# Catch and Release

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## Catch and Release

by [Ha_Haha_Hahahaha](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Ha_Haha_Hahahaha)

### Summary

Once you hit rock bottom, the only place left to go is up- hey! Put the pickaxe down! You won’t be able to dig any further, Komaeda-kun.

It’s time for you to get some confidence. You’re almost there, and you’ve been at this point before. Now all you need to do is follow through with it. But first, you have to look at that gigantic mess you made over there.

### Notes

so what do i call this fic? let's just call it the culmination of everything i wanted to happen to komaeda in canon ever. okay, not everything. i was originally planning to incorporate drv3 into this as well but because i'm not andrew hussie i don't think i can deal with that shit as well.

so, fellow komaedalings, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride. also, comments are very, very welcome. idc if you say you absolutely hate it (okay i'll care a bit), i'll appreciate some kind
of feedback.
The Beginning and the End

It was a surprisingly nice day. The sun was shining brightly with not one cloud blocking its light, the air was warm but not wet and had a very comforting breeze sifting through it, and Komaeda was setting up his own death.

His face was covered with a gas mask, the alien appearance of it contrasting to how softly he smiled behind it. But that doesn’t really matter, because a smile was Komaeda’s default expression no matter how harrowing the circumstances were. What does matter is what Komaeda was thinking at that very moment, or more like, every single waking moment of that day. It’s important, because after all of those rejected requests, missed chances, and incomprehensible avoidances of death caused by his own cosmic superpower, it was finally going to happen. Nagito Komaeda was finally going to die. He was finally going to be released from the captivity of a force that controlled his life as if he were an NPC in a simulation. Komaeda thought something along the lines of how he’d finally won out against his luck, as he would be able to manipulate the circumstances of it entirely, utilizing it like it had utilized him. That was the one thing it was good for.

Once he screwed on the cap to the fire extinguisher, he pulled the gas mask over his face, letting it rest on his forehead just in case a few adjustments were to be made. After deciding that the concoction was ready, he placed the bottle of poison back into the fridge, grabbed on to the fire extinguisher, and started making his way to the door. The others were probably hot in pursuit, and it would be a shame for his plan to go sour after he had already made so many preparations. Therefore, he had to act fast.

“Hiya!” Monokuma shouted as he popped up right in front of the door, very intentionally blocking Komaeda’s path.

“Get out of the way,” Komaeda said, trying to look around him for an escape route. “You already know that I’m not doing this to help you, so don’t bother me.”

“Geez! No need to be so sassy with me. I was just here to thank you for how much you’ve done for me recently.”

Komaeda rolled his eyes. “Really?”

“No, I don’t give a damn about what you do. For every time you make things more interesting, you also manage to piss me off. Props for stealing Monomi’s treasure chest though!” He gave Komaeda a thumbs up, a claw sticking out of the digit.
“Then, what are you here for? I’d like to think you’re going to warn me about the others’ locations, but that might just be too optimistic of me…”

“Well, you’re correct there! You’re the one who came up with this whole plan, so you’ve got to execute it all by yourself. I’ve done my part already. Anywho, I did actually want to talk to you about something. You see, a little birdie told me that you recorded another video message this morning…”

A shudder went through Komaeda, starting at the pit of his stomach and then spreading to the tips of his toes and the hairs on the crown of his head. “That’s…I should have known you’d catch me in the act.”

“You’re damn right I would! But I’m not mad. I knew your end goal was to thwart my plans in the first place. Are you assuming I’m dumb just because I’m a bear? What ignorance, Komaeda-kun!”

Komaeda sighed, feeling defeated in the face of the psychopathic animatronic’s taunts. “It’s not like you’d stand a chance to the traitor anyway. After all-”

“…anyway, if whoever they are actually watches it. The only thing you have on your side in that situation is that everyone hates me already, so the probability that they could bear to hear my voice after this ordeal is over is fairly low.”

“You think so? You don’t think anyone would care enough to watch it? Not even, let’s say, Hinata-kun? You know, if he were to watch it, maybe he’d get a little bit of a better understanding of you, hmmmm?”

Komaeda clicked his tongue, eyes flaring up. “H-Hinata-kun’s not the traitor. I know that much. I wouldn’t want him to survive the trial anyway.”

“Mnhmm, you keep telling yourself that. Whatever, I’m sure your shounen manga rivalry with him will sort itself out somehow, if only a hundred years after you’re both dead. Ha!”
“So,” Komaeda began, desperately searching for a change of topic, “If you’re not mad about the video, then why would you even bring it up in the first place? Are you just trying to stall for time?”

“Of course not! I completely respect your desire to get yourself impaled as fast as possible. Makes my job a lot easier. I just wanted to talk to you for one last time like a good sport usually does!”

Komaeda’s eyebrow quirked in curiosity. “What do you mean?”

Monokuma put outstretched a hand- or rather, a paw- up far enough so that Komaeda could reach it without having to bend down. Komaeda stared at the appendage in confusion. “Come on! Shake my paw, dammit! What the hell are you waiting for?”

“Um, why would I do that? I know you have claws. I wouldn’t want to leave any trail of blood leaking from my hand anywhere, or at least not at this point. That would confound everything.”

“Jeez, you have to overthink everything, don’t you? I’m just trying to be a good sport! Because, you know, even if we’re working together at this stage, once you kick the bucket, I’m flying solo!”

“I don’t consider you a friendly rival, you know.”

“Me neither! But we’ve been at it for a long time, clunking heads like it’s no tomorrow. I mean, it wouldn’t be like this if you weren’t a little bitch and accepted my gorgeous charms the moment we first met, but hey, you’re stubborn. I like that. It just means that you’re still up on your high horse when you’re obviously being manipulated. Ah, whatever, Komaeda-kun. May the best man win!”

Komaeda simply looked down at him, face contorted in absolute disgust. “I’m still not shaking it.”

“Aw, how unsportsmanly of you! You’re such a brat! But, I shouldn’t delay your master plan any longer.” Monokuma disappeared out of thin air, only to instantly poof back into existence behind Komaeda, who half-heartedly turned around to give him one last look. “Au revoir, Komaeda-kun! See you on the other side- if I ever die, that is!”

Komaeda walked out the door without sparing him another word, even with Monokuma’s robotic arm making unbearably annoying noises as he persistently waved it in his direction. The door shut behind him, leaving Monokuma standing alone in the room of someone who’d never return to it.
“Upupupupu, suckeeeeeer.”

A part of Komaeda highly regretted not shaking Monokuma’s paw.

He couldn’t play nice with the enemy as if this were just a friendly match of table-tennis, but there was something symbolic in what Monokuma requested that made his pale, pink lips turn into a flashy, toothy grin once he knew he was out of sight, made him chuckle as he stepped into the warehouse, carefully setting up a train of standees of the same bear with an oil lighter to punctuate it all, and made the naturally smooth skin of his face wrinkle and drip sweat and even drool onto his neck as he laid himself down, tied his limbs to rope, and smoothed some tape over his mouth. He couldn’t feel any sense of glee or poetic justice after that, because his brain couldn’t stop focusing on the extremely unpleasant pain he was inflicting across his entire body in the form of slashes and gouges, but everything leading up to it was sheer ecstasy.

Everyone on the island save for one represented despair, and Komaeda was going to stop all of them at once, or so he thought. Not only was he going to exterminate those who had essentially destroyed the world and all of its hope with their actions, but he was going against the very concept of despair itself. Monokuma’s plan was to bring the world despair, and Komaeda’s was to bring the world hope. All the horrid feelings that came with having the way you viewed the world shattered only allowed for the side of Komaeda he had repressed for so long to come forward. It was the Komaeda that wanted to be a hero himself rather than just a simple tool for those he considered to be worthier than him, the Komaeda that wanted to accomplish something and actually be recognized for it after all those years of failing and being ridiculed for it, and the Komaeda that wanted to do something good by using his luck, not his luck doing something good by using him.

One might say that it’s sort of a waste to long for the role of a hero if you’re not even going to be alive to reap the benefits of it, but Komaeda knew if he lived he would still be causing the world misery. His morals assured him he deserved to die just as much as everyone else he was planning on taking with him, and he really had no problems with that because living hadn’t been all that fun for over a decade.

Komaeda’s last thought was that he was feeling a bit hungry.
Komaeda gets the opportunity of a lifetime handed to him, and it's slightly hard for him to handle.

Komaeda stopped dead in his tracks as the full view of Hope’s Peak Academy’s entrance stood before him. It was just a building, of course. From the exterior, there wasn’t anything necessarily special about it, but the aura it radiated could only be described as powerful, especially in the eyes of one very enthusiastic fan of the establishment.

It had all really felt like a dream. One minute, Komaeda was having a doctor sugar coat the preparations he’d need to take in order to face oncoming death, and the next he was holding an acceptance letter for the school he revered in his hands, hardly being able to register the words on the slip of paper. He felt ashamed, almost baffled that they would want someone like him to attend the school, even if the title of Super High School Level Good Luck was a fairly honored tradition, but after calling the admissions office and even talking to the headmaster himself, he had no choice but to accept that he was actually welcomed there. It was decided; He was going to pack up all his bags and live his dream.

The wind blew against Komaeda’s face, blowing back his unruly white curls and stirring a few pebbles around his feet. He heard warm and friendly voices around him, laughs shared by friends over inside jokes and the smooth articulation of third years giving advice to their underclassmen.

Komaeda’s eyes searched the window panes of the building. He was aware of how unlikely the situation would be, but the thought of Jin Kirigiri staring down at the crowd of students entering the building and pondering all of the hopeful possibilities the school year would bring caused a thumping sound in his ear. He clutched his bag to his chest, bottom lip quivering in excitement.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to meet your expectations of me, Headmaster,” he whispered, “But, I’ll try to make you proud all the same....for the sake of hope…”

A group of girls that were walking by at that moment turned their heads more conspicuously than they intended too. Once Komaeda smiled curtly in their direction, they quickly went back to their previous discussion, feigning innocence.

Komaeda hoped he’d be able to make them proud too.
“Listen, Koichi, I know that by bringing in kids with spectacular talents, we’re setting ourselves up for some...eccentrics, but I didn’t expect to have so many problem children this year.”

Kizakura shrugged, throwing his empty beer can behind him and into the recycling. “It wasn’t my original idea to look for Yakuza members. Besides, just because some of them are a little rowdy doesn’t mean they’re problematic. Kids like Akane-san and Nidai-kun are just meant to be outdoors on the track field, I suppose.”

“I’m not talking about them.”

“Oh,” Kizakura said, getting the clue very quickly. “Well, Jin, I don’t know why you’re telling me this. My job isn’t to pick the lottery winners. That would...you know, completely defeat the purpose of a lottery.” He chuckled at his own remark, leaning back in his chair and crossing one leg over the other.

“I just think that since we’ve been friends for so long, I should be able to voice any concerns with you. After all, it would be unprofessional for me to bad mouth any students to my more distant colleagues, let alone my inferiors.”

“Just because we’re friends doesn’t mean I don’t work for you.” Kizakura reached for another beer can resting on the glass coffee table, but quickly retracted his hand once he saw the cautionary look Jin was giving him. “But seriously, what did the ol’ rascal do this time? Does Yukizome want him in for another visit?”

Jin leaned over on his elbows and intertwined his fingers, bringing his mouth down to the ball of appendages and nibbling on one. “I don’t know. I have to mark down all disciplinary visits here on his transcript, and I don’t want the Steering Committee on my case again. They don’t want any slights on the school’s reputation, including any misfit students. Every time I mention our lottery around them nowadays, they all look at me as if it’s the biggest mistake I’ve ever made.”

“I mean, I can’t say they don’t have a point...I’d hate to expel any students. Especially in that Komaeda kid’s case, it’s not like he has anywhere left to go at this point, but remember, this is only his first year here. If his little stunts were to get any worse, then-”

“I still couldn’t expel him,” Jin interjected, “Out of all the Super High School Level Good Lucks this academy has accepted, there had never been one that had a power that operates like an actual force before him! It’s positively magnificent, and on top of how intelligent that boy really is, he’s too extraordinary to just throw away like he’s rubble.”
“Hmm, okay, but what if his talent is the cause of something? Parents struck by a meteor, multiple records of previous injuries acquired in freak accidents, and two terminal illnesses at the age of sixteen don’t give you just a bit of the heebie-jeebies? His personality aside, aren’t you worried about what could possibly happen with him mixed up with hundreds of students and faculty members just because of his luck? I would think that would do a lot more damage to your conviction that it actually is a talent than him doing something on his own.”

Jin’s head sunk. “I...don’t know, but I’m not going to stop believing in his talent for something that hasn’t even happened yet.”

“I respect that,” Kizakura smirked, deciding to press the waters with an even more delicate topic. “Regardless of what Komaeda’s done or has yet to do, he sure has a lot of love for everything about this place. His classmates, his teachers, basically the whole concept of it. It’s like a religion. You think all that trauma he experienced as a kid has kind of turned him into a born-again Christian?”

Jin shrugged. “Maybe. In that case, it makes his constant self-deprecation even sadder. Imagine dedicating yourself to a belief system that can’t even lift yourself up. Meanwhile, he seems to be willing to do just doing anything for the school. I know he comes from a rich background, but the amount of money he’s given us in donations is obscene, and don’t get me started on how much he reveres all of the other talented kids. I heard a juvenile rumor spreading around that he...uh, he sneaks into the library past curfew to give...sexual favors...to the other students and even some teachers for free. I wonder if he’s aware of them.”

Kizakura’s eyes darted back and forth. He honestly wouldn’t have been surprised if those rumors turned out to be true. “Do you think there’d be anything to give him a self-esteem boost?”

“I don’t know. It might do him well to make some friends, but he’s totally convinced that he’s lower than everyone else here. I would nudge his classmates to be more friendly with him, but he’s just so... difficult that I feel like I’d be too unfair in doing so. It’s a shame. I know that he wants some sort of positive attention. If he didn’t, he would have turned down the decision to come here in the first place. I don’t want to take advantage of his admiration of this academy, but, well, it seems like it might be the only way to get him to buck up.”

“Say,” Kizakura started, the word coming out as a drawl. “He’s not the only student in this school who has spirit. There’s the kid that you were considering for the Project. Hajime Hinata, from the reserve course, right?”

Jin’s hair bristled at the word “project.” The very mention of it excited him, but talking about it left a nasty taste on his tongue, especially around someone he’d consider a friend. “That’s right. He gained
a bit of notoriety for being the one student admitted into the reserve course who was outwardly
genuine in his application. You can tell what kids just wanted to get in for the sake of saying that
they went to an elite high school, but Hinata was positively brimming with the desire to be at the top,
even if he wouldn’t admit it- well, at least not until I talked to him myself. I was thoroughly
impressed. His family isn’t necessarily rich, so it must have meant a lot to him to pay so much.”

“It’s a pretty interesting turn of events for a department that was only established to pay off all of our
expenses, wouldn’t you think?”

Jin snorted. “Yeah, definitely. Why’d you mention him in the first place?”

“I was just thinking that he and Komaeda might get along. Two Hope’s Peak fanboys would sure
have a lot to talk about. They could share...I don’t know, what would you call it? Lore?”

Jin sat on the thought for a moment. Of course, he couldn’t imagine them being best friends. Hinata,
for as much as he loved Hope’s Peak, was a relatively normal and average guy in personality. Him
befriending any of the absolutely bizarre main course students as hard to believe, let alone the
resident troublemaker. And Komaeda was willing to put himself down for not having a talent, then
coming face to face with one of his own kind could take a turn for the worst. Nevertheless,
Kizakura’s comparison was completely accurate. “Possibly. I don’t know how’d they mix together.”

“Ah, you’re right. It’s still up in the air. After all, Komaeda might just want to take Hinata’s spot as
Hope’s Peak’s new ‘it’ boy, wouldn’t he? I mean, his brain’s already changing as we speak…”
Kizakura met Jin’s eyes. His friend wasn’t laughing. He coughed into his hand, trying to lighten the
mood. “Hah, Jin, you know I’m not serious, right? We don’t need more people tangled up in this
mess.”

“Yeah….” Jin muttered. A lightbulb was flashing in his mind. It was so bright that he wondered if
Kizakura could see it too. “We don’t.”

The icy wind blew Koizumi’s short, red hair behind her, making her ears go numb along with her
fingers, cheeks, and nose. Her photography always came first on her list of priorities, but she was
seriously questioning her decision to work a few hours overtime developing the previous week’s
worth of photos in the black room with how cold the autumn evening air was.

The gust picked up, squealing as it ripped through the air. A few raindrops pattered on her hair. She
needed to get back to her dorm. *Fast*. 
As if mother nature was begging her to stay outdoors, she stumbled over a rock. She thankfully didn’t fall on the pavement herself, but the same couldn’t be said for all the photographs she was carrying in her hands. “Goddammit,” she murmured, almost feeling tempted to scream it, leaning down to gather all of her belongings. When she looked back up, an unfamiliar figure of a man was kneeling in front of her.

“Can I help ya, miss?” he offered, his voice dangerously warm. Koizumi squinted to get a better look at him. He wasn’t in a uniform, nor was his clothing professional enough to belong to one of the teachers. The sharpness of his jawline and the unkempt stubble around his chin signified that he was an adult, and definitely not from the school.

“No, I think I’m fine,” Koizumi said, standing up and trying to maneuver around him. He shot out his arm to the side, making her stop before she could duck underneath.

He tried to close in on her, placing his hands on her shoulders. The man had gloves on, but she still shivered under his grasp. “Hey, hey, hey, what’s the rush? You know, I really admire students like you. This place is the real deal. The boys here must be real intellectuals as well, huh? Good conversation partners? Maybe a bit more thoughtful in bed?”

“Let me go, and get off this campus.”

“Oooh, you’re a feisty one, aren’t you? Much more mature than the average teenager. Aren’t you looking for someone older than you-”

Koizumi jammed her foot into the man’s shoe, the distraction allowing her to break free of his grasp and run in the opposite direction. It would be easy. She’d go find one of the security guards who’d surely have to be on duty, and everything would be over. She heard the man yell after her, throwing epithets like stones. What worried her the most was the hastening sound of footsteps. *I just wanted to finish developing my photos.*

In an instant, Koizumi was intercepted by another body. There was no way the intruder could have caught up to her that fast. This was confirmed, as when arms flipped her around so that her back was nestled up to a man’s torso, she still saw the man running toward her. Before she could move, long and cold fingers pushed up her chin so that another hand could hold a *very* sharp pocket knife to her neck, gently nestling it into the ridges of her throat.

“W-What the-!” she tried to shout, but she couldn’t make any sudden moves. However, at least she knew that whoever was holding her was not affiliated with the first guy in any way, because he screeched to a halt, reflexively putting his palms out in front of him.
“Hey, who are-”

“It’s quite foolish for adults to come here for the sake of preying on girls, isn’t it?” her captor teased. Koizumi instantly recognized that husky, androgynous voice. “You were easily able to trick the rookie security guards into thinking that you were simply a doting parent looking after your child. After all, it’s not like cruising has ever been a problem here. Ah, how sad.”

Koizumi could see the bones of the man’s fingers tighten up at the remark, conflicted on whether to bolt the hell out of there or defend his last shreds of dignity. “You can’t judge me! You’ve got a knife to her neck! Are you a student here too?!”

Komaeda leaned forward and rested his chin on Koizumi’s shoulder, the soft exhale out of his nose tickling her cheek. She wanted to backhand him. “Of course I am! And I know that Koizumi-san over here is the cream of the crop when it comes to girls. Ah, if only we could choose our mate here as opposed to having them simply passed around. The casualness of it has its perks, but as someone hunting for a catch in his late 30s, you must also want the satisfaction of something long-lasting, don’t-”

“Oh my fucking god, this school’s basically a sex cult! You people are freaks!” The man turned tail and disappeared into the darkness and out of sight, hopefully leaving the grounds with the intention of never returning.

Koizumi felt the knife being lifted from the soft flesh of her neck, being free of Komaeda’s grasp. She looked up at his face and, sure enough, he was smiling jovially. “Good work, Koizumi-san! You played the role of the innocent sex slave very well! Now that sick pervert will never come ba-”

Koizumi actually did backhand him, leaving him dazed, a few steps behind where he was standing just a moment ago. The way he innocently rubbed the spot on his cheek where the hand came into contact with made it clear what his intentions were. “Are you crazy?! I was going to run for help!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, did I do something wrong?”

“Like hell you did! If you had a knife on you, why didn’t you just attack him instead of making up lies of me being the school’s resident whore?! One false move and that thing could have decapitated me!”
“I’m sorry, I was just trying to prove how confident you are in these sorts of situations. It would pain me if I took all the glory as the man who saved you from distress…”

“I wasn’t confident! I was having a knife held to my throat.” Koizumi sighed. Trying to explain reasonable logic to Komaeda was like teaching a brick wall how to dance. “Whatever. I’m going to my dorm. See you in class tomorrow.”

“Bye,” Komaeda said, but Koizumi already had her back to him.

Komaeda sat impatiently in the headmaster’s office, watching Jin pace back and forth intently. Usually when he was called in, he would get a spiel about how he should think before he acts with a short nod on how he shouldn’t be so hard on himself, the appointment only taking about 15 minutes in total. People wouldn’t call Komaeda emotionally intelligent, but he was perceptive enough to know that this was different.

“...did Koizumi-san report me?”

Jin fazed back into reality, slightly flustered at how easily he startled. “Koizumi? Oh, no, she didn’t report anything. I heard about it, naturally, but...you’re not in trouble for that. Don’t worry.”

Komaeda smiled, releasing the breath that was caught in his chest in relief. “I’m very thankful for that, Headmaster. But, if that isn’t being made an issue, then why am I here in the first place? Did I perhaps do something else to get myself in trouble? My sincerest apologies if that’s the case. I mess things up just by existing.”

Jin scratched his head, trying to relieve the headache Komaeda’s self-directed insults always managed to cause. Maybe this was the right decision after all. “No, no, no. You got it all wrong, Komaeda-kun. I didn’t call you in here because you’re in trouble. Quite the opposite, actually. I have a very promising offer for you. I hope you’ll hear me out.”

“A-An offer? For me? I’m...well, Headmaster, I’m actually shocked.” Komaeda chuckled nervously, trying to relieve the tension that was swarming through his nervous system. “I’m interested though. What’s it about?”

“Well, hmm, where to begin, Komaeda-kun! You’re such a...passionate person, so full of love for the things you care about. You’ve told me on numerous occasions that you’d do absolutely everything for the sake of hope, haven’t you?”
“Yes, even face the cold hands of death!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, you just went from zero to one-hundred pretty quickly. But, I guess that’s actually fitting for what my proposition is.”

“You’re offering me to...die?” Komaeda’s eyebrow quirked. “I mean, I’ll definitely take it, but that’s quite bold of a headmaster to ask of one of his students. You could be sued for a lot of money, don’t you think?”

“I’m not offering you the chance to die, Komaeda-kun. I’m offering you the chance to start your life all over again.”

“What do you mean?”

Jin was having a hard time speaking to Komaeda face to face, especially when he had to be straightforward. He walked over to the window where the sun was shining in so that his headspace could be cleared. “You know how much we value talent here at Hope’s Peak, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“As expected of someone like you, though pretty much everyone in the country knows that it’s pretty much our foundation. However, things have been at a...standstill lately. We’ve been looking for new ways to foster talent- or rather, cultivate it.”

“Cultivate it? You mean creating it for yourself?”

“That’s precisely it! But as you know, the methods of it aren’t as lighthearted and inspiring as the press wants. You know more than anyone else that talent is predetermined. Sure, an effort can help, but someone who has no inherent skill won’t be able to reach the top. But, what if there was another way to go about it? If the neurological structure of the brain can be changed, then wouldn’t that impact their capacity for talent as well? If we’re able to give every talent we can think of to someone purely through medical means, I think we’d have a being good enough to call the Ultimate Hope, don’t you think?”

Jin looked back at Komaeda in hopes of seeing that usually excited glimmer in the corner of his eyes, sometimes accompanied by a misty green fog in the whites of them. He was only met with a
downright anxious expression. Komaeda’s cheeks sank like a puppy. “Headmaster, you couldn’t possibly be suggesting something like a lobotomy. T-That’s just an insult to the very concept of hope itself!”

“Oh, wow. I didn’t expect you to think about it that way. It’s just—”

“True hope comes not just from talent, but from a strong will as well. If someone were to just be hope without overcoming any despair...well, they’d just be a complete fraud. Nothing but a cheap imitation.”

Jin was losing his confidence. As much as he was intimidated by Komaeda’s strong convictions, he was still above him. Komaeda was well aware of that too. So, hesitantly, he stepped away from the window, keeping his eyes on the other side of the room as he felt Komaeda’s almost hurt eyes on him every waking second. He circled behind the couch, leaning over the back of it to make sure he didn’t seem too tall in comparison to his seated student.

“Headmaster...?” Komaeda tried to look behind him, but one glance at Jin’s unnerving smile was enough for him to turn away.

“Are you sure about that, Komaeda-kun? Are you sure that someone who acquired talent through a lobotomy would really be just a fraud? Think about it. There’s nothing saying that they’ll just sit around and do nothing after the procedure happens. They’ll get to overcome all the despair in the world. They’d be a hero- the greatest hero, really. Who doesn’t want to be a hero?”

“I never wanted to be a hero.”

“Never? Not even when you were a child? You’ve never wished to be one of the good guys that everyone seems to root for?”

