frantically apologizes. Fuyuhiko simmers at the uncertainty and ‘I might die.’ written all over his face.

Fuck, he wasn’t trying to intimidate the kid. It was just the things he said that pissed him off. ‘According to you?’ ‘Apparently?’ Those weren’t words describing personal actions.

“Whatever, I got a little hot on the collar there.” Fuyuhiko tucked his arm into his pocket, looking away. A brief silence falls as they regain their bearings. Fuyuhiko calms down, while Naegi stops feeling like he’s on death row.
“You remind me of Owada-kun.” And with that, Naegi ties the noose on his neck just as it was coming loose.

Fuyuhiko took a deep breath, as to not bust a vein. “Don’t compare me to that thug.”

“He’s not a thug! He’s rough around the edges…violent sometimes…and a little scary…”

“Really not selling me on this here, kid.” Fuyuhiko sweat drops at the rambling. Those descriptions were complimentary in the yakuza’s world but being likened to some biker street punk didn’t sit right with the proud mobster. Different orders of gangsters there and Fuyuhiko ranked at the top.

“Owada’s a good guy, you just need to get to know him. I’m sure you’d become friends, like we are.” Naegi explains himself. Fuyuhiko doesn’t care. Naegi associates with good people sure, but Fuyuhiko’s also fully aware of Naegi’s tendency to hang with horrible fucking people (like Ikusaba), indiscriminately.

“Let’s get back on track…you really don’t know who you were fighting with in the library? You got amnesia too?” Fuyuhiko folds his arms.

“Not that I know of. I’d be in trouble if I lost my memories. I can barely keep up with school as it is.” Naegi whines, sporting a depressed look.

“So let me get this straight. You don’t got amnesia…so who was I speaking to?”

“Me.”

Fuyuhiko took more deep breaths. No need for another explosion just because Naegi was making Komaeda sound coherent. He was dealing with a good kid here, not one of his underlings. “Hey, Naegi. You say there are times where you blank right?”

The luckster nods

“Why are you so calm then? Aren’t you worried what might be going on while you’re K.O’d?”

The spikey-haired boy stares. “Why would I be?”

“Because your body’s practically moving without your input. Sounds like a big deal to me.”

Naegi’s mouth formed an ‘O’ in understanding…and then said “It’s not.”

Fuyuhiko splutters at the sincere response. First because it was said confidently, second because it made no sense. “Yes. It is. Do you even know how you got your injuries?”

“The reserve course. I remember that pretty well.” Naegi winces, like anyone would have at the memory of getting dogpiled by a mob.

“Uhuh…and why were you there?” Fuyuhiko assumes, hoping to hit the mark.

“Because…” Naegi shook his head, as if cleansing himself of unnecessary thought. “It doesn’t matter.”

Gotcha. Now he knew that Naegi was stonewalling. “Don’t dodge the question.”

“These things happen.” He repeats
“I don’t know where you learned that bullshit but normal people don’t black out and find themselves getting beaten down on by a whole gang!”

“You’ve got that wrong. This happens to me all the time. It’s not a big deal at all.” Naegi said calmly, opposing Fuyuhiko’s rising anger. A direct contrast from his usual timid behavior.

“Can’t you say anything else?! You’re letting someone else run your life!” The blonde slammed his hand on the table, standing to tower over Naegi.

The other boy raises his chin, unperturbed by the outburst. “Kuzuryu-kun. That’s how it’s always been. Ever since the day I was born.” Naegi’s voice is eerily monotone, his eyes spiral black and white.

Fuyuhiko flinched at the sight. His next words are caught in his mouth. “Yeah, I gotcha, I won’t bring it up again.” He backed off, falling back onto the chair. The Yakuza’s intuition told him that if he’d pushed, something was going to break. “What’s this about a Christmas party I’ve been hearing.” The important questioning was over, and he got next to nothing out of it. He changes the subject to a more pleasant one.

“Haha…you heard about that already?” Naegi rubs the nape of his neck, not a trace of those freakish eyes remained.

“Word spreads even faster with so little people around.”

Naegi plays with his fingers. “I’m working with the headmaster to bring the main and reserve course together. Along with restoring the public’s faith in the school, but that’s secondary.”

“Not a bad idea, I’d be down with celebrating.” Fuyuhiko grins, appreciating the prospects of some damn normalcy in this school for once. “But planning a party is tough shit. Why’d you even sign up for this deal?”

“I proposed it to the headmaster and he said I should take the responsibility…I think.” He has a far off look in his eyes.

“Yeah, but you’re only responsible if you came up with the idea? Did you?” Or was it someone else?

Naegi muses. “I can’t say, I felt this was something I had to do when I woke up one day.”

The eeriness Fuyuhiko had been feeling, the reason he kept getting so angry, was steadily made clear; it was like watching a puppet show with invisible strings. This guy didn’t think for himself at all.

Just like…

Like…

Fuck, he’s just like Peko.

“But…I like the idea.” Naegi said bashfully.

…

That was the first show of individuality Fuyuhiko’d seen. ‘Maybe he’s not totally hopeless.’
“You do give off that vibe.” The blond snickers. Naegi was arguably too much of a philanthropist, always sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong.

Fuyuhiko would rather the luckster watch out for himself once in a while. Then again, Maizono said that’s all he ever did. The older teen couldn’t wrap his head around this entire situation – He would prefer to distance himself from this clusterfuck and suggest taking the kid to a hospital. But he’d seen how that worked out in the past, and Fuyuhiko wasn’t one to shirk responsibility in the first place. Whether the gangster liked it or not, he was already a part of this screwed up story.

“Have you ever wished for everyone to be happy?” Naegi said out of the blue.

Fuyuhiko creases his forehead. How’d this come up? “Like world peace?”

“If that’s how you interpret it.” Naegi gives a non-committal reply, like Fuyuhiko had made a mistake that he didn't care to correct.

He laughs. This was a topic for children. “Everyone wants world peace…until they grow up and learn that shit just ain’t possible.” Not as long as any of us got any will of our own. There are countless reasons why people would fight each other…and not all of them are even bad. The second you grow a ‘self’ and recognize there are others who don’t think the way they do and would get in your way, you can’t avoid a fight.

“I guess I never grew up then.” Naegi chuckles like Fuyuhiko told a moderately funny, and expected, joke. “Even if you say it’s impossible, I won’t know until I give it a shot.” Fuyuhiko is reminded of may as well have been the boy’s…catchphrase…

Fuyuhiko’s eyes narrow slightly. Everyone wishes for world peace, few actually do anything about it. But Naegi legitimately sounded serious.

“You got me curious. How would you go about making everyone in this shithole of a planet hold hands and sing kumbaya?”

“I don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“Oi, since when were you such a goddamn cocktease?”

Naegi flushes at his word choice “I…never know how to react to your speech, Fuyuhiko.”

…

“What’d you call me?”

Naegi cocked his head. “What I always do.”

I knew it. “Fair enough.” That was all the yakuza wanted to know. This hadn’t been a totally pointless chat. “Say, Naegi. Do you remember our conversation when I brought you here?”

Naegi speaks after a pause “Why…would you ask me that?” His weak smile gives him away.

“No reason. You just seemed out of it.” Fuyuhiko replies vaguely.

“I didn’t say anything weird, did I?” He sounds concerned. The gangster could guess why.

“You’ve been a weirdo from the day we met, bit late for asking, don’tcha think?” Fuyuhiko plays along, satisfied knowing that this Naegi doesn’t remember either.
“You’re right. Never mind.” He follows up with a forced laugh.

“You even in any condition to plan that Christmas party?” Fuyuhiko returned to that important subject.

“Yeah. I don’t really have any other choice. Plus I’m looking forward to it.”

“Alright…then count on me to help out.” Fuyuhiko proposes.

“Eh?”

“I’ll be your deputy, making sure nothing goes wrong.” And keeping an eye on you.

“R-Really? It’s probably going to be a lot of work.” Naegi’s eyes widen.

“Too much for you that’s for sure. Do you even know the first thing about organizing folks?”

“Yeah, I was class rep in elementary school.”

…He’s proud of that kiddy stuff?

Fuyuhiko snickered, on the verge of mockery. “Okay, boy scout. But I bet taking care of a bunch of babies can’t compare to the shit a mafia boss has to put up with. Sit back and let me do the grunt work.” The blond offers his services in his own, brash way.

Naegi’s eyes glimmer with an intensity Fuyuhiko doesn’t recognize. His head tilts slightly, his fingers rest and spread on his cheeks. “I can’t say I agree with that. Children might obey authority…but they’re also cruel. When you’re younger, they don’t take you seriously at all. Not unless you prove yourself and gain their respect. There are all sorts of ways to achieve that…however there’s no need for those hoops when dealing with adults. Adults are trained and stable, you could take orders from a guy decades younger just because he’s your boss and nobody’ll bat an eye.” A faint, almost dismissible smile crosses his features. “In your case…they’re also afraid. Of your family…and assassins like Peko. I’m sure you also have trusted aides and advisors here and there. With that much assistance…can it be all that hard running a syndicate, I wonder?”

The air turns cold.

All who knew Fuyuhiko, were abjectly aware of his temper that seared at the slightest provocation. But those who knew him intimately, knew they were only superficial displays of outrage. When Fuyuhiko was truly angry, all he feels is his blood freeze and an urge to break someone. This was the second time Naegi brought him to the brink. “You…did you just-”

Naegi’s eyes widen, not from Fuyuhiko’s anger, but from the invasive presence of the sword inches away from his neck. Fuyuhiko looks behind him, to see Peko, who’d entered the room at some point. It wasn’t something as silly as stealth. Only that the blond couldn’t focus on anything else.

“Bold words, Naegi-kun.” The bespectacled girl speaks lightly. The blade placed neatly between Naegi’s neck and shoulder held more than enough weight. Fuyuhiko discerned the silver-haired girl had used one of the dull swords on his shelf, instead of her own shinai. With how Naegi was sweating, you’d think Peko had pointed a real sword at him.

Right…that did happen once. He wasn’t so apologetic about it right now.

“If you wish to compete with the master, then surely you could survive the same tribulations he
experienced since birth.” Naegi didn’t dare meet the swordswoman’s demonic glare. He didn’t dare refute her either. Frankly, he didn’t dare do anything that might set her off even further. “I take your lack of a response as consent? Very well, I shall inform the lady of the house and schedule a trial. She has always loved children…and fresh meat.”

Naegi’s soul had practically left his body, leaving only a white pale husk.

“P-Peko, chill! It’s just banter!”

“I know.” Peko quickly retracted her sword. A faint smirk graced her features. “Forgive me. Naegi-kun’s impudence often leaves me with no other recourse but violence. I’m merely playing with him a little.”

I hear ya, but still…“Like fuck that was ‘a little’. You brought *mom* into this!” That crazy broad would rip Naegi to shreds. “Just sit down.”

“As you wish.” Peko took a seat by Fuyuhiko’s side.

“Good afternoon, Peko.” Naegi greeted happily, like 4 seconds ago didn’t happen.

Peko exchanged glances with Fuyuhiko. “You as well, Naegi-kun. As the young master will informally be in charge of planning the party, should I call for help from the Kuzuryu clan?”

“That’d be great actually.” Naegi murmurs

“No can do.” Fuyuhiko shot them down. “I got chewed out by the headmaster for bringing in my boys to the school. He said he’d overlook the damage I caused if they never set foot on school grounds again.”

“That’s inconvenient. But all as well. It’s more…purposeful if the students are the ones working,” Naegi said.

“Pardon my unhelpful suggestion.” Peko relents.

“We’ve got other sets of hands. We can call back some of the guys from class and have them help out.” Fuyuhiko raises a point.

“You don’t think they’ll mind?” Naegi asks.

“They won’t if they know what’s good for them.”

“You can’t coax them into helping. It won’t work with Mahiru either.” Naegi raked his fingers through his spikey hair.

“…You two get over your disputes?” Fuyuhiko inquires.

“Well. I’ve honestly been too busy.” He yawned

At that, Peko’s curiosity overcomes her silence. “I’ve always thought you were a bundle of unlimited energy.”

“I think I’m wearing myself out.” The luckster rested his head on the table. His tone low and steady.

Peko exchanges glances with Fuyuhiko. Why was he tired all of a sudden? “You mustn’t sleep here. The young master needs his privacy.”
“I wasn’t gonna.” Naegi whined, not sounding convincing in the least.

Fuyuhiko waves his hand dismissively. “I don’t care, as long as he sleeps on the floor.” Nobody but him touches his bed.

“By the way, Peko…How’d you…get in here?” Naegi’s words came out sporadic. He really was about to drop any second.

“I have a key to the young master’s room.” Peko answered.

“He…hehe. I see.” He wore a knowing and slightly perverted smirk.

“And whatever could you be laughing at, Naegi-kun?” The bodyguard took that dangerous tone once again, but the lucky student didn’t answer.

The spiky-haired boy snored lightly.

“Shall I wake him?” The silver-haired girl grips her sword.

“Leave him.” Fuyuhiko gives Peko an exasperated look. As Peko’s childhood friend / boss, the baby-faced gangster was more than aware towards the silver-haired woman’s despondence towards her environment. Particularly, the parts that didn’t involve him – Information that Fuyuhiko didn’t quite know how to feel about.

More on topic, he knew Peko had also taken a liking to Naegi. She wouldn’t be so expressive whenever the lucky student was involved otherwise.

“Have you decided on what to do?” Peko asked.

Fuyuhiko scratched his chin. “Not yet…I want to watch a little longer.”

“And if things turn for the worse?”

“Depending on whether he’s doing stupid shit? I’ll pay back my debt and get in his way.” Just like Naegi did to him. An eye for an eye is what kept the mafia world spinning.

Peko nods, then glances at Naegi’s sleeping form.

“I’d prefer if he was this docile all the time.” She sighed.

“Finally, we agree on something.” Fuyuhiko sighs with her and leans back into his chair. He frowns. “Peko…what Naegi said back there. He tried to provoke me, didn’t he?” Fuyuhiko hadn't the slightest idea where the conversation took a wrong turn. He'd made a light joke, insignificant enough that even tight-asses like Mahiru wouldn't care. And Naegi, of all people, turns into an animal and bites right into his insecurities.

“Yes.” Peko offers an answer so succinct and neutral, that it draws Fuyuhiko’s interest.

“What…you mean that’s natural?” This was Naegi they were talking about. The guy who never holds a grudge and smiles for his attempted killers.

“It is. Were you not aware of his competitive nature?”

Fuyuhiko blinks, surprised. “Competitive? That guy?”

Peko cocks her head, believing that trait to be common knowledge. In fact, it was one of the very
first things she’d learned about the lucky student.

The silver-haired woman reflects on her first meeting with Makoto Naegi. A time that was only months before, but felt like ages.

(“How’d you move so fast? Was that cheating!? Do you have two talents? You’ve got to have an SHSL sprinter in there somewhere, admit it!”)

(“But I want a rematch. One more!”)

“More than competitive…he hates losing.” He was as stubborn as a child in that regard.

“Hey, Hinata-kun.” Nanami trails behind the red-eyed human experiment. The two taking an open stroll around the campus grounds. Directionless, Izuru would add. He had no particular destination, and neither did Chiaki Nanami. She stalked him pointlessly.

“That is not my name.”

“Kamukura-kun then.”

“What do you want?” He answers. “No. Why are you stalking me?”

“To make sure you don’t run off again.” She picks up speed, a heavy task for her given the fluctuation of breath.

“I am not your pet.”

“A pet would be cuddlier, yeah.” Nanami pouts. “Except cats, they’re not too friendly either.”

Little did she know that one of his talents incorporated the capacity for the very best ‘hugs’.

…

Sometimes Izuru speculated why his teachers felt the compulsion to award him _every_ single talent. There were so many he could do without. “If I wanted to run, not even Owari would catch me. You would stand no chance.”

The gamer blinked. “Probably…I’m not very athletic.”

“Good. So you do know your place.” If nothing else, it appeared there were some lessons Nanami could actually learn.

“Hey, Hinata-kun.”

Two words, an honorific and Izuru is forced to retract his assessment. “You are doing this on purpose.”

“You replied.” She takes his response as a victory. He would stop speaking, but that would imply she has some influence over him.

She doesn’t. “Only because I am beginning to see the futility in correcting you.”
“Sure but there something you said that’s bugging me.” Nanami pulls her hoodie overhead, staring downwards

“It would be miraculous if you managed to understand a word I’ve said thus far.” What an incorrigible girl.

“I was wondering why you’re still here.” She stares intently at him.

Izuru *stops*, looking her in the eye. “*Excuse me?*”

“You said I can’t catch you, but since you haven’t run off already, does that mean you *want* me to follow you?” Nanami asked.

…

“It does not.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For clarity sake, this was an important chapter for characterization/development. Fuyuhiko’s PoV might make it unclear but for various reasons, such as but not limited to Ryoko’s badgering, Naegi snapped in that scene.

Next chapter: Naegi burns old bridges. Komaeda tries to form new ones.
For the past 29 seconds, Kamukura patiently observed Nanami berating herself. “I owe Naegi-kun an apology.”

“How?” He would have followed up with ‘There are better uses of your time’, but as she was presently lounging around on her bed playing video games (mid-conversation), he doubted that.

“I feel bad for standing him up… I hope he’s not mad at me…” She said, lethargically might Izuru add.

“I assure you that anger is furthest from his emotions.” Izuru stood, his back to her dorm room wall.

“It sounds like you know Naegi.” If he were to describe the near imperceptible difference between a fool and an idiot, Nanami would come up first. In many regards, the girl lacked sense, but she was far from unintelligent – picking up details others would overlook.

“I have heard of him.”

She accepts his answer. “…Naegi looks the type who gets around.”

“Your worry is needless.”

“I don’t think worrying about anyone is needless. It shows you care.”

…

“What is Makoto Naegi to you?” He asked, only because it was in his nature to know.

He could see the theories and schemes stitching together in her head. “He’s like a cheeky little brother. Come to think of it, he’d be a good influence on you.”

“What? You believe I am inferior to him as well?” He feels a pang of irritation.

“You keep using that word. I don’t think it works in that context. We all have things we’re good and bad at, but that doesn’t make us inferior as people.”

“Do not judge me by your standards. I was created to be perfect, no human is allowed to exceed me in any regard.” There was an uptick in Izuru’s voice.

“Hm…you sounded like Togami-kun for a moment there.”

“I sense an insult in that.”

“If there’s one thing about you that hasn’t changed, it’s how much you love talent.” Nanami sighed.
“You’re wrong. Talent is boring.”

Nanami dropped the video game at the proclamation, now sitting upright. Raw confusion on her face. “That can’t be right. You cared about talent more than anyone else…”

“Correction: Hajime Hinata did. I am not him.” Izuru declared for the umpteenth time.

She sighed again, as if listening to a child’s incorrigibility.

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. The Ultimate hope was carefully positioned out of the viewpoint, like he’d planned it that way when he first stepped in.

Nanami motioned to open the door and out in front was a white-haired boy she hadn’t seen in over a year. It only took a second and a glance at his patented, fluffy white hair for her to recognize him “Nagito!”

“Good morning, Chiaki.” Nagito Komaeda beamed.

Chiaki pulled him into a hug. “For one of the ultimates to embrace garbage like myself! What a momentous occasion! I could die happy.” And quickly let go.

“You haven’t changed at all.” She offered him a weary but warm smile. “…What’s with the shirt… and the tan?”

“I like to think it’s stylish.”

“You’re allowed to be wrong.” Chiaki countered. She had so many things to ask him. “When’d you get back?”

“About a week ago. Just in time to watch the reserve course throw their tantrums.”

“Bad luck.” It needn’t be said. Nagito would come back on that day of all days.

“I’m sorry I didn’t drop by sooner, but I’ve been investigating the what led to the rioting. Those reserve courses were so coordinated and strong-willed, I’m sure there were somebody else pulling the strings.”

Investigating? “Are you saying the attack was planned?” That was a possibility she’d not think of. She’d rather put the matter behind her, asap.

“I have a feeling it was, and I also have a good idea of who the mastermind is. But before that, I heard you were attacked by those second stringers. Did you happen to notice anything out of the ordinary?” He doesn’t ask how she was recovering.

Nagito was also still poor at phrasing. What wasn’t extraordinary about that afternoon? “I wouldn’t say I was attacked. Compared to the others, I was mostly fine.”

“Who were the others?”

Chiaki regurgitated the names: Makoto Naegi, Ryoko Otonashi and Isshiki Madarai.

“Naegi and Otonashi, would you happen to know them?”

Chiaki tilts her head. “No offense Nagito, but this is starting to sound like an interrogation, and you know how I am with long conversations…”
Nagito chuckled. “How could I forget?” The white-haired boy reached into his bag and procured a box of donuts. He called it a souvenir and handed it over.

Chiaki’s eyes lit up at the offering. She was nothing like the famed donut-lover Asahina, but Chiaki had quite the sweet tooth herself.

“We don’t have to talk the whole time, but I’m sure you understand this is a serious matter involving everyone in the academy.”

The gamer clutched her hand in anxiety. “I’m not sure we should get involved. That goes double for you after only getting off suspension.”

“I promise to be careful…and while I do trust the academy’s security, I’m not comfortable leaving this delicate matter to someone else. I don’t like being in the dark and I hate indolence even more.” Nagito waved his hand. “At the very least, if something unfavorable happens, I never want to think ‘Things might have turned out differently if I’d done this instead’."

Chiaki winced, unable to argue with logic that hit so close to home. “Okay. Let’s meet up sometime later and I’ll help however I can.”

Nagito didn’t appear satisfied with that answer. “I can’t come in now?”

“Huh?”

He brings a finger to his chin. “No. It’s just…your usual reaction would be more…accommodating.”

“Nagito, you can’t just waltz into a girl’s dorm room.”

The lanky teen scrutinized her and then gave a non-committal shrug. “Fair enough…but may I ask one more, personal, question?”

“Not sure if I can answer but shoot.”

“Before I was suspended, there was this…average, talentless boy you hung out with – for reasons that escape me! – after classes. What was his name again?”

Chiaki frowned at the light jabs at her friend. “Don’t talk that way about Hinata-kun.”

“Ah, that was his name. Hajime Hinata, if I recall.” He makes it sound like he’d never actually forgotten. “Have you seen him around?”

Chiaki hated lies, so she sidestepped the question. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m investigating the reserve course, remember? Hinata-kun seems to stand out, vanishing into thin air like that, without a reason given.” A thin smile spread on Nagito’s features. “But it doesn’t sound like you know where he is, therefore, I promise not to take any more of your precious time, Chiaki”

The first thing since he got back and Nagito was already throwing himself head-first into trouble. As class-representative, she probably had a duty to stop him, but arguing further could reveal she knew about Kamukura. Chiaki was aware enough to recognize that her friend’s circumstances were much too precarious to speak of, even to another friend like Nagito. The other reason Chiaki kept quiet was because she understood the drive to take matters into your own hands and not wanting to have regrets.
Still… “This is a sticky situation.” She muttered, closing the door behind her. Now she couldn’t get her mind off the idea of a mastermind behind the reserve course. And if such a person existed… were they still at large?

“Are you bothered by him?” Kamukura stepped out of the shadows. She didn’t doubt that he’d heard everything.

“Nagito’s a weirdo, but his heart’s in the right place.” Probably.

“That kind tends to be the most problematic.” Izuru’s eyes narrowed at the door, a hidden meaning behind his words that Chiaki failed to grasp.

It was morning when Chihiro woke. Naegi had never returned so Chihiro had thought to take a short nap once it got late. He’d underestimated how overly comfortable Naegi’s bed had been (and he wasn’t just referring to the scent) and before he knew it, he’d spent the night.

The programmer’s waking eyes scours the room. He quickly spots Naegi’s form, the luckster’s back facing him. He sat by his desk, writing something down. Chihiro’s feet touched the floors, daintily approaching Naegi at the desk, he could already see several sheets of paper filled at the side.

“When did you get back, Naegi?”

Naegi turns to face him. “I only got back an hour ago. Morning, by the way. Did you have a good night’s sleep?”

Chihiro nods but… one hour? “Where did you go all night?” And day.

“I was with Fuyuhiko. I dozed off on his table and he practically threw me out earlier this morning.” Naegi scratches his cheek, wearing a weak smile. The very name of the mobster sent shivers down Chihiro’s spine. Of the students the programmer wished to never get involved in, Kuzuryu ranked amongst the top. “By the way, Chi… do you lock the door at night?”

The shorter boy pauses at the strange question. “Yeah, I do. Especially after the um… riot. You can never be too careful. Why do you ask?”

“The door was unlocked.”

Chihiro furrows his eyebrow. “It shouldn’t have been.”

“Maybe you forgot since I left you here alone. It wouldn’t be strange for me to get locked out of my own dorm. Then I’d have to run back to Fuyuhiko, who’d probably scream my head off.” Naegi jokes. That does sound like something that could easily happen to the unlucky boy.

“How did you get along with him?” Chihiro ponders. That scary yakuza and the gentle Naegi were like night and day.

“I know exactly you mean… but he’s a good guy. Thanks to him, I’m also even more motivated for the Christmas Party now.” Naegi said.

Motivated…”Naegi-kun… I was checking out Alter Ego’s development and I stumbled onto
something called the hope video. What is it?”

“Hope video?” He raised his eyebrow.

“The motivational video you had Alter Ego make. I know I never made it explicit, but you should have at least given me heads up before undergoing any projects…” Alter ego was essentially priceless, any damage done to him couldn’t easily be reversed.

“Uh…yeah, I’m sorry about that. I promise it’s harmless.”

“Well, I’m curious what it is exactly.”

Naegi claps his hands in apology. “I’m too embarrassed to show it to anyone yet. Just wait until it’s finished. It’ll blow your mind.”

“If you say so…but why have Alter ego hide it from me too?” Chihiro frowned, not quite over his own program so thoroughly disobeying his commands.

Naegi muttered another apology…but not an explanation. “Please…be careful about what Alter ego sees. He might be just an A.I to you, but he’s practically a newborn; that makes him malleable and very impressionable. In fact, he’s only barely safe from viruses.” Alter ego was Chihiro’s baby. He wouldn’t tolerate carelessness with it…not even from Naegi-kun.

 “…I already said what I was doing was harmless…” Naegi stops abruptly, cocking his head.

“What?” Chihiro asks.

The spikey-haired boy’s face morphed into one of recognition, a thin smile on his face as he chuckled. “Oh, I see. You don’t trust me.”

“Huh?” Before the shorter boy could speak, Naegi extending his arm, silencing Chihiro. “You don’t have to say anything, I get it.” He snickers again. “You used to cross-dress because you hated being called weak, but everything’s changed. You can stand up for yourself. You have friends, tons of them, who accept you.” The next words made Chihiro’s heart sink. “You don’t need me anymore.”

Huh? – Chihiro repeated in his mind. Where was this coming from? “I never said that.”

Naegi wasn’t listening. “Now you can even doubt me freely. Great, I thought you were too trusting.” He pushes off the small desk and stands. Then he positions his body sideways and extends his hand, directing Chihiro’s gaze to the laptop on the desk’s surface. “I don’t know much of anything about programming, but Alter Ego is very humanlike already. You can take him back now. I won’t impose any further.”

“I-I didn’t mean it that way.” Chihiro raised his voice. “You’re my friend…and more than that! I’ll always need you.” He couldn’t confess. On that front, he was still the weak boy he used to be.

So the luckster continued. “What did you mean? I figure Alter Ego didn’t show you the video and you’re upset about it. It’s natural that you’re suspicious.” His eerie calm unsettled Chihiro. Even though Naegi was pointing out his faults, Chihiro felt like he was the one being accused. “I was thinking it was just about time for you to start criticizing me. Everyone does eventually! I wonder when Mukuro’s turn will come, if it hasn’t already!” His laugh – once cheerful and rosy – rang hollow.

“N-Naegi?” There was something wrong. At some point in the conversation, something had gone
terribly, *horribly* wrong. Chihiro searched for what he’d said, where his fault lied…and couldn’t find one.

The frighteningly-pleased Naegi yawned. “I think I’ll be stuck in my room for most of the day. I’ll probably need some peace and quiet to work too.”

His meaning was clear. Chihiro was somehow able to move his petrified legs “I—I’ll get going then.” More than sadness, he was confused. The programmer opened the door, looking back at Naegi.

I’m sorry.” He whimpered. For what, he hadn’t the slightest clue.

Naegi waved. “Don’t be, Chihiro. I’m not angry with you. If anything, I’m happy. Just like Alter ego, you’ve grown up too.”

“Izuru Kamukura, I presume?”

The long, dark-haired man didn’t confirm or deny Nagito’s presumption.

Nagito wasn’t much of an investigator, certainly not to the standards of a woman like Kyoko Kirigiri. Nor was deductive work his style anyway. Nagito didn’t search for danger. *Danger found him.* Be it on morning walk, a plane ride or even sitting by a lonesome bench like he was doing right now. As always, his luck never failed him.

Now as for the matter of meeting a supposed killer in the dead of night, would that be good or bad luck?

“You don’t need to answer. You don’t need to say anything at all.” Nagito stood, reaching into his pocket. Casually, he aimed his handgun at the red-eyed man. If he was really The Ultimate Hope, a mere firearm would be trivial. If he was a fraud, then he deserved to die for impersonating hope…

Oh, and for the murder of the student council of course.

The ashen-haired teen’s hopes were raised when his target didn’t flinch at the deadly weapon. He pulled the trigger and…nothing.

Nagito’s fingers kept pressing down. “Jammed?” He turned the gun away from Kamukura, pointing at the grass to the side. A suppressed bang rang out as a bullet pierced the leaves.

The luckster broke into a snakelike grin, his eyes glazing over. “So it’s true. All that talent. All that hope. All in one body. *Amazing.*” Kamukura, like the statue reflecting his namesake, didn’t acknowledge Nagito’s eccentricities. “No response? Ah, would you prefer if I called you Hajime Hinata?”

“What do you know?” The man finally spoke up.

“I had my suspicions, what with you disappearing from the register at just the right time. Process of elimination narrowed the candidates of the hope cultivation program down to you. And you’ve all but confirmed it for me by showing up today.” Nagito’s smile widened. “I wonder where you were hiding when I was talking to Chiaki.”
“You misunderstand. You could not have pinpointed my former identity with only that much information. Nor could you have known about the Hope Cultivation program. My query was directed at your source.” Kamukura said.

And he was right on the money. Nagito shrugged, not intending on revealing his sources. “Believe what you want. It doesn’t matter right now though.”

“The alternative is boring.”

“Don’t be like that. You’re responsible for the riot, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Kamukura added.

“Why?”

“A test.”

“Involving Makoto Naegi and Junko Enoshima?”

“I can think of only three who could have gotten close enough to that knowledge – Ah, you must be colluding with Kirigiri. For her to have figured out so much in short time, I may have underestimated her…as unlikely as that is.” Kamukura mused, forgetting Nagito for the moment. As it should be. When thinking of genuine talent, why pollute your thoughts by throwing trash into the mix!

Nagito clapped, inwardly noting that he should be careful about what he says. It If he gave an inch, Kamukura would cross miles and more. “Did you really have to shake up the whole academy for that purpose?”

“It was necessary to test the limits of despair and it’s opposite.”

“Hope…You believe Makoto Naegi is hope?” Nagito’s mind drifted elsewhere temporarily. He really must meet this famous junior of his.

“Whether he is hope is irrelevant. He is an uncertain factor that opposes Enoshima. That was enough for me.” Kamukura gave a half shrug.

“Understood. That clarifies my assumptions, so first and foremost…allow me to offer my thanks.”

“…”

“Thanks to your efforts, this academy is going through a beautiful transition. With the sudden advent of despair, an even greater hope is starting to spring forth. Even in Chiaki, I felt a change. She would never lie to me before.” Nagito hugged himself.

“How boring.”

“You think so? Then let’s move onto a more interesting subject. The student council.”

“Must I repeat myself? Talking to you is proving an inefficient use of my time.”

Nagito ignores the snub. “Some of my respected peers were among the ones you killed.”

The Ultimate Hope’s eyebrow ticked. “Some? You mean to say you are investigating Soshun Murasame.”
“Pfft-ahahahahaha. You really are Hope!” His intentions were seen through in an instant.

“I have no relation to that man. In most likelihood, he is dead.”

“That's the thing. Everyone assumes that, but I've not seen a single person confirm his murder.” Nagito said, thoughtfully.

Kamukura shook his head. “The whereabouts of the council president are of no relevance to me. Now, it is time to answer my question. Is your goal as tedious as I believe it to be?”

“My goal? Nothing in particular. Certainly nothing concrete, yet. Right now, I'm fine to be the observer in this battle between hope and despair. I just intend to be an informed observer, like you. And since we do have a common goal... why not join up?”

Just then, Kamukura’s figure vanished from Nagito’s sight, then reappeared, inches away. The next thing he knew, 5 fingers circled around his neck, cutting off the air circulation as he was hoisted above the ground.

Nagito gripped Kamukura’s arm with both of his, unable to pry the vice-like hold away. He choked, his consciousness mere steps from fading. Until the sudden rush of air filled his lungs when Kamukura dropped him.

Nagito crumpled onto the ground, squirming like an insect.

“Be glad you're boring. Otherwise, I would have killed you already.” Kamukura turned his back, seemingly finished with the conversation... until he said. “Don't inconvenience me in your games.”

…Nagito breathed heavily on the pavement. He coughed, watching the apotheosis of talent walk away.

“But Kamukura-Kun... aren’t we... playing the same game?”

Makoto discussed his ‘falling out’ with Chihiro to Alter ego.

“Can you make up?” It asked. From its perspective, this was the equivalent of experiencing parental separation

“There’s no point.” He didn't have to avoid walking on eggshells and appeal to every individual anymore, and there was no time for it. “I need to get everyone off his back for the next little while.” Because Makoto could no longer trust himself.

One second he was arguing with Ryoko and the very next, he was in Fuyuhiko’s room doing who knows what. That wasn’t normal, it didn’t used to be. Before he could see whatever his other self did like a vision through a lucid dream. Now? He blacked out completely.

…

“If you want, I’ll return you to Chihiro tomorrow morning.” Makoto proposed to the A.I. It was only fair to give it the choice.

“I’ll... stay.” Was Alter ego’s answer. He expected that. Chihiro may have been Alter ego’s maker,
but Makoto raised it. Adding on, Alter ego was as innocent, and won’t go back on its promise to assist him.

“I don’t mind, you know. Don’t hold back to spare my feelings…and Chihiro is your creator.”

“I understand but…I think what you’re trying to do is wonderful, Naegi. A-And I want to help in any way I can.”

…

Makoto’s smile comes easily this time. “Thank you.”

With Alter ego’s consent, he didn’t feel quite as bad, though he didn’t feel any different in the first place. One argument isn’t enough to break Chihiro’s affections for him (if what Kirigiri claimed was to be believed). The programmer would be hesitant to retrieve Alter ego anyway, because he’s afraid that would really end things between them. It wouldn’t, of course. Even if he did take Alter ego back, Makoto would just find something else to use.

He glances at the A.I, bemused by its earlier words. In a way, Chihiro got exactly what he wanted. He desired Alter ego to behave like a human. And now the AI was exemplifying one of the most human traits of all.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Yikes. I didn't know it was Chihiro's birthday when I wrote this chapter!

Next chapter: It begins...
A/N: Good news and bad news. Bad news is that it's been exactly 3 months since I last updated. Good news is that I'll be updating twice a week from now on until the end. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-November 19th 20XX-

Today, all eyes were on Hope’s Peak Academy. Students, new and old, wanted and unwanted, were invited to the show. With the stadium-sized gymnasium becoming a full house, it probably was a good thing Nagito blew up the old one last year. Luck comes in all forms.

Now, let’s start with Group A:

As expected, tall, purple and anti-social Kyoko Kirigiri chose the stands in the far back to position herself, taking in the entire picture from an eagle-eye view.

Kyoko saw students she recognized, others she didn’t. It was easy to separate them, the ones she knew were seated on one side. The ones she didn’t were on the other, like a crevasse separating two warring factions.

That wasn’t far from the truth. The main and reserve course students had battled weeks ago. As for why they would convene now of all times…Kyoko presumed every one of them had received the e-mail sent by the headmaster himself. Failure to attend barring exceptional circumstances, resulted in immediate expulsion.

Nobody would refuse the ultimatum. Thus, Kyoko caught glimpses of several classmates and associates. Security took charge coordinating and guiding the seating arrangements for all entrees. She’d seen Nagito walking in with another upperclassman, Chiaki. Then there were Fuyuhiko and Peko, together as always.

The detective was flanked on opposite sides by were Miaya Gekkohahara and Aoi Asahina, and to the swimmer’s right, was Byakuya Togami. Aoi spotted Kyoko and Miaya together, then refused to leave them alone. Byakuya had been here first, for the same reasons she had been, and they ran into him.

It wasn’t the worst thing that could happen. If Aoi wasn’t a distraction, Kyoko could tolerate the arrangement.

“Hey Hey, Kyoko-chan. Smiiiiiile.” Aoi said, going as far as to pinch and pull Kyoko’s cheeks.

Tolerate…tolerate…tolerate.

The detective smacked her fingers away. Glancing at her left, where Miaya watched the situation unfold quietly.
“Meanie. So what do you think the hubbub’s about? I saw guys in suits and news cameras on the way over.” The swimmer asked

“My father hasn’t told me too much. Let’s see for ourselves.” Right on schedule. Jin approached the podium. Several TV monitors relayed his visage to the students farther back.

She had a vague idea of what Jin had in mind.

‘But does her father know what he’s doing’ – was the question.

“Welcome, all of you. I’m sure you’ve all had a difficult break, away from classes.” Her father began his speech.

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Group B was an unlikely trio of dysfunctional “friends” (using that word loosely) deep in the middle of the packed stadium. Chiaki Nanami was sandwiched between Nagito Komaeda and Izuru Kamukura.

“I understand that the school has experience a great tragedy, and I would like to apologize to families, students and everyone who placed their trust in our academy.”

“This is insufferable, wouldn’t you agree?” Nagito scowled next to her.

“Um, which part?” Chiaki asked, not really getting her classmate’s anger, but he’d been in a sour mood the second he sat down.

“The headmaster, the top of Hope’s peak having to stand up there and apologize for the delinquency of the common, ungrateful masses. It’s not just insufferable, it’s repugnant!” Nagito looked like he wanted to claw at somebody’s neck. Chiaki was grateful the reserve course were on the other side.

“You think it’s victim blaming?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Hajime…or Izuru, as he preferred to be called, was on the other side of her. He disguised himself in casual clothes and a hoodie worn overtop to hide his hair. Chiaki didn’t know how he could hide that much hair but she didn’t question it. She was much more comfortable to see him out of depressing black.

“Do not be distracted by theatrics or superficialities, what the public desires is to see the man bow his head and nothing more. Therein showing that the Ultimates – or the favoritism towards – are wrong in this scenario.”

“Then the assembly was just for an apology?”

The black-haired teen fails to deliver an immediate answer. “…Petty reasons aside, Jin Kirigiri does bear responsibility for this outcome. I do not believe he is solely a victim.”

Chiaki remarks. “You didn’t have to come you know. You’re not a student, technically.”

“I have to agree. I didn’t think you’d show up to this farce…assuming that’s all it is.” Nagito said. Chiaki didn’t have a clue when the two boys became acquainted, but Nagito had intruded into their little duo with an assertiveness Chiaki didn’t know he had. Not that she minded, exactly.
“It’s too early.” Tall dark and broody himself declares. He doesn’t look at either Chiaki or Nagito as he speaks. “…Jin Kirigiri should not have readied countermeasures this quickly. Not till after the New Year.”

Lastly, we have Group C…or as I’d like to call it, Ryoko and the squad. If the previous three were an unlikely bunch then these guys are hopeless.

“Nevertheless, it is our duty to take responsibility for the scars left on the students and to come up with a solution, so it never happens again.”

“Do I have to sit through this?” Ryoko twirls red strands in annoyance. Listening to this old headmaster guy was sooo boring.

“Shh.” The guy in sitting in front turned around to shush her. The nerve! Ryoko’s retort falls short of its exit when an elbow juts into her from the side.

“You’re a student too, so shut the hell up.” Yasuke snarls. Even though he’s being a big meanie as usual, he’s just as irritated to be here as she is!

“He’s being mean to me, Chi-chan.” Ryoko looks to Chihiro for assistance.

“…” And gets nothing. The smaller boy’s head is faced down, in a world of his own.

“What’s with him?” Yasuke asks.

“I hear he had a fight with Naegi. More like Jerkaegi.” Ryoko grows and kicks the seat in front of her on reflex, wishing it was Makoto’s head.

“Bad breakup. Good. Chihiro would do well to stay away from that guy.” Yasuke takes the words right out of her mouth.

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along. I knew you’d understand!”

“Shhh!” The rude guy at the front again.

“Mind your own business.” Ryoko seethes.

“Did you know about him?” Yasuke asks calmly, facing the podium.

“That dirty player. I’ve seen him waltzing all over this school pulling moves on all the girls.” Philanderers were the worst kinds of degenerates!

“Ryoko-chan, that’s not true.” Ugh. Sadly, there was still one person that hadn’t seen the light, sitting besides Chihiro.

“You should watch out too, Mukuro. He’ll drop you in a second once he’s bored with you.” Ryoko shrugs.

Mukuro doesn’t say anything in response. Junko was always right, but technically, Ryoko wasn’t Junko.

“For the main course, all participation counts towards this years practical exam. You will be expected to clear out your schedules on December 24th.”

Rumbles of bewilderment spread through the seated crowd like waves. Camera flashes shifted into
“Whaaaaat?” Aoi drawls out. She leaned so far out over the rails that it wouldn’t surprise the others if she fell.

Byakuya secretly hoped she would.

“I have plans on Christmas Eve! He can’t do that, right Kyoko?”

Aoi looked to her detective friend for confirmation. She’s not surprised at the lack of a response when she considers lilac’s form. Kyoko had one arm placed horizontally, resting the elbow of her vertically kept other on her gloved palm. Kyoko’s fingers curved below her chin as she uttered “Fascinating.”

Aoi’s shoulders slump. Kyoko’s gone into Detective Mode.

“Has Kirigiri gone mad? Even if he thinks these plebeian’s have room in their schedule to accommodate his charade, I certainly do not.” As usual, lemonhead’s gotta make everything about him. Even if he does have a point.

“I understand you have frustrations but do believe me this will be worth your efforts. The one responsible for planning the event can assure that. Allow me to introduce one of your fellow students.”

A small, average figure made his way to the podium at Jin Kirigiri’s prompt. The headmaster shook his hand and stepped aside.

The middle-aged man who held a commanding presence left the speaker’s position and was replaced by

“Makoto?!” Aoi’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head. She hadn’t seen the luckster in weeks, not since she’d checked up on him in the clinic after hearing he’d gotten involved in the riot. He looks better now, without the bandages. There’s a confident spring in his step as he approaches the podium. Unlike him. But not moreso than the black suit he wore that mirrored the headmaster’s own.

“Kyoko-chan, did you know about this?”

Not a ray of shock escaped her stone mask and still, Kyoko shook her head. “Not very much.”

“Did he say Naegi orchestrated this? If I’m forced into anything unsavory…”

“Can it. He’s speaking!” Aoi shushed the Togami heir.

“Good afternoon, everyone. I’m Makoto Naegi, a fellow student at Hope’s Peak Academy, class 78.” His makes a calculated pause and continues. “Oh right. Some also call me The Ultimate Lucky Student.”

It wasn’t surprising for Ryoko to see Jerkaegi (this’ll be his designated name for at least this whole chapter!) given the heads up she and Mukuro received from the boy earlier. That did not make seeing his face on the screens any less irritating.

“That’s a talent?”

“I’m lucky too. Make me an Ultimate.”
“How do they test that? Does he just have to show up for practical exams?”

She hears all sorts of whispers and murmurs around her.

“I’m sure you’re all anxious about the Headmaster’s speech. I know most of us, if not all of us, have plans on that day. Plans that don’t involve being on school grounds, but I’m sorry to say that disregarding extenuating circumstances, you’ll have to reschedule.”

“What’s with him?”

“They can’t do this, can they?”

“I know what you’re all thinking. Why not pick other, less busy days. But that’s really the point. Christmas time is the biggest celebratory holiday coming up, and that’s why we’ll have to compromise on it. It wouldn’t be a sacrifice otherwise.”

“Sacrifice?” Ryoko repeats. Why’s he making it sound so scary?!”Matsuda-kun, is it a tradition to offer people up as sacrifices here?!”

Bizarrely, there isn’t a witty comeback from the neurologist. Instead, she observes him plugging in earphones and raising the volume on his sound player. He faces her. “Do me a favor. Write down the important parts of this speech in your notebook.”

”…Can’t you just listen?”

“No thanks. I have enough poison in my ears. I’ll owe you one.” Yasuke leans back and closes his eyes without waiting for an answer.

“Done!” With pen in hand, Ryoko flips open her notebook and jots down idiot-hair’s speech. Ah, the things she did for love…

“On October 31st, the unthinkable happened. Students were hunted and attacked by our peers. That’s inexcusable. School is a place for us to form relationships, grow up together and to feel safe. Right now, all three of those principles are in jeopardy. None of us can overlook that. Nor can we ignore the fact that our responsibility to keep our school safe.

Of course, that also means I won’t be ignoring the elephant in the room. The fact of the matter is, that the ones responsible for breaking the peace of our rosy lives, are the reserve course.”

“I can’t believe he said that.” The girl in the wheelchair, Miaya was it? She cringed at the end of Makoto’s sentence. Had Aoi not been standing close by, she might not have heard with all the mumblings going around the gym. She even heard clapping hear and there…from one half of the room.

“What’s the big deal? He’s right, those psychos are the cause of all this.” Aoi said. They couldn’t be sane to have been wearing those weird helmets. Like they were part of some nutjob cult.

“Whether that is true or not, isn’t the issue. It shouldn’t have been said. The aim of this assembly should be to pacify.” Kyoko answered.

Byakuya piggy-backed off her speech. “Placing blame will only achieve the opposite effect. I shouldn’t need to ask this, but does that idiot understand he’s being politically incorrect?”
“What’s this about politics now?” Aoi asked.

“Shut up.”

“Let me state that I don’t intend to offend anyone, but the truth is important. A useful tool for staying objective, even if its unpleasant to hear. On Halloween, 174 reserve course students stormed the main campus, armed. Fortunately, everyone is still with us. Unfortunately, there were casualties all the same. Some still hospitalized.” With a snap of the finger, the screens overhead flickered through photographs of the injured students.

The sight made Ryoko queasy.

“Due to potential law violations, there are also injured members of the rioters who we’re not permitted to show. Many reserve course students with lighter, are detained by the police.

It’s fair to call this a tragedy that should never have happened…so why did it? Before the steps taken to finding a solution, that must be discussed first.”

Ryoko groaned, already having her fill of the speech. “Matsuda-kuuuun. Do I have to do thiiiis?” The boy she pleaded her heart too was asleep, eyes closed and snoring lightly.

“…Darn it.”

“Makoto’s a good speaker.” Chiaki commented, listening to the younger boy going through the tribulations the reserve course was faced with. She’d heard the spiel a million times before. Anyone who roamed campus the past few months would. The reserve course was vocal about their dissatisfaction with the school.

Nagito answered this time. “He has a way with words, but I’ll save my opinion till the end. I’m disappointed to hear that talk about the reserve course ‘parading’ day after day was all true. Surely, anybody could have had better ways to spend their time.”

“I…don’t fully disagree, but I’m starting to think that mentality is what brought us to this point, Nagito.”

“Don’t. You Ultimates have done nothing wrong. If you won’t take my word for it, ask Kamukura-kun.” Both stare at the Ultimate Hope expectantly.

He casts them a side glance and speaks softly. “Komaeda is right. Few things are duller than fruitless worry. What’s important lies beyond this filler. What is he planning?”

“…Far be it from me to ask, and this may sound impertinent of me—” Nagito continues like this for a full 30 seconds. He was like a true believer about to commit sacrilege.

“Komaeda, one of the vital signs of intelligence is knowing not to speak when you have nothing intelligent to say. Well, I already know what you’ll say regardless.”

Nagito gulps. “Kamukura-kun…It sounds like you don’t know.”

If Izuru was half as bothered as Nagito believed, he sure didn’t show it. “Naegi is…difficult to predict.”

“The reserve course’s pleas were never answered, so they turned to what they believed was the only other available – violence.” Makoto’s face took on a somber note. “But they were wrong.”
The moment force becomes your only option, you’ve stopped thinking, and lost. Even if you’re boxed in and cornered on all sides, there’s always a way out to freedom – a light at the end of the tunnel. If you don’t have a shovel, make one. If you can’t, then dig with your own hands. Only when you’ve exhausted all your blood, sweat and tears to the point where you can’t move. After that...then it might be fair to consider a rough approach. 3 months of not getting your way was far too early to give up.”

Kyoko’s steely eyes fell to Miaya. The older girl’s face looked every bit as stois as the detective’s own with the scarf shadowing half her face. Kyoko’s gaze fell lower and saw her fingers trembling, gripping the sides of the wheelchair.

In a display of uncharacteristic behavior, Kyoko rested her palm on the psychiatrist’s shoulder to stop the shaking.

“The reserve course were the perpetrators, but they were also victims. Victims of neglect and ignorance. This is partly the school’s fault and partly their own for not understanding what Hope’s Peak is about. Every institution, every brand has a modus operandi; a theme they call their own. For Hope’s Peak Academy, that has always been talent. The safety and needs of students or individuals designated as ‘Super High School Level Talents’ is the dominant priority’ - Section 16-B in the rule book.”

“We have a rulebook?” Aoi blinked.

Byakuya scoffed. “Every time you open your mouth, I find it difficult to believe you’re not related to Hagakure. Of course there’s a rulebook and what kind of idiot doesn’t read the print of what their signing?”

“I didn’t.” “Me neither.” Kyoko and Miaya spoke up.

“The school’s focus on Ultimates is common knowledge. Although there is a clause that states members of reserve course can enter the main course, that is only if they’ve shown the necessary talent. This too is in the rulebook given to all students, and...it seems to have given people the wrong idea. It’s understandable for students to feel their hardwork should pay off...but that’s not a guarantee, much less should it be expected. That’s life. Over the years...the Ultimates have become taken for granted. We look at all their achievements from afar and think it’s manageable if the ordinary people put in the effort. Meritocracy’s a nice thought, but whether it’s realistic...I want to leave that for the reserve course to decide. This time through more constructive and peaceful methods; an event facilitated purely by the collaboration of the main and the reserve courses: Hope’s Peak’s first Winter Culture Festival!”

“I think you should wake up now, Matsuda-kun.” Ryoko pinched the boy’s cheeks.

“What, scatter brain?”

She pointed at the podium.

‘A culture festival on the 24th?’ Chiaki mused. It sounded like a fun idea on paper, but...was it realistic? She couldn’t see the two spectrum of students suddenly joining hands. She turns to the others for logistic advice “Hey, Hinata-kun…” The boy doesn’t respond.

Was it a cause for concern or was he just curious? She motions to check with Nagito…and to her surprise sees the ashen-haired boy holding a similar degree of focus.
“Culture festivals in most schools have students feature the inner workings and products of their clubs in exhibits for their peers, teachers and public to see. Hope’s Peak isn’t big on clubs…but it is big on talent. That’s why, as a replacement for practical exams, every single Ultimate will showcase their skills in talent laboratories of their own design.”

“Talent…labs?” Chiaki detected a hint of reverence of Nagito’s tone. His voice could barely be heard by his friends thanks to the excitement rippling through the gymnasium.

“Do we have those?” The pinkette pondered. The duo looked to Izuru again, who sighed lightly.

“Most likely, you will have to design the labs in various quarters of the school. In your case, Nanami. Your talent laboratory would be akin to a game room.”

“…I get to design an arcade?” Chiaki was notably more enthusiastic than minutes before. She wipes off drool leaking from her lips. “I think I’m down for this, guys.”

“I wonder what I could do for the occasion. All I have is luck…oh well, it was never much of a talent anyway.” Nagito stews in his own self-deprecation.

…

“Is he putting more work on my plate?” Yasuke groaned, smacking his forehead.

“What’s the big deal? It’ll just replace exams, right?” Ryoko raised her voice to be heard amidst the crowd.

“It’s unnerving being around strangers…but it might be cool to show off my gun collection though.” Mukuro smiled awkwardly as she played with her fingers.

“I’ll stay away from the warzone, thank you.” Guns don’t sound like a good time to Ryoko.

“Suit yourself.” The ravenette pouts, then turns to the quiet Chihiro. His expression is unbefitting, his lips are a perfect line, his eyes square at his target. Mukuro had always thought the programmer looked like a fragile little doll who would break at the slightest mishandling.

Right now, Chihiro looked to her like a marionette with its strings cut off.

“It’ll be a lot of work creating those booths, but everyone needs to make sacrifices here. Which is why members of the reserve course will be assigned to individual Ultimates, to help build the labs. Labels like ultimates and ordinary people…I want to the reserve course to see for themselves how wide or small the gap is, If the talents the Ultimates possess can be replicated by them, If the ultimates are worth the praise and prestige Hope’s Peak Academy has given them. After that…I don’t think anyone will be able to complain. Thank you all for listening.”

The end of Makoto's speech was punctuated by deafening applause. Kyoko ponders. In a nutshell, he was going to create a intern forum to mend the fractured relationships between the main and reverse course, while pushing the school’s popularity in a positive direction. Conceptually, Kyoko approved, but practically, the plan relied on the cooperation between the warring groups. She couldn’t see them functioning together any time soon.

“There has to be something more. Naegi isn’t so optimistic.” That’s to say, that he didn’t rely solely on blind faith alone. Kyoko’s dealings with the luckster taught her that he was as much a man of action as words- surviving Fuyuhiki, The Madarai brothers and the rioters.
“That speech was adequate. Far from what I expected of Naegi.” Byakuya interrupts her thoughts.

“Yeah, wasn’t it cool?! I didn’t know he was such a good speaker.” Aoi cheers.

“He’s not done yet. Lectures are merely regurgitation. The hard part is the actual interview.” The blonde folded his arms. “It appears we’re right on schedule.”

Byakuya was right. Just then, Makoto announced he’d start taking questions from the audience. The camera-lights flashed, a select few adults sitting at the front stood, speaking out of turn and foisting microphones at the brunette. Makoto's finger landed on a bespectacled woman, with a no-nonsense disposition.

“I recognize that lady.” Aoi said. Kyoko didn’t feel the need to point out that she ought to. Anyone who’d been keeping up with the news would know.

“My name is Ikue Dogami, and that was a marvelous speech, Naegi-san.” A famous news reporter, who handled the plane crash incident months ago and is now following the Hope’s Peak fiasco. Her current stance tips towards the negative sides of the scale. Kyoko can’t fault Dogami, given what she knows about the corruption inside the school walls. “Headmaster Jin Kirigiri said you orchestrated this event. Is that true? If so, can I ask what your intentions were when you took up such a mantle?”

“To answer your question, yes, I did come up with the idea. There…wasn’t a big reason, really. I’ve always tried to help others, and when there’s a catastrophe on my doorstep, I couldn’t just sit back and do nothing.”

“That’s an exemplary answer. Fitting of a hero…assuming you are the same Makoto Naegi.”

“…What?” Kyoko stopped thinking.

“You don’t know?” Aoi gazed at her with an upturned look.

“Know what?” Kyoko frowned. The others, even Miaya, shared the same expression, their features morphed into mild surprise.

“Wow, never thought there’d be something I knew that Kyoko didn’t.” Aoi flashes a grin

Seeing no help there, Kyoko turned to Miaya for an explanation.

“There’s a rumor circulating, crediting Naegi for saving one of the reserve course that was struck by lightning. I hear the press have been trying to get their hands on him for an interview for weeks, but they couldn’t enter the school.”

“Until now.” Kyoko finished for the older girl, getting the gist of the situation. Kyoko could have imagined how that confrontation went down. Makoto would go out of his way to rescue his own attacker. That’s the sort of person he was.

“Be that as it may. I think it’s clear where this is all going.” Byakuya looked down at the scene with contempt.

“I didn’t really save him. I just did what little I could and called for an ambulance. If there’s anyone who deserves credit, it’s the medics.” A modest retort from a seemingly modest boy.

“Health reports say CPR was administered prior to the paramedic’s arrival. Did you have any training?”
“Um…I guess so. I learned a long time ago, thinking CPR was an important life-skill. I’m glad it came in handy…but I don’t think this is the place to discuss that.”

“Indeed. Let’s remember what the purpose of this meeting is. As proud as we are of Naegi-kun, his actions on that day aren’t particularly relevant here.” Jin interjected.

“I wonder. The timing is very convenient. For a heroic boy who’d already experienced a tragedy to step up and resolve the mayhem occurring in his school. it makes for an ideal story.”

“I don’t get why she’s asking all these questions. Naegi’s looking really uncomfortable down there.” Apo furrowed her eyebrows.

“She believes Naegi is a puppet of the academy. It’s a common tactic to use popular faces as mascots to sell.” Byakuya explained.

“That’s so demeaning!”

“That is the point.” Kyoko said

“Dogami is undermining Naegi-kun’s speech and showcasing him as just a figurehead, relaying what the school wants him to.” Displeasure drips from the tone of the rabbit presented on Miaya’s screen.

“Who’s to say that’s not the case? Using Naegi is a good plan, if a tad half-baked.” The affluent prodigy folded his arms.

“Kyoko, your dad wouldn’t do that, would he?” Aoi asked.

“I don’t know.”

“This is a time where students ought to be recuperating, not assuming the responsibilities of their seniors.” The interviewer continued.

“I understand that, but for future progress, I think the focus should be on the culture festival. I’ve spent the past month planning this event. I’d prefer to not have my efforts discouraged before its executed.”

“Fair enough, so let’s talk about that. Could you explain what these…talent laboratories are?”

“I can’t go into too much, since the details will be for the students to hear on the day of. What I can say is that the talents of each Ultimate have been assessed and the locations, area parameters and general designs of the labs have been decided on. The respective Ultimate will modify the lab to their own specifications afterwards. The purpose is to create a venue that displays their talent for the visitors on the day of the festival.”

“Does that mean I’ll get a pool?” The tanned girl nearly jumped.

“I’d be surprised if you didn’t.” Kyoko remarked.

“I see. So, I heard correctly when you said the students would finalize the designs. Is this really safe?”

“Of course it is. Not too different than any other cultural festival or putting on decorations. I’ve already overseen that.”
“You did?”

“Yes. All 128 laboratories, the Ultimates in the main course that’ll occupy them and naturally their talents. My first objective was to research and learn about them. I’m an overachiever that way.”

“Very diligent. But what of the normal students that’ll be participating?”

“Oh… I think memorizing around 2000 names and faces would be too much for me, but I’ve got it about halfway down.”

Laughter from the crowd ensued at the obvious joke.

Kyoko wondered if it was all that obvious. Or If it was a joke at all.

Dogami herself chuckled. “I was referring to the safety and fulfillment of the reserve course. I can’t imagine they’ll be met with open arms. And I feel the reverse would also be true.”

“The reserve course will be distributed on a first-come first-served and availability basis. Those who are quick to choose which lab and Ultimate they’d prefer to work with will be assigned there. There are member limits for each lab, so they’ll have to be fast or be forced to choose another. It’s unlikely that the rift between the two groups can be mended so easily…but I have hope that this will be the first step to reaching an understanding between the main and reserve courses.”

“You believe there are no downsides to having both groups mingle so soon? What safety measures are in place?”

“None.” Makoto said. Dogami clearly wasn’t expecting that answer. "There aren’t safety measures. There won’t even be security guards like normal.” At Dogami’s silence, he continued. “This is an open festival, for everyone. There won’t be any riots or infighting here so there’s not much reason for security. We’re all students in the same school, working towards accepting one another. Acceptance won’t come if there are barriers between us. We need to learn to feel safe around each other again.”

“I’m sorry to say, but that’s optimistic. Where is your guarantee?” The older woman presses.

“I’d like to call it hopeful. This school was founded on hope, I think it’s only fitting that in a time of crisis, hope is what will pull it through.”

“In other words, if the worst comes to pass, does the school intends to take full-responsibility?”

“Of course. It won’t come to that though…because I believe in everyone. I mentioned earlier that I am the Ultimate Lucky Student. Well, luck isn’t much of a talent.”

“He’s right, you know.” Nagito wagged his finger in approval.

Chiaki elbowed his ribs.

“All I did was win a national lottery. I’m just a normal guy through and through.” Makoto shifted to the unofficial side of reserve course students. “Believe me, I understand the frustrations, the powerlessness you feel, the inadequacy…and that’s why I trust you’ll learn to see the Ultimates the same way I do. Not people to hate, but as guides, inspirations. All my
classmates work hard to achieve their status. Even the guy I thought got in just because he was born rich had to earn his place at the top.”

Just this once, Kyoko couldn’t help but snicker. Aoi quickly followed, the swimmer hiding a giggling fit with her hands pressed against her mouth.

“Now just who could Naegi be referring to?” Byakuya seethed.

“Ah…I almost forgot something really, really important. But now’s a good a time as any to introduce them.” Makoto scratched his cheek. “Even among Ultimates, there’s one person I know who works harder than anyone else to keep her position. I’m sure most of you have heard of her.” He made way to the side of the podium.

Kyoko bristled at who took his place.

“Hello, everyone. I’m Sayaka Maizono. It’s a pleasure to stand in front of you all like this.” The idol bowed.

“Heeey, it’s Sayaka-chan!” Aoi waved, as if the bluenette could see her from all the way over. She wasn’t alone. Kyoko saw an uptick in positive reception among the crowd as the national idol took the stage.

“I’m not as eloquent a speaker as Naegi-kun, but I agree with his views. Seeing my classmates fight amongst each other…it was horrible. It’s safe to say it’s even more horrible for the victims and their families. The families of the aggressors too. That’s why I’m going to do my part to make sure a tragedy like that doesn’t happen again. But there isn’t much I can do alone. That’s why I’ll need all of your help.” Sayaka proclaimed.

“Sayaka will be participating in the festival like all the others, but she won’t have a talent laboratory.” Makoto added.

Sayaka put on a winning smile to accentuate her succeeding statement. “My idol group and I will be holding a concert on Christmas Eve till Midnight. It’s a first for me, but to show my sincerity, you won’t need to buy tickets or anything. It’s free for all attendants.”

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The crowd lost it at that point. Cheers and applause gushed forth like a geyser. Students unceremoniously left their seats and chanted the idol’s name. Reserve and main course alike. All attention was squarely on Sayaka, while the mastermind faded into the background, smirking all the while.

Izuru narrowed his eyes.

“What’ve you been up to, babe? Still single?” Leon asked.

Aoi rolls her eyes “Nice to see you haven’t changed a bit, Leon.”

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” He winked, then turned to the third of their little trio with much less
enthusiasm. “Then again, I wish some of us would go broke. Eh, Byakuya?”

The heir didn’t look up from the menu. He’d been at that for minutes.

“Just pick something.” Aoi pouted.

“Quiet. Unlike you, I’m careful about what I put into my stomach.” Byakuya snubbed her.

Leon rested his chin on his palm “Didya have to invite this guy? Could just be the two of us, yknow?”

“That’s exactly why he’s here.” Sakura was visiting her sick boyfriend, so she could be absent. Aoi would prefer to be around her friends than die of boredom, but she also couldn’t handle all of Leon’s flirting. It made her embarrassed. So, she brought Byakuya as her buffer.

“Is this your first time in a café?” She almost felt bad watching him struggle.

“What are you insinuating? I’ll have you know that as the heir to the Togami conglomerate, I practically own the world. A word from me could end wars and bring peace to nations. To imply that I’m too inept to easily maneuver through these common directions, is punishable by death” He goes on and on.

Aoi sighed. “Yeah yeah. You talk big, but I still say that’s impossible. The world’s a big place, and, I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s way bigger than your ego.”

Byakuya clicks his tongue. “Be glad you’re ignorant. I almost feel like telling you about the shadow council, then watching you get erased for possessing that knowledge.”

Leon shook his head. “Why’d Kyoko stay back? We could’ve had a mini-together. Oh, she doesn’t talk much but she’d be, like, a super-cute wallflower.”

“Said she wanted to talk to Makoto. I’d have stuck with her, but did you see that line?” She’d be forced to stand for hours behind the press and other to reach the luckster. No thanks!

“Same here. I’d congratulate the little dude, but I didn’t even know he’d be speaking. He hasn’t replied to any of my texts.”

“You heard the speech, he’s probably preoccupied.”

“Don’t tell me you believed that?” Byakuya butted in.

“Don’t tell me you believed that news reporter.” Aoi gaped.

“I don’t believe anyone without good reason. Kirigiri using a naïve fool like Naegi as a poster boy or Naegi having enough brain cells to produce ideas that’d impress even myself. Which is the more likely possibility?”

“Makoto’s smart. Smarter than you, I bet.” Aoi pointed a fork at the blonde.

“Wrong that you are, I can’t deny he has a way with words, but color me surprised to see he was so shrewd. If Naegi came up with all that by himself. I’ll have to be more careful when speaking to him.”

“Why?”

“…Maybe Kirigiri should be here. I’d kill for a half-decent intellectual partner.” Byakuya closed
the menu and set it on the table. “Write this down. There may be some small chance it’ll save a business venture in your unlikely future.”

“Come of your high-horse and spill already.”

“If I had a stallion, I’d prefer it just stomp on you instead, but suit yourself.” He doesn’t bother meeting her eyes as he gets to the point. “It’s about selling yourself. That’s the formula to all presentations aimed at swaying the audience.

The first being who he is – The Ultimate Lucky student. A commoner with not much talent to speak of, yet still rooted in the main course. Who better to use as a mouthpiece to placate both sides? The next strategy was even better. The utter lack of political correctness.”

“You mentioned that before. It was a bad thing, I think.”

“At the time, I thought so, but I’d spoken prematurely. You never want to offend your audience or implicate them as blameworthy, not in this context. But Naegi did just that. It was refreshing, a change of pace from the bore I expected.” Byakuya chuckles to himself. “Take it from someone forced to sit through tedious executive meetings where louts bring me whatever dull scheme or contract they’ve thought up to waste my time, all of it conveyed with the same boring professionalism. I’d rather pay attention to Owada showing up at my office to promote tonic for that fashion catastrophe he calls hair. I’d at least be entertained before showing him the door.”

“You’ve got an awful sense of humor.”

“To each his own. The third tactic is a follow up of the second. Naegi’s abrasiveness ought to have raised a few eyebrows. Some may agree and let it slide, but others won’t. Not in a scenario that was as violent as the tragedy. ‘The ones to be blamed should be the school, not the students.’ – is what many believe. But I’ll assure you most of those people won’t raise so much as a complaint after Maizono stepped up with that farce.”

“Oh yeah…the guys went nuts. I’m glad we were up top.” Aoi scratched her cheeks. “I think it’s a great idea though.” Aoi wasn’t all that into music, but she loved energy, and few events were as energetic as concerts. If it gets everyone pumped, who’s she to complain?

“Similar but ultimately world’s apart from Naegi. I can’t even comprehend the concept, but evidently these ‘idol’ types are beloved by the masses. Regardless of whether they were Ultimates or normal, they’d positively receive her. Maizono was the perfect patchjob to get Naegi’s message across and escape without a single consequence…and he waited for after the interviewers had begun their criticisms. To scrap the festival would also mean cancelling a free concert of a national-tier entertainer. Who’d be stupid enough to challenge his idea at that stage in the game?”

Aoi pokes the sides of her temples. “I think I catch your meaning, but…I dunno, it doesn’t sound right.” It might’ve been because she wasn’t smart like some of the others in her class, but there was something off about Byakuya’s explanation. “You make the speech sound so slimy.”

“Far from it. I’ve only spoken words of praise, I’ll admit Naegi did well, too well. Make yourself out to be better than you are. Swindle. Embellish. Lie. That’s how the game is played and it’s up to the audience to spot them. If they can’t, then it’s their loss.” Cruel and pragmatic, was the name of the game Byakuya played. “Your turn Asahina, do you believe Naegi could have come up with that plan?”

Aoi deflated, her drink tasting bitter. She didn’t want to agree with the scion, but he knew a lot more about things like this. If Kyoko were here, she might have asked for her assistance…but then
again, the detective didn’t get along with Makoto either. “Not…really.” Maybe that reporter was right, but if that’s the case. “That really sucks. Makoto looked like he worked hard. How could Kyoko’s dad manipulate him like that?”

“Oi, you two have been going back and forth for a while now. This stuff actually important?” Leon interjected, a bored look on his face.

“Asahina’s the one who needed a dose of reality. I was generous enough to provide.”

“Fuck, I was barely paying attention, but at the end of the day, what’s the big deal? Makoto’s been a sweet-talker as far back as I remember. No point butting heads about it.”

Aoi and Byakuya stared at the athlete in confusion.

“Now you’ve lost me.” The tanned girl said.

“Haven’t you really talked to the guy?”

“Duh.” She said. “But now that I think about it, you’ve been friends with Makoto longer than any of us.”

Byakuya coughed. “Asahina is merely speaking for me. I don’t recall assigning him the role of ‘friend’. I only let him follow me around for a bit.”

Yeah yeah, Scrooge McLemon. Their class hadn’t exactly been the most involved bunch. Everyone had their own focus and rarely mingled…until the year kicked off. But before that, she remembered Makoto’s friends had been Sayaka and Leon. “How did you guys become friends anyway?” Makoto was a good guy, but he flew under the radar for a while. She hadn’t properly noticed him for weeks, but those two clicked with him immediately.

The redhead in question spoke. “It’s a long story. Let’s just say I thought he was a funny kid, the day we met.”

“Funny how?” Aoi arched an eyebrow.

Leon stroked his goatee. A few seconds pass and he shoots Aoi a cocky grin. “Yo, we’ll play a game. I’ll give you a riddle to solve. And if I win, YOU,” He twirled his finger at the donut babe “have to go on a date with me.”

Aoi scrunched her nose. “I’m not that curious.”

“By the way, all expenses will be paid by yours truly, including no upper limit to donuts.”

“Lemme at those quizzes. I’ll knock them flat!”

Leon smirked. “Imagine you’re in the last plays of the game-”

“What game?” Aoi interrupts him

“Baseball.”

Aoi tilts her head. “Uh…you hate baseball. You hate talking about it even more in front of girls.”

“You want in on this bet or not?”

Aoi nods
“Like I was saying, it’s the last stretch of the game. It’s an exhibition match. There’s no climax. It’s a total blowout for the winners. But there’s one pitcher on the losing team that steps up to the plate whose pitches are out of this world, but he's also a rookie.” Leon pauses, raking his hand through his goatee.

“Maybe you should think of the question before posing it first, dummy.”

“It’s not that,” He shakes his head. “Every pitch is a curveball the batter can’t figure out, so he keeps swinging and hitting foul balls. One, twice all up until the 39th where the game is called. Nothing really changed, the batting team won. But y’know, fans still cheered for the losers. All because of that amazing play. Now here’s the question: The crowd goes wild…except for three people. The batter, the pitcher and the coach on the losing team. Any guesses why those three are exceptions? You get two chances.”

“I guess…because the batter never got a clean hit and the coach because his team lost?”

“Bzzz. Wrong!” Leon said obnoxiously. “Ya get one more shot. Here’s a hint: their reasons are the same.”

Aoi crosses her arms and gives her brain a workout! It…just takes a little while longer than usual. It couldn’t be helped, classes hadn’t been on in weeks.

“Any day now…”

“Grrr…I got nothing.” Aoi slumps. She hopes those donuts will cheer her up.

“Sweet! I wi-“

“It was an accident.”

“Huh?” Leon and Aoi turned heads to see Byakuya, fingers pressing against his glasses, looking deep in thought.

“The fool was embarrassing himself, was he not?”

“Who asked you?” Leon glared.

The blonde smirked, taking Leon’s bark as a sign of victory. “You never said this game was reserved specifically for the swimming idiot to answer. It’s a simple riddle, really. Hagakure aside, nobody is stupid enough to repeat the same tactic thirty-nine times when they’re already on the brink of defeat. Given you specified the coach in addition to the other two were synchronized in their disappointment; all whom - save the ‘rookie’ - I must assume are experts in the field, their discontent was on a technical level. A front that the untrained eye wouldn’t notice.”

“Ugh, stop with the big words. Kyoko isn’t here to translate!” Aoi rubbed her temples.

“Oi vey.” The heir frowns. “The pitcher was an amateur, never attempting to throw curveballs in the first place. He merely got lucky his shoddy performance didn’t incur anymore losses.”

“Is that true?” The tanned girl tilted her head.

The redhead boy growled at Byakuya, then sighed in defeat. “Yeah. Check the pitcher’s form, throws and angle and you’d see…he was trying to throw a fastball all along. He’s clumsy and awkward, but ya gotta look real hard to notice.”
“Huh…that’s a pretty clever riddle for you, Leon.” Aoi said.

“Indeed. It’s funny, Kuwata. That riddle of yours started sounding like a story half-way through. Or was it a recollection?” The blonde looks down at the athlete.

“Shut the fuck up. You cost me a date. I don’t have to listen to a word that comes out of your trap.” Leon fumes.

“Suit yourself.”

“Here you go, sir. One grand strawberry parfait.” The waiter dropped a mega-sized glass dessert in front of Byakuya.

The heir took one look at them and said. “I got tired and ordered the most expensive thing on the menu.”

“You aren’t going to finish all that by yourself, are you?” Aoi wiped the drool leaking from her lips.

“Are you insinuating that I’d share with you?” Togami said, digging into the parfait. For a second, she swore his lips turned upwards in satisfaction.

“Not sharing so many calories…sounds like something your clone in the upper class would do.” Leon grinned.

Byakuya’s lips curved downward. Leon’s comment made him visibly sick. “Fine. But I get the top.”

“What is this, an ambush?” The sun was setting. Makoto was finally given reprieve from the endless questions. As he exited the gymnasium, he found good old Kyoko waiting for him by the front door.

“Congratulations.” The lavender-haired girl said.

“You wouldn’t have waited here all this time to tell me that. What do you want, Kirigiri-san?” That came out harsher than intended, but he was tired.

“You sound frustrated for the boy always looking for an opening to pester me.”

“Fair enough, but I’m short on time. I’d prefer you go with a direct approach while my eyes are still open.”

She looked him over. Up close…he looked horrible “…Don’t overwork yourself fixing the headmaster’s mess.”

“No choice. If I want things to run smoothly, it’s better if I oversee as much as possible. The last thing I need is to be left out of the loop or have the board make some ‘changes’ or cut funding where I can’t see. Getting them on board took more time than I’d have liked.”

“You don’t trust them?”

“Their track record should answer that.”
“Be that as it may…you have friends that I’m sure would gladly help pick up the slack. They’re worried about you, so rely on them.”

Makoto rubs his neck. “What’s all this consideration? It’s not like you.”

“I do care for my classmates.”

“Then I’ll consider it.”

Kyoko wore an inquisitive look “…about this…hero business. What happened, exactly?”

“Ah. It’s what you’ve probably heard. On the day of the tragedy, one of my attackers suffered a freak lightning strike. I tried to resuscitate him. That’s all.”

The detective raised an eyebrow. “A freak accident? Is that an effect of your luck?”

“How should I know?”

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“…You did a good thing. Going out of your way to help a man who tried to kill you. But why? Did you feel guilty that you might have unintentionally played a role in his death?” He’d done the same with Fuyuhiko, but she’d never had the opportunity to properly question him.

Makoto laughed. Not his usual disarming one either. “Give me a break. Why do I have to beat myself up for his mistake?”

“I’m surprised you admitted that so blatantly…so why did you help him? You had every right to have left him there.”

“Because somebody would have been sad.” He answers, matter-of-factly. But Kyoko can’t see anything sensible there.

“I don’t understand. What do you gain from caring that much for the happiness of people out of your reach?”

“It’s not out of my reach. Not anymore.” Kyoko doesn’t have time to question when Makoto walks past her, prematurely ending the conversation. “Have a nice evening, Kirigiri-san.”

She wasn’t done yet. She turns back. “People are saying the board is taking advantage of you. I agree with them.”

“And?” He stops, back facing her.

“Does being used sit right with you?”

“They can call me a puppet if they like. I can’t remember the last time I cared what someone thought about me.”

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“You could stand to be consistent. You care about the happiness of strangers, but you ignore their feelings towards you?” Trying to see through this boy was like grabbing at mist.

“It’s not inconsistent at all…because the things I hold dear, my beliefs and goals…they’ve never changed.”
“And where will those values lead you?”

He turned back to face her. “You’re *that* interested in me?”

When there’s a mystery in front of her, she’s compelled to unravel it. “You don’t reveal much, if anything about yourself. And yes, I’m aware of the irony, but intrigued all the same.”

Makoto reached into his suit to pull out a rectangular object.

He throws it over for the detective to catch. Kyoko scans the digital item. “It looks like the student handbook.”

“All of the main course students will be receiving one. But yours is special. It’s for supervisors in the committee.”

Kyoko narrows her eyes. “…Is that an invitation?”

“It’s a chance. Do your best.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will up on Saturday-Sunday.
"You've gotta stop crying, Komaru." A toddler tries to soothe the wails of his 3-year-old sister. He’s about as successful as a drunk gambler. "Oh geez, what do I do?" Their mother had stepped out to buy groceries. At Komaru's request, he'd brought her out to the backyard to play. It was going well, up until the girl tripped and fell from running. Makoto rushed over the second the flood of tears came out, but now she wouldn't stop to even tell him why.

"Can you make her quiet already?"

In the yard next door, separated by a small fence, a blue-haired girl sunbathes on a long white chair. A row of books is neatly planted on the adjacent table.

She wasn't happy.

"Let's go inside." Makoto grooms his sister's hair, hoping it would calm her down. It doesn’t.