“Sure I have, but at the end of the day, those were just...childish dreams. I’ve matured enough to know that I’ll never be—”

“See! That’s where you’re wrong. You’re holding yourself back. And perhaps, as it is, your luck is the only thing you have worth calling a talent, but that’s absolutely wonderful on its own! I’ve tried to tell you this so many times, and you just don’t think so. It’s not enough for you, is it?”
Jin’s shadow swallowed Komaeda’s whole. Komaeda nervously fidgeted with his hands in his lap, opening his mouth in preparation for when he finally formulated his words. “…No. It’s not enough.”

“Exactly. Now, Komaeda-kun, I’m not trying to force you into this or anything. After all, lobotomies are pretty serious, as you would guess. If I had a better way of going about it, I would. But…it’s just something to think about since you’re always so miserable about yourself. Just take this into consideration, okay? But, if you’re going to be looked into, then you have to make the decision quick. Come back here Friday afternoon at the same time if you’ve agreed to it. If you decide not to come, I’ll never bother you about this issue ever again.”

Komaeda shuddered. He suddenly began to feel a sense of nausea stirring in his stomach.

“Oh, and one more thing. Don’t tell anyone about this meeting or what was said during it. You’re loyal, so I trust you, but I just wanted to make that clear.

Komaeda laid on his bed spread-eagled, back sinking into the mattress. He watched the fan languidly spin above him, hardly powerful enough to create a light breeze. He wanted to do something to quell his chest of the unbearable tightness he felt, but his brain wasn’t transferring any strength to his limbs.

A part of him felt betrayed. How could someone he admired so much come up with such an outrageous plan? Out of all the people to choose from, why would he consider Komaeda of all people? Did he really think he was that shameless as to let his selfish desires get the better of him? Jin wasn’t standing inappropriately close to him, but he could still feel his warm breath down his neck, enticing him along with a friendly smile and a ruse of companionship. It would be better to alert someone about this, but knowing everything, the ranks of people involved in the experiment probably only got higher.

Komaeda heard a knock at the door. With more effort than it should have taken, he pushed himself up on his feet, shuffled over, and opened it to see Tsumiki holding a bag in front of her.

“Oh, Tsumiki-san, what would make you come to my dorm at this hour?”

“S-Sorry if I’m bothering you, b-but the nurse asked me to give you this. I-I wasn’t supposed to look inside, so don’t worry if something really embarrassing!” She shoved her arms out in front of her, dipping her head down so that her plum-colored strands of hair would fall over her face. Komaeda took the bag from her and she instantly scampered down the hallway like a timid mouse.
Komaeda shook his head in pity at how disorderly she appeared and then ducked back inside, putting the bag of mystery items on top of his desk. He’s had things given to him by the nurse, and none of them have been all that pleasant, but he’s never had a special delivery before.

He opened up the bag, the first content he noticed being a slip of paper. He unfolded it, finding that it was a note, obviously written in a rush with how scrawled the handwriting was.

**Komaeda Nagito-kun,**

*I’m very busy with patients this week, and since I was just planning to see you for a refill, I thought it would be best to have Tsumiki-san deliver your medications to you herself. If you have any trouble applying the shot, please visit my office. Also, swing by if you get into any minor altercations again, as that’s been your most recorded reason for visiting since you’ve been here.*

Komaeda tossed the note to the side, sighing. Guess even the nurse was tired of seeing him. He dug through the bag and found his ten respective bottles of pills lined on the side, picking them out one by one and setting them down on the desk. He then took out the packet with the syringe and medicine meant to go in it. It wasn’t something he was originally prescribed, but the school’s health department had decided it had some special chemical that could potentially deal with his rotting brain and his rotting lymph nodes simultaneously. It was recommended that he shoot himself up with it twice a day, with breakfast and with dessert. Komaeda grimaced. He had inflicted stuff on himself before, but doing it to keep himself *alive* made him want to throw up. Surely, it was no way to live.

Komaeda threw the syringe in the trash, didn’t take any of his other pills, and went to bed. It was only 8:30 at night.

One thing that frontotemporal dementia causes is an increase an impulsivity. Sure, Komaeda seemed fine in the organizational skills department. He could properly plan a sequence of events, could solve a logical problem better than anyone else in his class, and had a working memory (at least for the time being), but anything having to do with proper decision-making, emotional regulation, and self-control was nearly fried. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why Komaeda decided to go to Jin’s office on Friday afternoon, or maybe he just didn’t want to live the rest of his life as a vegetable coked up on chemotherapy.

Regardless of the reason, Komaeda still had a hard time walking up the headmaster’s door, an even harder time placing his hand on the door knob, and the absolute hardest time working up the gumption to actually walk inside. Jin’s eyes went wide when he saw him, but softened into a pleasantly surprised smile. Only five seconds later did Komaeda realize it wasn’t the only pair of eyes on him.
Wake Up, Get On, Get Out There

Chapter Summary

Waking up from a coma to find out you have another chance at life has never been so miserable.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Komaeda felt wet, a gelatinous substance encapsulating all of him except for the tips of his toes and an oval on his face that consisted of his eyes, nose, and mouth. His eyelids fluttered open, revealing a great expanse of white light above him. It was as bright as the sun. Looking at it would surely blind him, but his eyes wouldn’t even squint.

From the light fell specks of pale blue, all neatly cut into little diamond shapes. Komaeda lifted his arm above him, residue of the liquid trailing down his fingers and splashing back into the pool he was laying in with little blips. Six little specks fell into the palm of his hand. He instinctively wrapped his hand around them like a venus fly trap, only to feel nothing. Golden shimmers leaked out of the creases where his fingers had folded in on themselves. Komaeda felt his throat tighten despite not even knowing what he was reaching out for.

And then everything went black.

“Hey…”

Komaeda could only see darkness. His face wrinkled around his eyes, a defined line forming between his brows. He thrashed his head to the side. Just five more minutes of sleep was all he needed, no different from when he was a little boy starting kindergarten. Whatever this new alarm clock was, Komaeda didn’t like it.

“Hey….can you hear me…?”

Komaeda wanted to say that, yes, he could hear him quite fine, but he’d forgotten how to speak. Even figuring out how to open his eyes was a hassle, but he could hear just fine, and he could distinguish that voice- that rough, boyish voice that reeked of never fully getting out of puberty- from the rest of the noise around him. There was the humming of machines, the click-clacking of fingers
on a computer keyboard, but that voice stuck out like an old friend’s shout right as you come out of an airport gate.

After a moment’s concentration, he was able to find where his eyelids were, blinking them open. The ceiling above him was dark and dull. The lime green light that seemed to be surrounding him faintly revealed the outline of some pipes. And then there was the source of the voice- two eyes piercing him gently from above, one a mix of bright, heroic gold and puke green, and the other bright red like an animatronic.

Those eyes widened at the same time Komaeda’s widened, the man they were attached to sitting up from his leaning position and looking away, his hand folded over his mouth to hold back the immense swell of relief, doubt, and nausea that built up inside of him.

“Oh my god, you’re awake, you’re really awake…I...wow…”

Komaeda’s breath felt caught in his throat, jumbled up among all the dust and cobwebs that accumulated after not using it for weeks- months, even. The low murmur of his voice was cracked and hoarse, but that didn’t stop him.

“H-Hinata-kun…?”

Hinata’s head snapped back to the reality that the person he was sitting in front of just got out of a coma. He reached out his arms, not knowing where to grab, or if he even wanted to grab anywhere, so he embarrassingly brought them to his lap, his palms cupping his knees and digging into the fabric of his jeans. “Uh, hi, Komaeda. I don’t really know what to say.”

Komaeda didn’t either. He didn’t know where he was, or what he was doing, or looking back on it, why he was even alive in the first place. “I don’t know what to say either,” he blurted out, his tongue finally beginning to loosen from the knot it had been in. “I have one question, though.”

Hinata didn’t know what to expect. He flicked his hand outward to signal that really anything would go at that point. “Hit me with your best shot.”

“Am I in the afterlife? This place doesn’t look anything like the real world, and if you and I are both here, then that must mean we’re both dead. We’re in Hell, at the hands of myself, right? Everyone but the traitor is here, right?”
“Well...you got the last thing right.” Hinata stood up from his chair, sticking his arm out for Komaeda to presumably grab on to. Komaeda raised his left arm first, only to realize that he couldn’t feel any form of a hand. He looked at it to see nothing more than a stump, a bandage wrapped right around the tip of it. Hinata sighed and took his right hand in his own without having to tell Komaeda otherwise, pulling him up into a sitting position, then a standing one. Komaeda felt his legs wobble, but he didn’t fall.

“It’s late. Let’s get you to bed. I’ll explain this all in the morning.”

“Aw, but I just woke up, didn’t I?”

Komaeda was brought to a bed, a hospital bed, and it was only then that he recognized the distinct scent of antiseptics, especially as he stepped into the communal shower and let the thick air waft chemicals into his nose. Hinata had him change into a hospital gown that he remembered sweating buckets into not long ago. He frowned. This was definitely not Hell.

He opened the door to the room and Hinata was leaning on the wall outside of it, head bobbing up and down with exhaustion. His weary eyes met Komaeda’s exasperated ones and he instantly knew that Komaeda had figured it out.

“You’re all washed up,” he said, playing dumb. “I’m going to be asleep in the next room. I know it’s kind of weird, but I can’t really leave you by yourself-”

“Explain,” Komaeda said, the quietness of his voice not making it seem less of a demand.

“Goddammit, not tonight,” Hinata spat, more to himself than anything. “I don’t have the energy for this.”

Komaeda took slow, concentrated steps across the hall until the tip of his nose was nearly pressing against Hinata’s, leaning his forearm on the wall vertically. The hospital gown fell over his shoulder, loosely revealing his collarbones. His left side was still open. Hinata had an easy chance to escape, but he stayed where he was, crossing his arms over his chest and pretending not to be just the slightest bit petrified.

Komaeda lowered his voice, the words drawing out like a whisper. “Explain to me why you’re alive. Explain to me why I’m alive. Explain to me why...” The tension in his limbs dissipated. His fingers lingered on the wall before they felt very heavy and crashed back down to his side. “Just explain everything, Kamukura-kun. Please?”
Hinata huffed, his head hanging down. He pointed back into the room, to the bed next to the windowsill. “Sit down. This is going to take a while.”

He told Komaeda everything from how his trial ended to the reality of the whole killing game being nothing more than a simulation, and how the Future Foundation were keeping them and the rest of the remnants on the true Jabberwock Island until further notice, hopefully rehabilitating for real this time.

And that was that. Hinata left Komaeda in stunned silence to finally go to sleep, but both of them knew that neither of them would be getting any shut-eye that night. Komaeda scanned the countless cabinets in the room for something useful, but all the sharp objects and various other pokers and pinchers were nowhere to be found. If anything, Hinata probably already disposed of them. Sure he was dense, but he had enough brain cells to know that Komaeda and weaponry went together like Souda and tanks.

Komaeda fell asleep on his side, gripping the sheets underneath him so hard his knuckles turned a lighter shade of white than they already were.

“Come on, Komaeda,” Hinata groaned, ready to snatch the pillow out from under Komaeda’s head and smack him with it. “Everyone’s waiting at the restaurant. Now that you’re awake, we have a lot of shit to go over.”

Komaeda hummed, rolling over so that his nose was touching the wall. Hinata was only able to see the white wisps of his hair that poked out from the blanket. “You guys never seemed to mind discussing things without me before. What makes this time any different?”

“Because we’re not in the program anymore. Things are different now.”

“So are you just going to move on? As if nobody’s done anything wrong? As if nothing ever happened between us?” Komaeda traced the little indents in the wall with his finger, trying to find a pathway to nowhere.

“You know that’s not what I mean. I know you don’t like it, but you’re one of us and you’re going to have to accept it.”

“No one besides you thinks that way.”
“And why would you say that?”

Komaeda tilted his head backwards so that the two were making eye contact. “Well, where is everyone else? Why weren’t they waiting beside my pod so attentively as I finally regained my senses? Why does it seem like you haven’t even told them I’m awake yet? Could it be that-” Komaeda inhaled sharply, trying to mimic a gasping sound—“they don’t want me around? Come to think of it, do you even want me here? Or are you just taking the role of the helpful sacrifice?

“I’m not—” Hinata stopped himself mid-sentence. The argument was not going to go anywhere. All it would do is loop around back to the undeniable fact that Komaeda didn’t want to be anywhere than six feet underground. “Fine. I get it. You’re not ready to face reality. A lot of us weren’t. But you will at some point. Mark my words.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Komaeda mumbled as Hinata shut the door. He rolled over on his back so that he was facing the ceiling. The fan was so hyperactive it made him uncomfortable. He missed being in a coma really badly.

Hinata sat at the restaurant table. Those who were there—the rest of the survivors, and everyone else save for Tsumiki, Koizumi, Tanaka, and Pekoyama—were idly chatting around him, taking note of his tired state. It was all small talk, as if it was a regular summer day. Nidai and Akane were playfully arm wrestling, Saionji and Kuzuryuu were awkwardly disagreeing with each other over certain foods, and Mioda was grasped onto the Imposter’s side like a fluffy vice. Everything was perfectly normal.

“Komaeda woke up last night,” Hinata blurted out, swallowing the last bits of his food along with his soul.

The activities of the room froze. A bit of soup dripped out of Souda’s mouth and on to his bright neon jacket. Teruteru dropped the metal tray he was holding, the bowls and cups cracking upon impact to the floor, their contents spilling everywhere.

“Oh,” Sonia said. Her dainty smile couldn’t conceal how rigid she sat, her arms clenched to her sides. “Was he perhaps not feeling very hungry?”

“No,” Hinata answered, nonchalantly. “Not really. I’ll bring him back stuff for later.”

Kuzuryuu bolted out of his seat, slamming his hands down on the table authoritatively. “You think
that’s the important part?! Where the hell is he?"

“In the hospital. He’s sleeping...hopefully.”

“Hopefully?” Souda slapped his hand to his face, lifting his sock hat a bit further up on his forehead. “Dude, why’d you leave him alone?!”

“Because,” Hinata spat. “I haven’t eaten in a day and I’m not about to haul out someone who’s picking fights not even 12 hours after finally seeing the light of day over here by force when I know all of you guys would just go into one big conniption fit, okay?” Souda and Kuzuryuu were silent. “I’m sorry for being irresponsible. Here, I’m finished- I’ll go back to the hospital, try to force feed him some soup, and maybe he’ll finally say hi in the next six weeks.” Hinata stood up and went over to the counter to get another tray, not wanting any more attention.

“Thanks for volunteering yourself,” the Imposter commented as Hinata approached the door. “It’s very honorable considering it’s not the easiest position to take on.”

“Don’t act like I’m making a sacrifice,” Hinata said before making his exit.

The others were right to be disappointed with Hinata, because Komaeda wasn’t going to let himself rot starving in a hospital bed. There had to be other, more efficient ways to deal with his situation. He wasn’t in tip-top condition, but he could walk and open doors, and that was enough.

While all the buildings were perfect replicas, the atmosphere of the real Jabberwock Island was nothing like in the simulation. The Neo World Program was the perfect artificial island experience. The sky was always a bright blue, the air crisp and pleasant. The real sky was a swampy green, shrouded by grey clouds that couldn’t decide whether to rain or not, and the air was disgustingly wet and humid. It was especially uncomfortable against Komaeda’s already slick skin.

Komaeda considered throwing himself into the ocean, but forcing oneself to drown isn’t very easy, and the thought of getting hundreds and thousands of tiny grains of sand in his slippers wasn’t all that appealing. He could go to the military base, maybe get a bunch of actual bombs to make his previous bluff of destroying the island a reality. There was no traitor anymore, so no one’s life worth considering.

He decided to go to the library to get a book instead. Things like suicide and murder take effort along with some kind of driving emotion like anger, sadness, or hysteria. Komaeda was all of those things, but above all, he was exhausted. There was no exciting killing game to lift his spirits up. It was just a
boring day that would probably turn into a boring week, and then into a boring month, and maybe if Komaeda was able to hold out long enough, a boring year.

The library could at least keep him occupied, but the selection in the real library was much more outdated than the fake one, all the interesting books covered in layers of dust. Reading was only enjoyable if you could actually distinguish the words on the paper.

“Um, Komaeda-san…”

Komaeda turned. At the end of the row he was scouring through, Sonia stood with her legs perfectly together, hands folded over one another at her waist.

Komaeda knew why she was talking to him, but he didn’t understand it. “Do you need something?”

Sonia was taken aback. She tried to make some sort of imposing gesture, as if to show she meant boss, but couldn’t. Komaeda had seen her at her most demanding, typically yelling at Souda for being absolutely pathetic, but that’s because she wasn’t afraid of him. On the other hand, she was definitely afraid of Komaeda. “Y-You’re not supposed to be exploring by yourself. We want to know your whereabouts at all times until we know you can be left to your own devices.”

“I was just trying to find some reading material. I can’t imagine you’d like it very much if you were confined to a little hospital room for breakfast.”

“Hinata-san implied earlier that you wouldn’t come to the restaurant even if he asked.”

“He’d be correct, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to go anywhere. It just means I don’t want to go anywhere with the likes of you guys.”

Sonia reached a pale hand up to her eye and swiped it with her thumb. Komaeda took a random book off the shelf to his right and walked toward her, slowly and cautiously. As he got closer, Sonia got smaller.

He held out the book in front of him. Sonia stared at him in confusion. “Here, do you want to read this? You must have come here for some reason, so let me give you a recommendation.”
Sonia took the book from him as if she was sure there was some sort explosive on it. She brushed some of the dust flakes off the cover to get a good look at the title. “How to Care for a Parent with Dementia…,” she said, stumbling over each word with a little squeak from the back of her throat. Something washed over her and she tossed the book to the side, crystal tears forming at the corners of her eyes and dripping down her cheeks.

Komaeda blinked. He was not equipped to deal with this. “Umm….”

“We didn’t think you’d ever wake up, Komaeda-san. The Future Foundation did x-rays...why didn’t you tell us about your conditions? You could have said something the very first day, and things would have been so much different.” She stopped talking to choke out a few sobs, using the collar of her shirt as a handkerchief. “We all should be glad that you’re awake, but you’ve made it so hard…”

Komaeda’s face sunk. His mouth, eyes, and cheeks all dropped into a frown in unison. “Sorry, Sonia-san, but I just couldn’t. It would take me a thousand years to explain all the reasons why…”

“You told Hinata-san. And then you took it back as if it were insignificant. How could you do something like that?” She stumbled a bit where she stood. If Komaeda wasn’t being reprimanded, he would have offered to use his shoulder as something to lean on. “When he found out the truth, he berated himself so much for not being able to see through your act...he felt so, so horrible.”

“Why...does that matter?”

“He worked so hard to ensure you eventually woke up. B-Before some of the others woke up...Kuzuryuu-san, Souda-san, and Owari-san suggested pulling the plug out of the outlet, as they say...you had such a low chance of survival, and forgive me for saying this, but could we really have carried your burden when we were already so stressed? Kuzuryuu-san even claimed that we’d be doing you a tremendous favor because all you wanted to do in the end was die, but...b-b-but…”

“But what, Sonia-san?”

“But Hinata-san wouldn’t let that happen! And...I wouldn’t either...s-so do as you’re told!” She stuck out her arm and pointed directly at Komaeda’s face, almost poking him in the eye. The light filtering in through the windows made her tear-stained face almost shine. “G-Go apologize to Hinata-san right now for leaving your room! A-And for not agreeing to come to breakfast earlier!”
Komaeda hummed, walking past Sonia and toward the library door. Sonia turned her head to follow his movements. He stopped short of the exit, ducking his head. “It’s so sad that I woke up before Tanaka-kun, isn’t it?”

As Komaeda walked back into the hospital, Hinata was walking out. With how fast the latter was walking, the two nearly collided. He was enraged, frantic, and about to punch Komaeda right on the spot.

“You!” he exclaimed, pointing a finger accusingly at Komaeda’s chest. Komaeda feigned innocence, pointing at himself and mouthing ‘me?’ for the sake of making fun of how obvious Hinata was being. “Yes, you, asshole. Get in here!”

Komaeda took one step forward so that he was, in fact, in the hospital. “Well, I’m here.”

“Don’t act like this is a joke! Where the hell have you been?!”

“At the library. I wanted to pick out a book to read but I couldn’t find anything. I also can’t find a clean change of clothes.”

“F-Fine! I’ll get that for you later. It’s just…” Hinata threw his hands up in the air, admitting defeat to himself. “You know what, why do I even bother? I shouldn’t have left you alone in the first place. I knew you’d just do something stupid…” He pointed behind himself with his thumb. “Just go back to your room. I set your breakfast on the counter.”

He expected Komaeda to go back to his room so the day could hopefully proceed as normal, but the scene didn’t change at all. Komaeda still stood directly in front of him like he couldn’t get the queue that the conversation was over.

“Sonia-san was at the library,” Komaeda said, “I heard all about how much you went through to keep me alive. She told me to apologize for giving you trouble.”

“So, are you?”

“No, I’m not, because you should have known better than to care about someone like me in the first place.” Komaeda pushed past Hinata without sparing him another glance. Hinata’s fists balled up in anger, but he couldn’t refute those words. Not yet. “But, I’ll participate in group activities. Just because I’m curious, you know? Now, are you staying to help me eat? Because I’m not used to
It happened two weeks later. Komaeda put his tray down where Teruteru had told everyone to drop them off. The little man in the hat was an open book. Komaeda could blink and he’d jump three feet into the air. “What a great dinner, Teruteru-kun. As expected of someone who once held the title of Super High School Level Chef. You probably wish the world would see you like that again, don’t you?” Komaeda flashed one of his signature bright smiles, sprinkling some malice over it. Teruteru gurgled.

“Hey, lay off him, will ya!” Kuzuryuu yelled from the table, slouched over. He took a swig of his water like he was drinking a beer. “If you keep purposely scaring the shit out of him like that, I will knock you on the head so hard that blood gushes out of your fucking toe.”

Komaeda snickered at the threat, winking at Teruteru. Souda nearly launched an entire glass at Komaeda’s head. “Goddammit,” he muttered, “Why is Hinata having me make him a cool robotic arm?”

“You are a mechanic,” Kuzuryuu said.

“And it is arguable that you treated him the worst out of everyone here,” Nidai added, “Your insults were sure excessive, and you even tied him up that one time…”

“Hey, you did that with me!”

Nidai laughed playfully at the remark. Giggles reverberated across the entire table. Even the Imposter, who never even got a chance to see the famed side of Komaeda everyone knew and hated, joined in. Beating up on Komaeda was like a funny inside joke, even to the man himself. If Hinata was there at the moment, he probably would have shut them down, but even then, the verbal punches were sometimes so accurate that he couldn’t come up with a reason to stop them. Komaeda agreeing to talk to the others was a step forward, but he wasn’t doing anything to earn back respect. All he did was remind everyone that they were, at one point, just as bad as him, if not worse.

But, since that day, Komaeda wasn’t their only problem. Hinata burst into the restaurant. He was so distressed that you could see an entire layer of sweat on his forehead. Everyone instantly knew what was going on.

The group had been working hard for the past few days to wake up Tsumiki. After Komaeda, it was like they couldn’t refuse to face anymore challenges. It was only Hinata’s luck that she woke up
during his shift. Mioda playfully slapped Hinata on the shoulder for being such a drama queen. Teruteru and the Imposter joked about it as well. It was only natural. Of course, they heard what happened. Mioda was even directly a part of it, however delirious she was when it occurred, but none of them could really believe the true state of Mikan Tsumiki until they actually saw it.

Everyone had woken up the way they were when they died in the program, so she would be the only one in despair. Some tried to be optimistic about the situation, but in the end, it was just as much of a nightmare to deal with as expected.

Nidai and Owari nearly tossed her lithe and rabid body down on the hospital bed, trying to pin her arms and legs to the point where she’d stop thrashing. Her hair was a mess, what used to be her supple skin was emaciated and bruised, and she had such little clothing on that all her scars were visible to anyone in the room.

“Let me go, let me go!” she wailed, her eyes wide and hungry. “If you are all here, then Junko-sama must be here too! I have to find her. I need her to drink all the false hope out of me and replace it was something wonderful.” Her words were slurred, like she was given a cocktail of vodka and aphrodisiacs.

Those who weren’t trying to keep her still watched attentively from the walls of the room. Saionji grimaced, crossing her arms over her chest. “Just euthanize her already. She’s better off dead!”

“Saionji-san!” Sonia gasped, folding her hands over her mouth.

“What? It’s true! We already have one shitty psychopath on our hands, but at least he’s acting like himself. She’s just gone off the deep end!”

“Saionji,” the Imposter said, “I know why you’re so upset, but if Teruteru and I can reach a common understanding, then so can—”

“Fuck that!” She stuck out her tongue. “At least Teruteru felt bad about it. Kuzuryuu, too, for getting Koizumi killed. I was close to trying to be nice to that piece of trash bitch-whore and look where that got me!”

Mioda scratched the back of her head. If one looked closely enough, they could see the faint residue of hair dye that had faded long before. “So this is the adorable Mikan-chan I once knew...I don’t know how I feel about this. I was all happy and stuff before, but now I feel kinda sick to my
Komaeda was leaning on the door frame, watching the scene unfold in front of his own two eyes. He felt like Darwin would have if he got the pleasure of seeing the whole world accept his theory of evolution. He smirked. “Do you get it now?” The bystanders turned toward him, some scowling, and some just apprehensive. “Do you finally understand why I’ve been, as you’ve all put it, bitching and moaning about this situation? The true state of Super High School Level Despair is revolting. Animalistic, even. If we were all gone, maybe the world would finally be able to move on, but as long as we keep living, the tragedy will never end.”

No one said anything, though Tsumiki shrieked something incomprehensible, trying to dig her sharp, thick fingernails into Owari’s forearm.

“I’m ashamed, especially with you five. You all saw Tsumiki-san in this state, but you chose to continue our lives anyway. I liked the Future Foundation better when they were trying to get us to kill each other.”

“Fuck off, asshole!” Owari yelled, her focus splitting in two. Komaeda shrugged and took his leave. He was moved to his own cabin a few nights ago. Might as well just lock himself up in there forever.

He was drifting off to sleep when he heard a knocking sound against wood. He staggered out of bed and opened the door. Hinata was on the other side, the surroundings so dark that at first glance Komaeda thought he was looking into a mirror.

“Hinata-kun, you have a cut on the side of your lip.”

“I know, jackass.”

A beat passed.

“Why are you here?” Komaeda asked.

Hinata sighed. “The others wanted me to tell you to go to hell.”
“Well, are you?”

“No, because I’m going to make you stay on this planet for as long as it takes for you to realize how much of an idiot you are.”

Komaeda grinned. “Is that a challenge?”

Tsumiki eventually came down from her post-awakening libido explosion, but she still wasn’t Tsumiki. There were no more stutters, no more tears, just laughs and snide remarks. If Komaeda didn’t refuse to talk to her out of his own moral convictions they’d find a friend in each other very easily.

Next was Tanaka, who’s awakening went extremely smoothly. Sonia leaped into his arms the moment he stood up, her tears wetting his scarf. He cried as well, if only because his hamsters never woke up. Even Souda reluctantly patted him on the back, trying to play tough for Sonia, but everyone could tell that he was happy he was alive. A death was a death, but him and Nidai were able to accept each other with no strings attached. It’s where the arranged battle came in handy. Even Owari was able to accept it given she had her best friend back by her side now.

That left Koizumi and Pekoyama. Pekoyama woke up first, her blank eyes scanning the people around her until they landed on Kuzuryuu. She instantly burst into a fit of happiness, and Kuzuryuu did too, throwing all of his dignity to the side. Saionji didn’t say anything to her until Koizumi woke up, eventually forcing her to at least acknowledge her presence. Koizumi wasn’t mad at Peko, she was just disappointed. All of her true anger was directed at Kuzuryuu, you stuck through all of her verbal abuses like a champ for days upon days until she finally broke down and couldn’t take it anymore.

And Komaeda just watched. They were all together again, just like they were at the very beginning of the simulation, when they all thought they were going to have a great, big field trip. Komaeda didn’t consider himself a part of the group then, and that didn’t change one bit.

Chapter End Notes

ahhhhh yeah, this was a doozy. hope you guys don't mind the non-linear storytelling. it won't get confusing, i promise. anyway, comments are encouraged! just thanks for reading in general. this is the first time i've been able to follow through with a multichap since like 2014 so everyone say congratulations
Hope's Peak Heroes

Chapter Summary

Let the competition begin!

Chapter Notes

hey y’all i know it's been three weeks but i went into a vegetative state over winter break so didn't really feel like writing. let me make up for the time with 8,000 words.

Komaeda dropped his bag in surprise. Jin scratched his head, grinning softly. The other student looked at Komaeda, then back at Jin, then at Komaeda again. He opened his mouth to say something, but Jin put his palm up at him before he could utter a single syllable, signaling to him that it's okay, I've got everything covered.

“Um.” Komaeda reached down to pick up his bag and slung it back over his shoulder. “I’m terribly sorry for disturbing you, Headmaster. Of course I’d make the childish mistake of forgetting to knock. I’ll take my leave now.”

“No, it’s quite alright, Komaeda-kun. This is what I was hoping would happen.” Komaeda shot Jin a quizzical look. “There were some parts of the project I had yet to tell you about. The truth of the matter is, you weren’t the only person considered for it.”

“W-Wait, hold up!” the other student said, bolting into a standing position. His voice cracked like an ugly bird. He audibly cursed himself for being so unprofessional as to slightly raise his voice, so he coughed into his hand to release some of the tension and sat back down again. “H-Headmaster, you told me that the decision was finalized. I mean, I don’t want to get ahead of myself or anything, but does this guy -” He turned to Komaeda, who was still lingering near the door. “Sorry, who are you again?”

“I should be asking you the same thing,” Komaeda said, crossing his arms.

Hinata eyes cooled for a moment before he went back to talking to Jin, flailing his arms around like he was stuck in a hurricane.
So Jin didn’t see him as the only option. It makes sense. It made even more sense that, judging by the monotonous and bland suit that the other student was wearing, he had considered a reserve course student. The main target for a talent cultivation experiment would obviously be someone who didn’t have a talent at all. Komaeda wanted to laugh. The poor little nobody wanted to be special, but Komaeda couldn’t judge. Not when he was in the same boat.

“-so, what I’m saying is that-”

“Hinata-kun, that’s enough,” Jin told him, talking like he was speaking to a rambunctious child that was coming up with excuses for why he couldn’t even pass health class. “I’ll explain everything if you’d just give me a moment.” He turned to Komaeda and made the “come here” gesture with his hand. Komaeda walked over to the couch, where Hinata had decisively stood up again with his shoulders back and chin up. “First, let’s get introductions out of the way. This is Hajime Hinata, a representative student for our new reserve course department. And that’s Nagito Komaeda, the Super High School Level Good Luck of our 77th class.”

Hinata’s gulp didn’t escape Komaeda’s attention. “What is it?” he asked.

“Oh, uh, nothing. I’ve just…” Hinata took a step away from Komaeda, gaze averting to the wall clock hanging over the door. “…I’ve just heard about you, a little bit. It’s whatever, though. It’s not like I’m afraid of you or anything.”

“...Anyway,” Jin continued, “You two have been chosen as prime candidates for our very own Talent Cultivation Plan, as you’ve probably already guessed. You both are also aware of how significant your agreement to participate is. I wish there was a way that was less...life-altering, but the subject is very important to me, and I have faith in the Steering Committee to make the procedure as smooth as possible. I hope you two feel the same way. Understood?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” Hinata and Komaeda said in unison.

“You were chosen not only because you’re both impressive young men, but because of how devoted you are to this academy. Hinata, you’ve stated that it’s been your dream to attend here since you were a child. You must have been so elated to finally have that chance, but your drive hasn’t ended there. Your determination to acquire a talent through any means necessary is extremely admirable. And Komaeda, you…”

Jin stopped mid-sentence. Komaeda was a much, much different case than Hinata. While Hinata had striven to be one of the talented since before he could count to one-hundred, as far as Jin knew, all Komaeda had striven to be was some device to be used. Saying as much would probably discourage
Komaeda more than anything else. “...you’ve showered all your classmates and teachers with affection from the moment you stepped through the gate. You have contemplated things like talent and hope more than—well, more than any person I’ve ever met! More than anyone else on the planet, even! If Hope’s Peak had a fanclub, you’d be president of it for sure. Your dedication shows that any action you take won’t just be for the sake of yourself, but for the sake of everyone around you.”

Komaeda twirled a curly lock of his hair around his finger. He wanted so horribly to argue against these praises, but the embarrassment was worth it.

“It’s that one factor—your dedication to Hope’s Peak—that will determine who will be the winning candidate for the project. There’s still a lot to mull over, however, so the deadline of the decision has been extended to the end of the school year. You’ll both be required to continue with your normal school schedule throughout, but I’ll also be asking a lot of favors. Very little about you will go unmonitored, so try to make the best impression possible. This means going above and beyond in helping out staff members, making sure your grades stay in an exceptional range, and most importantly, staying out of trouble. Also, Hinata-kun, I’ve sent a permission slip home to your parents. It doesn’t contain any details that would otherwise interfere with your participation, and I hope you don’t reveal anything on your part as well.” Hinata sheepishly raised his hand. “Yes?”

“Uh, why doesn’t Komaeda have to get permission from a family member? Is it because he’s a part of the main course?”

“Well, you see...”

“I’m an orphan,” Komaeda said, wanting to spare Jin the burden of having to make up excuses for him.

Hinata choked out a gasp, putting his hand back at his side. “Sorry for your loss,” he murmured.

“It’s okay. The story never changes, after all.”

“...Ahem, I think we’d better wrap this up.” Jin stood up from his desk, spreading out his arms to his sides as if to signal everyone to come together. “Let the final stage of this election officially begin.”

Komaeda and Hinata turned toward each other, both displaying two entirely different forms of awkwardness. Hinata huffed out the side of his mouth, scratching his chestnut brown, needly hair. It was the first good look Komaeda had gotten at him. He had a sharp, masculine jawline and a face
that wasn’t harsh, but had a sense of sternness to it that indicated he hadn’t properly relaxed in years. He was a lot more handsome than Komaeda himself, a lot more boyish in nature, from the rigid spike of hair that stuck up right from the center of his head to the broadness of his shoulders. Still though, for how domineering one would expect him to be, he couldn’t even get himself to look at Komaeda’s feet.

Komaeda stuck out his arm as a prompting of some kind of interaction. “May the best man win,” he said, a curious smile spreading across his face.

Hinata looked at the hand in front of him for a moment before getting the gumption to take it in his own, curtly shaking it like he had just negotiated something with a business partner. “I don’t plan on losing to you.”

“Good, because I don’t plan on losing to you either.”

Kizakura sat on the edge of Jin’s desk, shaking his head in disappointment. “You really did it, huh? Tsk tsk, my friend.” He took another swig of beer, sighing at the refreshing taste.

“Listen,” Jin began. He covered his face with his palms, all slick and oiled from stress. “I know how bad it sounds. It is bad, but I...my limit was reached.”

“Your limit? Pft. Your limit for dealing with Komaeda’s shenanigans?”

“Well, I mean, yes.” Kizakura rolled his eyes, laughing at the miserableness of the situation. “Hey, have you heard that boy speak? He’s basically floating through life without meaning. Nothing I or anyone else can say or do would change how he views himself. I pity him...and that’s why I gave him the chance. If he can’t live happily as he is now, maybe he could as the second Izuru Kamukura.”

“But Hinata’s still around. You can’t forget that. Not only that, but you’re not the only one who makes the final decision. The Steering Committee has just as much of a say as to who gets all the talents reprogrammed in them, and if I remember correctly, they aren’t that much of a fan of our friend Komaeda. What happens after that?”

“I...don’t know. Maybe I’m being a bit too optimistic, but even if Komaeda isn’t the one chosen, I’d hope this process would make him learn something, just anything, to keep his head up and get through the rest of his life.”
“Suit yourself, honestly, but you couldn’t have chosen a sadder sap. Maybe all of us wouldn’t have to walk on eggshells around each other talking about it if those guys could come up with a way to create talent that didn’t involve hacking some teenager’s brain open.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think there is any other way. If that was the case, then we could just tell the collective youth of Japan that they could get to this school by just working a little harder...we wouldn’t have enough housing for everyone.”

“Right,” Kizakura grunted. “Man, it sure is a cruel world we live in, ain’t it?”

Sonia excitedly waved her hands as she spoke, the eyes of the other girls (plus Souda) hanging on every word. The story wasn’t very extraordinary. It couldn’t even be considered a story in the first place, but the elegance of her voice and the charm of her diction made it impossible for people to take their eyes off of her, whether they liked it or not.

“...and I think it’s just wonderful! Tanaka-san is such a unique person, I’m so glad that he’s worked up the courage to put on his own animal show for the sake of conveying his true passions! And with his personality, the visuals and aesthetics are bound to be very good themselves…”

Komaeda looked over at Tanaka, who was huddled in the corner with his scarf pulled all the way over his nose and his eyes clamped shut. Then he looked over at Souda, who had resorted to lying face down on the desk, his beanie covering his ears so that he wouldn’t have to hear his crush sing praises to his rival, though the fabric of the hat would definitely not be enough to block out the sound of her voice in its entirety.

“...but, the school has done very little to help him promote it. The staff is far too busy, and- well, I don’t know why this is, but he doesn’t want me to do any work myself.” Komaeda briefly thought that was because he was probably doing the whole thing for Sonia in some part. “It’s very unfortunate. Tanaka-san may be an excellent man capable of many things, but I don’t think he can juggles everything by himself. After all, the procedures of the show, the animals presented in it, and so on and so forth are all under his control in the first place. Oh, I wish him the best of luck!”

Tanaka betrayed his stature and looked at Sonia out of the corner of his eye. She caught him in the act and waved her fingers sweetly at him. He instantly snapped back down, a pink blush accumulating on his powdered white skin.

Komaeda was in no way included in any of this, but he decided it this would be a good opportunity to jump on.
“Hello, Tanaka-kun,” Komaeda said cheerily, peering right over his shoulder as Tanaka was applying some very expensive makeup in the mirror.

Tanaka jumped up and twisted around like a cat who had been stalked by a mouse. He was reasonably surprised, as no one would ever really approach him in the men’s locker room due to his utmost nakedness. Self-consciously, he put his hands over his crotch. “Be gone, vile fiend! Leave me in my modest pleasures.”

Komaeda laughed. “It’s okay, Tanaka-kun. I can understand why your view of me may not be the best, but I’m not here to stare at your genitals or anything! I’m not a pervert, I promise. Teruteru-kun, however, is someone you definitely need to watch out for, as you are probably already aware. Now, what I was going to say is-”

Tanaka’s acutely styled pompadour was about to explode off his head. “Did you not hear my command? I have no time for your cursed ramblings! If you keep persisting, I will have no choice but to show you my true form.”

Komaeda laughed again, this time a bit louder. “I was just going to offer my assistance! I heard from Sonia-san that you’re planning an animal show, yet are having trouble advertising it on top of all the organization going on. Allow me to spread the word and pass out fliers on your behalf!”

Tanaka was about to yell something absolutely absurd once more, but he stopped mid-breath. He suddenly found himself so deep in contemplation that he removed his hands from his groin. Komaeda made a point of respecting his privacy by looking to the side. “Hmm, Nagito Komaeda, you are an outrageously foul being, but you haven’t done anything worthy of the depths of Hell rejecting you yet. Therefore, I accept your cooperation. Now, leave my peripheral vision before I change my mind!”

Komaeda’s eyes lit up. “Really?! Thank you, Tanaka-kun! I highly appreciate it. And, well, I guess I should get going now, shouldn’t I? Haha, I feel like this is the part where people usually shake hands, but yours were just cupping your crotch, so…”

“Begone!”

The reserve course building held a more bleak atmosphere than a wasteland full of vultures picking at the rotten meat of dead deer. It depressed Hinata almost as much as the fact that he doesn’t have a talent.
However, the boredom that had loomed over him in class was at least replaced with a newfound nervousness. He was absolutely positive that he'd be chosen for The Project. If Jin Kirigiri respected him enough to give him the time of day, then he must have been some sort of a standout, but that shred of confidence was gone. At the very least, it was certainly put up to the test, because he now had competition, and from the *main course* at that.

There were more rumors about Komaeda than everyone else in the 77th class combined. Has he ever been arrested before? Has he smuggled in drugs from the red light district- and if so, what kinds of drugs? Has he had sex before? Does he go down on the SHSL girls free of charge? Does he go down on the SHSL *guys* free of charge? Everything about the being known as Nagito Komaeda was just amplified in Hinata's head louder and louder as the days went on. Hinata at least knew he had one point in his favor with how little trouble he has gotten in, but Komaeda’s status as a SHSL student gave him more connections. The reserve course teachers didn’t care who anyone was. To them, they were all a bunch of suckers sitting in identical uniforms.

Hinata was just about to break his pencil in half out of stress when a pair of delicate yet fierce fingers plucked it out of his hands, then throwing it across the room so hard it split in two once it hit the wall.

“Why the hell did you just do that?!” Hinata turned to the window sill beside his desk. Natsumi Kuzuryuu, who was probably not much better than Komaeda when it came to track records, sat nonchalantly against the glass, one leg folded inward and the other one dangling off the edge of the counter.

She tossed her head back and smiled devilishly. “I was just trying to get your attention, dumbass. What’s been with you lately? Your whole ominous persona thing is starting to annoy me.”

Hinata rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and you taking my shit and breaking it is starting to annoy me.”

Natsumi stuck her tongue out. “Don’t pretend you don’t enjoy it at all. Without me, you’d be so bored with this rat race that you’d slit your throat.”

She was admittedly right, minus the clear exaggeration. Out of the hundreds of reserve course students Hope’s Peak admitted, she was the closest thing to a friend Hinata had. Very rarely would anyone else talk to him.

“God, this place is such a downer all the time. I get it, but at the same time, it’s like you’re the only one with any semblance of a personality here, and that’s not saying much.”
“Gee, thanks.”

“You get what I mean! At least I can tell that you’re human and not some goddamn robot programmed to obey, eat, sleep, piss, and shit. My brother says so much more happens in the main course building. Everything’s so much more exciting.”

Ah, right, Natsumi’s brother Fuyuhiko got in for being a Yakuza Clan heir. If Natsumi was first in line, maybe she would have taken that spot instead. “How’s he doing over there?” Hinata asked.

“He’s still an asshole, but what else is new? At least he’s got a friend there with him. He’s got those stupid bitches in with him too, but he can handle it. He’s my brother, after all.”

Hinata had heard of these so-called “stupid bitches” before, assumably two main course students themselves, but he had never heard the full story. “Who even are these, uh, bitches, anyway?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you? They were these girls I was in the photography club with back in middle school, and holy shit, they were such suck-ups! People like that are the actual worst. There was this red-head who was really into it- Mahiru Koizumi, I think. And then there was her friend, Sato.”

“Sato who?”

“I don’t know her first name. Didn’t bother remembering it.” Something internally caught Natsumi’s attention, and after a few moments of silence, she leaned forward so that her face was close to Hinata’s. “I have something I want to let you on. Wanna hear about it?” she whispered.

“Go on ahead,” Hinata said, somewhat apprehensive.

Natsumi jumped off the window sill ledge and got down on her knees, propping her elbows up on Hinata’s desk. “I have a plan for getting into the main course, and it involves that girl Koizumi in particular. I’ve been picking on her in the courtyard so hard that she’s starting to get really stressed out. I’m thinking that eventually she’ll just end up leaving the school, and then an open spot in the main course can be offered to me. I was thinking of selling myself as the Super High School Level Little Sister. What do ya think?”

“What the hell?” Hinata blurted out. “That’s terrible!”
Natsumi clamped her hand over Hinata’s mouth. “Shhh, be quiet, idiot.” Hinata made a muffled noise and she released him from her restraints.

Hinata coughed once into his hand and brought his voice down to the volume Natsumi preferred. “Why would you ever think that’s a good idea? You’re ruining someone’s life just for a spot in the main course?”

“Some people’s lives just deserve to be ruined. Sure, I’d have to deal with that little blonde bitch that follows Koizumi around like a dog, but I’ll at least know I’m fucking going somewhere. Do you have any better ideas on how to get into the main course?”

“I...I guess…”

“Then what is it?” Hinata didn’t answer, bringing a smirk to Natsumi’s face. “Sounds about right. Speaking of Koizumi, I heard that some dude snuck on campus and tried to rope her into prostitution. Imagine what low standards you need to have to go for her of all people. Only reason she escaped was due to this other guy- Komaeda. My brother says he’s a huuuuuuuge weirdo, just as the rumors say.”

“What about him is so weird?”

“Like, everything, I guess. Why are you even asking me that? Everyone already knows who he is. He’s like, an urban legend, but actually real. If you wanna get a good horror story you should try talking to him yourself.”

“Come see the absolutely amazing Gundam Tanaka’s animal show after classes on Friday! It’s bound to be overflowing with hope!”

Komaeda’s voice boomed from the megaphone he held up to his face. Students from both the main and reserve courses had their attention caught, hesitantly walking over to take one of the fliers he was holding out. On it was a picture of Tanaka riding a crocodile shirtless with a fluffy pomeranian in his arms. No one knew if it was photoshopped or not.

Hinata squeezed through the crowd of students that was growing progressively larger, pushing past enough people to finally get a good look at Komaeda’s gleeful, obnoxious face. Komaeda took notice of him, and held the stack of fliers up to his chest. “They’re free of any cost whatsoever, Hinata-kun!”
A few chortles rang out through the reserve course students. Hinata swore he could hear a girl question why he even knew who someone as ordinary as Hinata was. He felt a very intense urge to slap the smile clear off Komaeda’s face, but begrudgingly took one of the fliers anyway, and remained in the background until the crowd dissipated.

“Aha, thank you so much. Tanaka-kun will highly appreciate this!” Komaeda handed the last flier in the stack to a reserve course girl, who walked off bemusedly. He couldn’t help but grin at the achievement. This was truly a job well done.

He looked up from his joyful daze to see Hinata staring at him. He was clearly angry, but in the very petty kind of way. “Ah, Hinata-kun, you’re still here. I do a good business, don’t you think?”

Hinata didn’t bother with any of the unnecessary banter. “I know you don’t give two shits about this guy Tanaka’s animal show. This is just a whole ploy to get ahead.”

Komaeda frowned, both out of genuine disappointment and his own smarminess. “That’s such a horrible accusation. Of course I care about my classmate’s endeavors. That’s the reason why I’m competing again you in the first place. It’s just that I’ve found a way to utilize it.” Hinata didn’t have any quick response, so he continued. “Oh, and Yukizome-sensei has been watching me closely lately. She’s quite pleasantly surprised with me. Have you talked to any of your teachers lately? I don’t know how great the teachers in the reserve course are, but-”

“Oh, shut up.”

Komaeda shut his mouth like an obedient puppy. Hinata wasn’t quite expecting that, so he just continued to stand there and scratch at the sleeve of his uniform until he could find the right battlefield words. “…I’ll find a way. You may have your own advantages, but I have mine. I-I’ll help my teachers...I’ll even help students from the main course. I’m just not going to give up.”

Komaeda cocked his head to the side, remaining silent. Hinata quirked an eyebrow before he got the implication. “Uh, you can speak now.”

Komaeda smiled in satisfaction. “Well, that’s very courageous of you. Perhaps too courageous for someone that doesn’t even have a talent, but who am I to judge? I’m in the same boat! We really are very similar, when you think about it…”
“For some reason, I really doubt that we are.”

“That’s only natural, I suppose. We might be on the same level theoretically, but delving deeper into it, you’re just an average, ordinary, boring person. And I’m- well, I’m like a dumpster fire! That’s why no one ever initiates conversation with me. Anyway, I should get going. Ciao, Hinata-kun.” Komaeda gave him the salute. Hinata felt like giving him the finger, but he half-assed a wave instead.

“Hey, Natsumi, who’s this fucker?”

Hinata stood with his arms pinned at his side, looking down at the man he was supposed to be helping. He didn’t know why, but he offered anyway, because he couldn’t think of anything else that would allow him to get closer to the main course. So, he asked Natsumi to introduce him to her brother.

“This is Hinata,” Natsumi said, putting her hands on her hips. “You know, from the reserve course. I thought I told you about him.”

“Oh, right.” He scanned Hinata from the tip of his antenna to little ends of his shoelaces. “You have balls, don’t ya? Asking to meet a Yakuza Clan Leader and all. You must think you’re hot shit.”

“I really don’t,” Hinata grumbled. He shouldn’t have been surprised that the brother of Natsumi of all people was like this. The only thing that confounded him was how short he was in reality. Guess he never really hit puberty.

“Sure you do. Why else would you come over here?” Hinata wanted to point out that they were hiding behind the track shed and not in some secret hideout in a seedy neighborhood, but reason got the better of him. “Oh, oh my fucking God. You’re not fucking my little sister, are you? I’ll skin you alive!”

“Shut up, Fuyuhiko!” Natsumi shrieked, stomping her foot down. “We’re not dating, okay? Hinata just wanted to like...I don’t know, help you?”

“Help me?” Kuzuryuu wheezed a hardy laugh, like he had just been accused of committing murder. “What could a total chump like you do to help me?”

“I’m offering...tutoring services. Courtesy of the reserve course,” Hinata said, trying to conceal how
bad he was at lying the best he could.

“Tutoring? Natsumi, you haven’t been lying to this guy about my grades, have ya? I’m one of the top students in the class!”

“Wow, um, really?” Hinata asked.

“Yes, really! Are you underestimating me, asshole?!”

“No, of course not!” Hinata shook his head frantically. For how small Kuzuryuu’s stature was, he still managed to be intimidating. “Listen, do you have anything else I can do for you? I need...uh, points. To graduate.”

“Nah,” Kuzuryuu said, kicking a rock against the wooden panes of the shed. “I don’t need help from anybody. It’s me against the world. You know how many people I can trust in my position? Like, five, and it sucks for you, but Natsumi’s word isn’t enough to change that number. Now, Natsumi, tell this guy to fuck off for me, oka-”

“Hey, you guys aren’t supposed to be back there!”

Kuzuryuu turned around, the nostrils of his cupie doll face flaring. Hinata could have sworn he even heard Natsumi snarl.

Four girls had come around the shed, most likely because the obscenities the Kuzuryuu siblings yelled were too loud to ignore. The pack was led by a lean, freckled girl with hair as red as cherries. She had her arms crossed and her eyebrows slanted at perfect 45 degree angles. A girl with long, banana-shaped pigtails stood at her side, grasping onto her skirt like a daughter clinging on to her mother. She looked no older than nine, and had a smile so mischievous that Hinata wouldn’t be surprised if she was possessed by the devil. Cowering behind her, a girl with a shapely body wiped tears away from her cheeks. She was the tallest out of all of them, but held no ounce of confidence. The last one, a girl adorning cat ears and hair of at least five different shades leaned over the redhead’s other shoulder and flashed a peace sign at Hinata. Hinata didn’t know how to respond to that.