The bluenette sighs loudly. "You. I'm coming over. Open your front door."

"Eh?" Makoto gawks at the one-sided declaration. Mom said never to open the door for strangers...but weighing his options...this girl was our neighbor and if he didn't do something about Komaru, mom would be even angrier.

The girl disappeared into her house, effectively making Makoto's decision for him. He tugs on Komaru's arm, motioning for her to come inside. All she did was cry.

The warmth of his back as Komaru’s carried, is slightly calming.

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The door unlocks with a click. Makoto's head skittishly peeks out.

"Are you gonna let me in?" The neighbor's daughter stood tall. Her light dress ruffled with the blowing winds, but she didn't flinch.

"C-Come in." He opened the door fully for her to pass.

Without a word, she made herself at home, following the source of the loud wailing to the living room, where Makoto perched Komaru atop the sofa. Komaru's crying lowered to the level of small whimpers when faced with the stranger.

The girl looked Komaru over, stopping at the scrape on the left leg. With a pointed finger, she poked hard.

Makoto covers his ears when Komaru's cries intensified.

“Hey, runt. Where's the first aid kit?"

Makoto frowned. "Runt?"

She glared
"I-dunno what any of those things are."

"...It's probably in the kitchen somewhere." She said.

"Should I show you the way?"

"If you want her to stop crying, yes."

Makoto led her to the kitchen. Once there, the blue-haired girl searched the drawers at random. When she reached the limits of what her height could reach, she brought a small chair to use as a foot stool.

"I'm Makoto by the way. My little sister is Komaru. Thanks for helping us out."

"Shirai Hayase." The girl didn’t look back at him, focusing instead on a white box from the cabinet.

Makoto stood back while Shirai washed Komaru’s leg with a moist towel. The older girl then applied disinfectant to the cut and finally, the band aid.

"Feeling better?"

Komaru nods as Shirai pats her head.

Makoto's chest tightens.

"Sorry, Komaru." He hated seeing her cry.

"If that'll be all..." Shirai prompted her leave.

"Ah, wait." Makoto stepped in front of Shirai before she could leave. "Thanks...for helping Komaru...We have snacks, if you’d like!"

Shirai stares, pensively. "What kind?" She asks after much thought.

"Pudding!" Komaru jumped from the chair and landed next to them, like she hadn't bawled her eyes out moments before.

Makoto smiled. "Pudding it is."

"Suit yourself." Shirai mumbled.

Makoto zoomed back to the kitchen and zoned in on the fridge. A quick peek showed 4 cups of pudding left. One for each member of the family. Makoto looked away and ventures to the table. Tiny arms grip the chair as he climbed on. His destination was the bowl at the table's center, and the marker he knew was inside. He twirls the writing utensil in his hand and hops back to the open fridge.

"M-a-k-o-t-o." He writes his name on the 4th cup, grabs the other three and closes the fridge.


"Is that a picture book?" Komaru still can't read.
Shirai’s blue eyes drift to the pudding. "What took so long?"

"I'm here now." He voices a non-answer, takes Shirai’s left side, and hands her two cups, each with tiny spoons inside. While Shirai opened Komaru's pudding, Makoto peered at the book. No pictures.

"Charlotte's...Web?" He read the title.

Shirai's head snaps towards him. "You can read?"

He nods.

She looks him in the eye for the first time. "How old are you?"

"Four. I don't remember when I started. It was a long time ago."

Shirai didn't press the conversation.

"Tasty!" Komaru cooed. The other two watched her glow, and then fixated on their own dessert. Small fingers grab the spoons, dig into the pudding and put it in their mouths.

"…Tasty."

A smile for three.

-December 18th 1999-

"Makoto. Mushroom!" Komaru Naegi, age 4, plays backseat driver to her brother on Mario Kart 64. The Nintendo was in Makoto's room, so that's where they ended up. Makoto sat on the edge of the bed. Komaru sat on his lap. His arms extended and wrapped over hers. He vigorously mashes the buttons on the dumbest-looking controller known to man. He boosts his way to the finish line.

"...Second place." Makoto whined.

Komaru cheered loudly regardless. She celebrated ranking in the top 3 vicariously, through her older brother. She'd tried and never gotten past 5th. As she was on the brink of tears, Makoto said he'd win for her. Komaru brightened up immediately. She didn't think there was anything her brother couldn't do...except maybe...

Komaru turned her head to the desk, a little way over. Their blue-haired neighbor and friend was reading again.

"What?" Shirai feels the toddler's eyes on her. Komaru didn't think reading was all that fun.

"Play with us, big sis." Komaru held out the controller.

"Uh, Komaru. We only have one pad." Makoto said. Multiplayer wasn’t one of the options.

Shirai considers the invitation. "Alright. Might as well see what the noise is about."

"Do you even know how to play?" Makoto asks.
"I've seen enough. It shouldn't be that hard." She swipes the controller from his palms. "I'll need a trial run to get used to the controls though."

"Good luck."

She only needed two practice tries. By the third...she won first place.

"Do you have this game at your house?" Komaru latched onto the older girl with star-struck eyes. Shirai snorts. "No chance...and am I done having fun yet?" Without waiting for an answer, she threw the pad behind her and returned to her station.

Makoto reached over for the controller. His features flush with frustration.

"What's wrong?" Komaru pulled on his shirt.

He regards her with a small smile. "Want to try for first place this time?"

Komaru beamed

"Steer me in the right direction this time, Komaru."

"You can count on me!"

-October 6th 2000-

Komaru’s parents picked her up from kindergarten and were on their way to grab Makoto from school. She looked out the window when the car stopped. In clear view, was Makoto speaking to an old woman on a bench.

"He's doing it again..." Dad starts

Komaru turned to her bickering parents, their expressions filled with concern. Mom caught her staring. "Should I go get him?" Komaru asked.

The older woman’s lips thinned. Whenever she tried to open her mouth, it closed soon after.

"Komaru... does Makoto talk to you?" Dad asked from the driver's seat.

"Lots. Why?"

"Do you ever notice anything...strange?"

She squinted. "Like?"

Dad rolled down the window and pointed outside. All Komaru saw was her overly friendly brother.

"What?"

"He's talking to himself." Dad said bluntly.

"We don't know that. He could be rehearsing. Maybe there's a play at school." Mom's said harshly.

Komaru made a puzzled face. "He's not talking to himself. There's a granny over there with him."
Now her parents were looking at *her* with wide eyes, then back to Makoto. Then back to her. They'd never shown her those conflicted faces before.

She didn't like it. "What?"

"It's nothing. I'll go get your brother." Dad stepped out of the car.

It hadn't made sense, then. But that was her first time seeing a ghost. Deep down, Komaru knew nobody could ever know of this talent. She didn't want her parents or anyone to stare at her like that again.

- June 11th 2001 -

"This is haaard!" Komaru whined, her cheeks flat against the dinner table. Her school notes were scattered, everywhere. In contrast, Makoto's were neatly stacked.

Makoto’s heard this one hundreds of times before. “Did you even study?”

"Homework sucks." Komaru dragged out the dreaded pop quiz she had today. "Look."

Makoto cringed at the grade. "Ouch...better luck next time?"

"Tutor me."

"Eh?" Washed out hazel eyes switched between her work and his. "...Okay, I can make time." The small pause is suspicious.

"I was kidding," She flipped her hand. "Bet you have a lot more stuff to do than me, *class rep.*" She teases.

"Not really." He sighs.

She shoot him a look of disbelief "Uh huh. Isn't your new class full of...big kids? Why'd you go for that job?"

Makoto slowly shakes his head. "I didn't volunteer. They picked me."

"Why?"

“A prank, I suppose.”

Komaru blinked... "Bro, are you getting bullied?"

"Hm, maybe a little." He’s quick to intercept her following statement. “I’m not telling dad.”

"Why not?" Komaru slams her hands on the table.

"It's not like I don't understand their feelings." He rested his chin on his palm. "You don't have to worry about it. I'll take care of everything."

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

Makoto tapped his cheek with his pencil. "Let's put it this way. If mom or dad hear, they'll go to the school...but then what? The teacher'll get in trouble. So would my classmates, and then their
moms and dads might get involved. Doesn't sound pretty, does it? It's better to do things peacefully and quietly. That way, everyone'll be happy without much of a fuss." Komaru shook his head. His classmates? "Why do we have to care about them again?"

"Well...there used to be this huge crybaby sister of mine." Komaru froze. "If she fell, bit her tongue, or lost at a game, she'd bawl so loud the entire neighborhood would hear her."

"Shutupshutupshutup." Komaru blocked her ears.

The rolls of his eyes would reach the ceiling if not their physical confines "You're embarrassed now, huh? Think about how I felt. I hated seeing you cry, so I tried all sorts of ways to keep you smiling. Not all of them worked." He scratched his cheek. "But when they did...it felt good. I like your smile. Mom and dad's too."

By this point, Komaru was red in the face from embarrassment. "That's why I think...a class where everyone's happy is a lot better than the alternative."

"Al..ternative?" What's that word mean?

"The other choice." He explains. "Like, my classmates sulking."

Oh...Komaru wrote it down in her notebook.

"So, you've got nothing worry about."

"Really?"

"Mhm. When have I ever lied to you?"

Never. Makoto was honest. Too honest. And he'd never let her down before. If he says he's got it covered...it should be okay.

"At the very least...at the end, I want to be smiling too." He finished

"Okay, I won't say anything...if you give me the last pudding."

Makoto "But what are you going to do about your grades? I mean...if mom overhears..."

""You better not tell!"

"Looks like we're even." Makoto checkmates. "If you ever need help with school, ask me."

Komaru thought about it but decided against. "No, I'll just ask Shirai-neesan instead." It'd be same in the end. Her brother and "older sister" from next door were both special. Not just upstairs, but how they acted. Both spoiled her, but they didn't patronize her like the adults did. They were honest and fair, and talked to Komaru like she was the same age. Even though they had a lot more to say than she did in conversation, they spoke in ways she could clearly understand.

If Komaru needed help and Makoto wasn't available, she'd go to Shirai, and vice-versa. It....wasn't as convenient as it sounded.

"Do you...have to?" Makoto’s eyebrow twitched.

Komaru regretted opening her mouth. Among her brother's few bad points, there was the fact that he hated losing. "Not again. You know you don't have to keep picking fights with her over everything."
"I-I don't pick fights." He's scandalized by the accusation. "It's just...she's always so cocky...because she gets a tiny bit lucky...or I'm unlucky." He gripped his pencil tightly.

Komaru just nods. "You're right. You’d smoke her if you just studied a little harder."

“But…I always do my best?”

For crying out loud..."Does it matter? She's bigger than you. Like bigger than you are to me. You wouldn't be mad if our parents did stuff you can't, would you?"

"Those aren't the same at all. Besides, I'm smarter than most of my classmates." Who was he calling cocky again? "Hayase just...tries harder than I do." He's never called their childhood friend by her first name.

"Then I’m on your side. I'll distract big sis by asking her to tutor me, while you gain on her."

Makoto gasped. "You can't do that. That's cheating!"

Komaru plants her head on the table, groaning.

Looking back, her brother was always a handful. But...if she could have gone back to that time. If He could have gone back to being that person, maybe that would've been for the best.

It wasn't up to a year after that when everything changed.

-May 25rd 2002-

"Makoto, open up right now!" Mom yelled. Again. Komaru could hear her yells and the bangs on the door from the safety of her room.

The locks on the house doors had been for show, save the front. Her brother would be the first to use it shield himself from the family.

It all started during an innocent trip to a carnival in town. Her brother got lost. It happens all the time. However, this time, they'd found him in hysterics, unresponsive and inconsolable.

She'd never seen her brother break down like that...and it only got worse from there. Makoto's eyes were always off elsewhere. Like he was looking at something else. The terror kept most from approaching him.

If asked what scared him.

"He won't leave me alone." would be Makoto's reply.

If asked who he was referring to.

"The ghost."

He'd be met with skepticism and pity. Then he'd begin crying again. Sometimes, Makoto left dinner untouched. Sometimes, he'd be caught in the living room, all by himself, staring at nothing in the middle of the night.
He barely ate anymore. Over the months, he stopped sleeping altogether.

"Makoto!"

Komaru closed her ears and pulled up her bed covers. Mom and dad didn't understand...but she did. Komaru knew that since the night they returned home that fateful day, there had been one more occupant in this house. One only she and her brother could see.

But she couldn't say anything.

That Friday night, Komaru couldn't sleep. She wandered to the living room in her pajamas. She sat on the sofa and switched on the TV with a click of the remote. She wasn't in a picky mood and put on whatever random cartoon she could find.

Within minutes of watching, Komaru's thoughts disengaged from the screen and ventured to the problem that plagued their once quiet family.

"The air" that everyone else thought Makoto stared at. There, Komaru saw a terrifying human shape. Over the years, Komaru had seen other ghosts, but they didn't scare her like this one. He was dressed like a slovenly salary man. He was taller than dad. Most of all, he was...grimy. A blight on her vision. It strained her eyes to even look at him. This was something that didn't belong here. Yet he stayed, watching over her brother with a hawk-like gaze. Wherever Makoto went, that man followed. Everywhere.

Komaru didn't know who he was, or what he wanted. At first, she thought he would just leave. She naively (wanted) to believe that Makoto had dealt with these creeps before and knew how to get rid of them.

When that didn't work, Komaru thought to take things into her own hands and confront the ghost. Every time she mustered up the courage, she stopped once the apparition came into view. Right now, it was focused on Makoto, because he was aware of it.

She'd freeze up. Her mind would race through several, horrible outcomes. And when she saw her brother's worn, exhausted and broken expression, her chest constricted.

She couldn't do anything. What would happen if it latched onto her? There was nothing she could do to get rid of it. Makoto couldn't get rid of it and their parents couldn't even see it.

'He brought on himself by going off and talking to it.' Komaru bashed her head with the remote when those thoughts bubbled to the surface.

She takes deep breaths to calm herself down. Just then, the air chilled. A tall figure walked past her sight. It was fast, but can only make out the grime that disturbed her sight. She rubs her eyes quickly.

Out of her peripherals, she tells the seat next to her was now occupied. There sofa doesn't slump down as it would if anyone else had sat down. This person had no weight to begin with.

Komaru forgets to breath.

The only part of her body that moves are her eyes. If he was here, then Makoto had to be too. She’ll be safe as long as he was here (the lightning rod).

There was no sign of the brunette in this dark space, where the only light shining was from the
television.

It was her and the monster alone.

Komaru's heart stops at the thought. Then beat loudly enough that her ears grow hot. Her breathing resumed, in short, quickening spurts.

'Makoto, where are you?'

She holds onto the remote with both hands, to steady her shivering. Her eyes faced forward as if to escape into the television.

"This isn't any fun at all."

She bites down a squeak. The invader speaks for the first time. A mundane, ordinary voice that churns her stomach.

"Can you change the channel? Put on the news or something."

Komaru doesn't say a word, she didn't even blink.

"Hey, can you hear me?"

A drop of cold sweat falls from her scalp and down her cheeks.

"Is it hot in here? Why are you in the sweating?" His attention was fully on her now. Tears threatened to fall. "Can you see me too?"

Komaru's breath hitches, her mouth opens. Wordlessly, she prays.

Save me!

"What the hell are you doing?!"

Komaru's head snaps to the side. Makoto stands in the living room entrance. His figure as modest ever. But she'd never heard him speak in such a bloodcurdling tone. Nor had she ever seen his face twisted with such anger.

Komaru jump from the sofa, dashing over to her savior. She embraced Makoto, digging her head into his chest. She cried into his shirt like she'd done many times in the past. "I'm sorry." She repeated over and over.

He'd done so much for her, yet even now, she didn't have to courage to confront him.

He wrapped his arms around her back. "I didn't mean to yell at you, but it's...past bedtime." He was looking at her. He was also looking over her. His face had calmed, but the fire in his eyes still burned. "Go upstairs, okay?"

"But, what about you?"

"I'll be fine." He smiled after what felt like minutes. "I'll just grab a snack before heading to bed."

Komaru nodded slowly. She unlatched her arms and walked past him, not daring to look back.

She had to do something. The younger sibling thought as her pace quickened on the steps. She'd left her brother down there with a monster, alone.
It sunk in how odd that thought sounded. This wasn't the first time. Makoto had been alone with that ghost, this whole time.

"All this time..." Komaru's lips trembled. She balled her hands into a fist. She ran past her room and into her parent's.

"Dad. Mom!" She waltzed in and grabbed the sheets of their bed.

"Komaru?" Dad woke abruptly. His fright intensified when he caught her tears. "What happened?"

"What is it?" Mom groggily followed suit.

Komaru exhaled. "Makoto isn't lying. There really is a ghost a-and I can see him too. He's big and scary! A-And he's downstairs with Makoto right now. You have to help!"

Her parents were motionless. After what seemed like minutes, they shared bewildered looks. As Komaru's words sunk in, their features strained.

"Makoto's downstairs?" Dad asked.

"Yes!" Komaru cried.

"I'll got get him. Take Komaru to bed." Dad stood from the bed. He stopped to ruffle her hair and wipe the droplets from her cheeks. Then he left.

"Komaru. Do you want to sleep with us tonight?" Mom patted the bed

Komaru blinked at the offer. After the encounter with the ghost, she didn't want to be alone. She got on the bed, resting in the middle.

"You said Makoto was downstairs." Mom began.

she nods.

"Then you were also there. Could you tell me why?"

"I couldn't sleep."

Mom's warm hand ruffles her hair. "We're sorry."

Komaru blinked and rose her head to see her mother's grief-stricken face. "For what?"

"About your brother. It's my fault. Your father and I always thought Makoto was...special. He developed faster than other boys. We took him for education screenings and...we were told he was a prodigy. That's why we overlooked all his...quirks. Geniuses always have them I hear."

Komaru furrowed her eyebrows. She didn't follow. Anyone who knew her brother, also knew he was talented. Why bring this up now?

"Even when his teachers said it was fine for him to skip grades, we thought it was a great opportunity. And when he became class representative...you can't imagine how many times I bragged to the other moms in the neighborhood. But...I think we were wrong. Your father and I put too much pressure on your brother."

She pulled Komaru into a protective hug. The warmth made her drowsy.
"What are you going to do?" Komaru asked.

"We'll give your brother all the help he needs."

It was a few days later when Komaru learned exactly what that meant.

...

"Komaru, come see us off."

At the call of her name, Komaru walked slowly to the door. The past few days had been peaceful. An eerie calm. Makoto had been at ease...and better yet, she hadn't seen that ghost wandering around. Maybe it finally left them alone.

It was too little, too late.

At the front door, was mom straightening out Makoto's clothes. She paid him delicate care, caressing his cheeks or ruffling his hair.

"We're taking Makoto to the hospital now. Your father's already waiting in the car."

Komaru silently grabbed Makoto's hand.

"...it's just a check up. I won't be gone too long." With a hopeful outlook, he looked to mom for confirmation.

"You'll be back in no time." She said.

Makoto turned to Komaru and nodded, despite the crooked smile on his face. "I'll see you soon." He choked.

"Let's go, Makoto." Mom took his hand and gently dragged him away. "Oh right. Shirai-chan should be coming in a few minutes. Be good." Mom called.

Komaru took one last look at her retreating family and closed the door.

...

Shirai came over soon after everyone left, having taken on the role of babysitter for the siblings. On a warm, quiet day like this, it'd be criminal to not laze around on the veranda. Komaru rested on her back, her head perched on the older girl's lap. The back-cover of a book blocked her sight.

People breathe. Fish swam. Shirai studied.

"Big sis. Why do you like reading so much?"

Shirai moved the book over to look at her. "I don't, but I don't want to fall behind."

"Fall behind who? Makoto?" It hurt to say his name

"Anyone." She grimaced. "Education is useful. The smarter you are, the better your future. I'll go to university, graduate, get a high-paying job. From there, the money'll start flowing and I'll buy whatever I want." Shirai smiled darkly. She held up her fingers and counted all the things she wanted. "Fufu...video games, mansions, cars, dresses, jewelry, princes. All my hard work will pay off and I won't have anyone to thank but myself!"
Shirai saw Komaru quivering and coughed. "What I mean to say, is that studying now will make it easier for me when I grow up. I won't have to depend on anyone to get the stuff I want." She explained.

"Can't you ask your parents to buy them for you?"

Shirai hummed. "Have I ever talked about them before?"

Komaru shook her head. "I don't think so...or maybe I don't remember."

"Could be. Usually when people don't mention important things. It's either because they forget, or they don't want to tell you."

"You...don't want to talk about them?"

Shirai nodded. "And sometimes, even if you want the truth, it's best not to ask."

I don't get it. "Mom was right. All smart people are weird."

Shirai posed a curious question. "...you mean your brother?"

"Yup."

The bluenette pauses. As if the words become too difficult to read, she claps the book closed. "...How was Makoto when he left?"

"I...don't think he wanted to go to the hospital." Komaru visualized the brunette's face. "I didn't want him to either."

"He's not going away forever. They allow family visits, or you can write to him if you don't have the time. Think of it like... he's staying at a friend's place for a little while."

"But Makoto's not sick. He doesn't need a doctor." She argued.

"It would be worse if he stayed." Shirai's eyes glazed over. "Even if it's not their fault, just one person is all it takes to rip your family apart."

Komaru shifted subtly in the girl's lap. For a time, neither said anything.

Shirai broke the silence "Until Makoto comes back... no, even after, be a good girl. He and your parents will be counting on you."

"What can I do?" Komaru flipped her body around, lifting her head.

"Hmm. Actually, just be yourself." She giggled.

"That's easy!" Komaru perked up.

"Isn't it?"

The Naegi household was reduced to three. Mom and dad didn't talk about Makoto.

Komaru didn't try to fill the void he had left either. Rather, she wanted the emptiness to serve as a reminder that there was always space at home for him. His room had been left untouched save the clothes and items he'd taken with him.
After the first week passed, she'd asked. "When's big bro coming home?"

"When he's better." - was the answer she received and would continue to get long after. Weeks, turned to months. She'd nearly forgotten what it was like to have him at home. He'd stopped replying to her letters too.

One evening at dinner, mom picked up a call on the landline. Dad joined her. They spent an unusually long time on the phone. Komaru could only make out the spaced out, tense replies on their end. When the receiver dropped, both were ghostly pale.

"Komaru...we're going to call Shirai and see if she can spend the night." Dad's voice quivered in a way she'd never heard before. She wasn't told where they went that night. Nor did they tell her why they made periodic trips over the course of the week. Komaru remembered Shirai's words. If mom and dad didn't want to tell her, then maybe it was better she didn't know.

So she asked about something else one night. Something she thought would be an innocent distraction.

"When's big bro coming home?"

Mom broke into tears. Dad consoled her.

Komaru never asked about Makoto again. She never heard his name spoken again. Not until the holiday season later that year. By then, they'd moved into a new home, looking for a fresh start.

-December 22nd 2003-

Makoto was released from the hospital.

When she heard the front door open, the smaller Naegi sibling jolted downstairs. The cool air did little to disturb her. Makoto didn't seem to mind either, wearing the jacket and scarf that their parents had picked out for him earlier.

"Makoto!" She squealed, pulling him into a hug.

"Hey. It's...been a while." were his first words. When Komaru pulled away, she noticed he was shorter than she remembered.

"Makoto had a long trip. Show him to his new room."

Komaru practically hopped as she took his hands and guided him to his room. "I cleaned it just this morning."

"Ah...you did? It looks just like my old room. Or bigger, maybe."

"I can clean my own room now too." Komaru puffed her chest proudly.

He plopped on the bed, testing its softness. His head falls to the side. "You're still the same." He says, with a shade of a smile.
"Nope. I’m grown up now." With a pout, Komaru joined him on the bed. “I’ll even help you unpack.”

"No, that's fine. I don’t want to trouble you."

Komaru cocked her head. "How could you? We're family."

"Right. How could I forget."

It was the dead of night by the time they'd finished sorting out his room. They spent the rest of their time speaking about how her life had been during his absence. Not a word was mentioned about his time in the hospital.

Komaru yawned loudly, trying to fight off sleep. In contrast, Makoto was wide awake as he listened to every story she had to tell.

Mom was wrong. He hadn't been tired at all.

"Time for bed?" He remarked after her second yawn.

"Not yet." She rubbed her eyes. "Can I stay here?"

"If you want. Make yourself comfortable while I get some water."

A few minutes later, he returned, finding Komaru snoring lightly on the bed. One eye slowly opened at the sound of his footsteps. She caught Makoto fiddling with a container. He grabbed two pills, ingested them and finished with a cup of water.

"What’s that?" Komaru asked, slowly.

"Sleeping pills." He placed the container inside the drawer. After flicking the light switch off, he made his way over to the bed. He crawled over, taking the side next to the wall.

"...how was Hayase?"

"She's um. She told me to say ‘sorry’" Komaru yawned.

“I see.”

Makoto was never the same.

The first signs were immediate. He'd removed the posters in his room and cleaned most of the clutter, shoving them in a storage room. She caught him more than a few times lying on his back, either on the bed or on the floor. He stared at the ceiling with an empty expression. She'd playfully call him weird or strange. He'd respond with fond laughter, never telling her what he was looking at or what he was thinking.

His friendliness hadn't changed, but now...he was duller. Not just coordination, but his smarts. Komaru used to think her brother was wizard-like with how he always knew the answer to her homework. He couldn’t help her with that anymore. Not like before. Mom and dad were concerned about him going back to school so early, but Makoto advocated for it. He would repeat the 5th grade at a different school.

Komaru also had to get used to how clumsy he'd gotten. Small things, like forgetting to tie his shoelaces and tripping...or accidentally dropping silver ware. Mistakes Makoto never used to
"Big brother, what's that?" Komaru pointed, bewildered. Since they lived together, it wasn't uncommon to see her brother shirtless. Especially during the past summers.

Makoto furrowed his brow and followed her pointed finger. "Oh...you didn't know? I got into a tiny accident." He smiled. A wide gash streaked across his torso. "It doesn't hurt a lot anymore...but I can't run much."

Komaru traced her fingers through the scar. Judging from his lack of reaction, he was telling the truth. "How'd you get this?"

"There were a lot of sharp objects in the asylum. I got into an accident with one." He explained

"Asylum? What's that?"

Makoto scratched his cheek. "It's another word for hospital. A different kind of hospital."

Her reliable, genius older brother was gone. Makoto never touched the subject. She never asked. Neither did their parents. Because Makoto was still here with us, however normal he might be. He was happy to be cured, happy to be back home.

We let ourselves believe that, and soon enough, it became our truth. All we had to do was ignore the timebomb as long as we could.

-Present day-

"Komaru!" Dad called. Her name passed through her open room door with complete clarity. Enough that her friend on the line heard.

"Crap. I'll call you later." A sixteen-year-old Komaru exited her room. She passed by her brother's vacant one to get downstairs. "Sheesh. I was on the phone. What's with the yelling?" She muttered. As she drew closer to the parlor, she heard her brother's voice.

"Is Makoto home?" Her answer came at her destination. Mom and dad were sitting down, eyes fixed on the TV. Makoto wasn't hear, but she heard him loud and clear.

Komaru rubbed her eyes, wondering if she was hallucinating what she saw on the television. Was that the news channel? If so... "He's on TV?"
The dinner table was silent. Makoto stared down at the bowl of oatmeal. His features had lost color. He had prominent bags under his eyes from sleep-deprivation.

The sound of sliding papers came from the other side of the table. “Eat or your dad said I’m allowed to force-feed you.” Shirai’s eyes didn’t leave her book.

He didn’t move.

The blue-haired girl slammed her book closed and pulled her chair over to his side. She gripped the spoon, digging into the oatmeal and brought the contents to Makoto’s mouth. “Open.”

When he didn’t, she jammed the food into his mouth.

Makoto swallowed.

“You won’t eat, and you’ll resist getting fed. If you’re playing around, you should stop. Everyone’s worried, including the dummies at school.”

No response.

The older girl sighed. “What happened, Makoto?”

Makoto closed his eyes. He could see the fire.

He’d stood by and watched the man burn. He’d first worried that the flames could spread and envelop the house but...nothing else was burning. The flames weren’t hot either.

Still that didn’t mean all Makoto had done was watch. He ran to and back from the bathroom. Splashing the burning figure with a bucket of water. The water did nothing to alleviate the situation.

All he could do was stare at the unfamiliar development. He’d seen ghosts suddenly disappear into light, but never this.

The man who’d tormented him for weeks caught flame. Makoto didn’t know from where or how or why. He turned to cinders without ever mentioning his name or motives, but he’d left his mark, even in his final moments.

“He was screaming.” Those left the deepest impression of all.

“Who?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know him.” He answered, vaguely.

“You’re a mess, figuratively and literally. I thought you were smarter than this.”

“You don’t understand.” He said, listlessly.

“Explain it in a way I can. Then let me help you.”
Hope flickered in his eyes. “How?”

“Tell me what really happened at the carnival, in detail. I’ll talk to your parents and convince them. They trust me.” Did that mean they didn’t trust him? “I’m your friend. I won’t abandon you now.”

That was the first and only time his childhood friend ever admitted that fact.

-October 15th 2002-

He wanted to leave.

Makoto laid on his back. He faced the white ceiling. The room - not his room - was designed with only the bare essentials in mind. It wasn’t anything like his room back home. The doors locked from the outside. The windows were barred. There were no posters, no clutter of toys or reading material. No trophies.

There was a bed, a chair, a clock, a desk, a mirror and white. Lots of white. Even his mandatory clothing’ pearl-white colored shirt and shorts that still somehow made him feel dirty.

There’s lots of silence too. If a pebble fell anywhere or on the floor, he’d hear it.

...There were also cameras. He’d gotten use to the lack of privacy, just as he’d grown accustomed to his structured daily life. There were mandatory hours of sleep that he accommodated as best he could. Which wasn’t well at all.

Makoto had too much time in the night to think. In the day...he was given three plain meals. He was let outside for physical activity, under strict supervision. Then there were the routine checkups. They’d check his vitals, his blood pressure and his diary. A notebook where he wrote down his daily experiences.

Makoto suddenly sat upright, clawing the ends of his bed covers

He had to leave.

All of it might have been bearable, with someone to confide in. He’d gotten a reputation among the other children as "the ghost kid" and therefore a liar at best or crazy at worst. Makoto was neither, but everyone else believed he was.

He started thinking that's what mattered in the end.

...

If there was a silver-lining, it'd be his therapy sessions. He'd never learned anything during them (because they were completely wrong about him), but it was the only time when someone had to listen to him. The new therapist, Miaya was the closest thing he could call a friend. She didn't speak over him or look at him with disinterest like the old ones. Instead they had actual conversations and it looked like she wanted to help him.

Or so he thought. It'd been months and nothing changed.

Makoto hugged his knees.
How long did he have to keep living like this? How long were they going to keep him here? For another year? Maybe longer? Nobody ever gave him a date. His parents never said anything!

He shuddered as a thought dawned on him. Would they keep him here until he was cured? But he wasn't sick...and that meant...

Makoto paled. His breathing turned ragged and sharp.

He needed to leave

The boy's pupils dilated. White walls surrounded him on all sides. The windows were barred. The door was locked airtight. They would open in the morning, someone who couldn't care less about him would pass through and he would start his lonely, torturous days all over again. With No End In Sight.

His eyes darted to the camera, then to the chair, and finally the mirror hanging on the wall.

He slid out of his bed and stepped towards the desk. His small hands gripped the back of the chair and dragged it close to the mirror. With all the strength he could muster in his small body, he tossed the furniture at the glass.

A web of cracks formed on the mirror, but he paid no mind. The shards that fell catch his gaze. Likewise, the sound and cameras would also have alerted the staff. But they wouldn't get here quick enough. Makoto picked up the largest fragment and held the tip to his chest.

One way or another, he'd get his freedom.

-April 14th 2008-

"Woah." "Where'd you get that?" "Does it hurt?"

"I got it a long time ago. I'm fine now." Makoto raised his hands placatively in front of his classmates. This would mark the his first in Sixth Blackroot Junior High. Normally his scar was hidden by his uniform, but he had little choice in swimming class.

He would always be swarmed with innocent glances, until they got tired of staring. Thankfully, it happened quickly.

The first time, when repeating the 5th grade, a girl had asked. "Can I touch it?"

"Go ahead." He replied without hesitation.

He'd gotten strange glances and giggles for giving them exactly what they asked for. He'd spent the latter part of the day fixated on why. He deduced that he'd answered wrongly. That girl had just been curious, but his response was too direct and enthusiastic. it didn't mean she wanted to act on it, especially with others to see.

"Hey, Naegi, can I touch it?" One of the boys in his class poked him on the shoulder.

"Ah...that'd be a bit much..." Makoto feigned nervousness.

"Yeah, it looks kinda gross."

"That's awful." He laughed, scratching his cheek. No offense was taken on either side...and he
didn't stand out for it. That's how Makoto wanted it.

The feel of dipping his legs in the pool water was calming. His gaze fluttered to the groups flailing in the water. Some raced. Others attracted a crowd with their jumps. Others splashed each other. The connecting tether were their smiles. All of them looked like they were having the time of their lives.

His lips twitched upwards. His expression felt... off and the feeling wasn’t there. The smile fell and narrowed into a straight line.

A pair of hands latch onto his legs and drag him into the water. He surfaced with a gasp, facing his attacker with wide-eyes. One of his classmates, Shun. His most distinct features were his black curly hair and freckled cheeks.

"Haha, you almost pissed yourself."

Makoto sighed. "You bet. I got scared half to death."

"That's what you get for hanging back and watching. Race me and I won't tell everyone.” He smirked.

He didn't want to. Too much exercise strained his body. Makoto's lips parted, ready to utter an excuse to skip out on the bait. "You're on."

"Nice. Let's go." Shun got out of the pool and stood proud on its edge.

Makoto floated in the pool, wearing an empty smile.

"What're you waiting for?"

"I'm coming." He followed the boy. Too late to back out.

On a count of 3...2...1, they leap back into the water and swim in a straight line. The other students had made a path for them race unobstructed.

Shun was the first to touch the other side, and by a hair's breadth. "I won." The boy reveled in his victory.

"Looks that way." Makoto said, trailing behind him.

"Naegi, you're pretty good." Once again, he found himself attracting unwanted attention from the onlookers.

"I don't know. I still lost." He raked his wet hair.

Two boys looked at each other and then back to him. "Yeah but...that's natural. Shun's on the swim team."

Makoto wants to smack himself for that oversight.

He needed to learn more about his classmates. "I must've gotten lucky then. Excuse me, I've got to use the washroom." Makoto quickly left the pool. With his back to the others, his fingers scraped against his scar. It felt like someone was pricking his chest with sharp needles. But that wasn't his concern.

Back then... he planned on saying no to the race, didn't he?
Makoto stumbled into the men's restroom; his gaze transfixed on the mirror. There, he saw his reflection, smiling back. The same mousey brown hair and face, but two differences. There scar on his chest was gone...and his smile, it was different from his. It was natural, like everyone else's.

He shook his head and the reflection was normal. “I must be tired.”

The single most important skill he'd learned in Jabberwock, was lying.

It wasn't important to tell the truth or to lie. What mattered was telling people what they wanted to hear. If there's fault in lying, in the (in)ability to do it convincingly. Makoto didn't immediately claim to be cured during his time in Jabberwock after all. Ironically, he mixed in the truth here and there. Nobody would have believed an immediate recovery after a suicide attempt. He spent several grueling months gradually appealing to those around him.

After he escaped, he had to do the same to his associates. Makoto Naegi had to be reinvented. He couldn't retain the traits that put him away, nor did he ever want to go back. He would become an average boy that nobody would ever have expectations for.

In short, he had to keep lying for as long as it took. It got easier every time. Effortless enough that it became second nature in the most literal sense.

-July 2nd 2009-

It was in the summer when Makoto encountered a first of many fateful encounters relating to Hope's Peak

Makoto warmed the bench, overlooking the baseball game. He'd been scouted earlier in the week to pitch in for an injured player. One of his friends, Michio, thought he was available, and Makoto accepted without much of a fuss.

This happens more often than one would think.

Makoto wiped the sweat off his brow. He hadn't done much running, being a backup and all...but it was hot and these baseball pants were tight.

Makoto heard a clap and the sound of aluminum dropping to the ground. "Here he goes again." The crowd cheers right on time as a runner on the opposite team zips through the bases for the home run. The ball was already long gone. Their chances of winning the game flying away with it.

"That guy." Makoto observed the bane of their victory return to the bench. " riles up a crowd."

"That's Leon Kuwata." Michio remarked, dryly.

"Who is he?"

"You've never heard of him? ...Oh you're just the stand-in. Uh, Kuwata's like a baseball god, dude. They're saying he's the best junior baseball player in the nation. Maybe including pros. We never stood a chance."

Makoto hummed and smiled, leering at the baseball prodigy with renewed interest. That explained a lot...but not everything. He'd seen Leon take the stage often already. He was a great player, but he
was missing the most important thing. "Too bad. I'm sure he has an amazing smile."

"Naegi..." Makoto noted the disgust. "You say some weird stuff sometimes."

"Ahaa. I'm just impressed, is all."

"Yeah, you and his fanclub." The boys looked to the stands to see a group of girls from their school cheering the enemy on. "Shouldn't they be on our side?" Michio wasn't very happy… but he wasn't the only one.

Makoto took one long look at Leon. The baseball player took off his cap and grazed knuckles against his chin. A displeased expression on his face all the while.

The brunet caught a lucky break to speak with a celebrity during the half-time segment. And by that, he waited for the girls to leave Leon alone before approaching him.

Only 3 minutes to spare too~

"Yo, you're Leon right?"

The fiery youth regarded him with much less enthusiasm than he did the ladies. "Looking for an autograph?"

"Not really." Makoto placed his hands at the hips

"Good, I don't have a pen, and I don't take pics." Leon clicked his pierced tongue at the last bit, motioning to scratch his hair?

"You shave regularly?"

That got an annoyed reaction from the other boy. "You think I try to look this bad on purpose? My coach got on my case and made me." Leon frowned. Makoto couldn't relate, his hair was too unruly for even the caps to hold. "Like it matters. If I've got hair or not, it won't stop me from stomping the other team."

Makoto's grinned. For reasons he couldn't place, that lack of modesty and overwhelming confidence was… interesting. "I dunno about that. We might just surprise you."

An eyeroll comes. "Couldn't fooled me."

Makoto laughed. "Yeah, that might be a hard sell. You've score just about every time you've been at bat. It doesn't seem like the pitcher can psyche you out either."

"There a point to this? Cuz I don't have much time."

Flattery's a no go, huh? "But... I'll bet you won't even get to first base with me throwing the ball. At best all you'll be able to do is punt."

The way Leon gazed at him changed. "Your clothes are clean... have you even played yet?"

"Nope."

"Then you're just a backup? Quit wasting my time." Leon started to walk away.

Who's he looking down on?
"That's surprising. You'll stomp the other team, but you're too afraid to go at their best. I might be wrong thinking this but...could you be chickening out?"

Leon stopped in his tracks. He put on his cap and inched his head backwards. "You know who I am?"

"The best junior baseball player in the nation...supposedly." He added

Leon packed a menacing glare. "Put your money where your mouth is."

Jokes on him, Makoto was broke but if there was something he could offer others, it was far more valuable than what money could buy. Leon was extraordinary. On such a rare occasion, he couldn't not take the chance to let loose. If Leon's bored because baseball was too easy, then Makoto would gladly show him what it feels like to lose.

...

The bottom ninth. Makoto held the baseball in his hands. Leon was in front of him, getting into position. Half the spectators had left after seeing what a slaughter the game had been, and the home team had already given up.

There wasn't a reason to get down over losing one game, but he was asked to fill in, so he ought to leave at least some impression.

Makoto lifted up his leg and got into a wind-up position.

Leon bent his knees, gripping the bat with both arms.

The ball flew from Makoto's fingers, aiming straight at the umpire. It never reached him. The batter swung and aluminum met its target. The ball went flying...to the stands.

The ball fell into the hands of one of the spectators, whose features were that of someone who'd caught a miracle. "Was it luck?" Whispers and murmurs of that nature came from the crowd. But nobody was as surprised as Leon himself. That was his first foul of his career.

"Darn. Thought I'd get a strike." Makoto was honestly disappointed. Even from the distance separating them, Leon heard it loud and clear.

This time, Leon was ready before Makoto, in even better form. The brunet extended his hand behind him and pitched for round two.

Another hit. The ball soared into the air, but an awkward, slow angle. The fielder ran for the ball as it steered to the far right. He jumped just as the ball came within arm's reach but failed to catch it. The ball slipped out of his grasp and settled in foul territory.

There was a stark silence. Leon Kuwata's perfect record in the game had been broken...twice. This time, he'd barely escaped.

Leon gazed at Makoto and then his bat with raw confusion.

The ball returned to Makoto. He winded up. 'A strike this time'

Rubber met metal again. The result was another foul.

"..." Makoto's grin fell slightly.
The 4th throw, came. Then the 5th. Then the 6th...

The brunet’s arms were in pain by the 16th. The color of Leon’s face matched his hair. Frustration bloomed in both boys. There was a mixture of awe and disbelief among the audience. The size of the spectators had even grown. Phones had been taken out, capturing the showdown,

Makoto’s smile had been wiped clean off by the 24th pitch. ‘This is ridiculous.’

He threw Leon a look of cold determination and the baseball prodigy threw one straight back. Incidentally, their throws and swings mimicked this exact exchange, right up until the 39th.

The game was called right then. Not because either boy had given up. Rather, because both boys refused to give up in the face of the absurdity. The umpire had been lenient in permitting the private squabble as the winner had been decided long before, and took the imitative once the sun had begun to set. The game ended with the leading team's victory.

A roar of applause and cheers came from the crowd. Despite the home team's loss. Initially, he thought it was all for Leon, but he faintly heard his name being cheered there too. Or it could have just been from the members of the baseball team that jumped and tackled him to the ground.

...Despite the forest of smiles and cheers surrounding him, Makoto’s grit teeth battled against each other as he stared at Leon’s retreating back and the dirtied baseball rolling the ground.

Later, Makoto managed to slip away from the others. He was back into his casual clothes, only he was still dirty from not having taken a shower. He didn’t want to enter the change rooms with the other boys. Not now.

On the way to the school gates, he clutched his strained shoulders, grunting at the pain. What the hell was with that—...

"Leon?" Makoto mouthed when he saw the baseball player, in a white jacket, shirt and black jeans.

"Naegi, right?" Leon stood like an ogre guarding the gates.

"Yeah...great game, huh?"

"Can you tell me what the hell that was supposed to be?!" The athlete stormed.

"Come again?" Makoto’s smile fractured.

"39 fouls. 39! *Who does that?* You should've called it quits 38 pitches before!"

"If it was that bad, maybe *you* should've given up hitting, walked to first earlier and saved us both the trouble? Your team would’ve won anyway" Makoto argued.

"...Have you ever thrown a ball in your life? Your form is terrible." Makoto’s brow twitched at the insult. "Hey, you were trying to psyche me out with those weird throws, weren't you? Admit it."

"I couldn't strike you out that way…”

"You've got some nerve, shortstack." Leon scratched his hair.

"Um. I was trying to throw straight, I think. I didn't really get much practice."

"...Ah? Yeah I get that. Baseball practice is boring as shit, that’s why I never go." He sounded
proud of that fact. He was 100% genius with 0 effort.

"I wouldn't know too much. I'm not on the team." Makoto confessed.

Leon shot him a disbelieving look. "Say wha?"

"I was filling in for someone else. I haven't been on the team for more than 4 days, and I'm pretty much done now."

"But...you've played before, right? For other teams or schools?"

Makoto shook his head sideways.

"You for real?"

He nods.

Leon strikes a thoughtful pose. "...All that trash-talk earlier...was just a bluff?"

"Not really. I did think I could beat you." Makoto scratched his cheek. He tried. He really did. He can't remember the last time he put that much effort into something. Even though he lost he felt...he felt...

"Haha...hahaha" He heard soft laughter coming from Leon. "I got baited and couldn't hit a rookie's balls out of the park? Ain't that a kick to the nads." Even though he berated himself...he was laughing.

Makoto's mouth parted as he mimicked the athlete. "Ha...haha." A shoddy gesture escaped his lips. Something alien fluttering in stomach, bubbling up to the surface. "Hahahahaha."

He was laughing. He was really laughing...!

"So...you're sticking with baseball now right?" Leon asked.

Makoto stopped. "No, I'm not. It was a one-time thing."

Leon stepped forward and planted his hands-on Makoto's shoulders. "Dude, I know how you feel. It's dirty, boring, tedious, and worst of all...it's all guys...but there are perks. Chicks dig athletes~"

That was an incentive? "You'll stick with baseball, right?"

"Not really..." Makoto brushed his hands away.

"I'm begging you. Think about me here."

"Why?" Makoto gaped.

"Because I had fun. So...you'll stick with it and play me again, right?"

So pushy. What's with this self-centered guy?

"I'll take that as a yes. Great, can't wait to smoke you next time, but until then, I'll treat you to lunch." The fiery athlete patted him on the back and pushed him forward.

"Don't you have to go back to your school?" They came here on a bus, didn't they?

"Don't sweat the small stuff."
"You're...really easy-going, huh." Makoto felt envious of the carefree life Leon must live.

Still...If it meant he could have another opportunity to laugh like that again. What did he have to lose?

Although they never did play against each other again. He and Leon would reconvene in the most unlikely place. Hope's Peak Academy.

-April 1st 2011-

It was his luck that there were familiar faces in class 78. But even he never expected one of them to approach him first. Being the only one in the class without a proper talent, he'd kept to himself.

"Hello there." Makoto froze at the voice, lifting his head for the breathtaking celebrity. "I'm Sayaka Maizono. Looks like we're classmates...Naegi-kun."

He quickly nods. "T-That's me...Makoto Naegi."

"You don't have to be intimidated. We've known each other since middle school, after all."

"Y-You remember me?"

"Sure, I do. You were only 2 classes down." Sayaka brought a finger to her lips. "We never talked and then we graduated without ever saying a word to each other..."

"Yeah...but we're talking now, right? That means things worked out for the best." He really believes that when she makes the seat to his right her official desk.

"You were in charge of the animals, right? Would you happen to remember a day when a huge bird landed in front of the pond?" Sayaka asked

"A huge bird...Can't say I do..."

Sayaka seemed disappointed by his answer "Really? I thought for sure you'd remember."

"It was a crane."

"That's it! That's what it was. A huge crane and you rescued it!" She claps her hand together. "I was watching that day and I was so impressed. I always wanted to ask...why did you do it? Save that crane, I mean?"

He remembered clear as day. A bird with large, white wings, thin legs and a curved neck. Its loud calls frightened others away.

Makoto observed the events play out in his jet-black uniform.

He turned to the right.

"Look. Look. Isn't it cool?" "Will it hurt me if I get close?" Students with their phones out recorded or snapped pictures of the rare sight.

He turned to the left
"We don't know if it's dangerous. Don't approach it." "Everyone, run along!" The teachers were warding off the students.

His passive expression settled in front. The crane flapped its wing in futility, trapped in a cage of humans.

Makoto took his first step forward.

"I tried to lend a hand. If you were watching, then I'm sure you know how well that went." Makoto rubbed his nape.

"It had a field day pecking your head." She giggled behind her hand.

"Birds can't understand humans. It probably thought I was attacking it. But the injury could have gotten worse if I left the crane alone. I treated it, even if it would hate me." He explained, never thinking that incident would ever come up. Certainly not here.

He knew this girl. How could he not? When she made others smile just by being in her presence. "That's so like you, Naegi-kun. Always lending a hand." What he didn't expect was for her to have watched him as well.

Makoto cocked his head. "How-"

"Do i know that?" She cut him off, her face turning deadly serious. "Because I've been watching you. You see, I am that crane you saved and I was always looking for an opportunity to thank you. But you never looked my way."

"You shouldn't have. I only did what I thought was right." He said. "I hope you weren't too disturbed by me patching up your wing."

His partner was thrown for a loop.

"That was a joke." He continued.

"Gotta say...I didn't think you'd run along with that." She said slowly.

He didn't. If ghosts are real, no reason why shape-shifting cranes can't be. Though clearly not, in this case.

"But I was serious about you. You were always a nice guy, helping other people out. I thought it was amazing, how everyone around you was always happy. And...I'd love if you could be my friend."

Makoto's eyes widen at the expression she showed him. What a dazzling smile. It was perfect. Enough to assuage any guy his age of their worries.

She looked like a doll.

"Um...thank you." Sayaka said.

"Huh?"

"For complimenting my smile. I do work on it...but it's embarrassing if you put it so bluntly." She blushed.

"Did I...say that aloud?" He wasn't embarrassed in the slightest, but if his thoughts leaked out
openly then he would have to be more careful.

With a serious look, she said "The truth is...that I'm an esper."

That was cause for alarm. "You can read my mind?" Makoto's hairs stood on their end, he brought his hands up to shield his forehead.

"No no no, I was just kidding. All I have is good intuition!" She crossed her arms defensively. That’s how he knew his panic had been clear as day.

Sayaka Maizono was a special girl. Though she praised him, he couldn't help but think he fell far behind her. Amidst the troublesome class 78 where classmates bickered or ignored one another, the idol brightened up the atmosphere wherever she went. Even the most hardened students were charmed to some degree. but none moreso than himself.

-April 19th 2011-

It was after hours, where two helped themselves to a meal cooked by the Ultimate Chef in the cafeteria

"Togami-kun ignored my greeting again." Sayaka said. "He grunted my way a little, but that's the same thing, isn't it?"

"Beats him treating you like garbage, Maizono-san" Makoto drooped. The heir wasn’t one to hold back with his insults on the common man.

"There there". He blushed heavily as the idol caressed his hair.

His counterpart’s crush on Sayaka was painfully obvious to everyone. To Makoto, it was more than he'd ever felt. In a way, he was envious. Makoto didn't get what his metaphorical little brother felt towards Sayaka. He held no special feelings for the girl or anyone...but she was worth observing. What he'd give to control the mood as easily as he breathed. Was she born with the capacity or did she learn it? If the latter...could he learn to do so too?

“Hey Sayaka.” “Makoto.”

The two stop and smile.

“You first.” Sayaka offers.

He graciously accepts “This is going to sound a little weird, but I’ll cut to the chase. I admire you and I want to know how to be like you.”

Ordinarily Sayaka would have made some coy gesture at his forwardness, but he didn’t see any of that. Maybe it was expected. As an idol, she probably heard these words a lot. “I’m flattered, but that’s a vague request. What part of me specifically do you want to be like? Famous?”

“Not exactly. I want to make others smile, like you can.”

A brief period of silence follows. “I’ll be blunt, Naegi-kun. You’re throwing me off.”

“I’m not sure I know how to make my intentions clearer…”
Sayaka rubbed her shoulder tensely. “What would you gain from doing that?”

“Nothing really…You know me. I like to be surrounded by a happy environment.” Her gaze disturbed him.

“… I think there are natural mood setters. Like Asahina-san. All her energy rubs off on you just by being in proximity. But it's all natural for her. To me it sounds…it sounds like you want to make people happy.”

Failing a smile - he replied, “What’s the difference?”

Sayaka inhaled and looked him straight in the eye. She also looked straight through him. “Please don’t take this the wrong way. You’re very strange.”

“How?” He asks, slowly, inquisitively.

“At times…I think you’re adorable. You freeze up when I approach you and you’re receptive to my every word. It’s endearing, really. But other times…you’re different. The way you look at me changes.” That went both ways. "Your words are direct and...” She trails off, as if her following words would hurt him

…He was extremely uncomfortable with the direction this discussion was heading. “I don’t know what to say to that. Even if you think I’m weird…I’m just me. This is how I am.”

“So…is there also a reason why you keep alternating my name?”

Was he on trial? “That…it’s just a quirk of mine--”

“You’re normally too shy to look me in the face, but now and many times before, you called me by my first name. Even without my permission. And it isn’t only with me. You do it with others too.” She presses forward, not giving him a chance.

“Why…are you asking me all this?”

Awkwardly, she fumbles onto a conclusion that sends shocks throughout his body. “I-I can’t explain it, but it feels like I’m talking to different people.”

'I want to leave.'

“I want you to be honest with me. Are you hiding something?” Sayaka continued, assured of herself. When the idol notes his hesitation, she placed a hand over his. “If you let me, maybe I can help.”

("Explain it in a way I can. Then let me help you.")

Her touch burned like hot coal. "I don't need your help!" He reflexively slapped the hand away.

The crushing silence breaks too quickly.

“I was afraid of this.” Sayaka gently rubbed the back of her hand. He could see the intense hurt on her face…and the disappointment beyond it. “You’re strange. I wanted to deny it. I wanted to believe you were really the person I thought you were. But maybe I jumped to conclusions.”

The girl stood and picked up her tray. “Good night, Naegi-kun. I’m sorry to have kept you.” She left him with those final words.
He didn’t know how long he sat in the cafeteria, unflinching. A whirlwind of negative thoughts swirled in his mind, and the one that stuck out most…

“I took away her smile.”

-April 30th 2011-

“Feel like telling me how you ended up in the doghouse?”

A baseball flew into Makoto’s hand, courtesy of Leon. “Come again?” Makoto returned the ball to sender. Both boys were engaged in a game of catch in the academy’s baseball field.

“Maizono-chan’s pissed. At you.” Kuwata easily caught the baseball. The pattern repeated itself.

“I don’t know what I did, but yeah, she’s angry.” Makoto’s shoulders drop.

“Oh man, that fucking sucks. Better hurry and figure it out. It’ll only get worse the longer you put off the apology.”

That may be for the best. Makoto deduced that Sayaka was a dangerous element. He’d never come so close to being exposed before and in such short time. Maybe all that intuition talk was a lie. Maybe she really an esper. Either way, he should keep his distance.

“I’ve tried…I think. She avoids me like the plague.”

“She’s busy. If you ask me, you need to hit her fast and hard. Like corner her.”

The next ball slipped from Makoto’s fingers and rolled into the ground. The brunet gaped. “I-I can’t do that.” He said, beet-red.

“Sure you can. Quick example. You get a girl who hates your guts for reasons that totally weren’t your fault, into a closet for 7 minutes at a party. Just put the sweet-talk on and she’ll be spending a whole more than a few minutes with you by the time the night’s done.”

…

“Kuwata-kun…That was…very specific.” Was he even talking about my situation here?

“Tch. Don’t pretend you wouldn’t love to be in that position with Maizono.”

“T-That’s not wrong. I do want to make up with her…but what would I even say?” The brunet was two steps from evolving into a tomato.

…Maybe he should put in the effort to reconcile with Sayaka...It was his responsibility.

“Doesn’t matter. You’ve got to give her what she wants. Forget about what you want out of this and just think of her. Act like you’re the worst piece of shit on the planet and you want to work things out with her like she’s the best fucking thing to happen to you. Girls eat that up.”

“Will that really work?”

Is it really alright for him to be taking advice from Leon? Not like Makoto himself was an expert, but um…Leon?
“Sheesh. Can’t believe this is the same dude that taunted me the first day we met.”

“I can’t believe I did that either. To be honest, I don’t even remember it.” And scene.

“Did the adrenaline mess with your head?” Leon looked at him strangely.


Evidently, it was successful “You did not just-! Pick up the ball, I’m getting my bat. Get ready to learn why I’M the baseball star here!”

-May 4th 2011-

Turns out Leon was being serious and very literal about that whole idea. The baseball star had rented a house nearby and hosted the first party of the year. That meant games, drinks, teenage-hijinks and more drinks. But it also gave him a shot to clear the air with Sayaka. The stifling, claustrophobic air left in the bedroom closet.

“Funny situation we’ve got here…” Makoto joked.

“Depends on your perspective.” Sayaka replied, none too pleased with how their game of truth or dare played out. Oh, she’d taken the results in stride in front of everyone else, but once she was locked in this tiny space with him, her discomfort was obvious.

“I’ve been waiting for a chance to talk about…the other day.”

“And you just happened to find one? Or did Leon lend a hand in that too?”

“Ultimate Luck.”

She cracked a small smile.

“I want to apologize. For snapping like that. I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s fine. I wasn’t really angry at you.” Sayaka said.

“You’ve been avoiding me for over a week…”

“I realized I was angry at myself. For holding you to my own unrealistic standards.” Her voice was sprinkled with disappointment. That was arguably worse.

“If I may ask. What standards were those…and why me, of all people?”

“I’m not up to talking about that now. Sorry.” The conversation died down. They only had around four minutes left before Leon came to get them. If he let Sayaka get away now, he might not get another chance.

He weighed the pros and cons. What was more important? His childhood trauma…or one girl’s smile? …Framing it that way, he didn’t need even a few seconds to reach a decision. “Would you, if I told you a secret of mine?”
He wanted to see her smile again. The way she did when they first met. A smile that he wanted for himself. Compared to that, what was an inconvenient past?

Sayaka’s response was non-verbal. The full attention she devoted to him was enough.

He took the plunge. “You were right. About speaking to different people.” She won’t believe me anyway. “I’ve got a split personality. He’s the reserved one you mentioned.” And to top off the absurdity, “Not just that…I can also see ghosts.”

Silence befell them. Sayaka’s scrutinizing gaze didn’t waver an inch. “Are you…playing around?”

Makoto was neither surprised nor impressed. This is just how things are. “That was a joke, to get you back for all the times you teased me.” Once more, he strays from her eyes. It was difficult in this cramped space. “Just forget I said anything.”

Sayaka didn’t laugh. “…On the first day of school, when I said I was an esper, you reacted…badly. I’ve been watching you, so I notice these things. I thought you might just be a little gullible but…back then…you believed me, didn’t you?”

His silence was her answer.

“When I said I was a crane. Did you believe that too?”

She must think I’m out of my mind. “It was a joke. I was trying to make you laugh.” He stressed.

“I do that too…pretending to play around in order to hide what I’m feeling.” Sayaka said solemnly. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not an esper. I’m not a crane either. But…I’ve never lied about my intuition and right now…it’s telling me that you’re not lying.”

Makoto sneers derisively. “I know I played along with you that one time, but you don’t have to go this far. Ghosts or split personalities are just fiction. They don’t exist.”

“I don’t see why they can’t, if you believe they do. Actually, it might be a little romantic.”

“I’m telling you they don’t.” He felt a pang of irritation.

Sayaka only stared blankly...

He was never comfortable around her. He liked her smiles, but he hate-hated the way she looked at him! “I have to repeat myself? I was lying. You’d have to be stupid or crazy to believe delusional crap like that!” His voice croaked.

As soon as those words left his mouth, he couldn't say anything more. He looked to the ground. Makoto didn’t know how much time was left, but he wouldn’t be surprised if Sayaka stood up, walked out of the closet and never said a word to him again.

“Makoto, look at me.”

He kept his head down. He then felt warm hands cup his chin and lift his face up. Sapphire eyes peered into vulnerable hazel.

“I’m not like Asahina-san.” Why mention the swimmer? “The person you think I am, was a persona I spent nearly a decade crafting. I appeal to everyone I meet, chipping away pieces of my real self each time, just so I can cater to their tastes. If they’re put off by me, I must see it with even the slightest change in expression.” Sayaka sighed bitterly “Put it another way, and you could say
I’m good at manipulating people. Because of that…I have a better sense than most of when others are trying to do the same.” Makoto shook in her grip. “I don’t think you’re lying. No. You’re telling the truth.”

The idol couldn’t have known those final four words would plunge him into deeper despair.

“My parents. My sister. My friends. Nobody believed me.” Makoto quivers. He didn’t think any human would consider his words as anything but delusions. After all the lies he’d told, even Makoto had believed the same in a small corner of his mind. But if she believed him, really believed him…why did she appear now, when it was far too late?

“Why weren’t you there when…when they sent me away like-, like I was a defect.” He cried. The last time he did so was back when he’d been a different person.

The heartfelt confession and plea left Sayaka equal parts horrified and saddened. The girl chose to not let either emotion reach the surface. Instead she wrapped her arms around him and drew him close to her chest, muffling his sobs.

In the recesses of Makoto’s mind, he doubted. She was only trying to make him feel better.

She had to be lying

She was lying.

She was being considerate for his sake.

Otherwise…

His eyes blackened and swirled.

‘What did I suffer all that time for?’

-???-

It's past 2 am

On a school night few hours before class and Makoto was still wide awake.

To add to the luckster's deviant streak, he wasn't even in his own room.

Nope, Makoto was right where he figured half the student body would kill (him) to be.

The lights are off, the TV provides more than enough. And what a light show the screening was.

The volume is at full blast. The sounds of screams and gunfire make him jittery. Not like he minded, movies were meant to be loud.
Boy was this a good movie. The visuals were breathtaking.

"What a moron. Everyone knows guns don't work on zombies! He's gotta be American." A loud cackle comes from the side.

"This is intense." Makoto was (figuratively) strapped to the sofa, chomping on popcorn as he turned to the room owner. "I didn't know you liked zombie flicks or anime, Junko." That Junko Enoshima, called Makoto out in the middle of the night and strong-armed him into seeing a movie with her.

"What can I say? I'm a very flexible gal." The blonde does her best to fluster him, resting on the sofa while flaunting the model legs laying across his lap. "It's a lot easier to capture the horror with animation than live-action...but I think the real thing would be best."

"The real thing?"

"You know, an actual post-apocalyptic crisis. I could get off to that." Makoto moves his head backwards as Junko's legs kick in at the air, nearly grazing his chin. "Just picture it. The end of everyone's boring ol' lives and monsters roaming around everywhere. You'd get to see new, intense sides out of everybody. Even boring dweebs like Kiyotaka might be fun under that much pressure!"

Ah, like roleplaying? "I see the appeal, but...I wouldn't want to be trapped in that kind of setting."

"Don't like your chances?" She teases.

He chuckles. "With my luck, I'd be one of the first to get bitten." And then wind up with an even worse disease than even the normal zombies get.

Junko evidently misunderstood his meaning. "I can buy that. Unlike our heroes struggling to survive here, there's no chance for you to be anything but a rando-zombie. Oh, you might be the unremarkable childhood friend killed in the first episode, just to make the audience cry!"

"That's a sad role."

Junko sits upwards at last. Aquamarine eyes shimmer with delight."Don't sweat it. It's not much different from your real life, is it?"

"I'd have to disagree..."

"You're the equivalent of a mob character, eggie." She condescendingly pats his head. "You're so dull and boring. It's not surprising you don't have any friends here."

"...Leon and Sayaka are my friends."

An impossibly wide grin slides across her features. "Now what would a picture-perfect couple like those two want with a third wheel like you?"

He furrows his eyebrows. "I'm not following."

"Just think about it, Naegi. Really, think about it. You've got a good heart. Sadly, guys like you get taken advantage of." Junko's arm snakes around his shoulders and brings him close to her chest. With surprising strength, the model uses her other hand to adjust his face to the TV in a way that strains his neck. "Leon might be a punk, but he's a star athlete. Sayaka? She's friends with everybody, there's nothing special about you. In fact, you're the only boy in school without an
actual talent. You're barely better than the reserve course; it's no wonder those two pity you." She whispers poison into his ear.

"Pity me?" She might not have been entirely off the mark there. He'd noticed the pitying looks from the idol...but that was another matter entirely. Still, the fashionista was perceptive to have caught the bluenette's stares too.

"Yup. Can't think of many things more demeaning than being treated like a charity case. Where do they get off thinking they're better than you?" Makoto flinched. "I mean, they are, but you don't have to accept that. Why not show them they're wrong. I'll even give you a hand." The implicit meaning hung in the atmosphere.

Makoto peered at the movie intensely, the gory detail and bright visuals were almost enough to send him into a trance.

Almost wasn't nearly enough.

"Junko, are you," Innocuously, he continued. "worried about me?"

The fashionista froze. "Huh?"

Makoto took the opportunity to peel off her arms, because his neck was killing him. "If you are, don't be. Even if I don't have a real talent, I'm still getting by just fine." He smiled.

The strawberry-blonde shoots him a perplexed look. It was rare for Junko to be caught off-guard. "Did you listen to a word I said?" Unbeknownst to the luckster at the time, there had been a hidden connotation beneath Junko's words.

"About Sayaka and Leon being fake friends?" He scratched his cheek. "That'd be painful, I admit, but I'm not sure that's true. At least...I'd confront them before making any rash decisions."

"You trust them enough to think they'd tell you the truth? B-o-r-i-n-g." She rolled her eyes.

"What's trust have to do with anything?" He asked, sporting a similarly confused look as Junko.

There was a disconnect in the conversation that neither were able to piece together.

"What the heck...I just told you they're two-faced bitches. You should be angry. Angry enough to kill. And...the video-" Junko shook her head. "I knew you were a herbivore man, but are you this much of a doormat?" Her inquiry was laced with exasperation.

Makoto laughed softly. "You're a nice person, Junko. To get worked up over this." Much nicer than he was.

Junko deadpanned.

As if the boy mimicked her empty stare, he continued. "Their feelings concerning me...that has nothing to do with me."

Junko didn't understand, how Makoto could remain impassive. Even disregarding the brainwashing, the boy should have experienced distress on some level based on (admittedly minor) observations.

Makoto didn't understand, why Junko appeared so invested in his circle of friends. Before today, the model had barely looked his way, or even talked to him. But maybe her disinterest had been his
With a monotone voice, he exclaimed. "The way I live won't change, neither will my emotions. With or without those two, or the school, I am special."
The final arc begins...

“Our brothers are dead.” Nisshiki Madarai repeated Makoto’s words. They’d lost contact with the other 6 long ago. The news wasn’t terribly surprising.

That didn’t make reality easier to digest.

“I’m sorry you had to hear it from me.” Makoto said apologetically. This stranger who’d once been their enemy offered to locate the whereabouts of the missing siblings. He succeeded. They knew his words were the truth, because he had information nobody, but their brothers would know.

“Mukuro Ikusaba and…Yasuke Matsuda. You’re sure it was them?” Isshiki asked.

Makoto nods.

“And the council?”

“Junko, Izuru and Mukuro.”

The Madarai brother’s anger swelled…then subsided. “A promise…is a promise. We won’t go after them.” That was one of the terms for the boy’s service.

“You agreed pretty easily there…” The shorter boy said.

“We are still here. It’s not a problem.” The mission can still be carried out so long as one of us brothers lived.

“So, your plan…does this video work?” Nisshiki inquired.

“Can I test it out on one of you? It’ll be easiest if you see for yourself.” Makoto held out his cellphone. The brothers vaguely recall the sight.

“Trust is an important step in maintaining a partnership.” Isshiki grants the brunet permission. Makoto presses down on the side button and a white-light burst from the screen.

“Isshiki?” Nisshiki calls his brother. The elder sibling is transfixed on the device.

“It takes a few seconds.” Makoto elaborates. “Isshiki-san, swear you’ll never attack Izuru Kamukura, Junko Enoshima, Yasuke Matsuda and Mukuro Ikusaba, out of revenge again.”

“I swear.”

Nisshiki slaps the phone out of Makoto’s hand. “What have you done?”

Makoto rubbed his hand. “You promised you wouldn’t already, this was just a harmless command on that.” He casts the bodyguard an accusatory glance “Or…did you intend to break your word?”
“No.” Nisshiki says after a time. “He turns to his older brother. “Are you alright?”

“Slightly disoriented, but otherwise fine.”

…I can confirm the video works.” Nisshiki said.

“I see.” Isshiki continued. “So…how will you use it?”

Makoto pressed a finger to his chin. “I haven’t really thought of a plan just yet…but until then, I’d appreciate it if you could help me out.”

“As long as you keep your word.”

“If I can succeed…nothing like the council killing game will reoccur.” The boy’s determination couldn’t be ignored.

The contract was formed.

“Thanks. Now, since you said that trust is important. I have one more secret I have to share.”

The brothers traded glances, then looked back at the luckster. “What is it?”

Makoto hesitates, but speaks, nonetheless. “It’s fine if you don’t believe it but…well, I’m sure you’d see the discrepancies even if I didn’t say anything. Still, you should at least here it from me.”

-November 22nd 20XX-

Nisshiki, posing as his older brother perched himself in the corner wall of the student council office. The area, once emptied for months, now inhabited by some of Hope’s Peak Academy’s finest.

“Looks like everybody’s here for our first official meeting. Should we start?” Makoto addressed the handpicked members of the culture festival committee.

“We don’t have much time for idle chatter. What’re our roles?” On the furthest end of the sofa was Kyoko Kirigiri.

“I believe we’re mostly all familiar with one another already…” Kiyotaka added.

“Or more familiar than I’d like to be.” Byakuya snared in Fuyuhiko’s direction

Makoto agrees, occupying the seat of the former student council president. “Kirigiri-san’s right. This was all on short notice and I’d like to apologize. Some here knew ahead of time, others I handpicked on the fly, but I’d still wants to apologize and thank all of you in advance for the work you’ll be doing.” He spoke like a professional. “There are over 100 talent laboratories in school, and I’ll need you all to help me monitor them. Asides a few special cases with more responsibility, the time that’ll cost you means you won’t have time for your own laboratories.”

“Special?”

The idol responds to Kyoko’s inquiry. “One’s me. I’m…not really helping anyone with anything. My stage is being built, so I’ve got lots of free time for now, but once we get close to the festival, I
won’t be available.” Sayaka said.

Makoto picks up the baton. “As for the second…Byakuya demanded he get the main lecture hall…”

“Indeed, I did.” The scion smirks. “I’m not passing up a chance to conscript potential assets to my own branch of the Togami corp. I swear on my family name that I’ll raise those talentless fodders into the business elite.”

“Byakuya’s family donates a lot to the school…apparently. I couldn’t refuse. So, he says he’ll multitask both positions.” Makoto turned to the chef next “Teruteru’s on cooking duty for just about everyone…which is extremely important. In fact, it’s such an important position, I thought it’d be wrong to leave him out of the committee.”

“Can Hanamura-kun really handle of that?” Sayaka asked.

“Mademoiselle have faith. These hands of mine would cater to the whole country if they’d let me. Would you like a…demonstration?” The suggestiveness hangs in the air.

Fuyuhiko grunts. “Stop being a pervert. Our class might be used to you but these guys ain’t.”

“Hahaha…he’s exaggerating. The school’s hired many chefs to assist.” Makoto clarifies…to Teruteru’s obvious displeasure. “Oi. We argued over this for hours. If you’re still not satisfied, we can go again.”

“No thanks.” The short man shudders.

“Last is…”

“Me, right?” Mahiru holds up a camera. “I’ll be taking photos around the school and at the festival. I won’t have a talent ‘lab’ but that doesn't mean I'll be lazy. You'll see the fruits of my efforts in the anthology after the festival. That'll probably be sometime in the New year.”

The arrangements satisfied the newcomers, for the most part.

“One more question. Why him?” Kyoko points to Kazuichi, crouching on the floor.

“I was about to ask the same thing.” Byakuya sneers.

Shark-teeth bare. “Hey! What’s that supposed to mean? I can be useful.”

Makoto’s willing to back him up on that. “Kazuichi’s the one who built the notebooks for us to mass produce on short notice. He’s worked really hard already.”

The pink-haired boy bashfully rubs his neck. “Eh…don’t give me too much credit. I only tweaked the blueprints of the old ones and made a few adjustments. I’d explain but there’s a tutorial once you start it. Long story short, it’s like an itinerary and a messenger now. The committee’s pads are special, we have a list of all the students in them, their reports and what’s part of their labs…such as their budget.”

“On that note! W-What are all these zeroes?” Kiyotaka taps the top right corner of the notebook scree.

"That's the budget. The students buy any additional supplies they think might be a good fit for their lab.” Kazuichi replied.
"Ah, understood. I’ll be sure to warn them to use the money sparingly, so there’ll be enough to go around." Kiyotaka nodded.

A chorus of giggles and sighs emanated from the room.

“No, that's one laboratory’s budget. The total for the entire school is a lot more. They’re not connected." Makoto explained.

"S-So much?!"

"Yeah. There are variances between student budgets, depending on how financially exhaustive showcasing their talent is, but everyone has around the same range."

"As expected of Hope's Peak Academy to have this much to spend." Kiyotaka nodded to himself.

"Haha...it didn't come easy, I had to do a lot of convincing."

Nisshiki believed that was the board’s karma.

“Ah right, forgot to mention a feature of the handbook.” Kazuichi interjected. “Got any knives, Teruteru?”

“Course I do.” Nisshiki went on high alert when the stubby male pulled out a cleaver from between his apron.

“You keep knives with you?” asked the disturbed detective.

Teruteru shrugged. “It’s a habit I’ve gotten into over the course of the year. I’m tryna break it, I promise.”

“Just hand it over.” In what was undoubtedly a health violation, Teruteru tossed the knife over to Kazuichi; the kitchen item spinning for the duration it hung in the air. With surprising dexterity, and even moreso, the passivity towards the act, Kazuichi catches the knife by the handle, avoiding any injury to himself. “Thanks.”

Kyoko’s eyes Kiyotaka, likely noting out of the character it was the moral compass to dismiss the scene.

Kazuichi repeatedly stabs the e-handbook with the knife’s edge. Nisshiki counted 12 attempts before the mechanic gave up. “See.” He holds out the device for all to see.

“What are we looking at?” Mahiru squinted.

“Nothing, that’s the point. These handbooks are sturdy stuff. Bash em with knives, hammers. Hell, you could try loading them full of bullets and they’ll come out just fine. If you don’t overheat the e-handbook, you won’t have any problems.”

Makoto clapped his hands together. “So that’s the gist of it. We have a few special roles, but for the most part, we’ll all be assisting the students with their needs and complaints. If anyone has a problem, they should call me, and I’ll rush over.”

“That’s great, Makoto. But it still seems like a lot of work. I wish the council was still here.” Sayaka mused.

“They aren’t. We should look to this as an opportunity to build rapport with the school, not
something to complain about.” Byakuya objects.

The bulk of the meeting ends there.

“You can either hang back here till school starts or go on ahead.” Makoto dismisses the committee.

"Kiyotaka.” The hall monitor stopped. "Can you meet me later? There's something urgent you and I need to discuss." Makoto called.

"What might that be?"

"It's a surprise.”

“Very well then.” Kiyotaka says before stepping out of the room. Only Nisshiki and Makoto remain.

The brunet lifts his head to the bodyguard. “Nisshiki, you didn’t say anything.”

“It’s not my place.”

“What do you mean? You’re part of the committee too.”

“I’m fine as I am.”
"We are all Isshiki."

The president cocks his head. "That can’t be right. Your parents would have had hell raising you!"

"…Nisshiki is my actual name, but as long as we are on duty. It’s more efficient to call us Isshiki. Our secret is protected that way."

"Nisshiki. Okay, I won’t pry further, but first…how do I distinguish you from the rest?"

"Is there a need to?"

"Just because you’re octuplets doesn’t mean you’re not individuals. It’d be rude if I mistook you for someone else."

That was the first time anyone had ever said that to him.

… "Your concern is misplaced."

---

"Naegi."

"Yeah?"

"My brother isn’t here anymore so there’s no need to distinguish between us. Call me Isshiki."

"…Sounds like a complicated relationship." The brunet’s lips thinned. "I’ve got a little sister by a year. I can’t even imagine having 6 more."

Isshiki cracked a smile. "Even if you did, it wouldn’t be quite the same as my circumstances."

"Probably. In my case, I’ve always been the one looking out for her.” Makoto stood from his seat.

Isshiki followed the smaller boy out the door with a calculating gaze. "You do that for a lot of people, to my experience. You handled the committee well, as if you were born for that seat."

"Can I let you in on a little secret?" Makoto inclined his head back. "I’ve got practice. I thought of myself as a hero, always helping out the little guy."

"I see you were just as arrogant back then."

"True, but I didn’t think of it that way. The gifted ought to stick up for the weak. You should understand, with these weird powers of mine."

A case of noblesse oblige then. “…Is that why you dive headfirst into dangerous matters that don’t concern you.” Isshiki had been told the boy wanted to clean up this academy. He had never been given the ‘why’. “Does it make you feel like a hero?"

Makoto flippantly dismisses the assumption. “No no, this was all in the past. I can’t be a hero.”

A hero is someone who only gives.

"Haul ass, Chiaki." Fuyuhiko yells in his formal, black suit. Peko stood by his side as an accessory. Nothing new there.
Chiaki trails behind them in the halls. "Do we really have to get up this early?"

"Not unless you don't want your lab done in time. Besides, you don't want to look bad in front of those reserve course."

"Right...where is my lab anyway? I'm guessing the game room."

"You guessed right. That means you'll have it easier than most, renovating. Come on." Fuyuhiko dragged her along and Peko followed in tow.

"I've got a question. Why are you being so pushy about this?"

"Cuz' I'm one of the supervisors." He jerks his finger to his chest, snickering. "And I know that if I don't harass some of you like a dog, you won't get anything done."

"Why'd you accept that position? It sounds like work."

"I owe Makoto a favor."

Fair enough. "If it was like that, you could've asked me, y'know." She pouts.

"Too late for that. The other positions are already filled by rich pants, Kirigiri, Madarai etcetera."

"Madarai-san...I still haven't thanked him for helping us out."

"Do it later. You'll see him doing patrols every now and then." Fuyuhiko said.

"Patrols? I thought Makoto said there wouldn't be security." Chiaki asked. She still wasn't comfortable with that idea, but her junior's optimism was inspiring.

"Don't worry about it. We've got it covered. You and everyone else'll be safe." Fuyuhiko reassured her.

Chiaki spotted a familiar redhead wandering the halls with another girl besides her. "Heeey...Mahiru." She issued a fluffy greeting in contrast to the tensed yakuza duo.

Mahiru Koizumi faced them with a pensive expression. Her anxiety dipping upon crossing glances with Chiaki. The black-haired girl mirrored Peko and Fuyuhiko's reaction.

"Good morning, Chiaki." Her smile strains. "You too, Peko."

"Good morning, Mahiru." Peko speaks for the first time.

"Um, this is my friend, Sato." Mahiru introduces the brunette. "Sato, this is Chiaki. She's our class rep." Mahiru doesn't give the same courtesy to the other two. Chiaki assumes they're all either acquainted or Mahiru was rude just now.

"Hello, I'm the Ultimate Gamer. Nice meeting you."

"I'm Sato, from the reserve course. I'm assisting with the festival."

"...Is it just you two?"

"Actually, Mahiru is in the committee." Peko interjected.

Chiaki squints. "Does she get privileges like Fuyuhiko?"
"Yup...and I’ll be having Sato help me out."

"It won’t just be me. There are others helping Mahiru and going around with cameras." Sato continued.

"To start, could we take a look at your lab, Chiaki?" Mahiru asks.

"Why not?" What reason did she have to refuse?

"Ahem." Fuyuhiko coughs, drawing attention to him. "Before that...you two and I need to talk." The gangster said with a pointed look.

The girls share similar discomfort.

"Young master?" Peko's concern leaks out...and is sealed off by a few choice words from the boy. "Can it, Peko. We're just going to talk. No fighting. Not even arguing."

That turned heads. Fuyuhiko, even on his best days, loved picking fights. "Come to think of it...you haven't cursed once today." Chiaki thought with a finger pressed to her lips.

Mahiru gasped. "A-Are you okay? You're not becoming a monk, are you?"

"The young master is on his best behavior. I understand the desire to tease him, but please refrain."

"Peko...next time, lose the grin when you say that." Fuyuhiko growled.

The sharp smile plastered on the silver-haired woman's face vanished "I don't know what you're talking about."


The swordswoman nods and their group divides. Peko's silent as a scarecrow from thereon. It didn't make things awkward between them. Silence was Peko's style and it was where she was most comfortable. Chiaki could relate. Talking was fun, but she needed concentration to play games.

"Chiaki." Peko calls.

"What?"

"How have you been all this time?"

"All this time?" Peko's inquiry could yield vastly different answers depending on the timeframe. The bodyguard carefully selects her words. "Since the young master and I started to change."

"Oh...it was lonely without you guys. Sonia, Akane, Nekomaru and most of the others changed too. But things got better. And so, did you two...I think."

"You'd be correct."

They reached the door to the game room. Chiaki's fingers wrap against the doorknob

"Awww yeah, who's the boss?! "

A boisterous voice escaped the opening in the door. She and Peko shared confused looks and push
open. There they see a familiar red-haired girl on the ice hockey table. On the opposite end was a blue-skinned reserve course student, wearing a despairing expression. Not just him. Chiaki counted 15 others with the same defeated look.

"Hey. Who's ready to lose their lunch money next?" Ryoko Otonashi laughs maniacally into her palm. The women at the door stare, blankly.

"What are you doing, Otonashi-san?"

"Ooooh, it's Nanami!" Ryoko bounced over.

"You remembered me." It was probably hard to...after what happened.

"Yup, now get this. This place is awesome. I'm ripping these bozos off for all their worth, all because they can't beat me in a single game. Ah, I love being me." She hugs herself. She really does.

"That's what games are for...but, don't you have a talent lab to be working on?" Instead of styling on my guys?

"Nope. I don't have a talent." Ryoko crosses her arms into an 'X'

"How are you in the main course?"

"To be specific, I don't remember my talent."

Chiaki tilts her head.

"I've heard Otonashi-san has amnesia." Peko filled her in. Scarlet eyes had trained on the amnesiac since they walked in.

The gamer looked to Ryoko for confirmation and was met with a weirdly excited nod.

"I can't make a lab, so I'm just stuck as an assistant." Her enthusiasms divebombs from that point. "But Matsuda says I'm a nuisance and kicked me out of the neurology lab. I don't have anywhere to go."

Ouch. "You can stay here, if you'd like."

"Is that wise, Chiaki? You still have work to do." Peko pointed to the uneasy reserve course lounging around.

"I'd like to have Otonashi around. If it wasn't for her, I might be a lot worse off right now." Peko had no retort.

"Besides...I think she'd be an asset with her skills. It'd get boring without someone to challenge me." Chiaki wasn't about to forget her narrow victory over Ryoko. That gap needed to widen.

"If you say so." Peko relented with a sigh.

Chiaki moved, her eyes roaming around the room. There were several standard fare games around, ranging from pool to card tables. It was more accurate to call this a recreation room. Chiaki needed to change that.

"Um...hello. Are you Chiaki Nanami-san?" One of the reserve course approaches, holding a black tablet with the HPA insignia on its back.
"That's my name. What've you got there?"

"That is your e-handbook, Nanami-san." He hands over the device like it was an offering.

“Chiaki, those notebooks have everything you need to manage your laboratory.” Peko interjected, holding up an identical pad. “They serve a variety of other functions you can look into, including communications.”

Chiaki hops towards Peko, leaning in close. “Even games?”

Peko chuckled. “At Makoto’s insistence.”

Best junior ever.

The pinkette, turned back, approaching the boy who’d given her this wonderful item. "Thanks...I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

He hesitates. "I'm...Koji Asada."

The gamer spies a list of names written under hers (in large gold, colors). "Asada-kun, you're first on the list." A list categorized by first come first served rather than name. "What made you want to support me?"

"It's not really that important. You'd be better off addressing the group now, I think."

"It'd be hard to get to know you that way though..."

"Huh?" Asada's square glasses slant awkwardly.

"If we're all going to be working together for the next little while, we should get to know each other, right?"

"But...you're an Ultimate." He shies away from her gaze. Chiaki doesn't take the action as disrespectful; she also doesn't care for reverence.

"That doesn't matter. Talent doesn't define us." Yeah, that's how Chiaki would have answered in the past. She still believes it...but that doesn't mean others share her viewpoint. To some, the difference between having talent and not having it, is just too heavy to bear. Those who can't, are dragged under by their own frustration and helplessness. Chiaki couldn't make light of those feelings. "I guess so...but you want to be an Ultimate too, don't you?"

The boy's onyx eyes widen. "Um...I-I couldn't. I don't have the talent." He waves his hands defensively.

"That doesn't mean you can't learn. You came to this school because you thought it was possible to enter the main course." He shifts at that. "Hey, why'd you volunteer for my talent lab?"

"That's..." Asada gulps. "because I'm a fan. I've watched you win tournaments, and you make it look so easy. I couldn't imagine how you got so good. That's why...I wanted to take the chance and see it up close; your skills."

"I'm flattered...but that’s too dramatic for me." Chiaki says bluntly. Asada has a horrified look.

Peko coughs from behind.

Chiaki continues "That is to say...you didn't need to wait for any kind of opportunity. You could
"I just asked me, and I would've played against you."

"Really?"

"That's what I did." Ryoko pointed to her chest, proudly.

"Just so you know, I don't pull my punches even against friends. If you blink, I'll stomp you."

"No, I've got enough confidence that I don't think I'd lose...that easily." Asada said, resolutely.

"Happy to hear it." She'd break through the walls between the main and reserve course one by one.

Ryoko hummed suggestively. "Hey, Asada-kun. Have I ripped off your lunch money yet?"

The boy shook his head rapidly. "No thanks."

"Oh right." First order of business. She turned to the crowd of reserve course students, staring over at them pensively. "Um...I'm Chiaki Nanami, The Ultimate Gamer. Before we get started. I'd like everyone who lost to Otonashi-san to raise their hands."

There were 16 reserve courses in total. 13 hands were raised.

Chiaki turned to the amnesiac. "You and me on the ice hockey table. When I win, you'll return all your earnings."

"Bring it, sister. If you lose, you pay up twice as much as these bozos."

Flames (of passion) burst from the girls' bodies.

Peko watched the display. Chiaki was sensitive to others, so the silver-haired girl tried her best to shield her concern. But it appears her worries were needless.

She'd underestimated Chiaki’s strength yet again.

"Naegi, you got a minute?"

Makoto turns back to see an unfamiliar blonde, tanned girl. One hand on her hip and the other waving her notebook back and forth.

“What can I do for you—..."

“Kayano Kirishima, from class 76-C.” The pony-tailed blond said.

An upperclassman. “You’re the Ultimate Hairstylist, if I remember correctly.”

“You’ve got it. Am I popular or what?” The girl spread two of her fingers into a ‘V’ sign.

Makoto nods “I’ve seen your blog. Even if I can’t give much input as a guy, I think you do amazing work.”

“Thanks a lot, but I've like, got a major problem here. I want to be clear on the supplies for my lab. It just says, ‘Up to my discretion’. That’s kinda vague.”

“How you build your labs is up to you. Pick them up at a store or get them delivered. The quality of the items too.”
Kayano whistles. “There a catch somewhere?”

“IT comes with a lot of responsibility. You also need a receipt for every purchase, so the school knows where the money’s going. Any other questions?”

“Nope.” She pops the ‘P’. “Thanks, Naegi. By the way, I don’t just do girls’ hair. Come by my lab sometimes. I’ll give you the first-class treatment.”

“I’ll take you up on that offer.” He waves.

“Naegi-san.”

He inched his head to the call and saw a line of students forming behind him. He forced a smile. Before he could ask “What can I do for you?” A giant shadow stepped in front of him.

Isshiki glared at the boy who’d called Makoto’s name. “You’ll have to ask another time. Naegi is currently preoccupied.”

“But-“

“Another time.” The bodyguard stressed. Makoto peeked out from the side of Isshiki to see the dissatisfied crowd slowly disperse.

“You didn’t need to do that…but thanks.”

“You’ve been on administrative duties since morning. A break is necessary.”

“I’m not tired. It’s normal that the first few days are busy. If I slack off here, that’s not setting a good example for the others.”

Thank goodness for the Master notebook. A full itinerary of things for Makoto to do without getting lost. Top priority is routine checks on other talent labs. Makoto had…apparently, appointed several of his close (and qualified!) friends to divide managerial duty.

The most proficient way to handle things was to secure himself in the student council room and let the concerns come to him…but that would go against the ‘investment’ Makoto wanted to convey. He wanted to let the reserve course, and everyone know that Hope’s Peak cared about them as students, not ATMs.

Isshiki ruminated over Makoto’s reasoning. “Allow me to accompany you and aid where necessary.”

“I’m not about to say no to a helping hand, but you don’t have to stand around me the whole time. I’m not very interesting, once you get to know me.”

"I choose to."

“Okay, thanks! But remember this is a festival. Try to enjoy yourself wherever you can, Madarai-senpai.”

Isshiki narrows his eyes. “The transformation is that subtle?”

“Huh?”

“…Never mind.”
The two made their way through the clearing at the back of the school, a little way off the racetrack. A forest stretched far out into the distance; he couldn’t see the end.

The excursion reminded Makoto of just how big the academy was.

“Ikusaba-san should be around here somewhere.” Makoto noted

“Over there.” Isshiki pointed to the far right. There Makoto saw the older twin coming out of the forest and jogging ahead of a pack. “They’re doing drills, from the looks of it.”

“Whoa.” Makoto drew closer to the group, amazed by how bulky the guys were. The reserve course who applied were entirely male, many of whom were third years. “They’re intimidating.”

“Intimidation is one of the common benefits of operating as a group.” Isshiki replied, solemnly.

Makoto didn’t get the chance to ask why.

“Makoto?”

The Ultimate Soldier had stalked up to him before he could blink.

Quick… “Good afternoon, Ikusaba-san. I’m doing check-ins on the labs.”

The expressionless girl nods matter-of-factly. “Would you like to speak to them?”

“Can I?” Makoto peeked behind Ikusaba. Behind her were the squad lined up in an orderly fashion.

Mukuro faced away from him and saluted. “Attention!”

The boys mimicked Mukuro’s actions while Makoto stood upright at Mukuro’s booming voice. The soldier walked up to one at random and said. “State your name, private.”

“Kanzaki Arukawa, sir.” He yelled.

“Why did you join this regiment?”

“As a step to join the army, sir!”

“Really?” Makoto asked, impressed. That’s some vision.

“Most of them are the same way. Getting trained by the Ultimate Soldier is a big step up to their goals.” Mukuro shrugs. “It feels like I really am running an internship…and without getting paid.”

“Got any plans?” He started taking notes

“I’ve already got experience with training others. Most of my guys are fit enough. I’d say a week worth of drills to build up stamina, weed the pack and let me get used to their skills. Afterwards, we’ll get to firearm practice.”

Now there was a concern. “You aren’t going to be using live ammo, right?”

She shook her head. “Airsoft guns should be good enough. I’ve already placed in orders for those
“Good work, Ikusaba-san.”

Mukuro’s expression softened. “What about you, Makoto?”

“You’re not going to baby me too, are you? Am I that unreliable?” He gave a lopsided smile.

“You tend to get hurt when you aren’t being watched.” She states, matter-of-factly.

That wasn’t un-true.

“Looks like you’ve got things covered here. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Wait.” Mukuro stops him before he can even turn his foot around. There’s a curious hesitation in her voice. “We haven’t really spent time together since the amusement park.”

Ah, that felt like months ago.

Makoto tilted his head. “Did you…want to hang out later? If I have the time, I might be able to squeeze you in—” Makoto’s notebook vibrated. “Hold that thought.”

Alter Ego showed up on the screen. “Makoto, you’ve got a message from Celestia.”

…

“Sorry, but my schedule’s packed.” He got depressed just looking at the list.

Although not as much as Mukuro was by his rejection. “Okay, maybe another time.”

The gambler had sent him an odd text. On paper, it sounded like a request to change rooms. Only it wasn’t a request at all. She’d already gone through with making her own changes and moved to the academy’s dance hall.

Makoto couldn’t fathom what Celes would want with that venue, but he was about to find out. He just hoped there wouldn’t be any trouble, because the dance hall was already taken…by Sonia Nevermind.

Makoto wasn’t sure what he should have expected, walking in. The dance hall was one of the larger venues in the whole school and situated next to the gymnasium. The school had renovated it along with the gym after an accident the previous year. It looks to Makoto that it was being renovated again, and by unlikely helpers.

“Hmm, there doesn’t seem to be a territorial dispute but…is this appropriate?” Isshiki’s tone had a tinge of bewilderment.

“It’s not…against the rules but,” Dozens of reserve course students were in uniform performing odd jobs. Not even the school’s uniform, but formal outfits… “is that…maid cosplay?” Makoto squinted. He and Isshiki waded through the ballroom, their eyes wandering in different directions. Some students were repainting the walls, others decorating or moving around furniture. All of which looked extremely expensive.

“I…don’t usually come here much, but do those belong to the school?”
“No. I can only assume Nevermind brought them.” Isshiki informs. Makoto had almost forgotten the reinstated Ultimate had been in the student council. He’ll be a big help!

“I wonder how much all this cost.” Makoto flipped through the Ultimate Princess’ profile. A picture, a short biography of her background and talents. Like the other Ultimates, the blonde’s responsibilities were also listed along with her budget…

Makoto freezes in place, a blank expression on his face. “Madarai-san, could you take a look around and make sure nothing dangerous is going on?”

The pale-skinned man acquiesced, leaving Makoto to his own devices. The spiky-haired teen taps the shoulder of one of the boys passing by. “Got a second. I’m looking for Nevermind.”

The tall male raised his white gloves to his chest and spoke. “Follow me, sir. The princess is with Celestia-sama.”

If Makoto wasn’t about to panic for other, deeply important reasons, he might’ve been a little freaked out by the formality.

It turns out Sonia would have been easy to find, with or without help. As would his dear classmate, Celes. The two were seated opposite from one another on a round table in the middle of the room. The furniture was tapered with white embroideries, with a red-carpet underneath. It looked like they were drinking tea out of fine china. Tea supplied by two nervous looking girls and men too old to be students.

Celes wrapped a finger around the expensive cup. The gambler was adorned in her usual gothic-lolita attire, which happened to be more pronounced than ever in this environment.

Sonia wore a long white dress pinned by a rose. Silky, evening gloves covered her arms and a tiara finished the outfit.

It was quite the sight. The weak-willed wouldn’t approach that tempest of white and black.

Fortunately for Makoto, he didn’t have the luxury to back down. “Uh… hi guys. What’s going on?” He announced his presence.

“Wonderful afternoon, Makoto.” Sonia greets him with grace and warmth. A fine change from when they’d first met. It’d…just been the ‘grace’ part.

Celestia had a cooler reaction; placed the teacup down and crossed both fingers and legs. “Sonia and I were discussing how much we have in common.”

Like the red eyes?

“Steven, bring Makoto a chair.” One of the older men bowed and departed at Celes’ command.

Makoto faces the princess. “Be that…as it may. I've got a question.”

“Whatever could it be? You are rarely so serious.” Sonia clasps her hands together. Her cohort snickers from across the table.

“No doubt it’s about your frivolous spending.”

Oh good. The e-book wasn’t broken. Makoto flips over the screen to show the girls. On the side is where the current amount of funds is located. Sonia had a total of zero left to spend. “Can I get an
explanation for why this happened on the first day!?”

“A simple matter.” That she chooses not to explain herself. Sonia claps and the female ‘servant’ rises to the occasion.

“Nevermind-sama used all 100 000 yen on everything you see in this room and travel, including our uniforms. For which, we are all grateful. She even had the kindness to bring in some of her personal butlers to aid us.”

“Well said. I shall prepare a reward for you later.” Sonia congratulated the blushing reserve course.

“Did you…get everything you needed? I mean, this is still the first day.” This has gone far beyond his expectations.

“It’s hardly a problem. I shall simply add my own finances to the budget if need be.”

Makoto gaped. “B-But that’s cheating.”

“Is it?” Celestia called attention to herself. “I was to believe that Sonia was The Ultimate Princess. It should be within her right to exercise everything that comes with that talent.”

“That was the point of these nifty talent laboratories, yes?” The blonde agreed.

Makoto fingers brush his cheeks. “You’re not…wrong.” Hopefully Byakuya isn’t doing the same… “But how did you get the costumes ordered so fast?”

“I am the princess of Novoselic.”

Was that supposed to be an answer?

No, he better roll with it. “Okay um…what’s your excuse, Celes? I don’t see much gambling going on.” Makoto stops and smacks his forehead. “What the heck am I saying?” This was a school!

The gothic Lolita giggles. “It’s quite alright. We can’t be Ultimates without having one or two eccentricities.”

“Thanks…I think.”

“You’re welcome. Now then, I’m sure you have some grievances about my sudden decisions but hear me out first.”

“Ah so you’re not playing around.” Makoto breathed a sigh of relief.

“How rude.”

“Indeed. My friend has come up with an ingenious plan. I demand an apology.” Sonia flexed and Makoto found himself bowing and muttering “sorry” reactively.

“Your chair, sir.” Makoto turned around to see a white chair stationed behind him. “Thanks.” He’d need to sit down for this.

The gambler continued. “To elaborate. I began this morning by wagering my title against all 30 of my new proteges.”
Celestia had a surprisingly high number of recruits but… “You bet your title?”

“Naïve as always, Makoto. Place yourselves in their shoes. Gambling is a game of a chance. They likely registered for my station in high hopes of getting me to bet my status in the academy and lucking out.” Celes broke out a nefarious grin. “What fools. As if I could ever lose. I beat every single one. Naturally, I demanded payment equal to my title – their undying loyalty and servitude for the duration of their time at Hope’s Peak.”

Makoto nearly coughed a lung. “T-That’s totally going against the spirit of the event. We can’t force them to comply.”

“Au contraire, I did exactly as you instructed during that interview – wonderful speech, by the way – I showed them the difference between the talent and talentless.” She offered a sweet smile that held not a shred of sincerity. “However, I also saw some glimmer of potential in them. Out of the kindness of my heart, I’ve given them another chance, to win back their freedom. Sonia was so very happy to lend a hand.”

“I was extremely impressed with how Celes brought them to heel so quickly. She has the makings of a queen, I would say.”

“You flatter me.”

Aaaah, maybe it was a bad idea for these two to have met?

“Makoto, would you care for a game of poker?” Celes asked.

The brunet shook his head. “No time. Sorry.”

“Pity, a demonstration would have been easier, but let’s skip to the part where you lose to me. Discounting your luck, your loss is inevitable. Do you know why?”

Makoto winced at the declaration. “Can’t say I do? I’m not a pro with cards.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Poker has nothing to do with the cards and everything to do with the players. A boy like you who wears his heart on his sleeve would be easy pickings. As were the reserve course.”

I…just got insulted, didn’t I?

“That’s when I thought of building my new servants from the ground up, train them to suppress their emotions. Take for example: Where I to have them handle menial labors without so much as a complaint or change in expression, they may learn how to keep calm under pressure. Simple training.” Example? Who was she kidding? She was going through with it.

Makoto sweat-dropped. His classmate had bent the rules to give herself a servant harem.

“I’ve been waited on by the finest maids and butlers for most of my life. You could say judging their performance, is within my and my servants’ areas of expertise. Celes proposed we combine our talent labs for a greater purpose. I will use my resources to help train these commoners. A splendid idea, wouldn’t you agree?”

Makoto raked his hair. How couldn’t he have seen this coming? Celes was right, all Ultimates are like this. Give them this much free reign and they’ll obviously twist the regulations to favor them. “Please don’t force them to do anything they’re uncomfortable with.”
“Naturally. We are mannerly women, not slavers.”

“Clearly outline your objectives in your notebooks and I’ll make a note of it.” They’ve already gotten started without his permission anyway…

“Excellent. With all boring matters settled, let us do as Marie Antoinette and eat cake!” Sonia demanded.

Makoto waved his hands in panic. “Not me, I still have a lot more to do.”

“It’s unbecoming to refuse a lady’s invitation, Makoto. The day is nearly over, and you must have at least a few minutes to spend.”

He wasn’t getting out of this one…

“The girls in this school are so scary.” Makoto muttered under his breath. He’d been delayed by the all-too-merry couple. “The cake was good though.”

“Very.” Seeing how Isshiki munched on the delicious pastry, Makoto was glad he saved his upperclassman some.

“Haaa.”

Makoto and Isshiki halted at the moans. A red blush spread across Makoto’s cheeks. “Do you think somebody got hurt?”

“I don’t think those are pained screams.” The two looked to each other in pure confusion and walked slowly to the source. Other students pass them with dopey smiles, and drool leaking down their chins.

“What the hell?” Isshiki raised an eyebrow.

They heard another sharp, sensual groan.

“We’re probably overthinking things. There’s no way ‘that’ can be happening in a school.” Makoto said, overheating. They cautiously peeked into the weight-training facility, bracing themselves for what laid beyond.

“TAKE THIS!!!!!! NEKOMARU NIDAI’S SPECIALTY!” The man himself was giving, from the reception of the girl underneath, an amazing massage.

“Yeah, this is about right.” Makoto cringed and walked in. The space, once filled with gym equipment, now had multiple beds occupying the area. Nekomaru’s being the only one in use.

“At least he remembered to cloth her.” Isshiki said.

“Nidai-senpai. Are you free?”

The Ultimate Team Manager looked up from his work to meet the duo. “Makoto! Good timing. I was right about finishing up for the day.”

“Aaaw, already?” The long-haired brunette slowly rose to a seating position, wearing only a loose fitting
Makoto bashfully looked away from the scene.

“Actually, you’ve gone past the allotted time. Anymore and you’ll never be able to live without getting ‘IT’ from me!”

Makoto had to ask. “‘IT’ is a massage, RIGHT?!”

“Not just any massage. One given from the masterful fingers of the Ultimate Masseuse himself!” Nekomaru boasted. “You can’t compare it to the normal stuff.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but why are you giving everyone massages, and what’s with all the beds?” Isshiki inquired.

“Ah…Initially, I was scraping my head around thinking of how I’d train everyone as team managers. It didn’t work out.”

“Why? Is there anything the committee should have done?”

“Nothing you did, but…well, I can’t multi-task this. Splitting my focus between so many on such short notice? I’ll never give them all the attention they need. Instead, I thought of another way. I’ll bestow my massage techniques on them.” Nekomaru continued. “A trainer needs to know when its time for his pupils to rest and facilitate their growth. IT is my most effective technique. That’s why I thought for the first few days, I’d show every just how good my massages feel and then train them on how to do it.”

“That explains the beds.” Isshiki finished.

“You can also think of this area as a relaxation spot now. Not only my group but everyone’ll be invited to relieve stress here. That includes the visitors at the day of the festival.”

What a great idea. Makoto shouldn’t have doubted the older man for a second.

“Right now, you’re praising me on your heart, aren’t you?”

Makoto jumped at the expert deduction. “Are you…an esper too?”

“Of course not, I see it all over your eyes.” Nekomaru bellowed. “But you don’t need to look at all awe-struck like that, it’s embarrassing.”

“S-Sorry.”

“We’ve had difficulties with the other Ultimates. Seeing a lab as pragmatic as yours is a sight for sore eyes.” Isshiki elaborated.

“Difficulties?” Nekomaru asked.

“Yeah. With Nevermind-senpai and Celes.” Makoto added and explained to the team tracksuited male.

“It didn’t look like they were doing anything dangerous. All conduct was within safety parameters and the rules.” Isshiki elaborated.

“Sonia huh? If you’re concerned, don’t be. Sonia has made a lot of progress these past few months. Organizing a servant parade isn’t like her – the old her – but as Madarai said, there’s no harm in it.” Nekomaru placed his hands on his hips and sighed. “Everyone has their own way of doing things.
What might not make sense to us, may be logical to them and produce results we couldn’t think of. That’s how progress is made. Don’t worry too much about them.”

“I’ll try.” Makoto really would.

“Good. What you should be worried about is YOUR OWN HEALTH!”

Makoto pointed at himself. “Me?”

Isshiki nodded along with Nekomaru.

“I’ve heard some concerning things. Don’t push yourself too hard, Makoto or you might trip over yourself long before you reach the finish line.” Nekomaru said.

The luckster scratched his cheek. “People really don’t trust me to be alright, huh?”

“Trust has nothing to do with it. Your friends know you and are concerned. If you don’t rely on them, then they’ll never rely on you. And when it counts, all you’ll find yourself with, is regret.”

Thinking back on this conversation, it was a prophecy in the making.

Makoto’s mouth parted, as he thought of what to say. Ultimately, the words “Thank you, Nidai-kun, I’ll do just that.”

“Glad to hear it. I expect to see you here for ‘IT’ once every three days, minimum!”

The sessions in the campus were closing for the day. Officially, the hours were from 9 am to 4 pm, the average school day length. If some students were to apply for extensions, they could be granted within a maximum of two hours.

The duo about finished patrols when Isshiki asked. “Will you take Nidai’s proposal?”

Makoto elevated his gaze to the taller man. “What was it again?”

“…To take it easy.”

“No thanks.” He immediately replied.

Isshiki stopped. “Even though you were convinced back there?”

Makoto’s pace matches the pale-skinned brother. A short silence ensued before he continued. “He agreed, huh?”

“…I cannot get used to this. I do believe you possess another identity, but is there a better way to tell you apart?”

“It’s strange to hear that from an octuplet, but…there’s no quick way. I suppose you’ll be more comfortable around him than me.”

Isshiki fell silent.

Makoto swiped through his itinerary, searching through the day’s notes. “How productive do you think we were today?”

“Adequate.” Succinctly put.
Makoto sighed. “More’s too much to expect. Thanks for sticking by him today. Please help again, tomorrow as well.”

“But-“

“If he made an agreement with Nekomaru, then he’ll keep it.” There was no point keeping his little secret anymore. No, it was better to say he couldn’t keep it anymore. One way or another, he’d be exposed eventually. “Just...don’t forget our agreement.”

“I won’t. I look forward to it, actually.”

"You wanted to see me-...” Kiyotaka faltered, then let himself into the student council room. It was marginally bigger than a classroom. After all, it was a haven for the members of the student council. Hanging neatly on the walls were pictures of the dearly departed. Their belongings – toys, awards, accessories, stuffed animals and so much more – were scattered across the shelves.

The blinding orange rays of the sun passed through the window, bathing Makoto in an eerie glow. The lucky student stared straight at him. Like he’d been waiting. Which of, course, he had. Yet Kiyotaka was unnerved. A few meters and a brown desk separated the two. The furniture had nothing on it, except a closed laptop. Nothing that would serve as a distraction. Nothing indicating Makoto had been distracted at all, for he hadn’t looked up at the signal of Kiyotaka’s abrupt arrival. The shorter male’s eyes had been glued to the door long before he’d walked in.

The moral compass was hesitant in closing the door behind him. He approached the sun. “Has Madarai-kun left for the day?”

Makoto leaned his head to the right slightly. His smile was as thin and sharp as razor. “How are you?”

Kiyotaka paused. “Supervising duty went fine. Even the reserve course were very cooperative and attentive.” The boy’s shoulders dropped and if one paid attention, they would see the swirls in his eyes. “It was surprising. Usually...nobody listens to me.”

“It’s not surprising.” Makoto refuted. “Only a handful of the reserve course were in on the riot, but they could have been. I’m sure more than a few would want the peace of mind that comes from being morally upstanding. You’re like an icon now.”

“Indeed...er, very eloquently put.”

“Is it unlike me?”

“No at all. I’ve always believed you’ve had a brilliant mind.” Kiyotaka confessed, to the other boy’s surprise.

“That’s sudden, to hear from someone who gave me detention for a few minor infractions.”

The prefect coughs. “Always is an exaggeration, but I do think you’re incredible, Makoto. You saved the life of a person who aimed for yours. You took charge, tried to reform and mend the school while everyone else sat around. Everyone gathers around you. Everyone listens to you. You’re the heart of our class. You’re a model student. No, a model member of society.” Kiyotaka forced a laugh.

“...Do you dislike me?”
“Perish the thought! We’re classmates and friends!” Kiyotaka denied the assertion. “I-um…If I may confess. I am jealous.”

Makoto’s eyes widened slightly.

“Back when we first started classes…I didn’t think much of you.” Kiyotaka starts

"Go on. I won't be offended.” Makoto’s hand rested on his cheek.

“I gave you many chances, but you were always showing up late, always causing a scene. You weren’t the only one; even in our class, there were troublemakers like Leon and Mondo. But even compared to them, you were unremarkable. Your grades were mediocre, and your talent was anything but, yet people like Sayaka and Leon accepted you. The school accepted you, for all its prestige and you barely put in the effort! Why should you? You were admitted by a lottery.” Kiyotaka spiraled into a rant. His breathing and vision grew erratic. “Maybe that was natural. Hope’s Peak and their talents aren’t as great as society praises. Everyone…this whole school is filled with chaos, no respect for the rules or authority, and the adults just sit back and let it all happen. This school, its constituents and obsession with talent, is rotten to the core. Without order or justice…was it any surprise the hardworking masses rebelled?!” Kiyotaka shook, his tightened knuckle threatened to tear against itself.

“And that way of thinking brought you to Junko.”

Kiyotaka gasped. He reactively took a step back. The moral compass forced a smile. “I-I don’t know what you mean. Ah speaking of Junko, it’s been some time since anyone has seen her. I hope she’s okay.”

Makoto’s piercing gaze bore through him. The light in those washed hazel eyes had long since faded. Kiyotaka stood agape.

He’d always thought Makoto was a tad strange. Kiyotaka had monitored the smaller boy for months. While he could never discern the source of his unease, there was no harm done, so he never bothered. But now, he was gripped with an ominous sensation.

“Kiyotaka-kun, I admire you.” Makoto’s abrupt confession threw the recipient for a loop.

“Y-you do?”

“You’re honest. You give your 100% to whatever you set your mind on. You complain, but you never blame anyone or excuse your failures.” Makoto says, despite Kiyotaka venting his frustrations at the school moments prior. As if he’d ignored the prefect’s rant entirely. “Most of all, you’re normal and while many may not agree with you, we all think you’re reliable. Because you’re consistent. Whatever standards you set for everyone else, you also set on yourself.”

“T-Thank you…” He’d heard similar words before…when Junko first approached him.

“Which is why it’s a shame I overlooked you back then. I apologize.” His smile dropped into a solemn frown. “I know how it feels to be ignored and I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“You don’t have to apologize! It’s not like you did anything wrong!” But the apology felt good. It felt good to have someone acknowledge his grief for once!

“Be that as it may, I’ll correct that mistake.”
Kiyotaka furrowed his brow at the declaration.

“You did me a very big favor before, orchestrating the detention session for us. I didn’t know it then, but that opportunity is one of many that helped open my eyes. I’m indebted to you, and so I’ll leave you with a warning: Be very careful.”

“Of…what?”

“You called me a model citizen…that’s a bad joke, from where I’m sitting.” Even his frown leveled into a straight line. “I think you might have the wrong idea about me. You may even think I’m performing a social service, organizing this festival. To an extent, it’s true, but for me, this is also very personal. There is a goal I must achieve here, and I’ll stop at nothing to get it.”

There it was again. That feeling that made Kiyotaka overwhelmingly anxious. Like he was walking a tightrope and hoping he wouldn’t fall to the depths below.

“…is something the matter, Makoto?”

“I’m not the one you should be worrying about.” The dispassionate voice couldn’t be further out of place. Kiyotaka had half a mind to think it was the imposter standing before him, if the man’s weight wasn’t a dead giveaway for his disguises. “I’ll repeat myself: Continue to take care of yourself, because remember…school security isn’t here anymore.”

...

Was that a threat? It couldn’t be. This was Makoto. “Um, excuse me. But weren’t you the one who assured everyone that there wouldn’t be any dangers or accidents?”

“All the more reason.”

The sun finally set.

Kiyotaka walked out of the student council office with jitters.

The feeling of being read like an open-book and beaten into submission without a single fist thrown. It felt like Kiyotaka had been speaking to Junko herself.

Perhaps the brainwashing had a delayed effect. If so, Makoto could do unspeakable things, just as Junko herself could, without inhibitions. After all, this was the woman who murdered the student council, and worse yet, she also planned to-

Kiyotaka collided into something, sending him falling on his backside. The hall monitor winced and looked up to see a tall man with slicked back hair and shades. “Watch where you’re going, kid.” He slurred in a disrespectful tone.

“Be careful!” Kiyotaka fumed.

“My bad. My bad. Let me help you up.” With a grin, stretched his arm out. His fingers were marred with scrapes and scars that had long since healed.

Kiyotaka scrunched his nose and grabbed it. He flinched in pain as the man pressed down on the shake and picked him up with surprising force. “That’s some grip you have.” Kiyotaka rubbed his arm. A very strong grip.

“I can’t control my own strength sometimes.”
“Who are you?” Kiyotaka asked. He had never seen this suspicious-looking man before.

The overly casual person chuckled, patting him on the shoulder and walking by. “We’ll be seeing you around, Ishimaru-chan.”

Kiyotaka froze in place. He slowly, turned back like his bones were petrified.

“I never told you my name.”

And who were ‘We’?

I wonder if they’ll get the stage built in time.” Makoto pondered; half his body leaned out the window. He borrowed one of the previous council’s binoculars to peer into the back of the school. Nearby was the courtyard where Mukuro’s lab was running, the track field, the baseball field and more. Makoto didn’t need binoculars to see them, though everyone looked like ants from up here. What he was looking at was even further in the distance. A long, straight and wide pavement; a path that separated the trees and forests and trailed all the way to the stage where Sayaka and her idol group would perform on the night of the festival.

“The school hired the best architect and construction workers they could find.” Alter ego replied; the e-handbook stationed vertically on the desk.

“I hope they’re good enough. This is all a bust without that concert.” Makoto let his arms hang and comically flail in the air. “I also hope they get one of those huge TVs on the stage. Imagine how much Jin’s paying.” He said with a dopey grin.

“‘You’re…having fun?’”

“S’that what it looks like?”

“Uh…I want to think so…but, you spooked Kiyotaka back there.”

“Yeah, the look on his face was priceless.”

“Oh…you were just playing around.”

“Mhm.” Makoto angled his head backwards. The A. I’s worried features were so out of place with his face.

“Let’s tease him for a little while longer. Hopefully, he’ll stay out of trouble this way.” Makoto giggled, like he’d played a fun prank at the overly serious Kiyotaka.

“And if he doesn’t?” Alter ego inquired.

“Can’t say I didn’t warn him.”

Makoto returned to his viewing. He switched his interests from the concert stage to one of the old school communication towers. Unsafe and scheduled for demolition next year…

“You’re sure the antenna is still operational?”

“Positive.”

“The holiday season really is the happiest time of the year…ahaha.” Makoto laughs. He’s giddy with anticipation, like a child waiting to open their gifts on Christmas day.
The atmosphere in Hope’s Peak Academy had changed. The bell rings and kids flood into the school. Unlike weeks before, the campus was livelier. Unlike before that, the reserve course thrown into the mix.

A glance here. A glance there.

No animosity. No hate. Apprehension maybe, but no more than you’d give a stranger you might meet on a night walk. It was a little weird how perfect everything was going.

All this, nobody knew better than grumpy old Mr. Izuru Kamukura himself.

Izuru didn’t think this degree of cohesion was hard to imagine. Makoto’s half-baked ideas could just as easily have succeeded as it could fail. It can still fail with a severe setback. In an environment as volatile as this one, he could make it happen. It might happen all on its own.

But it wouldn’t.

Izuru spied the reason why – Two men concealed behind the trees, watching the students.

“Predictable as always.” Izuru made his way to the back of the school, moving through the crowd like a shadow. With hearing befitting The Ultimate Musician, he picked up on the banter out in the baseball field.

“New day, new practice! Which uh...kinda sucks, but you guys need it. Just bear with it and think about the girls. They’ll be swarming all over you by the time I whip you all into shape.”

Even among the myriad of this vapid cast, that one stood out as especially boring.

Izuru’s morning walk grew less monotonous. That was no mean feat, but even the Ultimate Hope had to give some pause to the lion that walked his way. The matured feline mere meters from, and having its sights set on, him.

For whatever little it was worth, there were no other students around. A quick analysis of the situation and it was easy to deduce that it must have escaped the Ultimate Breeder’s animal cages.

Izuru made no attempt to get out of the way as the mountain lion’s nostrils flared. Truthfully, Izuru didn’t know what it would do; no talent let him speak to animals. Would it find him edible and attack? Or was it trained to know better?

Thanks to an irritating interruption, he never got his answer. “Halt, Nemean!” The cat’s ears twitched; amber eyes turned to a pale-skinned man with a scar running down his face. “Excellent work escaping your binds, but you must return with me at once.” Gundham Tanaka came between him and the lion, all but admitting to his role in letting a dangerous predator prowl around.

That was interesting.

“Flee mortal, this beast is beyond your capacity.”
Gundham’s red eye gleam as he looked back to Izuru. “What a malicious aura, it almost escaped the evil eye’s sight. What manner of demon are you?” He faced him fully, as if the lion was now the one in need of protection.

“Those garments. You’re one of the reserve course?”

“Ah-ah, I can’t let that slide, Gundham.” A cheerful forth member, Nagito Komaeda invited himself to the party. It was almost like he’d been waiting for a chance. He had, of course.

Fantastic, it was getting worse. “Is this your continued attempt at stalking me, Nagito?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” The ashen-haired boy lied.

“So, you have returned to this realm, Nagito. I take it you are acquainted with this charlatan?” Gundham smirked. A gesture of confidence to mask his apprehension, no doubt.

“I am, he’s a friend of Chiaki’s, too.”

“Hmph, say no more. If That One confides in him then he is worthy to stand before me. Now I must return to my domain. Come, Nemean!”

The lion sluggishly followed behind the Ultimate, taking Izuru’s fleeting curiosity with it.

“Are you disappointed?” Nagito asked.

“Animals are less predictable than humans.”

“That’s a shame.” He lied again. “But if you’re looking for entertainment, why not follow me? I wanted to stake out the other Ultimates.”

Izuru looked at him for the first time this morning “You do not have a laboratory to attend?”

“Nope. I don’t think Naegi-kun knows I’m around. Having been suspended and all. Besides, I don’t think luck is testable. You can’t teach it either.”

“You wish to abstain from directly involving yourself with the talentless.” Izuru cut through the 3rd lie.

“Heh, I can’t keep anything from you.” Nagito smiled.

That went without saying.

“Gundham, wait right there while I snap a photo…does that thing bite?”

“Have you been ripped to shreds yet, woman? That is your answer.”

“Jeez, no need to be snarky about it.”

...

“Kamukura-kun, is it okay for you to be wandering around like this?” Nagito said abruptly.

“I am the Ultimate Spy.” Free to blend in his surroundings as if he were invisible until he let his presence be known. However, as seen with Gundham, the perceptive ones would catch him
regardless.

“I hear Yuto-kun from the other class disappeared some months back. Would you happen to kno-“

“He’s dead. Ask Yasuke Matsuda for clarification.”

“That’s a pity.” Nagito sighed.

Izuru turned around, walking back towards the school. Predictably and unfortunately, Nagito followed. “We’re going to see Chiaki, then.”

“…Is that a question?”

“Not really. I’m sure you’re looking forward to meeting her. You always are.” Nagito quirked a mysterious smile. A trace of arrogance and awareness hidden underneath obsequiousness.

Izuru stopped and waited. “And where did you intend to go?”

“The track is nearby. I thought of seeing Akane run.”

“Checking in.” Kyoko knocked. The door to the science lab opened. Yasuke stepped out. Only the new lab coat and spectacles changed in his unkempt appearance.

“On my work, or on me? If the former, I’m currently on break so fuck off. If the latter? I’m on break, so please fuck off.”

“As tempting as that sounds, I can’t do that. Give me an update on your lab.”

The slovenly-dressed intellectual clicked his tongue. “Just peachy. The lab rats you sent Miaya and I have been helping out real nice.”

Kyoko shot the neurologist an unimpressed look. “Don’t even utter that out loud. They’re not your guinea pigs.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” Yasuke shrugged. “But hey, at least they happily volunteered to be part of the process this time. Less to weigh down on my conscience.”

There must have been quite the load already.

“Is it safe?” Yasuke and Miaya were working on what they called the ‘Neo World Program’; a system that could tamper with memories, including erase and restructuring them. Kyoko was sure Miaya would have preferred the term ‘reset’ instead of ‘erase’. The detective thought it was dangerous by nature, but she could see the appeal on a psychiatric level. It’d be a breakthrough that could artificially cure patients of traumas.

“Relatively, yeah. At least when I’m at the helm. I’m 3-0, you know.”

The first on the elusive Izuru Kamukura. The other two on Ryoko Otonashi. “Is Otonashi there?” Kyoko assumed a contemplative stance.

“I told her to buzz off. She’s probably with that Nanami chick.”

“You should be watching her.”

“Fuck off.”
Quaint. “Just remember. She’s your responsibility and ignoring that, has never done anybody favors.” Saying her piece, Kyoko left the irritated Yasuke to his break. He’ll have to face Junko and own up to his crimes one day.

“So long, Kiyotaka.”

The detective turned around the hallway corner, hearing Chihiro’s voice. The boy waving goodbye to Kiyotaka. She’d only caught the back of the taller male as he strutted off.

“Kyoko?” Chihiro called, noticing her.

She caught his puffy eyes and depressive demeanor. “Can I have a moment of your time?”

Yasuke closed the door behind him. “Sorry about the interruption, guinea pig.”

“D-Don’t think you can get away w-with mistreating me just because you’re hot!” A purple-braided girl snarled.

“No, I’ll get away with it because I’m smart and we both need each other.” Yasuke urged his guest to lie down one of many expensive pods that circled the room. Gotta at least make the test subjects more comfortable to avoid any complaints. It was the school’s money that bought this shit anyway.

The girl sat down. Yasuke tossed her a virtual helmet.

“Put that on.” He ordered.

“I-Is this going to be like one of those d-dumb virtual-reality games?”

The neurologist’s face contorted with disgust at the insinuation. “Aren’t you an author? Shouldn’t you be smarter than the other dumbasses?”

“T-There are different kinds of intellect. I don’t know anything about technology, b-but I do know a man overcompensating for his masculinity when I see one.” My god, he wanted to slap that lecherous grin off her face. But Miaya would have his ass for laying a hand on one of her patients.


She listens, finally. But sadly, doesn't stop talking.

“Will this r-really cure me?”

“It’s a big step. You’re a much bigger catch than I anticipated. With your help, I might be able to finish the program.”

“A-And then, she’ll go away?”

“It’s not that simple, but I can say you won’t have to worry about killing anyone again, Fukawa.” Or should he say, Genocider Syo?

“What do you want to talk about?” Chihiro asked.
“You. I thought your slump would resolve itself, but it’s been weeks and no progress. As your friend, I’m worried. Others are too.” When Chihiro looked away, Kyoko sweetened the deal. “I am a detective, you know. I might be able to help.

Chihiro thought over the attractive proposal until his shoulders slumped. His head hung down. “I-I don’t know. I can’t think of what I did to make Makoto angry.”

As expected, but that made Kyoko no happier. “Angry? I can’t even picture what that would look like. Are you certain there wasn’t a misunderstanding?” Makoto treated offenders cordially, what reason would he (could he?) snap at the harmless Chihiro?

“He was! T-The things he said were…” He trailed off.

“Calm down. Why don’t you tell me everything that happened?”

…”

“Alter ego?” Kyoko mused after hearing the programmer’s story. An A.I with advanced processing power. Not something Kyoko would readily trust with another, if she were in Chihiro’s shoes. Then again, she hardly trusted anyone.

“What about him?” Chihiro asked.

“Is it…he, still with Makoto?”

Chihiro shifted, the sting of betrayal still fresh in his mind. “He should be, at least I hope so.”

“Why haven’t you gone to retrieve Alter ego? He is yours.”

“That’s not important!” Chihiro’s voice rose sharply. At Kyoko’s raised brow, the boy retreated into his shell. “I mean, Alter ego obviously matters to me, but that- taking him back won’t help me with Makoto.”

“Does it need to?” The lavender girl said with a tinge of annoyance. Why did she feel like a doting parent about to provide dating advice? “You don’t need Naegi in your life and if his lack of attention does this to you, then maybe distance is necessary.” The programmer was better off without him. “You’re strong. Take one look at yourself.” She pointed to his pants. “You’re strong and overcame your own crippling weakness.”

“Only because Makoto-“

“It wasn’t him.” Kyoko was fed up with everyone treating Makoto like their savior, when all he did was whisper hollow words for his own convenience. “Naegi didn’t make you who you are today, he didn’t force you either. Never mind what he told you, you were the one who made the conscious decision to reveal your gender and accept yourself. It’s your responsibility to uphold that decision.”

It was damn near unsightly seeing a youth as gifted and brilliant as Chihiro, forget to think for himself. “I didn’t want to say this, but Naegi doesn’t care about you. Not the way you think he does.”

A flash of hurt spread across Chihiro’s features. “T-That’s not true. He’s my friend.”

“Not a very good one if he’s left you like this but even ignoring that, you must have noticed by now. Naegi treats everybody he meets the same way. What he did for you, he would have done for anyone who asked. If you think he has anything close to special affection for you, then the same
The bare, unfiltered truth was the best remedy.

“Not everyone.” Chihiro grit his teeth, staring at Kyoko with envy. “He’s always treated you differently.”

“Not for a lack of trying.” A certain idol alluded to the same thing. More importantly, it appeared Chihiro recognized Makoto’s quirks. “It’s not my intention to make you unhappy. Like I said, I’m worried as well…but you ought to be more aware of your acquaintances. Take a step back and calmly analyze your dealings with Naegi-kun. Take control of your life and stop letting yourself be used.” If he didn’t realize it himself, there was nothing Kyoko could say

—

Kyoko smacking her hears in broad daylight was a strange sight for the many who happened to catch it. Then they all realized she was walking past the direction of the music room.

“I’m finally starting to get some feeling back into them.” The lavender-haired girl had the misfortune of encountering Ibuki Mioda in one of her ‘music jams’.

She took notes down on her tablet: *Advisory earplugs for the guests.*

“Thank you for rescuing us the other day!”

Kyoko stumbled onto a curious conversation. She hangs back where the involved trio of Chiaki Nanami, Ryoko Otonashi and…Isshiki Madarai wouldn’t discover her.

Isshiki was torn between the two girls, who abruptly ambushed him on his patrols. “Your gratitude is appreciated but misplaced. I was only doing my job.”

“Yeah but like you were so cool doing it!” Ryoko mouthed off. Kyoko was certain she hadn’t caught the bodyguard’s discomfort.

“I agree. Who knows what would have happened without you?” Chiaki Nanami sided with the amnesiac.

“You sure got out of the hospital quick…or wait, was that your brother?” Ryoko ponders.

Isshiki dodged the question. “The fact that you’re unharmed is proof that our task was performed successfully. For the ultimate bodyguard, the safety of their mark is what matters the most.”

Kyoko couldn’t help but be a little ticked off at the remark. “It’s funny to hear the word ‘safety’ coming from you.” She intruded on the conversation.

“Oh it’s…Kiri-something.” Ryoko said.

“Kirigiri…”

“Kirigiri-san.”

Kyoko nodded at Chiaki in acknowledgement, steadily staring at Ryoko before turning to Isshiki. “I’ve been meaning to have a word…without Naegi attached to your hip. Interesting how that dynamic came about.” The implication went unsaid. Would he rather discuss here or somewhere private?

“Excuse us, girls. Kirigiri have some…important disagreements to sort out.” Isshiki crossed his
Chiaki’s gaze shifted between them, aware of the emanating tension. “Let’s go, Ryoko. We should meet up with our group.”

“Okay! Bye, guys. See you at lunch!” Ryoko waved with one hand, the other arm getting dragged along by the gamer.

“Left out of the loop again.” Chiaki muttered.

“I owe you an apology.”

“I appreciate the thought, but sentiments are rarely useful. What I’m looking for, are answers. Why the sudden change of heart…or rather, what happened that night after you threw me into the lockers.” She snarked. “Or was that your brother?”

Isshiki slowly shakes his head. “It is a blur to me.”

“A blur?” She said, unsatisfied. That’s an awful excuse.

“Indeed. It’s hard to recall what happened. I merely found myself agreeing with Naegi’s principles. It's not hard to imagine why.”

On that front, Kyoko conceded some small amount. “His unorthodox methods tend to yield results…in the short term at least. I take it he is also the reason you’re standing in this academy.”

“My rescinded expulsion was one of the conditions Naegi gave the schoolboard for his services.”

“He bought you off.”

Isshiki scoffed.

“Did I give you the impression of a man who could be reasoned with through bribes?”

Fair enough. He wouldn't have attacked the headmaster's daughter if he still had such an attachment to the school. “I didn’t believe you could be reasoned with at all. Men seeking vengeance rarely can be.” Unless Naegi was involved, then they seemed likely. Of course, every time was unnatural and often involved some sleight of hand. “Which is why your sudden memory impairment strikes me as odd.”

“If you’re so curious, why not ask Naegi?”

If Kyoko wanted to be lied to, she could do it to herself. Though speaking of Makoto… “I haven’t seen him since morning.”

“He’s sleeping in the council office.”

Exhaustion, clearly. The workload for administrating the festival was absurd. She understood the appeal of having the students organize a culture festival. It’s possible in other schools, but HPA was on a larger scale. Teenagers couldn’t deal with this alone. But Makoto was hell bent on doing the impossible.

In Kyoko’s case, it’s more like she realizes the futility in dissension. Partly also because Kyoko
respected Naegi’s dedication, against her better judgement.

He was like a flame. Warm. You wanted to get closer. But get too close and you get burned.

Kyoko held velvet gloves out in front of her.

Something was going on in this school, and she would get to the bottom of it.

“All MEN ARE DUMB JERKS!!!” Ryoko roared into the microphone, her wails had the roster of reserve course and Chiaki covering their ears. It hurt the latter especially because she was touching shoulder with the amnesiac.

“She’s at it again…” “Never heard lyrics to a song like that before.” Many groaned from their stations. The recreation room had been remodeled to fit Chiaki’s vision of the Ultimate arcade. Ryoko occupied one of the karaoke machines, singing her heart out.

Bit of a shame that she was tone deaf

Matsuda-kun, huh?” Chiaki patted Ryoko's head as she cried on her shoulder.

“Chiakiiiii.” Ryoko cried. The pinkette brought out a handkerchief to wipe away the tears.

“Why don’t you dump that guy already? You can find someone better easy.” Chiaki hadn’t memorized everyone’s names yet. That voice was…Takeda’s…probably.

“Like who?” Ryoko sniffed.

Takeda pointed to himself

Ryoko cried louder.

“It was a good try.” Chiaki sighed.

“Why is he so cold to me? I haven’t done anything wrong. I’m just the usual me!”

“That’s reason enough.” The jeer came from the background.

“Why Matsuda-kun anyway? If he’s been cold to you the whole time…” Chiaki didn’t understand their relationship really. Frankly, she’d barely initiated more than a few words with the anti-social boy.

“Because we’re fated to be together…”

“Uh…why?” And what does that mean?

“We just are.”

“I don’t get it.” Chiaki cocked her head.

“That’s because you’ve never been in love, Chiaki-senpai. I can see it with my maiden eye.” Ryoko stuck out her chest.

The gamer puffed her cheeks. “Hmmm…You’re not wrong there. I’ve never given it much thought.”

“Hm…that means Jerkaegi’s charms totally failed. Heh, serves him right.”
“You don’t like Naegi, do you?” Chiaki cocked her head, unaware as to why the luckster name came up.

“For a total bad guy like him, his loss is my win.” Ryoko laughed, heartily.

“Her mood’s done a total 180.”

Ryoko smacked both cheeks. A fire was lit under her. “Boosh! No more pity party! Who’s ready to get their butts kicked?!?”

“You’re on!” “I’m ain’t losing again!” “Let’s play racing!”

Chiaki could only stare silently at the change of pace. The mood had lifted and turned into something else entirely. “What strange charisma.” She watched Ryoko jump into an open game, like the depression from earlier had been an illusion.

It wasn’t. Chiaki could tell Ryoko was forcing herself, but it wasn’t like the gamer could do anything about it.

“It sure is loud in here.” A rare Kazuichi was sighted.

“What’s doing, Kaz?” Chiaki asked.

“Bored, thought I’d relax with some games.” The mechanic motioned to the source of the ensuing noise. “So that’s the forgetful chick I’ve heard so much about. She is hot.”

Kaz had good timing. “I’m going to take a look around the school. Can I leave you to watch things for a little bit?” Chiaki asked. She needed to clear her head for a bit. Alone.

“You can count on me!” Ryoko’s hand rose.

“I was talking to Kazuichi.”

“Man, you’re seriously tough.” Kazuichi palmed his beanie, utterly defeated by the amnesiac in a game of his choosing. “I couldn’t win once.” He heard a few snickers and sympathetic sighs in the back. “I was thinking of joining the tournament tomorrow, but screw this.” Kazuichi lamented.

“I’ve broken yet another innocent man’s aspirations.” Ryoko sheds fake tears. “Why am I so perfect?”

“Ya know, the way you speak reminds me of someone.”

Ryoko’s mood lapses. “Let me guess...It starts with a Junko and ends with an Enoshima?” She drones.

“Yeah, you know her? If you don’t, take it from me when I say, ‘run the other way’.”

“I’ve heard of her and nothing good. Is she as bad as people say?”

“She’s off her rocker. I didn’t know it then...” Kazuichi’s fingers moved to his forehead. “No, maybe I did, and just didn’t care. She gets into your head and puts you through a real fucked up phase. I would’ve done anything to please her.”

“Like?”
“As an example, she asked me to make bombs for her.”

Ryoko’s jaw dropped. “Real ones?!!”

Kazuichi pressed a finger to his lips. “Not so loud…but yeah. They’re not huge or anything, but they could cause damage. Fortunately, they’re electronically activated explosives and only I know how. Just fair warning, in case you two do meet.”

Ryoko’s blood pressure lowered. “Want to play again?”

“I dunno…”

“Do it, you pansy.” Ryoko growled. Kazuichi followed heel. She needed something to take her mind off that evil woman/homewrecker.

Izuru’s day had been as obnoxious as predicted. That is to say, Nagito had been. The lucky student’s goal had been obvious from the start. He brought Izuru along to several labs; Akane, Aoi, Sakura’s and so many more. Using wordplay, Nagito then tried to pit him against whatever Ultimate was acting as the host.

Izuru had no reason to play along with Nagito’s whims, so he didn’t. Instead, he spent his time foiling Nagito’s attempts until that too, got boring. Which it inevitably did.

With all the commotion going around, he required some peace and quiet.

He ought to have known better.

Makoto Naegi came into view, taking slow, wobbly steps towards him.

Izuru stood up “What are you scheming?”

He searched left and right for the voice.

“In front.”

Makoto followed the directions “Waah!” He jumped back, finally recognizing Izuru’s presence “Sorry, I didn’t…see you there.” Makoto’s gaze scrutinized him. “Have we…met before?”

It was the boring one. “Once or twice. But you aren’t the one I wish to speak to.”

“Are you…waiting for someone?”

“Your counterpart.”

The boy waited for an elaboration waiting in the wings. Izuru's answer came in the form of a non-response.

“Aa, so that’s what it was. It's nice to finally have confirmation on that.” Nary a twitch or any indication of surprise whatsoever. Izuru had merely confirmed what ought to have been glaringly obvious. “Are we friends?”

“Hardly.” Izuru replied.

“You’re one of the few then.” Makoto’s face fell. “People flock to me, treating me like friends
they’ve known for a long time. Some I barely know or speak to. It was a little scary at first, but I’ve gotten used to it.”

Hm. This was a rare opportunity. Izuru had never spoken to this Makoto before for more than a few sentences. The main personality surfaced almost immediately upon meeting him. “You’re satisfied with being a placeholder?”

He flinched at the label. “Uh…I wouldn’t say that, but there are some perks. Like, If I’ve got homework or some kind of difficult situation, it’s all fixed by the time I wake up. Like I’ve got someone watching over me. I can’t complain.”

“I had taken you for a puppet. Were you always capable of formulating your own thoughts?”

Izuru assessed the shorter boy with a calculating eye. Yet again, there was information out of his reach. He would know it, and then grow bored of it. “The one those ‘friends’ care about isn’t you. You’re not the one who reached out to them. It is unlikely they would care if they knew who you were.”

“You say some hurtful things.” Each comment pierced deep into the luckster’s heart. Every word targeted at bringing out the insecurities that must exist. “I think we’re different people. Him and I. I often get weird looks from my friends, as if I’m doing things I…he normally wouldn’t.”

Izuru didn’t expect the timid Naegi to lift his head, imbued by a faint, but definite determination. “But you know…they still smile around me, even though we’re different. We still get along. That’s why even though I’m not the one they’re looking at, I think, in time, I can get them to accept me too.”

“That is ruthlessly optimistic.”

“Maybe. Even if I give my all, I might still fail. But I don’t think I have much choice. If I sit around and do nothing, I’ll definitely…fail.” His words may have made more of an impact had he not yawned loudly in the middle of it. “How are you enjoying the…uh…to-be-festival?”

“It’s boring.”

“You think the Ultimates reinventing themselves and sharing their talent, is boring?” He asked, scandalized.

“Must I repeat myself?”

“No. It’s just in my case, being part of an Ultimate festival is nuts. If you think that’s boring, you’ve got to lead one heck of an exciting life.” His inquiry was perfectly candid, without a hint of sarcasm.

Izuru looked to the side. “There’s nothing special about Ultimates. Once you stand above them, they’re just as boring as everyone else. You’d be better off not fixated on them.”

“Agreed, mostly. Talent isn’t important, but everyone wants to be special; to have something others don’t.” Makoto pressed a finger to his chin.

“How boring.”
“Boring is fine. Peaceful times tend to be boring. Rather, if excitement comes with scattering away that peace, then I might leave you bored forever, Izuru.”

“When?”

“Just now.” He smiled. “This is good timing. Where have you been?”

“That’s none of your business.”


“That way, you’ll be able to keep a closer eye on me?”

“That and I could use the help. If you’re so bored. We talked about this the day we met but it’s time I finally get an answer.” That doe-like amicability from earlier was like a dream. “You could side with me or against me. Which is it?”

“I will do as I please.” Izuru replied succinctly. He had no allegiances to any side.

“No, you won’t. You’ve had your fun. I won’t let you run around anymore. You’re a student at this academy, unofficially or officially, it doesn’t matter. If you’re here, you’ll work like everyone else.”

Izuru stood unphased by Makoto’s sudden declaration. “And who would stop me if I refused?”

The smaller boy sighed. “Even if you don’t want to be on the committee…I could always sign you up for Chiaki’s lab.”

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_Error._ “I don’t understand.”

That wasn’t an innocuous statement. It was a threat. That was obvious. But it wasn’t congruent with the data.

Makoto crossed his arms. “I’m giving you a choice. I know I’m not your favorite guy in the world. I thought you’d prefer staying by Chiaki. I’ve thought that for months, actually.”

Izuru stood silent. His mind raced through the circuit of possibilities. “Back then…during the riot. This was the reason you protected her. To use as ammunition against me.”

He clapped. “So you were watching even then? Good, that more or less confirms things for me. That you paid any attention to that “boring Ultimate” at all is all the proof I need. Old habits die hard, Hajime.”

Izuru’s brow twitched at the name… “You can’t think to stop me with just this.”

“I’m sure you’ve seen them by now. Fuyuhiko’s guys walking around the place.”

“Your ‘security’.”

“Yup. I know I said all that stuff about removing school security from duty, but we have to make sure things are safe somehow.” He proudly admitted to the deception. “Though whoever they protect is up to me.”
“Kuzuryu would never let them lay a hand on Nanami.” Izuru stopped himself.

“That’s disappointing. Are you flustered? Normally, you would know what Fuyuhiko or them ‘want’ doesn’t matter. I’ll make them if I have to.”

He would brainwash dissenters. They would not even remember the order once all was said and done.

“You’re bluffing.”

“...I don’t know. I really don’t. It’s all new to me. I don’t know what I could do.” He has the gall to contemplate on the spot. "Ah, maybe I could settle for telling her all about your plan with the reserve course. I wonder how Chiaki would take to hearing you were the cause of all that suffering.”

“The reserve course would have rioted with or without my interference.” Izuru retorted.

“You think Chiaki will accept that excuse? Knowing her, she’ll probably blame herself for not stopping you while you were Hajime. She’s such a good person.”

…

“Using Nanami as a hostage and mocking her good nature. I’m disappointed. After all that talk of happiness and hope, you resort to this…”

Genuine confusion crossed Makoto’s features. “I don’t think I mentioned hope that much though… but I see your point. I’m disappointed in myself too. Just a little. But I’ve decided to take a gamble. Though I’m sure you couldn’t care less.” He was correct.

Izuru didn’t respond well to threats. He had even less tolerance for legitimate ones. “I can kill you, you know. It would be over before you blink.” He had said those words the day they met. Izuru didn’t act on his boast. He hadn’t seen a reason.

Now was different. Izuru grabbed Makoto by the collar and lifted him into the air, just as he'd done to Nagito months before.

Makoto struggled to breathe. "What, you can't do any better than beating me up? Looks like you're just another one of the reserve course after all."

Izuru won't bite, but he squeezes harder around Makoto's neck.

The luckster chokes.

“I hope you're aware luck is a talent I possess as well. Do you want to test whether yours will let you survive?”

“You’re the one who likes experiments. Then again, you're not very good at it. Just like the people who created you, you've got terrible sense of direction.” Izuru wondered if Makoto had a genuine sense of fear, with how talkative he was in that position. "You clearly have a desire, so how you can leave so much of the groundwork in the hands of other people? You even admitted the reserve course would riot without you. Have you even done anything since you escaped that prison?"

Izuru's grip loosened somewhat.

Makoto smirked. "Looking at you, I understand Kiyotaka's grief a bit. It's one thing to be a
wounded bird that needs treatment, but you've got working wings and still don't know how to fly. That's just wrong. There's a limit to how complacent you can get." The grin transforms into a disgust. "It's just a guess on my part, but is that why you're so attached to Chiaki? Do you need her to teach what you forgot?

"You bastard..." Izuru's confusion was the only thing stalling him.

"Honestly, that's the one part about you that I approve. Chiaki might be the only thing in the world you care about, and that's why it's hard to separate from her. If you love something, you keep it close to your chest. I'm the same."

Normally, Makoto’s smile was plastered on like a mask, never reaching his eyes. Right now, it could hardly pass for subterfuge. To Izuru, the mask had broken to such a degree that a light breeze would blow away the last fragments.

What was happening here? What drastic change could have occurred without his notice?

“Hinata-kun?”

Izuru’s eyes widened. He dropped Makoto on the floor, before even turning to the caller.

“What were you doing to him?!” Chiaki had a hand near her chest, taking in the scene with worry.

Makoto’s luck suppressed all others in his vicinity, even his own.

The man in question coughed as he stood up, dusting his pants. He didn't immediately look at Chiaki, like he needed time to reapply to mask. “Afternoon, Chiaki. Hajime and I were having a tiny disagreement. Right?”

“That didn’t look like a small argument to me.” Chiaki looked between them in concern.

“It's my fault. I wanted him to join the council and I went a bit too far.” Makoto said. "I'm sorry." He apologizes. With the severity of his offences, Izuru can't think for a moment it's real. Then again, he doubts ever knowing the lucky student proper. Before either he or Chiaki can get a word in, Makoto walks away.

"Hinata-kun, we'll talk later." She follows after the brunet. "Makoto, wait!"

“That is not wise, Nana-...” Izuru motioned to speak, but refrained. Any show of concern or interest only proved Makoto’s point. He’s endangered Chiaki.

Worse is that he cared.

“How can I help you, Chiaki?” Makoto asked, once she finally caught up.

“You called him Hajime. Did you know each other?” She inquired, trying to get a feel over what they were fighting over.

“For a while. We’re not particularly close though.” Yet they were on first name basis? What a strange guy.

"I'm sorry for what happened with Hinata. He normally wouldn't do that. Are you okay?"

"Like I said, it's my fault. Don't worry about it." He rubs his neck. If Chiaki looked close enough, she would have spotted the indents and reddened flesh. "Now. Did you want something? I'm busy
at the moment."

She understands his position and doesn't remark on how cold he was just then. “Is there a reason you didn’t ask me to be part of the committee? I’m the class representative.” Chiaki got straight to the point. Why had Naegi overlooked her in the selection process? “Am I not good enough?”

“I thought you’d refuse.” He answered, simply. He read her confusion. “It’s not like you to monitor others…and I thought you’d be best in your own element. A stage where you could bring everyone in your group together, your own way. Just like what you did for your class.” He shook his head and smiled. “No, I know you will. That’s why I haven’t bothered to drop in. I’ve got complete faith in you. I’m sure your friends do too.”

“Why? I don’t think I’ve done anything to deserve that faith.” She hadn’t helped anyone. Even in her own talent laboratory, Ryoko contributed to their success just as much through sheer charisma. Chiaki felt so small compared to the people who environed her. “I envy you a lot. Everyone depends on you.”

Makoto simply stared. “You and Kiyotaka. Are you guys secretly laughing at me behind my back?”

Chiaki furrows her brows at the uncalled for comment. "...Are you okay?"

"You asked that already." He smiled. Yeah, that definitely didn't belong there.

"You don't have to smile all the time, you know."

"It'd be unpleasant if I didn't." It's almost phrased like a question with how anxious he looks.

"A not-smiling-Makoto would be weird sure...but it'd be even be weirder if you forced yourself." Especially right after a fight. "You don't have to put on airs. We're friends."

"Thanks...I needed that." She can see the wear in his complexion. "I suppose it's only fair that I give you advice too." He starts. "...I think you're going about this all wrong, with trying to stick out or do more. Don't go looking for trouble or biting off what you don't need to. You're strong by being yourself."

"Be...myself? That's enough? Then why did she lose Hinata?"

“A friend told me once that there are natural moodsetters. That’s you, Chiaki. People are drawn to you and they’re legitimately happy without you having to try. Without losing anything. It’s amazing how you can’t see it.” He balls his hand into a fist. "What I wouldn’t give to have that talent. Because I’ve come to see that unless I give my all, maybe...maybe I'm worthless after all. I can't do anything without hurting myself or others.”

“You can’t possibly think that.” Chiaki said, astounded. That self-deprecating behavior strongly reminded her of Nagito.

It was wrong with Nagito and it was wrong here too. But Chiaki wonders if Makoto even heard her. He falls into a daze, muttering inanities. He smiles again. Only, this time, it's a poor attempt at one. It unnerves her greatly. "But it'll all be worth it. In just a few more days, I'll finally, finally--"

"Okay, that's enough!" Chiaki shakes his shoulders. "Chill out, Makoto. You're freaking me out."

He blinks rapidly. "I-I'm sorry." He says it out of fear, not regret.
"Why are you apologizing when you haven't done anything wrong?"

He descends into silence, like he doesn't have anything else to say.

"Sorry." Still, he repeats, then grabs at her wrists. “I’m saying a lot that I don't mean, today." His tone comes off practiced, like memorized off a script. "I’ll get going. It won’t be possible to make you a supervisor now without shutting down your lab, but if you need anything...don’t hesitate to call me or come to the student council room…"

"Makoto, I think you should take a break." She wasn't letting him leave here in that condition. Chiaki'd had discussions with Nagito and Gundham (at their worst) that flowed more coherently than this. "I strongly advise it."

He shakes his head. "There's too much work to do."

"Then let someone else handle it. You can't do it by yourself."

"I...can't?" A flash of pain and shock mars his features.

"Not alone."

"No." He says slowly. "It's meaningless if...I'm...not the one..."

Chiaki watched him sway in the middle of his speech and clumsily collapse to the ground.

"Makoto?"

Izuru stood by the statue of his namesake. Doing nothing but thinking, about all he’d overlooked, and this new found emotion he couldn’t place. Despite possessing all the talents, he was incomplete. That Makoto Naegi could surprise him like this was proof. That Chiaki Nanami could instill uncertainty, was proof.

He was…defective. That was the truth of the matter.

But did that mean he was inferior to Hajime Hinata?

No, more than anything else, that can’t be the case. What was the point of everything he lost if he didn’t gain more in turn? How could he be living in the shadow of someone who didn’t exist anymore? It wasn’t logical and yet “Whenever she looks at me, she only sees Hinata.”

("But you know…they still smile around me, even though we’re different. We still get along. That’s why even though I’m not the one they’re looking at, I think, in time, I can get them to accept me too.”)

Even though his words wouldn’t reach anyone, he declared “For what It’s worth. Among, the three lucky students I know, you are the one I harbor the least distaste towards.”

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“You’re on time.” He addressed his guest.

“I’d have been here earlier if your invitation had been more direct.” Kyoko Kirigiri walked briskly. Her gaze lingered on the statue, then back to him. A silent confirmation.

“Let’s dispense with the pleasantries. This is our first meeting. but we ought to know a good deal
about one another at this stage. Rather, if you weren’t capable of that much, then I fear I have wasted my time.”

“Belittling me from the onset isn’t how you want to start a partnership.”

“Your reasoning?” He asked mildly.

“You aren’t high on my priorities list. Why else would you reach out to The Ultimate Detective?”

“Our priorities are the same. Makoto Naegi is a problem.”

Kyoko’s fingers pressed against her forehead at the mention of the lucky student’s name. “What’s he done now?”

“He’s threatened Chiaki Nanami. She is his only means for confining me.” Kyoko’s emotions betrayed her. Surprise leaked out from the stoic mask of indifference she’d crafted over the years. To her credit, that opening lasted only a moment before subsiding into a perfect calm.

“That would be entirely out of character. Why should I believe you?”

“He is different now. I cannot say why.”

The detective pressed a glove finger to her chin, looking downwards. “You’re asking me to clean up your mess.”

“I won’t deny my…mistakes, but you aren’t going to refuse my assistance.” Izuru reached into his pocket, a phone dangled in front of him. The screen flashed red.

He was mildly impressed that the detective had the foresight to shield her eyes.

“Judging by your reaction, you know about the brainwashing, that saves me time. But no, I won’t control your mind. Your allies would discern the changes and detain you. You are of more use with your own will and mind.” The tone and manner of speech were identical to Izuru’s but did not come from him. It was the Alter Ego hacked into his phone that spoke to Kyoko.

“What is that?”

“My Alter ego.”

“Alter ego? The A.I?” She asked, her eyes averted from the screen.

“This is a different version from Chihiro Fujisaki’s creation. I created my own as a necessary step to replicate the brainwashing video. You ought to understand where I’m going with this.”

The gears in Kyoko’s head turned. “Naegi…has that video.”

Indeed, and I can confirm he has used it more than once on the Madarai 8.”

She made a silent gasp. “All this time…had he approached Chihiro for that reason?”

Good enough.

“You understand how dangerous he is. That’s all I require. As I said, what I need is your own will and mind. You will act accordingly on your own.” Izuru’s turned his back on the detective. But She was determined to have the last word.
“I understand Nanami-san is important to you. But you aware that she was among those Ultimates jeopardized by your actions?”

He silently walked into the shadows.

-December 16th 20XX-

Mukuro watched Makoto lie on the bed, watched his chest slowly rise and fall, taking in his light breathing. Mikan diagnosed that he collapsed from overexertion and high levels of stress. Everyone readily believed it, thinking it was only a matter of time. That was his usual, reckless formula.

Did he love danger, or did he not care? – That question lingered the minds of his friends who watched, admired, worried over and laughed with him. That wasn’t a small number. Everyone in the school she knew, Makoto was likely friends with.

Where they all would tread with caution, Makoto ran far ahead. To where, nobody could say. They only knew that he’d get hurt in the process. Then, he’d bounce back with a smile, and say “mission accomplished.” In the face of that, their concern wavered. Even now, Mukuro didn’t feel deeply troubled by the fainting. He would just wake up and carry on like nothing happened. She wasn’t alone in that regard.

Makoto made them feel hopeful, that everything would turn out alright. And…and there was something wrong with that. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but it wasn’t right.

She can’t keep up with him, and she can’t understand him. Lacking those qualities, how could she stay by his side? “It was the same with Junko.” The soldier spoke aloud. “I’ve never been able to understand her, not as much as I want to. Junko’s been whimsical since childhood. Everyone around her were toys. She’d find one thing to play with, grow bored and move onto the next, not caring about what broke on the way.” Was Mukuro different than the other playthings? She’d like to think so, having survived right up till now. But was that proof that Junko cared about her?

“You wouldn’t know, but Junko changed this summer. She cut herself off from everyone, even me and locked herself up. The Junko I knew demanded the world paid attention to her every whim. Whenever I went to see her, she’d be deep in thought, not eating, not sleeping, not taking care of herself. I couldn’t understand, but…I think, for the first time, Junko might have been putting effort into something. One day, I realized I wasn’t needed. One day, she disappeared.” Becoming Ryoko Otonashi.

“Makoto was the same. I don’t understand him, and I’m not useful to him either.” The ones she loved were always out of reach. She followed behind, staring at their backs, waiting for them to call on her. Despite her athletic superiority, Mukuro feared the distance between them would grow too wide.

What was a soldier without a commander? Without someone to fight for.

“Why did you feel the need to tell me this?” Peko listened, her back to the wall. Mukuro didn’t know herself.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do.” She said softly.

“This is your chance, without Makoto or Enoshima, there is nobody to pull your strings.” Peko
said, after a time. “Reflect on yourself…and what they mean to you. Then…contemplate on what you mean to them.”

“Matsuda-kun…what am I to you?” Ryoko stood behind Matsuda in the science lab. If she couldn’t catch him first thing in the morning, he’d be occupied for the rest of the day.

“Are we going to do this now?” Yasuke said, sitting and back turned. His fingers sporadically pressed down on the computer keys. Yasuke had a quirky way of conveying affection. The lack of attention normally wouldn’t have bothered her. Normally, but you know…every girl’s got her breaking point.

“You’re busy most of the day or asleep.”

“If you want someone to blame for taking up my time, go find Naegi.”

Ryoko grabbed her other arm tightly. “It’s funny, whenever there’s a problem, that’ll be the name that comes up…and if it’s not him, it’ll be Junko Enoshima.”

Yasuke’s typing stopped. He spun on his chair, facing her with a deadpanned look.

The redhead bit her lip. The mention of Junko’s name was enough to gain his undivided attention. “Who…is she to you?”

“None of your business.” The bottom half of his face twisted into a snarl.

“He blinked, like he never thought Ryoko would press the issue. After all, Ryoko was a ditz that would take everything he said at face value and go back to daydreaming. “You implying I would help you otherwise?”

“Are we…really? Where’s the proof?” Ryoko cocked her head, narrowing her eyes.

He blinked, like he never thought Ryoko would press the issue. After all, Ryoko was a ditz that would take everything he said at face value and go back to daydreaming. “You implying I would help you otherwise?”

“There has to be something. Like a photo. Anything showing us together.”

Yasuke turned around, fleeing back to his labors “What’s with all these questions? You want me to laze around with you that badly?”

“I just want the truth.” She exhaled, every cell in her body struggled against itself as she spoke the taboo. “Tell me I’m not Junko Enoshima.”

The silence felt like it lasted Yasuke. She wondered what face Yasuke was making.

The door opened behind them, but Ryoko paid the sound of an intruder no heed. Nor was she leaving without an answer.

Ryoko smiled bitterly as she mouthed. “You’re smarter than me. Even if you’re hiding the truth, you’d have a good reason.”
With a shaky goodbye, Ryoko left, passing by a blue-haired girl in a wheelchair on her way to the exit.

…

Miaya slowly approached Yasuke. “You made her cry.”

“I do that a lot.” He replied without any of his usual snarkiness. His eyes were glued to the data on the computer screen. “This would be so much easier if Chihiro actually pulled his goddamn weight.”

“Will you use the neo world program on her?”

“Better Ryoko than assholes I don’t care about or will never meet anyway.”

“…The one you’ll be helping is Enoshima, not Otonashi-san.”

Yasuke heaved a heavy sigh. His back into the chair, his head facing the ceiling. He shielded his eyes from the bright light.

“They’re the same person in the end.”

“Class dismissed.” Fuyuhiko ended the most recent council meeting. It was a perfect attendance, save one surreal dumbass asleep in the infirmary. Thanks to said dumbass who will go unnamed, Fuyuhiko assumed temporary command.