“Yeah, and you’re back here too, now aren’t you, princess?” Kuzuryuu growled. Natsumi slunk up to his side, her smirk as sharp as a blade.
“Yeah, to keep you guys out of trouble,” the redhead said, pointing accusingly in his direction. “Are you dealing drugs out here or something?”

“That’s what you want it to be, right? So Natsumi and I can be expelled and fuck off for good. You’re such a pathetic little bitch, I swear-”

“Say one more mean thing to Koizumi and I’ll claw your beady eyes out!” The blonde girl snapped, her eyes clouding into storms clouds. Kuzuryuu could only click his tongue.

Oh, Hinata thought. So this was the girl Natsumi was allegedly trying to torture out of Hope’s Peak. Great. Amazing.

“How about you get the fuck out of here before I slit your stomachs open,” Natsumi growled. She took a step forward and drew a knife out of the pocket of her skirt.

The nervous girl took off in the other direction, wailing at the top of her lungs. The other three were paralyzed.

“N-Not c-cool dude!” the girl with the dyed hair yelped. She turned tail and ran after her friend. Hinata felt like he could relate to that.

“N-Natsumi…” he stuttered, gulping down a ball of air. He could think of a million reasons why she shouldn’t use that knife, let alone have it, but he knew Natsumi well enough to recognize how hopeless the obvious suggestions would be in swaying her. “I-If you use that knife, you won’t be able to get into the main course, right?”

Kuzuryuu flashed him a surprised look, but Natsumi stayed facing forward. The redhead had her arms wrapped around the blonde’s head, her fingers trembling against the thick strands of hair. Despite it all, she stood her ground defiantly, not moving her feet an inch.

Natsumi’s hands tightened into fists, faint blue veins popping out of her wrists and forearms. After what seemed like an eternity, she loosened her grip, and slid the knife back into her garment. “Next time, I’ll leave a mark on you. And it won’t just be a scar.” Before her opponents could react, she ran off in the other direction, covering her head with her hands in humiliation.

“Wait, Natsumi!” Kuzuryuu reached out to her and looked about to run off himself. He turned back
to the girls and shook his fist at them. “You’ll pay for this!” he yelled before escaping the scene, leaving Hinata to awkwardly face people who weren’t supposed to be his enemies, but probably were given everything that just happened.

“Are you with them?” the redhead asked, slicking her bob back behind her ears with her fingernails.

“Um, no? Or at least...not like that. I’m sorry.”

“Ugh, let’s go, Koizumi,” her friend whined, “This guy’s probably just some pedo trash anyway, so there’s no use bothering with him!”

“Pedo trash?!”

“Shush, Hiyoko. And as for you - well, you don’t look like the type of person to think for yourself very often, but hanging around those delinquents is a terrible idea. They’re such nightmares. What’s your name, by the way?”

“Hajime Hinata. Why?”

“Because I need it so that Yukizome-sensei gets the full story, duh. You’re not very smart, are you?”

“Obviously!” Saionji chimed in. “He’s not even in the main course!”

“Hey-!”

“Try to argue with us some more, and you’ll be in big trouble. And I mean really big trouble,” Koizumi warned.

Hinata couldn’t let Jin know that he was fraternizing with the school’s resident mob bosses. Maybe it wouldn’t be a problem if the whole incident hadn’t nearly turned into a knife fight, but alas, that was just Hinata’s luck. If he didn’t act fast, he might as well have kissed any chances of him winning this competition goodbye. No way in hell would he let that happen because of some bad blood that wasn’t even his fault.
In order to remedy a situation borne out of his impulsivity, he made another impulsive decision.

"Yukizome-sensei, Yukizome-sensei…"

He stood outside the main course building after classes were sure to have ended, scanning the plethora of people flowing chaotically out the doors for a tall, cheery woman with long, flowing brunet hair. He had never met Yukizome. The only thing he had to go off of was her graduation photo hung on the walls of Jin’s office. Maybe Hinata had the wrong idea. Maybe she was still in her classroom, or maybe she had left early after her homeroom duties were finished.

"Are you looking for someone?" Hinata felt the careful tap of a finger on his shoulder. The gentle touch mixed in with the sweet, syrupy voice made Hinata feel like he was about to melt into a puddle.

"Yeah, I- oh!" Hinata came face to face with a woman, her face as precious as a doll, and not to mention uncomfortably close to his own. "You're...you're Yukizome-sensei, right? I-I was looking for you, specifically."

Yukizome giggled. "Guess I found you first! Now, hmm." She briefly looked around her surroundings, puffing out her cheeks in dissatisfaction. "Let's go somewhere with a little less noise, okay? And then we can talk."

The two situated on a bench around the outskirts of the campus. The lack of student activity made things relatively quiet, but it didn’t stop Hinata from wishing they could have met indoors. Better yet, in secret.

"So, did you need help with anything?" Yukizome asked, tilting her head with a childish innocence that Hinata would never expect from a teacher.

"Uh, aren’t you curious as to why I wanted to talk to you in the first place? I don’t know you, and better yet, I’m from the reserve course…"

"Nonsense! I’m here to help anyone in need! A housekeeper can’t be discriminatory against her clients, now can she?"

"...No?"
“No, she cannot! But in all seriousness, this is my first year working here. I was offered a position after graduation. And, well, I guess I’m just a substitute for Kizakura-sensei, but I’m determined to do anything in my power to help every student here get the best education they need.” She slammed her fist down in her palm, grinning like an anime protagonist about to defeat the final enemy.

Hinata fidgeted with his hands. “Well, I wasn’t here to ask for any help. I actually just wanted to clear things up, since you’ve probably already been told…”

“Told? Told what- Oh, I see, you’re Hajime Hinata, aren’t you?”

Hinata’s heart sank. “Yup. That’s me. Now please don’t get the wrong idea. All I wanted to do was to offer, like, tutoring services to Kuzuryuu, so I asked his sister to introduce us. And then those four girls showed up, and things...well, things escalated. I wasn’t getting into any trouble, so please don’t tell the Headmaster.”

Yukizome tapped a finger to her chin, humming like a dramatic actress. “Well, you certainly don’t seem like someone who’d get into physical conflicts. You look a bit too soft for that.”

Hinata tried to take that as a compliment. “Yeah.”

“Alright! Then it’s a-okay.”

“Wait, really?”

“Of course. I actually don’t know why you were so worried in the first place. You have nothing bad to hide. In fact, you’d actually be commended. Koizumi-san mentioned that you were the one who stopped the Kuzuryuu sister from making things ugly. But, if you still don’t want Headmaster Kirigiri to know about it-”

“No, no, no, no. Please tell him about it. That’d be greatly appreciated.” Yukizome nodded, and the atmosphere lightened up. “Guess I won’t be tutoring Kuzuryuu after all.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that! He’s not completely alone. I wouldn’t call it a friendship, but he often talks to a female classmate of his. He’s still... himself about it, but you can tell he cares, deep down.
Ah, he’s more of an open book than you would think! Most of my homeroom students are very exceptionally hard workers, too. Even if some of them don’t quite get the material right away, I don’t think a reserve course student would be in that much better shape.” Hinata’s eye twitched. “Oh, sorry, I don’t mean it like that! We just have...different standards in the main course. You understand that, right?"

“Yeah, I get it.”

“...Anyway, they can be such pissers too, you know? Not to make them sound like children, but so many of them have problems with social interaction. Ah! I shouldn’t be telling you this. It’s completely inappropriate of me. They’ve all found friends among themselves, except for…”

“Except for…?”

Yukizome took her time in responding, her lips moving as she played back what she was about to say in her head like she had it recorded for awhile. “Say, Hinata-kun, if you were to befriend someone from my class, that would take a huge weight off my back! You seem like a great boy. Do you think you could do it?”

Hinata, not thinking properly, accepted the offer.

Hinata wanted to die. This is hardly an exaggeration. He didn’t know what made him want to jump off a cliff more: Komaeda standing in front of him, crossing his arms over his chest and smirking, or Yukizome standing next to him, a hand placed gently on his shoulder and a smile so charmed and oblivious that Hinata wanted to smack her.

“Komaeda-kun, thank you for agreeing to meet here at such a short notice!” she chirped. She nudged Hinata’s side with her elbow a few times, urging him to look less scared out of his mind.

“It’s no problem, Yukizome-sensei. I never have any plans after classes anyway. But I have to say, I was expecting a private meeting.” He shot Hinata a look, waving his fingers languidly in his direction.

“You see, I have great news! This reserve course student here wanted to meet you personally.”

“Wait, what-” Hinata’s interjection was cut off with another nudge from Yukizome, but it felt more like a shove this time.
“Ohhhhhhh, I seeeeeeeee.” Komaeda drew out the individual syllables too long for comfort. He tapped his bottom lip with his index finger, digging the corner up. “That kind of initiative takes a lot of confidence. Much more than the average reserve course student, I presume.”

“Komaeda-kun, be nice!” Yukizome pouted. “Hinata-kun is a very nice boy. He even broke up a fight between your own classmates just the other day.”

Komaeda’s facade broke in an instant at that. His posture turned rigid, eyes widening to twice their original size. Now it was Hinata’s turn to bask in his own glory. “You don’t need to say that, Yukizome-sensei.”

“But of course I do! Now, since you two are strangers, you should introduce yourselves to each other. It’s like you two are ambassadors for your respective courses, don’t you think?” She laughed heartily at her own joke, like she was telling it to an audience.

Komaeda and Hinata didn’t know what else to do other than to stare at each other, Yukizome waiting intently for either of them to say something without her prompting. Hinata cleared his throat. “Um, can we…”

“Oh, right,” Yukizome chuckled, “I just turned 18 last year and I’ve already forgotten how awkward teenage boys are! I’ll give you guys some privacy.” She trotted happily away like a burden had just been lifted from her, but not before winking discreetly at Hinata.

Once she disappeared around a curve in the pathway, Komaeda spoke up. “Getting to know your competitor a little more. Very sneaky, Hinata-kun. That’s a clever move.”

“I didn’t” Hinata stopped mid-sentence, took a deep breath, and continued. “This wasn’t intentional. I was trying to help out one of your classmates- Kuzuryuu- and that like, completely failed. Long story short, I agreed to help your teacher out with something, and she told me to hang out with you, okay?”

“That’s unfortunate. The thought that you were actually slightly interested in talking to me got me happy for a moment. Now it just seems like you’ve made a bunch of stupid decisions and gotten rewarded for them.”

“And it seems like you’re such a problem child that your teacher had some rando talk to you for a
“little bit so that she doesn’t have to worry all the time.”

Komaeda nodded, solemnly and with acceptance. He already knew as much. “So, are you going to go through with it? Remember, Yukizome-sensei is very close to Headmaster, so whatever you do, it will go down in the records.”

“Well, whatever it takes, right?”

The smirk from earlier was back on Komaeda’s face, lapping up Hinata’s determination. “Alright. Though you should probably get a little better at lying.”

Komaeda was used to feeling stares all around him, penetrating the back of his neck, swooping over his head, and burrowing under the soles of his feet. It was either that or not feeling anything at all, being in plain sight yet having no one know or care about the who, what, when, where, and why. Neither were good, and neither were necessarily bad. It was just life.

However, there were moments when there weren’t just stares. There were voices too. Occasionally, the voices were warm, lots of the time indifferent, but most of the time, they were loud, ringing, and directly in Komaeda’s face.

“Komaeda!” Souda slammed his fist down on Komaeda’s desk. A bunch of spare pencils and pens rolled off and clanked on the floor. “Are you trying to ruin my life??”

“No,” Komaeda said, not so much as flinching at the less than friendly greeting. He didn’t give any further elaboration. How could he, anyway? The answer was no and that was that.

“You’re lying! You set up that whole thing with Tanaka so that he could get ahold of Sonia-san! You totally just tipped the playing field in his favor. Do you have something against me or something?”

“But Souda-kun, you had no chance with Sonia-san in the first place. I was just trying to lend Tanaka-kun a helping hand-”

“Damn right you were! You probably think this is pretty funny. One of the cool dudes in school rightfully yells at you a few times, and you act all cool about it, but secretly, you’re uber pissed, so
you decide to conspire against him with his biggest enemy. Seen it a million times, a million times…”

Komaeda was puzzled. Souda hadn’t come to mind at all during the past week or so. He couldn’t really convince him one way or the other. “Listen, Souda-kun, I could lend you a favor as well. I’m perfectly open to that idea.”

Souda puffed at a loose strand of pink hair that fell over his face. “Pft, you’d help me? Funny joke, pal. How?”

“Anything you’d like! Ah, I’m not very good with machinery, but-”

Souda leaned clear over Komaeda’s desk, his torso almost touching his hair. His eyes went into a frenzy. “You’d help me with anything?! So can you get me a date with Sonia-san?”

“I mean, I suppose-”

“Oh man, thanks bud!” He fist-bumped Komaeda’s shoulder, then wiping his hand on the sleeve of his jumpsuit as to get all the hypothetical germs off. “Uh, sorry for what I said before. No harm done, right pal?”

Komaeda smiled completely closed-mouthed. “Sure.”

Komaeda was pondering his next unfortunately necessary way of helping out his classmates when the ground he was sitting on- grass, soil, and all- shifted underneath him. Hinata plopped down beside him, unzipping his bag and taking various contents of food out.

Komaeda would feel much more self-conscious about fraternizing with a reserve course student if he didn’t think of himself as nothing more than a deformed ant. He couldn’t imagine how Hinata felt, or what he’s been asked by his classmates. His actions would be branded as reckless and obnoxious, as if he thought he was better than the rest of the pack somehow, and Komaeda would agree, even if he was essentially the same.

The other reserve course students probably didn’t recognize him, but they’ve certainly heard about them. If Hinata tagging along with a Super High School Level didn’t already put a dent in his reputation, then tagging along with Nagito Komaeda of all people definitely would.
“Do you have anything to eat?” Hinata asked, swallowing down the remnants of his sandwich.

“I’m not usually that hungry,” Komaeda said. Hinata shrugged and took a swig of his soda.

For the past few days or so, their conversations carried out just like this. They’d meet for lunch, exchange a few words, wait for Yukizome to walk by and smile in their direction, and then part ways. They say to keep your enemies closer than your friends, but it wasn’t as easy in practice as it sounded in theory. They were well aware of each other’s intentions, so the only thing they could do to keep themselves occupied was small talk.

“You think it will rain later today? The clouds are getting dark.”

“I don’t know, but I hope so. I think falling asleep to the sound of raindrops is very soothing. It drowns everything out- ah, except if it’s a thunderstorm. Then it makes me a bit anxious.”

“Same, I guess. I don’t like being trapped indoors all afternoon either. I get all stir-crazy.”

“Really? I enjoy curling up with a book or just with my thoughts at the end of the day. Daily life is so active.”

“Mmhmm. Learning and stuff. Very exhausting.”

The two fell into silence again. A flock of ordinary brown birds flew overhead. A squirrel sprinted across the ground and leaped onto a tree, the autumn leaves crunching under its little paws. Komaeda tapped his foot a few times.

“Agh!” Hinata blurted out, sitting up and hanging his head over his knees. “I’m so goddamn bored!”

“The normalcy getting to you?” Komaeda hummed.

“More like the silence! And the stupid conversations. I’d have a better time talking to some robot.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Komaeda huffed.
Hinata pinched the bridge of his nose. “Don’t take it like that, Komaeda. It’s not you, it’s not me. It’s us. It’s this situation we’re in. If I didn’t have something at stake, I wouldn’t be talking to you at all, and I’m sure you feel the same. We’re two completely different people basically forced on each other. Think about it.”

Komaeda raised an eyebrow, casting Hinata a suspicious look. “I don’t think we’re that different. I said before that we’re actually quite similar, aren’t we?”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Hinata snorted. “I don’t hate you or anything, but there’s no way we’re anything alike. I’m just an average dude, and you’re...well, you’re you.”

“Then how did we end up in such a similar situation?” Komaeda questioned. “We both want to become the being known as Super High School Level Hope. That’s a pretty big likeness, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but...it’s different. I’m doing it because I don’t even have a talent. Why you’ve gotten yourself involved, I don’t know. You’re already in the main course. I’d do anything to be in your position.”

“You think that I somehow have more worth than you just because I’m in the main course?”

“Well, obviously. Everybody would think that.”

Komaeda chuckled raspily and strained. He laid down on his back. His bangs fell over and covered his eyes, but Hinata could have sworn they were glowing. “That’s hilarious. I told you before that I’m nothing but a fly crawling over a pile of garbage. My talent is luck - none of what I’ve achieved has been of my own volition, and I’m not even going to mention the bad side of it. You may never amount to anything significant the way you are now, but at least you can be happy. Get a well-paying job, have a family. I can’t say the same for myself.”

Hinata fell on his back as well, looking at how the clouds accumulated into different shapes. That had to be the longest Komaeda ever spoken to him. “It...it’s not like that,” he said, the words flowing out muffled. “I won’t be happy. Not until I can feel confident in myself. I thought I’d get to that point once I got here, but man, the reserve course fucking sucks. I was constantly being told how worthless I am without a talent before Hope’s Peak, and I’m still being told that now. Not to my face, but...I could just feel it.”
“I was told the same things, often directly to my face.”

“Hey, we’re not in a competition for who has the bigger sob story.”

“I’m just saying,” Komaeda yawned, “I know how you feel. There was a television program I used to watch religiously. Hope’s Peak Heroes, if I remember correctly. This was long before I learned of the realities of the world, but I remember watching the men and women on the screen, all overflowing with raw hope, and well, I...I wanted to be them.”

Hinata rolled over on his side, facing Komaeda. “No way, you used to watch that too? God, those were the days...I was just a kid. I’d never guess things would turn out like this.”

Komaeda felt a droplet of water splash against his forehead. “I told you we were pretty similar.” Another drop fell on his cheek, then one on his shoulder, then one against his stomach. Hinata didn’t have any objection. “I think if we met under better circumstances, we could have actually been friends.” Hinata still didn’t say anything, giving Komaeda a chance to backpedal. “Kidding! I haven’t had anyone to call a friend since elementary school, if ever! You wouldn’t need someone like me in your life in any timeline.

When the two finally parted, clothes essentially soaked, Komaeda went back to his dorm, only to find that the main course building was locked.
Hinata wanted to apologize to Natsumi for getting her into a situation that could have gotten ugly. However, that ugliness also would have been entirely her fault, so he also wanted to scold her for it. To compromise, he came up with a half-assed mixture of both.

“Natsumi, I...I shouldn’t have even asked about your brother in the first place,” he told her, head craned so far down that the tip of his nose touched the cold metal of his desk. “The whole main course is a mess.”

“Pft, now you’re getting it,” Natsumi sneered, wrinkling her nose. “That little princess should think twice before going around without her bestie. If she shows up again, I swear I’ll—”

“Don’t,” Hinata sighed, seeing no point in acting apprehensive about what she was capable of doing. She had probably been thriving off his exasperation toward her since the day they met. “This is an elite high school. You can’t treat this stuff like it’s a real-life Yakuza gang rivalry.”

“Maybe it is.” Natsumi crossed her arms and stuck out her bottom lip in a pout. It was an oddly childish gesture for someone as hardened as her. “If the teachers still allow people like them to treat my brother like garbage, maybe they don’t give a shit about what happens to their students after all.” Hinata wanted to protest, to say that he had been cared for enough to be given the chance of a lifetime, but no. It wasn’t the right time. There would never be a right time. Natsumi looked down at him with a scowl scribbled on her face. “You don’t have anything to say to that, do you? We both know that if anything did happen, I’d just be given a stern lecture about the importance of kindness and Koizumi’s family would be given hush money so they don’t go out to the press and make this place look bad. That’s just reality.”
Hinata thought about how he couldn’t deny that. That’s why he had to stay quiet about the Project, but he knew there were good intentions behind it. That’s why he was picked of all the people in the reserve course: an ambitious young man with good grades and a good heart. They didn’t just pick up any average joe. He was special.

That conversation was weeks ago. After that, Natsumi didn’t talk about those girls from the main course that she detested so much. When Hinata became suspicious enough to ask about it, she claimed that she had decided to forgo her plan of bullying Koizumi out of the school. Hinata was sort of shocked, but he was glad that he could focus all his energy into his own tasks, like his pseudo-friendship with Komaeda and whatever else he needed to do to win the competition he was put in. Concerning himself in drama he wasn’t even directly involved in would be a distraction.

This relief of his was unfortunately short-lived. About an hour after lunch— the lunch in which he finally had a somewhat natural conversation with Komaeda, the whole campus went into a lockdown. In the lobby of the reserve course building, all the students were lined up in rows designating their respective classes. Hinata bent down, trying not to be conspicuous among the dozens of perfectly motionless lines of mannequins that were supposed to be his classmates. He looked to his left, and then to his right. Natsumi wasn’t there. She was the only one who wasn’t there. The teacher took notice of this, and then contacted security. Fifteen minutes later, security arrived, their blank eyes covered with pitch black tinted sunglasses. Hinata watched the security officers as they talked to the teachers, trying to discern what the hell was happening, but the wrinkles on their face didn’t move an inch and their hands remained glued to their sides.

Hinata was frustrated, but above that, he was worried. He pushed through the lines of students, his poor attempts at excuses fading into the white noise of low mumbles and static. Before he could even get to the officer, another one clamped a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, kid, what do you think you’re doing? Your teachers told all of you to stay in line formation.”

“Sorry,” Hinata grumbled, turning around and bowing his head in obligatory embarrassment. “Could you tell me what’s going on, please?”

“No. This is an extreme occurrence and we’re keeping it confidential. It’s all part of the policy if you’re gonna fight it.”

“O-Okay, fine, I’m sorry. Again. B-But can you at least tell me you know where my friend is? Her name’s Natsumi Kuzuryuu. She’s not here.”

The officer pointed sternly down the room and back to the line where Hinata was supposed to be
The main course also had their own lockdown drills, but it was hard to accomplish this when the doors to the main building were locked with several kids floating around outside. Still, the courtyard was flooded with staff and security, barrier rope being put around the building’s doors.

“How many students are in the building currently?” Jin asked, patting his forehead with a handkerchief.

“About fifty,” the officer said, “However, most of them are in the cafeteria. The exception are these five girls from the 77th class. One of them is from Class A and the rest are Class B. They were all walking aimlessly around, but they’re all safe now. We’ve taken them into questioning.”

“Jesus.” Jin brushed his hairline back, tapping his foot impatiently. “A reserve course student goes inside the main course building for lunch one day and ends up dead. I want to assume the worst, but most kids don’t really care about that stuff, do they?”

“It’s been a long time since I was a student, Headmaster. Now I get what Sakakura-kun was getting at when he insisted on confining the students to their respective buildings. For a guy whose talent is punching people brains out, he has some surprisingly helpful ideas on how to eliminate conflict.”

“Tell me about it.” Jin had retracted some of his former pupil’s responsibilities as a new security guard out of fear that his personality was, to put it nicely, too harsh for the students to handle, but maybe his stupid sense of logic had some points. “We have the victim’s name, right?”

“Natsumi Kuzuryuu, Headmaster.”

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me,” Jin groaned, “The daughter of a Yakuza clan leader has been killed within my own school’s premises.”

“Afraid of all this news getting out?”

“You see, it’s a tricky situation. I want justice for the girl and her family, but I also don’t want the entire population of Japan against me. This isn’t something that can be solved with a simple public apology. And that doesn’t even consider how the Steering Committee will react. I- why am I even
telling you this?

“I think you’re a bit stressed out.”

“Probably so. Now, you’re in contact with whoever’s questioning the girls, correct? Tell them to send them down to my office afterwards. I want to talk to them myself before anything else.”

Komaeda walked aimlessly around the campus courtyard, security officers frequently pushing past him in groups of three or four. Nidai and Owari were sitting on a bench solemnly. Just an hour or so ago, both of them were bouncing around excitedly in a sparring match, but now they were basically still, hunched over and legs spread.

Nidai saw Komaeda out of the corner of his eye. The sigh that steamed out of his nostrils was as deep as an asthmatic horse’s snore. “Hey, Komaeda! Over here!”

Komaeda perked up to alertness. Nidai was waving a meaty, muscular hand at him. Owari elbowed her companion in the side, mouthing something like don’t call him over, you big idiot! Regardless, Komaeda waved back and trotted over to the bench. “Ah, Nidai-kun. Did you need something from me?”

“Er, not really. I just want to make sure everyone in the class is together, though lots of them are probably still inside. I hope they’re all safe.”

“You didn’t do anything stupid, did ya?” Owari asked, narrowing her eyes.

Komaeda laughed heartily. “Owari-san, you and I both know that most of what I do is stupid or useless in the first place, but no. I really don’t know what happened. But knowing how strong the combined power of all the Super High School Levels can be, I’m sure that everyone will be fine.”

Owari very indiscreetly cracked her neck to the side. Nidai didn’t say anything at all, just folded his arms across his broad chest. Komaeda thought that it would do them both good to be a little more optimistic about the situation.

The curtains in Jin’s office were drawn. The building had been evacuated for the most part, with a
plan to let everyone back in around dinner time. There was a buzz of voices outside, a chaotic mixture of tones and pitches. Five girls sat in front of him, looking at each other anxiously from the corner of their eyes. Jin had all of their profiles laid out flat on his desk. From left to right, they read: Mikan Tsumiki, Ibuki Mioda, Sato Satoshi, Mahiru Koizumi, and Hiyoko Saionji.