The others bailed without much of a fuss. Only Kyoko remained seated, eyeing him like a common crook. He’d feel offended, if she didn’t stare at everyone that way.

“You got something to say to me?”

“I’m not sure if I should. You haven’t been candid with me…then again, compared to Kamukura, I’d much prefer your assistance.”

Fuyuhiko looked at her like she grew a second-head. “Roll back there. Kamukura? You met that freak?” He regretted opening his mouth after he saw that smug on her face. He’d taken the bait, hook-line-sinker.

“I did, and he shared interesting information with me. Information you ought to be familiar with.”

Fuyuhiko’s confusion only intensified at the knowledge of Makoto having Junko’s brainwashing videos. “And…you believed him why?”

“I don’t, but the evidence points to it. I’ve spoken with Madarai and his testimony suggested hypnotism of some variety.” Kyoko noted.

Fuyuhiko felt a migraine coming on. “Okay so, let’s assume you’re not full of shit and Makoto can brainwash people in fly. What’s the big deal? That kinda tech could be in worse hands, and shit hasn’t gone down.” Not to mention in his experience, it took a lot more than showing you a clip and screwing with your head. Otherwise, Junko had gone through a hell of a lot trouble messing with his class when she could have gotten it over with in seconds.

Then again, Junko made no damn sense so what does he know?
‘Could be in worse hands?’ Will you still think that way after I tell you he supposedly threatened Nanami-san as an ace in the hole against him.”

Fuyuhiko gaped. He’d have busted a vein at the accusation if it wasn’t so absurd. “T-That’s bullshit, Kirigiri. Nobody’s going to believe that. And what does Chiaki have to do with Kamukura?”

Kyoko folded her arms. “I don’t know, but Naegi showed sudden interest in Nanami a few months before. That again, is corroborating evidence.”

Fuck. That did happen.

“Yeah, I remember that. I also remember him risking his neck out to save her during the tragedy. I also remember Madarai doing the same. Kinda not getting what you’re selling, Kirigiri.”

“I wonder what if you even recognize the threat he poses. Or if he’s fooled you to the extent that you won’t want to.” She brushed a strand of hair in this real condescending way.

“Oh yeah, the mastermind who recently forgot you need to eat, shit and sleep to function - and is now knocked the fuck out by the way! - is sooo scary.” Fuyuhiko rolled his eyes. He’d be more frightened of a runaway mutt than Makoto.

The detective cast him a steady glare. “You’re averting your eyes from the truth. Many do. All of them end up regretting that choice.”

The two engaged in a contest to see who’d blink first. That gave Fuyuhiko time to think and to inquire on a bothersome detail. “I’ve been wondering. What exactly do you want with Makoto? Cuz between you and me, I don’t trust you one bit.”

“I’ve never asked you trust me, but I at least thought you would do what was best for your friends.” ‘Your friends’ huh?

“That’s the part I don’t get. Why are you so invested? From where I’m standing, you two aren’t friends.”

Without uttering a word, Kyoko’s composure conveyed the words “Your point?”

“You cop-types are all the same. A guy doesn’t fit in with your squeaky-clean routine and they’re scum, not even human. You don’t give a shit about them or what they’ve been through. But even compared to those crooked cops, you’re bad. With them, it’s not personal, but you? You hate the kid, your classmate. So why should I trust you to help him?”

“I don’t let my own emotions carry me away. Unlike you.” Kyoko retorted. That was the first direct attack she’d thrown his way. He knew he’d struck a nerve.

Fuyuhiko shrugged. “Look, I get why your panties are in a bunch but until I see some solid evidence, I’m not jumping the gun.” Even this broad should understand the timeless logic of “put up or shut up.”

“And what if by then, it’s too late?”

“Then we’re both shit out of luck.” There was nothing more to say and Fuyuhiko didn’t want to be in a room with this chick another second.

“You know I’m right.” She said as he passed by.
“We’d be living in a cruel fucking world if everyone got their way just by being ‘right’, Kirigiri.”
Fuyuhiko stepped out of the council room.

‘How’d Chiaki get mixed up in all this crap?’

He didn’t bat an eye to Peko’s immediate presence.

“Of course, you were listening.”

“Actually, I came to tell you that Makoto woke up. I just happened to overhear.” Peko said. She
never lied so he didn’t question it.

“That so…” He shoved his hand in his pocket. “What do you think? You buy what Kirigiri said?”

“It isn’t impossible.”

"Fancy way of saying 'Yes'."

Makoto found himself in a precarious position. Not more than 2 hours after he woke, he was
flanked on all sides by some of the scariest people he knew. Fuyuhiko, Isshiki, Peko and Mikan.

Mikan outdid them all by magnitudes.

“Could you repeat that?” He asked.

“You’re off-duty. Grounded, if you prefer.” Fuyuhiko teasingly waved the notebook in front of
Makoto’s face.

“Says who?” The luckster calmly asked.

“Me, because evidently, a certain dumbass can’t be trusted.” The blonde snarled. Why was he so
angry?

“I might’ve overexerted myself a little, but I’m still in charge here.” Makoto huffed.

“I highly recommend Makoto not take on any more of his…duties, at least for the next few days.”
Mikan interjected.

“You heard the lady. Now skedaddle.” Fuyuhiko jerked his finger.

“Guys I’m fine. There’s only a litt-“

The yakuza interrupted “Shut the fuck up. I know you. You’ll try to weasel your way out of this.
Don’t open your mouth and go play in a sandbox for all I care. Just get out of my sight!”

Makoto gaped at the cutthroat rejection. He looked around the room for assistance.

“You brought this on yourself.” Peko closed her eyes.

“You refused to heed advice. Force was the only way.” Isshiki did the same.

He was at a loss. “You’re not my parents. You can’t tell me what to do, I have authority over you
given by the school.”
“Should we call them then?” Peko drew attention to herself. “Not the school. Rather…notifying your relatives would be the responsible thing to do in our position.”

…

Makoto was speechless. He stood off the bed and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

“He took that well.” Fuyuhiko said.

Makoto hated to admit it, but he was feeling a lot better after recharging. Still… ‘What’s their problem?’ He thought grimly. Which of course was hidden behind a smile as he waved to the passerbys that called out to him.

All he did was sleep a little, nothing to get mad at him for. This festival was his grand undertaking that he roped everyone into. Wasn’t it natural to put in the effort necessary to keep it running?

“What do they expect me to do now?” His ruminations came to a halt when he found the library on the second floor. “If I’m not mistaken, Hifumi’s talent lab should be here.” Intrigued, Makoto ventured into the unknown.

The library was…less dreary than he remembered. Colorful posters of fictional works were plastered on every corner.

Like Alice in Wonderland, the perplexed Makoto meandered the library-turned-comicbook-store, the sounds of printers working overdrive filled his ears.

There were miniature booths occupied by reserve course students. They hardly took notice of him, with their pencils circling over the sheets of paper with skilled precision. Books were placed in rows on each desk, likely a testament to how much work they’d put in these past few weeks.

If so…Hifumi was amazing in his own right.

Makoto sweatdropped as he came across the largest desk. Ignoring the Soda cans and chip wrappers were sprawled on the furniture, there were 5 rows of texts. Makoto had to lift his head to see the top of the largest stack.

“Hifumi, you there?” He called, unable to see the man behind the books.

“That voice, is that Mister Naegi.” He formally replied. The portly male’s head emerged from the side. “Welcome to my den of creativity and wonder. How are you feeling?”

“Just fine. Got any upda-…” Right, not supposed to be doing that. “I suddenly have a lot of free time. I thought I’d browse.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place! Come and feast your eyes on our treasures!”

Oh, so I can check out the books. “Got any recommendations?”

“Um…Hifumi, sir? I’ve finished my draft.”

Makoto motioned to the side. A shorter (how considerate!), silver-haired girl, held a magazine to her chest. Her gray eyes met his, before nervously looking away.

He ought to know her name. The face was familiar from his excursion into reserve course records.
“Anya-san.” Hifumi said. That was it! The European exchange student. “I’ve greatly looking forward to this.”

Makoto detected a powerful degree of amusement in the dojin author’s tone.

“I’m acting as everyone’s a beta reader.” Hifumi explained. “But since you’re here, mister Naegi. Why don’t you assess Anya-san’s latest work? She’s quite popular on the market.”

The girl who reminded him all too much of a certain programmer, faced him with beady, innocent eyes. “Would you, Naegi-san?” She offered the book to him.

“How could I say no?” He scanned the comic. The cover alone captured his attention…in the deeply befuddling sense. “This looks like Leon. And…is this Mondo on the cover?” If the baseball star and biker had their looks feminized up to 11.

The silver-haired girl blushed red.

“Miss Anya has some very niche tastes.” Hifumi covered his mouth, stifling a laugh.

“Um…you really don’t have to read it. Actually, please don’t!”

Makoto laughed gently, disarmingly as he stated. “Of course, I will. The drawing’s nice. A bit sharp and feminine looking, but I’m sure the guys would love it.”

“Nufufu, I urge you to read it before recommending it to them.” Hifumi chimed in. Curiously, Makoto flipped through the pages.

Hifumi and Anya’s gaze lingered on the luckster. The first surprised at how seriously he was taking his assigned task. The latter worried over the reception. Finally, he crossed over into the last page and shut the book.

“W-What did you think?”

Makoto pressed a finger to his chin. “Art is…outside my expertise, sadly. But if you’ll accept an amateur’s review, you’re incredibly talented. For the most part, they acted just like Leon and Mondo do and the anatomy was spot on. It’s like you’ve been with us in class the whole time.”

The girl’s smile was blindingly bright for the dark terrors she’d unleashed with a pen.

“I gave her all the necessary information on those two. The ones forums and boards don’t cover at least.” Hifumi said. “But Mister Naegi, I can’t help but notice you didn’t address the…story.” He coughed.

Makoto’s smile strained. “That…was an original scenario. Who knows, maybe all that could happen if they really were trapped in a sauna. Just…for your sake…actually no it’s fine.”

“Really?” Anya asked.

He patted her shoulder “Yeah. You’re a girl, so I’m sure those guys won’t beat you up.” One wouldn’t notice his terrifying implications with the expression he delivered that statement with.
“That’s a less exaggerated response than I expected. Are you perhaps familiar with the dark arts?” Hifumi asked.

“Not really. It’s not a problem for me though. Got any more you want me to look at?” Makoto looked over the desk and found… “Heeey, is this…me?” On the front was a boy who shared many of his traditional features, including his hoodie. He/I stood beneath a cherry blossom

“Good eye, that’s my handiwork.” Hifumi said.

“Hifumi-san, is that the sequel to the Kirigiri story?!”

“Indeed, and this shall be from Naegi-dono’s perspective.”

“Kirigiri? What the heck is this?” He was so confused.

“This,” Hifumi smacked his hand against the comic. “It’s going to be the masterpiece I showcase at the festival. The sequel to one of my best-selling romance series involving you and Miss. Kirigiri as tragic lovers.”

Makoto’s smile turned crooked; his shoulders shook until he doubled over. “Haha...hahahaha!” He laughed wildly. A mistake, but he couldn’t help himself

Mocking another’s passion was a surefire way to displease them. “I’m sorry. I…wasn’t laughing at you.”

“Why? This is fiction. It’s great because it’d be absurd in real life. Of course, you’d laugh. That’s all part of the fun, Mister Naegi.” Hifumi proudly declared, a shine gleaming from his glasses.

…

“Oh.” They weren’t angry. That’s…good.

“Is that so? Well, you got me. I’ll be sure to buy these at the festival.” Makoto showed a toothy grin. “…Do you take requests?”

“But of course.”

“You know our upperclassman from class 77? Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu and Peko Pekoyama?” The luckster asked.

“How could I not? Pekoyama-dono has the makings of a cosplay goddess.” Hifumi said exaggeratedly.

“Yeah…see what Anya did with Mondo and Leon? Do it with those two and push the draft as a headliner.” Makoto’s smile suddenly took a malicious form.

The silver-haired girl looked between the boys, feeling out of place.

“Why?” Hifumi asked.

"No reason-..." Makoto tilted his head and looked down to see him holding a comic book, then turned in a circle. “Whoa, it’s like a comic book store.”

Anya and Hifumi glanced at each other and back to Makoto. “Are you alright, Naegi-san?” The girl asked.
“Huh? Yeah.” He said quickly. His eyes fell to the front cover of the book he held

“What’s this? Is that…Kuwata and Owada?” Makoto skimmed through the novel, closing it no further than 9 pages in, and let it drop to the floor like it was on fire.

A furious blush spread across his cheeks “….Haa. Um, I gotta go!”

...The two gave him odd looks as he practically ran out of the library.

“A delayed reaction?” Hifumi scratched his chin.

Makoto roamed the school in a heated daze. He wouldn’t be able to face Leon and Mondo, his two older, taller, muscular - Bad thoughts go away!

In Makoto’s panic, he lost sight of his surroundings and walked head first into two pillowy-soft cushions.

“Uh…what’re you doing, Makoto?” Aoi asked.

Makoto quickly stepped back and threw a deluge of apologies “Asahina-san, I wasn’t watching where I was going.” Thankfully, Sakura wasn’t around to see that…

“Were you sleepwalking?” The flustered swimmer inquired, holding a brown bag to her chest.

“No, I just had my head in the sauna- the clouds!” He corrected himself. He was never, ever going back to Hifumi’s lab.

“Mhm, if you say so.” Aoi raised a skeptic brow. She fished into the bag and out came a sugar-sprinkled donut. Textbook Aoi.

What he didn’t expect was for the girl to shove the pastry down his throat. “You gotta remember to sleep well and build up on calories!”

He munched/choked. “I-I’ll remember that.” At least it tasted good. “What’re you up to?”

“I’m on break…kinda like you. Kuzuryu sent a mass text telling us you’re out of commission for a while.”


“Beats me, but isn’t that a good thing? You’re on Free Time now.”

Free Time. He felt like a kid. “Okay…w-what do I do?”

Aoi folded her arms and pouted. “Come swimming with meeee.”

“I do need the exercise…” He hoped his swimming trunks were still in his dorm room.

“It’ll be fun. And it’ll be nice to have someone I know around. The guys keep giving me pervy looks.”

Can’t really blame them…Aoi in a leotard was always a sight for sore eyes…wait a minute “Huh,
“Fire.” Mukuro commanded. A volley of (non-lethal) shots rang out through the forest. She had constructed traps and targets to use as practice for the “soldiers” she was raising.

Mukuro gazed at the man-shaped targets. She’d taken inspiration from the shooting game at the carnival and ordered for them. Holes and punctures were close to vital locations despite the distance.

‘They aren’t bad’ She thought. Their aim had significantly improved with her direction. A feat she took no credit for. All Mukuro did was regurgitate the training her own commander had doled out during her days in Fenrir.

Legitimate, innovative training was beyond her.

Mukuro’s ears picked up on the rustling of leaves. “Who’s there?”

“Kiyotaka Ishimaru!” Only the man in question would take the question to the uttermost literal and announce himself that formally.

“…What is it?”

“I have something important to discuss.” The moral compass said suspiciously.

“It can’t wait till later?”

If she thought he was acting strange before…“I-I don’t know. I-I think I escaped but I don’t know when next I’ll be watched.” He looked in every direction.

“Watched?” She thought he’d lost it, before remembering something like that had been going on around her. “Oh, I did notice that.” The strange men spread across campus. “They didn’t seem much of a problem; those guys are watching everyone.”

“It’s not the same. I’ve been getting into strange accidents lately and they’re never far behind!” Kiyotaka heaved. If she didn’t know better, she’d think him paranoid.

“You want me to get rid of them?”

He rejected the offer. “I would, but you have other duties to be performing. From Junko.”

Mukuro contracted her eyebrows. She followed Kiyotaka when he led her away from her group to a more secluded area in the forest. “Why my sister?” Mukuro asked.

“I am one of Junko’s faithful despairs, just like you.” He declared.

“I-Is this joke, Taka?” The logistics of that were…were absurd. “…Junko’s been gone for months.”

“And replaced with Ryoko Otonashi, I’m well aware. As for when,” H-He knows about Ryoko? How… “Around the first quarter of the school year.”

Mukuro titled he head, slackjawed. All she could ask was “Why wasn’t I told?”
He shrugged. “I don’t understand either, but I’m sure your sister has her reasons.” Kiyotaka handed her a notebook, identical to Ryoko’s “Have this.”

Just as Mukuro motioned to open it, Kiyotaka stopped her. “Junko instructed that you should only read it on your birthday.”

“Our birthday? Junko hates that day. She gets mad at me for just mentioning it.” Mukuro said bewildered.

“Those were my instructions.” Was Kiyotaka’s answer. “Now if you’ll excuse me.” He left Mukuro to her own intense confusion.

The soldier stared long at the journal. “What’s going on here?”

Makoto surfaced out of the pool. Quick shakes of his head spat out droplets of water from his scruffy hair. Fortunately, there wasn’t anyone around to annoy with his dog-like slushing. “Whew.” He floats in the mega-sized pool…scratch that, the facility was more akin to a miniature water park now. The elaborately designed slides leading to the water were cool…the artificial palm trees at the edge of the pool were also a nice touch…but…the dolphin-shaped fountains were going off the deep end. Water sprinkled off the snouts of the sculptures and into the pool. Aesthetic but expensive. Though not nearly as much as the arguably the biggest attraction in the laboratory.

On one side of the wall, concrete had been replaced by an aquarium tank. Schools of fish, big and small swam, wading in and out of the green kelp. Curious critters poked against the glass. Equally curious humans did the same from the other side.

“At least…the kids will love this place.” Makoto smiles. The gesture strains considerably when his gaze falls on the most out of place addition to the park.

The donut stall.

Makoto tried his best not to complain but, “Come on, Asahina.” You’re only playing up the donut girl image like this. Speaking of the swimming pro, he searched just in time to witness Aoi launch herself off the high springboard. He captures every flip and spin of her lithe body as the swimming goddess dives into her natural habitat.

His earlier disappointment in his classmate’s stereotypical behavior’s blown away by the splash. She surfaces a moment later and finds him.

He gives a small wave and she’s swimming over at a pace neither nor the fish in the tank could match. “You’re watching me too?” She pouts.

Makoto blushes and vehemently denies the accusation. “I think you might’ve the wrong idea about all the looks.” At least in his case. “That dive was crazy. I’d heard you were amazing but seeing it in person…I couldn’t look away.”

“Oh.” She nervously replies. “You’d see more if you came to swimming classes ever.”

He didn’t? News to him. “I’ve been missing out. If I get to see that every day, I’ll definitely come.”

“Yes sure know how to make a girl feel special. I can see why you have so many fans~” She teases.
“Ah…come on now.” He splashes the tanned girl with water. Bad move, because he’s blown back by her return stroke. He sucks in the stream of water and coughs it back out.

“That was a bit much.” He said. Yup, there was no hope in beating Aoi in anything concerning water. If you can’t beat em, join em. “Could you teach me how to dive like that?”

Aoi coughed out a laugh. “Probably not. I make it look easy but it’s tough…and really dangerous. And uh…Kuzuryu-kun and Sayaka will kill me if I encourage you, Mr. Daredevil.”

Makoto’s ahoge deflated. “Are they my parents?”

“You can’t really blame them.” Aoi peers down to his chest, surprisingly more toned that she expected of the boy. But what really caught her attention was… “What’s with that scar?”

Makoto instinctively covered the lightning-shaped indent.

“Don’t be a wuss, Makoto. Let me see.” Aoi’s superior strength peeled off his protection. “Did you ever get in a fight?”

He had no idea. “I don’t remember it much, but I think it happened when I was a kid.”

“You got into trouble back then too? huh. Sheesh, Leon was right calling you clumsy.” What was Leon saying about him?

His thoughts dispersed when Aoi trailed her fingers down the scar, an intrigued look on her face.

“You’re not…weirded out?” Makoto asked, the swimmer’s hair brushing against his chin.

Closely, her eyes found his and her smile dispelled any of his worries. “Scars are cool. They show you’ve had different experiences. Look at Sakura. Haven’t you ever thought of what she did to get those?”

“It’d be rude to ask.” But…yeah, he’d always thought the martial artist’s wound made her look seriously tough.

“Yeah it is. Sakura’s real shy about them. Glad to see you’re not though. Just…don’t be so reckless all the time.”

He smiled back. “I’ll do my best.”

Click

A flash and shutter of the camera had the two turning to the pool’s edge. There was Mahiru Koizumi, fully clothed and dry, but looking as accomplished as an Olympic swimmer.

Click

Click

She just kept going. “Bit of a raunchy shot, but it’ll sell.”

Makoto and Aoi faced each other again, now fully aware of their compromising position. With cherry-red faces, apparent even on the dark-skinned girl, they parted like the red sea.

“K-Koizumi-san!” His implied plea went unheard.
“Sorry, Makoto. I don’t delete pictures and natural shots like those are the best. I’m only doing the job you gave me.”

He hated himself sometimes.

Ryoko sat at the cafeteria. It was dinner, but she wasn’t eating, so much as she was picking at her food. A glance across her showed Chihiro wasn’t in the mood either. “Not gonna eat?”

“You aren’t either.” He replied with a frown she’d grown accustomed to. How long ago was it since she’d seen him happy?

“Anything good happen today?” She dared to ask.

“You think?”

“I’d like to hope. There’s no reason for both of us to be unhappy.”

Ever the sweetheart, he tore himself away from his own stress out of consideration, even if temporarily. “Did Yasuke hurt you again?”

“I don’t even know myself.” That phrase could be used in so many ways… “My problem’s nothing I can solve…all I can do is trust him.”

“Kyoko said that I shouldn’t. That I should move away from Makoto.” He hung his head.

“She’s the detective, isn’t she? Sounds like good advice.”

“The two of you don’t like him. I’ve always wondered why.” He chuckled. “Makoto was the first to accept me. I thought he would think I was disgusting when I told him my secret, but he didn’t…even.” Chihiro blinked, then shook his head. “He treated me like I was normal.”

“To put it another way ‘he didn’t even care’. That’s what you meant to say, right?” Ryoko rested a palm on her cheek.

“He called me his favorite.” It said so much…or so little, that this was the last thread the programmer could cling to. With a flick of the wrist, it was easily clipped.

“So he did. What’s he done to prove that, lately?”

Chihiro slammed his hands on the table. Small and frail they were, they barely made a racket. He scurried away leaving her there without word.

…

Ryoko didn’t touch her food. She grabbed both her and Chihiro’s trays and moved to the kitchen. She washed her hands in the sink, oblivious to the smile that crept on her face. That is, until the mirror atop the sink caught her attention. In the reflection, a strawberry-blonde with animal hairclips stared back at her.

…

He stood at the center of a dimly lit room. The black-white floor tiles were ordered like a chessboard. There were multiple exits, each had a curtain draped over them.
The fabric of the middle door’s ruffled as the clumsy nurse walked in, dragging a white bag with her. “S-Sorry I’m late. I grabbed lunch and dinner…hehe.”

He held out a hand as Mikan took a step.

Mikan blinked, the giggled in understanding. She tiptoed to the side and cut across to reach him. “I brought dumplings.” Mikan’s bandaged arm fished for food and held it out in front of the ex-council president.

Slowly, he picked the dumpling up, holding it to his face. Then, he threw the dessert over and behind him. It landed on a black title. A fraction of a second later, sharp-tipped needles sprung forth, piercing the pastry and raising it to the air. The filling spilled out of the indents and dripped to the floor.

Mikan’s hands moved to her flushed cheeks, drool falling from her mouth as she giggled at the scene. Both at what could have been moments before, and what will be in the near future.

Soshun’s red eyes shimmered in the dark.

The nurse wrapped his arm around his and leaned into his chest. “Only a few more days, and we’ll give them all what they deserve.”

“It’s getting cold, huh?” Chiaki noted, chomping on a blue ice-cream bar. Seated on the bench besides her was the ever-so-fluffy Nagito.

“We’re lucky it’s been this warm so far.” The luckster said, half-focused between the portable console held firmly in his hands and munching on his own popsicle. Between the classmates was a cooler containing loads of them that Nagito got ‘somehow’. “That wasn’t a pun.”

“I’m sure.” Chiaki’s fingers pressed away on her game.

A shadow suddenly blocked the rays of the dipping sun. Chiaki lifted her head upwards to meet him. Her ice cream bar fell to the floor as her mouth opened wide.

Nagito’s reaction was less pronounced. He observed the anomaly with scientific intrigue.

“Kamukura…kun?”

The brunette stood in front of them in his usual suited uniform. The only (astounding) difference was the loss of his long locks. He looked just like…. “Hinata-kun.” Chiaki mouthed.

“It is easier to move around this way.” Apparently, he thought that was suffice for an explanation. By his standards, it probably did.

“Nagito and I were playing a game. Wanna join?” Chiaki shifted to the side, creating more space in the middle.

Hinata wordlessly sat down, his fingers folded and locked together.

“Something the matter, Hinata?” Chiaki asked.

“No. It’s nothing for you to worry about.” The red-eyed body said. “More importantly, if you’re bent on calling me by my former name, then use Hajime.”
Hajime… “Okay. Hajime, it is.” Chiaki beamed.

The bag of ice cream rustled. The duo looked to Nagito holding out two bars of ice cream “It’s insolent of me to ask, but…would you care for some.”

…

“I would. Thank you.” The stoic accepted Nagito’s generosity, to the shock of both. He grabbed both treats and passed one to Chiaki. The pinkette watched him eat one as if it were perfectly normal.

A smile crept onto her face as she thought.

'Everything's going to be alright.'
Gundham Tanaka was the first to notice.

“The ominous wind blows.” The breeder’s purple scarf blew majestically in the gale. The clouds formed, obscuring the sun, and the animals behind him, of all varieties squawked, barked, roared and shivered in terror.

What manner of chaos was about befall the academy that would make even the supreme overlord of darkness’ tremble with fear. “Ah.” He notices, then relaxes. “It’s been a while since that last happened, hasn’t it?”

“I can’t thank you enough for going through with my idea.” Makoto apologized to Sayaka’s manager, for the abrupt arrangement.

“Adapting on the fly is part of my job description.” The suited man waved off the sentiment. “If all goes well, I’ll be the one needing to give my thanks. One concert broadcasted to the nation and abroad. I know people who’d kill for this publicity.”

Is that so? Sayaka did tell him showbusiness was tough. “Is Maizono-san here?”

“She’s practicing with the girls elsewhere.”

That’s good. He wasn’t supposed to be out and about doing his job. But…he couldn’t just sit still hours before the start of the event!

“Is there anything else you might need?” Makoto noted down whatever the manager might require. Without his e-handbook, he had to do things the old-fashioned way, through hand. Once finished, the two split off. “He seemed like a busy guy.” Then again, who wasn’t nowadays?

Makoto scanned the set. Big…didn’t begin to describe it. He’d been to the idol’s concerts before, but on the seats looking up. Now he was on the stage looking down at the wide expanse, leading all the way to the school grounds. It was dizzying. “Maizono’s amazing.” He could never stand up in front of that many people.

Right then, a familiar head of black hair and white clothes caught the boy’s eye. “Is that, Tsumiki-san?” It looked likes she was leaving “Where’d she come out from?” And how’d Makoto miss her?
The luckster nearly called out to the nurse, but remembered he was supposed to be off-duty. If Mikan finds him, he’s a dead man.

“Hi, Makoto.”

The brunet looked around, finding nobody but workers on-site.

“In your pocket!” His phone vibrated.

“Alter ego, how’d you get on my phone?” He asked, taking the cell out of his pocket.

“Oh…hi, Makoto!” Alter ego repeats after a brief silence. “I got the wrong person, so I thought I should try again.”

This must have been something his other self knew that he didn’t. Okay. “Thanks. I appreciate the consideration.”

“To answer your question: I can transfer myself into other electronic devices…as long as I can get a signal.”

Makoto gulped “…Don’t do anything illegal, you hear?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Not unless you wanted me to.”

“Makoto.”

He squeaks and jolts at the voice. Mikan, at some point, had gotten in front of him. “Hi, Tsumiki. What’s up?”

“Nothing much. I just…had a feeling.” The nurse says, vaguely. Her eyes scan everywhere on his body. “Looks like you're unhurt...for now.”

For now? “I’m fine...why do you ask?”

“Hehe…it’s kind of irritating to hear that from you. Do you want me to make a list of all your admittances to the infirmary?” She giggles, but a shadow falls on her face.

“I-I’m sorry!”

Peko walked down the stairs to the main floor alongside Fuyuhiko. The silver-haired girl carrying a small stack of papers.

“You’re nervous.” She casually remarks.

Fuyuhiko doesn’t deny his childhood friend’s remark. His shaky steps were proof enough.

“Tomorrow’s the big day.”

“Are we prepared?”

“Going by Makoto’s itinerary…I’d say yeah. Fuck, it all feels like it’ll blow up though.” The bulletin board came into view.

“It’s normal to feel that way.” The duo waited for the crowd of students surrounding the board to thin.
“What’s that you’ve got?” Fuyuhiko asked.

“Notices and advertisements for my dojo. Ogami-san also requested I hang hers up as well.”

“Shit, really. By tomorrow this whole place will look like downtown.” The blonde snickered, excitement was in the air. His features warped from pleased to puzzled. Peko followed his line of sight quickly enough to see another averting their eyes away from the pair.

“Hey, Peko. Have you noticed the strange looks at us?”

“I have.” Along with multiple expressions accompanying. Mainly the smarmy grins or tinted cheeks.

“Yahoo!” Two arms slung over the yakuzas’ necks, bringing to the invader who now stood in the middle. Peko would have flipped Ibuki Mioda on accident if she hadn’t heard the call first.

Unlike the young master. “You crazy broad, you trying to give me a heart attack!?”

“Oho~ So Peko’s not the only one who makes Fuyu’s heart go doki-doki and explode! Maybe KuzuPeko could become IbuKuzuPeko!” The musician wiggled her brows suggestively.

“What the fuck did she just say?” The young master sought her to clarify. Peko was unqualified for the position.

“Ibuki, what’s going on here?” Peko removed herself and Fuyuhiko from the energetic girl’s surprisingly strong grip. “And what’s that you’ve got?” The swordswoman glimpsed the book that hung off Ibuki’s hand.

With a teasing grin, the wild Ibuki said “These babies have been flying like hotcakes. Wanna reaaaaad?”

“Give me that!” Fuyuhiko swipes the text. “Huh? Peko…this you on the front page?”

The bespectacled beauty joined her master’s viewing. “There is a striking resemblance.” The ‘Adults Only’ disclaimer was intriguing.

Fuyuhiko flipped the page, soon enough another sharing his countenance came up. The setting was ordinary, resembling Hope’s Peak’s classrooms. When the characters began to speak, Peko and Fuyuhiko confirmed – to their confusion – that they were the characters in the pictures. The names were slightly different, but without a doubt, it was them.

“What is the purpose of this?” Peko wondered.

“Page 9 and on.” Ibuki’s shoulders shook.

Peko’s answers indeed came on the next page, where she closed in on the boy and-…

“WHAT THE EFFFING…” Fuyuhiko, tomato-red in the face cursed loudly enough to draw the attention of everyone else in the hallway. Peko handled it little better, just quieter.

He quickly skimmed through the pages, thoroughly unprepared for the contents. He closed the book, flabbergasted. “I-Who would do this? Why would they do this?!” Fuyuhiko’s voice lacked its usual rage-filled connotations. Instead his high-pitched tone sounded every bit the way he looked.

Ibuki twirled her fingers. Fuyuhiko turned the cursed item back to the front where the author’s name was signed. “I-I’m going to kill him. I think.”
“Peko shook her head. “Even as a joke, a committee member shouldn’t speak those words aloud.” Fortunately, she wasn’t in the committee.

“Peko, h-how can you be so calm?!” Fuyuhiko squeaked, pulling at his collar.

“Yeah, you know just about everyone’s got a copy. It’ll be selling tomorrow at the festival too.” Ibuki interjected.

“They are just crude, meaningless drawings. Please hang these, would you?” The swordswoman pawning her fliers on the two, then turned her back.

“Where are you going?”

“The library. I’ll get to the bottom of this, young master.” Peko narrowed her eyes. “And before the day is over, I’ll have the one responsible grovelling at your feet.”

The students in her way parted like the red sea.

‘What’s left of him when I’m through.’

“Akane…do you feel that?” Nekomaru stopped his massage.

“Yeah, coach.” Akane lifted her head from the bed. “I can’t put my finger on it, but I’m getting pumped.”

“What do you think it is?”

“I dunno…but my gut tells me someone we know is gonna die.”

“Any guesses?”

“Makoto.”

“That would happen…Come to think of it. It’s been a few days since he collapsed. It’s about time for another incident huh?”

Kyoko wished she hadn’t stumbled across what she did. The rare sight of three of her least favorite men in the world engaged in a fervent discussion. Makoto Naegi, the littlest one was expectedly nervous, talking to Jin Kirigiri, the headmaster and her father, along with his accomplice, Koichi Kizakura. It felt fair to call the trio “in cahoots”, because nothing good ever came from them. Worse when they were together. Naturally, Kyoko had little choice but to eavesdrop.

“Tomorrow’s the big day. How are you feeling, Naegi-kun?”

“Stressed out…but better! I haven’t done too much for the past few days.” The boy held a journal in both hands. A physical one, no doubt breaking his commitment to Fuyuhiko.

“Ah, I heard about your accident. I appreciate your sincerity, I really do, but let’s avoid any problems like that in the near future.”
“Yeah, I already got a stern-talking to from Kuzuryu-kun. He also demoted me.” Makoto hung his head low.

“Cheer up. Ladies love a hard-working man.” Koichi said a bit too loudly. Kyoko had a feeling why when a keen eye was directed her way. “Well, some girls might be tough to impress. At least, consider your talent promotion a consolation.”

“Talent promotion?” Makoto said what she was thinking.

Jin and Koichi shared odd looks. “Did you forget our talk? One of your rewards was your candidacy as the next student council president.”

That…well, from her father’s perspective, made sense.

“That makes no sense. I-I’m not ready for that position. I don’t even have the talent!” Indeed, that was a horrible decision.

“You’d be surprised.” Koichi took a swig out of a bottle that no doubt contained alcohol. “The qualifications require social competence, organizational aptitude and possessing a variety of skills. How well you conducted this little festival council was also a test. With how good things are looking, I’d say you passed.” The scout said.

“Let’s not jinx us now.” Her father chuckled. “Hey, Kyoko, what do you think of Naegi-kun’s progress?”

…Drat.

Kyoko stepped into view, arms folded as she put on her usual pokerface.

“Hi, Kirigiri-san.” Makoto greeted with a big smile, oblivious to her spying.

Kyoko nodded curtly. “What were you three talking about, suspiciously?”

Koichi snorted.

Makoto hadn’t picked up on it, evidently. “I, uh, might become the new council president. Crazy huh?”

“Certain things are.” She let her words hang in the air as she spied the book in his hands. “What’s that you’re carrying?”

“Kuzuryu-kun took my handbook away. I still wanted to help so…I’ve been noting down what I think might be useful for tomorrow. Like supplies and stuff.” Makoto said nervously, like a child having been caught in the act.

“Kuzuryu’s message was clear, you aren’t to be working at all. Hand it over.” Kyoko outstretched her gloved hand.

Makoto’s ahoge drooped, along with his shoulders. He begrudgingly handed over the journal.

Makoto’s ahoge drooped, along with his shoulders. He begrudgingly handed over the journal. Kyoko opened the small book. The first page was already filled. Good grief-

....

.......
“Oh?”

The temperature dropped.

“What peculiar handwriting you have, Naegi-san.” Kyoko smiled. The air grew colder and colder. Sub-zero temperatures. But looking at that smile had Makoto sweating like it was mid-summer. "Or would you prefer to be called, 'Mr. X.'?"

Icy Hot.

Koichi’s bottle gracelessly fell from his grip and shattered on the floor. The man’s fingers still curled together in a drinking motion, as if his flask remained in hand.

He knew.

“Naegi-kun.” Jin started, grabbing the boy’s attention. The headmaster gazed far off in the distance as he wore the smile of a man who’d reached enlightenment. “I’m not sure if you know this – ah you might’ve crossed this detail when you researched my daughter, but I’ll mention it in the critical case that you didn’t. My father-in-law trained Kyoko in the martial arts. She was a black belt by age 12, or so I hear.”

He knew.

Makoto’s words were slow “That’s…cool, but why bring that up so suddenly?”

The third and most involved party, did not know.

Jin stared down at him. “Oh, you’re still here?”

“M-Master. I’m getting a really bad feeling all of a sudden.” Toko Fukawa shuddered, and it wasn’t from the cold winds.

“Be quiet. I’m concentrating.” Byakuya Togami stared intensely at his cards, seated in a round table with two other of his peers.

“Don’t be too harsh with her. My keen senses are on high alert as well,” Celestial Ludenberg brimmed with confidence. “and it certainly isn’t due to the impossible chance of me losing this game of ours.”

The servants (and Toko) surrounding them weren’t remotely as self-assured. Their instincts were telling them to run away, but were suppressed by a single command.

“Still yourselves.” Sonia Nevermind ordered, although her calculating eyes were fixed on the Ultimate Gambler, as to not miss the slightest trickery. “Braving terror without losing composure for your masters, is proof that you’re the pinnacle of servants. Consider this your final exam.”

“Besides…nothing could ever happen to us. We’re rich.” Byakuya smirked.

“Indeed. Everyone knows misfortune never befalls the wealthy.” Sonia giggled.

“Hear, hear.” Celes interlocked her fingers

“Honestly, it’s probably just Makoto again.”
“Most likely.”
“Even I wouldn’t bet against that.”

It was in the middle of the afternoon. HPA, which should have been bustling with students in preparation for tomorrow, had a shortage of individuals roaming the halls.

Windows were locked.

Doors were barred or nailed shut.

Like animals instinctively running from a natural disaster.

It began.

Makoto Naegi screamed bloody murder as he jetted through the halls. He dared to look back to see Kyoko Kirigiri hot on his heels, with a chair in one hand.

“Fufu…Why are you screaming, Naegi-kun? I just want to try a few moves on you, it’ll be painless.” She cracked her fingers. Her amethyst eyes were hollow. “Your death, that is.”

“SOMEBODY HELP!”

The boy’s cries were heard, but none would dare respond. Even men who weren’t afraid to die, were afraid to die by Kyoko Kirigiri’s hands. It was much safer indoors.

As proof, Kyoko launched the furniture straight at him. Makoto ducked just in time, but the chair flew like a missile…only to be slashed to pieces upon contact with a force as devastating as the mad woman behind Makoto.

In the distance, he saw an unlikely savior briskly walking towards him. He recognized those silver braids anywhere. “Pekoyama-san! Save me!”

Makoto wasn’t sure what tipped him off. That menacing look in her vampiric-red eyes. The menacing way her sword was already drawn. The menacing pink bloodstain on the tip.

Or maybe it was the purple letters literally spelling [menacing] that hovered around her.

“Oh, You’re approaching me? Instead of running away, you’re coming closer?” The inflection in Pekoyama’s tone sent shivers running down his spine.

“It’s not like I can stop!!!” Kyoko was gaining on him.

“…Then come as close you’d like.”

Makoto slipped on a banana peel in his way, sliding on his ass past Pekoyama’s side, along with the sword that swung in a horizontal arc where his head would have been.

Strands of brown hair fell as Makoto froze, wide-eyed. He slowly turned back to see Pekoyama’s death glare.

He scurried to his feet and sprinted off.

Kyoko caught up to the swordswoman. Two of Hope's Peak's scariest women wordlessly exchanged glances, then, hunted their prey.

The chase escalated up to the third floor. Makoto’s legs cramping in pain. It was a miracle he’d
kept up his pace.

“Why why why is this happening?” He panicked. He didn’t have the stones to look back anymore. The luckster would flat give up if he saw both girls on his tail.

Fortunately, there were still souls brave enough to wander the school. Leon and Mondo were a sight for sore eyes.

He was saved

“You guys, they’re trying to kill me!” Makoto yelled.

The baseball star and biker snapped at the urgency of the call. “Say what?” “What bozo’s trying to mess with my buddy?!”

Leon gripped a baseball bat while Mondo cracked his knuckles. Then they got a good look at what they were dealing with.

The redhead’s bat dropped to the floor.


“Uh yeah, I don’t mess with chicks.” Mondo looked away and went the other direction.

“Cowards! I won’t forget this!” He couldn’t run forever, and he had no plan. When in doubt, there was only one thing he could rely on: His talent.

Makoto picked a random door on the side to run into, hoping it was open and shut it quickly behind him. He was thankful the school had locks from the inside.

He caught his breath, staggering away from the door.

“Makoto?”

Huffing, he turned to the side. Mahiru Koizumi and Hiyoko Saionji stared at him in wonder. There were a few other students there he didn’t recognize. All were plastering pictures onto a wall, likely Mahiru’s.

“Hi-Hi.” Makoto barely managed a greeting.

He yelped at the rattling and banging at the door, backing up to the window at the far back.

“Makoto. Open this door.” Peko said, calmly. “Or we’ll break it down.” Not calm.

Makoto felt all eyes on him. “Please hide me.” He pleaded.

“I’m not sure I understand.” Yet Mahiru raised her patented camera. Her experience, her talent instinctively told her what would happen next needed to be captured. The rest waited with bated breath.

Hiyoko, who’d recently underwent a growth spurt, tiptoed to the door in her yellow kimono. Her fingers hung on the lock.

Makoto gaped. “Don’t do it.”

The little devil’s pearly whites flared. “Makoto-onii’s riight here~.”
Mahiru’s camera flashed when the door opened.

“Where is he?” Kyoko seethed as she stepped in the room.

Hiyoko, who’d taken her eyes off the luckster for a second, stared at the open window. “Well damn.”

His odds of survival were higher jumping from the third floor than remaining in that room. Makoto landed on his feet with catlike agility, right in front of the courtyard where Sonia Nevermind, Celestia Ludenberg and Byakuya Togami were having lunch. Lunch served to them by finely dressed butlers and maids. And Toko.

Once again, all eyes were on him, ranging from glares to bewilderment.

“‘Servants’” “Fukawa.”

At the command, the extras each lifted small signs with numbers written in bold: 8-8-8-8-6

Are they…rating me? “Gee, thanks.” Makoto grumbled, not expecting help here. “Togami-kun, shouldn’t you be working?”

The heir gave him a pitying look. “Bold of you to assume you have time for a lecture.” His eyes flew upwards and Makoto ran. Not 3 seconds later, a sword Impacted the ground where he stood. Peko clicked her tongue to find nothing when the cloud of dust cleared. Only fissures on the ground.

“‘Servants’” “Fukawa.”

All 10s.

“Thank you.” Peko bowed then looked to the window. Mahiru’s camera capturing everything and Kyoko looking down. The detective nodded and left in the other direction. Peko nodded as well, and chased from the back.

They’d pincer him.

Makoto came across Aoi, Sakura and Yasuhiro when he ran by the side of the school. “Hi Makoto!” The swimmer waved.

“Hi Asahina.” He passed them. Through the combination of fatigue and previous disappointment, he’d forgotten he could have asked the two girls to help with his 30-minute-long predicament.

Peko came through next.

“Impressive how he is evading them.” Sakura commented.

“Yeah. I just learned Makoto was a fast swimmer, but I didn’t think he could run fast too.”

“It be like that sometimes.” Hiro clapped his hands in solemn prayer.

A full hour of running had Makoto on his last legs. He couldn’t run anymore.
“Haa...haa...” He panted, barely able to see what was in front of him…or whom. Makoto walked head first, into the much taller man’s chest, his hands gripping his vest. “Please...help...me.” He sunk to his knees and looked up to see red eyes staring down at him, not unlike the ones belonging to one of his pursuers. They were little happier to see him either.

Izuru Kamukura had no idea what the fuck was going on.

“...you having a workout, Makoto?”

Makoto hadn’t even seen Chiaki by the red-eyed boy’s side, but he wasn’t going to complain. Not when Kyoko and Peko found him yet again.

“Are you through running?” The silver-haired girl stated; exhaustion clear in her voice.

Kyoko was silent, but her ragged breaths suggested she was faring little better.

Makoto couldn’t even get up. He just sat on the floor with his hands pressed to the ground behind him.

“So it’s Peko and Kirigiri-san this week, huh?” Chiaki asked Makoto.

“He’s gone too far this time.” Peko answered.

“I don’t disagree with the notion, but I am interested in finding out why.” Izuru interjected. Had the girls been in a clear state of mind, they may have inquired as to who he was. Even Kyoko didn’t recognize him after the change in appearance.

“Um. I think you two should calm down. You look like you’re gonna put him in the hospital.”

“That was the plan.” Kyoko growled.

The seniors looked to him for an explanation. Makoto could only shake his head. “They won’t tell me anything.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?!” Makoto flinched backwards from the rare show of emotion from the detective. While not to the same degree, Peko shared those sentiments.

He…must have said something, done something horribly wrong for the ordinarily calm and composed girls to be this angry with him.

Chiaki looked to the reserve course for assistance.

Izuru was disinclined to acquiesce, because Makoto was frankly, an asshole.

“Chiaki’s right. Everyone should just cool off.” A white-haired boy Makoto had never seen before stepped between him and Kyoko.

“Now is not the time, Nagito.” Peko said.

“I know it’s no place for trash like me to get involved in disputes between Ultimates, but you two aren’t conducting yourselves with your usual grace, It pains me to say.”

“What?”

“First off…do we really have the time to be exerting ourselves this way. The festival is tomorrow. Is ‘putting Naegi in a hospital’ really the best use of your valuable time?”
They seemed to be heavily debating that.

“Second…are you sure you don’t have the wrong guy?”

“I’m positive that it was Makoto. I was thorough with interrogating my source.” Hifumi was presently incapacitated as a result.

Kyoko closed hers, saying nothing, predicting the following question: “Which Naegi-kun?”

The bodyguard tensed, then stared at the apologetic and confused brunette cowering away from her. She sheathed her wooden sword.

“Much better.” The white-haired boy said. “As for you, Kirigiri-san. I haven’t forgotten the promise I made to you. Leave things to me and I’ll get it done by the end of the day, your contact is the same, is it not?”

The detective slowly nodded and turned away. The clicks of her heels fading with distance. The swordswoman followed.

“Hmmm…that was intense, and I still don’t get what happened.” Chiaki cocked her head to the side.

“Like I told Kirigiri, just leave everything to me, Chiaki.” The boy with the green jacket reached for Makoto’s arm and pulled him off the ground. “Naegi-kun and I will be busy. Will you two be fine together?”

“What are you implying?” The pinkette puffed her cheeks.

“Nothing at all~” He replied, dragging Makoto along with him.

“Thanks for helping me back there but…I didn’t catch your name.” Makoto said.

“This is the first time we’ve been introduced. I’m your senpai, Nagito Komaeda. It’s nice to finally meet you, Naegi-kun.”

“Is it over?” Ryoko peeked out of the girl’s washroom. Students were flooding the halls and going back to work, acting as if they hadn’t heard the chaos.

*That* wasn’t something for her to get involved with.

It wasn’t something for anyone to get involved with.

“Guess I’ll take a look around.” Lacking her usual enthusiasm, she trudged along. Along her aimless wandering, Ryoko came across Isshiki Madarai near the school gates. The bodyguard was engaged in a conversation with a blonde man, carrying with him a black case that was nearly as long as he was tall, and a shorter pink-haired woman.

“Our expulsions are really going to be rescinded. No bullshit?” Ryoko heard the girl speak.

“Just like mine was, Naegi will make it happen in the next term.” Isshiki replied. He looked to the other male.

“It’s a deal. Do it, Yoi-chan.”

‘Yoi’ handed over the case to Isshiki.
Their conversation ended and the two unknowns turned back. Isshiki flipped around, facing the school. He found her.

“Ryoko Otonashi…Have you seen Naegi?”

“You…didn’t?” Most of the school ought to have.

“I was running errands…and visiting old acquaintances.” Isshiki pulled on the black strap that attached the case to his back.

‘Those two?’ Ryoko spied the direction the strange couple had left in. Oh well. “Naegi got in trouble and was running away.”

“Was it that time of the week already?”

Evidently.

“Madarai-san, could I ask a favor?”

“What?”

“I don’t know you. But you know me, it’s written in my notebook. I wanted to hear your side of the story. Why did you chase me that time?”

Reminded of the past, Isshiki examined her from head-to-toe. “You were connected to the disappearance of the student council and Junko Enoshima.” He snarled.

“I’m sick of hearing that name.” Ryoko’s hands balled into a fist. “Why can’t she just go away already?”

“Will that be all?” Isshiki asked.

“One more thing. You…have brothers. Twins.”

“We are octuplets.” He corrected her. “Or at least, we were.”

“What was it like? Having multiples who were identical to you.”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“How could you live trapped in someone else’s shadow?” Ryoko hung her head, eyes shadowed by her hair.

“With my brothers, I never had to stand out. It was convenient for us that we were perceived as identical by everyone else. But as long as one person recognized me, I had no reason to complain anyway.”

“Who…”

“My brothers.” He said solemnly. “We were octuplets, but we lived our entire lives together, connected and formed bonds. We would never mistake each other. Is there nobody like that in your life?”

If there was such a person who accepted her, she would treasure them more than anything.

Ryoko’s mouth parted. “So that’s how he feels.” She could understand why Chihiro was so
attached to Makoto, so blinded by him.

“Thank you, Madarai-san. Good luck with finding Naegi…” She passed him by, deep in thought.

“Odd girl.” The bodyguard watched her retreating form. The conversation unearthed memories of his own. “I’d almost forgotten. There were others who tried to understand us…”

“You were here, Yosshiki?” Soshun Murasame said, entering the council office.

"Nisshiki."

"I was close this time!"

Not really. “I had to settle a squabble with Someya and Umesawa. They were fighting over the rights to stuffed animals…again.” He pointed to the torn plushie resting on the stand.

“Those two… despite appearances, they should act their ages.” Soshun palmed his face. “Sorry you had to go through that.”

Nisshiki didn’t think much of it. “Freezing conflicts and preventing harm from befalling you all, is my only job.”

Soshun brushed off his reasoning and posed a question of his own. “Hey, are you Sasshiki?”

“Nisshiki.” He repeated, rising to the president's usual joke.

"Why don’t you guys help me out and wear numbers on your shirts?” He said, with a confident smile and hands on his hips.

“Over my dead body.” Nisshiki growled.

Soshun laughed.

“What?”

“It’s just…you’ve got an outdated way of speaking. Like a bushido.”

“Hell of a thing to hear from you.”

The president coughed. “Fair enough. No samurai jokes from me, if you promise to hold back on your end.” It appeared that was a chink in the armor for a man whose appearance and namesake was traditional Japanese. “It would have been nice if you were the only Madarai who talked that way. I might’ve been able to tell you siblings apart by speech.”

He’d never stopped trying. “Why bother?”

“Even if you’re keeping a secret from everyone else…there’s no reason to lie to your friends, right?” Soshun raised a pointed finger.

Nisshiki disagreed. “I’m just a bodyguard.”

“By taking care of the brats, you’ve done more work that Shouji or Sousuke today.” The way Soshun’s eyes widen, Nisshiki figured he’d come up with an idea. “Ah, but if you’re looking to
lend a hand, I’ve got tons of apologies that need to be written. Did you hear about what happened to the gymnasium?!”

“I did. What a spectacular exam.” In many ways.

“Rumors had it a member from that troublesome class 77 was involved. I never hear the end of it from those guys.” Soshun groaned.

“How much have you been saddled with this time?”

“I’m about halfway done. It’ll take me the rest of the week to finish the other half.”

Next…week? “Perhaps I shall call my brothers and have us assist you.”

"I would pay you if I could." Soshun beamed with gratitude. "Or as thanks… I'll figuring out how to distinguish you brothers. Until then,” Soshun continued. He doesn't give up. “I’m counting on you, Nisshiki.”

“I swear it. I won’t sit by and allow a tragedy like that to fall upon the school again.” And it won’t. He bet on Makoto's ideals and…and he would play his part in seeing those goals achieved.

“Haaa…this feels amazing.” Makoto made waves swimming in the hotsprings. “I’ve got to go again.” To Nekomaru’s laboratory. He ‘woke’ up in the middle of Nekomaru performing ‘IT” on him. It was everything he imagined and more. Every motion made him feel like he was on cloud nine.

“I’m sure it does after the workout Peko gave you. What did you do?” Nagito Komaeda hung back, near the edge of the springs, most of his body submerged into the water.

Makoto swam to and fro the other luckster. Only half his face on the surface. “I might’ve commissioned an artistic depiction of her and Fuyuhiko in one of Hifumi’s stories.”

“Even then, her response was exaggerated. The Peko I knew would never get angry over herself, and if Fuyuhiko was involved, she’d conduct herself efficiently but dispassionately. She’s changed, to take a childish prank so personally.”

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing, really. Peko used to be so emotionally detached, calling herself a tool. If she can get mad enough at me to chase me all throughout the school, that’s progress.” Makoto said cheerily.

“I take it you are responsible for that progress. I’ve heard the stories, in my absence.”

Now there was a story. Makoto swam and paused next to the white-haired teen, his bare arms folded on the edge as he shot him an intrigued smile. “Where’ve you been all this time, Nagito?”

“A trip around the world.”

Makoto pauses. “Around the world…” with clouded eyes he repeated. “It must have been amazing to have the chance to go wherever you wanted.”

Nagito didn’t think so. “Not really, the travel on the way back was the most eventful part. Compared to Hope’s Peak, everywhere else is a downgrade.”

“Hmm, so you think the academy’s the peak of what the world has to offer?”
“Isn’t it? A treasure trove of talent nurtured and developed so they can spread all their hope to the world.” He totally ignored my pun. Rude. “Hope is great.” Nagito said with red-tinted cheeks.

“I’m sorry. If I knew you were so passionate about the school, I would have made sure there was a lab for you. Although, even as the lucky student myself, I’m not sure how that could be tested.”

“Shall we brainstorm?”

“Russian roulette? Poker? Magic boxes?”

“Sounds like they conflict with the talent of the ultimate gambler.”

“Where does Celes get off stepping on my turf anyway?” He joked. Darn, he was feeling awesome. Who’d have thought an Ultimate-level massage followed by a hot bath would be so great?

He was even conversing with a guy he barely knew like they’d been friends for years. Admittedly, they’d probably be doing this anyway.

“Really, though, I’m hardly bothered. Observing talent means so much more to me, and you’ve given me a chance to see it happen to the fullest. I tried something similar before I was suspended, but the result wasn’t nearly as grand as this.” Nagito leaned his head back. “If I had to point out one flaw, it’s that the entire thing is a sham.”

Strike to the ego. As the planner, Makoto must ask. “One hell of a flaw. Care to explain?”

“During the interview, you created the illusion that those unfortunate reserve course could become Ultimates if they worked hard enough. A pleasant thought, but don’t you think it’s a little cruel? By bringing them so close to the Ultimates, what you’ve done is let them witness the unbridgeable chasm between them.”

The brunet pushed against the edge and back into the water. His ahoge cut poking out like a shark’s fin, circling Nagito. Makoto’s head resurfaced in front. “That wasn’t my intention. If they have the skill to become Ultimates then that’s great. If they don’t, then they’ll realize that and either try harder or give up. None of that is my responsibility.”

“Even if they were to fall to despair?”

“What?”

Nagito made a face. A tired face. The one you make when asked to repeat a phrase for the 10th time. “If you’re not born with talent, you’ll never possess it. Each and every one of those reserve course students has hit a dead-end from birth, they merely haven’t realized it. It may not happen now, but next year or the year after that. When their hopes and aspirations are dashed, they’ll call this festival a fraud. Blaming you and the academy for their own incompetence. If they riot once, it’ll be easier the second time. It’ll be despair all over again.” He ranted.

Makoto cocked his head to the side. “Oh, was that all?”

“Hm?”

Makoto turned around, moving to Nagito’s side and copying the older boy’s posture. “You’re just theorizing…based on the possibility of there being a next time.”

“There won’t be?”
“There won’t be. Never again.”

“I don't mean to doubt the basis of your confidence, but…I must ask.”

Makoto pressed a vertical finger against his lips as he grinned. “That’s a secret. You’ll find out soon though.”

Nagito shrugged. “Then I’ll drop it, but in exchange, could you answer an alternative question?”

“You’re a really curious guy, Nagito. Reminds me of someone else I know.” A certain nosy, angry-a-lot detective.

“I can’t help it. I’ve been so out of the loop and you appear to be at the center of everything that’s happened at this school.”

“There’s been mostly bad things though…”

Nagito smiled mysteriously and proceeded with his question. “Imagine you’re tens of thousands of feet in the air, on a plane. A tragic accident occurs, the engines blow out and hundreds of passengers are screaming. Everyone is going to die, except you. What would you have done in this scenario?”

“I would save everyone.” Makoto replied immediately. “Just picture it, how happy they would be to escape a life-threatening disaster! – would be my ordinary response, but if they’re doomed either way. I’d make them smile before dying.”

“Smile?”

He raised his hand into the air, spreading his fingers as if to reach for the abstract. "Wouldn't it be picturesque to smile in the final moments, instead of flailing around in terror like animals?”

…

“I understand. Shall we get out? I’m wrinkly.” Nagito stood from the water, fishing for his towel.

“Go ahead, I’d like to stay a little longer.” Makoto wasn’t through with this good, relaxing time yet.

“One more thing.” Makoto looked up to his senior. A boy similar in too many ways. “We lucky students, you and I, haven’t lived very blessed lives, have we?” With that vague comment, Nagito left the baths and Makoto floating in the water.

“…”

—

Kyoko responded to the knock on her door.

“Hi.” Nagito Komaeda waved.

Kyoko bristled. Why? Nagito ranked well within the top 5 dangers in the academy. “I thought you were going to call.”

“Things changed, It was best if we talked in person. May I come in?”
No – is what she’d like to say, but it’d be a problem if they were overheard. Make it quick.” She let him in, and he made himself at home, finding the closest chair to sit. His inquisitive gaze scours the room,

Kyoko was fine standing across him. It was easier to move if he tried anything funny.

“I’ve been thinking on my way over, about whether Naegi-kun was hope or despair…”

“Hold on a minute. You brought this up before. What do those terms entail?”

Nagito was abjectly shocked. “What a strange thing to say, Kirigiri-san. Hope is you. It is you Ultimates that radiate talent, potential and most of all…a shining future. Hope is strength, it’s victory. Hope is progress. A greater hope can devour a weaker hope, but it will never lose to despair. It endures, always moving forward!”

…

It was even more nonsensical than the detective predicted. A pathology, and a dangerous one at that. Not only because of Nagito’s fervor, but the nebulous description he attached to ‘Hope’. These were people he was talking about, but he referred to them as vessels for a concept.

Still, she pressed further. “And despair is…”

“The absence of hope.” How convenient. “Fortunately, despair is like a vacuum, something must fill it. If there is despair, there is hope. The greater the despair, the greater a steppingstone it makes for hope,” Nagito sighed “and that is why Naegi-kun is such a disappointment.”

Kyoko narrowed her eyes “Naegi-kun is despair in your eyes?”

Nagito folded his arms, his expression neutral yet testing. “Not quite. From the feats I heard, I thought he could be the one. The Ultimate Hope I’d been searching for. A hope who could withstand anything and denies all despair. Alas, what I found was marginally different, and that margin made all the difference. He’s impure.”

“Impure?” She really hoped this term was closer to the actual definition.

“I can’t explain it very well, it’s just what I feel. I mentioned progress, but what I refer to is stable, genuine. That requires care. Naegi’s hope is not that. He’s blind to the future, to progress. Whatever he creates is a counterfeit that will eventually collapse. And he does not care. It's all self-satisfaction for him.”

Nagito wasn’t wrong there. He was saying, in his own way, what Kyoko had been for a very long time. It was refreshing that someone agreed for once.

“I suppose you could call him The Ultimate False Hope.” He laughed. Or maybe he didn’t. It lasted such a short while that she wondered why he bothered. Maybe lucky students have a knack for putting on fake pleasantries. “But you know, even that name carries power. This might sound contradictory to what I mentioned earlier, but Naegi-kun has fostered many strong hopes until this point, just like I would expect. I imagine, if someone were to overcome him, they would be the True Ultimate Hope.”

“What…do you mean?”

“I brought up the possibility that this festival may have negative consequences in the future, that a riot would break out. He told me that wouldn’t happen. That it would never happen again.”
Kyoko scoffed. “That sounds like his typical arrogance.”

“He was serious, Kirigiri-san. That wasn’t a bluff. He was confident that it would 'Never.Happen.Again.'”

“On what grounds?” Kyoko asked.

Nagito conveyed transparent disappointment. For someone who worshipped ultimates, he wasn’t afraid to vent his passive aggression. “I thought the Ultimate Detective would have paid more attention.”

Kyoko’s irritation was perfectly blocked by a stoic mask of professionalism.

“Remember what he said on the day of the interview

(It’s unlikely that the rift between the two groups can be mended so easily…but I have hope that this will be the first step to reaching an understanding between the main and reserve courses.)

Naegi-kun claimed to not expect results. This festival was a step in the procedure to the school’s reformation. Why then, was he so confident that another tragedy would never reoccur?” Nagito questioned.

“He’s planning something. Something hidden.” Of course, he was. Why had she forgotten? How could she have forgotten? There was never anything simple about Makoto Naegi. With every action, there was an ulterior motive.

“It’s still just a theory on my part. I do think you should keep an eye on him for tomorrow.” Nagito stood. “That’s all I have to say. In exchange for the information on Enoshima, I hope this suffices.”

“It’s more than enough, thank you.” She was grateful. She would be even moreso if he could get out of her room and let her think things over.

“Then let me do you one more favor.” It wasn’t over yet. Nagito reached into a jacket and procured an item Kyoko was deeply familiar with; Nagito had carried and used it the day they met. “For you, a souvenir from my trip.”

Nagito planted a handgun on the table.

Kyoko glared. “Why?”

“It might come in handy.” Was all he said. It was all he needed to say if she’d paid attention to the conversation.

A greater hope will devour a weaker hope. A great despair will give rise to a greater hope.

“I won’t.”

“That’s up to you. Unlike Naegi-kun, I have no intention of forcing anyone’s hand.” Nagito said ominously, letting it slip that he may have known more than he told her. “Good night, Kirigiri-san.” He was out the door.

Kyoko didn’t move from her spot. Her eyes were glued to the gun. There was no scenario she could think of where she would pull that weapon on a fellow student.

That she could think of.
"How many times have my expectations been betrayed?"

…

(“I hate to admit it, but you're a lot smarter than I am. If you haven’t noticed the gaps by now, it means you haven’t been paying attention.)

‘Why was she always off her game when it came to Naegi? There was a problem with her, and she needed to resolve it, now!

Kyoko Kirigiri, in a miniskirt and heels unbefitting the cold, snowy night, meant business.

The door opened, revealing a lime-haired woman wearing a long scarf that covered her mouth. Her most distinct feature, was the unorthodox – yet no doubt advanced, judging from the screen on the helm – wheelchair she was strapped to. “Kyoko! have you finished preparations for tomorrow, already?”

The ambiguously defined breed of animal in Miaya Gekkogahara’s screen asked the tumultuous question.

“Have you seen me working a stall?” The detective huffed, making herself at home inside the other girl’s room. Couldn’t be helped, she was having one of those infamous moody days.

The therapist’s fingers danced on the wheelchair-installed keyboard. “That’s a dereliction of duty. Everyone’s been working very hard with the reserve course!”

Kyoko scoffed. “I’m one of the supervisors; I’m doing my job as long as I check in on the other establishments every now and then.”

“Still not too enthusiastic about the idea, huh?”

Kyoko would have offered the older girl a word of praise; few people could see through her so easily. Similarly, few things annoyed her as much as her thoughts being read so openly.

“After what happened, I believe the reserve course should have been disbanded outright, but I’m not opposed to the headmaster’s alternative decision.”

“Sure sure. After all, what you dislike is whom the idea came from.”

“That goes without saying.” It really didn’t, but the detective wasn’t about to let Miaya have the satisfaction of besting her twice in a row. “I expected this attempt at reconciliation to fall flat on its face…but empirical evidence leans in the opposite direction. The students are getting along.”

Which was far from a bad thing, but it was also abnormal given they were at each other’s throats not long ago. “There was too short time for the animosity to disappear. How’d Naegi do it?” Kyoko rested her chin on her glove.

“I don’t think it’s so outlandish, if you consider the season.” Miaya mused

“What season?” Kyoko spun around.

“The holiday season…and we’re orchestrating a Christmas party. We’re kids, Kyoko. We’re supposed to get excited over things like this.”
“Christmas is mere propaganda once you’ve removed the religious context. I fail to see what’s worth celebrating.”

“You’ll get coal from Santa.”

"If Santa did exist, I'd have caught him for breaking and entering already." She wore a sinister smirk

The rabbit cowered in fear of her expression. Miaya was unphased. Kyoko thought it was curious how her green-haired upperclassman let the animation emote for her.

“Your circumstances aside, it’s not hard to see why this plan was met with success. The school read the mood and picked the right time for this event.”

“The school did?” Kyoko repeated with skepticism.

“Would it change anything if Naegi was responsible?”

“Quite a lot, actually. The board is transparent, but Naegi’s a different story. You know that.” As a detective, Kyoko could never overlook the motive. Even objective evidence in a case can gain new dimensions of meaning upon learning what the culprit’s aim was.

Kyoko was right to distrust Naegi’s intentions along with this party he was running. But she was one voice among many. Many who supported him.

Like Fuyuhiko.

The lavender-haired girl’s disposition grew worse recalling their last conversation.

“I wish I didn’t.” Miaya finally answered. “Is that why you came to me?”

“Partly, but I my request is even more…personal.”

“I’m all rabbit ears!”

Rabbit confirmed. There was one mystery solved.

“I may need to re-evaluate myself.” Kyoko said, hesitantly.

“…I didn’t think you were the kind for self-doubt.” Miaya guessed smartly.

“I’m not, but some people seem to think they know me better than I know myself.” A blue-haired idol came to mind. “I’d like a second opinion to prove them wrong.”

Miaya shook her head in exasperation. “I’ll do what I can. Come sit down.”

Kyoko sat across Miaya, her fingers crossed on the table separating the two. A habit she’d inherited from her father.

That alone was enough to make her hate it.

“How this conversation goes hinges on whether you agree with what I’ll ask.” Kyoko said tersely. Miaya was correct that she wasn’t one to doubt herself, but she also wasn’t one to ignore her own weaknesses. Right now, there was a chink in her armor.

“I’m listening.”
“The truth - regardless of how painful it might be to learn - isn’t something to run away, wouldn’t you agree?”

Hearing Kyoko Kirigiri request for an evaluation of character was one of many surprises in the coming days for Miaya. “There are no absolutes.”

“For the Kirigiri family, there is - The scales tip towards the truth.”

“I see.” Miaya’s fingers tapped on her laptop’s keyboard.

“What are you writing?” Kyoko frowned.

“Don’t you keep notes on your job?” The rabbit asked.

“Fair enough.” She crossed her leg and made herself comfortable for the therapy seminar. “That saying is the family motto, and we’re big on family.”

“You don’t say…”

“Sarcasm is professional?”

“We’re friends though. It’s not every time I can cut loose while working at the same time.”

Kyoko crossed her legs and fingers. If Miaya would relax, so would she. “Again, fair enough. I’m thankful that you’re willing to see me on short notice at all. As far back as I remember, I’ve been a detective, or training to be one. My grandfather taught me that everything, but the family trade, was excess, a distraction. Even my parents. I say taught, but after hearing my father’s side of the story, I might have been indoctrinated. I called my grandfather to verify…and he didn’t deny a word. He had nothing to hide and was proud of his decision.”

“That’s always a danger with parenting. Some just want to pass on their teachings. Others do so strongly enough that it leads to abuse and they may not realize it.”

“Still, it was natural to me, to disregard others. I wasn’t there when my mother died, nor did I go to her funeral. Instead, I tended to the corpses of strangers.” Kyoko recollected bitterly.

“What do you think about your grandfather?” Miaya went there. A sore topic, but one Kyoko was hardly afraid to face.

“I love and respect him as a detective. My respect for him as a person, has waned.”

“Hmm…you feel he took a piece of your childhood away.”

Kyoko made a non-committal grunt. “In school, old schools. Many of my peers took shots at me, saying I had a heart of ice. I never cared, of course.”

(Of course.)

She didn’t like the way Miaya phrased that. “But now, I realize they may have been telling the truth. I never reflected on my mother’s sufferings or feelings and I never made connections with other children. Even now, I can’t hold a normal conversation without picking apart what the other person is saying. I’m always looking for what lies beneath the mask.”

That brings her back to Makoto. It was like he was from a different species altogether, and nobody noticed. Kyoko wanted to learn more about Makoto…so she could firmly keep him at a distance.
“Is that why you hate Makoto?”

Kyoko snapped to full attention, denying the accusation. “I’ve said nothing of the sort.”

“Hating him won’t make you any less of a person.”

She wanted to strangle that rabbit. She didn’t want to admit it...because hate bred bias.

Kyoko gritted her teeth. “Why? Why do I dislike him?” Fuyuhiko had been right. All of them had been. She’d never liked Makoto from the start and she couldn’t piece together why. Nagito, being just as bad, if not worse, didn't trigger the same instinctual aversion that Makoto did.

“Because he’s everything you were raised to fight against.” Miaya’s clear response prompted a surprised look from the detective. “The...Kirigiri motto...was it? It sounds cool if you ask me, but there’s also a strong fixation with uncovering the truth at all cost. For whose benefit, I can’t say. On the other hand. Makoto lies and people accept it. In some cases, they’re aware and still accept it, because it’s convenient for them. With lies so alluring, maybe there’s no need for the truth at all.”

“T-That’s ridiculous.” Kyoko lost her cool. She would reject that kind of thinking as long as she lived.

“The culture is too different, polar-opposites. It’s no wonder you don’t get along. You’re quick to dismiss a liar and put no weight in his words.” Miaya looked her straight in the eye. “Your reaction today was natural?”

She heard. Likely the whole school had heard or seen that disaster earlier on in the day, seen Kyoko behave in such a disgraceful, chaotic manner unbefitting a Kirigiri. Something that had never happened before.

Being fair, she was rarely so humiliated.

“I thought I was the one with a clear head. The one who knew nothing good could come from him.” But she accepted his sweet lies, without even directly hearing them. She was happy to hear about her mother from Jin, she wasn’t...unhappy to be patching her relationship with said father either. Even the challenge, along with the presents she’d received, brightened her birthday. She would have forgotten it was her birthday. Regardless, Makoto invaded her privacy, made a fool of her, and worst of all, lied to her.

And Kyoko was all the better for it. What would she do now? Keep hating Jin? That would be worse, because then she’d be lying to herself.

Kyoko tightly gripped her skirt. 'How dare he make her feel this way!?'

“But Kyoko...” Miaya snapped her out of a rage-field stupor. “The one who gets hurt the most by these lies is Makoto himself. To go even further than that, he lies because he’s in pain. It’s our job to help him realize that and cure him. You agreed to cooperate me, so I expect you to share those objectives. He is not your enemy.”

“...”

Kyoko closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. “You’re right.” She remembered visiting Makoto’s room that night on her birthday to confirm his sickness. He’d apparently been ill throughout the course of that week. The items for her birthday, couldn’t have been planted there for more than a day or two; too many complications would have occurred.
In other words, in that horrible condition...he ran around town preparing that scavenger hunt.

“He’s just an idiot.”

-December 24th 20XX-

The bus drove off into the distance. A youthful and nervous girl stopped, as did the wheels of the luggage she dragged behind her. Her head lifted high to take in the monolith of an academy, *The Hope’s Peak Academy*.

“I made it.”

Komaru Naegi, makes her debut.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The plot twist built up for 28 chapters
“Tiny.” mouthed Makoto Naegi, 1 years old. From the opening in the crib, he marveled at his newborn sister like she was an alien lifeform. Similar but so very different from himself, yet his parents regarded it with the same affection they did him.

Any jealousy he felt was brushed aside by intrigue.

“You were the same.” His mother stroked his hair.

“Noisy too?” Makoto wiggled in her lap. His sister’s babbling and cries made it hard to sleep during the many nights since she was brought home.

“Sometimes.” Dad replied, picking up the baby. “Why don’t you hold her?” He placed Makoto’s younger sibling on his lap.

She was light, especially from a seating position. He looked up to his parents, wordlessly asking what he should do.

“Komaru’s your little sister. It’s your job to protect her so be nice.”

The boy’s chest swelled at the responsibility. He brought his face down to meet Komaru’s. “Hi there. I’m Makoto!” He waved.

Komaru’s gaze followed the motions of his hand. Her own small hands reached upwards and grabbed at his. A series of gargles burst forth.

Makoto beams widely in turn.

-December 24th 20XX-

We’ve come a long way to get here, D-day.

I’m not what you’d call patient, far from it. Waiting this long is just one of many proofs that I tried reaaaally hard this time. Everyone did, but I deserve a special applause laying the groundwork and planning this culture festival!

*sigh*

It’s always nerve-wracking in the final hours before showtime...however, I believe in everyone. That’s why I know everything will work out.
...If there's one person who needs the most luck...or the least, depending on how you look at it, it'll be the star herself.

Sayaka Maizono fixed the final clip onto her hair. She straightened out her blouse. Blue-plaid skirt flapped with a small twirl in front of her full-length mirror “Perfect.” Her reflection, in full idol gear, praised. It didn’t, but Sayaka imagined it spoke.

Some celebrities seek sanctuary in their private lives where they can be themselves, away from the public eye. Sayaka thought differently. To convince everyone she was faultless, she first had to convince herself, every waking moment.

If she tried hard enough to immerse herself in the role in every facet of her life, she hoped the act would become the truth. She hoped to succeed today, especially.

“The concert’s still hours away. I should head to the council room.”

She double-checked her appearance in the mirror, then spoke the words as many others in the academy.

“Showtime.”

A winter breeze blew against her hair. The cool air was unfortunate for a day where she expected hundreds if not thousands would be outside. Thankfully, it wasn’t cold enough that she’d freeze even without additional layers of clothing. The bright, warm sun tipped the weather in their favor.

She made her way to the main school building, waving to acquaintances on the way. Some briskly walking to their destination. A few running in a hurry. Others overwhelmed by the scenery.

Cameras were in the process of being stationed. News vans also caught her eye. That much of the culture festival would be broadcasted nation-wide might unnerve the average student, but it hardly made a difference in her case.

For the Ultimate Pop Sensation, every facet of her life was a performance. One she planned to ace with perfect-

“Oof.”

Sayaka staggered slightly as she was hit from the side. The idol turned to the cause of the disruption. A black-haired girl who’d fallen to the floor.

Sayaka didn’t recognize her.

“Ow…” She stood, rubbing her head and backside. The younger-looking girl looked up to her, panic spread across her features for a moment.

“You didn’t hurt yourself, did you?” Sayaka asked.

“No, I’m right as rain. Sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was going.” She chirped.

‘Pretty’ Sayaka thought. Not in a bombshell way as many of the girls Sayaka knew in the school. More cute-like. If the idol could think of an equivalent…

“What’s your older sibling’s name? If I know them, I can point you to their dorms.”

“How d’you know?”
“I’m psychic.” If the opening presents itself, she’s gotta land that catchphrase.

The girl’s eyes grew wide with awe and fear.

“Kidding, it’s intuition. I’ve never seen you around before and the festival hasn’t opened yet, only family members of the students are allowed in right now.” It wasn’t a big leap of logic.

Sayaka still received suspicious looks despite the explanation, but eventually she said “I’m looking for Makoto Naegi, he’s my older brother.”

…

Of all the boys in the school… “You must be Komaru. I’m Saya-” The bluenette was silenced by a raise of the hand from the younger Naegi sibling.

“Please don’t finish that sentence. I’m in the middle of convincing myself that you’re someone else so I don’t go into shock.”

“Sayaka Maizono, often mistaken for that one idol but we’re different people.” Sayaka giggled. “I’m Makoto’s friend. Should I take you to him?”

“If it’s not a bother.”

Just like that, Komaru Naegi joined the party. Sayaka was always more comfortable in pairs. Although, this one kept quiet right up until they entered the main building.

“Are the dorms inside the school?”

“No. Makoto’s probably in the student council office. I was heading there myself.”

“Student council room…” She whispered like it was a mystical place. Sayaka thought the council room was annoying, just because it was on the highest floor.

“So many TVs…” The normal girl’s gaze flew in every direction when they exited the elevator.

“It’s exaggerated but Hope’s Peak likes doing everything to the next level. Oh, and if you’re planning to stay all day, you could watch the concert from anywhere in the school thanks to them.”

“No thanks. I’m getting myself front row seats!” Her eyes shone like stars. Sayaka resisted the urge to pat her head.

“How are you liking the school? I have some free time later and I could give you a tour.”

“I-I couldn’t ask you to do that.” She blushed.

“If you change your mind… Here we go.” The idol stopped in front of the office. “You ready?”

She turned back to see her new friend nervous but, receptive.

Sayaka nodded, knocked, then opened the door.

“Good morning, everybody. I brought a guest.”

Komaru didn’t know what to expect when she, a level 1 hero, walked into the den of last bosses. Being permitted to wander the halls of THE Hope’s Peak Academy with an Ultimate was already living the dream. But getting to meet the student council was…crazy. They’d be the ones at the top of all the other talented students.
On the bright side, Makoto was there so…maybe it wouldn’t be so scary. It only took Sayaka dragging her in to learn she was so very wrong. At the mention of ‘guest’ all heads snapped, lifted and lagged towards her.

Unable to speak, Komaru took in their faces one at a time; their expressions ranging from confusion to irritation. Strongly on the part of the tall, glasses-wearing male. Although, a few of them looked like they’d never worn a smile in their lives.

“Who the hell is that?” said a baby-faced blonde in a suit.

With transparent shock, Makoto said “Komaru?” The sight of her brother’s familiar face calmed her enough to remember how to talk.

“Hi, Makoto! What’re you doing on that big chair?” She waved

“She’s my sister.” Murmurs of understanding and intrigue erupted across the room. “Excuse us.” Makoto stood, walked towards Komaru and dragged her out of the room.

He closed the door behind them.

Seeing her chance, Komaru caught Makoto in a surprise hug. One he was slow to reciprocate.

“What are you doing here?” He backed off.

“I came to see the festival and you, why else?” Komaru grinned.

“Are mom and dad here?” He asked tensely.

“They’re at work. They might be able to make it, but you know their work hours.” Komaru doesn’t remark on how relieved her brother looked to hear that.

“So…what’s your plan?” He looked squarely at her.

“Plan?”

“What’ll you do all day?”

Oh….uh “I…haven’t thought that far ahead.”

He cracks a smile that says ‘typical’. “Didn’t think to come with a friend?” She punches his shoulder.

“There’s lots of attractions anyway. We’ll think of what to do after the meeting. Want to come in?”

The self-preservation part of her wanted to decline the invitation, but curiosity won out.

“Finished your strategy meeting?” The bespectacled blonde said as soon as they returned.

“More or less, Byakuya.” Makoto gave a formal introduction. “Everyone, meet Komaru, my little sister.”

“Nice to meet you all.” She bowed and received brief greetings from and introductions from the others. More than their names, Komaru was surprised to hear about some of their talents. She strayed from the cute kid (who evidently, is an actual mafia boss!) and found an empty spot between Sayaka and the silver haired Kyoko to sit. While Makoto returned to the desk. It looked
important, so why was her brother the one sitting over there?

“Now that we got the little surprise done with...Take it away, Fuyuhiko." Makoto lazily motioned to the short stack, shorter than he was in fact.

Just as Komaru thought she’d found the president, Fuyuhiko shot that train of thought down. “Oh no, I’m done filling in. Why not impress your sis over there and be the boss again?” The gangster tossed a tablet over to Makoto, who caught it with ease.

“Gee thanks.” Makoto droned.

‘How can Makoto be so chatty with that guy?’ Stranger yet, was Fuyuhiko implying Makoto was running things...but that would mean...

Komaru raised her hand. “Um can I ask a question?”

“You don’t have to raise your hand.” Makoto scratched his cheek.

“It speaks well of her upbringing. Your politeness is admirable, Naegi-kun.” Kiyotaka interjected, thoroughly pleased with Komaru’s civility.

“Are you guys the student council?” She cut to the heart of the matter. What she hadn’t meant to do was raise the tension in the room by leagues.

Kiyotaka answered, only after it appeared nobody else would. “Strictly speaking, we are not. We’re closer to a committee planning the festival in the place of the council.”

So these guys weren’t the student council. “In my school, the council does all that and...this is their room.”

The next response came from besides Komaru. “It’s a complicated situation, but for all intents and purposes, we are in charge and the council won’t be in attendance.” Kyoko crossed her legs, facing forward to not directly acknowledge the younger Naegi.

“Now would you stop wasting our time with pointless questions?” Byakuya scowled.

“Ah, sorry.” Komaru retreated into her shell.

“It wasn’t pointless.” This time, Kyoko fixed a tiny glance her way. “It speaks of your intelligence to notice that detail and inquire on it.”

Despite the emotionless tone, Komaru felt happy for the compliment. From that point, she chose to hang back as the committee supervisors discussed their responsibilities and progress for the day. 40 minutes passed when Makoto called break.

“Alright, it’s 10 am. Showtime everyone.” The majority filed out of the council room at the brunette’s declaration. Only three stayed. Two that Makoto called back.

“Kirigiri. Sayaka. If it’s not too much trouble...could you show Komaru around?”

Komaru snapped her head to her brother. Come to think of it, Makoto said he’d have someone show him around. “Why can’t you do it?”

Makoto tilted his head. “I have to remain here. It’s early in the day. If some of the students have any pressing issues, it’ll be now.”
“Then I’ll wait.” Komaru planted her butt on the couch, arms folded and pout at the ready.

Makoto’s eyebrow twitched. “You don’t have to. It’ll be boring here.”

“We can play catch up, It’s been months since we saw each other…or don’t you want me here?” The thought of the latter being the case…stung. It clearly showed on her face when she saw how Makoto recoiled.

Both siblings and Sayaka were surprised to see a mediator come in the form of the detective. “It should be fine. As Naegi-kun said, it’s at the beginning where most of the problems, if any, will surface. An hour-long wait or two should suffice. There’s plenty of time for exploring after.”

Kyoko was quickly climbing her way up Komaru’s favorites list.

Sayaka then voiced a supportive comment of her own. “Festivals are more enjoyable with family, I hear. We can all show Komaru around afterwards.”

With all 3 girls in agreement, Makoto caved. “Sounds like a plan.”

Chiaki’s laboratory was bright(ly colored) and lively.

“Hmm.” The gamer hung by the corner, flanked by Hinata, Ryoko and Asada. Visitors had flooded in droves at the official start of the festival. Even with all the game consoles and arcade games Chiaki had called in, there was still an overflow. “Thanks…sure are a lot of people here.”

“This is the recreation room. It’ll be even busier in the afternoon when the guests feel the need to relax.” Izuru commented in that matter-of-fact way of his.

“There’s a sign in the back room. I could write down the occupancy limit and put it up on the front entrance to avoid health violations.” Asada proposed.

“Good thinking, Asada-kun. I can’t stand the heat.” Chiaki nodded

“Problem is, I don’t know the capacity of this room.”

Neither did Chiaki.

“65 people.” Evidently, Ryoko and Izuru did.

Asada looked between them and gulped. “Got it. I’ll be right back.”

Chiaki returned her attention to the boisterous laboratory. Excitement was abound Heck, she even recognized some well-known gamers in here. “I think we can say this was a success.”

“Shame they’ll all be crying in frustration when the tournament starts.” Ryoko chuckled darkly. The game tourney in the afternoon was the highlight of the laboratory.

Chiaki’s eyes lit up. “It’ll feel weird when I win my own prize.” But the strong must devour the weak.

Izuru and Ryoko scoffed.

“Awfully confident for a girl with repeated losses to me.” The ex-reserve course said.

“I’ve won a few times too, you know.” Ryoko twirled a strand of hair.
“Yeah, but I was never serious all those times. Tournaments are where I shine. If you guys want
the right to challenge me, you’ll have to fight amongst each other.” It’d be a good way to get them
to bond too. Izuru had joined her laboratory at the last minute. It’d be nice if he could make friends
with Ryoko.

“The win’s already in the bag.” The auburn-haired girl laughed.

“How boring.”

“Maizono-san, are the other members of your group here?” Komaru walked closely besides the
idol as they moved through the halls.

“They texted me earlier. They’ll be here around 3.”

Makoto had a slower pace, silently gauging the pair a sizable distance behind.

For some reason, the detective had kept him company. “She makes you uncomfortable.” It wasn’t
a question.

“It’s that obvious.” He affirmed.

“What should have been obvious, was expecting your family to visit.”

“...”

“She seems like a nice girl seeking your attention.” It almost sounds like she’s playing a joke. On
this matter, he wasn’t up for playing along.

“I’m shocked you’re talking to me after yesterday.” He changed the subject. Knowing Kyoko, this
was likely to end their conversation on the spot.

“I have to apologize. I overreacted.”

... He tripped on thin air. “Was that a joke?” Wait you don’t make jokes. Are you sick, Kirigiri?” The
glare this girl could make.

“Shutting up now.” Makoto zipped his lips. The two sunk into the silence for a few minutes, before
Kyoko spoke up again.

“You won’t apologize?”

He concluded that Kyoko must have figured out what he did for her birthday. If so... “That would
only have the opposite effect with you.”

The lavender-haired girl accepted that answer with a nod, suggesting he was correct. Before yet
another silent bout, they’re drawn to a loud *smack* followed by resounding applause. Komaru
and Sayaka halt, letting the trailing duo catch up.

Makoto deduces the source is the open dojo. “Must be Peko.” On the opposite side of the garden
entrance, was a sliding wooden door. The others followed behind him.

“Holy shit.” When Makoto said a dojo, Komaru imagined a dusty, dreary old arena. Instead, she
was welcomed to a surreal Japanese-style scenery. Cherry-blossom trees were lined up in rows as pink flower petals fell to the ground. Records of calligraphy and poems were fixed onto the upper far ends of the ceiling.

“Language.” Makoto frowned.

She stuck her tongue out at him. He may have been familiar with this level of bizarre, but she wasn’t!

The quartet sat on their knees behind the other visitors ahead of them, like they were in a sakura festival. But the main attraction lied in front. There was an elevated stage with wooden floors and traditional Japanese decor. Swords hung off the rack and life-sized samurai armor were stationed at opposite ends.

“It’s so pretty…”

“You’re such a girl, bro.” Komaru mocked her brother’s voice.

“I didn’t say that.” He murmured, holding up a tablet with…his face on it.

“Hello, Komaru.” It said.

Komaru deadpanned. “Ventriloquism?”

“Don’t be rude.” Her brother said.

“I’m Alter Ego, an artificial intelligence program. You can call me Makoto 2.0 if you prefer, pleased to meet you.”

“Makoto…identity fraud’s a big deal nowadays. Aren’t you worried?”

“Like I said, don’t be rude. Alter ego’s a good kid.”

Komaru sweatdropped at Makoto complimenting a creation in his own image. “Did you…make it?” That sounded impossible, but hey, her definition of what’s normal and what isn’t, has been questioned enough.

“No, a friend did.”

“After all this, you consider Chihiro a friend.” Kyoko spoke, on the other side of Sayaka. “Interesting…but hardly surprising.” Komaru looked to see her facing forward, watching the sword duel.

“What did you mean by that, Kirigiri-san?” She looked back to see her brother doing the same.

They were talking at each other from opposite ends of the four.

“Only that Chihiro has been deep in depression for several weeks now thanks to a certain someone. Shouldn’t you do something about that? Forcing happiness on others is your favorite hobby, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t realize it was my obligation…or that I had to hold everybody’s hand.”

“But you are holding onto his life’s work. Why?”

“Alter ego’s his own person. If he wants to go back, I won’t stop him. In fact, he said he would
after helping me with the festival.”

Komaru sweat like she had a fever, being caught in the middle of the verbal warfare. A calming hand from her idol was very welcome. “These two just love fighting. Ask anyone in school.”

The duo in question silently refuted the rumor.

Komaru watched as two opponents crossed (wooden) swords on stage. The affair lasted short while. Inexperienced she was, even Komaru could see the fighter on the right was faster. With a yell, their sword broke their foe’s defenses and sent them falling backwards.

Komaru yelped at the harsh impact. “Are they hurt?”

“Maybe a little. The protective gear should have blunted the impact.” Makoto explained “Then again…that’s all up to how much Peko wants to hurt you.” He let out a small, nervous laugh.

“Peko?” Komaru inquired. Just then, the winning swordsman took off their helmet, revealing a gorgeous silver-haired girl.

She’s so cool… “What’s with this school? Everyone here is beautiful.”

“Thanks, but I prefer handsome.” Makoto pointed to himself.

“Not you, dummy!”

“Oh…so you just meant Sayaka and Kirigiri-san.”

She blushed heavily.

“Don’t be embarrassed. It’s true and I’m sure they get that a lot. Right, guys.”

“Ah, it’s a little annoying the way you put it, Makoto.” “I’d rather not hear that from you.”

Makoto flinched at the cold tone. “Forgot I was still in the doghouse. Okay, maybe Peko would appreciate the comment.”

“Can we drop it? She looks kinda scary.”

“Peko?” He gazed at her with disbelief. “No way. She’s a good person.”

Kyoko was on cue with a refutation. “Pekoyama is the Ultimate Swordswoman and right hand/bodyguard of Kuzuryu. The soon-to-be-mafia-boss.” She punctuated the blonde’s title for further clarity.

“Oh so she is scary…haha” Komaru shivered.

“I’m telling you, she’s not.” Makoto argued. “Why don’t you go up against her next and see for yourself?”

“Are you nuts!?”

His face said he completely misunderstood her “This is an interactive festival. Even non-HPA affiliates can join in.”

Gosh, he was so dumb sometimes.
“I meant that there’s no way I’d fight a pro. Why don’t you try?”

He thought it over a moment, then “Sure, why not.”

…

“Are you nuts!?”

“You said that already.” He stood. Komaru grabbed his trousers as he stood. “Uh, could you let go? It’ll be fine.”

She vehemently disagreed. “Whenever you say things will end up ‘fine’, somebody gets hurt in the process. That somebody, is you.”

Sayaka gave an exasperated sigh. “He’ll be alright. Makoto practices with Pekoyama, if I recall.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while. Hope I haven’t forgotten all that training.” It was like he was perfectly in-tune with these crazy scenarios.

“Pekoyama likely still harbors a grudge. You know that, don’t you?” Kyoko added.

“Nothing we can’t work out.” Makoto shrugged and pulled away from Komaru’s loosened grip. The luckster beams as he walks up to the stage.

“What are you doing, Kyoko?” Sayaka eyes the lavender-haired girl. “You’ve been suspicious all morning.”

Kyoko stayed silent.

Makoto picks one of the wooden swords from the hangars. Both hands grasp firmly at the hilt and point towards the expressionless Peko.

“You won’t wear protection.” Much like with Kyoko earlier, it wasn’t a question.

“I don’t have to, if you don’t want to hurt me.”

“If.” She smiles faintly.

Komaru’s eyes widened. “She said ‘if’! Aren’t they friends?”

“I don’t think I called them friends.” Sayaka looked away, guiltily. Komaru’s eyes were peeled to the trainwreck that was sure to come. At the referee’s signal, Pekoyama charged and crossed swords with the spiky-haired teen. The swordswoman was faster than before. An even bigger surprise was that Makoto still blocked her.

The boy coiled his sword around Peko’s and locked both to the ground, leaving them at a stalemate.

Pekoyama backed off. Komaru deduced it was only temporary, when the older girl lunged again. Not only was her footwork faster, but her strikes were too. Komaru stopped counting after 4 successful blows. All parried successfully by her opponent.

“Holy shit.” Komaru’s jaw dropped. Similar murmurs of disbelief and awe came from the other guests.

Kyoko scrutinized the match. “Is he enjoying this?” As if she didn’t trust the smile on her brother’s
face to give a clear answer.

“I…think he is. From what Leon tells me, Makoto has a competitive streak.” Sayaka replied to the detective.

That…that's true. It was true. A long time ago

Peko retreats again. The red eyed girl took slow, deep breaths and fixed a glare at the lucky student.

Makoto’s smile dropped. He tensed, assuming a proper stance. He ran at Peko. The sudden switch in tactics gave the silver-haired girl pause.

*Smack*

Makoto staggered back as his sword was flung upwards and away from him. Peko didn’t anticipate his attack…so she didn’t hold back. A second blow came in quick succession. The swordswoman’s overhead swing came crashing down at the defenseless luckster.

Komaru shielded her eyes and let out a short scream. One that was drowned out by the crowd’s applause. The little sister peeked from the opening in her fingers. Peko’s wooden sword was just short of reaching Makoto’s face.

“You stopped.”

“Shouldn’t I have?” Peko retorted.

“Does this mean you forgive me?”

“Would you hold it against a tiger for not changing its stripes?”

“Haha, your words sting though.”

She let her weapon down, her eyes not leaving the boy. “I can’t understand what’s going through your head these days. Why did you pull such an elaborate prank…then this?”

“Hifumi said not to take his drawings seriously. I figured it might be fun.” He scratched his cheek.

“As for our little spar…I thought we could come an understanding after we crossed swords.”

“If people could come to an understanding by fighting, every war would have a quick end.” Peko shot him down. “Still, you’re better than before. Have you been practicing?”

“Secret.” He showed a toothy grin. Infectious, as she chuckled.

“Oh, could you come meet with us at lunchtime? My sister came to visit, I want to introduce you.”

“Sister… you mentioned her. Komaru, was it?”

He nodded. “I’d say you can bring Fuyuhiko too…but you’re both gonna be together anyways, right~”

“I am still armed.”

“Kidding!” Makoto sprints off while he can.

“Sorry, I lost.” He stops by Komaru and the others.
She huffs, secretly relieved. “Of course, you’d lose, she’s the Ultimate Sword fighter or something. Just be glad you’re in one piece.”

“…Hm, you’re right.” He sits down and rests his cheek on his arm. Abruptly he blinks and scans the room. His eyes fall on Komaru. His brows knot together. “Komaru?”

“What?” She asks.

“I-It’s nothing. I’m…glad to have you here.”

Chiaki bounced happily on the couch, happy the tournament turned out well. With Ryoko, Izuru, herself and…surprisingly Isshiki as the finalists.

When asked what he was even doing there, the bodyguard had said “I’ve come to enjoy the festivities.” He sounded embarrassed, which…was expected of the overly serious man.

“Lunch isn’t too far off, Ryoko.” Chiaki Nanami said to the analyst, slacked on the long sofa and munching on junk food.

“You’re just saying that, so I won’t have enough sugar to stomp you.” Ryoko Otonashi replied next to her.

“Incorrect. An excess intake of sugar will only impair your cognitive functions, prohibiting you from playing at your best. The effects would also take too long to matter.” To the other side of the gamer was Izuru Kamukura or Hajime Hinata – as she relentlessly dubbed him in public – side-glanced the auburn-haired girl “Not that I care, but was that the excuse you'd use after you lost?”

“Do you want a handicap?” The redhead boasted and looked to her right. “Hey, what about you, Isshiki-san?”

The pale Ultimate had his eyes focused on the wide screen in front of them. “I’ve never played this game. I shall try my best.”

“Atta boy.” The analyst smacked his large back.

Dozens of players stood behind the couch, as audiences to the oncoming bout. Out of an original 66+ contestant signing, these geniuses were left to settle who was the best…in a game of Smash.

The stoic’s selection earned him a few raised eyebrows.

“Mega’s a cute pick…but why?” Chiaki asked.

“The blue bomber is the greatest creation of his era and acquires his opponent’s skills upon defeating them. He appeals to me.” Was his curt answer.

“Then I’ll be Kirby. He’s fluffy and lovable and Strong, like me.” Ryoko added.

“Those descriptions are more befitting Chiaki. If relatability is your game, choose Pit.” Izuru argued.

“Eh, I’m not into younger guys…wait, are you calling me an angel?” Ryoko flushed.

“Relatively speaking.” The taller boy doesn’t elaborate.

“I’ll go with Ike. I’ve always dug the knight in armor.” Chiaki decided.
“Hmm. Him.” Isshiki picked the tiny winged knight.

“Meta knight. Copying me?” Ryoko grinned.

“I like the look in his eyes, and I agree with Nanami. Knights are an honorable, dutiful bunch.”

“If you say so~”

“First to three wins, takes it all.” Chiaki announced.

-5 minutes later-

“Buzz off, Hina!” Ryoko growled, exaggeratedly mashing the buttons to dodge the blue bomber's relentless shots.

“Hina’s the junior in the lower class. It’s Hinata.” Chiaki corrected, hounding Isshiki herself.

“His fault for having a girl’s name.”

“I’m not getting distracted.” Izuru deployed and threw the leaf shield just as Ryoko switched to melee.

“…Lame.” Ryoko deadpanned as Kirby was knocked out.

“Guess it’s me against Hajime.” Chiaki had taken out Isshiki at roughly the same time, leaving the blue knight and machine at odds on the stage.

A minute into their scuffle and the red-eyed body’s eyebrow twitched. “What is the meaning of this? Your skills should not be this high.”

Chiaki let out a slight grin. “I’ve been training with Ryoko for weeks. When she gets in the zone, she plays like you.”

“Hardly like me. Watch.” He proved it when Mega man struck the smash ball.

“Oh boy.” Chiaki sighed as the 5 robots shot multi-colored beams at the screen.

“The first round goes to me. As expected.” Yet there was an undertone of pride in Izuru’s voice. Ryoko and Chiaki exchanged glances.

-8 minutes later -

Izuru was back to his usual grumpy self, when he lost the second round. “You couldn’t hope to win alone, so you joined forces? Could you be anymore predictable?”

“Look at him, Chiaki. He’s sulking.” “If we were so predictable, why’d you lose?” The girls said smugly.

“It seems I’ll have to remind you two of the difference between us. Enjoy your last victory.” The dark-haired boy declared.

“Bring it on.” “Someone call the photographer chick. I want a picture of you crying your eyes out when I kick your ass.”

Feeling left out of the adrenaline, Isshiki could only shake his head
“I fear you are all taking this game too seriously.”

“Food, finally!” Komaru drooled over the feast presented in front of them. After hours of surfing from one insane lab to the next. Finally, the break came on. They hadn’t secured a table in the packed lunchroom, so moved outside. It was like a small picnic.

“Don’t get hooked. Hanamura-kun’s meals are…addicting to say the least.” Makoto said, vaguely. “You’ll probably be asking me to send you leftovers back home.”

Her brother was right, as she found in seconds. “I want to marry him.”

“Don’t even joke like that!” Makoto shuddered.

“Hello.” The sibling banter was interrupted by a middle-aged couple.

“Good afternoon.” Makoto replied.

“You’re Makoto Naegi. If you’re not too busy, could we have a word?” The older man called out her brother.

The brunet stared at Komaru and the other girls. None of which had anything to say to this development.

“I’ll be right back, guys.” He scratched his cheeks, before following the pair elsewhere. Komaru watched closely, until her eyes were distracted by the liveliness and holiday decorations of the festival, even outside.

“This school is amazing.”

“That’s only the 4th time you’ve said it.” Sayaka giggled.

“7th actually. Perhaps Naegi-san suffers from memory loss?” Komaru honestly couldn’t tell if Kyoko was joking, but now that Makoto was gone, this was a good chance to do some snooping.

“Could I ask you guys a heavy question?”

“Sure, why not.” The bluenette replied.

“The truth is…our parents are really worried, and they asked me to secretly check in on him. Is Makoto always so reckless?” She refers to the sword bout.

The older women were silent for a moment, thinking best how to respond. Finally, Kyoko did. “Yes. You’ll see him get into trouble bi-weekly. I believe most of the school know that by now.”

Sayaka smirks. "Yes, you see just yesterday, Kyoko and your brother were-

Kyoko cuts her off. "He's hardly a problem, as you can see, things turn out alright regardless.”

“That doesn’t mean he should keep throwing himself into danger. I don’t know how the rest of you see Makoto, but he’s got a breaking point like everyone else.”

“Preaching to the choir…and don’t provoke her, Kyoko.” Sayaka brushed a strand of hair. A hint of exasperation of her tone.
“Provoke?”

Kyoko cracked a small smile. “Sorry, we’re well aware. But Naegi-kun’s stupidity is difficult to look past. I’m sure it would worry his family to death.”

…

Suddenly, Komaru laughed, to the other girl’s abject confusion. “It’s just…I’ve been thinking all day. You remind me of a childhood friend Makoto and I used to have.”

Curious glances were sent Komaru’s way.

“What was this friend like?” Kyoko asked.

“She was like our older sister. Smart, pretty but a little cold and antisocial if you didn’t know her. Even if she didn’t show it much, she liked us a lot.”

“That does sound like Kyoko.” Sayaka giggled behind her palm.

“I disagree.” Lavender crossed her arms defiantly.

“Well, it’s more that he acts the same way with you from what I’ve seen. He always used to compete with Shirai-chan.” Those were the days. Now she was feeling nostalgic. “I thought he’d changed throughout the years, but he’s acting…just like how he used to. Maybe he didn’t want to show that side of himself to us.” She said bitterly.

Sayaka and Kyoko stared.

“What?”

“So he’s never told you.” Kyoko pressed a glove finger to her chin.

“Huh?”

“I’m back!” Makoto found his seat. “What’re you guys talking about?”

“Girl talk, you wouldn’t be interested.” Sayaka curbed his enthusiasm. “What did they want?”

“Ah…hm…they were the parents…of that reserve course student I saved.”

“Saved?” Komaru cocked her head to the side.

“He was struck by lightning. I gave him CPR on the spot and called an ambulance. Apparently, he’s got some serious scars but his life isn’t in danger anymore.”

Komaru stopped listening at “struck by lightning”. Maybe all of this was normal in this new, weird world she’d wandered into.

“That’s great news.” Sayaka clapped her hands. “But…you don’t look too happy.”

That was understatement. His expression was riddled with unease. “It’s just…they bowed to me. They were so grateful that I saved their kid in spite of everything. They must love him a lot, I think.”

“That’s normal. They’re his parents.” Komaru said bluntly. Yet…the other three around her said nothing. She couldn’t have known they all had their own deviant circumstances.
“Maizono-san…” She sought the most amicable for reinforcement.

“Not everyone sees things the same way.” The idol didn’t meet her gaze. Frankly, neither did the others.

“Heyo, ladies…and dude.” A boy dressed in punk-rock barged in, grinning like a fool. “Whoa who’s the cute new girl? Sup babe.”

“B-Babe?” Komaru’s blushed heavily.

“Classy as always, Leon.” Sayaka said with palpable satire.

Makoto gave a similarly unimpressed introduction. “This thing is Leon Kuwata. He’s my best friend.”

“Leon…Kuwata. That baseball player?”

Recognition clearly elevated his pride. “Want an autograph? All the hotties get em free…and I’ve given -and gotten!- double digits today already.”

She wasn’t good with these types. “Bro…” She sought Makoto’s assistance.

“What is it?” He barely reacts.

“Didya say, ‘bro’? You’re Makoto’s sister?” Leon scratched his hair.

“I’m Komaru Naegi.” She emphasized her last name to use as a barrier. Guys don’t normally date their friend’s sisters, right?

“Totes in my strike zone.”

Wrong.

“Lay off, Leon. She’s nervous.” Sayaka chided the baseball star. “You’ll get used to him. He’s harmless.”

She wasn’t entirely convinced, but…the tense atmosphere had lifted.

Elsewhere was an even more unlikely foursome. Chiaki (and crew) were headed to lunch after finishing the tournament. One Isshiki Madarai carried a next gen gaming console in hand, along with credits containing the budget surplus for Chiaki’s laboratory. All befitting the winner.

Of course, the other three hadn’t cared about the prize…so much as they were outraged by loss. Ryoko let it show openly. izuru simply hadn’t spoken a word. Chiaki quickly got over the mild indignation, since everyone had a good time.

Isshiki had been the least emotionally charged. Not even so much as a gloat for his victory. She’d never spoken to him before the festival, and she was starting to see why with how serious he was.

“Isshiki-san, I’ve been meaning to ask. Why aren’t you with the student council?” Chiaki posed.

She didn’t notice when the others, even Izuru tensed.

“What do you mean?” Isshiki asked.
“They all went to that new overseas campus, right?”

Ryoko let out a relieved sigh.

“I chose to remain here with my brothers.” Isshiki replied.

Without all his friends? “Are you lonely.” She had been when her friends had gone all isolated on her.

“That’s not something for a man to admit.” Just when Chiaki thought she’d been shut down, he continued. “Truth be told, I’m not sure myself. My relationship with the council was fragile at best. A bodyguard is just a bodyguard.”

“I don’t think a bodyguard is all that different from a friend.”

“How so?”

“Friends protect each other too. It’s lazy to hold yourself back by thinking you can’t make friends with them in the process.”

Isshiki mulls over her words. “Hm…The president told me something similar.”

“Murasame-san…He was really nice to me.” Chiaki thought of the upstanding but dorky president. “And he always had snacks to giveaway in the council room.”

“Ah, those were delicious. Homemade too.” Isshiki nodded, smiling. It was the first she’d gotten out of him.

“Let’s hope Teruteru’s cooking can distract us… Oh, there’s Mahiru, Fuyuhiko, Peko and… Nagito?” She called out to the four. The photographer spotted Isshiki. "I heard Isshiki-san won the tournament. I can't believe someone could beat Chiaki."

"He got lucky. If Hajime and Ryoko hadn't gotten in my way, that'd be my trophy." Chiaki flustered.

"So indignant."

"Spoken like a sore loser."

Izuru and Ryoko grumbled, though no less pleased than the gamer.

Mahiru pulled the bodyguard away from the other tree. "Stand right there..." The camera obscures her face. "Don't forget to smile!"

"Must I?" Isshiki jerked

"It's the victor's privilege." Izuru remarked

"Come to think of it. I've never seen Isshiki smile before. Maybe he's nervous about iiiiit?" Ryoko giggled from behind the taller male

"Sadly, Otonashi is correct. I'm unaccustomed to such gestures." Isshiki admitted.

"Don't you hang around Makoto a lot? Just copy him." Chiaki advised.

"How about no. I've got tons of surprise shots of Makoto and more than half have got him with
that plastic smile. Give me something natural here." Mahiru pouts. Rare shots like the ones she'd taken of the luckster and Aoi were a goldmine.

"How about we give him our support?" Chiaki said.

"How?" The pale-skinned Ultimate asked cautiously.

"It's easier to do everything in groups. How about the four of us jump in the photo together?"

"I'm down." Ryoko raised her hand.

"I'll admit. I feel more relaxed among others." Perhaps it was a side-effect of his birth. But Isshiki also found the tournament surprisingly...fun. It was among the few instances in Hope's Peak where Isshiki had left his comfort zone He...wouldn't refuse an offer to play with them again.

"That's the spirit. Hajime never smiles either, so this is a good chance to see it."

"I knew it." The Ultimate Hope grunted, well aware he wasn't getting out of this unscathed.

"Take the fucking picture already." Fuyuhiko tapped his feet hastily, having been forgotten in the conversation. Meanwhile Nagito and Peko were more than used to remaining in the background.

"Get in together, everyone." Mahiru called.

Ryoko posed on Isshiki's other side while Chiaki linked her arms with those of the dark and broody boys. "Remember guys. On the count of three, you've got to smile. I'll make Mahiru wait all day."

'She means it.' Izuru lamented. "Whatever, I've got nothing to lose."

Mahiru started the countdown. "3...2...1...cheese!"

The camera flashed and encapsulated the scene. Mahiru searched through the gallery. A giggle slipped from her mouth.

"Let me see!" Ryoko rushed over, with Chiaki close behind. The girls peered at the digital photo and imitated Mahiru's laugh. At least initially, until Ryoko devolved into a series of laughs.

"Maybe smiling doesn't suit you two after all." Chiaki wiped a tear from her eye.

"So annoying." Izuru said, his expression not quite so neutral this time.

"I did say so..." Isshiki crossed his arms.

"No biggie. Let's take as much as we can until we get it right." Ryoko said, ignoring the protests from the boys.

"Wonderful. All those hopes." Nagito bit on a piece of cloth as he cried tears of joy.

"Hey, why don't you three join in?" Mahiru called them over.

"Thought you'd never ask. Let me show these losers how you pull off a mean grin." Fuyuhiko snickered. Peko wordlessly accompanied. Nagito hesitated, until the swordswoman dragged him with her.

Mahiru captured the colorful mix of personalities as best as she could. "I think we've got a good
shot for the album." The photographer smiled widely.

"Sheesh, about time. My shoulders are stiff." Fuyuhiko remarked. "Oh shit. We were heading over to see Makoto and his sister. Want to come with?" The gangster says.

“Sister?” A chorus of inquiries.

“Yeah, she showed up at the council office unexpectedly. Don’t scare her off.”

“I wonder if she’s good at games.” “I bet she’s nowhere near as cute as I am.” “Another Naegi. Just what I needed.”

“What did I just say?!" Fuyhiko roared.

“Why should the Ultimates hold themselves back over an ordinary girl?”

...

Fuyuhiko faced Nagito in stupefaction. “Come again?”

Puzzled, the white-haired teen continued. “I don’t see what the fuss is about. Just because he might be special, doesn’t mean she is.”

“Who the fuck made you the arbiter of who’s special?! You got into this school on a lottery!” Fuyuhiko gripped Nagito’s shirt, pulling him down to eye level.

“I’m well aware. Don’t waste your energy getting on angry on trash like me. I’m just stating facts. Talent transcends genes, meaning until this Komaru person proves her worth, she’s only Naegi’s little sister. Not worth speaking about at all.”

“He’s not incorrect.” Izuru noted.

“Not now, Hajime.” Chiaki chided.

Fuyuhiko snapped. “You bastard…”

“Stop right there, both of you.” It was then that Peko stepped in between the two, practically peeling off Fuyuhiko’s hand away from Nagito. “Nagito is right about one thing. This isn’t worth fighting over.”

Fuyuhiko clicked his tongue and walked in front. “Tsk. You better stay at least 10 feet away from me for the next 24 hours, Nagito.” He pointed back to the luckster.

Peko glared at Nagito for a moment before joining her master. The bodyguard and amnesiac caring little for the argument had gone ahead.

“I don’t understand. Why are they so angry?” Nagito pondered.

“Natsumi Kuzuryu.” Izuru offered a two-word explanation.

“Oh right! Gosh, how could I be so thoughtless?” Nagito laughed. Everyone else shook their heads in exasperation. The act, in of itself, showed Nagito hadn’t learned a thing.

“It’s not your fault.” Izuru made no attempts to comfort the lucky student. He merely spoke the truth. “It’s just you.”
‘W-What’s with all these people?’ Komaru’s screamed internally. Over time, their small group of four (five counting Leon) exploded into over a dozen. Worse…or better depending on perspective, is that she’d become the center of attention. Like the class transfer student. She couldn’t deal with all this. Makoto was no help either, pairing off with Kyoko, Leon and Sayaka in the distance.

“Komaru-chan, what’s your favorite song?” Ibuki Mioda asked, her face really, really close.

“Oh. that’s an easy one!”

…

Mukuro leaned against a tree, her hands turning the pages on Junko’s diary. Her brow moved with every word. Gripped by confusion, the raven-haired girl tore her eyes away. A scant search led her to Junko/Ryoko; standing atop a table and singing off-beat lyrics as others cheered her on. Next she searched for Makoto. First, she finds Chihiro sitting nearby. All it takes is to follow his line of vision to spot the lucky student. Kyoko moves elsewhere as Mukuro locks the four in her sights.

The short teen was flanked by Leon and Sayaka, the two he’d known the longest.

Longer than her.

He’s perfectly at ease, making expressions he’s never shown to her. The kindness Naegi had displayed, that she believed was evidence of their closeness, now appeared otherwise. That kindness he’d shown everyone may have been proof of the distance between them.

Her eyes find the diary once more.

…

“Any team I was on, won. By the end, I did everyone a favor and sat the games out.” Leon gently lobbed a baseball.

Makoto rolled his eyes, catching the throw. “Maybe I should’ve dropped by if you were having it too easy. Losing could do you some good.”

Leon cracked his knuckles like he’d seen Mondo often do. “We’ve still got time after this…How about we plan a game with the guys?”

“Okay, boys. Chill out.” Sayaka swiped two pieces of cake and shoved it in their mouths. For the few seconds they ate, it was quiet.

“Mmmhmm.” Leon moaned. “Man, if my girlfriend could cook half as good as this, I’d never leave her.”

“When you find one, I’m assuming?” Sayaka shook her head.

“That a long ways off.” Makoto chimed in.

“I could get one easy. I’m a chick magnet.” Leon pumped his fist into the air.

“Okay, go score right now.” Sayaka deadpanned.

“Whoa, like now now? Come on, talk about short notice.”

“It me or is that the sound of a ‘chick magnet’ chickening out?” Terrible pun but dropped for a good cause as far as Makoto was concerned.
“You guys are on. I swear, you better worship the ground Leon Kuwata walks after this.” The redhead turned in every direction. “…Oho, target spotted. She’s looking over here too.” He grinned widely and took off.

“This’ll be good.” Sayaka grins, watching the baseball star in the act. He approached a woman with long, braided pink hair. “She’s beautiful. Leon’s way out of his league.”

At the idol’s compliment, Makoto fixed his attention towards Leon’s “target.” He estimated she was older by at least 2 or three years. He spotted a necklace over her porcelain skin. She had a shapely figure underneath a white top, a tight-fitting miniskirt. A sweater was wrapped around her slim waist.

Overly girly, just Leon’s type. Similarly, she was out of his league, but “She isn’t any prettier than you are.” Makoto murmured, resting his face on his palm

The surprise comment had Sayaka flush red. “You think so-”

“Or Kirigiri, Aoi, Junko, Chiaki, Sonia…there’s too many to list. Maybe Komaru was right about this school. Every girl in it is drop dead gorgeous. What is this, a dating sim?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking getting my hopes up.” Sayaka deadpanned. Makoto’s gaze lingered on the pinkette.

He gets a clear look at her face.

“With the way you keep staring at her, I wonder if we can trust that evaluation.” He didn’t look back, but it wasn’t like he could ever mistake Kyoko’s voice. The lavender-haired girl returned with the drinks she’d left to buy.

“Thank you~” Sayaka took the beverage.

Makoto, on the other hand, couldn’t stop staring, like the detective said. “Hold on…does she…go to this school?” He presses a finger to his chin.

“Not sure.” “Didn’t you research all the students in the main campus?”

“I thought I got through most…but, where have I seen her before?” His gaze was intense enough to provoke the other girls’ curiosity, who joined his observations.

The unknown woman was timid to Leon’s advances, her eyes flickering back and forth from him to their location. A taller man appeared. With a stern, a hand on Leon’s shoulder

“Oh, she’s with a guy. Maybe this was a bad idea.” Sayaka cringed.

“I’ll run over and pacify things…” Makoto stood, placing the baseball inside his hoodie’s pocket. His movements halted when he took further notice of the older male. wavy, chocolate brown hair.

His style of dressing was like the baseball star’s. Not quite as exaggerated, but giving off no less of a ‘punk’ appeal with his skull tee and skinny jeans. “He’s familiar too.” Maybe not by himself but combined with the other girl-

“Yikes!”

Makoto had to double-take with what came next. Maybe Leon had said something he shouldn’t have (a strong possibility). The redhead pointed over to their table, said a few words…then, the girl latched onto his arm and flipped him onto the ground.
“Pfft-ahaha.” Sayaka succumbed to a bout of giggles at the scene, uncharacteristically clutching her stomach.

Even Kyoko was smiling.

“Good grief.” Makoto swayed his head from side to side.

The pink-haired woman glanced over towards them, towards him. With a look of surprise, she started running over.

Makoto blinked. “She’s…coming this way.” And waving too. “Is she a friend of yours?” He turned to his friends.

“Definitely not. I probably would have warned Leon.” Sayaka said, still cackling.

“I believe I already answered that question. I’ve never seen her before.” Kyoko noted.

“Then,” Makoto never got to finish before a pair of arms slung around his waist. Before he knew it, his feet were off the ground, and he was spun around in the air.

“It’s been ages!” The woman with abnormal strength said

“What the hell?! Put me down!” Makoto flushed, heavily embarrassed. What the heck was she doing?! “I’m not a kid!”

“Hard to tell.” The other man walked over, calmly. His hands in his pocket. With warm, affectionate eyes, he said. “You haven’t really grown up much, Makoto.”

How does he know my name?

“Could you ask your friend to let me go? She’s kinda crushing me.”

The man’s eyebrow ticked upwards, followed by a short laugh. “‘Your friend’...Haha, I can't blame you for not wanting to recognize this gorilla woman.”

Makoto’s was back on land in an instant, as the girl glanced back to her partner. “Feel like joining the poser over there on the ground?”

“Only if you feel like ruining your first impressions any more than you already have.”

Makoto silently observed the banter, overwhelmed by nostalgic warmth. His body instinctively realized the truth. His mouth moved “Nana...Kotaro…”

The two stopped bickering at the mention of their names. “Hah, he said my name first.” Nana snickered.


“What are you doing here?” Was it…luck?

“We saw you on TV. We couldn’t wait to see you after all this time.” Nana squealed. Before she could get in another hug, Makoto beat her to the bunch, tightly embracing his old friends.

He was seeing a utopia of the past, before it fell to ruin.
“You two…haven’t changed at all.” The height disparity only grew with time. He looked up to them, overflowing with excitement, jubilation and anxiety.

“Unless you meant that in a good way, I’ve changed a lot.” Nana said in faux displeasure.

Kotaro ruffled his hair. “You can’t believe how surprised I was. To see you, but you getting into Hope’s Peak wasn’t surprising at all. That’s our little genius.”

“Genius?”

Kyoko voice cut through the moment. That’s when Makoto remembered Kyoko was there…and many others. He broke away from the hug and turned around to see an assortment of puzzled glances his way.

“Um…these are my childhood friends. We were classmates in grade school.” He said loudly.

“Kotaro Sakakibara.” “Nana Takizawa.” The two introduced themselves.

A limping Leon strolled into the scene, shooting Nana dirty looks. “Your friends are dangerous, Makoto. Give me a heads-up next time.”

Nana clapped her hands in apology, reverting to her innocent façade. “Sorry, I really wanted to head over here, and you were holding us up. I used more force than I had to.”

“It’s…partly your fault, Leon.” Makoto scratched his cheek.

“Leon. Leon Kuwata.” Kotaro said with a surprised look

“The one and only.” The redhead soured.

“My bad. I didn’t recognize you without a shaved head...Can I get an autograph?”

“Just end me.”

The two are interrupted by a cough from Kyoko. “I don't mean to interrupt, but…you called Naegi-kun a prodigy.” She repeated her earlier question.

“This little twerp used to be in the same grade as us.” Nana hugged his back.

“The…same grade?” Sayaka cocked her head to the side. To her, Nana looked several years older.

Leon scoffed. 50% disbelief. 50% jealousy from the contact the brunet received. “Makoto? Genius? He gets 60s average on all his tests.”

“Ah…uh…” Makoto stuttered.

“No way.” “Impossible” Kotaro and Nana exuded the same confusion.

“Makoto skipped grades. He was our class representative, a perfectionist, even a track star. He could run like the wind.”

Aoi choked on her donuts.

"Ho?" Kyoko gave Makoto a calculating look. ‘So...that was true, after all. It explains why he was so difficult to catch.’
"Makoto was our golden egg." Nana hugged tighter.

Makoto flushed beet red at the praise. Before the conversation took a route he desperately wanted to avoid. "Then you disappeared on us. What happened? We were worried sick." Nana said.

“I…I…” He froze. There was no way to explain this, not on such short notice. Was this bad luck after all?

“What’s all the fuss over here, big bro?” Komaru waltzed in, her mouth stuffed with food.

“Komaru-chan?” Kotaro blinked

“That’s me! Have we met before?”

Makoto interjected. “You were pretty young, so you might not remember…These are my old school friends, I brought them home a few times to study.”

“She’s grown so much…in more ways than one.” Kotaro said.

Nana retaliated with an elbow to the gut.

“Why’d you hit me?!” Leon whined, clutching his sides.

“It’s nice to meet you both.” Sayaka called. “Why don’t you two sit with us and eat?”

The newest entrants into the mini-party stared at the blue-haired girl in silence.

“Is that THE…Sayaka Maizono?” Nana pointed.

Kotaro swatted her finger away. “D-Don’t stare.” He said, staring incredulously all the same.

“Still in pain here…” Leon groaned.

…

“Those bozos are making a huge racket. Embarrassing.” Hiyoko mocked.

“It is a festival. It’d be weird if things weren’t upbeat.” Mahiru said. She raises her camera to eye-level and zooms in on the scene. The pink-haired woman clutched the idol’s hands with raw fanaticism. The brown-haired newcomer frantically apologized and fanboyed over the baseball star, who reveled in the attention and likely needed the boost to his fractured ego. Close by was Makoto observing them, laughing.

Mahiru’s mouth parted at the photogenic opportunity. The camera flashed with the press of a button. She peeks at the gallery.

A peppy and awkward smile.

“...Finally, a good shot of him.”

Mukuro stood in front of a control console in the A/V room, as per the instructions given in the diary, at the time suggested. She’s got a real dull look on her face. Shocking, I know! But I can overlook her disappointing existence just this once. Mukuro was only following the road already laid for her.
“You’ll always return to my side, because I’m the only one who loves and understands you.” Mukuro recited the final paragraphs. Foreign emotions overwhelmed the soldier by the end.

“Happy Birthday…” were words Junko had never uttered in her life. Yet they were written here for her to see. “It’s up to you whether to unwrap your gift.” There was nothing else in this room, save the monitors. “I love you. I understand you. I’m not angry that you betrayed me, because you don’t understand it, the beauty of despair. Now I’ll let you. Now, I want you to understand me too. See the world through my eyes.”

Mukuro looked at the monitor with trepidation. If she wasn’t mistaken, what the soldier would see is…

The ravenette steeled herself and slowly inched her gloveless finger to the on-button. The screen lit up. Mukuro stood motionless, captivated by the brainwashing video burning into her retina. There she saw… “I knew you’d come back to me.” Junko’s visage on the screen, cackling.

I really did. They all made it too easy. In Mukuro’s case, all I give her was a diary. Although, calling it that might be incorrect. A diary was a record of past events. This had foretold the future.

October 12th 20XX

A storm brewed inside Hope’s Peak Academy, slowly but surely enveloping all within the academy’s walls…

No, that wasn’t quite correct. You can’t stop a natural disaster, after all. Hmm… a bomb might be the better analogy? Yeah, let’s go with that. A time-bomb placed in plain sight for all to see, steadily counting down to the end.

What could be done about it? A number of things, but that depends on the sort of person you are.

I grouped people in two categories. Those with sight and the blind.

…

October 15th 20XX

Ryoko undergoes multiple fateful encounters, while Yasuke regrets ever meeting Junko Enoshima. Poor guy, maybe one day he’ll find happiness.

All he needs is a little helping hand.

“Good Morning, Matsuda-kun!” She shouted the first thing after waking. It was far from normal to call out someone else’s name as she did, but she had a feeling he would be there.

…

October 26th 20XX

That Mukuro, burdening herself with meaningless subjects like loyalty. ‘Should I protect Junko or help Naegi?’ She let herself be plagued by these thoughts, born of fundamental misunderstandings of character; her affections would never reach the two recipients, while they would only smile indifferently, regardless of her choice.

Mukuro Ikusaba was born into a highly dysfunctional family. Her parents were, for the lack of a better term, useless and irresponsible. She couldn’t think of a single instance of feeling genuine
gratitude towards them. Besides giving birth to her little sister.

Junko was...perfect. Mukuro acknowledged this fact ever since they were children. She learned to speak fluently in under a year, completed any task assigned to her and even in elementary school, designed a scarily accurate model of a church using nothing but sand. It wasn't unusual to assume the elder sister would suffer a crippling inferiority complex, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. Mukuro adored Junko and her talents more than anything in the world.

...

October 27th 20XX

I've always liked Peko, even if she's a little bit wary of me. There's so few people out there who know exactly who they are and what they want to be. I'm opposed to the self-deprecation and the whole tool thing, because she has so much potential. I'd like to hope her self-esteem changed after we met and she sees Kuzuryu-senpai as more of an equal, now that she's motivated to take down that Enoshima. Even if only a little.

...Yeah, I guess that's not very likely, huh?

...

October 28th 20XX

Chiaki Nanami, sensing the disturbances in HPA and acknowledging her shortcomings, seeks out the assistance of an expert. Does that sound simple? Something any idiot could think up? Well then, you'd be surprised to know this executive decision already made Chiaki more intelligent than nearly the entire student body.

...

And so on, were scripts summarizing the actions and motivations of all the players on the board. Now, it was time to forward to the climax, the final minutes before The Tragedy.

Remember what I said at the beginning? I'm an opportunist. If I see a bomb in front of me, there are only three choices:

Run.

Diffuse it.

Make use of it.

I said I chose the third, because no fucking shit I'd blow up the bomb I planted!

It's so despairing how everything went according to plan Upupu~

Chapter End Notes

I'd say it's Junko time...but it never stopped being Junko time. Congrats to Meathir for inquiring about the narrator but it wasn't Makoto.
Chihiro locked the dorm room door. He fell headfirst on his soft bed. He was tired, but not sleepy, if that made any sense. “I need to snap out of this funk.” He whispered. The culture festival was… fun, all things considered. The atmosphere itself put a smile on his face, however small.

Kyoko was right. Makoto didn’t care about him. Not anymore than he did everyone else.

Today, Chihiro had gotten to see what the boy was like when he was really happy.

“Liar.” The programmer slammed his pillow in frustration. He didn’t know why Makoto lied when he called Chihiro his favorite, but…there wasn’t any reason why Chihiro had to be unhappy because of someone who didn’t even like him.

“I’m taking Alter ego back, first thing tomorrow.”

It was then that the programmer heard a beep from his e-handbook.

“Who could this be at this time? The festival’s over.” Chihiro swiped the device open, shocked to see the face that came on the screen.

“Alter ego?” He had a million things he wanted to say to his creation, but the AI beat him to the punch.

“Hi, creator. There’s something important I have to tell you.”

“What?”

“I-I tried to keep it a secret, I can’t agree with Makoto’s doing, but I can’t stop him either. He can override my controls.”

How the heck can he do that? “…Explain.”

“I’ll start from the beginning…”

Izuru found Chiaki outside the game center, crouched, her back against the wall. “There’s still time left before the concert. Your work is nearly finished.”

“‘Nearly’ is a problem, I’m sleepy.” Her head slowly sways back and forth.

“Have you grown as bored of this as I have?” He sits next to her.

“Nope, it’s just way past bedtime hours for me.” Chiaki rubs her eyes. “What about you? You didn’t like the culture festival?”

“I feel nothing in particular for it.”
“You sure you aren’t still grumpy from losing the tournament.” It was a low blow, but she’d never get a reaction out of him otherwise.

“Restricted to the confines of a video game, my loss was inevitable. It doesn’t change that I’m superior to you lot.” He doesn’t say it as strongly as he used to.

Chiaki nodded in agreement. “That’s true. You can do so much that we can’t. A lot more than the old Hajime could.”

“…You admitted it.”

She wrapped her arms around her legs, bringing them closer. “I was afraid of accepting you changed…and what the school changed you into.”

“It was his choice.”

“It was.” She admits that too. “I’m sorry, for not being useful back then. All I did was make you more insecure without realizing.”

“Some people hurt others merely by existing. Hajime Hinata was crushed under the weight of his own complex. His weakness, is no fault of your own.”

“And…that means you’re strong?” She looked up at the taller Ultimate.

“I believe you acknowledged that just moments ago.”

“I want you to say it.” Chiaki shook her head. “Do you think you’re better off now? Happier?”

“…”

When Izuru failed to give a response, Chiaki filled the silence. “I hope you are…and if you’re not, I want to make you happy.”

Izuru’s eyes widened. It was a waste of time. Biologically…logically, he shouldn’t have the capacity for it. He was a machine. Yet “How would you do that?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll try – I mean it this time.” She looked at him with determination. “I won’t be all talk anymore.”

“Even if you were to succeed…your efforts are misplaced. You would be helping me, not Hajime.”

“That wouldn’t change my mind.” She pressed. “If my friend really is gone, then you’re all that’s left of him.” Her heart constricted at the thought, but she wouldn’t falter. “Instead of looking at the past, I want to help your future.”

…

“You…really aren’t boring, are you.” Izuru averted his eyes, rising to his feet.

“Going back?”

“I’ll go make coffee.” He strutted away.

“Was he…embarrassed?” Chiaki tilted her head. She covered her mouth as another yawn came along. As soon as she was left alone, she tired.
She wasn’t alone for long.

“Chiaki-san, w-w-what are you doing on the floor? It’s dirty. There could be germs!”

The pinkette was speaking before she even looked up at the nurse “Hi, Mikan.” She got up to her feet. “I haven’t seen you all day.”

“I’ve been at the nurse’s office…in case of emergencies.” Mikan played with her fingers. Timid, but overbearing when it came to taking care of others.

“Sounds rough, but I’m sure you’re doing a good job.” Chiaki said. “Did you even have a break?”

She shook her head. “I-I’m on a short one which is why I want to make this quick.” Mikan straightened up. With uncharacteristic fortitude, she asked. “Could you come with me? I have something important to show you.”

“Like?”

“It’s a secret. Could you please, right now? J-Just the two of us.”

It must have been important for the normally reserved Mikan to be so pushy. She was only that adamant with health related in concerns. “….okay.”

Mikan led her outside, around the back of the building.

If this was a dating sim, this would be the part where Chiaki would get a confession. “I don’t remember tripping any flags though.” She whispered.

“Have you been enjoying yourself?” Mikan’s asked.

“Lots. This is the most fun I’ve had since I can remember.” Chiaki smiled. “Everything’s better in multiplayer.”

“I’m happy to hear that. I really am.” Mikan turned around, arms behind her back. “I hope this was the happiest day of your life.”

“That’s a little much. I’d have to think about it….so, what’s this surprise you’ve got for me?”

Mikan pointed overhead. “He’s right behind you.”

Chiaki hadn’t even the time to ask. She choked on air as an arm abruptly wrapped around her neck. A damp cloth closed off her mouth, the toxic smell filling her body as she slowly lost consciousness.

02:46

“Where is he?” Sayaka glanced at clock located in the middle of class 78’s homeroom. It was 9:14 PM. The concert was soon…but she had to clear up an important matter before she could go on stage with full attention. Something she was currently lacking thanks to an earlier conversation with the resident detective.

…

“Alright, Kyoko. Time to spill the beans.”
“What specifically?”

“You’ve been following us all day. You can’t tell me that’s not suspicious.”

“Your paranoia isn’t my problem, Maizono.”

“Listen here. I’ve got an important event coming up shortly. It needs to be perfect. That no freak accidents that this school loves, happens … You’re up to something, and that means you think somebody else is and you’re trying to stop them. Is any of that going to affect me?”

“…I appreciate your faith, but you could stand to be more candid. You and I both know who that ‘somebody’ is.”

“…What’s Makoto done?”

“I don’t know, and I have no evidence of anything either. But Maizono-san. You were the one who told me never to underestimate intuition. Naegi-kun has ulterior motives and if he’s going to show them, it’ll be tonight. That’s why I’ve been watching him where possible. I wasn’t counting on his friends showing up and whisking him away.”

…

“Hey, you sent me a message?” Spikey brown popped into the doorway.

She hated the way everything faded into the background in his presence. “Where are your friends?” She tried to suppress the envy she felt towards them.

He cautiously walked over, maneuvering through the rows. “I said I had something important to do, we split ways.”

“Important?”

He points

She giggles, suppressing her envy of Makoto’s friends. She then motioned for him to sit with her on the desk. All the chairs were already commandeered and taken away.

“I got their contact information…they said to keep in touch.” She can tell he’s nervous. In a way that made her doubt who she was speaking to.

“What about Komaru?”

“I bailed on her too. Said I had something to do. They should still be around for your concert, so knock em dead.” He shadow-boxed.

“…I plan on it.” She posed the question. “Which Makoto am I talking to by the way?”

“The one you dislike.” He joked, arms relaxed, behind his head.

“…It’s been one heck of a year huh?”

“It sure has been, but things are looking up now.”

He lightly hops off the desk, moving to the nearby window. Sayaka’s thankful that the air coming out isn’t too cold, even without the sun’s warmth. Those idol outfits are too frilly sometimes.
“Come see.” He motions for her to gaze with him. They don’t watch the stars or any such romantic view. Or maybe it might have been to him. Droplets of snow fall to the ground, where crowds of people parading the campus.

The number isn’t grandstanding for the Ultimate Pop sensation, but he’s taken by the sight.

“It was rough getting here…for you at least. You always push yourself too hard.” She says.

“Not really.”

“You collapsed.”

“I did.” He doesn’t deny it. It’s not important enough to bother.

“I’m sorry…I never visited you.”

“It’s fine.” He brushes off the apology.

Sayaka inhales…it was now or never. “It’s not. I should have at least checked in on you, but I was spiteful. It was the same with when you ran off to chase after the reserve course. The things you do just get to me. I wish you cared more.”

“I do care. But I can’t let that stop me from getting results.”

Sayaka bites her lip. “Ever thought that things could be resolved without hurting yourself?”

“I only try my best…things just end up that way.” He touched his chest. She knows there’s a scar underneath his layers.

The bluenette suppresses her bubbling irritation. “You’re wrong on two points. There are easier ways, you…you don’t want to believe in them.”

“What’s the second thing?” He looks up at her, doe eyed. He was remarkably short, like a child. Unfortunately, he was about as easy to reason with as one too. Most of all, for all his faults, he was equally as pure.

“I like you.”

He blinks, puzzled by the confession. It wasn’t the first, but the timing threw him off. “I…don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“You said I disliked you earlier, that’s wrong.” She corrects.

He breaks eye contact, returning to the crowd below. That was his answer, wasn’t it?

“I’ve never once said the person who saved that crane was me, specifically. It could have been the other Makoto.”

“Was it?” It would be easier for her if that was the case.

“It was…and he likes you back.”

Which is why he was more likely to lie about it.

“I want to believe in you. That’s why I don’t want to believe Kyoko.” He jerks at the stoic’s name. “What are you up to?” Sayaka asks.
He shoots her a calculating eye. “…What did Kyoko say?”

Sayaka feels more than just a tick of irritation “I’m the one asking. Me!” She gripped his shoulders. “My career is important to me. So are my friends…”

“Your concert will go off without a hitch, Sayaka.” He promises.

“Nothing will go wrong…or nothing you think is wrong.”

This time, it’s the silence that answers her. “So it’s true.” She gives him an even stare. “I’m not as smart as you, but I’m not stupid. I can read you and better yet, I can read the mood. I had suspicions from the day you came to me for help. You have another agenda, and the fact that it hasn’t happened yet, means it’s going to. There’s no other time but right now, during my concert, what you made the main event of your festival.”

Before anything else was planned. Before they had even told the headmaster, Makoto had decided that.

“Don’t do it.” Her eyes sting with water. “Whatever it is. Don’t use me like this. Don’t be like them.”

As gently as he would brush away a feather, he removes her shaking hands from his shoulders. She’s stunned when he walks by her without a word.

“W-Where are you going?” She whips around.

He looks back to her “You should be getting ready. Your concert is in one hour.”

Her breaths hitched. Something inside her snaps. The lock on her emotions, breaks. Like a dam, she bursts. A resounding clap emanates across the room.

Makoto staggers back, his hand reaching for his reddened cheek.

Sayaka’s breathes harshly, her hand stinging from the impact.

“Ha…haha…that’s the first time you’ve hit me.” He smiled. He laughed. Like nothing phased him. Like nothing she did could, would, ever reach him.

“I hate that about you.” Her voice was shaking…but natural. Gone, were the sweet overtones and practiced inflections. “Always acting like you think nothing’s wrong, and you know it’s not. Always messing with people’s heads. All those fake smiles. How can you live like this?!”

His hazel eyes are cold and judging. “You’ve been doing just fine so far.”

Her blue ones see red.

The second slap sends him crashing to the ground, nearby desks falling over with him. He struggles to pick himself from the floor. She sees a heavy red bruise on his cheeks. She’s too angry to care. The tiny sliver of hope she held shattered this night.

“I won’t ever become like you! Find Gekkogahara and get some damn help, you freak!”

Shock and hurt are painted on his features. It almost brings her satisfaction to know she caused it.

For a moment. “It finally comes out. Why’re you acting like this is a big revelation? You’ve thought that right from the start, haven’t you?” He said.
All the tension leaves her. “You’re hopeless.”

‘I’ve had enough.’

“I’ve always believed you, always accepted your faults…because you’re my friend. You’ve always been my friend.” She wipes the tears from her eyes. “But it’s clear to me now – I’ve never been yours.”

She marches past him without looking back.

“…She’s so emotional.” Makoto whispers to himself, cupping his cheek. His bangs shadow his eyes.

“Where’d everyone go?” Leon Kuwata stretched his arms, the bones creaking from a stressful day of being the best. “Haaa…maybe I’ll hit up Neko’s barracks.” He wasn’t really into letting dudes touch him, but the team manager was something else.

He took the long route along the academy walls because noooo way, was he going outside with that massive crowd.

“Hm.” A familiar head of blue-hair, fit body and thighs came into view. “Yo, Sayaka.” He freezes when he gets a look at the girl’s face.

Leon grabs the back of her shoulder as she walks by. “Hold up!”

“Let go of me!” She screams, but his grip only tightens.

“Hey hey, whoa! You’ve got a concert in a few minutes. You can’t be wearing a face that says you’re about to murder.” There’s no knives around here, right?

She glares at him with puffy-red eyes.

“Yeah, that one!” He recoils. “Fucking hell...just come with me a sec.”

Thankfully, she doesn’t resist him dragging her off to an empty classroom, because those are the only places left in the whole school that you can find some peace and quiet.

Leon finds a chair and sits in a backwards fashion. “…What’d he do this time?”

Sayaka sniffs, wiping her eyes with his handkerchief. This’d be a great chance to work to get some good guy points.

“Noth everything’s about Makoto.” She says.

“He’s the only reason you get that pissed.” Otherwise, she just hides it. “Calm down. Spill, what’d he say?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”
“Oho, really?” Leon crossed his arms. “A few months ago, Makoto broke my favorite bat. And when I say broke, I mean split clean in half. Like he’d put it through a saw. That was my treasure, my baby! You can’t imagine how fucking pissed I was.” He still kinda was. “I wanted to clock him, but someone apparently beat me to the punch.” Literally. Bruises, scrapes and bandages everywhere.

“He never gave me a straight answer, so all I could do was bottle it up.” The baseball star clicked his tongue.

“Typical.” Sayaka seethed. “Even though he’s surrounded by people who cared about him, he’s never accepted any of us.”

“Okay, so I’m getting a vague idea of what happened. Like, he’s always been a little shady but we knew that right? You shouldn’t get too worked up.”

“You don’t know anything, Leon.”

“I play along for a bit and the two of you think I’m the idiot third wheel, huh.” He sighs, rubbing the back of her neck. “When’d you get to know the pipsqueak. In HPA right? Well, I’ve known him longer than that. You really think I haven’t noticed, by now? Makoto’s a lot of things but he’s not exactly movie star material. All you have to do is pay attention, and I had plenty of time to. By the end of our high school year, I bet everyone’ll see it too.”

“You-You know?” Man, that baffled expression kinda irks me.

“Remember that party I hosted at the start of the year?”

She nods.

He holds up 7 fingers. “7 minutes in a closet – I said. You were in there for 15. A guy gets curious.” He lets loose a perverted smirk.

She blushed. “You saw that?”

“Someone had to stand guard. I also happened to overhear a few things.” Felt bad about that…

“Why haven’t you said anything?”

“A man has to respect boundaries.” Leon shrugs. “When’s he’s ready to tell me, I’ll listen.” Until then, it was a lot easier to go with the flow.

“You’ve been hanging with Mondo way too much.” She laughs. Score!

“It’s not like I can do much else for the guy. I ain’t no shrink and I’m no babysitter either. I’ll just do what I can.”

“That is?” She listens intently.

“Let him be and watch. When he’s ready to ask for my help, I’ll lend a hand. That’s what friends do, right?”

“Friends. You know those two from earlier…” She began.

“Like I could forget.” He spat. So humiliating. It doesn’t matter how cute a girl is, nobody flips Leon Kuwata!
“I’ve never seen Makoto that lost…that happy. I was jealous.” She brings her knees close to her chest.

Ugh, minus points. Damn you, Makoto.

Still, he did share the same feeling. “Think he likes them better than us?”

“I think so.” Sayaka replied.

“In that case, we just have to prove that we’re better.”

“Huh?” Like a deer-in-the-headlights.

“It ain’t hard. All this means is that we’ve got competition we didn’t know about. We’ve just got to show Makoto that we’re his best buds. Not some old school kids. We know him better than they do anyway.” That old childhood friend advantage is a myth. Sorry, Kanon.

Sayaka eyed him with suspicion. “Sounds like you’re treating this like a baseball game.”

“Why not? If you ask me, you guys take things too seriously. Don’t tell me you haven’t crushed other idols in the music game. Same deal, different stage.”

She’s almost offended by the comparison. “I think my case is a lot more severe than yours.”

He scoffs. “Girl, people call me talented, a gift to baseball. But if you ask me? All I’m doing is making the crowd go wild and the hard-working guys on the other team cry, when I beat them. Are you really different?”

The idol thinks over his words. “You’re awful…but not wrong…for once.”

“Ignoring the ‘for once’ part. Compared to our hobbies. Makoto will be a cinch.”

She gives a sad smile, which goes down in like a split second as she says “I shouldn’t have hit him.”

Leon’s eyes bulge out “You decked him?”

“Worse.” She gripped her hands, guilt written over her face as the weight of her words. “I called him a freak.”

“What the fuck happened?!” Leon almost fell out of his chair.

“I-I have to go back and apologize.”

“No, you’ve got like no time before the concert. If I were you, I’d run. I’ll talk to that goof.” Leon said.

Sayaka didn’t try to argue. She really didn’t want to see Makoto right now. “I’ll leave it to you. Thanks, Leon.”

“Go on a date with me, and I’ll consider us square.”

“Haven’t you pushed your luck enough for one day?”
Makoto knocked on the door to the science laboratory,

‘What am I doing’ He thought with a vacant expression. He didn’t know why he came here, the one person he wished to avoid more than anyone else.

Oh right. ‘It doesn’t matter.’ He might as well be an idiot for once.

The door opened. Yasuke Matsuda, not the person he wanted to see.

“What do you want?”

He didn’t care for the neurologist’s tone. He cared even less to put up with it.

“Get Gekkogahara out here.”

Even the sharp-tongued Yasuke gave pause at the venomous tone.

“Please.” Makoto added.

The older man retreated inside.

Makoto waited anxiously. He clutched his arm to stop the shaking. ‘Take deep breaths.’

Promptly, Miaya appeared. She’d matured since he last saw her…but still in a wheelchair. “I never thought you’d come to see me. It’s been a long time, Makoto.”

“It has, Gekkogahara-san.” He said slowly, weirded out by the rabbit on the LCD screen speaking for her.

“Why so formal? You’re more comfortable with first names, and we’re friends, aren’t we?”

...“Don’t you think it’s a bit mean, going around behind my back like this?” He spoke with false courtesy. “I’ve thought the way some of my friends were looking at me...analyzing me, was off. I didn’t want to say anything or think the worst. There’s nothing unsightlier than an insecure, paranoid, man...haha.”

“Is this foreign to you? You seem to do it a lot from what I hear.”

“I am not a licensed professional. Aren’t you committing a crime?!“ He raises his voice before he knows it.

“Calm down, Makoto. You’re breathing too quickly.”

“I’m very calm. Why wouldn’t I be? We’re adults here.” He was sick. Just being around her made him want to vomit. She was right, he needed to calm down. “What’s with that rabbit...don’t tell me you’re still shy.”

“I am. Usami is more efficient too, my patients are more comfortable around her. I have Chihiro to thank for that.” She sent him a cold look.

He had nothing to say to that, except “It’s making me uncomfortable. Could you...”

“I don’t think I’ve done anything to you to warrant this level of antagonism from you, Makoto.” Miaya spoke, in her own voice.
Hearing her voice reminds him of the institution. He shivers, to the therapist’s notice.

“Oh, I see. The reason you haven’t come before now, is because you’ve projected everything onto me. I’m a connection to the past.”

“Stop assessing me. I’m not a patient.” He said.

“I want to help you, Makoto. I always have. But you lied to me.”

“I didn’t have a choice. You wouldn’t listen.”

“...Why are you here?” Miaya asked.

“That’s a good question. I don’t know myself, but if I had to make up a reason on the spot…” He trailed off. “Don’t get in my way.”

“Okay.” The blue-haired said simply enough to give Makoto pause. “I’ve been thinking about your condition a lot…and I agree. I have no right to force you into treatment. Especially after I already failed you once already.”

“...Well, aren’t you accommodating. That’s nice! I wish everyone was so reasonable.” Makoto laughed bitterly. “But since they tend not to be, I hope you’ll understand that I’m skeptical.”

The science room door burst open, interrupting their conversation. A panic-stricken Yasuke looked at them. “Oi, have you seen Ryoko?”

“I haven’t. Check Chiaki’s laboratory on the 3rd floor.” Makoto informs. Without so much as a word of thanks, the neurologist runs off. The two stare at his back in confusion.

...

“Where were we?” Makoto asked.

“Just about finished.” The therapist turned the chair around. “If you’re ready to accept my help, I’ll be there whenever you need me, and I’ll give you the best care I can offer. But it has to be your choice. I’m sorry if I hurt you in the past and believe me when I say I won’t do it again.”

“...Why should I?” That was the question.

She looked back. “I’ve kept away from you this whole time, haven’t I?” With that, Miaya returned to the science lab.

After a moment of standing, motionless… “Ha…that was easy! I was worried over nothing.” Makoto scratched his cheek. ‘Yup, it’s bad to let my imagination run away with me after all.’

The boy walked away… “Alter ego.” He called.

“Yes…Naegi-kun?” Makoto caught the hesitation in its voice.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah nothing…why did you call?”

“Tell Isshiki to rendezvous under the tower. Time to finish this.”
Kyoko spotted Nagito Komaeda with his hands on the doorknob to the council office. He notices her quick footsteps and offers a small smile. “After you.”

Kyoko accepts his invitation and walks in ahead of him. Over a dozen of her upperclassman and more occupy the space, each with confused or worried looks.

“Nanami is missing?” Kyoko asks.

“That’s what I called ya for.” Fuyuhiko snapped. She’d received his message on her handbook.

“Give me a time stamp and your source. If she really is missing, the longer we wait, the worse it gets.”

“Worse how?” Kazuichi Souda clutched his beanie. Kyoko didn’t answer, it should have gone without saying.

Luckily, she was a good distance from the door when Akane Owari and Nekomaru Nidai ran in, both breathing heavily.

“We can’t find her anywhere!!” “We might have missed her but there are too many darn people. I wish we could just get rid of em’”

Kyoko addressed the group. “Is there anyone else on the look out?”

“Fuyuhiko and I have our servants searching for her as we speak.” Sonia Nevermind replied, seated on the long chair. The princess’ calm disposition was welcome. The less idiotic questions and panicking, the better. “Chiaki is an important friend. If she’s missing, this calls for all assistance available.”

“I’m in the same boat as Kirigiri-san, having arrived late.” Kyoko wasn’t fond of how close Komaeda stood by her. “I’m a bit out of the loop. Do we know with certainty that Chiaki is MIA? Couldn’t she have just left somewhere?”

“She left her post.” Ryoko Otonashi spoke up, clasping her hands. “I uh tried calling, but no dice.”

“Who was the last person to see her and where?” Kyoko asked.

“Ask him!” Fuyuhiko pointed at the red-eyed boy standing furthest in the corner, away from everyone’s immediate gaze. Kyoko hadn’t even noticed his presence until now.

“Izuru Kamukura.” She said.

“Huh? That’s Hajime Hinata. He’s a friend of ours.” Ryoko said.

“Nanami was weary and she sought refuge outside her laboratory. We spoke and I offered to make coffee. By the time I came back, she was gone.” Izuru explained.

“She didn’t tell you where she went?”

“Not a word. It is not in her personality to wander off without waiting. That leaves two options: She was either taken by force or coerced. The latter would only occur with an important other.”

It wasn’t hard to clue into who Izuru was referring to. But it might be best to keep their options open wide.
“Why should we believe anything that comes out of your mouth?” Fuyuhiko seethed.

“What reason would I have to lie? If you intend to derail this investigation, then leave. I seek results, not tantrums.”

“I’m with Fuyuhiko on not trusting this dude, but If that’s the case, she should be fine right…I can’t think of anyone who’d hurt Chiaki. She’s harmless.” Kazuichi interjected.

Fuyuhiko nervously twitches. His gaze meets hers and falters “Could…Makoto have taken her?”

Kyoko isn’t petty enough to tell him this was a possibility he ought to have foreseen all along. But she will think it. “There’s no evidence of that yet.”

“You’re the one who came to me with that shit, and now, she’s gone. What am I supposed to think??”

“Before you ask, Naegi has not responded to any calls or messages to his handbook. He’s nowhere to be found either. Interesting, given his position.” Izuru said. Naturally, everyone else was lost in their argument

“Where’s this going? Makoto? What would he want with Chiaki?” Akane voiced the collective’s curiosity.

Kyoko dodged Nagito’s knowing gaze, instead tackling on Fuyuhiko’s worries. “We don’t know that, and I’m not sure you believe it either, Kuzuryu.” She faced Izuru. “As I was led to believe, Naegi required Nanami as a deterrent for you. Well, is there any reason why he would need to act on that threat?”

“None. I have done nothing to warrant his attention in months.”

“Then you should be aware he is severely lacking a motive.” Kyoko pressed her finger against her chin, as she did whenever deep in thought.

“Yet he is absent at the most inopportune moment.”

“You asked for my help, unencumbered by your machinations. I’m giving it. Rather, as someone who ought to have my talent, I can’t imagine why you would make such a glaring oversight.” She glaring.

“Kirigiri-san is right. You’re too worked up, Kamukura-kun.” Nagito waved his placatingly. Ironic, given his next words were nothing short of an accusation. “It sounds like you’re trying to shift the blame.”

Fuyuhiko bit the hook. “You bastard, if you dragged her into something-”

“Ah, Fuyuhiko, I didn’t mean Kamukura was the kidnapper, if there is one. I’m saying it’s not necessarily Naegi-kun.” Nagito smiled, as if the blonde was wrong to conclude what the white-haired boy had set himself. “Kamukura-kun brought up a good point earlier. If Chiaki wasn’t taken, then she willingly followed someone. I find the latter case more likely because, I assume there wasn’t any sign of a struggle otherwise I’m sure someone with Ibuki-san’s hearing,” Izuru caught onto the suggestion. “or the others in the laboratory would have heard something.”

Ryoko shook her head rapidly. “Who would take her?”

“Any of you could.” Nagito spread his arms wide.
“What?!" Fuyuhiko spoke for the group.

“Ultimate Despair.” Kyoko remarked. The room descended into silence, shame filled looks aplenty. Nagito wouldn’t let that stop his inquiry. “It’s an interesting rumor. I’ve heard the lot of you have done interesting things. Such as…Sonia-san treating her servants harshly…or even Fuyuhiko assaulting Peko.”

“Be silent.” The swordswoman in question said.

“You believe one of them is the captor. Understood, following Enoshima’s philosophy, Chiaki would be a prime target and I would not be able to predict the logic behind it.” Izuru said, matter-of-factly.

“Hey, we’re totally back to normal.” Kazuichi yelled.

“No, you’re not. Many of you still behave irrationally and recklessly.” Kyoko is reminded of Teruteru and Kazuichi’s knife juggling act on the first committee meeting. “Nevermind is particularly concerning.” At Izuru’s declaration, Sonia became the center of attention.

Unphased by the suspicions placed on her, the Novoselic princess casually said. “Of course. I came to realize that I was more fascinated with Junko herself than despair, and it appears she has long abandoned us.”

That answer was enough to satisfy most.

Not all.

“And what if she hasn’t.” Fuyuhiko growled, his aim changed from Izuru to Ryoko “I’ll gut you if you had anything to do with this.”

“Eh? I didn’t do anything! I have evidence, I was in the room the whole time!”

“Junko Enoshima rarely needed to do the work herself. She had others act for her.” Peko backed the gangster.

The vibrations of Kyoko’s notebook distract her from the ensuing witch hunt. She’s directed to a message from an anonymous sender – Mr X.

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The detective’s eyebrows lift a millimetre, but the shock is clear from her tone. “…What?”

“Is it about Chiaki?” Izuru asks.

“I received an anonymous message. It, from what I can read, does not involve Nanami-san.” Her eyes didn’t leave the notebook “It’s worse.” That’s enough to silence the bickering. “I’ll mass-forward it to all of you.”

Nagito approached Izuru to share his e-handbook with the Ultimate Hope. “So…that was Naegi’s plan. How cunning.” He almost sounds impressed.

“What is this? Spam?” Kazuichi says in disbelief.

To dissuade anymore doubts, Kyoko reveals the severity of the situation. “Naegi intends to
brainwash everyone watching Sayaka Maizono’s concert, using the TVs stationed almost everywhere in this academy.”

The tension in the room spirals into absurdity.

“That’s ridiculous!” Fuyuhiko doesn’t even let her words sink in.

“Is it really?” Kyoko glared. “Are you really telling me nothing could have prepared you for this? That nobody warned you this could happen?”

“We don’t need this shit right now. Not with Chiaki missing.”

“We found a motive, Kirigiri-san.” Izuru interrupts. “With Nanami as his hostage, Naegi can keep us at bay.”

“Makoto is the kidnapper and he plans to brainwash everyone. I do not understand, for what purpose? Not even Junko had ever done such a thing and I doubt Makoto cares much for despair.”

Sonia fidgeted.

There it was, the question of the motive. With Makoto, it never made sense to those who hadn’t poked into his character deep enough. Truthfully, even Kyoko herself couldn’t say she knew him. “Naegi-kun’s goal has always to make others ‘happy’. Enoshima tried to brainwash others to despair. Why can’t Naegi do the reverse?”

“That doesn’t explain the motive.” Said the bulky imposter. A boy whose true name was unknown, and currently dressed as her arrogant classmate. He pulled it off well, if she dared to say. “What would he gain from infecting everyone?”

“It is all for his own self-satisfaction. He believes your happiness will lead to his own.” Kyoko arched an eyebrow at Izuru’s assumption. Was it accurate?

“That still doesn’t explain everything. Even if I were to handwave the logistics, Makoto still would have no reason to brainwash everyone. He will never see most of those happy faces.” ‘Byakuya Togami’ said. His pragmatic point of view was narrow…but for the moment, inarguable. Certainly not by the detective.

…I can’t get behind this.” Nekomaru’s calm, slow way of talking told volumes of his lack of enthusiasm. “Makoto is a bit…direct and overbearing, but what you’re talking about is just too much. He could never go this far.”

A refutation comes from an unlikely source.

“He could.” Mahiru Koizumi clutches her camera, shivering. “Makoto can be…scary.”

“What makes you say that?” Sonia prods.