“You five are probably aware of why I brought you in here,” he started, digging his thumbs into his temples. “I know you’ve already had a good amount of interrogating, but I just want to clear some things up. First of all, how are you feeling?”

Saionji stifled back an obnoxious laugh. Tsumiki wiped her eyes with her sleeve. Mioda swung her legs back and forth restlessly.

“Um, I...think we’re okay,” Koizumi said, her breath hitching with every minute glance Jin shot in her direction.

Satoshi nodded. “Agreed. We’re all still a little frazzled though. Haha, I hope I’m able to sleep tonight…”

“Understandable. I’m sorry that all of you had to see something so traumatizing. Just so you know, we’ve suspended classes for the next few days so that you five, as well as everyone else, can rest and recover from today’s events.”

“Is that all? Can we go now?” Saionji asked. She leaned up against Koizumi’s arm, her eyes drooping with exhaustion. Koizumi lightly elbowed her so that she would sit up properly and show a little respect.

“Unfortunately, no. You don’t have to go into detail, but can one of you give me a quick overview of what you told the security officers? I’ll hear all the minutia from them later, but since I called all of you up here right away, I might as well get a bit of background.”

Koizumi glanced sideways, trying to keep her focus on the gold-tinted clock Jin had hanging on the wall. “W-Well, we-”

“We told them what we saw, when we saw it, and who we think might have killed her,” Satoshi said, cutting her friend off completely. Before Koizumi could shoot her any sort of weird look, she inconspicuously clasped onto her hand, still keeping a straight face. “You see, there’s this pervert that’s been sneaking inside the school and preying on the girls. He’s even snuck into the laundry room to steal clothes before. My swimsuit’s been missing for a couple of weeks now, and since we found it in the music room, well…”
“Y-Yeah!” Mioda piped up, frantically jabbing her finger into Satoshi’s shoulder. “Sato-chan’s right. Mahiru-chan ran into some guy on campus some time ago. He was all creeperific and even tried to take her home with him. It was probably the same guy, right?”

“That is interesting,” Jin said, “Most sex criminals tend to be repeat offenders, and saying one could kill a teenage girl isn’t that hard to believe. How he made it all the way to the music room, I don’t know. If that’s the truth, there must be a serious flaw in our security system. I’ll be looking back on the tapes soon.

“Now can we go?” Saionji moaned, bringing her feet up on the chair and hugging her legs to her chest.

“Saionji-san, keep your feet on the floor. Those are some very bad manners,” Jin ordered. Saionji stuck out her tongue, but reluctantly complied. “Anyway, what I really wanted to talk about is Natsumi Kuzuryuu herself. After all, I have more tabs on her than any of the security guards do, and I’m sure the five of you know even more about her, even if she was enrolled in the reserve course. Tell me, what did you think about her?”

“Annoying and ugly,” Saionji said.

Mioda scratched her head. “I probs shouldn’t say anything.”

“S-She could have been a b-bit nicer, I think…,” Tsumiki whispered, picking at her teeth with her fingernails. “B-But she’s dead, so…”

Koizumi sighed. “I don’t want to say anything mean, since she is dead and deserves some respect for that, but she was basically just like her brother. You probably know we went to junior high school together, and we didn’t get along even then. Maybe we could have gotten along if she didn’t hate my guts, but I guess that can never happen now…”

Jin nodded in understanding. “I did get a notice not too long ago of there being an... encounter of sorts on campus, involving her almost getting violent with you, Koizumi-san. In fact, if I remember correctly, you’re the one who reported it. And Yukizome-sensei has already informed me of the conflict you have with her brother, if only because his conflict with almost everyone in your class is a fairly common topic of conversation. Anything more to add?”
“I knew her back in junior high too. She hated me just as much as she hated Mahiru,” Satoshi said, scowling. “One of the reasons I feel so close to Mahiru is that Kuzuryuu-san’s actions made me protective of her. Or at least, that’s how I feel. I’m sorry- I’m getting too personal with this.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m not expecting any of you to be cool-headed after what happened today. I was just curious, because regardless who killed her, she- a reserve course student- was in the main building, and her brother makes a point of eating lunch outside on the outskirts of campus every day. I wanted to know if she had any other relationships with the main course students.”

“She probably just wants to pretend she’s in the main course,” Satoshi said, not missing a beat. “She was super upset when Mahiru and I got accepted, with her only being in the reserve course. Doing something selfish like that is totally on brand for her.”

“Good to know, Satoshi-san. I’m finished, for now. You all may go back to your dorms and get a good night’s sleep. Again, I’m sorry that all of you have to be questioned so thoroughly when what you need is some time to recuperate. Thank you.”

“Oh, thank god,” Saionji yawned, hopping off the chair and pulling Koizumi off hers. Mioda and Tsumiki followed suit, shuffling out the door awkwardly.

Satoshi stayed in her seat a little longer. Jin quirked an eyebrow. “Are you okay, Satoshi-san? I can call the school’s counselor, and of course, feel free to contact your parents.”

She sighed, but swiftly stood up and escorted herself to the door without looking back at him. “No, I’m fine. Thank you, Headmaster.”

The door clicked in place behind her, the patter of her footsteps fading away slowly. In a few seconds time, the only noises in the room were the click of the wall clock and the soft buzz of the ceiling lights.

Hinata had been expecting the very worst for almost an entire day. He couldn’t bring himself to eat dinner, was too exhausted to sleep more than three hours, woke up too late to take a shower, and by the time he was in the cafeteria for breakfast, he decided there was no point in even looking at the food. Rice somehow developed a smell overnight, and it made him want to vomit.

However, all of the pessimism couldn’t stop his heart from dissolving into his stomach and sliding into his intestines when the announcements sounded through the hallways, Headmaster Kirigiri’s dry
and monotonous voicing crackling to life— if you can even say that.

“As you all know, classes are to be cancelled until next week throughout the entire campus due to the death of Natsumi Kuzuryuu, who belonged to the reserve course division of the 77th class. It’s confirmed that the death was a homicide, yet we are still unaware of the culprit.”

Hinata slumped to the nearest wall, sliding his back down it until he was sitting on the frigid tile floor. He could sense the eyes of his classmates on him, clearly confused, but no one offered any support.

“Sadly, we can’t send anyone home during this period of investigation, but the staff is making a concentrated effort to act as a support system for anyone who’s affected by these events. I ask all of you to respect one another, and to lend a helping hand whenever possible. In the end, we’re all a part of Hope’s Peak Academy, and here, we believe that lifting people up is one of the best things we can apply our talents to. Thank you.”

The speakers clicked off. Everyone was more silent than usual. For the first time, Hinata could safely conclude that he felt like a waste of oxygen.

The main course was, for once, just as dead and silent as the reserve course. Yukizome shook her head, closing the drawers to her desk and locking them with a key. “I know that this is just homeroom, but you guys really don’t have to be here. You should all go back to your rooms, rest a bit...or maybe socialize to distract yourself. I know I can’t get anything done in these circumstances.”

Class 77B’s attendance had always been shoddy. This was the first day that everyone had shown up, let alone on time, for at least a month. Everyone was sitting upright at their desks, downcast and droopy-eyed. Komaeda didn’t like it. He didn’t like that somebody had to die for seemingly no purpose at all, but seeing the saddened faces of his classmates panged his heart even more.

Kuzuryuu was the first to crack. He slammed his hands on his desk, making Tsumiki and Souda nearly fall out of their seats, and slowly drew himself to his feet. He stuffed his fists into his pockets, and walked to the door so slowly that just listening to his footsteps was painful. One of his elbows knocked against Koizumi’s shoulder. She crossed her legs together, wanting to turn around and snap at him, but she knew she could be better than that, to shout at someone for acting rude after their sister was literally murdered.

About a minute after he left, Pekoyama stood up, quietly excusing herself and rushing out with her head ducked. At that point, everyone was shooting strange glances at each other, trying to weed out
who they could suspect and who was suspecting them. Yukizome was still sitting up at the front, looking like she was ready to explode.

“Class!” she wailed, tears spurting from her eyes. She definitely got everyone’s attention. She felt around her desk until she found a box of tissues. She grabbed one and dabbed her eyes with it. Still, no one said anything. “I’m sorry. Just please don’t stay here. I can talk to any of you one-on-one...but...I can’t bear to see everyone acting so morose at once!”

All Yukizome could do was cry. Sonia stood up from her desk and turned to the rest of the class, dignified in the face of tragedy. “I’ll stay here and comfort Yukizome-sensei. I advise all of you to follow what she and Headmaster Kirigiri have instructed and get some rest.”

Sonia’s command seemed to work. Everyone started filing out of the classroom, Koizumi, Saionji, Mioda, and Tsumiki being the first ones out the door. Everyone else merely shuffled out, not making the slightest bit of eye contact. Komaeda was the last one to linger in the classroom. He softly smiled in Sonia’s direction, and made his exit.

Hinata wanted to be alone, but not too alone. He went back to his room and tried to sleep all the bad feelings away, but after a quick nap he already felt suffocated. It was the same when it was finally time for lunch, and he sat down in the cafeteria. Everyone else in the room seemed just as dead as Natsumi was. At this point, Hinata wouldn’t be surprised if they all really were and he was stuck in some weird fever dream. Maybe he was already on the surgery table, and this was just one of the side-effects of having his brain hacked open.

He needed to talk to someone- anyone, really, who could offer the bare minimum of a human connection. His parents would pull him out of the school immediately if they sensed he was in any sort of danger, the counselors felt too unfamiliar for him, the last thing he wanted to do was disturb Headmaster Kirigiri when he knew how much pressure this incident had put on him, and the one person who shared his plight with the reserve course was gone forever. He slumped against the brick wall of the main building, too far gone to consider going back to his dorm. He just wanted to hide. Maybe he could blend in with his surroundings with how ordinary he was.

“Hinata-kun, what are you doing?”

Hinata looked up. It was Komaeda, obviously. He was holding a can of soda, taking light sips from it each passing second. Something in Hinata’s gut stirred at the sight of him, but there was no point in shooing him away. “I don’t know. I’m done. Really done.”
“Ah, I see you’re depressed from yesterday’s events as well. Everyone in my class is so dreary. It’s rubbing off on me.” Komaeda waited for a response, most likely some angry retort. He got none, so he took that as a sign that it was okay to sit himself down across from him. “You and Kuzuryuu-san knew each other, correct? Were you friends?”

“Yeah, we were, or at least that’s what I thought.”

“Hmm, shame,” Komaeda said curtly. Hinata thought about his question again. Him and Natsumi were friends, to at least some degree. Sure, she constantly insulted him and had one of the worst attitudes he had ever come across, but she was someone to talk to, a spark of unique energy in a boring factory system. He wondered if standing out is what ended up getting her killed.

Hinata wiped the sleeve of his uniform across his eyes. The fabric soaked up wet splotches of tears. He hadn’t even realized he was crying.

“Ah, Hinata-kun, you’re crying…”

“I know, dumbass,” Hinata sputtered.

“There’s no need for snapping. I was just making an observation. I guess you and her really were friends after all. Who knew the bonds between reserve course students could be so close? I never would have guessed.”

Hinata was sniffing. His throat felt like it was coated in lizard scales. “You’re really bad at this whole emotional support thing, you know?”

“Sorry, sorry.” Komaeda waved his hands out in front of him like he was trying to deflect his own words. “It’s not like I’m not upset either. Kuzuryuu-san’s death was completely meaningless, a complete tragedy that should have never happened in the first place on such a sacred campus! But...it’s alright. Everything will be alright.”

Hinata’s tears of sadness morphed into sweat droplets of confusion. Komaeda’s voice lowered to a whisper as he spoke, a light growl coming from the back of his throat. It made Hinata want to gulp down his entire esophagus. “Someone just died yesterday. Isn’t it a bit too early to be saying that?”

“Au contraire. You saw that episode of Hope’s Peak Heroes spotlighting the former Super High
School Level Firefighter, right? His entire family—wife, son, and daughter—all burned to ash in some sort of freak accident, but just a few days later, he was back to doing his job. His dedication skyrocketed. He was a hero for saving people before, but after that, it had become his life goal. We’re still young, but trust me when I say that the people in my class have that very same potential. Maybe it will spurn some sort of redemption for her brother!”

Komaeda laughed at his own joke and wouldn’t stop. Hinata didn’t move a single facial muscle. He could register what Komaeda was saying on an intellectual level—of course, he had seen the episode as well, but something didn’t fit right when he tried to connect it to his heart. “So, where does that leave people like me, Komaeda?”

Komaeda stopped laughing. He looked into Hinata’s eyes, the whites still red and stinging, and took notice of how his bottom lip was quivering just a little bit. Still, he couldn’t stop himself from saying the truth. “Well...I don’t know, really. I don’t think you’ll ever get over this incident in the way the SHSL’s do, but this sadness won’t last forever. Haha, whenever I think of all the people in my life that have died, all of it is just numbness. Maybe you’ll be the same, but that’s kind of insulting, right?”

“Yeah, it is.” Hinata stood up, grunting a bit to himself. He wiped the grass stains off his pant legs and started to walk off back to where he belonged. “It’s insulting, but not in the way you think it is.”

Komaeda looked after him naively, innocently, like a puppy seeing its owner getting into a car for a long day at work. He saw the way Hinata’s charming eyes crinkled in pain, his hands balling up into fists in misery. It didn’t completely add up, but it was getting there. “Hinata-kun!” he yelled after him, cupping his hands around his mouth like a megaphone.

Hinata turned around. “What is it?”

“I’ll bring you some extra food for lunch tomorrow!”

Hinata didn’t reply.

Later that day, Komaeda heard a knock at his door. He expected to see Tsumiki on the other side, making another drug trip for the nurse. Instead, he got a Souda that was trying too hard to cover his face with his hat.

“Hey, Souda-kun,” Komaeda greeted, aura much more cheery than his guest. “I would have never
expected you to swing by at this hour!”

Souda stepped inside and slammed the door behind him. A glass of water Komaeda had on his desk spilled as a result of the aftershock. “Listen, I really don’t want to be here right now, not like you’d figure that out anyway.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I know.”

“You do? Is that supposed to be an insult? Okay, whatever, I didn’t come to pick a fight. I mean, if I did, I would totally win, but I’m not gonna. Anyway, I struck up a dealio with you a few days ago. About Sonia-san.”

Komaeda nodded. “I remember.”

“So like, the deal’s still on, right? I was thinking about calling it off, since Kuzuryuu’s sister just died and all. I don’t want to seem like a total asshole. Like, I’m all bent out of shape too, but I don’t see it as a reason to just throw everything out the window, right?”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

Souda stuck out two thumbs up. “Great! I mean, you probably don’t even care about her death at all, but glad we’re on the same page! Now that I got that off my back, I can tell you the idea I was thinking about! But it’s a big one. I think I need some water so my throat doesn’t go completely dry talking about it. Have any?”

Komaeda looked to where the glass of water was rolled on its side on his desk, the papers he had scattered around it completely soaked. There was a puddle accumulating on the floor. “I... had some.”

Souda seemed to finally notice the mess as well. “Oh. Sorry about that. I just got so exciting slamming that door of yours. Happens all the time. Anyway, so, I was thinking something like this: You, like, attack Sonia-san. Don’t hurt her or anything! Just give her a little spook, and then I come in, punch you in the face, and swoop her up in my arms and take her away!”

“Is that...all?”
“No way! That’s just the abbreviated version. I still gotta work out how the attack’s gonna be like. Nothing sexual. Maybe just...I don’t know, be yourself?”

Souda had his hands balled into fists, smiling like a complete idiot. Komaeda couldn’t even blink at him. It wasn’t long before he was laughing hysterically, not being able to articulate anything. “Huh…? Hey, Komaeda, you’re supposed to be helping me out here!”

Komaeda wiped the corners of his eyes, flicking the tears into Souda’s face. “I-I’m sorry, Souda-kun, it’s just...t-that can’t possibly be your plan!”

“Oh, fuck you! I put a lot of effort into that! I thought you said you’d do anything for a Super High School Level!”

Komaeda was still chuckling. He snorted unattractively and Souda felt the urge to open the window and throw him out of it. “I-I did say that...a-and I’ll still help you, but let’s make some revisions first, please! Haha!”

“Like you’d have any better ideas. I’m outta here.” Souda stomped out of the room, opening the door wide and slamming it even harder than when he came in. The glass on Komaeda’s desk fell to the floor and shattered into hundreds of tiny pieces. Komaeda didn’t recover from his laughing fit for at least another fifteen minutes.

“Yeesh, today’s been a day!” Mioda yawned. She threw up a chocolate covered peanut in the air, opening her mouth as it fell back down. It landed square on her nose, and bounced down to the floor of her room. “Aw man, I’m so depressed that I can’t even eat my candy properly!”

“That’s not even how you eat candy!” Saionji said, sticking out her tongue. Mioda reached down, fumbling around for a few seconds before she picked out the peanut and popped it in her mouth. “Ew, you’re so disgusting!”

“You still hang out with us, Hiyoko-chan.”

“Yeah, because Mahiru does. She’s the only non-weirdo in our class. You guys should feel lucky I’m even here right now.”
Tsumiki was sitting next to Mioda, her hands twitching in her lap. She could tell her friends were affected. Saionji would never willingly hang out with her and Mioda without Koizumi around unless something was troubling her, and Mioda herself could barely crack a genuine smile the entire day. She knew they did nothing wrong, that none of this was their fault, but she still felt a sense of guilt that made her want to cry harder than she usually did.

“W-Where’s Koizumi-san…?” she muttered, more to herself than anyone else.

“She’s in her own room. I told her and Sato-chan to come here tonight, but neither of them showed up. They probs don’t want to see each other after Sato-chan got so mad earlier. It’s really messed up!”

“Satoshi’s acting really weird. I think that bitch is hiding something. I heard her dad’s not even Japanese.”

“S-She’s been our friend all this t-time…”

“Your point, pig barf? Just because someone’s nice to you doesn’t mean they’re your friend. Most people are two-timing jerks. I thought you’d know a little bit about that.”

Tsumiki whimpered, crawling further onto the bed. Her shoes tracked some dirt onto the blanket. “I-I…"

“Guys!” Mioda leapt to her feet, stretching her arms out like eagle wings. “Stop fighting! It’s not cool. Everything’s going to be fine! Sato-chan and Mahiru-chan are always like this. They’ll be a-okay tomorrow! Trust your friend Ibuki!”

Saionji was still staring at Tsumiki like she wanted to slit her throat open. Nothing Mioda could say would make her feel better. “I’m going,” she snarled.

When the door slammed behind her, Mioda looked at Tsumiki with a pleading look. “Come on, Mikan-chan! You know I love you! We can get through this tough time together. I think we just need to trust each other a little more.”
Tsumiki’s eyes had turned to faucets. Mioda reached over to wipe some of the wetness away with her hand, but Tsumiki slapped it away. It was then that she decided not to push anything further.

“I-I...need to go too,” Tsumiki weeped. She scampered to the door, leaving Mioda to sit by herself, completely enveloped in fluorescent lighting.

The classroom was the same the next day. Yukizome was seated at her desk, all of her typical joy still in the hands of the force of darkness called life. Still, everyone showed up but Kuzuryuu, his empty desk only making people think about him more. Those in the mood to converse a little bit pushed their desks together in a huddle, careful not to disturb anyone else.

“I guess Sonia’s emotional support didn’t do much,” Akane murmured.

Sonia bowed her head down in shame. “Some wounds cannot be healed in a day, let alone just with words. I’m sure you all understand.”

Teruteru stroked his chin, feeling around the whiskers he missed while shaving. “Maybe I could make her a nice dessert. A teacher always appreciates affection from their students if it’s in the form of a gift. I could even hide myself inside of it and surprise her if going the extra mile is necessary...the thought is delicious!”

Togami lightly pounded his fist on the wood. “Unacceptable. As the person in the class with the most leadership experience and the most objective mind, I say we leave her be. The world is cruel. Just give her time.”

Yukizome pretended not to be listening, but she blew her cover the moment she stood up and walked out of the class, leaving her students even more concerned than they already were.

“The supreme leader of the classroom leaves her own territory to her subordinates,” Tanaka said, shaking his head in disappointment. “That is when you know there are troubles in her heart.”

“There are troubles in all of our hearts,” Nidai added, putting his hand to his chest.

Komaeda watched his classmates intently whilst they mentally blocked out his presence. Nevertheless, he was elated. True hope was hard to find, but all of his talented classmates binding
together to make his teacher happy came closer than anything he had ever witnessed.

Well, not quite all his classmates. Koizumi, Saionji, Mioda, and Tsumiki were glued to their desks, not speaking a word to each other nor anyone else. Pekoyama was practically motionless herself, her eyes being hidden by the bright glint of her glasses. All it would take was a match to be lit and the whole room would go up in flames.

A classroom without a teacher became absolutely unbearable very quickly, and everyone eventually split up. It was hard to believe that things would just go back to normal in a matter of a few days. As she was leaving, Sonia brushed Pekoyama’s shoulder with her fingertips, finally getting her attention. “Pekoyama-san, are you okay? You appear distracted, not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“Well? No. It’s fine.” Pekoyama pushed up her glasses so high that her eyelashes brushed against the lenses. “I’m just worried about Kuzuryuu-san. That’s reasonable of a classmate...right?”

“Of course! That little stout man might have caused a bit of trouble before, but it would be questionable not to feel bad for him. He lost his own sibling!”

“I’ve heard that they had a very close bond. It’s hard to believe, but in the world of the Yakuza, family means everything. Or at least, that’s what they say.”

“Indeed. But it’ll be okay, I’ve heard that there are already several leads for the culprit. I just have to remember that the truth always reveals itself in the end.”

Komaeda was standing out in the courtyard with an extra serving of soba noodles in his hand, and no one to share it with. More people were outside than yesterday, walking around with their hoods pulled over their faces and chatting with their friends in hushed voices. Even students from the reserve course were out and about, their monochrome uniforms sticking out like dozens of sore thumbs among the autumn scenery.

However, there was no Hinata. Komaeda hadn’t always ended their conversations on a good note, but he figured there was an unspoken agreement to meet up with each other despite the true status of their relationship. If Hinata broke it, he was only hurting himself. After all, he was the one who was doing Yukizome the favor of trying to be friendly. This sort of situation, one where he made Hinata so pissed off that he just gave up, was almost ideal in that sense. It put him ahead in the competition. But somehow, as he continued to stand, waiting for someone he knew wasn’t going to show up, he felt hurt.
Komaeda was snapped out of his own musing when he saw Sonia walk by, sullen yet noble. He remembered his deal with Souda, and how the other party most likely assumed it was all over, but Komaeda couldn’t let failure for something so trivial happen so easily.

“Sonia-san!” he called, trotting over. He held the soba noodles out in front of him, only for Sonia herself to become somewhat confused. “Would you like some? I’m not particularly hungry, and the person I meant to give them to decided that he just didn’t want to talk to me today. Though I suppose I can’t blame him for that.”

“Komaeda-san…no thank you. I’m not hungry myself.” She pushed the box of soba back into Komaeda’s chest. “Are you alright?”

“I’m feeling just fine, actually. Seeing you and the others planning a way to make Yukizome-sensei feel better is outstanding! Ah, the combined hopes of the Super High School Levels never fails to amaze me.”

“I feel like you’re speaking in a dialect I can’t understand, but regardless, you’re too kind for offering. A-And thank you for helping out Tanaka-san with his animal show too. I wanted to thank you for that, but then this incident happened.”

“No worries! Your boyfriend’s like a one-man zoo. There’s no way I wouldn’t help out someone with such amazing abilities like him.”

Sonia’s pale, porcelain face instantly turned pink, almost red, at the comment. “B-Boyfriend? K-Komaeda-san, you misunderstand. He’s just a good friend of mine.”

Komaeda didn’t take any notice to Sonia’s embarrassment. “Oh, my apologies. I guess that makes my job easier…”

“W-What’s that?”

“It’s nothing. Say, would you be happy if you and Tanaka-kun were together?”

Just as Sonia’s blush was starting to dissipate, it resurfaced in full force. She sputtered a bit, but tried to
pull it off like she was just coughing into her hand. “W-Well, I can’t say it would be the worst thing in the world. I think Tanaka-san would be very gentle, or at least in comparison to my past admirers.”

“In that case, I’d say you should go for it! Follow your hope, Sonia-san! Thinking about it, how would you feel if I helped you out a little bit? Maybe we could eat dinner together sometime next week?”

“Komaeda-san, I never imagined that you’d be so skilled in the field of... romance. In fact, I still can’t imagine it.”

“Oh, I’m not, but I know someone who is. I’d bring him along, of course.”

Sonia sheepishly looked over Komaeda’s charming yet completely socially inept face. Her head was telling her that accepting would be the wrong decision- hell, her heart was too, but if the dinner wasn’t going to be just one-on-one, then maybe the stakes were much lower than what the two most important organs in her body were trying to convey to her.

“Alright, that’d be fine. If this man is nice enough to be your friend, then I guess I’d have no qualms with him either.”

Komaeda’s face lit up. His long, curly tendrils of hair almost seemed to sparkle in the sunlight. “Really?! Thank you, Sonia-san! I’m very grateful that you’d agree to my invitation! I won’t disappoint!”

“Mhm, you’re welcome,” Sonia said. Komaeda still hadn’t gone away. Whether he was expecting a catch to her acceptance or was just too giddy to realize the conversation was over, Sonia didn’t know. She just wanted to clear her head. “Um, weren’t you supposed to meet up with someone?”