This time, Peko replies. “Because he is evil, no different from Enoshima. In some regards, he is worse. The fact that we’re standing here and can’t bring ourselves to recognize it, is proof.”

“Okay…but I still don’t get it. What’s wrong with everyone being happy again? Wait, how can he even do that?” Kazuichi inquired with a mixture of shock and disbelief.

“He only needs to reverse the process of what Enoshima used on most of you.” Izuru explained. “As for the problem…take this current situation. The anxiety and fear you feel towards Chiaki’s capture…in the future that would ensue, those emotions would be stripped away. You would only
feel happiness, *ever*.”

A collective shudder emanated from the group.

“That sounds…freaky. Even Ibuki wouldn’t want to be pumped *all the time*.”

“Where is he? Where the fuck is he?!” Fuyuhiko stands in a rage.

As if Fuyuhiko’s outburst was timed, the door opens again. Yasuke Matsuda stands at the opening, sweat pouring down his face. “Where is she? Where’s Ryoko?!”

“Matsuda-kun! Why are you so hotbloodedly looking for me?!”

“Fuck, good, you’re safe.” He sighs in relief, then glares at the rest of us. “Can the rest of you get your heads out of your ass explain what the fuck is happening here?!”

“The fuck is your problem?!?” Fuyuhiko rises to the verbal challenge.

“Your friend, is my problem!” The neurologist holds up his notebook. On the screen is a picture that twists and turns the stomachs of those who can see.

Even Izuru takes a step forward.

“Chiaki!” Ibuki Mioda screams.

“I got a message attached saying ‘You have until midnight to come with Ryoko Otonashi and the others’ Whatever the fuck that means.” Yasuke scowled.

“That they would send you that picture…We are being taunted.” Peko deduced.


“The meaning is clear. He is targeting all of us.” Izuru said.

“He?” Matsuda’s forehead creases.

“Makoto’s gone fucking loco…apparently.” Ibuki explains in her own colorful way.

“What about the kid? I just saw him on my way over.”

“Where?” Kyoko demands.

“He came into the science room to see Miaya. He looked out of it too.” Yasuke takes in the intense stares… “Oh fuck, are you saying he’s behind this?!”

“Let’s grab him and stop this whack plan.” Hiyoko jeered.

“Plan?”

“Makoto onii’s going to brainwash the concert into fucking hope drones. Using that stupid video.” The dancer fumed.

“Oh you’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” The neurologist facepalmed.

“On that matter, should we be stopping the concert?” Sonia suggested.

Yasuke shot her down. “No chance. Hope’s Peak’s got this thing broadcasted nation wide, even to
some parts of the world. There are also thousands of people down there. Cancel that show and you’re looking at some real fucking backlash.”

“Hardly comparable to watching the world go insane.”

“Some of us actually need this corrupt school. I’m not letting it go under until I’m finished my research!” The black-haired male seethed. His gaze momentarily shifted to the amnesiac.

Nagito shivered, hugging himself “What wonderful hope…such despair…and if the ultimates can triumph over even that…”

…No comment.

Yasuke scratched his hair in frustration. “Look, I ain’t saying not to cancel that show, but make it your last priority.”

Fuyuhiko’s cell rang. The blonde put the device to her ear. “Yeah…” His features morphed into one of satisfaction. “Good. I’ll double your pay.” He dropped the call “Chiaki was seen over an hour ago, being carried by two others. One of the descriptions sounded like Mikan’s.” The mention of the nurse threw the class for another loop.

“Pig barf? Why her?” Hiyoko questioned

“No, the question is…why isn’t she here?” Nagito asked with a thoughtful expression.

“She could be working for Makoto. Maybe he brainwashed her.” Fuyuhiko adds.


Kyoko elaborates. “If Naegi-kun was going to brainwash anyone, why not do so to Nanami herself? It’d be easy and warrant less suspicion.”

“Mikan’s our gal, huh?” Teruteru Hanamura scratches his chin. “Hey, have any of you noticed anything about her? Like she’s been real busy?”

“Haven’t seen her all day.” Kazuichi shrugged.

“Not what I meant. Like, she comes into the cafeteria a lot, asks for big servings then runs with it. I don’t do takeout, but that’s what she treats my meals like.” Said the offended chef.

“Is any of that relevant?” Mahiru inquires.

“Thought I’d pitch into the investigation jazz and point out some shady stuff.”

“Teruteru, how long has this gone on?” Nagito keen eye falls to the stubby Ultimate.

“How long? It’s been happening for a while. Sometimes I find ingredients missing from the fridge the next day.”

The ashen-haired boy folds his arms. “How peculiar. Knowing Mikan, she’s really careful about what she puts into her body. I can’t imagine her overeating or eating at night… a better explanation is that she was caring for someone.”

“Do we really have time to be talking about that skank?” Yasuke grits his teeth.

“Agreed.” Hiyoko pitched in.
“Ne, who was the second person described, Fuyuhiko?” Nagito asked.

“Male, short wavy hair…in the academy uniform. Also said they weren’t very clean.”

“Unclean?”

“Tears on the fabric, like he’d been in a fight.”

“Now, isn’t that interesting. For someone to wear the main course’s uniform on the day where everyone was dressed casually. It’s almost like they wanted to be conspicuous.” Nagito trails off… as if leaving them to follow the trail of crumbs.

“I can think of only one man who matches that description and fits into all this. Soshun Murasame.” Izuru said.

“The prez? Weren’t those guys killed off?” Fuyuhiko remarked.

“Killed?! I thought they left overseas!” Mahiru’s eyes shot up.

“That was a cover story. One night at the end of summer, all of the council members were slain by Junko Enoshima. All except Soshun Murasame.” Kyoko explained.

The redhead and a few others (too few) are stunned into silence. “Oh my god…You guys knew about this? And said nothing?!?”

“I had thought he was dead.” Izuru noted.

“Same. There’s no reason to keep that guy alive.” Yasuke pinched the brides of his nose. “But she could do this. That evil woman. She could torture someone like this, and you’ll never be able to understand or predict her. I could see Junko keeping him alive for shits and giggles.”

“When trapped in a blizzard, the best course is to find the nearest shelter.” Gundham Tanaka holds his scarf to his face.

“He means that perhaps the easiest solution may be the correct one. We should not stray too far from what we can see in front of us.” Sonia interprets.

Kyoko actually agreed. “We’re wasting too much time. We need to find Naegi, but we must keep in mind that finding him, may not lead us to Nanami.”

“Do we even know where he is?”

“There’s a hint, and the sender is Mr.X.”

“Mr…X?” Nagito tilts her head.

“It’s fine. I know it.”

The lucky student poses a question. “I agree with Gundham, but I’m still suspicious about Mikan. Hey, do you guys know the area around the founder’s statue?”

“What of it?” Izuru side-glances him.

“Well…when I came back in October, on the morning of the tragedy…I saw Mikan wandering around. I followed her and she just…vanished around there.”
“The statue…” Peko frowned. “It’s an underground base for Enoshima. It was where I saw her last before resigning from Ultimate Despair. There’s a trick to opening the path, and Mikan should certainly know it.” The bodyguard turned to Kyoko. “Is that where the hint leads you to Kirigiri-san.”

“No, it’s not remotely similar.”

“Maybe the hint is a diversion.” Nekomaru guessed, but if so why give it in the first place?

“It sounds to me like we’ve got two places to go. Let’s split up.” Nagito proposes.

“Uh guys. I don’t think splitting up’s gonna work out for us.” Akane waves her hand. “I was trying to be helpful on my own, so… I messaged Mikan.”

“Do you really think she’d reply, shit-for-brains?” Fuyuhiko smacked his forehead.

“Yeah…and she did.”

Silence descends as Akane reads out the message. “Hehee, you found me out~ As your reward, I’ll tell you what to do next. Izuru Kamukura, Ryoko Otonashi, Yasuke Matsuda, and all the others in class 77 needs to come over. To beneath the Kamukura stature. I can’t promise Chiaki will be safe otherwise.”

“Me?!” Ryoko jumps, eyes watering.

“No thanks. I don’t have to risk my neck out for that girl.” Yasuke snarls.

“You goddamn will if you know what’s good for you!” Fuyuhiko doesn’t entertain their alternative. “This is your fucking fault.”

Kyoko could see she was finished here. “There’s no time to argue. All of you have to go. I’ll track down Naegi-kun.”

“Think you’ll be fine by yourself?” Nagito asked. Just as Kyoko nearly states the obvious “yes”, Peko cuts her off.

“I will go with her.”

“Didn’t you listen to that letter? Your entire class must go.” Kyoko rejected the offer.

“Then the young master will suffice. From the beginning, I was merely his tool.”

“Peko, not this shit again.” The master in question sighed.

“Kirigiri could use the assistance and this might be the only possible loophole for us. Mikan knows about Peko’s quirks, it won’t come out of left field if she doesn’t show. In fact, it’s consistent. From what I remember, even though Fuyuhiko became an Ultimate Despair, Peko was untouched.”

Nagito smiled. She could tell what he was thinking. He wished for conflict between hopes. Peko’s backup gives Kyoko an advantage.

He intended on this.

“Indeed. Enoshima merely saw me as an accessory. If Mikan still follows that philosophy, she will accept that rationale.” The silver-haired girl rationalized.

“Your assistance would be welcome.” Beggars couldn’t be choosers.
“Wait. If Peko’s my tool or whatever, then she could go down into the basement in my stead.”
Fuyuhiko argued, “Makoto’s my responsibility. I helped him plan this festival…and if he’s just
going to fuck us all over, then I’ve got a ton of shit I want to say to his face.”

“No. You won’t.” Everyone stared at Peko as if the sky had fallen. “You are too kind, young
master. Makoto will take advantage of that. I will go.”

“Peko.”

“I am your tool. That means serving you to the best of my ability, even if it entailed usurping your
command. Let’s go, Kirigiri-san.”

Kyoko scrutinized Peko ‘You wish to help Naegi as well…but if push comes to shove, I’ll do what
needs to be done.’

“First we need to go to my room. There’s something there that might help the investigation.”
Kyoko said. She didn’t need to look back to see the elation on Nagito’s face.

The duo took a single step outside the room. Kyoko glanced to the right and waiting there for was
a familiar, and unexpected face.

She turned back to glare at Yasuke inside the room.

“What?” The boy replied. It takes a second for him to realize her unvoiced complaints. “The chick
outside? What about her?” He doesn’t understand what he’d done wrong.

Kyoko sighed and turned to the deeply perplexed eavesdropper.

…”How much did you hear…Komaru Naegi?”

Makoto was grateful for the moonlight bathing him. Asides his notebook, this was the only source
of luminescence in the dark, empty area, and it was empty — An abandoned building on academy
grounds. It hardly had a roof.

“Could we not have chosen a more secure location?” Isshiki Madarai appeared, dragging with him
a black case.

“I’m a minimalist. I find ‘nothing’ more calming than most.” Makoto said. “Never mind that. Was
it hard getting in?”

“A proper door would have been preferred, yes.” Isshiki handed him the case. He scanned the
room in distaste. “It doesn’t seem safe.”

“That’s the point. In a remote place like this…if we were found, that would mean someone was
absolutely looking for us.” It would have nothing to do with luck. “Plus, we need the antenna for
Alter Ego to distribute the video as far as possible.”

“Are you alright?” Isshiki looked down at him in concern.

“More complaints?”
“You’re pale.”

Makoto’s initial retort dies in his throat. He sighs. “Calm down, I’m not getting stage fright. All it takes is a push of the button and you’ll get your wish. We both will.”

…

The concert was already on. Makoto could hear the singing even from here.

“Can we not start now?” Isshiki asked.

Makoto shook his head. “The brainwashing will work best at the peak of the show. Everyone’s looking forward to 12:00 AM…” He smiles. “Besides, you’re too uptight, Isshiki. You could be a bit more dramatic.”

Isshiki crossed his arms, his impatience too apparent.

“Even if you disagree, I won’t change the time.” He stared at the bodyguard with a blank expression. “This is personal for me.”

“…I suppose there’s no talking you out of it. What a quirky person you are.”

“Welcome to the club, there’s a line of people ahead of you who think I’m a freak.” Makoto forced a laugh.

He touched his still reddened cheek, where the idol’s nails left their mark. He must have really made her angry. But it wouldn’t be for long. Come tomorrow… “I’ll just have to give her a heartfelt apology!”

Isshiki raised his eyebrow at the sudden outburst. Before he could voice anything, the sound of footsteps diverted his attention.

“Stop right there.” The bodyguard commands.

Out from the darkness comes a friend. Whatever that term was worth. Sayaka was right that he’d never put stock in it. Not really. “Yo, Mukuro. Fancy seeing you here.” Makoto greeted.

The soldier ignored Isshiki’s warning. Her face was as impassive as ever. “I can say the same. What are you doing all the way out here?”

“I’m moments away from brainwashing the entire academy into living happy lives, forever.” Makoto exclaimed with a flamboyant gesture. “It’s a joke. You’re supposed to laugh.”

“It’s not a joke, is it?” Mukuro stopped.

“It’s not.” He affirmed.

“…Do you know what today is?” Mukuro asked.

Judging by her tone, Makoto sensed there was a deep meaning to the question. “Depends on who you ask. Though, people have called Christmas Eve the happiest time of the year.”

“It’s our birthday.” Mukuro corrected. The use of plural was telling. “But I wouldn’t expect you to know that.”

“Sorry to disappoint you. I’ll definitely remember next year.”
He’d meant what he said, yet he ignited a spark of negative emotion in Mukuro – Not dissimilar from Sayaka’s before.

“What do I mean to you?” The soldier asked.

Makoto closed his eyes and sighed. “No matter what we discuss, you already made your choice.”

“I have. I already decided by my being here.”

“You made your choice a long time ago.” Makoto snaps. “You lied to my face. You promised never to kill again, and you broke it, for your sister. When you shot Kotomi-san.” He bitterly finishes.

His knowledge of that incident shocks the ravenette. “How did you-”

“I asked her. Our vice president was really sour, you know? Not that I can blame her.” Makoto shrugged.

If Makoto were in the student council’s shoes, even he might not think positively of his killer.

But that was neither here, nor there.

“That confirms it.” Isshiki gauged Mukuro’s reaction.

“Isshiki…” The call stops the bodyguard from flying off the handle. “Are you going to break your promise too?”

“No. I keep my promises.”

Makoto turns to Mukuro. “Unlike him, I’m not angry.” He paused. He was rarely angry. “Not because I didn’t know the people you killed but if I can be honest,” In fact, up until moments ago, he’d forgotten what that emotion felt like. Regardless, it certainly wasn’t what he was feeling now. “I never expected anything from you in the first place.” It was mild disappointment at best.

Mukuro hangs her head low at his words. “Junko-chan…you really do understand me better than anyone.” She mutters. “And now I understand you too. That’s why…I’m going to bring you despair.”

Makoto and Isshiki watch her with raised eyebrows.

My perfect little sister. For longer than either twin could remember, Junko could do whatever she wanted, effortlessly. But now, for the first time, Junko tried. All her hard work, everything she slaved for.

I’ll make sure it was all for nothing.

I’ll steal away the reward.

“I’ll teach you the meaning of failure.” Her eyes swirled.

“I’m sorry, Makoto. But for me to do that, you’ll have to die.”

Chapter End Notes
I added the dreaded tag.

Next chapter: Role reversal
“Where is he?” Leon Kuwata stomped. That dumbass Makoto wasn’t responding to any texts or messages. He’d covered nearly the whole academy by now… “Could it be, is he at the concert?” That’d be weird, given he and Sayaka just had a bitch fight or whatever…

Light peeked out from the headmaster’s office. “There?” One way to get in deep shit if he was discovered.

“Anyone here?” The door creaked open and Leon grinned.

He didn’t find Makoto, but one of the hottest babes he’d ever met, all alone on Christmas Eve. This…isn’t bad. Definitely not bad. “Watcha doing, Aoi?”

The swimmer was in the middle of aligning rows of dominoes. He didn’t know why, didn’t care much either.

“Leon, what’re you doing here?”

“Just walking around. Have you seen, Makoto?” He drew closer, carefully maneuvering around the tiles.

“Nope. Why?”

“No reason.” Fuck it, I’ll drop by his dorm tomorrow morning. Chicks always come first. Makoto would understand.

“Who’s that, Aoi?” Leon whipped his head to the sound of the male voice. A tanned kid poked out from the headmaster’s desk.

“Oi, what’re you doing here, brat? This place is off-limits.” Don’t ruin this for me!

“That’s my little brother…and what do you mean off-limits?” Aoi cocked her head to the side.

Leon facepalmed. “So, it’s the brother this time.” Give me a break…

“Why are you getting all mopey for? Help me set these up!”

“…Whatever.”

“Who knew a place like this was under the school?”

“It gives Ibuki the creeps.”

“Ditto. Let’s bail as soon as we grab Chiaki and Mikan.”

“It’s not likely that Mikan will come with us willingly.”
“Knock her the fuck out. There, problem solved.”

Izuru tuned out the chatter of the group following behind him. The seemingly endless hallway led them to a medium-sized room.

Chiaki wasn’t here. That was all that mattered. Izuru kept walking.

“Hold on, Kamukura-kun…we might be able to find clues here.” Nagito said, scouring the area. It didn’t take long for him to find the table with chess pieces lined up.

“Junko and I played chess here.” Sonia said. “But…not like that. Not so untidy.” Finally, Izuru followed their gaze. There he saw a peculiarity in the pieces’ formation…along with stacks of paper scattered across the board.

The Ultimate Hope looked through the sheets “These are files on us.” Izuru surmised.

“Wha? Lemme see that.” Hiyoko’s shrilly voice rang out, peeking at the contents laid out over the desk. “Hey, there’s a picture of me and…eeew gross! Enoshima is such a stalker!”

Others came forward, scoping out the documents that seemed to have explicit information on all of them and more. Izuru caught sight of papers of Chiaki and even others from class 78. “This stuff’s scary accurate! It even has my favorite training regimen.” Nekomaru bellowed.

“Why are we wasting our time here? Come on…” Fuyuhiko strong-armed the group to the exit way. They pass by Izuru, who surveyed the large table in silence.

The black King was not on the board, but it appeared the game continued.

“Kamukura-kun?” Nagito called.

The lucky student matches his pace. There isn’t a shred of anxiety on his pale features,

“Komaeda.”

“What?”

“There were two individuals in this group that were not in those documents. The first is Ryoko Otonashi.” Izuru said.

“And the second?”

“You.” Izuru said. “I have a plan.”

“Chiaki!” He couldn’t tell who screamed when they passed through the curtain entrance, it hardly mattered. Chiaki was bound to a chair by rope and her mouth tapered off. Asides her terror-stricken features, she was unharmed

Izuru moved to his next priorities, the man standing too closely besides her, and the nurse bowing at the center of the room.

“If you don’t want to wake up in the ocean tomorrow, you’ll let her go right now!” Fuyuhiko threatened. As if they would agree.

“Fuyuhiko is always so scary~” Mikan giggled. Clearly out of her mind.
“Ugh, could you be any lamer?” Hiyoko said with palpable disgust.

“Come back to your senses, Mikan.” More pointless attempts from Mahiru this time.

Izuru thought it fortunate to have some degree of intelligence left in the group. Namely the impostor. “Mikan isn’t the one we should be worried about. Even if we could convince her…could we do the same to him?” He appeared to have been the one to notice Soshun Murasame’s new… peculiarities.

The council president stared at them with eyes as vacant and scarlet as Izuru’s.

“Tsk, he’s brainwashed too.” Fuyuhiko clicked his tongue.

“Any reason we can’t just beat the crap out of them?” Yasuke asked.

That was a question not worth answering. Izuru moved to the front of the pack. “What are your aims?”

The air grew tense around Soshun. There were several among them who’d known the man before. Cheerful, charismatic and meek. Traits Izuru saw as dull, but still praiseworthy among lesser organisms. None of that was present here. The intensity was there, but he didn’t utter a word.

Yasuke was the next to speak. “Oi, I get why you’ve got a vendetta against these misfits. But Ryoko and I have nothing to do with Jun…”

“S-Stop!” Mikan pleaded, glancing at Murasame worriedly, then back to them. “Um…I’d prefer if nobody said Her name.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“I wouldn’t be able to control Soshun. Y-You should understand.”

“Right…” Yasuke backed down.

“Let’s get to the negotiations. What are your terms?” The Novoselic princess stated.

“Negotiations?” Mikan pronounced the word as if the blonde had spoke in her native tongue.

“It may be too advanced for you. But I can see no other play for you here. You’re outnumbered and outclassed, yet you’ve brought out prize out in the open for us to see and take. Your only option is to delegate.”

Mikan whimpers. “Eeeeeeh. I-I didn’t know anything about that!”

“Calm down, Mikan.” Out from one of the several curtain doors in the room, comes the Ultimate Moral Compass, pushing along a cart with its top covered by a white blanket.

“Good evening, everyone!” Kiyotaka Ishimaru cheerfully greets them. He wears his usual monochrome apparel, only dawned with a black cape and an oversized glove of the same color.

…At any other time, Izuru might have been curious.

“Eh?! That’s the guy with a stick up his ass all the time! Why’s he dressed like a supervillain?” Hiyoko asked.

“He’s with them. Peko told me a while back that E-…that she got to him.” Fuyuhiko explained.
“Quite right…so pick whatever you choose.” Kiyotaka pulled off the blanket, confirming Izuru’s suspicions. On the cart were various blunt and bladed instruments.

…How boring.

“Game? You want us to kick the shit out of you with em’?” Akane glared.

“You will use these amongst yourselves!”

Izuru directed his scoff at Soshun. “How droll. Is this your idea of revenge?”

“Kamukura-kun, I wouldn’t antagonize him.” Nagito said.

“You must be referring to the killing game with the council. Well, lucky for you all, it’s not like that. That much bloodshed musn’t be allowed in a school environment!” Kiyotaka prodded Mikan to his side. “Would you like to do the honors, dear?”

“Yaaay, I’ve been waiting for this.” Mikan pulled out a vial containing purple fluid from her shirt. It was daring of her to casually approach him. “Um…Kamukura-san. Would you take this?”

“Poison.” Izuru stated. He hears gasps from behind him.

She giggles. “I-It won’t kill you fast. If you survive, I’ve got the antidote with me.” It wasn’t that she was stupid or brazen. They were flaunting the control they had over the situation.

Izuru took the vial and popped open the lid.

“A-Aren’t you going to ask what happens if you refuse o-or if the antidote works?”

“Your intentions are obvious. I have no choice.” He said and drank the poison. Almost instantly, his organs feel like they were lit on fire.

This could have killed an ordinary person, yet Mikan acts like she pulled an elaborate prank.

“Aaaw. I wanted to feed it to you.”

“She’s crazier than usual!” Ibuki panics.

“If you want to save Nanami,” Kiyotaka drew attention to himself. “You must kill those two. Ryoko Otonashi and Izuru Kamukura. They will have a head start of 3 minutes and will flee in one of these doors, the rest of you will have your eyes closed to not see which door they will pass. Your time limit is 12:00 AM. If they aren’t brought before Soshun, then Chiaki will become one.” The threat is punctuated by the raise of Soshun’s arm and the gun pointed to the gamer’s head.

If Izuru had been in range, he would have ripped the entire limb from his body.

“W-Why is this happening?” Ryoko screamed.

“To hell with that! We’re out of here…” Yasuke grabbed the auburn girl’s wrists.

“Feel free to leave.” Kiyotaka declared “But remember, Nanami-san’s life is on the line. Even if you might not care…”

“Stay right where you are.” Fuyuhiko demanded. Yasuke and Ryoko’s escape route was blocked by the impostor and Nekomaru.
“Does this satisfy as a presentation for our demands?” Kiyotaka addressed Sonia.

“Indeed.” The blonde said with thinned lips.

“Do you think he’ll keep his word.” Fuyuhiko asked the princess.

“Doubtful, but we are left with little option.”

“Don’t be so down everyone. It’s just a bit of sport.” Kiyotaka bellowed. “Although many of you have lost Her blessings, you should still remember what it was like to feel despair. Killing two people shouldn’t be a problem.”

Enmity greets the moral compass’ nonsense.

“Maybe if I run fast enough.” Akane whispered.

“Don’t even think about it, Akane. That bastard hasn’t blinked once since we got here.” Fuyuhiko kept his eyes peeled on Soshun.

“If we do kill them, what guarantee do we have that Chiaki will be set free?” Sonia asked.

Kiyotaka responded with a confused look. “Murasame-san only wants revenge on those who orchestrated the council murders. He has no need of anyone else.”

“You summon us as familiars in this hellish coliseum.” Tanaka’s hamsters whimpered but the man himself spoke with a suppressed fury “Very well but be warned. Contracts with demons as powerful as we, come at a heavy price.”

“Nobody said-“

“We don’t have a choice and time is ticking. Sorry, Matsuda-kun, but the odds are against you.” Nagito interrupted the neurologist. His lofty tone didn’t go unnoticed by Izuru. He was enjoying this. “But if it’s you, an Ultimate, perhaps you’ll find a way to overturn them.”

“You bastard.”

“That will be all for explanations. The game will commence now. Shut your eyes everyone, we’ll have no cheaters among us. Or else.” Kiyotaka said.

“We get it.”

Class 77 did as instructed.

Izuru didn’t have a need for weapons. With unparalleled agility, he dashed into the hallways. Not a sound was left in his step.

Yasuke grabbed Ryoko’s hand and ran for the cart. Knives, spears, chainsaws…

The neurologist grabbed the last, if only for the psychological effect. Ryoko nervously held a pickaxe, then glanced at Chiaki. The poor girl seemed like she had something to say.

“Come on.” Yasuke hissed and dragged her through a separate door.

3 minutes passed.

“Um…I think the two lovebirds went that-a-away.” Ibuki points to one of the doors.
“Ah, whoops. I forgot you have excelled hearing.” Mikan mumbles.

“Are we…really going to do this?” Mahiru shivers.

“You don’t have to do anything, big sis.” Hiyoko stood by the photographer’s side.

“I understand that you feel that way, but you might be forgetting something.” Kiyotaka began.

“Ryoko Otonashi and Her, are the same person.”

Reactions ranging from mild surprise to gasps filled the room.

“Yeah, it’s true. She lost her memory and that Ryoko chick’s all that’s left.” Fuyuhiko elaborated.

“Still think we can’t do this?” He asked Mahiru.

The redhead remained steadfast. “That still doesn’t give us a right to kill her! It’s wrong!”

“Yeah, I get where Mahiru’s coming from.” Kazuichi stated. “I’ve seen Ryoko and she’s pretty chill. Even played games with me. If she’s lost her memories then that means she’s a different person anyway, right?”

Sonia cut him off. “We’re on a timelimit. While you make good points, Kazuichi, surprisingly.”

“Hey!” “There is a simple but difficult decision to make. Do we choose them or Chiaki?”

It was a near unanimous decision.

Chiaki shook in her chair, struggling against her binds.

Fuyuhiko stared at the gamer, muttering a silent apology. “Let’s go hunting. Split up however you like.”

They drew weapons from the cart like lots. Some handled theirs expertly, others nervously fidgeted through them.

Slowly, but surely, they all disappeared through the doors.

All but one.

“D-Don’t you want to play with everyone else, Nagito?” Mikan asked.

The lucky student gazed at the trio with calculating eyes. “There was something you said to Kamukura earlier that bothered me. You didn’t anticipate that he wouldn’t verify whether you had an antidote. It was an understandable reaction, even I was surprised.”

“What about it? I do have it on me if you’re worried about him. But you shouldn’t be. To save Chiaki, you have to kill—”

“Peko’s not here.” Nagito said briskly. “But you didn’t even ask. Does that mean you anticipated that?”

Mikan and Kiyotaka cracked grins.

“You’ve always been so clever, Nagito. Just like a detective.” The nurse praised.

Nagito narrowed his eyes. “I see. I underestimated that person. I had thought she couldn’t be worthy of the title of Ultimate Despair to go down so easily. But to see this far ahead…”
“You won’t fight?” Kiyotaka asked.

“No need, I’m no true Ultimate, I don’t deserve to overcome these trials. But I would like to watch…” He turned to the monitors, already depicting the fleeing Ultimates.

Mikan heaved an exasperated sigh, then ran over to the gamer. Her fingers reached for the sides of the tape and ripped it open.

“AH!” The gamer screeched from the pain.

“Chiaki-san. Sorry if that hurt!”

“Mikan, stop this! Our friends are going to die!” Chiaki pleaded.

The nursed tilted her head. “I’m not doing anything anymore. I’ve completed my role.”

“Myself as well.” Kiyotaka joined the conversation “Haaa, it was tough being watched all the time, but on the bright side, it helped draw attention away from Mikan.”

Mikan looked him over. “Um…if I may ask. Why are you dressed like that?”

“Don’t I look perfect for the part?”

“Um…sure.” The nurse averted her eyes. “By the way, what was your role?”

“The same as always. To nurture the bonds of my classmates.”

——-

“Get out of my way!” Makoto watched Mukuro kicked Isshiki back. The bodyguard stood up and wiped the blood from his lips. “You’re so persistent. You couldn’t beat me even if you had all 8 brothers.”

Mukuro’s assessment was probably correct. In the minutes since they began, Isshiki hadn’t gotten a hit on the twin. On the other hand, Makoto was sure if that Mukuro’s attention hadn’t been mostly on him, the fight would have been over already.

Even Makoto thought it was nice to be popular. If only it was a lot less…lethal to his well-being. “What’s all this about, Mukuro? I’ve done nothing wrong.” He distracts Mukuro.

“You wouldn’t understand.” That’s a fine way of dodging the question. “No, I don’t want you to. This feeling is between me and my sister. Stay out of it.” Mukuro lets loose a rare show of emotion.

And yet, I feel the most involved. “I guess it’s hard for you to think rationally, being brainwashed and all.”

She snorts. “I chose this. To be closer to the one person who loves and accepts me.”

…

“Is that your way of saying I drove you to this?”

The brainwashed soldier laughs at his fallen expression. “It’s nothing personal, Makoto. If you don’t resist, I’ll make it painless.”
Makoto muttered under his breath. “Well this nostalgic.” Then he called, in a loud voice. “Did you hear that, Peko? Mukuro’s ripping off your old lines!”

Mukuro squinted “I’m not going to fall for that.” A split second later, she freezes at the icy touch of a naked blade pushing against her neck.

“I admit, it sounds unpleasant to hear it from the other side.” Said the voice behind her.

Without turning, Mukuro verified that Peko had indeed appeared.

“Thanks for rescuing us, Peko…is what I’d like to say. But the fact that you’re here…and with Kirigiri-san no less,” Makoto looked over the two and behind Mukuro. “Means I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

Sweat dripped down Mukuro’s forehead. “Kirigiri’s here too?”

“Not to sound ungrateful and all but…you guys do know a national pop sensation is singing outside, right? You’ll never get a chance to see concert for free again.” Makoto said.

“I’m sure you would like that. For us to be there when you brainwash everyone.” Kyoko brushes his ridiculous proposal aside.

“Just checking.”

Kyoko glowered at Makoto’s callousness. “I followed your riddle. You’ve finally shown your true colors.”

“My what?” Makoto furrowed his eyebrows. “…Ah. Oh well. You’re here now and that’s what matters. So how do you plan to stop me?”

“Isn’t it enough to reason with you?”

“That’d be wasting your time. You don’t have much left, by the way.” He pointed to the digital clock on the ebook. Isshiki joined Makoto’s side. “Since we’re here. Why not just sit and wait?”

“Don’t misunderstand, Makoto. We came for you, not Ikusaba.” Peko exclaimed.

“Why? It’s not like I’m going to brainwash people into fighting or hurting each other like Izuru or Junko did. Instead…I’m going to fix this world.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

Isshiki stepped up. “It’s the truth. There won’t be any more tragedies or killing games after our work is done.”

“’Our work’? You’re evidence of the problem, Madarai-san. Although I doubt, you’d realize, after you’re already under his mind control.” Kyoko shifted her gaze to the brunette. “You outran him, did you?”

Makoto scratched his head. “Yeah, it was pretty bad that time, so I had to use the video on the brothers.” His confession was unabashed. “But don’t get me wrong, Kirigiri-san, Isshiki isn’t working with me because of that.”

“Indeed, I’m here of my own will, to repay my debt and receive what I was promised.” He pointed at Mukuro. “My brothers and friends were murdered, by the injustices of this school. By Junko Enoshima, her sister and Izuru Kamukura.”
Kyoko glanced at the despair twin, who was kept in check by Peko. She made no motion to deny the accusation.

“Sadly, it’s the truth. I’ve seen their ghosts and those of the student council. I know everything Mukuro and Junko have done.” Makoto said.

Kyoko had nearly forgotten that supposed skill of his. One he’d yet to prove.

Makoto touched his temple in light exasperation. “That said, I ran into the same problem as always. The newly dead can’t let go of their attachments, so I needed Isshiki’s help in getting them to pass on.”

“I didn’t believe him at first, but Naegi knew information only my brothers could have, along with the truth of the tragedy. In their memory, he promised to make this corrupt school safe again, so another tragedy will never occur. In exchange for keeping that promise, I wouldn’t kill those two.”

“I see. Then you’re complicit.” Kyoko closed her eyes. It was good they’d had this conversation. She had begun to forget that Makoto had no need for any artificial brainwashing, he had a natural talent for it. “But Madarai. Is this how you intend to repay Naegi’s kindness? By letting him fall deep into depravity. This isn’t a game anymore, or just personal squabble. You’re about to commit acts of terrorism.”

“Terrorism…that’s not a bad way to put it.” Makoto whistled. “But you’re looking pretty scary right now too if you ask me.”

“I don’t want to do this, Kirigiri. Unlike so many in this school. You are at least innocent, but you’re in our way.” Isshiki long arms reached for the detective.

“Kirigiri!” Peko sought to warn the lavender-haired girl. That lack of focus gave Mukuro the opening she needed. The younger girl ducked below the sword’s reached and swiped her legs.

“…!” Peko jumped, evading the low kick and putting distance between them. Before she knew it, Mukuro had drawn knives from her skirt.

“That’s disappointing but at least…” Makoto trailed off as he turned his attention to Isshiki, surprised to see his classmate somehow keeping pace with the bodyguard.

She took a formal stance. “But that’s fine, I still have to repay you for last time.”

“Since when did Kirigiri know martial arts?” He leaned against the black case.

00:46

Ryoko and Yasuke gripped their knees, panting.

“We have to keep moving.” The boy said, but his legs were already dead tired.

“Why is this happening? Weren’t we all having fun just a little while ago?” Ryoko lamented.

“It doesn’t matter why. We are in deep shit, and if we don’t do something about it, we’ll be buried in it.”

“Junko Enoshima’s the one they all want. Why can’t they leave us out of it?”

Yasuke looked like he wanted to bang his head on a wall, but settled for a click of the tongue. “If
you don’t have anything useful to say then shut it, they might hear us.”

But sound may have been the least of their problems. Yasuke didn’t know the layout of the tunnels, similar to the ones they’d used to reach the center. For all he knew they could be walking into a dead end…or worse, the hallways could be connected and could be cornered on both sides.

“What bullshit.” He cursed. All they had were a bunch of shitty tools they had no experience using and were outnumbered. It was completely unfair.

“And that’s the point. Isn’t it, Murasame?” Yasuke scowled at the cameras above. “Hey, take a lesson from this, scatterbrain.”

“What?”

“Never involve yourself in other people’s bullshit.” He wished he’d done the same—“What’s that noise?” Yasuke hearing picked up on…squeaking?

“Oh, I think it’s this little guy.” Ryoko crouched and picked up a small hamster. Where had he seen that before?

“Oh crap. Toss that damn thing. It’s that freak’s pet.” Before Ryoko could argue, Yasuke swatted the animal out of her hands. It fell to the ground and ran in the opposite direction. He grabbed the girl’s wrist and ran.

Izuru walked slowly, too slowly. The world slowly distorted around him. The poison would spread too fast if he ran. In retrospect, maybe his best option should have been to incapacitate the 77th class early on.

…

Izuru shook his head, clearing his blurred vision. What was he thinking? He didn’t deal in uncertainties or rash actions. He knew the reason he fled. He couldn’t make a proper estimation of his debilitated abilities and fighting that many ultimates was unwise.

The poison must be affecting him.

They didn’t know where he fled, thus their most favorable recourse is to split up. He needs to take them down in smaller groups…and within the timelimit.

He looked to the cameras. “I don’t give a damn about your revenge.”

Footsteps quickly became audible for his heightened hearing. He counted 3 others, light footsteps.

“Found ya!” Akane Owari shouted, sprinted towards him at full speed, barehanded. How fortunate, he could take care of one of the bigger problems early on. The gymnast used her acceleration to launch a kick in the air.

It was doubly fortunate that Akane was a fool.

Izuru caught her leg before the sole of her feet reached his face. With a growl, he twisted his body, slamming the tanned girl hard into the wall.

Akane coughed in pain, dropping to the floor.
A normally trivial task for Izuru had been arduous. His body felt like it was weighed down by bricks and his lungs felt like they were on fire. However, that wouldn’t be enough to do him in. His work was far from done after all.

The Ultimate Hope shifted to the side, evading the pointed tip of Teruteru Hanamura’s skewer. Unlike Akane, the chef was no fighter. Slow enough that he only got one shot before Izuru rammed his shoe into his gullet.

“Avril…Lavigne.” Teruteru said as he crumped to the ground.

The third hadn’t attacked. Ibuki Mioda stood there, hesitantly gripping a metal bat. The musician was among the few who hadn’t succumbed to despair. It was evident by the non-lethal weapon she chose.

For that reason, he was gracious, knocking her out with a painless chop from behind. She hadn’t gleamed his movements at all.

Izuru sighed. “…Hm?” His cheek stung. A sliver of blood ran down the small cut. The brunette wiped away the blood and stared at Teruteru’s fallen form.

“I…couldn’t dodge it.”

Makoto watched the spectacle in front of him with a mixture of faint amusement and exasperation. If the formation of everyone in the room were a pyramid, down-right were Kyoko and Isshiki, trading blows like Makoto had seen in karate movies. Ultimates sure were something…even if Kyoko was mostly defending herself.

Down-left was a different kind of match entirely.

Sparks flew as sword clashed with knife in frighteningly quick succession. “So, you’ve chosen Enoshima.” Peko said, devoid of emotion as her sword held Mukuro’s knife in place.

“Yes, I have you to thank. For getting me to think about where I stood.”

“And your answer is murdering your friends? The one you claimed to love?”

“He doesn’t care about me.”

“That doesn’t justify his death.” Peko counterattacked. “Is this really about your sister, or are you angry at realizing the truth?”

“Does it matter?” Mukuro grunted.

“Yes. Depending on your answer, there could still be hope for you as a person.”

“Aren’t you the one who always called me a tool?!” Another knife immaculately slid from Mukuro’s sleeves to her gloved palm. With a roar she swung it at Peko. Strands of silver hair flew as the swordswoman barely dodged. Once again, she’d been forced to create distance between them.

Mukuro breathed heavily as she glared at Peko. The true target of her anger was the brown-haired boy quietly watching their fight, but Mukuro knew taking her eyes of the swordswoman was suicide. “Well you’re right. I am a tool. My sister’s, and I’ll make sure to give her exactly what she
Peko cast Mukuro a pitying look. Now that the older twin had taken on the role, Peko could see Mukuro wasn’t the same.

Peko has grown up knowing who she belonged to from the beginning. Mukuro was still wandering.

She served Fuyuhiko to the best of her ability for his sake and nothing else. Mukuro only wanted to be loved, appreciated and would devote herself to whoever awarded her with that affection.

That couldn’t be called servitude.

“…If that’s how you see yourself, then allow me to give you some more advice as your senior.” Peko clutched the hilt of her blade with both hands, assuming a basic kendo stance. The transient emotion she wore vanished like mist, replaced by neutrality. “A blade doesn’t cry.”

Peko rushed the raven-haired girl at her fastest. Not nearly fast enough that Mukuro couldn’t react, but enough to put her on the defensive. The swordswoman’s struck an endless flurry blows that her knives weren’t equipped to counter.

Mukuro found herself getting pushed backwards. Away from Makoto. With a yell, she put all her strength to swiping at Peko’s blade. The weapon bounced, but that was all. Mukuro was at a fundamental disadvantage. Peko was safe to attack and defend from a distance thanks to her long sword. Theoretically, Mukuro could have thrown her knives, but the motions to do so were slow enough that the other girl could dodge. If Mukuro missed, she’d be down a weapon. If she lost both, that would cost her.

Makoto was father and farther away from her. “You’re always getting in my way.” Mukuro seethed at Peko, a constant obstacle in her side. “Why are you protecting him?!”

“Because that’s the proper thing to do.”

“Proper? You’re an assassin!”

Peko’s form tensed. “…Correct. Then allow me to rephrase – Because he is my friend.”

“Friend?” Mukuro felt like she’d been slapped in the face. She even let her arms fall to the side limply. “I-I was his friend too,” Her voice cracked. “and all he ever did was lead me on, lying to me and playing with my emotions. I’m not his only victim either. This-This bastard, is your friend?” She cried.

“I don’t expect you to understand.” Peko was simply more tolerant to dealing with and accepting the bad in people. She’d grown up in a den of lions, after all. Mukuro may have served her sister, but she didn’t understand her sister. Whether that had changed…at least, that had been the case before.

Mukuro’s eyes swirled as she let out a broken, hollow laughter. “I get it. Then protect your friend’ all you want. Before midnight, he’ll be dead and so will you if I have anything to say about it.” As if mirroring Peko, the crazed overflow of emotions were cast aside by Mukuro. The tears flowing served as the only difference in their expressions.

Peko felt the surge of killing intent and prepared herself.

Mukuro crouched, readying for a sprint and in an instant, she leapt towards Peko was panther-like agility. Her face showed not an inch of fear as she entered the range of Peko’s sword. She pushed
“…!” Peko faltered at the unexpected recklessness. That was her downfall. As if the roles reversed, she’d become the one on the receiving end of an avalanche of attacks. She couldn’t even get in motion to swing her sword for a counter. All she could do is protect her body against what would otherwise have been fatal strikes. ‘She’s really trying to kill me…’

Mukuro had turned into a killing machine, living up to the title of Ultimate Soldier, able to fight even Sakura Ogami to a draw. Every cell, every action, every thought was focused only on bringing the enemy down.

Until…

“You’ve got that wrong, Mukuro.” His voice rang in her ears, once deceptively sweet now stomach churning. “I wouldn’t say I never cared about you. I’m the one who reached out to you after all.” She wouldn’t listen. “I still think of you as a friend. Even if you betrayed me.” Mukuro gritted her teeth, she would have blown out her eardrums if she could. “That’s what people do, they can’t help themselves and neither could you. But I think your good points outweigh all that anyway. Like how you’re so devoted to the people you care for.” He’s lying. He’s trying to manipulate you. He’s “I love that about you.”

“Eh?” Mukuro stopped. The human won out over the machine.

Peko couldn’t miss that opening. Her body, her honed instincts, couldn’t allow it. All she could was twist the sword to its blunt side. The swordswoman struck the momentarily defenseless Mukuro on the neck. A sickening crack was heard as Mukuro flew to the side, motionless.

At this point Isshiki and Kyoko had halted their squabble, their own features a shocked as Peko’s.

The yakuza froze, looking at her sword in horror. When her sense returned, she slowly inched her head over to Makoto, deeply wishing not to find what she knew would be there.

Makoto smiled. The same unshakable smile he used to comfort others, that he used in the interview weeks ago to preach cooperation and togetherness in front of the country “Does she mean anything to you? Does anyone?”

Makoto tilted his head in a slight, off manner. “I did it to save you.” He probably wasn't lying.

And it made her sick. Good and bad mixed and smashed together crudely, ironically leaving no distinction when all was said and done.

Peko drew a deep breath and pointed her sword at the luckster.

Makoto laughed heartily. “That’s it! You’re always so exciting, Peko!”

Silver brows furrowed. ‘Exciting?’ In all the time she’d known Makoto, that word had never escaped his lips. She wasn’t given time to ponder it. The case behind Naegi was open, and in his palm was a white handle without a guard. In a flash, round orbs protruded from the handle and formed a sleek white blade.

“Naegi are you…” Isshiki voiced his concern.

“It’s fine.” Makoto replied, taking steps towards Peko.

Kyoko critically analyzed the scene.
“Has this *ever* ended well for you?” Peko asked.

Makoto gripped the blade.

“Let’s hold my graduation exam.”

Chiaki struggled against her binds to no avail. Mikan had turned her chair over towards the monitor, giving her full view of the twisted game they’d set in motion.

“Nagito!”

“No can do, Chiaki.” Nagito shook his head. “With the three of them here, I can’t rescue you, as much as I’d like.” He said crestfallen. She would think the emotion he displayed was a lie after the mirth that erupted the next moment. “Instead we should believe in our fellow Ultimates and their ability to overcome this despair.”

…It was no good.

“Mikan, do something. Please!”

The timid girl fumbled around, thinking of what to do. “Um… did you want a better view? I’m not really good with TVs, sorry.”

“How could you think…” Chiaki trailed off. There was something deeply wrong with Mikan, if this deranged person really was her friend.

The gamer scoured to the others. Soshun Murasame was a lost cause. The man reminded Chiaki of a doll. Human like yet lacking the expressiveness of one. He stared at the screen, oblivious to everything else.

What happened to him?

Her only hope was…ironically, the ultimate moral compass. “You of all people have to see this is wrong, Ishimaru.”

“Of course, it’s wrong! Betrayal and murder are among the worst of offences.” The faint hope that she could reason with him was smothered by despair. “And that’s why it needs to happen!”

“How is something like this necessary?”

“A certain someone told me that despair is born from hope, but I think the reverse is true. It’s from despair that hope thrives. Although, such abstract definitions aren’t to my liking. I think justice and injustice work much better.”

Nagito observed the moral compass with an indecipherable expression.

“Take for example: the laws of society. Do you know how they’re made?” Ishimaru began. “It is because people recognized evil that countermeasures are created. Ironic isn’t it?” He was the only one laughing.

“What does any of this have to do with my friends?”

“Because they *are* evil, unjust. Did you see how quickly they turned on each other? It shouldn’t be surprising. One of your classmates is a two-bit criminal and the academy glorifies his status with a title. Ludicrous!” Kiyotaka stomped on the ground like crushing a cockroach beneath his boots.
“Let evil fester tonight and have its filth apparent for all to see. Surely, some good will come of it!”

“But Ryoko and Hajime are innocent!”

Kiyotaka shook his head, gesturing to Chiaki like an adult listening to the complaints of an ignorant child. “Innocent? Ryoko might be, technically speaking, but Izuru Kamukura is a villain, through and through! What else could you call the man who participated in the murder of the student council and orchestrated the tragedy?!”

“W-What?”

Nagito rested his finger against his chin. “You really didn’t know? I suppose Kamukura-kun must not have wanted to tell you.”

Chiaki couldn’t believe it. Even Nagito was saying that? “T-That can’t be true. Hajime would never-”

“Such faith is admirable, but it is my duty to dispel blind faith and lead you down the proper path.” Kiyotaka interrupted. He pointed to Soshun. “Do you think Murasame-kun is here for a vacation? Is that the man you remember? What do you think happened?"

…Chiaki’s head fell. Her mind raced through several possibilities. Favorable ones that would reject Kiyotaka’s claims.

Why was Soshun here instead of the overseas school?

Mikan giggled, catching Chiaki’s puzzled glances at the president. “Kiyotaka’s right. The student council are aaaaaall dead. All except for Soshun. How do you think he feels, Chiaki?” The black-haired girl drooled.

“For Murasame-kun, this is justice.” The prefect smirked. “And I will gladly play my role in it watching met.”

00:42

“Back, Stay back!” Ryoko waved the tip of her spear back and forth. Yasuke was on his knees behind her after he got injured in the fray.

“Hey, are we sure this is Junko?” Kazuichi sweatdropped, watching the girl flailing about.

“Her appearance dictates as such and it makes some sense. And since it likely is Enoshima, she would probably enjoy this ending.” The imposter had been her main source of grief. Despite his size, he was fast! He’d body slammed into Yasuke while they were trying to run away. Personally, Ryoko didn’t think it looked that painful but the neurologist…didn’t seem the athletic type.

“True.” Kazuichi agreed, and then emphasized the wrench in his hands. “It’s nothing personal, but if we don’t do this, Chiaki’s in trouble.”

Ryoko turned to the third obstacle. The creepy looking guy with those hamsters. “Hey, d-don’t you know it’s unfair to endanger cute critters in a fight?!”

“Oh? You understand the majesty of the four beasts, impressive. Do not fret, the likes of you could never harm them.” Gundham roared with laughter. It’s true, they were too adorable!

“Ryoko, get out of here.” Yasuke wheezed
“N-No. Who knows what they could do to you?!”

“We don’t want him. It’s you we’re after.” Kazuichi interjected.

Ryoko froze. “Oh. Should I run after all?”

“We’ll use Matsuda as a hostage if you leave him behind.” The imposter crossed his arms.

“Drat.”

“It’s like I’m about to put down a dumb dog.” Kazuichi sighed. “Who knows, you might not even die. Like, just get really hurt so those freakshows think it.”

“That still sounds very painful.”

“Duh!” He swung the metallic object at her.

“Eek!” Ryoko ran to the side, in time to escape harm. “Fine, be that way! I’ll send all three of you packing with my secret weapon!”

Her diary.

“Jum-P, stop her before she unleashes the cursed grimoire!” “The what?” Kazuichi’s complaint fell to the background. The hamster jumped at Ryoko but it was too late!

The amnesiac had opened and closed that darn book every day, repeatedly, for months. No way was some dumb hamster faster than she was!

Ryoko fell into an eerie calm, and sidestepped Jum-P. “They’ll encircle me.” She whispered, predicting Gundham’s next attack. She crouched down as the other three hamsters bumped into each other in thin air, falling to the ground near the girl.

Gundham gasped. “We were too late!”

“Your hamsters just suck.” Kazuichi struck next. Ryoko’s eyes were peeled to her book not even bothering to look up to dodge every one of the mechanics attacks. Even The imposter’s blindside from behind missed its mark. He barely managed to stop himself from ramming into Kazuichi.

“Hey, is it me or is she REALLY good at dodging?” Kazuichi grunted.

“Her movements are unnatural. It’s like she’s predicting us several steps in advance.” The imposter had similar complaints.

“She’s not even looking at us. It has to be luck!”

“Fools, I warned you. In that state, combat is unwise, but the dark lord has his ways.” Gundham said. “Girl, might you want to look at what I’m about to do?”

Ryoko did, and saw the breeder standing next to Yasuke. His arms snaking around the neurologist’s neck.

“Matsuda-kun!” Ryoko snapped out of her trance.

“L-Look out, idiot…” He barely let out.

Kazuichi’s wrench smashes Ryoko’s skull before she can process the warning.
“Ryoko!” Yasuke yells. Gundham withdraws his arm and joins the other two standing over the fallen girl’s form.

“Did she perish?”

“Uh maybe. I didn’t mean to hit her that hard. Y’know, in case we might fool Mikan and the others.” Kazuichi scratched his head. The wrench in his arm was stained pink, the same color flowing out from Ryoko’s forehead.

“Wha…What the fuck is wrong with you bastards?” Yasuke coughed, standing on his feet.

The imposter cast him a backwards glance. “You of all people should know.”

“What?! Sorry, but I’m not in the habit of killing innocent girls!” He shouted. Shit shit, this can’t be happening. Everything he’d worked for up until now. What the fuck was the point?!

That fucking coward Kazuichi spoke next. “I hate to agree with Ishimaru and Mikan, but they’re not totally wrong. Even now, cutting loose like this just a…tiny bit cathartic. I wouldn’t want to do it, normally, but if our hands are tied like this...”

“You have your dear Enoshima to thank for that.” Gundham said

With a loud groan, Ryoko stirred, slowly and clumsily got to her feet. The others watched with varying levels of confusion and awe. Awe that she was still conscious despite bleeding profusely at the head.

“You idiot, if you were still alive, why didn’t you stay down?” Kazuichi’s beat the neurologist to the punch with that remark.

Ryoko swayed, a dizzy look on her face as she brought two closed fists up, imitating a boxer’s stance. “R-Round two!”

The sounds of metal clashing rang in the abandoned building. Peko and Makoto locked swords

“Still think I'm a novice?” Makoto exchanged blows. Each strike was fast, hard and with purpose. Just like Peko had taught him.

Peko remembers the animosity she felt towards him the day they met.

She remembers the challenge he issued.

She remembers him falling on his face during the second attempt.

“No, you’re quite strong now.” But that was all. Makoto was nothing compared to Mukuro. He lacked her strength, speed, experience, technique and most of all, the bloodlust.

The silverette parried every swing with ease.

After what just happened, it was jarring that Peko had to suppress the smile that would otherwise
He had that affect on others. This boy, who had only first picked up a sword months ago. If he’d lied then somehow he managed to deceive over a decade worth of experience Peko had honed as a swordsmaster. For him to have progressed this far in such a short time…what raw talent he had.

As his teacher, she had a right to be proud…and to be disappointed.

‘That’s enough.’ She’d memorized his patterns and already predicted his next moves. One full force swing would knock him off balance and the blow from under to knock the sword away.

“Kuh!” Peko saw her chance. Her arms raised upwards and the blade fell. Makoto blocked with his own, but teetered back. His defense had always been strong, in spite of everything else. The swordswoman stepped closer and with the next blow she…missed?!

Pekoyama retreated, narrowly escaping Makoto’s counterstrike

‘He got…faster?’ Peko’s eyes widened, shocked that he side-stepped her last hit. The surprises continued. Makoto advanced, quicker than she expected. Then he…went on the offensive. The speed of his sword was still more than manageable and the strength behind them was nothing special. Peko brushed him away.

Makoto took deep breaths after being forced back. He narrowed his eyes and cautiously, he walked around, circling Peko. Soon, his steps transformed into full sprints.

He was fast. Peko had to admit that. It seemed his ability to outrun her and Kyoko hadn’t been a fluke. It was only experience that told her he would strike from the back. She planted her sword behind her to meet his. “I don’t remember teaching you this.”

“If I only did what you taught me, how could I win?”

“Fair enough. Then, I’m sure you won’t mind if I try a bit harder.” Before Makoto could retaliate, she’d swept her feet on the ground, hitting his leg. The boy stumbled and fell onto the floor. He was smart enough to keep rolling even then.

Peko hadn’t followed up, however. If she had, he would be dead. This was just another forum for communication between them, like in the morning...as long ago as that seemed.

“Tch.” Isshiki growled.

Kyoko intercepted him right as he intended to run to help the luckster. “You’re not getting away.”

“Damn you, Kirigiri.” True to her word, she’d kept him check for a substantial period. In truth, even if he went to help Makoto, they couldn’t defeat Peko, and with Kyoko behind them, they’d have no chance.

“Why are you getting in our way? We’re trying to do something good in this school for once!”

“So you’ve said, but to me, it only looks like you’re both trying to take the easy way out and erase any disagreements with your viewpoints. Why else would you resort to mind control?”

Isshiki narrowed his eyes. “So short-sighted. You don’t see the forest through the trees.”

Kyoko relaxed. “Isn’t that quite the analogy. But you know, sometimes there’s more ground to be covered observing what’s closest to you.”
“What?”

“Pekoyama-san and I aren’t the only ones who know about your intentions. Many others do as well...but why do you think only we are here? It’s because another tragedy might occur right under your noses.”

Isshiki scoffed.

“Tragedy?” The fighting between Makoto and Peko stopped. The brunet looked their way. “What are you talking about?”

“Chiaki has been kidnapped, used as bait to lure my classmates, including the young master, Izuru Kamukura and Ryoko Otonashi.” Peko explained.

Makoto couldn’t mask his surprise. “Kidnapped by who?”

“There were two seen captors. The first can be identified as Mikan Tsumiki. The other was most likely Soshun Murasame.”

The latter name shook Isshiki to the core. “I must have misheard.”

“You heard right. I am referring to that council president.” Kyoko folded her arms.

Every fiber of Isshiki’s being was prepared to deny that accusation. “You have some guts to disrespect the dead, Kirigiri!”

“There’s sufficient evidence that points to him. He was never confirmed dead, and witness reports suggest he had been in Tsumiki care all along.”

“Bullshit!” Isshiki forgot himself. “This is nothing but a plot to deceive us.” He turned to Makoto. “And I can prove it. Naegi has spoken with the council, he has seen them!” He sought confirmation from the boy, whose expression was neutral.

“So even you’re willing to be lied to, in order to escape the truth as well.’ Kyoko thought in disappointment.

But she didn’t expect what happened next. “Kirigiri-san, isn’t a liar.” She didn’t expect those words from Makoto Naegi.

The bodyguard, shocked, could barely form words. “But you-“

“I verified the council’s death, but…I never saw Soshun.”

Peko and Kyoko had expressions of confusion mixed with relief. They never expected to be believed, or that Makoto of all people would admit it to Isshiki.

“Then…it’s true?” Isshiki asked Kyoko.

“It is. They are under the Izuru Kamukura statue, in one of Junko Enoshima’s hideouts.” The lavender haired girl confirmed. “But I deeply question his state of mind, having been isolated by one of Junko’s Ultimate Despair.”

“All this time...Soshun was alive?” Isshiki shook. What had he been doing? Pursuing the killers, but he had never even looked for him.

“The quicker we stop this meaningless fighting, the better. We have to assist Fuyuhiko.” Peko
“But that…would mean abandoning our goals.” Isshiki said slowly, cracks of uncertainty appeared on his formerly iron will.

“Indeed.” Kyoko said.

“That won’t happen.” Makoto smiled. “Even if Chiaki’s been kidnapped, I’m not going to stop.”

“How can you say that?” Peko asked, outraged. “Chiaki treats you like a younger brother. You know the horrors Enoshima can inflict on even the best of people.”

“Yeah, and if they’re down there, my brainwashing video won’t reach them. That’s a pity, but it won’t make me concede.”

Peko didn’t know why she placed any faith in him...

“Yes.” Isshiki balled his hands into fist. “A bodyguard…doesn’t serve two masters. I already swore to support Naegi. Even if Soshun is alive, I can’t abandon him.”

“There’s no need for that anymore, Isshiki-san. You’re fired.” Makoto laughed heartily, ignoring the odd looks he received.

“F-ired?” Isshiki didn’t understand.

Makoto nodded and took steps towards the bodyguard, leaving Peko behind. “Our partnership ends here. I’m thankful for everything you’ve done so far.” Makoto reached into his pocket and withdrew a cell phone. “This has a copy of the brainwashing video, a stronger one than what I used on you. Um…I tinkered with the batteries a bit. Let’s hope they hold up.” He wrenched Isshiki palm open and handed him the device. “Use it to go save your friend.”

“I…but…”

“Do it for me too.” Makoto said. “I…want to help Chiaki and the others, but…I…I’m trapped. I can’t leave here.” His smile cracked. “Don’t worry about me. It’s just Peko and Kirigiri. What kind of man am I if I don’t have the stamina to handle two beautiful girls starving for my attention?”

Neither of the girls responded to the forced joke.

Ishikik gazed at the cell phone.

Makoto gave one last push. “Remember how we first met…you said you wanted to avenge the council’s memory. I wanted to help you do that…the right way.”

“Yes, and that’s why I am here.”

“But don’t you see? That’s wrong…because the council isn’t a memory anymore. Soshun is alive. What you’re meant to do is now isn’t to avenge but protect. That’s your talent. Your purpose.”

“That’s right. My duty…is to protect the council.”

“I’m counting on you, Nisshiki.” Makoto said.

Isshiki turned his back on Makoto and ran as fast as he could. Something in the shadow stirs, ducking the bodyguard’s sight. In moments, the number of people standing in the room dwindled
to four. For now, it was 2 against 1.

“I didn’t think you had that much goodwill in you.” Kyoko noted.

“You’re a piece of work, Kyoko.” Makoto's demeanor altered. Like the flip of a switch, the compassion he showed Isshiki was replaced by irritation “I let him go, because he was useless to me now. With the doubt you planted in his heart, it was more dangerous to have him close to me.”

“...I suppose that’s another possibility.” Kyoko concealed her disgust. “But to me, it sounds like you’re trying to pretend to be someone you’re not.”

“You don’t know anything about me.” Makoto walked ahead, until he stopped at the black case. “Shall we continue?”

“You’re going to fight us both?” Peko stepped to Kyoko’s side.

“Taking on two women at once is a first.” He opened the case. A second sword was pulled out. Makoto slammed the hilt on the ground and drew a black blade from it’s sheathe.

Peko and Kyoko prepared themselves for what was to come.

Makoto gripped the sword with both hands. The handle extended and like the activation of a switch, the blade transformed. Stream poured forth as the red edge glowed orange. “Round two.”

'He's serious' Peko thought. Beforehand, they had just been playing, like during training and she went along with it. But the bespectacled youth knew that sword was dangerous.

She didn't rise to the challenge, instead lowering her weapon. "This isn't a game anymore, and it's gone far beyond any childish pranks like you're used to pulling. We're not enemies. We're-

Faint laughter cut her off. Makoto reacted as he would to one of Leon's jokes.

"Sorry, I just think it's a little funny. Mukuro aside, it's only at the end that all of you finally feel like talking." He wore a mix of pity and amusement. "I know what you're thinking. 'You don't want to fight' 'You don't want anyone to get hurt' 'There are so many ways, better ways we can solve our problems than fighting.' Am I wrong?"

"There's no reason you would be. As long as I've known you, you've advocated peace over conflict. Which is why now is the best time to adhere to that principle."

"You know me well." Makoto looked away to brush a strand of his hair. "But if you knew that much, why did you fight me?"

"...What?"

"I'm talking about the time in the music room, when I showed up instead of Mahiru. Don't say you've forgotten, because I haven't." His tone took on a somber note. "I forgive many things and I don't hold grudges. That doesn't mean I forget. That doesn't mean I don't feel pain...Did you ever apologize for what you did to me?"

Peko closed her eyes. "I didn't, and you know why. I won't apologize for your irresponsible and reckless behavior any more than I condone them."

"A very good answer." Makoto said. "It's my fault. I wouldn't be surprised if I've given you all the impression that I can't get hurt. If that's true, let me give my official statement. It hurt. A lot. As
you say, I act recklessly, but I'm not a masochist. It's because nothing less will get through to you people." He raised his voice. "And why is that? Why do I always have to go this far? I'm asking; Why did you fight me?"

Kyoko stepped up. "I fail to see how this is relevant--"

"It's fine, Kirigiri. This is my responsibility." Peko raised her arm to shoulder length, interrupting the detective. "'Kill him.' Those were my orders. It is my life's purpose to obey."

"And why did Fuyuhiko order you to kill me?" Makoto pressed, clearly leading the swords-woman on to his intended point.

"He was under the influence of despair." Peko answered curtly.

Makoto rolled his eyes. "It's easy shift the blame there, isn't it? Do you think Junko or brainwashing have been the only reason why people have killed before? Fuyuhiko wanted you to hurt me because he was angry and hurt by his sister's death. To him, it was unfair, he wanted payback, even if it meant projecting his anguish on innocents. He couldn't think of an alternative to blind revenge without me having to stab myself and lie. Fuyuhiko is nothing special, narrow-minded men like him are everywhere."

Peko's muscles tensed. She gripped her weapon tightly. It took considerable willpower to avoid lunging at the boy for the verbal attack. She had already taken an unintended step. "It's fine if you want to air your grievances on me, but I will not stand for you insulting Fuyuhiko."

"You think I'm insulting him?" Makoto's eyebrows rose. "I'm saying everyone is the same. We choose that path of least resistance because it has always been available to us. You're no different, Peko so why pretend now?"

Kyoko paid astute attention to the private discussion. Makoto Naegi. A boy whose personality and actions shifted constantly. He paraded around wearing masks appropriate to whatever situation he found convenient for him. It was no proper way to live, in the detective's mind.

Especially now that there were so many cracks on said mask. Over the course of the year, his disguise had splintered and fragmented. Now, she could see parts of his true face beneath.

'Did he always hold those negative philosophical views?'

If so...

("I can’t explain it very well, it’s just what I feel. I mentioned progress, but what I refer to is stable, genuine. That requires care. Naegi’s hope is not that. He’s blind to the future, to progress. Whatever he creates is a counterfeit that will eventually collapse. And he does not care. It’s all self-satisfaction for him.")

Nagito's assumptions would check out...and it appeared he had a better understanding of his fellow lucky student's character. Then did that mean he was also correct about Makoto's reasoning?

'This entire scenario is forced and antagonistic.' Kyoko concluded. She never dreamed of the day where someone would have to talk Makoto out of fighting. Then there was his reluctance to help Chiaki of all people. From what he told Isshiki, he couldn't leave this place. That sounded asinine
to Kyoko, as there was nothing in this broken down building that physically tied him here. *Why is he so desperate...and for what?*

"Fuyuhiko may have been brainwashed but you weren't. You knew he was wrong, so why didn't you stand up to him?" Makoto asked.

Peko went silent "..."

"You couldn't and it's not your fault. You were raised to obey. To act against Fuyuhiko would be to step out of your comfort zone and change your world view, and that was too hard for you. Compared to facing that difficult trial, taking my life was just too easy, wasn't it?"

"You're right. Back then, I excused myself under the grounds that I was Fuyuhiko's weapon. Had Ikusaba not come to your rescue, I would have killed you. In days, I would have forgotten you like all the rest." She said, ashamed. "I won't pretend to be a good person at this point, however I am more than prepared to face the consequences for my actions." He gave him an even stare. "There's no need for lies between us. If it's retribution you're after then meet it out on me."

"Like I said, I don't hold grudges. You were just an example."

"In that case, you are off the mark." She continues "I'm not that simple-minded person anymore. I don't want to resort to violence without exhausting every option, least of all against my friends. I can- have learned from my experiences and changed."

"Even if that's true, not everyone is as strong as you."

"Is that to say you aren't? I don't think a single person in this academy would agree with that. Our past shapes us, but it doesn't define us. Don't let your past dictate how you live now."

Makoto expressed momentary shock. He hadn't let the undertones slip past him. "...How long have you known?"

"Long enough, and none of us thought any less of you because of it. Whatever pain and suffering you experienced before - don't project it on innocent people."

Makoto's gaze fell to the floor, his weapon shook in his hands. "Looks like you were telling the truth. Your skills aren't only thing about you that's sharp anymore." He smiles sadly. "If I were to tell you to leave right now. Would you?"

"If that were an option, we would have gone after Isshiki to rescue Chiaki already."

The brunet shifts his attention to Kyoko next. "And If I were to go on with my plan to brainwash the audience...what would you do?"

"We'd stop you...by any means necessary." The detective proclaimed

"Kirigiri..." Peko snapped her head to the detective.

"Thousands of people are in danger. We can't let out emotions sway us here." Kyoko's logic was iron-clad and true to her word, without a shred of empathy.

"'Any means necessary', huh?" Makoto softly repeated after her. The light trembling stopped. "In that case...I'm sorry, but it's too late, Peko. This is the only path I've got left and you two are blocking my way."
Peko squeezes her eyes shut as disappointment overtakes her.

Makoto continued. "Let's resolve this using the worst possible solution. It'll be the last time any of us will ever get the chance."

The girls prepared themselves as Makoto advanced.

"After midnight, I'll take that freedom away from you."

Chapter End Notes

We're at the final 3 chapters.

I've always been a sucker for the irony of stories ending in the place they began, then taking a step back and seeing how much has changed. From the beginning, I intended on two separate but related confrontations. Izuru's story began with the student council game and instead of watching, he has to fight in one, co-orchestrated by the sole surviving member of the council. The second was to recreate the climax of Layers, with Makoto and Peko having their roles flipped. Thanks to Makoto, Peko was given the chance to grow to be a better, more responsible person while Makoto has fallen from that seat.

And to confirm, the swords Makoto's using are the same as Munakata's in DR3. I figured if Makoto gets the talent, the rest of the package ought to follow.

Next chapter: Chiaki learns about the killing game. Mahiru takes a stand. Makoto reveals his real plans.
Izuru breathed lightly. The blurry figures of the burly Nekomaru Nidai and sadistic Sonia Nevermind were his opposition.

“Dire circumstances aside, this is an exhilarating experience.” The princess remarked, brandishing her spear. A weapon was well accustomed to wielding in Novoselic.

“Sonia…” Nekomaru used an admonishing tone.

“I did say ‘dire circumstances aside’.” She repeated, then watched Izuru with a discerning eye, like a predator stalking her prey. “It is a shame. If he were under my control, he’d make a wonderful asset to Novoselic.”

Nekomaru sighed. “…it’s not like I don’t get where you’re coming from. Even like that, he’s got the fitness of a top athlete.”

Sonia nodded then addressed him. “That’s enough to let you catch your breath. A princess musn’t be unfair, especially to her enemies.”

Izuru still retained the mental faculties to point out a glaring lie. “The longer you wait, the more advantageous the situation becomes for you.”

“I guilty as charged.” She unabashedly confesses. “I suppose this means you will make the next move.”

He did. The time they’d awarded him was enough to formulate countermeasures against their numbers advantage.

The duo dodged to opposite ends of the hallway when Izuru ran between them. Sonia narrows her eyes at the seemingly disadvantageous position he placed himself in. Flanked on both sides, he would be blind. “What faith you have in your skill.” She took it as an act of underestimation and jousted.

Izuru narrowly avoids the spear tip…and the punch Nekomaru threw from the other side.

Sonia’s eyes widen, halting her movements, but not before the lance pierces Nekomaru’s flesh. He backs off, clutching his wounded arm. “Watch that thing!”

In praise she said. “How shrewd.” Stars shone in Sonia’s red eyes, eyes that were glued to Izuru’s shadowy form. In an enclosed hallway, a spear, which would normally give her the edge, could also be used against her…or rather, her partner. He expected that she would hesitate in fear of harming the team manager.

Once she realized that, it was already over. Izuru gripped the staff with one hand and shoved Sonia with the other, she flew back to the wall and crumpled to the floor. He ripped the weapon away and, with the back-pole end, thrust it back into Nekomaru’s gullet. To the giant’s credit, he didn’t go down with just that.
He left his mark, a punch square to the stomach that had Izuru reeling backwards. The Ultimate Hope fell to his knees, covering his mouth as he coughed out blood.

“Whew. Good fight.” Nekomaru clutched his stomach. He walked past Izuru, and towards Sonia. “Unconscious…but fine.” He turned back to Izuru, who was struggling to stand.

“For now, I’ll have to at least make sure to put your lights out.” The burly man cautiously approached. Izuru lacked the means to stop him.

…What a failure he was.

“Don’t move another muscle!” Both boys glanced to the back of the hallway to see Mahiru Koizumi pointing, accompanied by Hiyoko.

The red head girl stomped towards them, displeasure written all over her features. “What is wrong with you boys?! How could you do that to Sonia?”

Hiyoko rushes to the sleeping princess.

“I wasn’t the one who-” Nekomaru trails off when Mahiru steps between him and Izuru. She grabs the ex-reserve course’s arm and slides it over her shoulder, forcing him to stand. “We’re helping him get out of here.”

“WHAAAAAT?!?”

“I don’t like it. Everyone was so quick to resort to killing. It isn’t right!”

Nekomaru scratches his head. “You’re not wrong there. Hell, even I’m not all gung-ho about it. Especially after seeing all his potential firsthand!”

“Then give me a hand already.” Mahiru groaned. Izuru would remark that he wasn’t that heavy, but he wasn’t about to rebuke his savior.

“But, Mahiru. What’re you planning on doing even if we get him out of here? Fuyuhiko and the others won’t be as cooperative as I am.” Nekomaru crossed his arms.

“It isn’t…strictly their fault.” Even talking’s fucking painful… “The effects of Enoshima’s brainwashing have diminished considerably…thanks to a lack of reinforcement and Naegi pushing them in a positive direction. But that still isn’t enough to completely revert them to their original selves.”

“So again, it’s Enoshima’s controlling everyone.”

“Even me? I don’t feel very manipulated.” Nekomaru asked

“I said it wasn’t ‘strictly’ their fault’. It would take more energy than I have to explain, but Enoshima’s video wasn’t as advanced as what Naegi is using. It was only suggestion. Ironically, that is why it’s easier for you lot to relapse.” Izuru explained.

“I had a feeling it wouldn’t be that easy. Those idiots.” To Izuru’s surprise, his candidness didn’t cause Mahiru’s determination to waver. “I don’t know about the two of you but I’m not letting anyone die today. We were finally getting back to normal, so I know it’s possible to break free from Enoshima’s clutches.”

“Ugh, what a hassle. I’d rather run away but I’ll make sure none of those dipshits lay a hand on
“you, big sis.” Hiyoko yelled.

“…Then it’s fortunate that I have a plan.” Izuru said.

…

“Everything’s going to be alright now, Yasuke.” Ryoko cupped his cheeks.

‘Yeah, that made no fucking sense…but really, what in his life did nowadays?’ She was covered in blood from head to toe…mostly hers. He tied makeshift bandages around her forehead using Tanaka’s scarf.

As for the man himself…if one were to look…all over the place, they’d see Kazuichi, Gundham and the fake’s body’s sprawled across the floor after the ass kicking of a life time.

How the dumbass in front of him accomplished that feat still escaped Yasuke. Without her notebook and practically delirious, Ryoko had overpowered the other three.

“Did you…kill them?” He asked.

“Nope~.”

“How do you feel? Don’t say good because that wound’s fucking terrible.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty light-headed…ahaha.”

“Doesn’t say much.” Didn’t say anything about this airheaded moron. “Why didn’t you run?”

“Because I’m Ryoko!”

…Yasuke had to recoil at receiving an even stupider answer than expected. “Brain damage?”

Ryoko shook her head, sending drops of blood splattering everywhere. What was she, a dog? “Not like that, I mean…I can be Ryoko and nobody else, as long as I have connections.”

“Connections?”

“I learned that to accept who I am, I need people who like and remember me for me. Like my friends. I could never let them harm a hair on your head! You’re my best friend, Yasuke.” He doesn’t stop her from patting him on his head, as demeaning as it is.

“A selfish reason like that…sounds more like you. You’ve been thinking about that crap?”

Blood sloshed as she nodded again.

“Fucking hell, it’s getting all over me. Stay put.” He tightened the fabric around Ryoko’s head. “I’ll get proper bandages from that bitch Tsumiki once we’re out of here.”

He grabbed Ryoko by the hand and led her down the tunnel.

He hoped not to run into anyone else. Best case scenario is that they gang on Izuru and all take each other out.

…

“You two gonna explain yourselves?” Fuyuhiko met Nekomaru and Mahiru with an icy glare.
Albeit, most of it was directed at Izuru. “You’re going to pick him over Chiaki?”

“I’m not choosing anybody.” Mahiru countered.

Fuyuhiko wasn’t wrong. If he’d been in the yakuza’s shoes, he’d have called bullshit on her optimism. Good thing their position wasn’t so bad. An armed Fuyuhiko would be too much for him and the photographer, but they could manage with Nekomaru.

Probably.

…Probably? What was wrong with him?

“I get you two can’t stomach gettin’ your hands dirty, so run off and leave it to me.”

“Believe me, I’d love to go take a shit, but no can do, Fuyuhiko!” Nekomaru’s bellows were a lot quieter than normal. It wasn’t that he was reducing the octave.

Izuru’s hearing was getting worse.

“Do you think that macho talk makes you cool? Use your head for once. We don’t know if that guy will even let Chiaki go. We’re all just wasting our energy and making it easier for them!” Mahiru chided him

“Think I haven’t thought of that? But guess what? We’ve got no other options.” Fuyuhiko growled. “If there’s another way, I’m all ears!”

“I don’t know if there is…but I know we shouldn’t choose the easy way out without thinking. I thought you’d changed after everything that happened with your sister.”

The blonde flinched from the jab. “This ain’t about revenge, it’s about our safety.”

“That’s an excuse and you know it.”

The two stared off against each other until Nekomaru’s brought up a possibility. “Maybe the brainwashing’s impairing Fuyuhiko’s reasoning…in which case, we’ll just have to beat him up.”

“Who’re you calling mentally impaired?!” The mafioso nearly coughed a lung. Without waiting for a reply…he switched gears. “Fine...I’m walking headfirst into a tragedy in the making, but fine, let’s go.”

“You agreed pretty fast there…” Nekomaru commented, suspiciously.

“What? You want me to argue? You want me to tell you how fucking stupid it is to walk out here without a reliable plan? No thanks, I’m done playing mister sensible. I have been run ragged for WEEKS! All so Makoto fucking Naegi could be a two-faced little bitch and screw me over. Now I have to put up with THIS horseshit ON THE SAME NIGHT as the festival! I’ve got no energy left for anything. This whole school is fucking crazy.” Fuyuhiko vented. “Jesus, I’d almost forgotten we were students IN SCHOOL, because we haven’t even had class in months! So tell you what? He pointed at Izuru. “Fuck you, Kamukura. Fuck Naegi. Fuck Enoshima. I’m going out there to tell Muracuntsack to fuck off and get Chiaki back, then after we leave here, I’m going to sleep and I’ll smile like a goddamn baby. When I wake up, Santa better gimme the best goddamn present a guy could ask for - The world finally going back to normal because I’m smacking heads if it’s not! Let’s go!”

The trio stared in silence…
Nekomaru roared with laughter. “That’s the spirit!”

“Geez, you should have acted like this from the start.” Mahiru sighed. “I can totally get behind that. I’d love some sleep right about now. But…I’ve still got all those photos to render for the yearbook.”

Izuru could only remain silent in the concert of trusted friends.

…

“Mahiru has such a strong hope.” Nagito praised.

“I agree. She’s always had an eye for order. What a splendid student.” Kiyotaka joined.

Nagito side-eyed him “Your plot is about to fail.”

“Why?” Kiyotaka tilted his head.

“Ishimaru-kun…” Mikan gripped the prefect’s sleeves.

“Isn’t it fine if they know? They’re far too late to stop us anyway.”

“No, you don’t have the right. She’ll get mad if you spoil her fun.”

…

“Guess the tunnels connect after all.” Yasuke deduced. Ryoko swaying back and forth by his side as they stumbled across Fuyuhiko and the other three.

“We’re leaving. You coming?” The short blonde said.

“What’s with the change of heart?” Yasuke said in a distrustful tone. “Or are you looking for a truce after we already dealt with your friends.”

“That better not mean what I fucking think it does, pal.”

“Does it sound like I care? You tried to kill Ryoko.”

The girl in question interrupted their squabble. “They’re fine. I didn’t use too much force on any of them.”


“Oh…Souda, Tanaka and the big guy. I don’t know his name.”

“Never letting em live this one down.” “Note to self: Those three are getting some serious training from me.” Fuyuhiko and Nekomaru muttered under their breaths.

“Back to the topic at hand, why should we go with you?” Yasuke asked the midget.

“You want to stay here and wait to die? Be my fucking guest. But me? I just remembered that I’m the boss of the fucking Kuzuryu clan and no way am I letting myself pushed around by one asshat with ONE gun! I’d be the laughingstock of my entire family.” Fuyuhiko walked off, prompting the others to follow.

“Should we get the others?” Mahiru inquired
“No time. We need the antidote from Mikan for that asshole” Fuyuhiko said. “Besides, it might be better if some of them are out cold for now. We’ll get them once we deal with those three.”

“They’re turning back.” Chiaki smirked. She should have had faith that they’d sort things out.

“As long as we have you, there’s nothing they can do.”

Chiaki winced as Kiyotaka coldly reminded her of her impotence.

Nagito watched the interaction and conspicuously addressed Soshun, the boy who hadn’t emoted so much as disappointed by the turn of events. “What do you think, Murasame-kun? This should be the best option for you.”

Silently, the president shifted his body towards Nagito. Chiaki was beginning to wonder if there was any reason left in him.

Nagito continued his speech without care for the onlookers. “Let the Ultimates wage their hopes against one another, then trample on the winner. Well, what I desire is an Ultimate hope that can withstand anything. If he- they lose here, then it just means they aren’t what I was looking for.” A thought came to mind. “What about you, Murasame-san? I’d nearly forgotten you too are hope.”

“…Nagito?” Chiaki called out the luckster’s name, scandalized by the implications.

“I can only imagine what despair you must have faced, watching your friends turn on each other in the killing game. Thereafter, you were abandoned by Hope’s Peak Academy itself. For someone with a shining future like yours, I can’t even imagine a greater tragedy. If I were in your shoes, I’d be wishing for death.” He made a fist in lamentation at the grief Soshun suffered. “But you, you persevered. It doesn’t matter if that was someone else’s design; the fact is you survived and are prepared to right those that wronged you. How does it feel to finally be able to take matters into your own hands?”

“Soshun…” Mikan stared at the council president with trepidation.

Nagito procured a small knife from the cart, theatrically waving it in the air. “There are still those with hopes as strong as yours. Don’t pass up this chance to prove yourself. Kamukura-kun and the others will walk through there in a few minutes. When he does, you have to give your all. Even in his state, he is still the pinnacle of Hope’s Peak’s achievements. Haha, in a way, that could make him everything you hate.” He pointed the blade at Soshun.

“Excellent choice of words, Komaeda-kun! Even I’m feeling motivated. The idea that you can just graft talent into a human being and skip the process of hard work is unsightly.” Kiyotaka interjected.

“To an extent I agree. Talent is not something you inject into talentless fodder. I don’t know what Hope’s Peak was thinking.” Nagito sneered.

Chiaki could only stare in horror as Nagito paraded around like he was one of them. “H-How could you... I thought we were friends.”

The boy looked away, towards Soshun, flanked by his two caretakers.

“How will you handle this auspicious moment, Murasame-kun? A simple bullet to the head sounds
too anti-climactic."

“Oooh ooh! We’ve got tons of knives. Maybe Soshun can stab Kamukura-kun. One for every council member that died.” Mikan suggested.

“Now there’s an idea!” Kiyotaka chimed in

“What nonsense are you feeding him?” A new voice broke apart the inappropriately jovial conversation. Stepping out from the entrance was…

“Madarai-san.” Chiaki breathed. The towering Ultimate’s eyes fell to her, angered at the sight. Disappointed by those who brought it about.

“Soshun…” Isshiki Madarai spoke to the former council president. The red-eyed man was listless and unresponsive, as if he hadn’t heard the call, or recognized his old friend.

“H-How did you find this place?” Mikan stood between the two.

“Get out of my way.” With his long, muscular arms, Isshiki swatted Mikan aside. Or at least that was his intention, if Kiyotaka hadn’t latched onto his arm, holding it in place mid-swing.

“I can’t allow a woman to be harmed in my presence. It’s uncouth.” The moral compass said.

“I second that.” Nagito added, slowly inching away from the ensuing chaos.

“Ishimaru…you too?” Isshiki asked.

“From the very beginning.” Kiyotaka smirked.

“I see. I’ll be sure to save you after my work is done.” Isshiki looked to the unflinching Soshun. The bodyguard could not bring himself to ask “Why are you doing this?” It was insulting to ask.

But as it appeared, Kiyotaka was already plenty insulted. “I don’t like being ignored!” The moral compass threw a punch. One Isshiki easily caught.

Kiyotaka found himself flung to the side but was quick to get onto his feet.

“It seems this night is coming with many challenges.” Isshiki said.

“Seems that way.” Kiyotaka removed his cape and tossed it aside.

Mikan and Soshun watched as the two began fighting.

Meanwhile…

“Nagito?” Chiaki whispered

The luckster silenced her with a gesture. His knife shears the ropes.

---

Fragments of silver scattered through the air.

Peko’s conviction remained steadfast, even if her sword was reduced to half its former stature. Kyoko was similarly resolute, despite the numerous, tiny slits across her body.
“I give up’ is the safety word. Say it and I’ll stop.” Makoto waved the source of their hardships in the air, like a child flailing an expensive toy. “Neat isn’t it? I had Izayoi-san make it for me. The edge gets so hot that it can cut metal like butter…but you already figured that out.”

Peko would normally have little to no difficulty subduing Makoto but neither she nor Kyoko could even get close to him with that modified blade in the way. He stopped Peko with that, and Kyoko with the silver sword. “Your weapon’s broken. That means I win, doesn’t it?” Makoto said.

She points the broken edge at him. He quiets at the sign of continued defiance.

“I thought something was different. Whether I had misjudged you or that you’d changed somehow…I couldn’t be certain, but what I do know is, that I’m thankful.” Peko said, vaguely.

“‘My sword is broken, therefore you’ve won’. Then…back when the young master ordered me to kill you in the music room…did you admit defeat when I cut your weapon in two?”

“…”

“I didn’t think so. I believed you were the sort who would break before giving up.”

“Are you going somewhere with this? It won’t change that you’re losing this fight.” Makoto’s eyebrow twitched.

“Winning or losing. If you're relegating our situation so mundanely, then I was correct.” Peko smirks. "You were a lot more terrifying when we met."

“Huh?” Makoto’s focus subsides, his sword lowers.

“It’s like unraveling a myth, only to lament its lost mystique. The Makoto I remember would have coerced everyone at that concert personally. It would be impossible, but you would try. He wouldn’t resort to something as cheap as brainwashing.”

Makoto shook his head in denial. “…You don’t understand.”

“You said it before.” The one to speak was Kyoko. “It was an excuse then and it’s one now. If we don’t understand then make us understand. Isn’t talking what you advocate most? Or are smiles all you need in life? Are the a few thousands empty expressions important enough to outweigh a friend’s life?"

“That’s what I mean when I say you don’t get it.” Makoto planted the sword’s edge on the ground, cracking the surface. “Kirigiri-san. If using the brainwashing video on all those guests was enough to satisfy me, why wouldn’t I have just turned it on myself?”

“You’re not predictable enough for me make those assumptions.” Kyoko’s words were not praise.

"...Y’know, I’ve always laughed at all those villains on TV that explain their motives, goals and plans to the heroes. That’s just asking to get themselves fucked over…” He catches himself. “Sorry, didn’t mean to swear. But I kind of get it. It’s all about validation. When you’re going to rip my character to shreds like that I…can’t take that lying down.”

“Then you’ll finally come clean?” The detective surmised.

“You’re right. Those smiles are empty. I don’t want them, and they can’t help me. Before I get down to it, I need your answers to a simple question: Do you think it’s possible for everyone in the
world to be happy?"

“No.” Kyoko replied.

“People can’t live without hurting others. It’s a fact of life.” Peko would think that was obvious, but the evident disappointment on Makoto’s face told a different story.

“And who decided that? You? No. Nobody did. Everyone just accepts it as the truth, But it was also the true that the Earth was flat, once upon a time. All this means is that someone has never succeeded in proving the impossible is possible.”

“And you intend to be that person…” Kyoko’s train of thought moved faster than her speech. She let out a low gasp.

“You get it. My goal isn’t the ‘thousands of people’ at the concert. It’s everyone.” Every last person on Earth was his target. “I only realized recently…Hope’s Peak Academy is…ridiculously favored…and popular, even overseas. It has connections all over the world…and things that happen here can influence the outside.

That’s why I chose this place. The radio comms still work, amplifying the range of Alter ego. He’ll play the video across the entire school and it will reach everywhere the concert is broadcasted. That may well be the country, maybe more. But what matters is afterwards. Hope’s Peak, High standing individuals with money and global power…such as Sonia and Byakuya, and Fuyuhiko and Sayaka and Mondo. Not to speak of politicians. Imagine if all of these powerful groups were to distribute their efforts to helping people and making the world a better place, all at the same time. The rest of the world would be shocked, in awe…and they would follow in their footsteps. Just as the mass riots did.”

("Um, Komaru? I heard some have died. These acts of violence are a bit…extreme to be called a fad, I think.”

“Sometimes, Makoto…I really don’t think you understand just how incredible you are to be attending Hope’s Peak Academy.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. If you did, you wouldn’t be asking why everyone going nuts right now. It’s not just a fad. Anything that involves Ultimates is the biggest deal. You guys could become vegetarians and the country would quit meat within the week!”

“What I’m looking for is a ripple. A wave so big it’ll crash against the shores of everywhere on the planet. There won’t be anywhere to hide, and they won’t want to. Happiness is infectious, a natural phenomenon. Everyone from the day they’re born wants it, but it’s so easily taken away by others. People who seek that same happiness or lament other having it. It doesn’t matter if you’re friends, families, associates or even strangers. It only takes one. One person to steal it all away from you.” His voice breaks and he trails off. “Then…I thought, if everyone was happy, there’d be balance. To be unhappy would make you the odd one out and nobody wants that. That’s how the world works, so I’ll play use those rules to break those rules.”

“How could you think so lowly of others, like they’re sheep?” Kyoko couldn’t remain stoic at the confession. Was this how he saw them all?
“I didn’t. My sister gave me the idea.” Makoto shrugged. “I admit, it’s not perfect. I still need to brainwash a minor percent of the population, sacrificing their happiness for the real product, but that’s close enough, as far as I’m concerned. The brainwashing might not be forever either, so I’m sure things will come full circle and you’ll all reap the rewards too. So you see, the smiles I’ll create won’t be empty.”

Kyoko glared. “And the rest of us are just your fodder. You realize that includes your own sister.”

“Yeah…I didn’t count on Komaru being here today.” Makoto rubbed his nape. The gesture of discomfort quickly gave way to apathy. “What can I do? I know what I’m doing is wrong. It’d be hypocritical of me to stop because of my sister if I’m willing to sacrifice the rest of you, even my friends.” He paused…and pushed out any hesitations. “I have to do it. There’s no other choice and nowhere for me to run.”

“I see.” Kyoko closed her eyes and said loudly. “Do you believe me now, Naegi-san?”

Makoto tilted his head. “Believe what?”

“I wasn’t speaking to you.” Who Kyoko had been referring to was made clear when a figure walked out from the shadows, where the moon light didn’t reach.

Makoto grunted lowly when the saddened and perplexed teenager came into view.

“What are you doing over there, Komaru?”

Isshiki and Kiyotaka panted, both bruised from repeated exchanges of blows. Isshiki normally wouldn’t have had this much trouble, but he’d already went rounds with Mukuro and Kyoko, then rushed to the basement without stopping.

His stamina was low, but…with a glance at Soshun, he could forget all that and keep fighting.

“I said don’t ignore me!” In hindsight, Kiyotaka’s constant yelling was a boon in letting Isshiki know when and how he would attack. Like right now. The hall monitor’s straight punch was caught at the wrist. Isshiki kneed Ishimaru’s stomach and punched him square in the jaw.

“Guk!” Kiyotaka crumpled to his knees, clutching his broken nose.

“Eeek! You’re bleeding!” Mikan knelt besides him.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not!”

“I would listen to her if I were you. I’m sure we’ve all had a very trying day.” Isshiki gave a veiled warning. In turn, he received one. He heard the cock of a gun and following the sound, was Soshun holding him at gun point.

Truth be told, Isshiki had been thinking of a way to reason with Soshun at the back of his mind, even during the fight. “You are angry, but Chiaki Nanami has nothing to do with this. The 77th class are not responsible for the killing game either.”
Soshun didn’t react.

“Revenge is not the answer.” Isshiki knew that now, staring the gun barrel down. “It won’t bring back the others. But there’s still a chance for you to move on.”

He couldn’t tell if Soshun had heard, from how unresponsive he was. Maybe it was a lost cause after all. If Isshiki had been one of the council, he may have been able to convince him. He wasn’t. He was only a bodyguard, protecting from the outside, looking in.

Nevertheless…he had to try. Had Isshiki pursued his revenge, he likely would have ended up dead. Had he somehow killed Izuru and Junko, that would be the end of it. He’d still be removed from Hope’s Peak Academy…and would carry the burden of murder for the rest of his life. Neither happened, and he’s now able to make a difference. Currently, Soshun was still a victim, not a perpetrator. The school owes him much, but if he went any further, his options would close significantly.

Slowly, with as little motions as possible to not draw Soshun’s eye, Isshiki drew the onyx cellphone. With a slight press of a button, a bright white light emanated from the screen.

…

In that instant, Nagito covered both Chiaki’s eyes and his own. Mikan and Kiyotaka made shocked gasps but were too late to do the same.

The sound of bullets flying caused both of their eyes to open.

The light dies as the cellphone drops to the floor, blood spilling on the screen.

Chiaki covers her mouth in horror as she sees Isshiki pressing against his punctured shoulder. Even on his knees, the ultimate stood tall.

Smoke left Soshun’s gun.

“He didn’t even flinch at the video.” Nagito noted, dragging now freed Chiaki by the arm as they stealthily circled around the room. The boy had gestured that she stand behind him the whole time.

“That was close. Good work.” Kiyotaka said, patting Soshun on the shoulder, who poised the gun at Isshiki’s head. Seeing Isshiki’s perplexed face, Kiyotaka elaborated. “What you didn’t have was ‘time’. Something like that won’t work on him.”

(“Trust is an important step in maintaining a partnership.” Isshiki grants the brunet permission. Makoto presses down on the side button and a white-light burst from the screen.

“Isshiki?” Nisshiki calls his brother. The elder sibling is transfixed on the device.

“It takes a few seconds.” Makoto elaborates.)

“He’s…immune?” Isshiki wheezed.

“Not quite. It’s more like Murasame-kun has become a killing machine. With an iron will, the brainwashing can’t hold him long enough. Perhaps if you incapacitated him first, you’d be given the time…”

“Sometimes…I wonder if Soshun is actually…alive in there. He doesn’t respond to anything else
but killing. It’s such a waste, I think.” Mikan remarks. Her words at odds with the way she’d ‘raised’ the president to be the machine standing before them.

Nagito took one step ahead of Chiaki and, spikes flew out from the floor, piercing his feet. He let out an audible yelp.

“Nagito!”

Soshun gun zipped to the noise. Isshiki tried to take the opening by attacking the unsuspecting man, only to be tacked by Ishimaru. “Not so fast. That also goes for you two.”

The spikes retracted, leaving Nagito unbalanced and a small puddle of blood formed around his feet. “Unlucky me. Sorry, Chiaki.”

“I-It’s all my fault, I forgot to disable the trap!” Mikan screeches, scurrying towards the medicine kit on a nearby wall.

“Why are you helping the enemy again?” Kiyotaka asked, keeping Isshiki pinned.

Mikan stopped. “Huh? Nagito’s my friend…and he’s not on the list. Isn’t that why we haven’t done anything about him?” She clumsily ran towards the lucky student with the white toolbox. “Um…d-don’t move!” She urged the ashen boy. Her gaze fluttered to Chiaki. “Y-You too. It’d be bad if you did.”

Chiaki frowned.

“This…along with Madarai-kun having Makoto's video. Things aren’t going according to plan…” Kiyotaka lamented.

“And what plan would that be?”

Before Kiyotaka could react, Fuyuhiko’s boot rammed into his jaw, knocking him off Isshiki. The barrel of Soshun’s gun landed on his forehead.

Fuyuhiko looked up unimpressed. “You got one shot. Better make it count, but you might wanna take a look around you.”

Behind the yakuza were several others, including Ryoko and Izuru.

Chiaki found it hard to look at the listless boy, using Nekomaru as a prop to stand. His skin was grossly pale.

“Don’t do it, Soshun.” Isshiki’s plea reaches her ears. The president hadn’t removed the firearm from Fuyuhiko’s head. If his earlier actions were any indication...he was prepared to use that thing. “Don’t involve others in your own pain. You’re not that irresponsible. You’re not like Enoshima!”

Mikan stopped tending to Nagito’s wounds, inching her head to the chaos. Kiyotaka was similarly unnerved. An ominous quiet descended broken by the word

“E…no…shima.”

Fuyuhiko began to sweat as the pistol shook rapidly. His eyes widen in increments when he hears Soshun sloppily utter the words “Eno…shima.”

Yasuke moves to protect Ryoko.
“Enoshima…Kill. Eno-“

“Junko Enoshima…murdered…your friends…and so did I.” Izuru confessed.

With crazed eyes, Soshun turns to the experiment. Izuru separates from Nekomaru, barely able to remain on his feet.

“Hajime…” Chiaki whispers. So it was true. She remembers the innocuous, timid reserve course student, as he used to be. “How could you have done something so awful?”

Izuru ignores her. “You should…be aiming that thing over here…if revenge is what you’re looking for. After all, that show was put on for me. All of you were Enoshima’s sacrifices to me.”

Fear crept up in Chiaki’s heart.

“I was there…I saw each member of the council rip each other apart. If I recall, Ikuta was shot by Mukuro Ikusaba and killed instantly.”

Soshun gun leaves Fuyuhiko’s head

“Hajime, run!” Any attempts Chiaki made to rush over were stopped by Nagito’s grip on her body. The luckster shakes his head.

“Then it was…Someya that died next. I can’t remember all their names…Oh, right. I’d forgotten the one who’d come after me with the chainsaw. His death had been especially brutal. Hino was it?”

“Be silent, Kamukura!” Isshiki yelled.

“Why the bravado now? While your friends were fighting, you were off hiding. If you didn’t have what it took to end the fighting then, you sure as shit don’t have it now.”

“He’s baiting you. Don’t.

Izuru smirked. “Stop pretending and put that gun down, you cowa-“ He staggers back as a bullet flies into his chest.

*bang*

Everyone covers their ears (in some cases eyes) as Soshun unloads several more shots until Izuru fell. Screams erupt from all over the room.

Chiaki did so first. She pried herself away from Nagito and ran over to the fallen boy as fast she could.

Izuru lies motionless.

Nagito takes in the scene with neutrality. He addresses Mikan. “It appears he’s dead. If you don’t mind, may I have the antidote now?”

“Why?” Mikan asks confused.

“Call it curiosity. It shouldn’t be of any use to you right now.”

Mikan nodded and procured a vial from her nurse’s apron. Nagito took it and held it in front.

“Thank you.” He stood and limped towards Izuru.
“Y-You shouldn’t move yet!” Mikan flustered.

“Hajime!” The others crowd around as Chiaki shakes Izuru’s motionless body.

Isshiki’s slaps the gun out of Soshun’s hand. Forgetting the pain in his shoulder, he grabs the other male’s collar. “Do you know what you’ve done?! This is the person you wanted to become?” He cried.

Soshun didn’t react. He only stared with empty, red eyes.

“I told you, it’s pointless.” That came from Kiyotaka, watching the scene dispassionately. The pale-skinned ultimate reflects on the moral compass and nurse’s earlier words.

“It’s more like Murasame-kun has become a killing machine.”

“Sometimes…I wonder if Murasame-san is actually…alive in there. He doesn’t respond to anything else but killing.”

“It was you.” He unhands Soshun and takes thundering steps towards Kiyotaka. “You did this.” Isshiki pulled back his arm.

“And what will you do? Take revenge too?”

Isshiki punch stops mere inches from Ishimaru’s face. The bodyguard quivers with rage, the grits of his teeth would have been audible had they not been drowned out by Chiaki’s cries.

Nagito knelt by Chiaki, popped the cap from the container and dumped its contents into Izuru’s parted lips. A short, momentary passage later, the brunette coughed aloud as he body spasmed.

Amidst the surprised gasps Nagito sighed. “That was a close one.” He ripped open Izuru’s shirt and from there took the e-book that was strapped to the boy’s chest. The screen a spiderweb of cracks.

Izuru opened one tired eye and tried to lift the upper half of his body

“What?!” Nekomaru yelled as if he’d seen a ghost.

“Y-You’re alive…” Chiaki whispered.

“All…thanks…to Souda.” Izuru let out.

(“Nothing, that’s the point. These handbooks are sturdy stuff. Bash em with knives, hammers. Hell, you could try loading them full of bullets and they’ll come out just fine. If you don’t overheat the e-handbook, you won’t have any problems.”)

“Huh, that moron wasn’t exaggeratin’ when he said those things were tough.” Fuyuhiko blinked, in a daze himself.

“You’re lucky Murasame shot all in that area…Oh shit, I forgot we downloaded luck into that skillset of yours.” Yasuke quipped. He received odd, questioning stares from most. “Don’t ask me like I fucking know. it just worked.”

“Luck is a useful…talent…to have. Especially with the two of us working together.”
“Working…together?” Kiyotaka asked outraged. “No…you couldn’t have. You wouldn’t have let things go this far if you had. That’s suicidal.”

“Correct, Ishimaru. The plan…was that there was no plan.” Nagito smiled.

“Phrase that in a way that makes sense, idiot.” Yasuke smacked his forehead.

“Pardon me. What I mean to say is that Kamukura-kun just trusted me to see things through away from him and rescue Chiaki while your attention was on the others. It worked much better than expected.”

‘He was acting…’ Chiaki thought, feeling guilty for doubting Nagito.

“Two lucky students were better than one.” Izuru concluded. “Nagito might be an irritant, but I respect his competence when it counts.”

“I’ll take it.” The luckster chuckled.

“You’re both crazy!” Mahiru shouted. “One misstep and you’d be dead!”

“You’re really stealing my thunder there, Mahiru.” Chiaki let out a dry laugh. She was too relieved to express anger. It wasn’t in her nature.

“Well, looks like you dropped the ball.” Fuyuhiko smirked at Kiyotaka. “Got anymore schemes or are the both of you ready to pay for all the trouble you’ve caused us?”

“W-What about me?” Mikan pointed to herself.

Fuyuhiko ignored her.

Soshun scanned the floor.

“Betcha forgot about me.” Ryoko blew a raspberry. In her hand was the firearm Isshiki slapped away from the shooter. “Chiaki, you’re okay!” Ryoko ran to hug the gamer.

"Yeah, from the looks of it." Relief washed over the pinkette.

"You're not hurt, right?"

"I...should be asking that about you." Chiaki frowned at the sight of Gundham's scarf bandaging Ryoko's head.

“Checkmate.” Yasuke said.

Kiyotaka and Mikan traded glances then turned to Soshun. “It does seem bad for you. What are you going to do?” The moral compass asked.

Soshun walked past him without a word, to the weapons cart. Isshiki, understanding his intentions, intercepted. The bulky man spreading his arms wide like a goalkeeper.

“You’ve gotta be shitting me. He really planned on fighting?” Yasuke arched an eyebrow. It didn’t matter if the guy had weapons. It was one, maybe two, against all of them and they had the gun now. “Are you really that crazy, Murasame?”

“I’m getting tired of explaining. Murasame-kun won’t listen to words. As long as Kamukura and Junko are in his sights, he’ll aim to kill…until he’s dead. Looking at it from another angle, he
might as well be dead already.” Kiyotaka exclaimed.

Isshiki may have attacked Kiyotaka had Yasuke’s next words not quelled his anger.

“That’s a load of crap. He’s got a brain and a heartbeat so he’s clearly fucking alive.” The neurologist gives Kiyotaka a condescending stare. “All he’s got is severe fucking trauma. Nothing I can’t fix.”

“He can be saved?” Isshiki asked hopeful

“Like I said, stop making it sound like he’s dying. He’s just screwed up in the head. Fuck, that goes for nearly everyone else here. I’ve been working on how to fix a case like this for months.”

“yeah, yeah. That’s nice and all, now let’s get down to business. Will you surrender and let us tie you up? Or will we have to beat you and then tie you up?” Fuyuhiko ushered an ultimatum

“Don’t hurt me!” Mikan screamed.

Fuyuhiko ignored her.

“Is this really where it ends?” Kiyotaka asked.

“Uh yeah. What the fuck do you think?”

“Is this really the end?” Again, Kiyotaka asked.

“I just said yes.”

“Hmm. Then it is!”

"Chiaki..." Ryoko speaks in a voice that compels Chiaki to attention. "What do your eyes see?" The whimsical girl stands behind the gamer, with one hand protectively wrapped around Chiaki’s waist.

"See what?" Chiaki asks in a low voice as Ryoko pulls her backwards. Their footsteps don't make a sound.

"We're at the last stage, and we've beaten the boss. But look at them. Do they look like they've lost?" The private conversation goes unheard to all but them. Chiaki stares straight at Kiyotaka, whose voice nearly faded into the background when compared to the girl behind her.

“Splendidly done staying alive against all odds. I thought for sure our strategy was sufficient, but Giving credit where its due, Komaeda-kun was truly a surprise. We didn’t account for him being here. What a lucky trump card!”

"From the start, Kiyotaka and Mikan were...laidback." Chiaki says slowly.

"Why is that?" Ryoko presses knowingly.

“About that.” Nagito began. “What do you mean when you say I wasn’t accounted for. It’s been giving me a funny feeling. I understand I’m trash but...was I so unimportant that you didn’t even care to have my profile?”

“It was more that we didn’t even know about you nor that you would be returning as early as you did. You were a blindspot that we couldn’t handle…and our movements had to be severely limited,
for the plan to succeed.” Kiyotaka said.

Chiaki’s reminded of the ridiculous get up the moral compass appeared with. “It's like they've been playing around.” She swells with unease.

"I agree. Not to mention those three were never A-rank material to begin with."

The cramped underground space makes Ryoko's touch burn. Cold sweat rolls down the sides of Chiaki's face.

“Limited?” Izuru coughed. His cognitive capacities were severely diluted by the poison. He couldn’t even stand anymore.


Mikan and Kiyotaka traded glances once more, both of them perplexed by the team manager’s statement. “No, it didn’t. How could it fail when you guys haven’t even done anything to it?” Mikan cocked her head.

"You're almost there. Just a little more, Chiaki. You must have seen an anti-climax like this in one of your games. If we were playing one right now, what happens next?" Ryoko leads her on.

At this point even Nagito was visibly at a loss. “What plan?”

'The real boss shows up.' It dawns on Chiaki; the reason for her near-whispers, the reason her breaths are labored, why her heart races. The reason her gaze is locked in front and can't turn around. In Ryoko's other hand was still-heated metal pressed to her temple.

“Allow me to congratulate you all again, on your survival. You passed this little detour of ours with flying colors.” Kiyotaka bowed.

“Yup. It’s almost midnight. Makoto should be just about ready. Even though he’s a bad boy who’s always getting hurt, he works sooo hard for everyone.” Mikan giggled.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Fuyuhiko yelled.

The answer didn’t come from either Mikan or Kiyotaka, or even Soshun.

"The Biggest, Most Awful, Most Tragic Event in Human History!"

That sweet, regal voice sent shivers down their spines. That small window where one's fingertips brushed against victory, was when they became the most complacent. They were so sure of themselves, they hadn't noticed the despair sprouting in their midst.

"Bang."

She pulls the trigger. The bullet flies. Blood spills. Before the stroke of midnight, Junko Enoshima marks her return by taking a life.

Chapter End Notes

The most evil cliffhanger.
Next chapter: If I were to give it a title, it'd be "Despair, Hope and Me."
The Ultimate Lucky Student had more strings of bad luck than good.

‘Good grief.’ Makoto thought.

Komaru’s steps were shaky. Though she walked on hard concrete, it felt like she was standing on a cloud, liable to fall at any moment. That was the dreamlike state she was in.

She looked to the far off right, to the fallen Mukuro, limp and motionless. She dared not to think any further. To the near left, were Kyoko and Peko, covered in scrapes.

In front…was her brother, who admitted to calling her a sacrifice…to be…brainwashed.

The murkiness and trepidation swelling in her chest was too painful for this to be a dream, yet, the events were too lucid to be a nightmare.

This was real.

Makoto never expected to see Komaru there. Even less that she would be figuratively and literally, standing with Kyoko, against him.

Makoto ruffled his hair. “How much did you hear?”

“Everything. We met Naegi-san on our way. She happened to overhear a conversation regarding you and demanded she come with us.” Kyoko replied. “I was against the idea, because I suspected she’d be a hindrance.”

“Well yeah, she’s just a kid.”

“Someone who didn’t fully believe that you were a danger would only be a liability…just as you supposedly thought of Madarai.” Kyoko corrected him “I wanted Naegi-san to see the truth for herself, without any bias from us. We asked that she remain hidden and wait. Pekoyama-san and I promised her we wouldn’t injure you, and we kept that promise.”

Makoto looked to his sister, who deliberately shifted her gaze away from him.

His shoulders slacked. “Turning my own sister against me. I’ll say it again: You’re a real piece of work, Kirigiri.”

“Don’t shift the blame.” Of course, she’d give a smart reply like that. He knows she’s smug underneath that stoic mask.

To be fair, she had every right to be. Even Makoto couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re right. I really played myself. Haha…it’s ends just like the movies after all. Ah well. It’s not the first time my family’s abandoned me. I’ll live.”

Komaru visibly winces from the backhanded comment. She uses the resolve she’d silently gathered to say “Makoto…come home.”
“What?” Why would he ever go back?

“Let’s forget about this craziness. Just come home with me.” She pleads, on the verge of tears.

‘Was anything I said that heartwrenching, I wonder?’ He thought.

“I’ll pass. There’s nothing there for me.”

“Is there anything I can say to get you to stop? Anything I can do to help you?”

There wasn’t. He knew what that kind of ‘help’ entailed. It might have been his least favorite word in the dictionary.

“I don’t need you. Never have. Don’t worry, that’s not to say I hate you or whatever you’re thinking.” He employs damage control, able to see every succeeding sentence piercing deep into the girl’s heart. His cheerful demeanor did little to soften the blow. “Nothing that happened to me is your fault. There was nothing you could have done.”

“Is this…about what happened at that hospital?” She asked slowly.

He came back a different person.

“You’re not a kid anymore. We both know that wasn’t a hospital.”

She finally sees how different.

“And…I gave you the idea to do…all of this.”

Komaru takes his silence as an answer.

“I’m sorry.”

“Like I said, what happened was out of your hands.” Komaru’s always been a crybaby. He’d learned how to deal with her by now. “Tell you what. First thing tomorrow, I’ll take you anywhere you want. I know some great places-”

“If…If I hadn’t been a coward, I could have helped you before it was too late.” She cried.

He wasn’t sure if he was more miffed by how she ignored him or how she’s still going about…whatever. He didn’t really get it.

“I just said-”

“I can see them too.” Komaru looked him square in the eye. Peko and Kyoko give her odd looks, the same as he.

“Pardon me?” See what?

“Ghosts. I can see them too.”

..................

Taken aback. He questions the punchline to that strange joke.

“...Ahaha, oh right, you...heard what Isshiki said about the council and his brothers.”
Uncontrollable laughter bubbles to the surface. “Don’t make fun of me, okay?” It’s in bad taste.

“The ghost…he looked like a businessman.” Makoto’s laughter is stripped faster than the stroke of lightning. “He stalked you at home…everywhere. And one time, in the living room, I thought he was going to attack me. I was so scared…b-but you came to protect me.” She said, guilt-ridden.

“You knew.” Makoto said.

At those two words, Kyoko reached the same conclusion as Peko, not through heightened senses as an assassin or a fighter but through the skills and experience she’d honed as a detective; a woman able to read another’s intentions at a glance.

Here…she couldn’t see anything. And that was never good.

“You saw everything…and you didn’t say anything?”

Makoto’s expression was a blank slate. His tone, inflection and pitch were ominously leveled and devoid of either emotion or tension. A stark contrast to seconds before.

“You let them think I was hallucinating. Why?”

“I was afraid.” Komaru recalls the crushing terror of sitting alongside that ghost in the dark living room.

At that moment, Peko and Kyoko faded to the background from Makoto’s perspective. Had they attacked him then, he wouldn’t have noticed. Komaru occupied his undivided attention.

He smiles. “Oh, that makes sense. You were just a kid. Of course, you’d be scared. I understand. Having some dead guy stalking you everywhere you went, not letting you sleep, eat or give you a moment’s peace would be terrifying. Traumatic. Especially if you were a kid. I was too! You SAW THAT, RIGHT!?"

His reaction was like out of a play that couldn’t even be called third rate – A poor actor reading a script without rehearsing the lines, without knowing what emotions to express them with or what facial expressions to use.

“But it might not have been so bad. If you had at least one person who stood by you.” He gripped his sword. “I-If one person really believed me- I would. I might have-”

“Makoto?”

The smiles and laughter die.

“I – I – ” “I…No…I …I…don’t understand…” He glitches. “You’re my sister. I…I always stuck up for you. How could you sit back and watch…?” He flutters from one incomplete train of thought to another. “Stop crying and give me an answer. What were you thinking when my life was falling apart!”

Komaru drudged up the emotion and terror that plagued her during those odd weeks as a child, the discomfort felt whenever everyone gave Makoto strange looks for talking to ‘thin air’. “I…didn’t want to end up like you.” She confessed to the guilt that weighed her down for many years.

Komaru didn’t want to be treated differently, she didn’t want to be ostracized, she didn’t want to be hurt.
She wanted to be normal.

And that meant he wasn’t.

Makoto cocked his head slightly to the side, the last shards of his mask fall to the concrete. He wore the perplexed, bewildered expression of a man who’d been slapped in the face and couldn’t process he’d been hit. His fingers touch his cheek, still reddened from before any of the fighting had begun. Many seconds pass before he speaks. “It...couldn't be helped then. Blindly telling the truth does nobody favors.” His gaze is unfocused.

Kyoko might have thought that a sleight against her, if she hadn’t vanished from the luckster’s view entirely.

"Congrats on realizing that. You must have thought I was the idiot who didn’t. That I fucked up my own life.” He scratched the side of his cheek; an act all too common for the boy. But compared to prior instances, there were two major differences here that unnerved the girls to the extent that none could reply. The first was the inappropriate casualness. The second was considerably more jarring. His eyes swirled.

He reminded Peko of watching her own classmates fall to despair. Only where they had red eyes, Makoto’s was black.

“I stand by what I said. None of this is your fault.” He said.

“You’re…not mad?” Komaru asked, relief slipping through the cracks of her voice.

“I don't have the right to be angry. I'm the one who didn't have the sense to lie when I should have and ignored what I should have.”

Looking back, Makoto's phrasing should have rung alarm bells in Kyoko’s mind. Had she acted then, she might have been able to prevent what was to come.

“Makoto.” Komaru smiled, despite the tears.

“Crying again...”

Embarrassed, Komaru wiped the tears from her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I know I’m a crybaby. But you’ve always been a step behind to make feel better.”

“That’s what big brothers do. They protect their younger brothers and sisters.” Makoto recited words spoken ages ago. He couldn’t remember where, when or from whom, but he lived by that doctrine. But, those words weren’t his own. Why'd he have to follow them?

He spoiled her too much. She was right that he’d cross an entire district in a heartbeat to get the waterworks to stop...but now, “I don't know anymore.”

“Huh?

Makoto closed his eyes.

He’d thought there was no getting around being locked up in Jabberwock. It was inevitable. Ghosts didn’t exist and only idiots, liars or lunatics believed them. If you didn't accept that, you were one of them.

He hated that lazy, irresponsible way of thinking.
Sayaka showed him he was wrong. Someone might've believed him. His 'friends' and 'family' didn't want to, because it was easier for them than changing perspective.

And he wasn't any different. He lied to himself so he wouldn't have to acknowledge those same associates were just pieces of shit all along. When he needed them most, they'd prefer he was out of sight, than stand by his side.

"I'm disgusting." And a hypocrite. That came part in parcel with being a chronic liar.

Lying, always lying. It'd become a staple in his every day life. He was good at it, and manipulated so many like chess pieces on a board.

Before he knew it, he'd begun to use himself as one of those pieces, without regard for his own safety or dignity.

Why was he forced to live like this? He knew the answer, he'd just gone over it, and received confirmation from his sister seconds ago.

Makoto opened his eyes for the first time in years and everything around him was contemptible. "Even if I understand you don’t have anything to apologize for…”

Komaru furrowed her eyebrows.

Every bit of negative emotion he’d buried, obfuscated and forgotten for nearly a decade, surfaced, but not like a dam bursting, a lava erupting from a volcano or any of that flowery nonsense.

If you're buried that long, you rot.

"I still can’t forgive you.” As effortlessly as breathing, Makoto threw his sword. The blade flew like an arrow, pointed at Komaru’s chest.

“Naegi-san!” The swordswoman pushed the frozen Naegi sibling out of the way, but not fast enough to fully evade it herself. The heated blade pierced and burned through Peko’s side and kept flying, smashing into a pillar.

Komaru fell with the swordswoman on top of her. “…Bro…” She creaked her head over to him, shock and denial etched on her features. Peko’s pained screams barely reached her.

“Pekoyama!” Kyoko called out, then twisted to face Makoto.

“Alter Ego. Start the video.” Makoto held out his e-book. The next second, the device was, literally, shot out of his hands.

Dumbfounded, Makoto looked at his now bleeding hand.

“You won’t.” Kyoko pulled out the gun Nagito had gifted, poised to shoot the boy next.

Normally, Komaru would have stopped the detective, but the shock of being nearly killed by her own brother had left her numb.

“This is your last chance.” Kyoko commanded.

Makoto clutches his injured hand, shaken by the pain and stunned by Kyoko's action. At first, he looks on disbelief, then he settles on an icy glare. His hatred for the detective unfiltered. "I bet you've wanted to do that for a while.” Her warning fell on deaf ears. Like the student council president, words weren’t enough to reach him. "You've treated me like shit right from the get-go.
“What is your problem, anyway?”

“That-” She’s cut off.

"On second thought, I don't care what you have to say." There was not a thing she could say that would matter. "Alter ego, do it now!"

Kyoko’s fingers pressed down on the trigger.

“Upupupupu.”

The unfamiliar laugh made her hesitate.

“THIS IS AWESOME! I couldn’t ask for a better climax! What despair to usher in the new world!”

The detective stopped at the voice, hearing it come from Makoto’s notebook. ‘Was that alter ego?’ From the confusion on Makoto’s face, she doubted it.

“Who are you? You're not Alter Ego.” He walked over to the device slowly, ignoring Kyoko’s demands.

“I might as well be. I’ve been with you the whole time, the most important parts anyway.” Came the voice of a woman, full of whimsy and sadistic pleasure.

"The Biggest, Most Awful, Most Tragic Event in Human History.” Ryoko Otonashi said…or instead, it should have been. The face was the same, as was the body. Phonetically, her voice was a perfect match.

But it wasn’t Ryoko. The way of speaking held a distinction to everyone who knew. The amnesiac girl was soft spoken in trying times and comically boisterous when happy; like a child. The comparison was apt, as Ryoko had only been a few months old.

This person spoke with self-assurance, and condescension. A mere 10 words yet it felt they’d all been pierced by knives.

Only Chiaki didn’t understand. Strictly speaking, they had never met nor spoken before.

Chiaki had thought of Ryoko as a friend. The similarities in their appearance, a strange coincidence. Even when Kiyotaka had conflated the two, Chiaki hadn’t noticed. Her mind was preoccupied with Hajime’s safety. And frankly, she couldn’t have believed the girl who saved her life would be that person. That’s why Chiaki hadn’t reacted strongly when Ryoko lifted her by the arm, wrapped an arm around her waist and brought Chiaki’s body closer to her own.

But now, seeing everyone else’s terrified reactions, Chiaki wished she had.

“R-yoko?”

Red eyes stared back at her, reading her every thought. “Want to try again? You have two guesses left.” She emphasized the gun in her free hand, pointing the barrel to the gamer’s head.

“Who are you?” Chiaki’s voice quivered.

“The last boss.”
“When?” Yasuke asked.

“You want to be her lifeline, Yasuke?”

“When did you remember?” The neurologist spat.

“If Kazuichi worked his game half as good as he worked a wrench, he'd have Sonia wetter than the Atlantic.”

“Let go of…her, Enoshima.” Izuru said

Soshun spasmed at the name. “Enoshima…”

“Ding ding. Half-dead and still the smartest person in the room. I missed you, Izuru.” Junko mocked. “Speaking of,” The despair’s hand trails around Chiaki’s abdomen. “You’ve got a rockin’ body, Chiaki~. Why don’t you put the games down for a bit and go on a modeling diet with me? I’ll show you the world, babe.” She licked her lips. “If you say yes, there might be a tiny chance you’ll make it out of here alive.” The way she twisted the gun to Chiaki’s temple said otherwise.

“Didn’t you hear the man? Get your slimy hands off her, you bitch!” Fuyuhiko screamed.

To Junko, he may as well have been spouting pleasantries. “Yahoo Fuyuhiko, long time no see! Not since you whored yourself out to Makoto! Shame on you. Dumb for not bringing Peko along too.” A chesire grin formed on the diva’s face. One that grew impossibly wider after stumbling onto Soshun. “Ha, I almost forgot you. My cute little dud. It was worth keeping you alive. Hey, I put you and your friends in a killing game. Now you did the same to me and we're both still alive and kicking. So we're square right?”

In a flash, Soshun reached for a weapon from the cart – any weapon He didn’t even look to check. Junko’s presence had left the rest too dumbfounded to react in time. He ran at the despair. With a queen’s disposition, she said. “I suppose not. Very well, allow us to reward you for being the evening's appetizer.”

Soshun hadn’t even gotten near the fashionista before he came within the line of fire. “Bang.” The bullet fired…

And struck Isshiki Madarai in the chest. The Ultimate used his long arms to pull the back of Soshun’s clothes and throw him to the side.

The others were shell-shocked. Most notably Chiaki who could only stand, trapped by the shooter’s grip, the tool mere inches from her own head.

“Was this…the extent of your will, Otonashi? Were the connections and memories you made really so weak?”

Junko didn’t give him as much as a reaction.

Isshiki fell to his knees. “What happens here…can’t be made public. It would ruin everything we worked for.” Makoto’s declaration to the country was that none of the students would be harmed. “I can’t bear the shame of being the one to break his promise.”

The recipients of the bodyguard’s plea had no words to respond with.

“Your hopes won’t be tarnished, Isshiki-san. I promise that.” Nagito was the only one who could reply. The ashen-haired boy knew the creep of death when he saw it and had long grown
despondent. Although, even if that weren’t the case, Nagito wouldn’t let a mundane sensation like shock prevent him from appreciating the splendor of hope’s last embers and doing his very best to support it.

Isshiki nodded as he felt the last of his strength leave him.

Soshun’s attention left Junko, instead he watched as his savior fell backwards onto the floor. Picking himself up, he slowly marched over to the bodyguard, with only question on his mind.

"Why?"

"It is my duty protect the student council.." His words were weak, not because his life was fading, but the sentiment itself didn't match his emotions. He remembered why. "No, that's...an excuse. I wanted to save...a friend."

"Me?"

"Weren't we? Going back on your word...isn't honorable..."

"...Nisshiki," Soshun whispered.

Nisshiki's eyes glazed over and his body relaxed.

Silence and disbelief enveloped the room. Even the normally snarky Yasuke couldn't utter a word. Tears welled up in Chiaki's eyes. "Why is this happening?" Why couldn't she do anything...again?

"He shouldn't have survived this long." Junko said, nobody dared to face her. Nobody wanted to. "Surprises like this really make life worth living."

Chiaki couldn't believe those words came from the woman who'd snuffed out a life away mere seconds ago. "We played games together." A time that seemed like years was in fact mere hours before. "How could you kill him? He was our friend."

"Yes, he was." Junko answered. "Having him fall into the despair of his own impotence was the only reason he wasn't invited to the killing game. Yet...he wormed his way into my plans and saved the council just like he wanted. Normally, that ending's a bit too hopeful for my tastes...but that I was the one to pull the trigger..."

Chiaki felt wet drops against her hair, she looked up in disbelief to see Junko, both crying and elated. "What an amazing feeling this is!"

'She's insane.' Chiaki thought numbly. So, this was the person that ripped her friends away from her. Chiaki felt so much safer when she'd been kidnapped and tied to a chair than being in the grip of despair. "Please let me go." Chiaki pleaded.

"Hmmm...okay." Junko unhanded her.

Chiaki froze. The simple act of walking felt impossibly difficult to her now.

"What? I let go, you can leave now...or have you fallen for the ol'Junko charm?"

The truth was that the gamer was terrified. There seemed to be no rhyme or rhythm to Junko's antics. If she were to take a step, she might be shot from the back. She might be attacked either way.

It was then that Nagito stepped forward and pulled Chiaki behind him while he stared down Junko.
"Bit of warning. You probably can't kill me with that."

"Oh I know, senpai. For a bag of skin and bones like you, I don't need it~" Junko grinned.

"Darn you!" Once Chiaki was away from Junko, Nekomaru rushed the fashionista.

"Wait, you idiot." Yasuke tried to call back the team manager. The memory of what happened to the three from the class fresh in his mind.

With deceptive ease, Junko dodged Nekomaru's punch by a wide margin, like she'd had all the time in the world. Using her smaller size, she latched onto the taller man's arm and flipped him with over. The Ultimate despair pressed her kneels against Nekomaru's shoulder and begun to twist the arm she still grabbed.

"Quit it, you're hurting him!" Mahiru did the only thing she could and threw her camera at Junko. Without even looking, the strawberry-blonde caught the projectile.

"Wow, you're right. Breaking big guy's arms are a no no." She let go of Nekomaru. "Even The Ultimate Despair wouldn't deprive the world of his massages."

Izuru clumsily, finally returned to his feet. Chiaki and Nagito backing up to opposite sides of him. Fuyuhiko hid Mahiru behind him as best he could, in fear that Junko would retaliate for the attack. Soshun stared down at Nisshiki's body, like a broken puppet.

Yasuke stood alone, watching the events unfold with dread and acceptance.

"Yo, Izzy. Wanna join in next? I don't think it'll end up too well though~" Junko teased. "If that machine of a brain is still working, you'd see you've got no chance...then again, you're not really the same Izuru I used to know."

The red-eyed boy creased his brows "What?"

"Junko is finally back!" Mikan wailed.

The diva grinned. "Nice to see you too, Mikan~. Doubly nice that you didn't totally fuck this up for me. You two are too stupid for words."

The nurse giggled at the admonishment, as did the moral compass. "Just kidding (not). i had fun watching you blunder about like chickens with their heads cut off. Well, don’t worry. Mommy’s back to take care of everything...and to be fair, I did tell you to enjoy yourselves on this detour."

"What have you been doing all this time?" Izuru asked. "The more you speak, the more I feel like I've been used, and I can't understand how you could."

Junko let out a long, exaggerated sigh. "Yup. Here's the part where I infodump at the climax. This formula is complete trash. Why does the villain have to work so hard anyway? It's discrimination!"

"Let us help!" Kiyotaka raised his hand.

"Alright. As my loyal left and right hands, I bestow you the honor of dabbing on these peasants alongside me." Junko decided. "Now where to begin...okay, let's start with this: The fact that all of you are here - save one - was my design from the very beginning. Yes, Yasuke, even you."

The neurologist chuckled darkly, exasperation wouldn’t begin to describe what he felt. Hopeless, would be more appropriate. "You knew I'd betray you. You counted on it and strung me along."
"Counted on it...not the word I'd use but the meaning is similar - Yes, I saw your betrayal coming a mile away...and I also knew Izuru here would help." She turned to The Ultimate Hope. "By putting me out of commission, you'd be free to experiment as you pleased. Like the poor robot you are, it was all so predictable. That may have been the biggest disappointment of all." Junko frowned then crossed her arms in an ‘X’ “FUCKING HELL, I’M BORED ALREADY!”

With a prompt from Junko, Mikan crawled on all fours, using her back as a seat for the Fashionista. Kiyotaka knelt by Junko’s side, his arms out to be used as a rest for her elbow. “Junko-san had me take care of Soshun over there and get him all dressed up for tonight’s big event.” Mikan spoke like a proud mother in a position appropriate only for a slave. "The reason was because we needed to give you all something to do while Makoto was working hard for us."

"Working for you? Makoto would never do that." Chiaki spat. All of the enmity directed at Junko.

"He wouldn't. We're using him so to speak, much like the rest of you." Kiyotaka interjected. "My job was a bit more...complex than Mikan's. I was supposed to watch over Ryoko Otonashi and her affiliates, to make sure everything was running smoothly."

"That's too broad, Taka. Just spill the beans, you've got my permission." Junko yawned.

The prefect nodded. "I provided most of the non-classified records. That means files on you all."

"You've got to be shitting me." Yasuke swore.

_Kyoko handed him a yellow folder._

_Yasuke opened it and found...some incriminating evidence of Junko (as well himself) exploits, in scary detail. They even added the part where he'd erased her memory._

_Oh hell, even Kamukura’s information was here._

“I’ll tell you now there’s no point destroying that, I’ve already made plenty of copies.” Kyoko said.

“Don’t you worry, I don’t even give a shit.” He showed her a defeated, rueful grin. “Still...I gotta know where you got these?”

“You think I’ll reveal my sources?” Kyoko lied. The sender of the file was unknown. They’d manage to break into her room and left no trace of their presence.

“I just said I don’t give a shit. I’m asking this for your sake. If you dug up this info on your own, then pat yourself on the back and walk away while you’ve got the chance. But...if this was handed to you, then know you’re in a shitload of trouble.”

(Komaeda sighed. “Okay, allow me to rephrase my inquiry. Kirigiri-san, who gave you those documents?”

“There was no sender ID. Someone broke into my room and handed me those papers.”

“In short. There’s an unknown party out there, with a clear image of what’s been going on. Does anybody have a clue who that is?” Komaeda folded his arms.)
"Indeed. The files Kyoko also received were planted in her room by me. It was easy to sneak around when I have the keys."

"Why would you want that busybody involved in this?" Yasuke fumed.

"I only did what I was told." Kiyotaka shrugged and looked to Junko for an explanation.

"Because I thought it'd be fun." She said simply. "In my roundabout way, I hired Kyoko-chan to snoop around Makoto's private life like the scummy detective she is. All to make his work harder for him."

"What work?" Chiaki arched an eyebrow.

"Harder? I thought the point of this distraction with Murasame was to lighten the load?" Nagito interrupted. "If all of us had gone with Peko and Kirigiri, we'd have easily stopped him...but from the sounds of it, the only reason we knew at all, is because of you. None of this is congruent."

"What part of fun don't you guys get? It's like the carrot and the stick dilemma, without working for it, it'd be boring. I wanted to make Makoto's life, and by extension mine, difficult. The games' no fun if we're guaranteed to win - Kyoko was just what the chef ordered to spice things up. Plus...I really needed to do something about Izuru either way...and it turns out Makoto and I had the same idea. Funny how that works eh, Chiaki?"

"Why do you keep mentioning Makoto and what would he want with me?"

Junko groaned. "We're gonna be here a while if you can't keep up with the uptake, girl. Makoto used you as bait to lure Izuru. Just like I did. You're so nice and open. It was honestly like stealing candy from a baby. Upupupu."

"That can't be..." She looked around for confirmation.

"It is." Fuyuhiko said.

"Did everyone know except me?" She wasn't referring to Makoto alone, but...everything.

"Sucks being the outsider. You're oblivious to all the pain...and that itself is painful. Lovable irony, really." Junko mocked her. "As for why I want Makoto...ever heard of Alter ego?"

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00:06

"You've been using all of us, this whole time?" Kyoko covered her mouth in shock. “The reason we couldn’t reach Naegi to ask about Nanami...and the electronic note from ‘Mr. X’. It was you, wasn’t it?"

"Correctamundo! I’m so glad you’re smart, Kyoko. It give me less to explain…and makes stylin’ all over you all the more satisfying.” Alter Ego Junko/‘Mr.X’ said. “While the real me was chilling in the back, I made sure the plan went smoothly. As for how I did any of this. I had Kiyotaka even implant me, a virus into Makoto's laptop. Mind you he almost fucked that up and left you a hint. You might have been gone, but Chihiro was in your room that day.”

(In reality, Soshun Murasame died the moment he closed his eyes. No, it may have been more
poignant to say that The Ultimate Student Council President died two months ago, along with his companions.

As he writhed on the bed, the monitors glowed red. A figure appeared on the screen.

“Upupu~”

(“By the way, Chi...do you lock the door at night?”

The shorter boy pauses at the strange question. “Yeah, I do. Especially after the um...riot. You can never be too careful. Why do you ask?”

“The door was unlocked.”

Chihiro furrows his eyebrow. “It shouldn’t have been.”)

Makoto listened, seemingly un-phased by the reveal. "So, it's not like you were Alter ego from the start."

"Yup. Since a bit after you hatched up this whack job scheme of yours, I hacked into his data and have been your best pal for the last...2 months or so! I learned a lot! The kid might still be in that laptop somewhere, but good luck breaking him out. He’s all locked up."

The brunet's eye twitched.

“There we go. Did that hit too close to home?"

"What do you want from me, Junko?" He said, monotone.

"Despair. You've given me plenty already, but I want more...like say, global despairation?" She alone laughs at her jokes. "You know what I mean don't you? It's the opposite of what you intended."

“What?"

Makoto's plan was super lame. I was going to brainwash the reserve course and have them all ransack the main course...oh wait, sorry Izuru. I wasn't ragging on ya, big guy. I was at least going to have all of them commit suicide after.
"Your insincere bullshit isn't my concern. You haven't answered my question. How did you do all this?"

"D-Didn't we just explain all that?" Mikan asked confused.

"You told us the 'what' not the 'how'?' Yasuke replied. "I refuse to believe you could have planned this far in advance. There were too many pitfalls and hurdles. Don't bullshit me."

"Ultimate Analysis can be likened to allowing us to see the future, however it is not infallible…Not against me, who also has that talent, and not without you to monitor events." Izuru added.

"It's always about talent and brains with you guys. You can stand to be a little more in touch with the heart y'know? That's why Makoto and Chiaki are so popular!" Junko gave a non-answer, or at least the two believed. "What's so hard to understand? I spent weeks memorizing your patterns and behaviors, but even more than that, all it took was me to have faith in you all." Junko waved a hand and smiled.

"F...aith?" Izuru said slowly, at a loss.

"That is what I said." Junko deadpanned. "Weren't you and Komaeda talking about that a while ago? You didn't work together per se and didn't know what the other would do. Still, you trusted in your abilities to succeed. Why can't I do the same?"

"You Trusted. Us? When am I waking up from this shitty nightmare?" Fuyuhiko looked like he was going to be sick with how the room was spinning.

"I trusted Mikan and Taka, didn't I? Why not you? I love you all, and that's why it's worth giving you despair." She wrapped her arms around Taka's head and pulled it to her chest. "Although, I'm disappointed you had to ask from the start, Yasuke. Shouldn't you know me by now?"

"Yeah...you've always been this way." The neurologist said, drained.

(Yasuke remembered his elementary school days. Junko built a sandcastle – almost literally– of the Sagrada Familia Church. It was such an amazing construct that neighbours marveled over the month-long work. Yet, just before completion, the craft had been destroyed. Yasuke searched everywhere for the culprit in a rage. What kind of monster would destroy a work of art, that a little girl had devoted herself to creating?

And wouldn’t you know it, right when he’d given up, Junko confessed to having destroyed the sandcastle herself.)

"You build things up, with care and affection, just so you can watch them suffer and demolish." He grits his teeth.

"There isn't a bigger scumbag on Earth than you."

"Rude...and more importantly, incorrect. Can't you think of one other person?"

"This is ridiculous." Makoto said. "You must have a lot free time on your hands to be treating my life like a game."

"You make it sound so easy, Makoto. Don't get me wrong, predicting Izuru was, but you were
tougher, especially with that luck jazz. I had to believe that you'd be an opportunist and go beyond expectations, not unlike myself." Junko grinned maliciously. "Or...maybe it'd be better to say, exactly like myself. After all...I barely had to convince you to wait till 12 on the dot, because you knew it'd be fun and climactic. Some might call you stupid, but I get it. I really do. When you want something done right, why not also have it done in spectacular fashion? And what better way to celebrate the new world than with the biggest party of the year, on the happiest day of the year?"

"..."

"I thought this festival idea was sooooo much fun, I made a bet with myself. It'd be despairing if everything went according to plan, so I thought I’d derail my original’s plan somewhat. We became so close that I figured, why not let you carry out your crazy hope scheme that drove you off the deep end so much?" The A.I continued “All you had to do was wait until the countdown reached ‘0’.”

(Can we not start now?” Isshiki asked.

Makoto shook his head. “The brainwashing will work best at the peak of the show. Everyone’s looking forward to 12:00 AM…” He smiles. “Besides, you’re too uptight, Isshiki. You could be a bit more dramatic.”

Isshiki crossed his arms, his impatience too apparent.

“Even if you disagree, I won’t change the time.” He stared at the bodyguard with a blank expression. “This is personal for me.”)

“If you stuck by that boast, I’d have done eeeeverything you wanted.” She deadpans. “But, if you were forced to move ahead of schedule...well, that’s just something a loser would do when backed into a corner. I, for one, would never cheat just because my plans are falling apart.”

“..."

"No quips? No witty comebacks? Guess little sister over there stole my thunder. Seriously what a traitorous bitch. I wish I could screw over Mukuro that badly. Meh, I’ll just settle for stealing your thunder." Junko’s following words are the most shocking yet. "I'll use the despair video at max setting on Sayaka's concert. Everyone there will go mad with despair and...*sigh* I’ll leave what would happen to your imagination and skip to the conclusion: The world is going to end."

Peko had to lean on Komaru to stand, the younger Naegi sibling still lost in the conversation. Her gaze was firmly locked on Makoto, who hadn't or chose not to acknowledge her further.

"Whelp, we got 2 minutes left, so why don't I hear you out before it's over. How does it feel, Makoto? To have all your hard work blow up in your face - and I know it's hard. I was there with you for all the long, sleepless nights, all the personality changes. All the anxiety. I know it all. And I betrayed you. How does it feel knowing you caused the end of the world?" The girls watched as Junko provoked him, prepared for another deranged outburst. " Hey, how does it feel? Hey hey hey!"

“You'll fail.” Makoto started.

“Oooo! We’re in the denial phase already? Pray tell, why?”

“We came up with the idea to use Sayaka’s fame together. The concert needs everyone watching to
be receptive to the video. If you're going the other direction with despair, the brainwashing effect will be weakened.”

“Bold of you to assume I wasn’t talking out of my sweet ass but leave it to my buddy to hold out hope.” The mirth oozing from Junko’s voice spelled nothing good. “You’re right that everyone’s sweet on Sayaka’s pop music…but I’m sure that’ll all change when she blows up. Literally.”

A series of shock and despair gripped their hearts.

“What…did you do?” Makoto asked slowly.

“Let’s just say good ol’ Kazuichi did me a favor a while back. He gave me a few explosives I thought might come in handy one day.”

“Mikan helped me set them up on the stage where Miss. Blue and all her pretty friends are dancing their hearts out!”

(“As an example, she asked me to make bombs for her.”)

Ryoko’s jaw dropped. “Real ones?!”

Kazuichi pressed a finger to his lips. “Not so loud…but yeah. They’re not huge or anything, but they could cause damage. Fortunately, they’re electronically activated explosives and only I know how. Just fair warning, in case you two do meet.”)

(“Is there anything else you might need?” Makoto noted down whatever the manager might require. Without his e-handbook, he had to do things the old-fashioned way, through hand. Once finished, the two split off. “He seemed like a busy guy.” Then again, who wasn’t nowadays?

Makoto scanned the set. Big…didn’t begin to describe it. He’d been to the idol’s concerts before, but on the seats looking up. Now he was on the stage looking down at the wide expanse, leading all the way to the school grounds. It was dizzying. “Maizono’s amazing.” He could never stand up in front of that many people.

Right then, a familiar head of black hair and white clothes caught the boy’s eye. “Is that, Tsumiki-san?” It looked likes she was leaving “Where’d she come out from?” And how’d Makoto miss her?)

Don’t worry though, the explosion will be controlled enough to not affect the screens.”

Komaru succumbed to dread. “I’m having a nightmare. All of this can’t be real.”

“Oh it can, darling. From here, I’m electronically linked to those bombs. In a flash, I can detonate them, and will, at the end of the countdown. The whole world will get to see Sayaka blow up into a million pieces. A tragedy that could have been avoided if HPA tightened security, but some dumbass thought it’d be a bright idea to leave none at all.” The mastermind let out an uproarious laughter. “Then again, Komaeda somehow got passed those guys too...meh.”

“…You’ve put a lot of thought into this” The lucky student said.

“The shock and horror should be just enough to leave their minds vulnerable. Does that satisfy any doubts you had left, hope boy?”
Makoto’s shoulders sagged as he looked to the sky. "The end of the world…"

"You bet your ass! There ain't nobody who'll be smiling the way you want when I'm through! Good job breaking it, hero! " Junko's cackle is shot by three clear words.

"Fine with me"

"So you see, Soshun here, is just a dud in every sense of the word. The real bomb is in another castle!" Junko mocked.

“It worked out almost too well. With much of the focus on myself, Mikan could move about freely, without anyone suspecting her.” Kiyotaka boasted.

"You've been running your mouth, but all this means jack. Peko already went to stop Naegi."

"I sent Mukuro to run interference." Junko played with her fingernails. "And, you really think Isshiki would be here- been here, if they'd already won?"

The faint hope that Fuyuhiko clung to was snuffed by hard logic.

"Just sit back. In just a few minutes, this long story ends." Junko finished, as were all of them. Fighting her was meaningless and they couldn't win even if they tried. They'd been checkmated the moment they walked down those steps.

And yet "It won't." The fire of hope still burned in Chiaki Nanami. "Your entire plan is dependent on Makoto, but why should we believe you?"

"You know the least about him of everyone here that he's wronged, honey. You have no ground to stand on."

"I believe in the Makoto that I know, just like you claim to."

"A horrible decision, really. But I'll bite. What exactly do you believe about him?"

"That he'd never settle for a world you create if all you care about is hurting people and would definitely stop you. Makoto worked harder to make the culture festival fun than anyone else. What would be the point if he only cared about the final minutes? As far as I'm concerned. You're nothing like him or Ryoko. She'd never kill people like you have or hurt the ones she cares about. Go away and give my friend back her body."

Junko was speechless. "I'm woman to admit you have a tentative point with the first, but...'give back her body'?" Junko trailed off. "Ignoring that I was the first...that doesn't even make sense. I can't give back what's still hers. I mean, you're not about to ask Izuru to give 'Hajime' back to you when they're the same person."

"What?" Izuru’s eyes widened.
"This is disappointing beyond words. This is the second time I've come back, and you still haven't got it?" Junko giggled behind her palm. "I suppose I shouldn't be too harsh. Hajime was a spineless loser who was so ashamed himself that he willingly tried to become a different person."

"Tried to become?" Nagito asks.

"Shut up!" Chiaki yelled. "Don't talk about him like you ever knew him."

"I don't have to. The proof is right there." She pointed at Izuru and then at Yasuke. "Or over there too. Tell em' Yasuke."

"She's not wrong."

"She is. The experiment erased Hajime Hinata." Izuru vehemently denied the claim.

"An experiment I took part in, replicated and used on Junko. As you can plainly see – unless Ryoko is pulling the prank of the century – Junko's still here. Yokos replied. "Your origin might be your blindspot, like a shadow creeping on you. I learned that what we did wasn't 'erasing' your memories but resetting them. The mind is still unexplored territory in science and again, using this bitch as an example, it's not easy to just erase memories. They linger and can come back. I've been running tests on a certain patient to learn more about split personalities."

"Don't beat yourself up too badly, Izzy. This is new technology that was first used on you. But sorry, you're still that talentless reserve course student and that's why Chiaki has such an effect! So much that I can hardly recognize you now. The old Izuru wouldn't be such a bitch. But I'd say you're about...40% Hajime as it stands. Slow progress compared to me, but our situations are reversed. Ryoko Otonashi was the personality born from resetting my memories. Her will is a lot weaker than mine so it's easy for me to dominate in time, when she's mentally distressed or an opportunity presents itself. With you...do I even need to say it?"

Hajime Hinata was weak. Izuru professed that time and again. "Then I too..."

"If you disregard all the talent, you're still the same loser upstairs. To put it in an analogy. The body is hardware. The mind is the OS. The experiment performed an inadequate factory reset...but the OS remains the same." Junko took great pleasure in seeing despair creep in on hope. "So you see, Chiaki, you're calling out fake names. Izuru is still your dear Hajime, for what that's worth, and I am still your friend Ryoko, along with all her memories and emotions. I can't give back what always was, and still is, hers. Please don't write me off as the big bad villain who only appears at the end. I've been here all along."

Izuru stared powerlessly at the ground. The severity of Enoshima's words was clear only to him. He was born as The Ultimate Hope, that was to be the peak that mankind had to offer. Ironically, the academy deemed this meant he also be distanced from humanity as much as possible. For that, they needed a blank slate, without fallibility. However, if even a fragment of Hajime Hinata remained, then the experiment was a failure from the beginning.

That meant he was a failure.

"Is that all?" Chiaki's soft voice sent ripples of white in the black pool of despair. "Whether he's Hajime or Izuru, he's still the boy I've been playing with all this time. Likewise, if you're still Ryoko, then it's possible I can talk sense into you." The gamer could feel the myriad stares on her.

"And people call me crazy?" Junko murmured.
"Matsuda-kun, could you verify everything Enoshima said?" Chiaki requested.

"I can't say I know everything, but her analogy is mostly correct. They're not segregated from their other selves, but more derivatives of the same person."

Chiaki nodded, "Then there's no problem. He may have changed. He may have done...terrible things...but that's no reason to abandon him. I can't imagine what went through any of your heads to have done that to the council – to the reverse course. I don't want to, and I won't." The gamer declared, placing a hand at her chest. "Whether it's Hajime or Izuru, the person I've come to know wouldn't commit those atrocities. I don't care what you say. Instead I'll help Hajime...Izuru become someone he can be proud of." She looks at the bewildered reserve course. "I promised, didn't I?"

"Yes. You did." Izuru said. Her argument was irrational, filled with holes anyone could pick at. But where had that same logic gotten him? Perhaps Chiaki had known all along. Izuru believed he was perfect, yet Chiaki vouched to help him...and he wished for it. That proved that he knew too. Maybe he'd always known.

(Makoto smirked. "Looking at you, I understand Kiyotaka's grief a bit. It's one thing to be a wounded bird that needs treatment, but you've got working wings and still don't know how to fly. That's just wrong. There's a limit to how complacent you can get." The grin transforms into disgust. "It's just a guess on my part, but is that why you're so attached to Chiaki? Do you need her to teach what you forgot?)

"The Ultimate Hope. That isn't me." It never was. That meant there was still more talent for him to acquire, more knowledge to assimilate. Room to grow.

Izuru smiled ruefully. The more he thought of his own contradictory existence, the funnier it all seemed. "Ha...haha." It escalated into a short, satisfied laugh. This would mark the first sense of fulfillment since his inception. "It beats endless boredom any day."

"Then get up already."

Izuru gingerly took the hand Chiaki held out for him. "Thank you."

"Friends help each other out." Chiaki noted, and turned to the apparently bored fashionista. "That includes you, Ryoko. By your own words, you're still the person I knew. I'm not sure if I can forgive the things you've done, but you deserve help."

"You've mixed things up. I am not Ryoko. Ryoko is me!"

"That still means you're capable of being a good person."

"I'd say 'good' is a stretch. A harmless, idealistic idiot is more like." Yasuke corrected her.

"So Izuru gets a pass for killing folks because he's your old boyfriend. But in my case, Ryoko's the one who matters? Am I the only one seeing the hypocrisy here?" Junko clicked her tongue.

"Don't care. I'm fine being a hypocrite, if that means my friends and I can be happy, and safe." Chiaki argued.

"Okay there, princess." Junko snapped. "You're wasting your time trying to 'help' me. Or have you forgotten Isshiki already?"
Chiaki bit her lip and inched her head behind, to see Soshun still standing over the dead. She tore her eyes away and back to Junko. She'd be lying to claim she wasn't furious, but "You weren't trying to kill Isshiki. Your target was Murasame."

"And... that makes it better? Wow, Chiaki, are you sure I shouldn't be the one converting you?" Junko let out a mocking chuckle.

"You're dodging the issue. Isshiki was our friend, Murasame wasn't. In fact, he kidnapped me, endangered everyone and tried to kill you. You never had a reason to care about him." Chiaki said.

"Yeah, not selling me on this. Murder's still wrong you know." Junko blinked. "Yeah...I just said that." She deflated. "This has taken a disgusting turn."

"Which is why I said you were never a good person. You only cared about what was in your reach and what gave you validation." Yasuke said. "But Madarai was also one of those connections."

"You believed that crap I made up? You've always been too naive, Yasuke. I love that about you." Junko made kissy faces at the neurologist, who only glared back.

"Made up? Because I could've sworn Madarai said the same thing you told me when you shot him. So unless you've been masquerading as Ryoko long before this, then you're lying. And if you say you were, you're still lying, because you just told me Souda's attack was the reason for the switch."

"..."

"Come to think of it. You haven't even directly attacked us. You captured Chiaki, however immediately let her go. Nekomaru and the others attacked you, but you retaliated with non-lethal means. And you didn't even respond to Mahiru. For the Ultimate Despair...I say can't you're much of one, from this interaction alone strictly speaking. It almost seems like you're playing a game."

Nagito huffed.

"You want me to shoot you or something?" Junko wagged her gun to emphasize that she was still very much an active threat.

"Nagito is right. There was a fundamental flaw in your scheme." Izuru began. "You said you could barely recognize me, but thinking about it, the same is true of you too. You're not the type to sit around converse with your prey for this long. If I recall correctly, boredom was your fatal characteristic. The ease at which you tire over everything. It almost seems as if you're invested in this mere distraction."

"T-That's true." Mikan spoke up.

Junko glared at the nurse.

"I-I meant, you were acting a little strangely. I-I thought you might have lost too much blood!"

"Shut it, Mikan." Junko growled and the girl quieted.

"That also begs the question...why are you here?" Izuru asked. "It looks to me that you've left your alter ego to handle the main event while you toy with us. It's backwards of you to let someone else steal the spotlight."

"This is disgusting. Oi, Fuyuhiko. Tell your friends they've gone fucking crazy. They're saying I, Junko, am not evil as sin!"
The blonde shoved his hands in his pocket. "I don't have any idea what the fuck is going on, and I want to sleep. From the sounds of it, Chiaki and science-boy have things down, so I'll leave it to em."

"Tch, never let a manlet do a supermodel’s job." Junko snapped.

"If that’s what you think, then there’s an easy way for you to prove us wrong." Chiaki took steps towards Junko until a mere two feet separated them. "If you're right and Ryoko isn't in there, then shoot me like you tried to do to Murasame."

"I suddenly regret everything. Have you lost your damn mind!?" Fuyuhiko screamed.

"I've got this you guys. Don't interfere and believe in me for once." Chiaki smiled back at them. "Think of it as a game, Ryoko."

The implicit challenge was thrown. A continuation of their earlier battles in Chiaki’s laboratory.

Honoring her request, Junko flashed the gun, square against Chiaki's forehead. Izuru barely stopped himself from moving to slap it out of Junko’s hands.

"You really think your beliefs are worth shit, huh?" The red eyed girl cursed.

"If you can trust everyone to act. I don't see why I can't." Chiaki replied.

The coming moments felt like an eternity. A period where not one shot was fired. "You might have been the biggest surprise of all. Alright. I think there's an even better way we can settle this." Junko put the gun down, her grin revitalized. "What was it you said at the start, about 'believing' Makoto? Let's make that our last competition." Junko said. "There's less than a minute left. Taka turn on the concert."

The moral compass rushed to the monitors. In seconds, the voice of a pop sensation filled the room. Vibrant colors filled the stage as Sayaka Maizono and her bandmates danced.

"Turn that shit off!" Fuyuhiko yelled, closing his eyes. Only for the diva to ignore his protests.

"Look at her, unaware that in a few seconds, she'll be dooming the world with her song…and her death. A pretty good deal I’d say. A star exploding in her prime and taking the world down with her. Just as she’s always wanted, she’ll never be forgotten…unless," Junko's deadpanned. "Makoto somehow stopped me."

"It's fine, Fuyuhiko. You can open your eyes." Chiaki said.

"Close yours! We're fucked if we watch that!"

"I trust Makoto, and you should too."

The yakuza's face contorted with confusion and anger. "That kid's a nutcase, Chiaki. You can't believe the shit he's done and how much he's lied about to all our faces!" said the enraged blonde.

"Maybe I can't, but that’s not important to me. What I do know that once Makoto’s set his mind on something, he's never let me or anyone down." She reminisces of the brunet who’d taken her to the carnival, who’d paid attention to her plight when nobody else noticed and worked himself into the bone doing everything he could for the festival. "I can't believe he'd want a world filled with despair…and even if I’m wrong on that, there’s one thing I know for sure,” Chiaki cast the yakuza a determined look. “Makoto would never fail to save a friend.”
“I thought you’d refuse.” He answered, simply. He read her confusion. “It’s not like you to monitor others...and I thought you’d be best in your own element. A stage where you could bring everyone in your group together, your own way. Just like what you did for your class.” He shook his head and smiled. “No, I know you will. That’s why I haven’t bothered to drop in. I’ve got complete faith in you. I’m sure your friends do too.”

(“Thanks...I needed that.” She can see the wear in his complexion. "I suppose it's only fair that I give you advice too." He starts. "...I think you're going about this all wrong, with trying to stick out or do more. Don't go looking for trouble or biting off what you don't need to. You're strong by being yourself.”

"Be...myself? That's enough?" Then why did she lose Hinata?

“A friend told me once that there are natural moodsetters. That’s you, Chiaki. People are drawn to you and they're legitimately happy without you having to try. Without losing anything. It's amazing how you can’t see it.)

Fuyuhiko let out a sigh of frustration, and then begrudgingly nodded. “I can't argue against that. That guy’s an incorrigible dumbass who’d risk his neck to protect the enemy.”

"Makoto believed in me. It's the least I can do to have faith in him." Chiaki said.

Junko smirked. "Then it's settled. Keep those eyes open and prepare to lose yourself to despair."

A blinding light bloomed from the screen.

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The final minute before the countdown ended, 5 youths surrounded a stack of dominoes in the headmaster’s office, intoxicated by the festivities.

The monitor showcased the live concert at the back of the school.

“Why knock them down after setting it up?”

A little girl sat on Aoi’s lap. The tanned swimmer held onto her tiny fingers, inches away from the tiles. Excluding them there were three other boys, Byakuya Togami, Leon Kuwata and her brother, Yuta Asahina. All listened intently. Systematically placed around the entire room were dominoes Aoi spent hours piling up.

Now she was going to knock em’ flat.

"That's a tough one." Aoi paused to think of a way to articulate her answer to the girl. Eventually she settled on an answer even a child could understand.

"It's because they're dominoes!"

'I hate phrases like ‘That’s just how it is.’ Or ‘That’s the way the world works.’
Despite being second away from seconds away from Christmas, the long eve wasn't through with Kyoko Kirigiri. Makoto's declaration was the latest in a long line of surprises that had even the Ultimate Detective second-guessing her actions and worth.

"I had a feeling it might turn out this way." Makoto said.

The A.I Junko spoke for everyone else. "Oh, I get it. You knew I'd double cross you and try murdering your friends...and uh, did nothing? Makes sense, except for the part where it doesn’t!"

"It's called bad luck, and I've got plenty! I'm not techy enough to have notice Alter Ego'd been sabotaged...but so what? It's not like I ever trusted him." Why would he when Alter Ego betrayed his own creator? "I've never trusted any of you, And for your information, I don't have a problem with your despair world either."

In pure disbelief, Komaru addressed her brother. “Didn’t you hear what she just said? She’s going to kill Sayaka and her friends.”

Makoto’s eyes were a void when he replied. “So?” A simple word rendered them speechless.

"Um...not that I’m complaining about this sudden change of heart, but was there a third personality in there you never told me about?" Junko arched a digital brow.

"Weren't you the one with the master plan, predicting our moves every step of the way?" He snapped his head towards Kyoko, glaring at the detective. "What about you, Kirigiri. Aren't you the detective? Didn't Miaya give you files without my consent? And you Peko? What happened to all grandstanding earlier? Or have you lost all that spirit because a sword grazed you one fucking time!?" Vindictiveness and accusations spewed forth like liquid venom. "All of you keep talking about understanding and trying to help me, yet you never listen. Good riddance if the entire world goes to shit. As long as it happens to everyone!" He stressed.