“Aha, yes, I got stood up though. I was a bit sad over it. Usually, we don’t talk about much, but I have to say that he puts me at ease. Nevertheless, talking to you sure cheered me up! Though that makes me even sadder. I can never not be pathetic, can I?”

“Komaeda-san, please go talk to your friend.”

“Friend? Oh no, he’s not my friend. He’s-”
“Even if he’s not your friend, if you tell him you’re hurt, maybe he’ll regret his decision. Besides, he must be feeling a certain way too. Maybe if you face him directly, both of you will be able to understand each other more. Now, excuse me, but I have to go.”

Sonia walked off as fast as she could in her slightly heeled uniform shoes. Komaeda looked at the soba noodles he still had in his hand. He wasn’t about to waste perfectly good food.

Komaeda cut into the lobby of reserve course students like a butter knife. Just the sight of his light brown blazer seemed to fascinate and intimidate everyone in the room. Komaeda accidentally made eye-contact with one of them- an acne-ridden boy with a bowl hairstyle and poorly cut bangs- and took enjoyment when he saw him jump back, slamming into some of his colleagues.

The lady at the reception desk was so concentrated on him that she didn’t even realize that he was addressing her. His words blurred together like high-quality syrup.

“Excuse me, are you listening?” Komaeda asked.

The lady snapped back to reality with an electric jolt, her glasses nearly flying off her face. “Y-Yes, sir, I am. Name please?”

“Nagito Komaeda.”

“A-Ah, right, what are you here for? Did you need something? I’d think the main course had everything it needed…”

“I came here to visit a student. I’m kind of the worst when it comes to contact with other people, so I don’t have his number or anything like that. Could you call him down…please?”

“Are you sure you have the right department?”

“There is only one reserve course department here, am I right?”
“I-I guess you’re right. What’s his name?”

“Hajime Hinata.”

“Okay, I’ll call his dorm for you. In the meantime, you can...you can take a seat on one of our benches.”

Komaeda nodded and sat down on one of the backless wooden benches lined up on the walls, directly in-between two students. Both of them scooted away, yet continued to communicate with each other through indiscreet looks.

When Hinata came downstairs, Komaeda faced an even more unfriendly greeting. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, voice hushed yet sharp.

Komaeda presented the box of soba to him with a smile. “I told you that I’d bring you some extra food for lunch yesterday, but you never showed up.” He couldn’t help but be aware of everyone leaning in toward them, from the students to the teachers to even the receptionist. “Maybe it would be best if we talked about this in your own room.”

“Is this your way of apologizing? Even if I wanted to let you in, I doubt they’d let me. Main course students never come in here, and I don’t see why you should be the first.”

“Really? You think that?” Before Hinata could tell him to get lost, he walked up to the receptionist desk again, leaning in close to the lady’s space with a smirk written on him. “Miss, is it possible for me to go up to your department’s dorms? Hinata-kun here thinks there might be a rule against it.”

“I don’t see why not. Uh, Hinata-kun, please take care of this main course student. It’d be disrespectful of you to do otherwise.”

The veins on Hinata’s forehead were about to pop out of his skin. He swiftly grabbed onto Komaeda’s arm and tugged it forcefully along with him, almost causing the other to fall. “Come on, Komaeda.”

“You’ve got some major fucking explaining to do.” Hinata jabbed his finger into Komaeda’s face. Thank god the walls to the dorms were soundproof, or there would have been some commotion in
“Why did you show up here?”

“I wanted to make sure you weren’t stopping your favor for Yukizome-sensei.”

“Bullshit. That would benefit you. I’m not stupid. You probably just wanted to annoy the shit out of me in front of all my classmates.”

“Hinata-kun, that’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“I wanted to see you,” Komaeda answered, calm and straight to the point.

Hinata’s finger bent inward. The muscle in it went slack. “That’s even more bullshit- you know what? I don’t know. I wasn’t expecting that answer,” he grumbled.

Komaeda offered the box of soba to him again. This time, Hinata grabbed it out of his hands and ripped the tape off of it.

Hinata gulped down all the noodles in a few minutes, remnants of the dipping sauce splattered across his face. “Thanks. I haven’t eaten in like, a day.”

Komaeda was sitting on his bed, shifting around to find at least one comfortable spot on the rock-hard mattress. “Tragedy will do that to you. I’ve certainly been there.”

“Guess I’ll be starving myself forever then. You know, since I’ll never overcome it…”

“Oh right, I forgot you were still mad about that. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“For starters, you can apologize for being a dick.”
“But I really wasn’t being one!”

“Uh, yeah, you were. I lose a friend and that’s what you say to me?”

“You misunderstand, Hinata-kun. I can’t lie about what I believe to you, but I can at least try to empathize. You may never be the archetypal hero with a tragic backstory, but at least, at some point in your life, you’ll be able to cherish your memories with her without the extra sadness. That’s what I was able to do with my parents, anyway.”

Hinata’s eyes widened with the common feeling of Oh shit, I forgot. “I-I forgot your parents are dead…I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be! It’s my fault they died anyway. All my fault. A meteorite crashing through a plane decapitating both of them! I really am unlucky.”

“Ha,” Hinata chortled. He instantly wanted to slap himself for it. “I-I don’t mean that your parent’s death is funny! It’s just that you’re like, Super High School Level Good Luck or something. Though I guess luck doesn’t really exist.”

“It absolutely does!”

“Huh, it what ?”

“I don’t know if anyone else in the world carries this curse, but I’ve been lucky ever since I was a small child. I’d win nearly every game played in school, won the lottery multiple times, it’s really strange, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I don’t know if I buy it.”

“Last time someone told me that, I played 50 rounds of coin toss with them. I won every single time. I can still remember the frustration on his face. Pity I wasted someone’s time like that. Ah, speaking of pities, having luck isn’t always a good thing. You know how yin and yang can’t exist without each other? Heaven and hell? Hope and despair? Well, it’s the same thing with fortune and misfortune.”
“Please explain.”

“Well, whenever something really bad happens to me by chance, something really good happens afterwards. For instance, when my parents died, I was still able to inherit their fortune! I never had to worry about the cost of anything after that. Aha, it’s a cycle that never ends. I don’t know where I’d be in life if I didn’t have it. I’d probably be normal like you.”

“Yeesh,” Hinata sighed, “You learn something new every day. But, I think I get what you’re saying, even if you’re making my head hurt.”

“How really?” Komaeda bounced over to where Hinata was sitting, flashing him a genuine grin. “You understand what I’m saying?”

“I-I mean, you suck at empathizing with people, and you’re still kind of an asshole, but...I can kinda get why you said what you said...and why you’re in this whole thing in the first place.”

“E-Even that’s good enough for me...ah, why won’t my heart stop beating?”

Seeing Komaeda pitifully clutch on to the neck of his shirt was enough to make Hinata’s own heart ache. “You’ve...really never had any friends, have you, Komaeda.”

“Not at all, but I did set something up so that I’m dining with two people from my class. A guy and a girl. It’s not really a date or anything, but I feel like it’s enough for the male one to consider it one.”

“A setup? What are you, a matchmaker?”

“Haha, no, as I said to the girl earlier, I don’t have the relationship experience for that. It’s more like...another one of my plans.”

“In that case, I hope it fails hard.”

“Haha, thanks. Maybe I’ll let you come along if you’d like to return the favor I’ve done for you just by coming here.”
Pft, as if. I don’t...god, I really, really don’t want to say this, but I don’t have any romantic experience either.”

“No way! Are you being serious? I thought for sure you would have had a girlfriend before! Sure, you may be ordinary, but you’re pretty handsome.”

Hinata almost coughed up his soba noodles. “What the hell do you mean by that?”

“I mean you’re handsome. Isn’t that a fair compliment?”

“It’s a pretty weird one, if you ask me.”

“But I’m right!” Komaeda retorted, laughing.

This whole conversation made Hinata want to implode to the size of a dust speck. He questioned whether Komaeda truly realized the weight of what he was saying, especially with such a large, toothy smile. “I...I think you should get back to the main course now.”

“You can’t make me do that, Hinata-kun- not after I found a comfy spot on your bed.” Komaeda flopped down on the mattress, letting out a gigantic sigh of relief. The ceiling fan was turned on. The way it slowly rotated was hypnotic. “You know, it’ll be really sad for me when you lose this whole thing.”

Hinata threw one of his chopsticks from the noodle package at Komaeda. Both of them erupted into laughter and wouldn’t stop until both of them were crying, like the two of them had forgotten they both agreed to sell their souls to their school.

“Koichi, is it normal to regret your job sometimes?” Jin asked, thumbing through a stack of papers.

“I’d say it’s pretty reasonable,” Kizakura smirked, “That’s why I get drunk on weeknights.”

“As an old friend of yours, I really wish you didn’t.”
“And as an old friend of yours, if you don’t like it, you have every right to fire me. I can find a new job in no time. What’cha looking at right now?”

“Oh, these? Investigation papers. I’ve sent copies to Kyouko to look at for herself, but she’s being kind of moody right now. In any case, she still agreed to look at them.”

“Ah, young Kyouko, pretty much the best daughter you can have at this point. Still want to admit her next year?”

“Of course. She deserves it. And more importantly, I’ll finally be able to see her more often. This school’s always been a sore spot for her ever since I became headmaster. I want to make it up to her.”

“Well, hopefully she doesn’t blame you for what happened two days ago. And god forbid she find out about the Izuru Kamukura Project. She’d have a heart attack on the spot.”

Jin knew Kizakura was tipsy, and he knew that he was absolutely right regardless, but it infuriated him to hear it nonetheless. “Don’t remind me, please. As if I didn’t already have enough things on my plate. The outcome is a mystery at this point. Both Komaeda-kun and Hinata-kun are putting in their best efforts, despite their individual challenges. However, it’s still weird. Yukizome-san told me that Hinata had agreed to be Komaeda’s...fake best friend, of sorts. If only she knew.”

“Ha, really? That’s priceless! That’s one way to make a good impression: take the resident troublemaker off some poor new teacher’s back. I know they’ve gotta be phoning it in, but like, I told you they’d get along.”

“I wish I could share the same joyful sentiments. I’m happy that there’s a chance of them becoming friends, especially for Komaeda-kun, but...I don’t want either of them to lose sight of things. After all, they can’t just back out of the Project. The agreement they both signed is final.”

“Implicit, I understand what you’re saying. Maybe it would be better if they could both get turned into talent-machines, so neither of them are left behind. Damn, if only we had the money for that…”

Jin’s phone started ringing the moment he opened his mouth to speak. He held up one finger for clarification after seeing who the caller was picked it up. “Hello, this is Headmaster Jin Kirigiri speaking.”
When Kizakura saw Jin’s face pale until his veins became translucent, his mouth hanging open in an “oh” shape, he knew something was wrong.

Suddenly, in the midst of a quiet dream about nothing in particular, sirens blasted through Komaeda’s head. He woke up immediately. Hinata had fallen off the bed and hit his head on the floor. Ah, that’s right, I fell asleep here.

He took a glance out the window, only to find it pitch black, bright red lights dotted across what he could see of the campus. He leaned over the edge of the bed, where Hinata was rubbing a sore spot that would probably turn into a goose egg. “Hinata-kun, I think something’s wrong!” he shouted.

“No shit, Sherlock!” Hinata yelled back, “W-Wait, you’re still here!? I thought you were only going to nap for like, thirty minutes!”

“I was tired!”

Hinata got back up on the bed, the rise and fall of his chest still visible in the dark. Komaeda attempted to cover his ears due to his thorough annoyance with the noise. About five minutes later, the sirens stopped, and Jin Kirigiri’s voice boomed throughout the room.

“Hope’s Peak Academy is now on lockdown due to the current state of emergency. Those of you inside the dorms should report down to your respective lobbies. Like last time, security officials will come and get anyone in the cafeteria, the library, or any other recreational place or classroom. Thank you.”

“Oh wow, again?” Komaeda said with wonder, “Hopefully, no one was killed this time, but...it seems like it’s one disaster right after another. Do you think so, Hinata-kun?” He patted Hinata’s shoulder, only to find that the skin underneath his fingers was trembling. “Ah, Hinata-kun?”

“Fuck this shit,” Hinata said, hopping off the bed and haphazardly sliding on his shoes. “Come on, Komaeda, let’s go. You’re going to have to come up with a real good explanation as to why you’re still here, too.”

The receptionist lady’s mouth went agape when she saw Komaeda appear in the lobby again, his
hair messier than usual. “Oh, thank god you’re still here. I don’t have to file a missing child’s report…”

Komaeda felt gross. He hated going to bed without taking a shower, especially when he’s still dressed in his school clothes. It just made the continuous stares of the other reserve course students even more domineering.

He squeezed in beside Hinata in line, and leaned over his shoulder. “Are reserve course students usually this nosy? It’s not like they’ve never seen a main course student before.”

“It’s because you guys never bother to talk to us in the first place. Of course they’re all like this. Plus, you have tons of rumors about you. Like, it’s not even funny.”

“Rumors?” Komaeda sounded truly surprised. “I didn’t think anyone actually cared about me that much to spread rumors of all things. What kinds of ones are being spread?”

“Uh, you being a p-pro…I’m sorry, I can’t say it.”

“A what? A professional basket weaver?”

“What? No! A prostitute, Komaeda. People think you’ve slept with your entire class.”

“A prostitute? Oh wow, should I be flattered? I mean, to think the masses would assume people would willingly sleep with someone like me is-”

“Oh my god, shut up, please.”

It wasn’t long before security officers entered the room. They were different from last time, or maybe they were the same people. Hinata honest to god didn’t know, and since they all looked the same, it was virtually impossible to know.

When they got to his class, the instant target of attention was obviously Komaeda. They got in close, practically sniffing his neck and clothing like they were dogs trying to weed out a bunch of drugs. They couldn’t find anything odd. “Say, what’s a main course student doing in the reserve course at
night? Are you up to trouble?”

Komaeda pointed to Hinata. “I was visiting my colleague, but I ended up falling asleep in his dorm room. I woke up when the alarms sounded.”

The officer took a step back and scanned Komaeda from head to toe, then took a side-step to the right and gave Hinata the same analysis. “Figures,” he muttered, and went on to continue his surveillance.

Fifteen minutes of awkward silence later, Jin’s voice was audible on the loudspeaker again, a dramatic sigh ringing out of the speaker before he actually said anything. “Students and faculty, I have terrible news yet again. Another corpse was found in classroom 1-B in the main course building shortly before the alarms went off. It belongs to Sato Satoshi, Super High School Level Graphic Designer of class 77-A. We can’t stress how much of a tragedy this is enough. Like with Natsumi Kuzuryuu, an investigation is taking place. We believe that the two events are connected somehow. In any event, please go back to sleep. We also ask everyone to continue being respectful of the victim and her friends and family. Thank you, and good night.”

“Sato...Satoshi,” Komaeda uttered, drawing out each syllable like it was its own word. “I think I’ve heard that name before.”

Hinata’s memory wasn’t perfect, but the name stuck out. He could imagine it being said in Natsumi’s voice- just her first name, of course, but with all the resentment and disgust of that person’s nemesis. That’s right, Sato had been a part of Koizumi’s group of friends.

The security officer walked back to the two, and handed Komaeda a pink slip of paper with a messy signature on it. “You should go back to the main building. You should be able to get in if you show this to the guards out front.”

“Okay,” Komaeda said, ducking his head. “Bye, Hinata-kun,” he whispered, but Hinata himself was too distracted to notice.

Yukizome was oddly put-together for how weary and upset she had been the past few days. Still, the whites of her eyes had a pinkish tint, and she frequently dabbed at them to keep anymore tears from leaking out.

“I don’t know what happened!” Koizumi wailed, flailing her arms around as she tried to gesticulate
all she was feeling. “I mean, it’s not like she did anything wrong...it was probably that pervert again! He must have snuck back in the school!”

“Shh,” Yukizome hushed, her eyes darting around awkwardly to gauge how much attention they were attracting, despite no one else being present. “Koizumi-san, I know this is very traumatizing for you, but if you can’t stay calm, there’s no way the administration can get enough information to do anything. We can assume that you’re not at fault, but...you and your clique of friends are still up to some scrutiny. You weren’t spotted near the crime scene, so there’s no reason to stage another security interview yet, but Headmaster Kirigiri instructed me to call you in.”

Koizumi crossed her arms, playing the defense. “O-Okay? Then why aren’t Hiyoko-chan, Ibuki-chan, and Mikan-chan here too?”

“I was told to conduct each session individually so that different accounts weren’t mixed together. Trust me, Koizumi-san, this will be, really, really short. Just tell me when you saw Satoshi-san last.”

“I-I saw her the day before. Briefly. In the cafeteria. We were too exhausted to talk about anything important.”

“Alright. Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Yukizome flashed Koizumi a sweet smile with her words, but was only met with a deep frown between the eyebrows. She didn’t intend the remark to come off so facetious. “O-Oh, and you might be asked some more questions later, but not by me.”

“Okay,” Koizumi muttered, not even bothering to push her chain in before slumping out of the room, the soles of her shoes dragging across the tile floor. Once the door clicked to a close, Yukizome burst into tears again.

“I swear, life is full of surprises,” Jin said, distractedly mulling over a random assortment of papers on his desk as Komaeda and Hinata sat awkwardly on the other side. The rest of night had fallen already and the sun had risen to its peak. The current accelerated feeling of time made it feel like it had been years since either of them had stepped into the office. “I mean, faking a camaraderie with your opponent to get on some teacher’s good side? I would have expected this kind of trickery from Komaeda-kun already, but you, Hinata-kun? It’s kind of amazing what kind of lengths people will go to. It’s interesting too, for me especially.”

Jin lowered his eyes smugly at Hinata, and gave him an indicative wink. Hinata tugged at the collar of his uniform. Komaeda bit the inside of his cheek and coughed into his hand, just a few tugged nerves short of an *ahem*. 
“But,” Jin continued, “I can’t say it wasn’t a smooth save. In fact, every step forward I’ve marked down for you is preceded by their own respective sticky situations. It’s weird of me to be saying this, but Komaeda-kun’s work is a lot more consistent. On top of helping Tanaka-kun’s animal show, he’s been keeping a track record of doing several other smaller tasks for his fellow students and teachers.” He turned to Komaeda, smiling in a parental sort of way. “It seems like you’re the type of person who operates the best on baby-steps. But, I’m really not going to tell either of you who’s ahead and who’s falling behind. That would be kind of cruel of me. What I am going to do is address the...glaring elephant in the room.”

Hinata picked at a skin flake on the side of his face, remaining silent. Komaeda, of course, was the one to break it. “Ah, you’re talking about the murders, right?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right.” If Jin wore glasses, he would be fiddling with them. “These tragedies were completely unexpected. Truth be told, we were never quite equipped to deal with this sort of situation. It also puts some serious delays on... this. Some pretty serious adjustments are going to have to be made, though of course, I have no intention of cancelling it.”

“I can help,” Komaeda said, interjecting.

Jin made an ugly sound of surprise. Hinata’s head whipped to the side, mouth agape. “Komaeda…?”

“Oh, yes, Komaeda-kun, please do explain what you mean by that.”

“Well, since the actual police don’t seem to be getting involved in any of this, I was thinking that there was a serious lack in detective work. Haha, of course, I’m not qualified, but if you need a personal grunt to do the dirty work, I’d be happy to help—”

“Me too!” Hinata jumped in, nearly standing in his chair. “I-I guess…”

Jin stroked his jaw muscles. He wanted so badly to reject, to tell both of them that students should have no involvement in on-campus deaths, but he could sense another light bulb brightening, flickering a few times before filling his whole brain with light. “I see…I-I...I don’t know what to make of that, but I sort of like the idea. Komaeda-kun, if you’re that interested, just focus on your classmates for now, see if there’s anything you can gather from them. And Hinata-kun, well, you don’t seem nearly as passionate about it, but…”
“I’ll dig for information too,” Hinata said, knowing damn well he had no clue how and where he could get this information without causing trouble. “I can even work with all the papers and stuff. I mean, that can’t be too hard, right?”

Jin sat back in his desk, gazing back at what he certainly considered to be determination. “Impressive. But for now, I’d say all of us need to get a bit of rest. Go back to your dorms and take it easy the rest of the day.”

The alleyways in between sectors of the main campus had a musty smell to them. No matter how bright and sunny it was outside, the bricks covered by shadows would always be moist and mossy.

“Young Master, do you need help discarding of all the evidence?” Pekoyama asked. She was standing ridgid like a guard dog sitting next to their owner’s feet, unmoving except on command. It made Kuzuryuu want to throw up with guilt.

“There is no evidence. I wore the damn gloves and hoodie you gave me. If you want to hack into this shithole’s security system to delete any and all footage for good, be my guest. Like that would make a difference though...if they actually gave a shit about the tapes, Satoshi would have been locked up within hours.”

“What about the photograph you found in the garbage can?”

“The photo? For fuck’s sake, Peko. It’s the last picture I have of Natsumi. At least let me hold on to it.”

Kuzuryuu dug into his pocket and pulled out the picture, all wrinkled and torn at the corners. No normal person would want to keep something like that, a photo of your dead sister’s corpse, all bloodied and bruised. Kuzuryuu wanted to commit a murder a second time just looking at it.

Pekoyama noticed how his fingers trembled as they grasped at the edges. “How are you feeling, Young Master?”

“I’m feeling fucking dandy, why thank you.”

“I mean, how are you feeling about having killed somebody?”
Kuzuryuu sucked in a breath, and then shoved the picture back in his pants. He dug the toe of his shoe into the mud, creating a hole at least two inches deep. “I...don’t know. I know you’ve had to do this kind of stuff before, but there was no reason for it. I...well shit, I was just really fucking angry that some bitch could just take my sister’s life away like that. I think it would make my parents proud if they knew.”

“They already do know. I contacted them.”

“Wha-? Are you shitting me right now?”

“It’s for your own good. If the news reaches the administration, your family’s position will still assure that you remain at this school.”

“Well, maybe I don’t wanna stay here. Not when I have to sit in a classroom with Koizumi just a few feet away. She knows everything that happened yet she’s still gonna try and play the victim. God, what a complete fucking joke…”

“I’m sure she’ll get her comeuppance. Whether they do or don’t know of the full situation, I’m sure our classmates feel the same way in their hearts.”

“Hmm, really…” Kuzuryuu blew out the side of his mouth, chuckling a bit at his own immaturity. “You know, my best memory as a kid was you, Natsumi, and I going down to the fields to watch the stars every summer Saturday. We didn’t know shit about constellations or anything, we still don’t, but it was fun making up our own stories about them. Sometimes, I really wish we were that young again.”

Pekoyama smiled. The corners of her lips only slightly crooked up, but it was still a smile. “Me too, Young Master.”

“What the hell were you trying to do back there?” Hinata asked, not even bothering to open up his lunch. Thoughts about the Project were too distracting for him.

“What do you mean?” Komaeda asked, halfway through a mouthful of salted, greasy potato chips.
“Don’t play dumb. You’re trying to suck-up to Headmaster Kirigiri by getting involved in shit you shouldn’t.”

“Who said I shouldn’t get involved? It is a matter of Hope’s Peak Academy, after all. It’s completely fair game. I think you’re just jealous I beat you to the punch.”

“I’m not jealous! I just think it’s kind of an asshole move to undercut me like that. Was that just to make up for not ratting me out to Yukizome-sensei yesterday?”

“That’s a completely different circumstance.”

“Oh, really? And how? Enlighten me, Komaeda.”

“It’s different because to on-campus deaths carry much more weight than our little arrangement that Headmaster Kirigiri seems to see right through. I seriously don’t understand why you’re so angry about all of this.”

“Fine,” Hinata digressed, plopping his back onto the grass. His eyebrows slanted perfectly diagonal. “Arrangement this, arrangement that. It’s so dumb. Sure, we’re not besties or whatever, but can’t we at least say we’re friends?”

Komaeda could feel his skin heating up, his pores turning into miniature volcanoes. He swallowed down a few more potato chips before coming up with a proper response. “You say that word like it means nothing.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that going on and on about how similar we are, confiding in me about your parent’s death, buying food for me, and going on about how attractive I am still aren’t enough to raise the friendship level.”

“I’ve never had someone so insisted on being my friend before,” Komaeda sighed, rolling up the empty chip bag and throwing it into the nearest trash can. “Haha, I wish I could keep arguing, but I really can’t.”

Komaeda also wished he could apologize for giving himself the clear advantage right in front of the judge, but he really couldn’t do that either.
Kuzuryuu was back in class the next day. Yukizome hadn’t even bothered to show up. He wasn’t happy, but he was grinning anyway. He was trying to act relaxed by placing his feet up on the desk, showing off his gangster roots, but it was painfully obvious in the way his blazer clung to his neck and shoulder muscles that tension was coursing through his bloodstream.

There was something extremely off in the atmosphere. Even someone as socially clueless as Komaeda could notice it. Mioda pointed her fingers at Kuzuryuu enthusiastically, trying to lighten the mood by complimenting him on his attitude. He gave her the finger and told her to fuck off. She went to play a card game with Saionji, Tsumiki, Nidai, Owari, and Teruteru. Souda was about to bang his head into the table watching Sonia and Tanaka talk about demons together. Togami and Pekoyama had their noses in books. This was normal. Everything seemed normal.

The only one who wasn’t normal was Koizumi, who had resided to the corner of the room, not even taking her seat. She had clearly not expected Kuzuryuu to show up. No one had expected it, but she was the only one reacting to it. She met Komaeda’s eyes, and instantly looked away, scowling.

“Yo, Koizumi, wanna play some Go Fish with us?” Owari called over, waving her arm back and forth like it was some kind of beacon.

“No, I’m fine,” Koizumi said quietly. Too quietly for Owari to realistically be able to hear. Her body language is what made the refusal obvious.

“Ugh, Mahiru! Don’t leave me with these idiots!” Saionji cried, not genuinely upset about anything. Koizumi didn’t react, simply shuffled her feet. “Aw, come on, Satoshi wouldn’t want you to act all gloomy like this, you know.”

Kuzuryuu’s smirk was still written across his face, unassuming and sharp. Pekoyama, however, picked up her head right at the mention of her name, waiting for Koizumi to say something back, something indicative.

“We shouldn’t use the dead against each other,” Sonia said, wagging her finger in Saionji’s face. “I didn’t know Satoshi-san that well, but several of you were friends with her, including Koizumi-san. For now, all we can do is grieve like we did with Natsumi Kuzuryuu, and hope for the best that the culprit is captured. Speaking of which, Kuzuryuu-kun-”

“What?” Kuzuryuu spat, the force of his voice nearly sending Sonia back to Novoselia.
“I just want to inform you of the joyous news, no worries,” Sonia said, trying to act unabashed, “You see, they think that the supposed pervert that killed your sister may have also killed Satoshi-san. They’re hot on his tail-”

“That pervert didn’t kill jack shit.”

“I...well, we’ve all got our opinions.”

“It’s not an opinion. It’s a fact. He didn’t kill jack shit.”

Koizumi plucked a few stray threads out of the hem of her uniform, her jaw clenched tight. You could almost hear the sound of a rusty screw as she opened her mouth. “H-How do you know that?”

Kuzuryuu whipped around. His dimples were so on fire that the only thing noticeable was the sharpness of the bones underneath. “Because I’m not an idiot. A bitch like you wouldn’t be able to believe that though.” He lifted his feet off the desk and stood up, nearly tripping Koizumi as he stalked out of class. “Whatever. Trying to blend in with you guys was a complete waste of my time. You guys will never understand the kind of pain I go through.”

Komaeda followed him out the door before Pekoyama could even think about doing so.

“Kuzuryuu-kun!” Komaeda called out.

Kuzuryuu turned around, frowned, and went back to walking without saying anything. Komaeda trotted up to his pace, getting in front of him so that his path was completely blocked. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I just wanted to ask you a few questions. You seemed like you had a bit of information on the murders of your sister and Sato Satoshi. Can you tell me more about it?”

“Fuck off.”

“Ah, I don’t mean to be rude! I just want to help uncover the truth for the sake of all of you. Now,
are you suspecting Koizumi-san of anything?"

“You can’t even imagine. Now go fuck off.”

“Haha, can I fuck off just a minute later? I have a few more questions. I’m not really an investigative reporter. Anyway, what was the relationship between you and Satoshi-san? Your sister and Satoshi-san? What makes you think the pervert didn’t do anything? Is Teruteru-kun the pervert? Do you know who truly did the murders for sure? Did you do one of the-”

Suddenly, Komaeda saw stars.
“Alright, Komaeda, there ya go.”

Komaeda examined the piece of metal attached to him. The black and grey material was smooth and cool to the touch, though moving it around didn’t feel any different than it did with ordinary flesh and bone. It was impressive, especially for a one-man job. Souda himself wasn’t paying attention, or at least, he was trying not to. Perhaps he was just embarrassed.

“You made this for me, all by yourself, Souda-kun?” Komaeda asked.

“Yeah, had to hit the books for it. Learned about pain sensors and all that. It would have gone a lot faster, but Tsumiki was in a coma for quite a while, and once she woke up, can’t say she’s been cooperative.”

Komaeda hummed, at least showing some acknowledgment of Souda’s skill. Even if Tsumiki had agreed to help out, Komaeda doubted it would have gone very well. She probably would have tried to sabotage the whole project, make the arm unusable or even explosive. “And you just decided to build this prosthetic- no, robotic arm for me? You woke up one day and felt like doing a good deed?”

“You could at least say thank you, asshole,” Souda sighed. “But no, this wasn’t my idea. You know that it was Hinata’s already. Don’t know why, thought you were perfectly fine with only one hand. You should feel thankful you’re getting spoiled so much.”
“We’re all being spoiled. The Future Foundation is treating us like children who stole their mother’s lipstick and used it to draw pictures on the wall.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Souda flapped his hand dismissively, flicking a few drops of oil on to Komaeda’s jacket. “We get it, but I’ve got bigger fish to fry than listening to your little pieces of wisdom.” He turned his chair around and pulled it back up to his desk, tip-tapping on the remnants of a computer he had probably smuggled from Electric Town.

Komaeda, realizing he wasn’t being listened to, got up, and left.

Komaeda didn’t hate his robotic arm. It certainly made getting dressed easier, as well as carrying a breakfast tray and squeezing the shampoo out of the bottle and onto his hand in the shower.

As much as he hated to admit it, Komaeda also didn’t hate being served three meals a day, getting a proper night’s sleep, and the means for proper hygiene. It was hypocritical for sure, but even if he refused all these basic necessities, the others would make sure to turn them into accommodations.

Meals were always full of tension. The atmosphere was more relaxed back in the program, where there was nothing stopping anyone from taking out a knife from their back pocket and finishing off every last person in the room. Thinking about it, there was nothing stopping anyone from doing that now. It seemed like people had an even greater reason to kill.

When Komaeda walked into the dining hall for dinner, he was instantly the center of attention. That’s why no one missed how he was sporting an entirely new appendage, despite all but the hand being covered by his thick, green jacket.

Mioda smiled at him, albeit sheepishly, with a thumbs up as a compliment. “Sick new arm.”

“Thank you,” Komaeda replied, grabbing himself a tray and sitting down at the end of the table, away from where everyone else was gathered. It was disappointing for everyone else to see, but no one was surprised. It was just another part of the daily routine, and was nothing to get upset over, seeing how Komaeda wasn’t even everyone’s biggest problem anymore.

“Where’s Tsumiki?” Owari asked, unfortunately breaking everyone’s five minutes of feigning peace. Everyone’s neutral expressions turned into scowls. Saionji even clanked her fork sharply against her plate. “What are you looking like that for? Someone’s gotta say it. Who knows what she’s doin’ if she’s not here?”
Hinata sighed, pushing his tray of food further toward the center of the table. He stood up and pushed his chair back in so forcefully that Komaeda could hear a few chips of wood split. “You’re right, Owari. I’ll go look for her.”

“Huh? Don’t you wanna finish your food?”

Hinata shrugged, the bones around neck cracking as he rolled his shoulders back. “It’s whatever. I’ve lost my appetite.”

Once he left, Teruteru cleared Hinata’s food away. “I’ll put this in some plastic wrap for later,” he explained, scuttering back to the kitchen.

“I never would have imagined that Hinata could become such a leadership figure,” the Imposter mused, starting to pick at his meal again.

“Same,” Koizumi agreed, “He was always nice whenever we hung out back in the program, though...b-but he didn’t seem *that* impressive, right?”

“Aw man, you guys sure missed out on a lot,” Souda yawned, leaning back in his seat and stretching his arms above his head. “I mean, like, I hope that’s not *offensive* or anything.”

The Imposter shook his head. “No worries. Teruteru and I have made peace with what happened. It’s strange, but I’m glad I was able to have things explained to me.”

Komaeda focused his eyes on the table, pretending not to notice the very obvious glare the Imposter was sending him from behind his glasses.

Koizumi hummed, which put Kuzuryuu on high alert, which put Pekoyama on alert, and then *everyone* was looking at each other like they were once again resisting the urge to murder each other. Komaeda felt uncomfortable too, but it was that sort of discomfort that he couldn’t help but just relish in.

He looked up and put a big, white, toothy, soulless grin on his face. Suddenly, all eyes were on him again. “Am I starting to make a little more sense yet?”
Everyone ignored him.

Hinata searched every corner of the island before he went to what would be the most obvious place to look: Tsumiki’s cabin.

He knocked once. No response. He knew it was bullshit. Tsumiki was visible through the window, dozily rolling back and forth on her bed with her arms about. Hinata didn’t want to be that guy to intrude on a woman’s private space, but this seemed pretty justifiable, so he twisted the doorknob-surprisingly, unlocked- and forced his way inside.

Tsumiki didn’t have an immediate response. No worried scramble into a sitting position or even a slight glance in Hinata’s direction. He wanted so badly to get pissed off, but he knew it’d be futile.

“Why weren’t you at dinner?” he asked, voice as stern and masculine as he could make it out to be.

“Why would I need to be?” Tsumiki giggled, not missing a beat. That shrill, callous noise pierced Hinata right through the chest. It made him feel like he had knives stuck inside his heart.

“Because we can’t afford to have you doing god knows what god knows where. Like, I know you’re just playing dumb. You know that’s obvious.”

“Huh? But I’ve just been in my cabin the whole day.”

“Yeah? Doing what in your cabin?”

“Masturbating. I’ve been thinking of Junko-sama a whole lot lately, you know.”

“Jesus fucking christ!” Hinata exclaimed, shielding his eyes from Tsumiki like she was doing something explicit at that very moment. “I really...was not prepared for that.”

“You guys always say things like that. That you never expected me to say this or do that, like the fact that the old me was nothing but a shriveling ball of tears was somehow a better person. You in particular, Hinata-san. I had offered to act like an animal for you, essentially just debase myself. You really are dense.”
“But I wasn’t wrong,” Hinata grumbled, slowly urging himself to look back at her. “Everyone else and I weren’t idiots for trusting in you. You did have a heart. In fact, you still do. It’s just the worst sides of yourself have been taken advantage of. I think you’re the dense one for not being able to look inside yourself and realize that.”

“Maybe I don’t want to realize it,” Tsumiki said airily, flopping on her pillow. “Maybe I like it this way. You’re trying sooooooooo hard to turn me into a good, submissive little girl again, but I’m happier this way, because when you guys finally decide to put me down, I can meet Junko-sama in Hell.”

“God, you still keep up with the animal metaphors even like this…” Hinata didn’t have more to say. Arguing with Tsumiki was just like arguing with Komaeda, like talking to a big brick wall that doesn’t budge unless forcibly pushed. The thing is, even with some pushing, Tsumiki wouldn’t move a centimeter forward. “Whatever. I don’t have time for this shit.”

“So? How was Tsumiki-san?” Komaeda asked, leaning against the front of Hinata’s cabin. He had his prosthetic out in front of him, looking through the spaces between his fingers as he flexed them.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Hinata said, moving past Komaeda and going inside. Komaeda frowned, disappointed at the lack of response, and followed him in. “I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then I’ll talk about it. You can just listen.”

“Just leave me alone, Komaeda.”

“Then you leave me alone,” Komaeda retorted, voice so thick and assertive that Hinata had to pause to look him in the eyes, almost cowering under the intense stare. “You’re weird, you know? You spend an entire killing game telling me to get out of your way, and yet you’ve been the one chasing me around since I’ve woken up. And now, you’re going back on that?”

“I have limits. I basically have sole responsibility over making sure you don’t go fucking wild again, and now, you’re not even the only person I have to keep tabs on. We can talk tomorrow, okay?”

“I see,” Komaeda smirked, “So I’m like a kid you have to send off to daycare because taking care of them is so tiring? Well, I never thought of myself as easy to deal with, so maybe I can empathize a little-”
“Jesus fucking Christ, Komaeda!” Hinata shouted. The walls of the cabin shook at the reverberations. Any background noise seemed to have become absolutely null. Hinata was breathing deeply, his face bright red and steam coming out of his ears. Komaeda’s snide smile dropped, his hands falling limply to his lap. For the first time in weeks, Hinata couldn’t detect any malice in his eyes. “...Can’t you just be...normal again?”

Komaeda’s mouth fluttered open and closed again, struggling to decide whether he was supposed to answer or not. “I was never normal...”

“Maybe you weren’t, but at least we were. Even if it was just for a few days, I...feel like I can’t forget it.”

Komaeda remembered how Hinata’s eyes were crinkled in his sleep, the muscles on his face twitching every time a gust of wind blew by. He remembered how cautious he was when he introduced him to everyone else. He was blunt and stern but would instantly fall into a fit of awkwardness whenever Komaeda attempted to lighten the mood with a slight joke. He remembered how his brow furrowed during that very first investigation, shirt tightening over his chest with every sharp inhale. Komaeda wasn’t even planning on being alive when the investigation started, but it wasn’t an unpleasant experience.

“I can’t forget it either,” Komaeda murmured, slicking back one of the wild tendrils of hair behind his ear. “It makes me think. You know, about what would our situation be like if Monokuma never appeared.”

“Well, you can blame me for that,” Hinata huffed, “I mean, we’d all have to wake up to this world again at some point.”

“Aha, that’s a good point.” Komaeda looked up at the clock hung on Hinata’s wall. It was stuck at noon- or midnight, Komaeda couldn’t tell the difference- and had probably been that way for months. “Why don’t you have Souda-kun fix your clock for you? None of us have watches on us, anyway-”

“Komaeda.”

“Right,” Komaeda said. He waved curtly in Hinata’s general direction and left to go back to his own cottage.
“Dude, I’m kinda flipping out. What if we’re not doing...you know...rehabilitation correctly?”

“Everything’s going to be fine. We’re all awake and none of us are hurt. With that, we’ve already surpassed that smarmy blonde asshole’s expectations.”

“Shh, you two! I’m trying to get myself mentally prepared for this! If I end up saying something stupid it’ll be you!”

“Since when did you care about accidentally saying something stupid?”

Everyone had filed into a small, compartment-like room that held almost nothing but a gigantic computer screen. It was their first check-in with the Future Foundation, or at least, the branch that didn’t want them all at the bottom of the ocean. It seemed as if Naegi had waited quite a while to get an update on how everyone was doing, or maybe they had communicated sometime before Komaeda had woken up as well. He didn’t bother to ask.

Naturally, those who survived the Neo World Program were up at the front, and would be doing most of the talking. Everyone else stood awkwardly behind them- bar Tsumiki, who unsurprisingly wouldn’t show up- not knowing who the hell these people were and why everyone was supposed to care about them. They knew the general idea, but after hearing of how dangerous the Future Foundation was for the better part of their entire lives in the virtual world, not having the experience of seeing them in the flesh didn’t make up for much.

Souda snapped two wires together and the computer screen blipped on to a fuzzy and disorienting lime green color, which faded to a more clear image of people’s faces in a few seconds time.

“Hello…?” an uncertain voice called from the screen. It was an ordinary looking boy. Completely normal, but a softer kind of normal than Hinata. Komaeda’s eyebrow arched. His voice sounded unusually similar to his own.

“Hey, Naegi!” Hinata greeted him, voice cracking. “We’re just um, well, Naegi, I guess….Naegi...uh…”

Naegi laughed in the least judgemental way possible. “Hinata-kun, you guys are right on time! I’m surprised you remembered. Man, if only cell phone signals still worked…hey, you seem to be packed in pretty tight.”
“Yeah. Everyone’s awake now, thankfully.”

“Everyone?!” Naegi’s eyes lit up like magic. Little shreds of diamond dust seemed to fall across his eyes. That had to just be the quality of the computer. “That’s amazing! Hi guys, I’m Naegi Makoto! From the Future Foundation!” He waved past Hinata and into the crowd of what he probably saw as shadows. Komaeda couldn’t resist the urge to wave back. No one could.

“Hi, Naegi-san!” Sonia said, cheerily wiggling her fingers at him. “Us survivors are doing fairly well too, you know.”

“Haha, of course. I knew you guys could do it. Togami-kun was really doubtful about any of the comatose waking up, but...here you all are! Don’t get me wrong, he’s glad to hear the good news though! Right, Togami-kun?”

Just as Kuzuryuu had mentioned earlier, a smarmy blonde man walked on camera, nearly blocking Naegi’s vision, pushed up his glasses, and clicked his tongue. “Color me surprised,” he droned, walking back offscreen.

“Bitch,” Saionji whispered under her breath, “At least be a little grateful if you’re the one who saved us.”

“I’m happy as well,” another monotone voice, this time originating from a woman, called from off camera.

“Is that Kirigiri?” Hinata asked.

“Sure is! She’s really busy with stuff at her desk, so she can’t come on, but she can hear everything from where she’s sitting! Anyway, so is everyone there?”

Hinata shook his head, cursing himself for not being able to lie about it. “No. We have one person who decided to miss out. But otherwise, yeah, we have pretty much everyone.”

“Oh? Just one person?” Naegi looked quizzical, and a bit disappointed, but he didn’t frown at the revelation in the slightest. “Was it Komaeda-kun?”
“Uh, no, he’s-”

“I’m right here,” Komaeda said, pushing past a few figures so that he could be properly seen. Hinata shot him a look that could only be read as *please go back*.

Naegi chuckled his own error off, awkwardness written all over his face. “My apologies. Then who’s the one person missing?”

“Tsumiki,” Hinata answered. Naegi nodded in understanding. There wasn’t really anything he could say to remedy her current state of mind or how everyone on the island felt about it.

“I wish there was something we could do to make it a little easier,” Mioda grumbled.

“I’m sure there is. After all, there’s a real human being underneath all that despair.”

Hinata and Naegi shot the breeze back and forth between them. Saionji whined something to Koizumi in boredom and the two walked out together. Eventually, everyone who hadn’t survived the program but Komaeda took their leave. Souda sent Komaeda a scowl over his shoulder as to signal that it would make things a lot less tense if he got the hell out of there as well.

Komaeda was going to make him regret doing that. “Say, Naegi-kun…” he started, interrupting whatever topic him and Hinata were on at the moment. “…You went to Hope’s Peak, right? What was you Super High School Level Talent?”

“Komaeda, stop-”

“It’s fine, Hinata-kun. A completely valid question. Well, like you, I was actually Super High School Level Good Luck, though it…but, after the first killing game, which I’m assuming you know of by now, I’ve been entrusted with...Super High School Level Hope.”

If Komaeda’s nails were any longer, they may as well have torn through the calloused skin of the palm of his hand. “That’s...interesting. For many reasons. Is that title up for debate now that you’ve promised to keep us all alive?”

“Well, I mean, I suppose-”
“It’s funny. Did you ever strive to become Super High School Level Hope? Would you ever risk your life for it? Would you ever intentionally sacrifice yourself for it? I—”

“That’s enough.” The sound of heels against tile clicked into the picture, and the woman appeared on screen, glaring down at Komaeda like he had dishonored her entire bloodline. “If you have issues with Naegi-kun, you can take them up with me. After all, it was my father who admitted him into the school. That almost didn’t happen, you know, because the Steering Committee weren’t too keen on having another lucky lottery winner…”

“Kirigiri-san, you really don’t have to…”

“Oh, be quiet. You’re my colleague. I won’t take any unfair judgment about you, and I expect that you’ll do the same for me.”

Komaeda stuffed his hands in his pockets. The outrageously expensive fabric of his coat, still not the slightest bit worn after so many years, felt too constraining against his new metal fingertips. “My apologies, Kirigiri-san. I guess I shouldn’t be too harsh on the same people who are keeping us supplied with all our basic necessities.”

He could see how Kirigiri peered into the screen, how she looked him up and down as if there was some sort of secret clue embedded in his clothing, his skin, or simply just the air he breathes. What the clue was supposed to lead to, Komaeda wouldn’t know.

Komaeda startled from his concentration as an elbow jabbed into his side. Hinata was frowning at him in the same disappointed way he did whenever he managed to act out of line. “Komaeda, I think you should leave. I mean, it’s probably for the best that the survivors talk to Naegi and Kirigiri in private.”

Knowing this was coming, as it was par for the course at this point, Komaeda nodded in understanding. “Alright. Bye Naegi-kun. I hope we can talk sometime again in the future. And Hinata-kun, you know you can be honest with me when telling me to leave.”

As he made his exit, Komaeda could hear Kirigiri grunting satisfactorily. He also could have sworn Naegi swallowed a sizable gulp.

The island was pretty much barren on the outside. The Imposter, Nidai, and Koizumi were all waiting in the hallway for the rest of the crew to announce any new information from the people on the other side- it made sense, given the authoritative nature of their personalities- but everyone else
had seemed to have ditched in favor of relaxing back in their cabins. Everyone knew that the world was decimated, and that had been their faults, but on a remote island in the middle of nowhere, that fact was much easier to put on the back burner. The Future Foundation was just a reminder that there was no escape from everything else.

When Komaeda came back to the hotel, Tsumiki was in the pool, swimming around the edges of it in a messy doggy-paddle. It was surprising. No one had used the pool since he had woken up. In fact, he didn’t recall anyone using the pool in the program either.

Tsumiki was quick to notice him. She looked up, eyes stained bright red from all the chlorine. Against her incredibly pale skin, the coloring made her look like some sort of demon. She rested her forearms on the ledge surrounding the pool, resting her chin on her wet, slippery arms. She was waiting for some sort of question, and all Komaeda wanted to do was leave.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” she asked, not a whimper to be heard in her voice.

Komaeda scowled. It’d be so easy to escape this conversation. He hadn’t said a word to Tsumiki at all, and for good reason, too. But for some reason, a small part of him didn’t even want to leave. He was standing in front of what he believed was the closest living thing to what he referred to as his greatest enemy, facing her dead in the eye.

“I’m just wondering what you’re doing,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders. “Nobody uses the pool, you know.”

“There aren’t any rules against it. Besides, even if the weather’s gloomy, the temperature’s still pleasant. I haven’t been swimming in a long time.”

“I would just think things like pools and beaches are to be associated with times of fun and amusement.”

“Who says I’m not fun and amused?” Tsumiki smirked. She pushed herself out of the pool, droplets of water cascading off of her and landing onto the pavement. “Being alone is lots of fun. I wish Junko-sama was here with me, of course, but it’s like all expectations are off of me. I don’t have to care for other people anymore. Isn’t that amazing?”

Tsumiki looked starved. When Komaeda first met her back in the program, she had the most full and healthy looking body out of all the girls. All of the meat on her had melted off over the course of the tragedy, and now, her bones seemed to jut out of her flimsy skin. “Why weren’t you at the meeting?”
“Why aren’t you at it right now? Were you not invited? Or were you just kicked out for being a nuisance?” Komaeda didn’t respond, just croaked up something in the back of his throat. Tsumiki couldn’t help but laugh. “Things never really change, do they? Anyway, the real reason I didn’t go was because it would be a personal offense to me. I’d rather relive my whole childhood than have to face the person who killed my beloved. He’s absolutely wretched.”

“Yet you’re okay facing yourself in the mirror every day?”

Surprise flashed through Tsumiki’s eyes, giving way to a devilish glint. “You’re still as full of hatred as ever, huh? Junko-sama would laugh. You can’t admit anything to yourself.”

Tsumiki walked past him, not bothering to put around herself as she went back to her hotel, but Komaeda wasn’t finished yet. “...Do you ever feel like dying, Tsumiki-san?”

Tsumiki turned her head to the side. “Hmm? What on a non-sequitur. But yes, I experience that feeling. I always have. The only difference is that this time, I don’t feel like dying because I’m too much of a burden on the rest of the world. It’s just that the rest of the world is too much of a burden on me.”

The pitter-patter of Tsumiki’s footsteps rang heavy in Komaeda’s ears as she walked away. He wondered what it would feel like if he were able to etch some words into her. Maybe even in her throat.

Komaeda tried falling asleep that night, but his attempt was in vain. He had too many thoughts swarming around his brain. If only the Gods, if there were any out there, could just reach down from the heavens, take him by the throat, and squeeze him until his limbs went limp and his face turned purple. If he was lucky, maybe he’d get a free ride up to the afterlife as well.

So, he went to the beach. The beach was relaxing. The stars illuminating the shimmering mixtures of deep blue in the night sky, the reflection of the moon on the oceans as they crashed onto the beach, and the light sway of the breeze against the palm trees couldn’t be called anything other than serene. Komaeda brought a can of Blue Ram with him in case the natural beauty alone couldn’t calm him down.

Komaeda wondered what it would feel like to just keep walking into the ocean until he was covered from head to toe. Well, his body would probably just wash up to shore. If it didn’t though, then what would happen? Would anyone really be too sad? That was a stupid question. Sonia broke down in tears in front of him, and Hinata had been putting a lot of effort into getting him into shape. Hmm,
“Komaeda!”

Komaeda turned around. There was Hinata, nearly stumbling over himself as he dashed across the sand, kicking up annoying little pellets everywhere.

“Komaeda, there you are! I was banging on your cabin for ten goddamn minutes!” Hinata panted, hunching over to grip his kneecaps. “Whatever! We need to talk!”

“About what?” Komaeda asked nonchalantly.

“You know what! About the video call! What was up with that?”

“Why do you keep asking questions you already know the answer to?”

“I-” Hinata sucked in some air, putting one hand to his chest as he exhaled, like this was some kind of anxiety-reducing activity he had started. “You know what, why do I keep doing that? Okay, good. I know why you’re pissed off. I just want to explain something to you.”

“Explain what?”

“That Naegi’s a good and trustworthy person.”

Komaeda threw his head back and chortled. “Are you serious? Of course he’s a good person. The best of people. Super High School Level Hope. In fact, he’s so very hopeful that his first reaction to a bunch of deranged criminals destroying the world was to take them in and put them in a self-help program.”

“Look, I get your jealous, but-”

“Jealous? Me? You have to be kidding.”
“Shut up, you are jealous. You’re mad that Naegi, a guy with the exact same talent as you, was able to achieve what you couldn’t accomplish. Hell, I’m jealous too. You know how grateful I probably would have been to get the chance to become Super High School Level Hope without having my brain cut open?”