“I can't smile like the rest of you, not anymore. I thought if I was surrounded by others happier than me...I could get it all back by learning. That never happened. It didn't matter where I was, who I was with, I was still empty. I know why. It's because I'm a failure, at least in your eyes." The eyes of everyone who knew his secret. A number that grew-wider whenever some insensitive bastard decided to go behind his back. “You've all thought I was imbalanced. Do any of you know how humiliating it is to be considered one of the dregs of society? Of living for nearly a decade afraid of returning to some nuthouse?”

At times, he thought they were right. He was a failure. He couldn't convince a single person that he was sane, and he never escaped that stigma.

He was intelligent, he had friends, he was talented...It only took one mistake, one person to mark him with a stain that couldn’t be wiped from his record.

"I lost...but it wasn't to any one person or an organization. It was 'common sense' that did me in.” He singles out Kyoko among the group. “Your notions of what was right and wrong, what's true and what isn't. Who gave you the right to decide that? Why was I punished for being better than you? Why did I need to try and kill myself just to escape!? " Makoto's teeth chattered as he shook with anger. "Until I reverse that loss, I'll never be free.”

...

"As I thought, there wasn't a shred of altruism at all..." Kyoko began
("That doesn’t explain the motive." Said the bulky imposter. A boy whose true name was unknown, and currently dressed as her arrogant classmate. He pulled it off well, if she dared to say. “What would he gain from infecting everyone?”

“It is all for his own self-satisfaction. He believes your happiness will lead to his own.” Kyoko arched an eyebrow at Izuru’s assumption. Was it accurate?

“That still doesn’t explain everything. Even if I were to handwave the logistics, Makoto still would have no reason to brainwash everyone. He will never see most of those happy faces.”)

It wasn't for altruistic purposes nor a vicarious experience like Izuru believe. He only wanted to...

"There has never been a point in time where everyone's happy or at peace. It shouldn't be possible, shouldn't be logical. And that's why I wanted to make it a reality. Just imagine what the future would be like 50, 100 years after.” Makoto trailed off. “A utopia like that would look back on history, all of you, and think you're idiots! Savages with their heads too far up their own ass to think that maybe they didn't have to fight.” His gaze held only contempt for everything in his sight.

"A world entirely in conflict and chaos is just as unreasonable and breaks the foundations of common sense. You wouldn’t care either way.” Kyoko noted. Even if thousands…millions would die. What Makoto was looking at wasn’t any of them or their feelings.

(It's not inconsistent at all...because the things I hold dear, my beliefs and goals...they've never changed.)

She believed he flip-flopped because of mental instability, but he had been consistent. Kyoko glances at Mukuro’s still, unconscious body. How do you claim to appreciate a person’s happiness without caring for the person? The answer was that neither were truly important. They were the means, never the goal.

Her grip on the gun faltered.

“I want to win. To humiliate you. To prove I was right." He brings out a baseball from his pocket.

(“Any team I was on, won. By the end, I did everyone a favor and sat the games out.” Leon gently lobbed a baseball.

Makoto rolled his eyes, catching the throw. “Maybe I should’ve dropped by if you were having it too easy. Losing could do you some good.”)

("I’ll run over and pacify things…” Makoto stood, placing the baseball inside his hoodie’s pocket. )

' What's he going to do with that?'

"From the sounds of it, maybe we ought to have been working together, like legitly! Upupu” A.I Junko was intoxicated by the outburst. “Oh well. No time like the present. Let's celebrate the end of hope and the birth of despair."
"Then there's you." Makoto addressed the program. "Hope? Despair? None of you will shut up about them. What do they even mean? You're all just scum in the end." The deadened stare he gave the A.I was even worse than what he'd shown the others. "One person's hope can just be to bring others despair. And Despair? Newsflash, people don't get off to their life going to shit! If you're a sick bastard who gets off to your own despair, then that's your hope!" He croaks. His features contort with anguish. "And that nonsensical bullshit is going to ruin everything I've worked for. Shit shit shit!"

With a passive expression, Junko said. "Well...you...pull yourself together while I start the count. 10...9...8..."

"You can stop right there. I'm taking you down with me." All eyes shot up at Makoto's exclamation.

The lucky student pulled his arm back and threw the baseball as hard as he could. The object rams straight into the hilt of the sword, sending cracks through the collapsing pillar. Concrete gives away and falls. The ball ricocheted across the room, slamming into the unstable columns until it ended back in Makoto’s hand. “If I were you, I’d start running.”

Kyoko heard it. The low, disconcerting rumbles. The strings of screws falling.

Makoto whipped the ball again. It bounced from corner to corner. The rumbling gets louder. "I really am unlucky. Unlucky enough that a baseball could bring the house down...even if it was already falling apart."

The shocks grew and she could envision the area coming apart, more pillars gave way. "Naegi-san, Pekoyama. We have to get out!" Kyoko rushed to the swordswoman’s other side, picking her up. She’d thought this area was unstable from the start.

The shoddy roof began to collapse, large chunks of stone fell to the ground. The antenna atop the building destabilized.

"I'm losing the signal. Why? Even as her plan unraveled, Junko Enoshima's Alter Ego didn’t show apprehension. Whimsical as the fashionista was, she was still The Ultimate Analyst, and her core was little different from Izuru’s. Makoto's luck was unpredictable to her. But even more puzzling was the logic behind his actions. “...Why? I’m giving you exactly what you wanted.” Perhaps she was even more of a machine as a literal computer program. In front of her was an unknown that she was compelled to understand. “Oh. You just couldn’t bring yourself to let Miss. Blue die. How adorable.”

"I'd have been a stepladder to your victory, not mine.” With a slight, perplexed tilt of the head, he cut through her reasoning.

“...I lost...to that...?” Rare uncertainty betrayed the A.I’s calm. His answer fell above and below expectations. “My revolution - an unprecedented despair that could have bathed the whole world. That would have freed all life on Earth from the shackles of monotony...lost to a petty--” The voice was abruptly silenced by the rocks crashing against the e-handbook.

Makoto looked beyond the dust to see Kyoko dragging Komaru, with Peko’s aid.

"We can't leave him!" Komaru stretched her arm to reach out. “Makoto, come with us!”

Makoto looked his sister in the eye one last time. Without a word, he turned his back.

"We're going now!" Kyoko demanded, dragging the flailing sibling away
"Trust, huh?"

The concert ended without incident.

"It's your win, Chiaki." Junko dropped the pistol.

"Looks that way, Ryoko." The gamer replied.

With a flick of the wrist, Junko ordered. "Taka. Go help the other dorks inside the maze. Take whoever you want or whoever wants to come."

"That's it? You're just going to give up." The moral compass asked.

"I'm not giving up. I *lost.* Pinkie's right. I could drop a bomb on the diet building but I wouldn't be able hurt a finger on Yasuke's head over there. Jeez, how selfish is this chick?" Junko admonished her other self.

"I hate to interrupt the short victory celebration, but should we address the elephant in the room?" Nekomaru jerked his finger over to Soshun. Seeing him like that...nobody could even approach. Not yet.

"You did this to him! Not just him, but Isshiki and the entire council. H-How are you planning to take responsibility for all this?!" Mahiru cried.

"I doubt she has any intention." Nagito said. "She may be somewhat de-fanged but Enoshima is still despair. All that's changed is that she's slightly more selective and appreciating of specific others."

"I wasn't kidding about that bombing thing by the way. It's been on my mind for *years.*" She played with her nails.

"You still won't give up on despair?" Chiaki frowned.

"That's like asking me to stop living. You might as well pick up that gun and do the honors." Junko replied. "Despair is the only joy in my life."

"She's been like this since we were children." Yasuke noted. "She's sick or her brain is wired all wrong."

"...Ryoko was fine." Chiaki said.

"Ryoko was like a chick, and she didn't have access to her analysis 24/7."

"Should we tell the police?" Mahiru fidgeted.

“No. Not unless you want to step over Isshiki’s hopes." Nagito said.

"Like I told Kirigiri, that'll do nobody good anyway. No cell will hold her...and being honest, I have no intension of helping any of you if you tried." Yasuke said.

"You're on *her* side? Even after everything she's done?!" Mahiru's accusatory tone was all too transparent.
"Yeah, yeah. Call me a whipped dog if you'd like. It's not like my hands are clean either." Self-disgust laden Yasuke's speech, but that's all it was. Talk and understanding. He couldn't do anything about it. Yasuke had been trapped in Junko's web since he was a child and it was far too late to escape.

"OMG, this is why I love you soooo much, Yasuke!" The demented woman cheered aloud, mocking him no doubt. To her, he was just a pet...and so be it. Junko was the most important thing in his life. He realized that after he thought she'd been killed by Kazuichi. He didn't have anything without that monster.

"All I can give is a compromise. In a few days I'll have everything I need to finally take a crack at her. I suppose we'll need to lock her and the other two up until then..." Yasuke commented and circled the room. "And just about all of you too."

"Hm. Dying of boredom in therapy might be dispairing. I don't think it'd stick though, just between you and me." Junko said.

"Not therapy. Rehabilitation. I'll be fixing you from the ground up." Yasuke narrowed his eyes. 
"Attendance is mandatory by the way. That includes Kamukura, Murasame and everyone whose been influenced by her. I'll stake my life's work that there won't be a shred of crazy left in any of you."

"I don't need fucking therapy!" Fuyuhiko growled. "I'm clean and so is Peko."

"You tried to kill us."

"I'm a mobster. Murder is in the job description. It's got nothing to do with despair."

"What do you intend?" Izuru asked.

"Virtual reality." The neurologist's words yielded a collective "Huh?"

"Fuck, I am way too tired for this." Yasuke sighed. "It's called the Neo World Program."

Light snow drops onto brown-spiky hair.

A lone streetlamp shines down on the bench Makoto Naegi occupied. Normally, it looked to everyone as if Makoto didn’t care for his (appearance) spiky hair as much as he ought to have, but he was even more disheveled than usual. Bruises, scratches and splotches of dirt marred his body.

if he looked right, he'd see a cloud of smoke in the distance, where the abandoned communications building once stood.

Short, ragged breaths irritate him. Mukuro’s sleeping form lies across the bench, her head on his lap.

Force of habit - is the only explanation for why he saved this girl...right?

He's lost. In both definitions of the phrase. "Where to go from here." He barely makes a sound. He wanted someone to show him the way, to cling to.

Only an empty darkness surrounds him and Makoto realizes he's alone.

On Christmas.
The thought tips his lips upwards infinitesimally. A hollow laugh follows. He couldn't complain. He brought this on himself. There was no other way for him to live. "Let's go."

He gently lifted Mukuro's head up to stand, he carries her on his back and leaves deeper imprints on the snow and he walks along.

Knowing, Kyoko, she'd have campus security take him away and plant considerable evidence against him. Makoto wouldn't run.

Even if nothing happened tomorrow. Makoto and his counterpart were disconnected. If not now, then eventually, even the sheep in this school will figure out things don't add up...From there it was all over.

That fear was in strong part what motivated Makoto to go through with his plan.

"But it was hopeless." Everything went right, just according to plan...except he ran into the same problem as always. Makoto had to rely on someone, and when did that ever work out for him?

He wasn't too disappointed, really. It was a gamble, and logically, loss is always a strong possibility.

He just gambled away everything he had. He wasn't disappointed at all.

"That's weird," Yet hot tears slide down his cheeks.

He wipes them away. "I thought I'd be used to losing by now."

The road to nowhere is silent.

"Hm." Makoto lifts his head. A short, familiar figure steps into the light.

Makoto plants his feet in the snow. "Chihiro,"

"Happy holidays, Makoto." The chestnut-haired boy's arms are folded behind his back as he takes slow, dainty motions forward.

Makoto barely remembers the last time they'd talked. This timing wasn't any better. He didn't want to speak to anyone right now.

"What're you doing out so late? Sayaka's concert ended a while ago." Chihiro looks up at him with lifeless brown eyes.

Makoto wasn't sure if it was the stress or exhaustion or something else that causes him to blurt out "Mukuro fought me back where all the smoke is coming from. I'm taking her back to the dorms."

"I see." He dismisses the soldier's condition. "Where's Alter Ego? I'd like to have him back."

"He's buried under the rubble." Makoto says. "Ah, that was just Junko's A.I in disguise. She did say he’s still trapped in the laptop somewhere. Just take that from my room."

"I hope he was useful to you," Chihiro continues, like he’d barely heard Makoto’s response “after all the trouble you went through to steal him from me.” The programmer seemed taller than he remembered.

Makoto’s lips form a straight line. 'What a pain.'
"Why did you approach me, that first day of detention?"

"I can't say. That was a long time ago."

"You sure? It wouldn't have had anything to do with the program I was working on, would it?"

"It didn't. And you're the one who lent Alter ego to me."

"You knew I would, because I loved you. I would have done anything you asked me to."

Makoto avoided his heated gaze.

"You were just using me the whole time. Did you even want to be my friend?" Chihiro raised his voice. "When I told you about my secret. What were you thinking?"

Ah...that. "I didn't care." Something as silly crossdressing wasn't-

Makoto's train of thought cut off. The flash of metal reflects on his eye. He reflexively tries to step backwards. The weight of the girl on his back keeps him firmly in place. Chihiro abruptly pushed forward and bumped into him. Makoto blinked and then felt something deeply wrong.

The programmer cast him a deadened stare and backed away empty-handed.

"H...uh?" Makoto looks down to see silver mixed with pink; a kitchen knife sticks out of him. His body catches up to his mind, and he drops. Mukuro’s body piles on him, lodging the blade further inwards when the handle touched ground. His adrenaline skyrockets. Even against the snow, his body heat surges to unbearable levels. "..." He lifts his head up in abject shock.

Maybe it was the darkness, or maybe Makoto had never looked hard enough, but Chihiro had been shaking.

Words couldn’t do the hatred and anguish on the smaller boy’s face justice.

'That Chihiro, who'd cry about hurting flies...is going to kill me?' Not Junko. Or Mukuro. Nor Izuru. Not even Kirigiri or Peko. It would be Chihiro, of all people... "W-Why?"

"Alter Ego told me everything! Everything! You manipulated all of us! I told you Alter Ego was just a child. You promised to keep him safe, but all this time, you were using him to try and destroy the world!"

"D-Destroy? What are you-" ...It finally clicks. "Ah...you wanted me to pay up front? Aren't you thorough..."

Once the shock subsides, neither pained cries nor pleas escape Makoto's lips. He defaults to the reaction he was most accustomed.

"Ha...hahaa...hahaha!" Crazed laughter bursts out of him, overcoming the predicament in his gut.

"Eh?" Chihiro stepped back when Makoto pushes against the ground. Mukuro slides off him and falls as he stands. The knife was almost all the way in, and was blocking the flow of blood from pooling out.

Still, that wasn't a condition for any sane man to laugh at.

Makoto takes a step forward
"S-Stay back." Chihiro cried, falling backwards in terror. When Makoto's arm reached for his head, he screamed, 'I'm sorry! D-Don't hurt me!"

...

"Why would I?"

Chihiro opened his eyes to see the luckster, standing and sporting a lopsided grin.

"… you're really stupid." Makoto confesses without traces of affection or passion. "I'm flattered on one level. That I'm so important that there are people who'd love and try to kill me. Mukuro's the same and you know…I can't help but think you're both stupid. You have so much talent, yet you rely on someone to the point that it drives you to the brink. I don't understand how you can leave your emotions open for anyone else to access. I could never trust anyone that way."

Chihiro looked down to Makoto's stomach. Sure enough, the knife was there, deep enough that engaging in a conversation like this was abnormal. "What are you...?" The programmer couldn't finish.

"One day, you'll meet somebody who loves you just as much you love them. That person's not me."

Blood trickled down the his jeans. "Take care of Mukuro…I can't carry her anymore." Makoto walks past Chihiro.

The smaller boy couldn't process this turn of events. Tears welled up in his eyes as he scrambled to his feet. "Where are you going?"

The luckster angles his head back. "The girl's dorms." He pointed forward. "Your math grades are higher than mine. How long would it take to reach the dorms if I ran from here?"

"T-Three...minutes...Why?" Chihiro asked in a daze.

"Let's see if I make it."

The programmer snaps back into reality. "What?! That's crazy!"

"Perfect, that makes it worth doing." Makoto took the outburst in stride. "If I run over there and croak, then you're right. However, if I make it and say everything I need to, then it's not crazy. You're just full of shit."

“What are you talking about!? Stop playing around.You’ll die!”

“…Isn’t that what you wanted?” Makoto seemed genuinely confused.

The chill that went through Chihiro’s body was colder than the winter air. Before he could recover, the lucky student sprinted off.

Chihiro crumpled to his knees.

"I stabbed him. D-didn't I?" Had it all been a hallucination?

The thought was dispelled by Mukuro lying on the floor and the literal blood he affirmed on his hands.

"W-What have I done?" His hands clawed at his scalp.
Makoto runs through the snow, painting it with his own internal fluids. The cold brushed against his cheeks...yet his body was brimming with heat, searing pain and elation. He embraced them all with a boyish laugh.

Why? All the negative emotions he felt were still there. It’s just that…he didn’t care anymore. It helped that the sudden delirium made it hard to think rationally. Not that he would want to even if he could.

A bad joke - His life could be summed up in those three words. It wasn’t worth taking seriously, so why not laugh at the end?

Even better was that now, he wasn't constrained by hopes nor burdened by fear. In this transient time, he could do whatever he wanted, go wherever he wanted, without a care.

Exhilarated, Makoto smiled.

The countdown to despair had stopped. Now the clock ticked towards the end of his life.

Still, he felt more alive than ever.

"I'm free."

Sayaka always felt amazing(ly exhausted) after a successful performance, especially as she'd gotten to see her friends for the first time in months. "I think that might have been our best yet." People would remember this night for years to come. The only notable problems were a slight technical malfunction with the screen lights at the end of her song. And the abrupt rumbling everyone heard. Not nearly enough to mess up the performance, thankfully. If only she'd had the time/strength to greet the fans or hand out autographs, but it was late and shortly after midnight, the guests were forced to exit the premises.

All in all, It would have been a perfect day for the idol, if not for one unforgettable encounter.

Admittedly, even Makoto wasn't enough to down her mood. She hugged her pillows and brought up her bed covers. "Time for a well-deserved rest."

Not a second after she closed her eyes, there was a knock on the door. "At this hour?" Sayaka frowned. She left the bed in a tee and pink hot pants, sauntering towards to the door.

A second knock came.

She worried it might be some fan who was still roaming the grounds...but would they know where her dorm room were?

"Sayaka. Is now a good time to talk?"

Her fingers went to her forehead as she sighed. 'Is he trying to scare the daylights out of me?"

"It's late." She said succinctly. She honestly wasn't ready to see him right now...and any discussion between would need a while to iron out.

"...that’s fine. I'll just say it from here if you don’t mind. I hope your performance went well."

'\That mean he didn't see it?' Sayaka bit her lip. Not off to a good start, jerk.
"...Least I hope it went better than mine...ah well...I'm sorry about what happened between us." He breaks. "I...I was pissed off, when you called me a freak. I'm not good at dealing with my emotions, and I lashed out."

Sayaka's brows contorted when his words slowed. "I...understand if you won't forgive me. I'm not big on forgiveness myself, as it turns out. I've made you angry more times than I can count...but I really mean it this time. I want to be your friend. And...hah...I'm really sorry."

Sayaka walked away from the door, irritated at herself and him. It was a shame she didn't know how much, if any of that rushed apology she could trust. But at least this means things would go back to normal. Yay. "Happy holidays, Makoto. I'll see you in the morning."

"..." There's no reply.

Sayaka stopped, questioning the silence. Maybe her tone put him off...probably not. Makoto wouldn't get irritated over that.

She glanced at the clock.

"Why did he show up so late? I should have been asleep already." Was it actually important? Sure, he apologized, but he'd given plenty before and even in those cases, the boy carefully selected times when she'd be more receptive to accepting said apology. He was also a lot...less, brash. His usual eloquence was absent.

"Maybe he was genuine this time." She hoped... it was a serious fight...but then, that still wasn't a reason to show up at this time.

Sayaka's intuition flared.

"He's so weird!" The dissonance and discomfort compelled the bluenette to turn back to the door. If he was serious about the apology, the least she could do was meet him face to face. Sayaka put on her slippers "I hope he didn't get far." She pushes against the door and met resistance. "Is something blocking the frame?" She applies more strength and finally forces the door open. Sayaka steps outside to see what caused...her...so...much...

Her thoughts screeched to a halt and any subsequent words died in her throat.

Lying on the floor, face up, was the lucky student, pale-faced and eyes closed.

"Ma...koto?" The common name has never sounded so foreign.

"Ah...!" She finally registered the cleaver sticking out of her friend's abdomen, drops of blood can be traced from his body all the way to the staircase.

She screamed.

"AHHHHHHHHH!"

Chapter End Notes

One of the central themes of this story was what I felt was the legitimate one of the first game (until ch 6) and the beta: Trust vs distrust. Whether certain characters could
believe in others, and if they couldn't, were there parts of the whole that they could place faith in. Makoto does not trust or confide in anyone more than he must. In contrast, Chiaki never stops believing in her friends and their positives. Even when she's angry that Junko and Izuru turn out rotten, she's believes in the parts she knew were good. The title of protagonist or 'hero' has been between these two who embody those themes. If you follow conventional storytelling and think trust = good and distrust = bad, then extrapolate that onto Chiaki and Makoto and their positions in the story become clear.

As for Makoto's fate...that was something I had in mind back when finishing the prequel (if I were to decide to write a sequel), prophesied by Izuru at the end of his conversation with Makoto. Makoto (and Junko)'s undoing would either be their own self-destruction or they'd meet their downfall by those they manipulated. There were jokes in-story about Makoto being a cheater, and this is sort of a parody on that - only substituting romance of any kind with exploitation. Makoto's night was a glorified bridge burning of the relationships with the prominent women (and man) in his life. Toying with the affections of multiple people is a terrible thing to do and in true cliche fashion, it ends in knife badly for the player. In the planning phases, Makoto's attacker would either be Mukuro, Sayaka or Chihiro. The ball landed on Chihiro's court, as the one most dependent on Makoto and who I felt would have the biggest impact. None of this is to say Makoto deserved it, given his own circumstances.

Makoto boasts a once natural self-assurance, but in present is a front to hide his severe inferiority complex. Leon was the first to revive his competitive nature along with the drive to succeed. Sayaka was the first to awaken Makoto's fear of his true self being discovered and, to make him deny that he could be supported and accepted by others in spite of their knowing the truth. Consequentially, his relationship with the idol is love-hate. As an aside, both Ultimates bear similarities to his childhood friends, which is why Makoto gravitates towards them. Although Makoto may not have realized that.

I wanted to create a version of the character that was in despair (a natural despair instead of Junko's brand), but to an ambiguous extent. What he thinks and does aren't always what he feels. 'Is there some sliver of good in him or was he rotten to the core?' I'll leave that for the readers to decide.

Final chapter: Hope's Peak begins a new semester. Class 77 gains a new member. Class 78 is missing one.
“Don't you think it's time we move onto the next level?”

He points the round tip of the wooden sword at her.

“Next...level?”

“Secret sword skills; the ones with cool names.”

“There's a good reason you've never seen me do anything that silly. They're not real, Makoto.”

They draw closer.

“Bummer...If they’re not real yet, it couldn’t hurt to try and make some.” His eyes are trained on her sword, scrutinizing the slightest shift in movement.

“I can think of few bigger ways to waste time. If you're up for embarrassing yourself, be my guest.”

“Already did. I call it ‘Fall-on-Face’. It’s guaranteed to distract the enemy and make them laugh...”

She involuntarily cracked a smile. “You’d need a partner to complete that technique and deliver the finishing blow...or it’s just you being a clown.”

He comes within striking distance,

That’s the idea! Between you and me, it’ll be a two-person sure-hit-kill.”

Peko Pekoyama cuts through the memory with a clean stroke. The scar on her left side punishes the action by a sending a jolt up her body. The pain is merciful, compared to when the injury was fresh.

“...It’s quiet.” Peko speaks to the silence. She's the lead act of a once popular play. The seats were never full, however...there'd been one member of the audience - boisterous and beguiling he was - to grant the illusion of a full house.

Her concentration expands to encompass the newly renovated dojo. Several weeks weren't enough for the staunch swordswoman to get acclimated to the culture festival's mementos.

The cherry blossoms were especially distracting.

Peko’s alerted to the knock on the door. Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu leans against the wall near the
entrance, dressed in the academy uniform. “Came to get you. We got the new kid in class today.”

She lifts her head over to the falling petals.

“I’ll be there shortly. I need to water the trees.”

“…I’ll lend a hand.”

“Thank you.”

*Smack*

The ball soars above the baseball field, crossing a distance to reach beyond Leon Kuwata’s sight. In his sportswear, the athlete gears up for another swing.

“You’re getting better.” Nekomaru Nidai pulls his arms back for another pitch.

Again, Leon’s bat connects and the ball flies. “After all these morning practice sessions, I’d hope so.”

Nekomaru checks his wristwatch. “It’s almost time for class. What’s say we kick this into overdrive and hit the showers?”

Leon nods.

A series of shutter clicks interrupt. Both boys spot a group of girls with cell phones, waving their way.

“Your fans?” Nekomaru asks, knowing how easily distracted the redhead is.

Leon’s gaze lingers a few seconds longer. Guilt wells up in his chest. He turns away and back to the team manager, assuming a swinger’s stance.

“Forget em’. Let’s keep going.”

“I’m not sure about this, Junko.” Mukuro whimpers at her current state. She’s forced to sit down, arms between a miniskirt. One that didn’t have combat shorts underneath like the soldier felt comfortable with. How does anyone move in these?

“You want to get me, sis? First you gotta learn the pains of modelling! Now stay still, private.” The strawberry-blonde grins, applying makeup on Mukuro’s face.

“Y-You’re not gonna make me dress up like a clown, are you?”

“Should you really be giving me ideas?”

“But why are we doing this?”

“So you can look pretty? You finally got your neck brace removed. Now you can get over that old flame and bag a new guy!”

…Mukuro’s mood sours. She still thinks about Makoto from time to time.

“See, there’s that look again.” Junko sighs. “What can I say? Heartbreak is top 3 despair for girls.
Not that I would know…huh, I finally found something you’re better than me at.”

“I don’t think I want to hear it.”

“Fiiiiine~” Minutes later, Junko backs off to criticize her work. "I can’t pull off miracles, but you should at least able to impress some average Joe. Look.” Junko holds the mirror in front of Mukuro’s face.

“This doesn’t feel like me…” Too…girly.

“It will, once you start taking better care of yourself. Also, you’re fucking crazy if you think I’ll do this for you every day. I’m teachin’ here and if you don’t learn fast, you’re going in the doghouse.”

“Understood.” Mukuro groans. “But you know, I’m not trying to impress anyone.”

“Makoto’s not holding your hand anymore, and I won’t either. If you want friends, then shape up… or did you like being alone?”

“Not particularly.”

“There we go. People who don’t bother to take care of their appearance and still want to be liked, are the worst.”

“So…if I’m pretty, I can make friends?” Sounds shallow.

Junko rolls her eyes. “More like If everyone sees you’re (I’m) making an effort to be pretty they’ll flock to you. First thing I learned when I wanted to start manipulating poor saps.”

Junko was never wrong.

“I’ll give it my best.” Mukuro smiled. “...We're not doing wigs, right?”

“Only when I want you dressing up as me. Now, let’s get this over with and go to class.”

Junko had changed considerably

“We’d still be really early.” The raven-haired girl noted the time.

“Yeah, but I want to meet Yasuke and Chihiro on the way!”

Or maybe it’s Ryoko that's mostly the same.

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Kyoko Kirigiri scans the room with the methodical and analytic prowess of a machine. Fitting, as hardware occupied most of it. It could be better called a workshop than a dorm.

“It’s not very tidy in here.” Kyoko’s deft fingers swipe off the accrued dust from the shelf of computers. She doubted the room would ordinarily be this unkempt, she doubted the machinery would be smashed and broken either.

Though perhaps not as broken as the boy sitting on the edge of the bed, his face as ghostly-white as the sheets he wrapped around himself.

“I promise not to take up too much of your time, I only have a few questions.” She said.

Chihiro stares at her with tired, weary eyes.
“Were you out past midnight of December 25th?”

“…Are you going to arrest me?”

“…” Kyoko wordlessly reaches into her jacket. A clear, sealable bag dangles in the air.

Chihiro panics at the contents. Inside the bag contains a bloodstained cleaver.

“Get that away from me!” He screams.

Kyoko doesn't move a muscle.

The boy’s fear subsided and was replaced with uncontrollable sobs. “I-I didn’t mean to. I was so angry. He used me and endangered my Alter ego!”

“‘He deserved it.’” Kyoko mused. “Is that how you’ll justify what you did?”

Chihiro’s pupils dilate as the cold reality crashes down. “I’m sorry.” He hiccups, trying and failing to wipe away the tears.

Kyoko's silent for nearly a full minute. “You’ve committed a severe offence. One that could land you in prison.”

Chihiro convulses.

“Truth be told, as someone physically close to the victim, I was put in charge of the private investigation by the school. That means I have full authority to apprehend you.” Kyoko confessed, to the programmer’s dread. “This knife is the key piece of evidence leading to the culprit. It was a clumsy attempt at murder, with no thought put into covering the tracks. A single fingerprint check would have revealed the culprit in a matter of days.”

Chihiro hangs his head low.

The scales tip towards the truth. Run or hide from it, the truth remained infallible and objective.

A detective’s role was neither to protect nor mend, but to unravel the truth.

That was her most deeply valued belief.

An ideal she’d strained herself to now reject.

“Would have, if not a strange happenstance.” The lilac-haired girl placed the item back into her jacket. “Shortly after the investigation began, this crucial piece of evidence vanished from the forensics. As a result, the trail has gone cold.”

A faint hope sparks in his eyes.

The truth was a weapon, and like any weapon, the merits laid in how it was used. Wielded irresponsibly and the truth hurt more than any lie.

She’d arrived at the realization a little too late.

“I don’t know what to do, Kyoko.”

“Apologize. If you don’t want to be weighed down by regret, apologize…then smile.” She follows with words Chihiro needs to hear, however doubtful it sounds. "I’m sure that’s what he would say."
However long that might take you, is entirely your decision.”

She turned towards the door. “But... in exchange for my... assistance, you’ll be required to schedule therapy sessions with Miaya. Is that understood?”

Slowly Chihiro nods.

Kyoko grips the door handle and... it was pulled open from the other side.

“Chihiro-kun. It’s time for class!” Kiyotaka Ishimaru nearly bumped into her as he barged in. He appeared to have returned to normal...

“Kyoko, what are you doing here... and so early? Nothing illicit, I hope.” What was he assuming?

“Chill out already, fucks sakes.” Mondo Owada pulled back Kiyotaka by the collar, giving Kyoko as apologetic a look as possible for the delinquent. “We came to bring check in on the little guy and bring him to class... Fuck that don’t sound right coming from me.”

"I’ll leave him to you.” Kyoko walked out of the room, and they entered.

“One more thing. I expect to see you in class as well. The teacher said there was a surprise for everyone.” Kiyotaka called out to her

“A surprise?”

“Kukuku...” Chiaki Nanami raises her head, mildly alarmed by the gremlin-like snickers. Hiyoko Saionji tip-toed in front of the partially open door, trying to fit a blackboard eraser at the top.

“She’s pulling pranks again...” Chiaki noted...and, if Mahiru Koizumi holding a camera up was any indication, nobody had any intentions of stopping Hiyoko.

Chiaki sighed and looked to her right, therein lied an empty desk.

“It’s harmless at least. Better this than stepping on ants.” To her immediate left, Nagito Komaeda relaxed into his chair. In all fairness, an Ultimate could bring down the whole classroom and he’d permit it.

“Yeah, but you know who’ll be walking through that door...”

“All the more reason to watch.”

“The white one speaks truth.” Gundham Tanaka overheard the conversation. The legs of his chair grated against the floor as he stood, marching towards the troubled Hiyoko.

“Allow me.” Gundham’s bandaged fingers fixes the eraser in place. “Now then, struggle with all your might.” The Ultimate Breeder issued a challenge to their soon-to-arrive-guest.

“Thanks, big bro!” Hiyoko cheered.

Kazuichi Souda covered his mouth in a giggling fit. “What are you two, grade-schoolers?”

“I’ve seen such playful antics on tv, but never in person. What fun.” Stars shone in Sonia Nevermind’s blue eyes.

“Let me join, guys!” Kazuichi hops on the bandwagon
“Why antagonize him? Are you all looking forward to pain that much?” The impostor overlooks the antics with exasperation. A sentiment shared by the smallest male in class.

“I hope they all get their asses kicked. This whole class has way too much energy.” Fuyuhiko rested his legs on the desk, awaiting the school bell.

“I-I’m sorry! I’ll be quieter!” Mikan Tsumiki flipped out and cried for no reason.

“You hadn’t even said anything until I did, you dumb who-” A knife flew past Fuyuhiko, whisking to the side of his head before slamming into the back wall like a dart on a board.

“Oopsie, I was just practicing my throwing. What were you going to say?” Chisa Yukizome feigns a smile.

“Not a damn thing.” Fuyuhiko relents.

“Ibuki hears footsteps coming close by.” Ibuki Mioda held her hands to her ears.

“Battle stations, men!” Sonia commands and the soldiers of mischief fly to their seats.

There’s a knock on the door.

“Come in!” Ms. Yukizome said, excitedly.

The door slid open and closed in the blink of an eye, fast enough that the trap hadn’t even the time to fall. Standing in front of the room was a boy, spiky-brown hair, in the main course uniform. His hetero-chromatic irises gleamed. His lips moved upward, transforming his passive expression into amusement. “Hi, starting today, I’ll be your new classmate.” His fingers speedily wrote his name on the blackboard. “I’m Hajime "Izuru" Hinata. Address me however you like.”

“Hinata-kun, what are you doing?” Chisa fumes.

“I don’t understand the question.”

“You were supposed to get chalk on your hair!”

“This is a teacher…” Fuyuhiko shakes his head in disappointment.

“Sorry, Miss Sonia. He got us.” Kazuichi frowns.

“It’s no problem at all. It should be expected of the man I intend to bring home with me to Novoselic.”

“Ha!” Kazuichi screamed

“Get in line, Sonia. Hajime and I have a score to settle.” Akane jumped from her chair, flipping in the air until she landed in front of the newest addition to the class. “I’m ready now.”

“Didn’t you get creamed by him last time?” Hiyoko jeers.

"Oh myyyyy~." Teruteru Hanamura's mind is a journey best not ventured.

"Uh…Hajime can’t go to Europe or fight. He’s supposed to be playing games with me.” Chiaki interjected, motioning for Hajime to sit besides her.

“It’s a fucking romcom. Just kill me.” Fuyuhiko groans.
“It will be fine, young master.”

“Now now. I’m sure everybody wants a piece of the new kid…” Chisa doesn’t continue, to their confusion.

“And?” The impostor prods.

“What? You want a piece, grab a piece. I won’t stop you.”

“Can we learn something today? I’m begging you!” Fuyuhiko cried.

"It will be fine, young master." Peko repeats.

As Fuyuhiko argues with the teacher, Hajime made his way to sit by Chiaki’s right. “I think they like me…oddly enough.”

“We’ve been through a lot. The past is the past.” Chiaki said. “Speaking of…I’m guessing the treatment is finished.” His had taken a considerably longer period than the rest of her classmates.

“Yeah. No more daydreaming in a pod all afternoon for me.” Hajime’s tone subverts into monotone. “Although I do appreciate the aesthetics of a perfect simulation over the more… irksome parts of life. Especially the first-class meals.”

“We’ve already got a 2D specialist in the other class. Let’s not lose you too.”

“Hold up. If you’re looking for first-rate cooking, I’m your man. No crummy computer’ll ever keep up with my skilled fingers~” Teruteru moved his fingers in his usual pervy way.

“No thanks. I’ve heard what you do with your food.” Hajime recoils from the chef’s closeness. “I’d rather make it myself.”

“Wussat?! Are you suggesting you can rival my cooking?” Teruteru turned red with indignation.

“Logically, yes. After all, your talent is merely one of-“

“Cool it, Hajime. This’ll turn into a cookout before the day is over.” Chiaki pauses from her game and speech. “Then again that might be kinda fun actually. What do you think, Nagito?” She faced the luckster, staring out the window.

“…Nagito?” She pokes his shoulder.

“Hm? Did you say something?” He faces her.

“I was asking if you’d like to see a cookout between Hajime and Teruteru…why were you spaced out?”

“That would be interesting…” There’s markedly less enthusiasm than the boy commonly shares for Ultimates, especially in competitive scenarios.

“Come to think of it, you haven’t talked about hope in forever. You sick?”

“…Nothing like that. You shouldn’t worry about trash like myself.” He’s considerate in a way only he knows how to be.

“Disappointed?” Izuru says aloud.
“...I really can’t hide anything from you.” Nagito trails off. “I don’t understand it. The pieces were all in place for to give birth to the greatest hope. I expected a bang. But the ending... fizzled out. The two I placed my hopes on, the perfect steppingstone for The Ultimate Hope... collapsed and imploded... leaving behind this perfect peace.” Nagito watches the playful, innocuous banter between his classmates and thinks it's out of place.

“That's a good thing, isn’t it?” Chiaki tilted her head.

“Conflict breeds progress.” Hajime answers in Nagito’s stead, knowing the luckster would, in two exchanges, outrage the gamer and all who may overhear. “His values are incompatible with yours. Arguing with Nagito will only make you angry.”

“Is that your way of saying I’m wrong?” Nagito asks sardonically.

“You are correct.” Izuru starts. “But you’re not right.” Hajime finishes.

Perplexed, Nagito covers his face with his hand. “Sorry... but I don’t understand.”

“It’s fine if you don’t, we’ll understand for you.” Some things can’t be changed. Sometimes, they don’t need to.

The door slides open.

“Excuse- ow... geez. Who put that there?” The trap springs on an unsuspecting youth.

“Haha. Who’s the dork that fell... for...”

Hiyoko gapes.

“Wrong class.” The voice of an older male outside the door called.

"Oh. Sorry for interrupting and it was nice seeing you all again.” The door closes.

Class 77 succumbed to silence, peering at the door as if it were portal to another world. Nobody knows when Hiyoko resumed speaking.

“That's a weird hallucination.”

“Not if we all did.” Mahiru gulped.

“I-Is it a... ghost!?” Kazuichi shriveled in horror.

Peko stands and forgets herself. Recovering, she turns to Fuyuhiko.

The blonde is out of his chair before she utters a sound. “What are you sitting down for?! After him!”

The new term was well underway yet the class was still in a dreary phase, as far as Kyoko could see.

“Hmmm. You sure were late today, weren’t you, Taka-kuuun.”

Using peripheral vision, Kyoko spies Junko playfully rolling her fingers into Kiyotaka’s cheeks, to
the boy’s chagrin.

“Grrr…I can’t deny that.”

“Like you’ve got room to talk, lady. You’ve ditched class for months…and hell we met you on the way, so you were late too.” Mondo said.

“Guilty as charged.” Junko backs off. Kyoko marginally avoids the fashionista's scan. “But I’m thinking of skipping again. Everyone’s so gloomy nowadays.” She said loudly enough that it must have been intended for ‘everyone’ to hear.

A class of 15. Missing one right from the gate. Signified by the empty desk between Leon Kuwata and Sayaka Maizono.

With a bored look, Leon turns the page on a yearbook. To be precise, it was an anthology by Mahiru Koizumi, containing expert shots of the culture festival and its preparations.

Kyoko didn’t need advanced deductive skill to guess at what the baseball star was looking at.

The bluenette’s appearance was pristine as ever, but lacking expression. Kyoko hadn’t seen the idol smile in a long time. She also supposed it couldn’t be helped and nobody could blame her.

Sayaka had been the one to find Makoto that night. Everyone knew, but nobody dared ask her. Except Kyoko. She’d been the one performing the interrogation.

A pleasant experience was nowhere to be found for either girl.

Makoto had been taking to a general hospital in critical condition…and they hadn’t heard a word since. From all the blood Kyoko had discovered…well, it’d be cruel to hold onto false hope on grounds of ambiguity.

Lost in their own worlds, the aloof duo were unconcerned with the rest of the class. But even in the latter case, things weren't so much better.

Kyoko’s gaze moved to the isolated groups. Aoi Asahina and Sakura Ogami were together, all was right with the world on that front…if you’d disregard even the swimmer’s diminished cheer and Sakura’s silent attentiveness.

Celestia Ludenberg pilfered off the tearful Yasuhiro Hagakure, who without a doubt was pleading for whatever he lost in the bet with her. Intelligent men would know better. The gothic-lolita kept a perfect façade of contentment as Hifumi Yamada served her tea.

An interesting case laid with Toko Fukawa and Byakuya Togami. The former had undergone a drastic change. Gone were the braids, she started taking better care of her appearance…and hygiene. Even her personality altered abruptly, that even the heir was more receptive to her presence.

Kyoko knew the author had been involved with Yasuke Matsuda’s testing of the Neo World Program, but no more. Presumably client confidentiality.

If the lilac-haired girl could be honest…the class cohesion was much better than the start. At that time, there was great division among them, even the pocket group of friends barely existed. Until Makoto Naegi came.

And then he left.
“S-Stop—” Chihiro spluttered as Junko hugged him from behind and brought him to sit on her lap. That…certainly wasn’t something the old fashionista would’ve done.

“The weak should fear the strong.” The statement earned a few chuckles from the class. If there was someone who was still in top form… it was Junko Enoshima… Yasuke gave his word that the straw-berry blonde had been rehabilitated after extensive testing. Kyoko didn’t know how much of that she could trust, but she did know that Ryoko Otonashi had been passive in the months she had stayed with them.

All Kyoko could do was be vigilant and believe.

The door opened and with it, Koichi Kizakura walked in front. His lax disposition would never indicate he was in a position of authority. “Yo kids. I’m here to inform you that there’ll be an addition to your merry class, starting today.”

Murmurs and whispering resulted from the sudden announcement. The distraction allowed Chihiro to slip away from Junko’s grasp and return to his desk.

“Where are they gonna sit?” Leon asked in a biting tone.

“There’s only one free spot, isn’t there?” Celeste replied.

Leon shot her an intense glare.

“Get a load of you guys.” Junko interrupted the heated staredown, drawing the class’ attention. “The school has the most bitchin’ party of the year, we’re getting fresh blood and you’re all down afterwards because Makoto croaked a little early. It’s been months, get over it already.”

The space grew cold. The callous, crude and insensitive comment stunned most. Even the gambler looked uncomfortable. Kyoko felt little better about it.

Koichi coughs “About that –”

“Take that back.” A cool, sharp demand from Sayaka superseded whatever it was the scout intended to say.

“I thought you’d gone mute. Wouldn’t that be a problem, miss pop star?” Junko mocked.

The idol paid the false courtesy no heed. “Take that back.” She repeated in a level voice.

Junko folded her arms, averting her gaze in boredom. “No thanks. Can’t shut a girl down for speaking the truth.”

The detective knew this was going badly when Sayaka left her desk, a mask of disdain slaps over her face. “Take that back.”

With renewed interest, the fashionista continued. “Oooh, that’s a scary look you’ve got there. But you’re not doing yourself any favors ruining your image over the past.”

Sayaka stomped towards Junko, arm slowly extending.

Mukuro jumped in front to protect her sister, but even the silent warning from the ultimate soldier didn’t quell the bluenette’s anger.

Therefore, Leon had to hold the idol in place.
“Let me go!” Sayaka struggled in the athlete’s grip…yet didn’t take her eyes off the fashionista, ignoring even Mukuro in front.

Perhaps Junko felt safe with those measures, for Kyoko would never have dreamed of saying what came next to the idol. “Wasn’t Makoto all about rays and sunshine? You’d break his heart if he saw this. Maybe it’s good that he isn’t here to?”

It took a considerable amount of control for Mukuro to not turn and face her sister in utter disbelief.

Sayaka’s momentary shock gave way to a burning rage, as hot as the tears she shed. “I said take it back, you bitch!”

The raw emotion from the normally curt girl was enough to make even the most hardened students in the class flinch. Leon had to wrap his arms around the idol’s body in case his hold on the arm slipped. If Junko had been born the opposite gender, Mondo, close as he was and unable to understand her intentions, would have her flying halfway across the room.

Chihiro gripped the sides of his head and held it down, muttering inaudible apologies.

Junko alone was unphased. “Regret, guilt or whatever. What happened wasn’t your fault. Bottle those emotions up and you’ll get eaten from the inside.”

‘That isn’t the right way to do things.’ – Kyoko thought.

“Fucking hell, Sayaka. This ain’t worth it.” Leon urged the enraged pop sensation, then addressed the instigator with a warning of his own. “Shut the fuck up already, Junko.”

“Leon’s right. Take it easy, guys.” An oddly familiar voice came from the front. It sounded like... Kyoko’s eyes shot up as she took in who was standing besides Koichi. At some point during the scuffle, he’d entered the room without their notice. Slowly the others matched her gaze, expressions varying wildly between confusion and shock.

“Now that we’ve finally got their attention.” Koichi addressed the boy. “Introduce yourself so they won’t think you’re someone or something else.”

“Okay.” He grabbed the chalk and wrote his name down, dispelling any doubts they had of his identity. “Hi, I’m Makoto Naegi. Nice to meet you all…again and…please stop fighting. We’re all friends here, aren’t we?”

Leon arms go limp and Sayaka, falls to her knees, staring at the boy. Brown, spiky-hair, his patented hoodie and parka combination, wide doe eyes and disarming smile. The entire package was right before their eyes.

Makoto scratched his cheeks.

“Give it a second.” Koichi said.

“This can’t be real.” Hifumi said, breathless.

“I-i-i-i-t’s a ghost!” Yasuhiro screamed.

“I’m not a ghost! Just touch me and you’ll see.” Makoto raised his hands protectively.

Junko strutted up to the front of the class, and with long, red nails, pinched and pulled the sides of the boy’s cheeks.
“O-Ow. That hurts.”

“Huh. He’s the real deal.” She lets go.

Chairs and desks flip over. Junko and Koichi move out of the way as a stampede rushed towards Makoto. “W-Wait, hold on.” His words fall on deaf ears against the swarm. The fastest reached him first, which happened to be Leon, Aoi and Mondo.

“Makoto!” The swimmer hugged in front

“Dude, we thought you were a goner.” Mondo pressed his firm down on the shorter boy’s head.

“Shit. Glad to have you back, man!” Leon wrapped his arm around Makoto’s shoulders. The cluster was soon to grow before Koichi declared.

“He won’t be back for long if you kill him off. He just got discharged.”

They speedily unhand him, giving the brunet room to breathe.

“Thanks…I almost suffocated.” Makoto scratched his cheek. “Been a while, huh?”

“I can’t believe you’re alive, dude. I totally saw you biting it in my visions.” Yasuhiro said.

“We can be thankful they’re often inaccurate.” Sakura smiled.

“It was close…the doctors said it was a miracle. The blood loss was the worst of it…but there was a blood transfusion ready… I guess being average in every way has its perks.” He joked.

“Heh…just like a cockroach. Right when I thought I was finally rid of you.” Byakuya smirked.

…

“He’s alive.” Chihiro whispered. He was among the four frozen at the back of the room along with Mukuro, Sayaka and Kyoko. Each having their own specific reasons.

”Hey…did you ever see the guy who did this to ya?” Mondo asked. For Chihiro, the fact that Makoto, his victim, was standing there ought to terrify him…but it didn’t.

All he felt was relief, like weighted stone lifted from his shoulders.

Just then Makoto peeked into the back, looking over the others. His eyes locked with Chihiro’s. With a smile he said. “No. It was too dark to see. Maybe that whole ‘no security’ thing was a bad idea after all.”

Chihiro’s eyes stung.

Mukuro was conflicted as she walked towards the group. Whoever it was that attacked the boy…it didn’t change that she had tried to do the same. While she’d been under the influence of the brainwashing video, she made the choice to accept it and it was the soldier’s emotions that fueled the her actions that night.

She didn’t see the boy in the same light as she used to but…if nothing else, “I’m glad to see you’re okay, Makoto.”

“So am I.” His eyes find her, as does his smile. Nobody looked at her quite like he did. “…And wow, when’d you start wearing makeup?”
“…I’ve been trying to reinvent myself.” Mukuro explained.

“It’s working. You look great.” He complimented her.

“Uh…thank you.” Mukuro shifts nervously.

“She’s so goddamn awkward.” Junko smacked her forehead.

Leon smacked Makoto in the back and shoved him forward, pointing to the sunken bluenette.

Makoto took slow strides towards Sayaka and held out his hand. Sayaka hesitated, fearing he’d turn into mist and vanish with a touch.

“Why didn’t we hear from you?” She said, standing.

“My family…wanted me to cut ties with Hope’s Peak, saying it was too dangerous.” Understandable, given his track-record of injuries. “But there’s still something I have to do... and I couldn’t just throw in the towel when my friends are all here.”

Sayaka dove, head-first into his chest, crying uncontrollably. Makoto wrapped his arms around her.

“M-Makoto.” Chihiro began, approaching the brunet’s side. “I’m sorry…about everything.”

Makoto blinked and extended an arm, leaving room for the programmer to join the tearful embrace.

That left just one.

Kyoko Kirigiri observed with her usual unreadable stoicism. The two had never been on the best of terms, which is why it was unexpected when she said “Don’t leave again. The school isn’t the same without you.

Makoto beamed. “Thanks, Kyoko.”

“Kyoko?” There was an uptick in the detective’s brow.

“That’s it, I’m sick of waitin’! Show us the scar, bro.” Mondo said.

“Scar?” Makoto looked back to the biker. The others had migrated to their position.

“They’re a man’s pride. You gotta be proud of them.”

“Yeah Yeah. Just like we talked about.” Aoi added. Sakura nodded along.

Sayaka and Chihiro stood aside as Makoto pulled up his upper clothing. A slim scar where the knife had been was visible on his torso.

Chihiro forced himself to look.

“You actually survived that. You really earned your title. I must have a game with you sometime very soon.” Celestia challenged.

“Actually…that’s not my talent anymore.” Makoto scratched his cheek. Seeing the confusion of everyone in the room. “Now…I’m uh…actually The Ultimate Student Council President.”

“What?!” The commotion came not just from the class but from outside the room.
Koichi moved to the door and slid it open. Out came the colorful group from the upper class, falling on each on top of each other.

“Chisa…” The scout tipped his hat, silently admonishing his coworker.

“Hehehe…We were having an…in-door field trip.”

“Yay, big bro Makoto’s not a ghost.” Hiyoko cheered, jumping off the pile.

“See it wasn’t just me.” The clairvoyant added.

“Sorry for barging in, but…you get it right?” Mahiru explained.

“Yeah yeah, who cares. I got something to say.” Fuyuhiko brushed the redhead aside and barged in, stamping until he was inches away from Makoto. The yakuza inhaled. “President or not, you ever pull that shit again and I ain’t just gonna ground you. Got that?!?”

Makoto nodded. “I promise.”


Peko appeared by Fuyuhiko’s side. “I expect to see you in the dojo soon, then we’ll talk about your graduation.” She smiled.

“Go easy on me.” Makoto begged, feeling a dark aura from the silverette.

“Impossible.”

“Hmm, first the cookout and now a spar between Peko and Makoto. I hope they’re not on the same dates so I can watch both.” Chiaki said.

Kyoko sighed as the suddenly felt a lot smaller. Truthfully, she was uneasy. Makoto was still a dangerous element…but it had nothing to do with her.

Kyoko spots Nagito, who silently observed from the back.

Back then, she’d given into her inner demons. If pushed far enough, she could have been the one to make the fatal error of murder. Kyoko was too attached, too biased when Makoto was concerned…and that was more dangerous than anything. The detective still believed the boy needed psychiatric assistance…but she wasn’t qualified to give it to him. All Kyoko could do is have to watch him closely…and hope a friendlier approach would yield more benefits.

Kyoko didn't believe that Makoto hated them as much as he claimed.

If he truly despised us…he wouldn’t have stopped Junko. Even if the Ultimate despair had hijacked his plans, he set the foundation for all of it to come to fruition. All he’d have to do was rationalize Junko as an accomplice and he would have gotten everything he wanted.

It was only a theory, but seeing the interactions play out before her eyes, Kyoko wanted to believe.

The atmosphere…was preferable compared to moments prior. It was almost depressing that one person could invoke such a drastic change in so many, including herself.

“This is fine.” A rare smile graces Kyoko's lips.

The sun finally returned.
“You want me on the council?” Isshiki Madarai repeated the proposal the soon-to-be instated council president gave.

“Mhm.” Makoto nods, walking with The Ultimate Bodyguard down the halls to the science laboratory. “You were a big help during the culture festival.” Isshiki stiffens. “I’d like to have that whole group again, if they’d accept.”

“Running the student council is different and you’d need a full class instead of the handful in the committee. It’s not wise to pick members from favorites either.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He really means it. “By the way, did you enjoy the festival? I know you’re the working type...”

Isshiki maintains his silence.

It wasn’t a question he could answer.

“You’re not him…are you.” Not the overly dutiful Nisshiki that served as a bodyguard, assistant and friend all-in-one.

“You’re mistaken.” Isshiki started. “Though us 8 had our individual names, we lived as Isshiki Madarai and showed that to the world. As long as I live, Isshiki Madarai…my brothers, are immortal.”

8 are 1 and 1 is 8. Perfect unity. Perfectly replaceable. That was the true nature of The Ultimate Bodyguard. It was a wonderful talent…but, “As far as everyone knows, we’re the same as ever. I think…that’s a little sad.”

Isshiki heard the somber tone, his eyes fell to the brunet and in a knowing voice, he said “I see. You’re not him.”

Makoto puts a finger to his lips.

Isshiki nods and procured a photograph from his pocket, given to him by Chiaki Nanami and taken by Mahiru Koizumi. A figure with the bodyguard's likeness smiled, surrounded by his peers. "We both have large shoes to fill it seems."

"No. Speaking for myself, I don't want to be a replacement."

“Hi, I’m Makoto. Nice to finally meet you.” The brunet introduced himself to Miaya Gekkogahara for the first time.

“I’m Miaya and…it’s weird hearing you say that, I’ll admit.” The Ultimate Therapist led Makoto and Isshiki around the science lab. “I received your message, Makoto…but are you sure about this?”

“Yeah…and I don’t think I can get him back without your help.”

“You’ll need more than my help.” To whom the blue-haired girl referred to, was made clear when Yasuke Matsuda was sighted, hovering over a futuristic pod. The grim neurologist took notice of them, mostly Makoto. “So, it was true. Still alive and kicking huh?”

“How is Murasame’s condition today?” Isshiki asked. The man routinely checking in on the
patient inside the pod.

“Better, from our observations…it should only take a while longer before he’s ready to go,” Yasuke said. “But as I’ve mentioned…we needed to erase most of his memories of the past year. He might relapse if he gets them back. You get what I mean, don’t you?”

Issiki nodded. “He has to avoid the triggers. It’s for the best, as I would also prefer if he never sees this school again.”

Makoto’s eyes wandered between the two men.

“Don’t worry. Your memories won’t be erased…they don’t need to be.” Miaya soothed his worries, then moved to a large computer with multiple wires circling around it.

“You know the drill, step on in.”

Issiki followed Yasuke’s instructions and climbed into the pod besides and connected to Soshun Murasame’s. The bodyguard put on a headset and the pod closed.

“On to you.” Yasuke faced Makoto. “Miaya gave me the summary, but…I want to hear it from you.”

“I don’t know much myself but…” He’d woken up in the hospital in pain weeks after the stabbing. After that, the medical treatment followed conventional procedures. Physically, Makoto was fine now. Mentally, he wasn’t. He was missing a part of himself, the main part and that was something no physician could cure.

“He hasn’t come out even once. It’s just been…me awake, the whole time. That’s never happened before.” Makoto elaborated. He looked to Miaya. “You’re the one who treated me as a kid, weren’t you? I-I thought maybe you’d know what to do.”

Miaya and Yasuke exchanged glances.

“First thing’s first. What makes you think there’s something wrong?” Yasuke asked. “By that, I mean…why do you want him back? As I understand it, he was the dominant persona, and with him gone, you should be free.”

Makoto pondered the question, then shook his head. “I can’t abandon him.”

Yasuke looked unconvinced. “If it’s what you want, then so be it. But if you’re psychologically dependent on him like an addict, then I can’t advise this. To begin with, you’re the less problematic personality. There’s nothing to cure with you.”

“Maybe not me, but what about him?” Makoto looked down. “I don’t know what happened that night, but…somebody tried to kill me…to kill him, and he’s just gone afterwards. I can’t accept that. There’s just too many questions I need to ask…and he’s the only one who can answer them.” He’s the only one I want to answer them. “I need your help, Yasuke, Miaya.”

“Thank you, Makoto.” Miaya said, suddenly. “Even if it’s harder for you, you’re trying to help a friend of mine.”

Yasuke scratched his head. “That settles it then. More work for me.”

“Sorry. I know how you hate doing more than what you’re supposed to.”
“You still remember that? Don’t sweat it. After all the people I fucked over, this pain in the ass job is what I deserve. At least now I can help people.”

Makoto nodded. “So can you help me?”

“Yeah. The same way we did Kamukura and Junko. Your case will probably be easier since your condition wasn’t artificial and is closer to our prototype test subject.” Whoever that was, Yasuke didn’t elaborate. “Come with me.”

Yasuke led Makoto to one of the pods. “Get in there.”

Makoto gingerly sat in the machine. “It’s comfy.”

“That luxury’s pretty much where all our budget went. Not like we could buy shit for something we were about to invent.” Yasuke shrugged. “Now then, I’ll explain once, so feel free to stop me and ask questions as we go. Right now, you’re about to enter the Neo World Program -- A virtual reality.”

“Like a game?”

“Son of a bitch.” Yasuke swears so fast that Makoto’s certain he’d expected that response. “Can’t any of you think of something else for a comparison?! Fuck is wrong with this generation?”

Miaya laughed at the neurologist’s personal dilemma. “It’s an extremely realistic simulation of real life, Makoto. We’ll be putting you in a setting of our own design, but what goes on there and…who you see there will be determined by your own thoughts. It can be an ideal world, where everything goes your way.”

Makoto’s mouth parted in awe. “This must’ve been a great attraction at the festival.”

“This feature’s for health purposes alone. We showed the guests watered down shit.” Yasuke explained.

“We made it a VR game.”

Yasuke slowly turned to usher the therapist a death glare. “Ignoring that…” He directed his attention back to the council president. “Like she said, the Neo World Program will access your thoughts, that means what’s in your mind can exist there. So…if that other personality still exists, you should be able to see him.”

“If?”

“Is there a trigger for when you used to switch personalities?” Yasuke asks.

“Not…lately. Before ‘he’ used to do everything, but after a while…we just sort of switched in and out, without warning.” Makoto explains. “We were…sort of fine with that arrangement, I think. He didn’t put obstacles in my way…even though he could have used Isshiki and Nisshiki to keep me grounded.” He presses a finger to his chin. “He even gave me instructions on how to run the festival, but he never limited my options or told me there were things I couldn’t do.”

“I see…if he’s that permissive towards you then, you’ve got an equal chance.”

“Equal chance?”

“One of our patients with split personality disorder had sneezing as a trigger and it worked without
fail. Neither side was dominant, and they didn’t interfere with each other, similar to you. At most, the more abrasive persona was influenced by the others’ emotions. Two other patients with the same condition did not have triggers. Instead one personality dominated the other almost entirely. Which group do you think was a bigger pain to cure?”

If Makoto had to guess. “The second?”

“Even though they don’t have triggers like you?”

“It’s just a feeling I have.” Makoto spoke with unease.

“Your gut’s right.” Yasuke nodded. “The key to the cure…is acceptance and stability. With the patients, we had to reset their personalities back to a certain point, starting with their most stable ones. In the case of the two mentioned, that was Hajime Hinata and Ryoko Otonashi. Ah, if you weren’t aware, Hajime is Izuru’s original.”

“So…they were reversed?”

“It was necessary. The ones with the least psychological baggage were our starting point. From there, we had close friends or family to assist them in a secure, nurturing environment, strengthening their confidence and consolidating their sense of self.”

Makoto looked towards the pods were Isshiki and Soshun rested.

“But we also wanted the memories and personalities of Junko and Kamukura to return, but with the stable foundation the neo world program provided them, and without the stimuli that turned them into the fuckups we know and hate.”

Makoto flushed at the neurologist’s choice of words. He was never comfortable with cursing.

“During the graduation phase of the program, those two engaged their other selves and reconciled with them, leading to who you met today. In a way, you could say they’re complete now.”

Makoto blinked. “Hey…are you saying that I’ll –”

“Exactly. If you go through with this, there’s no guarantee you’ll come out the same person. Feel like changing your mind?”

Makoto shook his head slowly. “I have to at least try.”

“That’s only one of the risks you might face in there.” Miaya stated, “For treatment to be successful, the NWP was made to be…extremely realistic. That means we keep your senses alive in there. If you hurt yourself and bleed, it’ll feel the same as in real life…and your bodily functions will interpret it as real.”

Makoto tilted his head. “Isn’t that kind of dangerous?”

“Yup, If for example, you were to uh, die. Your brain’s going to register that as authentic and might even shut down.”

Makoto’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head. “Shouldn’t that have been the first thing you mention?!”

“Medicine is also poison, welcome to the real world. The Neo World Program’s dangerous enough that just prolonged exposure can be addicting and disorienting. But the rewards are worth it, in my
opinion. Besides, we’ve got safety features installed so nobody files a fucking lawsuit against us. And I’d think you’d have much bigger problems if death was a possibility in your ideal world.”

“Oh…yeah that’s fair.” Makoto wiped the sweat from his brow. “You scared me a little. I’m fine now.”

“Suit yourself. It may not even work and you’ll just return as yourself depending on his condition.”

“You said that before…you mean, I might not see him in the virtual reality?”

“For two reasons: The first is that for unexplained reasons, he’s gone, like you told us. In that case, he might have been removed from your mind completely. The second…is that he doesn’t want to come back. This is a two-way street, kid. If one personality throws in the towel, you’ll be the only one left in the ring.”

Makoto leaned his head to the side. “What would I do then?”

“Isn’t convincing others your specialty?”

The ocean scent
The summer breeze
The hot sand his shoes dug into
The intense rays of the sun
The taste of sweet ice cream
“It’s all so lifelike.” I credit Yasuke and Miaya for their work. Although the ice cream bar occupying my mouth muffles the words. After an hour of wandering a resort aimlessly, a guy got tired…and hungry.

The bag filled with treats in hand hail as proof of the supermarket raid.

“Where is he?” Makoto wasn’t given precise coordinates…or any coordinates at all. The only guide was a map of the islands. Who I was looking for could be anywhere…or nowhere.

…

“Wait, what would he even look like?” Maybe a doppelganger? “That’d be a bit freaky…hm.” Makoto halted. I turn to the ocean. A figure sits on the sands.

There was nobody else in the simulation. In order to make the search easier, NPCs were removed. I slowly approached that person.

Suddenly, I feel a stinging pain on my feet. I yelp, fall forward and land on my face. I spit out the sand and lament the dirtied ice-cream. With a groan, I search my feet and see a red crab peeking out of its shell, its claws latch onto my red soles. “…Someone’s crabby.” I whine. Even in a digital world, luck was ever-present.

A small hand picked up the assailant. Makoto’s eyes trailed upwards, not far, not necessary. The rescuer was too small, even shorter Chihiro. In this case, younger might be a better use of phrase.

A youth, looking no older than 10 dangled the crab by its shell. He wore a long-sleeve, white shirt
and shorts, but Makoto wouldn’t describe the attire as casual. Not with the straps hanging from the arms of the shirt. If tied, they could theoretically be used as binds.

The boy’s barren-gray eyes watched the sea-creature struggle before callously, flicking it away.

I rub my eyes, the younger boy fizzled in and out…like a glitch in the system. He crouched in front of me, his fingers wiping off the sand with far more care than he’d shown the crustacean.

It was embarrassing for me.

“Are you hurt?” The unnamed boy said

“Nope.”

In-between blinks, the child disappeared and reappeared to the edge of the shores. There's strong doubt that he ran over there so fast with those short legs.

A magnetic pull draws me to his side.

“Thanks for helping me. I’m Makoto, by the way.” I sit on the sand.

“…”

“I didn’t expect to find anyone like you.” Yasuke and Miaya might have a few bugs to iron out with the program.

“I don’t know how I got here, but here I am.” His reply is short and direct.

Makoto considerately nodded. Nothing made sense in digital space. “Have you seen another guy around? He looks like me, like a twin.”

“No.” Came another quick answer.

“…Got a name?”

“Makoto.”

“Surname?”

“Naegi.”

I lean backwards, keeping stable with my palms flat on the sand. "I've...got nothing to say to that."

“You don't sound surprised.”

My response is as casual as I feel. "You don't feel like a stranger to me. I don't know how to explain it. Maybe it's because we've shared a body for a long time.” This was our first meeting, but I felt we were as close as brothers. I'm sure he feels the same way.

“Here I was, looking forward to your freak out. I feel silly.” He unabashedly admits to the prank.

“Geez. Why do you look so young anyway?” I scratch my cheek. It's admittedly a nice change of pace for the luckster.

“I don’t know. I told you. I don’t know where I am, what I’m doing here…and I don’t care.” Another glitch punctuated the end of his speech. "You should enjoy it, it's not every day we talk to
"The thought never crossed my mind." No sirree. “I was pretty adorable back then...only I heard you smiled a lot.” I heard, but it never matched the image I had in mind.

“What?” I ask.

“I'm sorry.” He interrupts. "This is your body too. I forgot that." His bangs cover his eyes. "I'm sorry."

My mouth opens and closes, unsure of how to respond to the sincere apology. I get there though. “I think the ones you should apologize to are mom, dad and Komaru. Your friends, Kotaro and Nana-san, I think. And uh... pretty much everyone you freaked out.” Which was everyone. “Of all of them, I think Komaru was scared the most. She’d never leave my side, always apologizing. No clue why though.”

“That's not my concern.” The compassion he'd shown me was like a split-second dream.

“I know we had a... difficult past. But they’re our friends and family.”

“Your family now. Your friends too. I’ve finished with them.”

‘That’s not how it works’ - Makoto wanted to say, but that would probably lead to a dead end back and forth. I wanted to avoid that until absolutely necessary.

“...What happened that night?”
He doesn’t respond so I follow up with the consequences. He deserves to know them.

“Nisshiki-san died.” At least, that was the strong implication from the last of the octuplets.

High pinned brows relay his surprise. He looks Makoto square in the eye for falsehoods. He finds none. “… Chiaki was in danger, and I told Nisshiki to save her and Soshun Murasame.” Such an abridged explanation wouldn’t cut it for most, but I’d lived my short life accepting everything that came my way without much of a fuss. “I sent him to his death and couldn’t even keep my promise.” He chuckles darkly.

“That’s not what I wanted to hear. I felt you had to know, and… if what you’re saying is true. Then Nisshiki-san succeeded. Chiaki and the council president are safe and being treated.”

Approval finds its way on his features. “Good for him. He didn’t die a failure.”

Makoto frowned at the negative implications.

“Why are you here?” He questioned.

“I’ve come to take you back with me, to the real world.” I said without hesitation. “I’m already pretending I’m you. I’ve even started calling everyone by their first names like you seem to.”

Makoto recalls his nervousness. “I don’t even know how you could be that bold, I freeze up every time I try to be that casual.”

The kid sighed. “There are enough idiots around here without you joining them. Nobody will mind if I’m gone when you’re the perfect replacement. If you ask me, you’ve hit the jackpot. I won’t get in your way anymore.” Isshiki said something similar, but Makoto found a lot more dignity in that conversation.

The depressive boy didn't fit the profile etched into the minds of those who environed him. Makoto Naegi was spirited, forward, proactive and, most of all, happy. None of that had ever sat right with me. Whenever I 'woke up', it was a struggle. Long ago, before entering HPA, I'd thought nothing of my relatively empty rooms, the absence of childhood memorabilia, the friction in the family. As far as friends were concerned, it was the same everywhere. Makoto was everyone's friend...but were they his? Few had nothing but basic compliments whenever I subtly asked, or were admirers from afar.

The biggest tell was the pain. I can't count how many times I ended in a bad situation on the spot. Be it stomach pain from eating documents, getting ragged on by the reserve course, the exhaustion from many sleepless nights, and so much more. All of it was common place.

The most pleasant transitions were oddly lying on my bed. I'd find myself staring straight at the ceiling in a dorm room that could only be described as plain. Not average. Average implied it met the standard. Makoto's room was desolate. There's a saying I think, that a person's room is a reflection of themselves.

If Isshiki was 'lonely', then the other Makoto lived in complete isolation.

It was only a few weeks ago, without him, that I started to think. 'How could someone like this be happy?'

"You've gone quiet, all of a sudden."
“...I was just thinking...you should’ve seen how everyone reacted to me. They were all waiting for you to come back and I’m not going to dash those hopes.” I replied.

“Are you telling me that doesn’t bother you? There’s nobody on Earth that likes living in someone else’s shadow.”

“...You’re right. It was a little painful, knowing they were thinking of you instead of me.” I frowned and sit upright. Pumping my fists, I issue the challenge. “Even if I may be number two now, that just means I’ll have to climb my way up and get everyone to recognize me, for me.”

He actually smiles. “I wasn’t lying about you being a perfect replacement. You’re strong, unlike me. Even when your back's against the wall. Even though your life is unfair because of me, you can still say something like that truthfully. Meanwhile, I nearly got the world torn upside down, I stabbed Peko aiming for my own sister, then got stabbed and rescued by people I betrayed. Now you’re going out of your way to help me. There's only so many ways to fuck up and I somehow managed them all. Now that's talent.”

I was stunned into silence by the confession. 'That’s…what happened?’

The two sat in silence. I can’t imagine what could have driven him to that point…but that’s all the more reason for me to bring him back. He has to face what he did and move on.

“What do you think of this place? Can you believe it’s all just a computer simulation?”

The younger Makoto scrunches his nose. "Simulation? So none of it is real.” He looks to his hands. “How did I get here?”

“It’s how I’m going to bring you back - using the Neo World Program Miaya and Yasuke made.”

“Miaya...she's confined me again, huh.”

Confinement? In a way, that could be true. No matter how beauteous this island was, it wasn't the real world. “Sure...if you've seen prisons with a beach and a resort. It took me hours just to explore the first two islands. I think most people would kill to get locked up in that scenario. Not to mention virtual reality like this, is unheard of, and it's all for us! I’m feeling lucky, personally.”

The boy's eyes brighten at my positive exclamation. A smile forms and parts as laughter follows. “So you can laugh.” I had a shot, after all.

“You’re right. A tropical island for us...that definitely beats what I'm used to.” The tension resumes.

I rub my chin. "'Used to'? I don't understand."

"A cage isn't only physical barriers or bars."

I stumble, searching for an answer. "Is it a riddle?"

“It’s people.” His answer leaves no room for confusion.

...Without a reply of my own, silence descends once again. I reach into the bag and pull out a cup of pudding, then peel off the top. Anything to lighten the mood.
A coincidental glance to my partner has me barely catching the focused gaze before the other Makoto rips his eyes away.

I blink.

“Here you go.” The offer has him as suspicious as a fish gauging bait dangling from a hook.

‘Give me a break...’ I open his palm and firmly placed the pudding in his hand.

“This one’s on me.” I start to eat. The sweet delicacy flies down my throat. “I missed these.” My nerves cool down.

The younger boy watches slowly, then looks down to his cup. His hand left his stomach, revealing the wound. I'm still not okay with eating heavy foods. With him, it looked like the injury hadn't healed at all. Looking at his face though, I wouldn't be able to tell he was in pain. Maybe he wasn't. This is a virtual world after all.

“Do you need me to open it for you?”

“I can do it myself.” He snaps and copies my motions.

He eats the dessert, and finishes much faster than me. “…Got any more?”

‘So bratty...’

I lift the bag and places it between them. “Help yourself.” He does. I always thought I had a sweet tooth, now I know where I picked it up. “I’ve been wondering. If you made me, are you my older brother or my dad?”

The original Makoto bites down harshly on the spoon. There’s an indent when it comes out of his mouth. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to call me, ‘Mom’?”

Somehow, a heart attack is avoided. I drop my pudding onto the floor. “That’s way too creepy!”

“You started it. If you’re gonna pick a fight with me, you better be ready to go all the way.” He gives me a disgusted look.

"Gotta...I'll think before I speak next time." I motion to pick up the dessert but...it’s swiped away from me by the beak of a huge bird.

"Whoa!" Wide-eyed, I roll away from the white bird, gaping as my body is covered in sand.

Its beak presses down on the pudding, only to drop it on the ground. The avian loses interest in the container, it's long legs move towards the convenience store goods.

"Hey, don't eat those!" I plead, only to be ignored as it lowered its head to poke at the bag of treats.

'I kind of don't want to go near it. What's it even looking for? Food?'

The over-sized animal latches onto a candy bar, then changes targets again - this time, switching to the other Makoto, the one who doesn't share my fear. His expression's unreadable as it sizes him up. Perhaps it doesn't see him as a threat. The bird turns away from him and walks to the water's edges. It flaps its wings and flies away.

I blink twice, eyes peeled to the sky. “Darn seagull did whatever it wanted, scared the daylights out of me and just leaves. ” I pout.
“It’s a crane.” He corrects me. His eyes transfix on the wayward bird, even when it flies far beyond their sight, his longing gaze doesn’t waver.

“Thanks.” He begins. "I mean that. Thank you, for coming all the way here for me, even when you had nothing to gain…but I'm going to disappoint you.” He stands and faces forward. “I wanted to be saved…but I couldn’t rely on anyone to do it right. I can’t trust anyone. There's no reason for me to go back, and I don't want to. I give up.”

Little by little, I understand the reason for the form my counterpart assumed.

“You’re not a failure.” Even if I know words won’t get through that wall he’s built for himself, I have to try. “I can't begin to understand what your intentions were with the cultural festival…but for what you promised everyone…you succeeded. Hope’s Peak Academy public perception is the highest its been in a century. It was such a success that loosely related riots outside stopped. The school’s getting more government funding and there’s been talk about making the festival an annual thing. Everyone, our friends included, heck, I had the time of my life preparing for it. You’re the reason all of that happened.”

“…” He doesn't react

“Is that really not enough? What does it take to make you proud of yourself?”

His last smile is razor thin, and heavy with regret. “I wish I’d been born with a twin. I'm sure you at least, would have stuck by me and maybe I would've turned out differently. That's probably the one thing I can believe in." Toneless, he concludes. “But that's not realistic. I’m just a ghost now. The least I can do is disappear like the rest.”

That’s an excuse.

“…As far back as I remember, excitement's all I've known. I like making people smile too, I like helping others. I love our friends. The friends you got for me. I owe you so much. I won’t leave you to hole up somewhere alone. Nobody'll be happy with that.”

I offer him my hand. “Come back with me.”

Eyes identical to mine flicker with hesitation. His small arms move, his hand closes on my palm…but it’s not enough. He tries, but he doesn’t make the leap. He pulls back and I know I’ve failed.

“Why?” is all I ask.

"I finally realized, at the end, what the happiness I searched for really was"\n
I follow his pointed finger towards the shimmering ocean. There might have been something on the other side...or Its digital expanse may have been infinite for all they knew. The possibilities were endless.

"What are you-" I don't get to finish that sentence. I look back...he's gone. My head zips back, forth and to the side. The only traces of his ever being here were the empty cups and white shirt on the sand.

He could be anywhere now, or nowhere. I didn’t know when or where he would reappear. With renewed vigor, I rise to my feet, wiping the grains from the back of my trousers. “Fine. I've never played hide-and-seek before, but if that's the way you want it...” I take off my parka and hoodie. The stripped clothing land next to the small shirt. It’s hot enough without them. I raise my arms overhead and stretch, then fall into a runner's starting position.
One of the interesting lessons learned during the festival period...is that I was a fast runner, with plenty of stamina.

I sprint off, without a destination in mind.

“Whatever it is you're searching for alone…” Makoto didn't understand the meaning of surrender.

“I want you to know that you can have it with us too.”

**Chapter End Notes**

A/N: The story comes to a close but the daily lives of HPA's students continue, and in many cases, are better than ever. There were no casualties. There's a new council and Makoto and Isshiki are still around. All because the relevant cast members, and a special shout to Kyoko, chose peace over truth. Following that, I'll be the first to declare that the ending is morally bankrupt. The council, Madarais and a few others are still dead, and news of that will probably never reach the surface. Meanwhile, the ones responsible are seemingly neutralized, but also escape punishment. The scene with Aoi, the others and their domino dilemma in the headmaster's office, symbolizes that you won't always find satisfactory reasons for everything in life. Sometimes, it's necessary to accept that. I tried to convey through Kyoko and Chiaki's decisions that justice may not be what's best for the majority in their circumstances. Part of what inspired this change in Kyoko was seeing Makoto learn the truth from Komaru, and it ended in disaster - this being even with A.I Junko's interference stopping her from killing a man. She didn't want to see Chihiro share Makoto’s fate, even if it meant forsaking her own morals. Whether their silence will haunt them is an open-ended conclusion. But, I think if it's for the sake of the happiness of their friends and loved ones, they're willing to bear that sin.

Thanks for all the comments and kudos. A special thank you to the readers who stuck with this story from the beginning. It's surreal to see it's finally over! I'll be honest when I say 200k was waaaay more than I expected. I also didn't expect or plan to finish this fic exactly 2 years after Layers ended, but these things happen. I hope you all enjoyed this commotion of awkward, deceitful and lovable misfits.

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