“I...suppose you’re right.”

“I am right. And Naegi’s a pretty impressive guy. He handles a lot of shit. Of course, he has his associates, who also all survived the first killing game- and remember, the ones that died didn’t come back to life, but-”

“They’re....very close, aren’t they?” Komaeda asked, though it sounded more like a statement.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, they are. Anyway-”

“Naegi-kun and Kirigiri-san. They’re impressively close friends. She used the term ‘colleague,’ but it’s so glaringly obvious there’s something deep between them.”

“And...?”

“Well, I was just wondering what it’d be like to have a friendship like that.”

“Oh. Um, well, I guess if Nanami survived, her and I could be like that…”

“I guess. Nanami was programmed to be the ideal friend, after all.”

“...Don’t be disrespectful to her.”

“I don’t think she’d care,” Komaeda said, “I think that, more than anything else, she’d want you to move on from her. Reach new heights, you know? That kind of generosity is too much for any of us real humans to have inside of us.”

“Yeah, but I think Nanami would also want us to be optimistic about our current situation, including
how we see other people.”

“You’re probably correct about that…” Komaeda couldn’t help but sigh, the tension inside of him becoming undone. Even though the waves crashed onto the shore with an excessive amount of force, it could lull him right to sleep. “She’d probably want me to become ‘normal’ again as well...either for my own sake, or for yours.”
The Hope Cultivation project has finally come to a climax.

i'd like to apologize for the people that had to wait another 6 weeks for this. i would also like to apologize to komaeda bc oooooooooooh boy.

Komaeda’s lip quirked upwards, his head slightly tilted to the side. “An MRI?”

“Yes, an MRI,” Jin explained, waving his hand in the air as if any gesture he made could possibly represent what an MRI actually was. “You’ve...well, you’ve probably had them before. If you’re worried about your condition being a confounding factor, then please don’t fret. The medical staff at Hope’s Peak are no ordinary doctors.”

“That’s a relief!” Komaeda chirped, “If that were the case, then I probably should have been disqualified from the start.”

Jin nodded curtly, a little fretful about Komaeda’s optimism. “So, aside from the upcoming physical exams...”

Jin sat with his back hunched over, interlacing his fingers together as he rested his hands on his desk. His face was contoured to a perfectly angry smile, his furrowed brow staring Komaeda down.

“How do you feel?” he asked, voice low and painfully deliberate.

“I feel a little bit of excitement,” Komaeda said. There was apprehension thrumming through him, lifting his skin up in little goosebumps. “Though, I don’t really know why I’ve been called here. Ha, should I be worried? I’m starting to think that I should be worried.”
Jin sighed, scratching at the greyed hairs of his temple. “Don’t be worried, Komaeda-kun. This wasn’t a complete failure on your part, after all. We were able to pinpoint the culprit, anyway...or at least, one of them.”

Komaeda’s eyebrow quirked quizzically. “Oh? Does that mean I didn’t do anything wrong? I mean, I suppose there’s no reason to thank me either, but I’m happy to be of service-”

“Komaeda-kun, hold it for just a second ,” Jin demanded, leaving Komaeda sitting there awkwardly with his mouth open and his grin sagging. “Despite also being a help, you did do something wrong. Because of how recklessly you went about collecting information, what was supposed to be a secret operation is now known to the whole school- the entirety of this, this Twilight Syndrome copycat murder case is now everyone’s news! Do you know how damaging this could be for the school’s reputation- for my reputation?”

“...You’re aware of the Twilight Syndrome series, Headmaster? Because I was a big fan of that series, and if it was meant to be a copycat, then there were some fairly serious inconsistencies in Kuzuryuu-kun’s pla-”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Komaeda-kun! It wasn’t a literal copycat!” Jin’s veins were about to pop out of his neck, only stopped by the force put on the ground as he stood up. Komaeda shrunk down in his chair, feeling enveloped by Jin’s figure. “I mean, why do you have to be so goddamn difficult all the time? The Steering Committee has asked me to expel you several times, but I’ve always disagreed with them because I wanted to give you a chance! And you were doing so, so well, but then you had to go and do this .”

Komaeda eyed Jin softly, masking in how fervently he held in his breath. He felt pinned to the chair, cuffed tightly to the armrests by his wrists. A part of him wanted to argue back, to assuringly tell Jin that everything would be alright, and he’s sorry for being a piece of shit worthless idiot that can’t do anything right and he probably should just die and-

“Are you even listening to me?” Jin pressed further. Komaeda nodded, slowly and with concentration. It puffed bouts of steam out of his nostrils and sat back down, spinning around in his chair so that he didn’t have to look in Komaeda’s eyes anymore. “You know, the worst part about this is that this only makes me want to choose you more, just to keep you from screwing up your whole life.”

Jin didn’t say another word after that, didn’t even spare Komaeda another look. Komaeda stood up and left the room of his own accord.

“Young Master-”
“Peko, shut up.”

Kuzuryuu head hung so low that it dangled between his knees. Pekoyama stood directly in front of him, almost as if she was about to reach out and pat his head, maybe thread her fingers through the short spikes of his hair, but the two weren’t comfortable enough for that level of contact. She would have to leave soon, anyway. Male and female students hanging out in each other’s rooms wasn’t particularly allowed, though Pekoyama wouldn’t call this “hanging out.” It was more of an unofficial meeting.

Pekoyama continued to over him, not saying a word until Kuzuryuu felt like he was about to spontaneously combust. “Goddammit, Peko. When I tell you to shut up, don’t just like, actually shut up! I’ve just got some major stress going on right now, but if you have something on your mind, then please just tell me.”

“Very well.” Pekoyama took a step back to give Kuzuryuu some breathing room, still perfectly dutiful in her movements. “I’ve contacted your family.”

“And what did they have to say?”

“They plan to keep you enrolled here.”

Kuzuryuu jolted up, nearly releasing a ray of spit onto the floor. “Are you kidding me?! I murdered someone, for fuck’s sake!”

“I told you this before. Your family’s position will always make sure that you stay in this school. They’ll be sure to take extra measures in threatening the Headmaster so that none of this will have any effect on your future endeavors.”

“I’m pretty sure it already has. I mean, Peko-” Kuzuryuu was too restless to finish his sentence as he was sitting down. He needed to walk, to pace around Pekoyama like she was the sun and he was the Earth in an absolute overdrive of an orbit. “The cat’s out of the bag! Everyone knows what I did. Like, shit, I didn’t have any friends before, imagine what life’s looking for me now! I’m gonna have to sit at the front of the classroom every single goddamn day, having Yukizome-sensei bore holes into my forehead. Yeah, sure, I can’t literally get expelled, or denied a job, or thrown in prison, or whatever, but when it comes to social interactions and shit, I’m as good as garbage. The only solace I have is that Koizumi could get canned, since it’s not like she’s innocent either.”
Pekoyama didn’t say anything, just watched the bob of Kuzuryuu’s head each footstep he took through the tinted sheen of her glasses. “Like, Peko, do you ever feel bad about killing people?”

“I don’t think I have, Young Master.”

“Really? You really think that? I mean, I know you’ve had to do this kind of shit since you could fucking count to ten, but like, you gotta be holding a lot of weight on your back, because this stuff’s driving me absolutely crazy. I mean, bitch deserved to die, really. She was annoying before, but anyone who lays a hand on my sister should just get the bullet, you know? But like, I don’t know! I didn’t think I meant to kill her! I just got pissed, swung my bat, and bam! On the floor, dead! There was blood gushing out of her scalp like nobody’s business. I thought I was gonna be sick. Like, if someone else had done the job, or if she just stepped on a landmine or something, I wouldn’t give two shits, But like, I did it! That was me! It’s like...ugh...I’m feeling guilty! Not because she’s dead, but because I goddamn killed her!”

Kuzuryuu came to a stop, suddenly feeling lightheaded. He slid down to one knee, and brought his hand to his mouth. The muscles in his stomach, chest, and neck all seemed to squeeze together, and he was keeled on the floor, writhing like he was having a heart attack.

“Young Master!” Pekoyama shouted, crouching at his side. She rolled him over on his back, putting a hand to his forehead. “Are you running a fever?”

“N-No,” Kuzuryuu choked out, “But I am gonna be sick.”

“Man, Koizumi-chan,” Mioda huffed, twiddling her thumbs to keep her thought process going. “Sato-chan really killed Natsumi-chan?”

Saionji was on the floor, clutching on to Koizumi’s knees as if she was dangling off a cliff. It was the first time anyone had seen her beg before. “Mahiru! Don’t tell me you knew all about this! T-Tell the truth!”

She was sobbing harder than Tsumiki was. The two were almost in a contest to see who could cry the loudest. Koizumi was being suffocated. She wanted to shove Saionji off her knees and tell all three of them to go away to leave her to die. That would basically tell them all of what they wanted to know, anyway, but it wouldn’t work like that. It was just to spur on more questions and make her more anxious.
“It’s true,” she muttered, not even sure if she could be heard between all the crying and incessant rambling. But somehow, it was loud enough, and everything was silent. She didn’t want to have to say anymore, but she realized she had to. “Sato-chan murdered Kuzuryuu’s sister. She lied to you. She lied to me too, but even then, I knew the truth for way longer than I should have. I-I...I’m sorry for lying to you too.”

Saionji’s grip softened on Koizumi’s knees. Her wails grew quiet, transforming into sharp, embittered sniffles. “H-How could you…?”

“Hiyoko-chan, I-”

Before Koizumi could get one more word out, a small, sharp hand flew across her face, just hard enough to leave an imprint. Koizumi winced, not being able to look at Saionji as she stomped out of the room, leaving her to rub her cheek and wallow in her own guilt.

“Uh, man, she’s taking this pretty hard,” Mioda observed, gazing off at the closed door. “Of course, I believe that this will all work out in the end! But...Mahiru-chan, I’m a bit shocked.”

“It’s okay,” Koizumi huffed, unconsciously scratching at the backs of her fingers. “I betrayed her. I betrayed all of you. None of you deserved that.”

“M-Maybe Saionji-san was right,” Tsumiki whispered, huddling against the wall, far enough away from the bed for it to be awkward.

“Huh? Whaddaya mean, Mikan-chan?” Mioda asked, the plastic cat ears on her head almost moving along in curiosity. “Don’t tell me you let everything she’s been saying get to you.”

“S-She had a point...about how friends will always just betray each other…”

“Mikan-chan,” Koizumi sighed, flicking away the wetness accumulating at the corners of her eyes. “I know you’re mad at me, but I just...I just couldn’t let Sato-chan suffer. I couldn’t go behind her back, so I went behind all of yours. I would have told you all the truth, eventually. It’s just that all the answers were forced out so quickly, now all four of us are probably being suspected of plotting the murder. It’s just...I don’t know…”

Koizumi fell on her side and squirmed so that she was lying face-down on the pillow, draining her
eyes of all the fluid they could possibly produce.

Mioda walked up to Tsumiki, lending out a hand of support. “I think we gotta leave her alone. I hate to say it, but I don’t think any of my gags are gonna make a difference!”

Once the two were out in the hallway, Tsumiki couldn’t stop a question from rolling off her tongue. “Mioda-san, why aren’t you crying too?”

Mioda thought about the question, throwing her elbows up and scanning the ceiling as if it would hold any possible answers. “I don’t know, man, I just don’t like seeing everyone depressed! And when everyone’s depressed, I’m depressed! I can’t vibe with that!”

“Hey,” Hinata greeted. He held out a bottle of soda, fresh out of the vending machine, to Komaeda, who reluctantly accepted it and opened it with a crack. Hinata was bewildered. Komaeda was completely silent. He hadn’t even made a sound of distaste. “Are you okay? You look...pissed.”

“I’m not pissed,” Komaeda said, almost like a retort. “I’m just not happy. Haha, it’s like my childhood hero just spat in my face, though it’s not like I deserve any better.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Hinata took a seat on the grass, leaning back on his hands. “Did Headmaster Kirigiri chew you out or something?”

“No,” Komaeda lied. It couldn’t have been more obvious with the way he was acting, but the delivery was smooth enough for Hinata to not catch it.

“Oh? Uh, that’s nice, I guess. I thought he’d be pretty mad at you for getting everyone on campus so pumped up. What did he talk to you about, then?”

“He just informed me that both you and I are going to receive MRIs soon. I think he means brain scans, though.”

“Wait, they’re doing that now?! That’s completely unfair! The physical exam should be like, the pre-requisite.”

Komaeda hummed, not bothering to agree or disagree. “Headmaster Kirigiri has probably made his
decision already, or is going to. This is more or less going to be an examination just so the surgeons know what to do with either of us when they cut us open. It’s strange, you know? To think that our competition of ours has winded down.”

Hinata stopped short of talking. He grabbed a few clumps of grass and tugged them until they snapped from their stalks, and then let the blades cascade back down to their own brethren as the wind blew by. “Y-Yeah. That’s right.”

Komaeda took a long sip from the soda can, then placed it on the ground, pushing it into the dirt so that it could stay anchored. “I think he should choose you,” he said, nonchalantly, as if words had no meaning anymore.

“Wha-?” Hinata asked in a gasp. He looked into Komaeda’s eyes for answers but Komaeda just stared back. “A-Are you serious? You really think that?”

Komaeda shrugged. “I guess. I mean, at least people like you, Hinata-kun. And if they don’t like you, they don’t dislike you. You aren’t reviled by every single one of your classmates, people don’t have to fight on your behalf so that you won’t be expelled. The very reason why you were given this opportunity was because someone believed in you, not because someone hoped they could believe in you. Nobody should expect me to prove myself to them because in the end, I’ll always just find some way to horrifically mess it up.”

“Wow.” Hinata bit his lip, raised his eyebrows. Komaeda was still looking at him as if all he had done was tell him about how much he was enjoying the weather that day. “That’s...a lot to pack in.”

“You’ll figure it out, eventually.”

“Hey, Komaeda.”

“Mnhmm?”

“Headmaster Kirigiri really did chew you out, didn’t he?”

Komaeda wheezed, letting himself fall back onto the grass spread-eagled. “He did. He was furious with me. He was so furious that he said I had a better shot of winning, because that’s how much he wants me to change.” He paused, taking in the view of the clouds as they moved across the sky in
little bouts of fluff. “It’s funny, isn’t it?”

“Fuck no, it’s not funny. That’s like...extremely harsh. I mean, I don’t think he meant it that way. I think he was just angry and blew up.”

“Well, it’s understandable why you would rationalize it like that.” Komaeda waved his hands around in the air, too languid for any coherency, to clear the air of the tenseness. “What’s funny is that even though I think you deserve to win, I’m still eyeing the top. Because I agree with Headmaster Kirigiri. If I could go from being the worthless, despicable creature I am now to an all-powerful being known as Super High School Level Hope, well, why wouldn’t I take the chance?”

Komaeda laughed. He couldn’t properly see Hinata’s face in this position, but he could just imagine it covered with bemusement. He wanted to sit up, lean over, and boop him on the nose in an obnoxiously affectionate gesture, but that would be too cruel. “Hinata-kun, if you lose, think of it as positive, because even if you’re completely ordinary, I’d gladly be ordinary with you.”

“What the hell are we going to do about Kuzuryuu-kun?” Jin asked, pacing back and forth around his office. He was erratically sipping coffee with each step, not really helping his nervous habit. “Hope’s Peak has never expelled a student before. What kind of news would this bring on?”

Kizakura smirked, enjoying the spectacle of his companion coming apart at the seams. “Bad news, probably. Though, at least it would show that you’re taking action against it.”

“Yes, but I don’t want parents to be afraid about their children going to school with a bunch of potential murderers. At the same time, however, I don’t think an actual murderer should be on campus. I mean, at least with the four girls, they didn’t actually kill someone.”

“Maybe you could fabricate it,” Kizakura suggested, “Say Kuzuryuu-kun had to leave due to health concerns. Of course, the rest of the school would still know, but the outside world wouldn’t.”

“That’s the point. The rest of the school knows. Oh god, the rest of the school knows. With that in mind, literally anything can get out. I mean, how long will it take before one student makes a measly phone call home? It could be occurring right this moment.”

“Hey, if you think you’re having a bad time, try Kuzuryuu-kun. He must be seething right now. Especially since he could have gotten away with it if it weren’t for Komaeda-kun.”
“Yeah. Oh, Komaeda-kun...do you think I was too harsh on the kid? I think I was too harsh.

“Well, you’ve never been particularly good at handling teenagers.”

Jin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh, shut up, Koichi. You know I’ve always tried my best with Kyouko. But Komaeda-kun is...he’s just...I don’t know. He can’t seem to keep his hands off his self-destruct button.”

“So, do you think Hinata-kun’s the more viable candidate? Sure, he’s done less, but he’s also... done less. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, I understand.” Jin’s shoulders started to tremble. He took another sip of coffee. “I don’t know. Hinata-kun’s dealt with a lot of baggage and insecurity his entire life, but compared to Komaeda-kun, well, I wouldn’t want to have it any other way.”

“It sounds like this is starting to become a matter of who you pity the most more than who’s more dedicated to Hope’s Peak Academy.”

“Can you blame me? It’s not like a lobotomy attracts the most well-oriented kids around. Besides, it doesn’t matter in the end, because the end result stays the same. An embodiment of talent will be created.”

“You think Komaeda-kun could survive a lobotomy? His brain is rotting, for god’s sake.”

“I know that, and I have asked the surgeons to guarantee the process will be safe for him regardless of his condition. He should pass the physical exam just fine.”

Kizakura grunted. He had known Jin long enough to accept his harsh stubbornness. It was a good way of running the school, he supposed, as he would never be too malleable in the hands of the higher-ups, but as a friend, it could be utterly infuriating to deal with. “I think you should cut back on the coffee,” he said.

“If you cut back on alcohol, maybe I will.”
The phone started ringing. Not the office phone, but Jin’s cellphone. He rustled through his pocket to retrieve it, expecting an estranged family member or perhaps one of the members of the Steering Committee. Instead, he gave it a quizzical look.

“Who is it?” Kizakura asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t give this number to a lot of people, so I have no clue who it is.” He held the phone up to his ear, turning toward the doorway to give the illusion that he was having a private conversation. “Hello? This is Jin Kirigiri. How may I-”

Kizakura watched Jin’s jaw grow slack and faintly heard the furious growls from the other side of the phone. He couldn’t hold up his smirk any longer.

Hinata was starting to think that the reserve course dorm was more of a defacto prison than anything else.

He hated breakfast. It just reminded him that he had no friends in his class anymore. In fact, no one had any friends in the class, or at least it came off that way. All the noise in the cafeteria was comprised of whispers. It’s like everyone there didn’t know how to be a teenager.

Hinata sensed three figures- all male, all tall, and all stocky- lurking nearby, maybe a table away. At his old school, this would be a good thing, because that basically describes every friend Hinata ever had back when his life was normal. Here, however, it just put Hinata on edge. He didn’t dare to turn and look at them, instead keeping his eyes on the cruddy plastic of the lunch table.

“That kid over there is sitting alone again,” one of them remarked, voice drowned in contempt.

“I mean, he’s not completely friendless,” another one said, “He hangs out with that reserve course kid. I wonder why he even bothers doing that. You think he just likes it?”

“Really? You think he likes it? That he’s actually enjoying himself?” the last one sneered. Hinata could put the voice to a face. He didn’t even know the kid’s name, never bothered to remember it, but he knew he was the alpha dog of the clique. “Listen, if he really wanted to be like them so bad, he should have just gotten a talent in the first place. I mean, hasn’t he gotten the memo yet? Our chances of being treated like actual people here are zip. Null. Nada. Goddamn, he makes me so pissed off. Such an arrogant little shit. When’s he gonna realize that sucking main course dick doesn’t make him better than us?”
“I mean, Komaeda Nagito? He’s really that desperate for validation that he’d try to mooch off the privileges of the school’s resident freak? This is what he acts so high and mighty for? He may hate our guts, but he’ll always be one of us: Just a bunch of side scraps.”

The three sauntered off, laughing at their own self-proclaimed witiness. Hinata’s eye twitched. He hadn’t had such an intense urge to punch someone before, so he slammed his hand down on the lunch table, cringing at the pain.

“God dammit .”

Komaeda was so wrapped up in the world of murder mysteries and potential lobotomies that he completely forgot about the promise he made to Souda.

“Hey, hey, hey! Komaeda, what the hell are you doing?” Souda shouted, exasperated. Komaeda had invited himself inside his room. He shoved some random articles of slightly preppy clothing into Souda’s hands with a smile. “What’s all this for?”

“It’s clothing, for your date with Sonia-san. I’ll step outside to let you change in privacy.”

A few shirts slipped out of Souda’s hands and onto the floor, though he was fumbling so clumsily with them that he might as well have just intentionally dropped them. “Whoa, what did ya say? I’m going on a date with Sonia-san tonight ?”

Komaeda nodded curtly. “Yes, you are.”

Souda hastily rushed toward Komaeda, slamming his hands down on his shoulders. The way he shook his body back and forth was certainly rough, but with the way his eyes sparkled , he was utterly overjoyed. “Man, oh man, thank you so much, Komaeda! I didn’t think you’d actually go through with it! I guess I should probably apologize for calling you a weirdo, or a piece of shit, or a bastard...uh, well, that’s really great!”

Komaeda couldn’t find the words to respond. Souda chuckled awkwardly as he retrieved his hands from Komaeda’s shoulders, stepping back a foot or two. “Uh, one more question though. What’s all this for?”
“Huh?” Komaeda asked, rubbing a juncture that Souda had grabbed particularly hard. “Don’t you want to dress nicely? The place we’re eating at is fairly casual, but I don’t think she’d particularly appreciate you showing up in a jumpsuit.”

“You know what, I take it back. You’re still a bastard. People always say that you should be yourself on first dates, y’know?”

Komaeda bent over, picking up a light blue button-up top with his thumb and index finger. He gently placed it in Souda’s hands, smiling assuringly. “You should be yourself, Souda-kun! Just a better version of yourself.”

Souda snorted but obliged in shimmying out of his jumpsuit and throwing on the shirt over his head. “Is this yours?”

“Yeah. I apologize if it’s too big, or too small. I just thought they’d be of use since I never have the chance to use them on campus. Ah, here are some pants.”

Komaeda picked up a pair of pants from the ground, someone crinkled from being shoved in the back of his closet for so long. It only took one glance at the pants for Souda to start fuming.

“I am not wearing leather pants!”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean why not? I’d look like an idiot in those! They’d be so tight that everyone would be able to see my package!”

“Isn’t that part of the goal?”

“No! That comes at least three dates in! She’s gonna think I’m a pervert! Hell, if not that, she’ll probably just think I’m gay.”
Komaeda examined the waistband of the pants, coming to the conclusion that they definitely would be tight on Souda, but was getting too much joy out of his embarrassment that he couldn’t help but keep pushing it. “Well, Tanaka-kun applies pounds of makeup every day and happens to spend more time doing his hair than the average person, let alone the average man, yet Sonia-san seems to have no doubt in her mind that he’s perfectly heterosexual.”

Souda wouldn’t stop frowning, his lower lip jutting out like a little kid who was just told that he couldn’t wear his favorite pair of sneakers to his aunt’s wedding. Komaeda giggled, knowing he had no choice, and handed him a normal pair of jeans.

“Um, Komaeda, I have just one more question,” Souda started, all of his excess energy making him nearly pant with each step he took. “Why couldn’t you just tell me where the place was? Like, you’re not going on the date here. Though like, I guess Kuzuryuu could jump out of the bushes and murder me at any moment. You think he’s out here? You have dirt on him, right?”

“Just play along,” Komaeda said. It was already cold, but the atmosphere off campus was almost frigid. Komaeda couldn’t recall stepping outside of the gates since he walked through them. He had already planned how this evening would occur, but with new experiences, there was always a sense of uncertainty. With all the unfamiliar sights, sounds, and faces, it was almost like they were walking through an alternate dimension. “Besides, if she doesn’t show up, at least you won’t be left all by yourself.”

“Wait, wait wait- you’re saying there’s a possibility that she won’t even show up? What the hell, dude!”

“Relax, Souda-kun,” Komaeda grinned, “I just don’t want to rule out the possibility. After all, I made the arrangements before Satoshi-san died. She might still be feeling gloomy.”

“Yeah, well, if she’s not there, I’m going straight back. I mean, if I’m going to have a one-on-one dinner with another dude, I’d rather do it in private, you know? But wait, that would mean spending a lot of time with you in private and I don’t know how to feel about that. You’d probably just try to make me crack so I would divulge my deepest darkest secrets...hey! How do I know you’re not doing that now? Are you going to tell Headmaster Kirigiri about my crush on Sonia-san?” Komaeda looked at Souda blankly. Souda gasped. “Did Headmaster Kirigiri want you to set me up with Sonia-san? Is that it? Oh man, that’s how you know we’re meant to be!”

“Komaeda-san!” Sonia called, waving her hand through the air. Her heels clicked against the pavement as she trotted over. She was moving so quickly that she had to clutch her scarf to make sure it wouldn’t fall off. “You passed the restaurant! It was back there, and-!”
Upon seeing Souda’s face, any excitement visible on her face flushed out. Souda was smiling, however, fidgeting with the collar of his shirt so it fit perfectly over his chest. Komaeda stepped back, obscuring himself where the traffic lights couldn’t hit.

“Komaeda-san, is...is this the person who’s knowledgeable in the field of romance?” she questioned. Her voice was soft, not authoritative in the least, but it still cut deep.

“Huh ?!” Souda exclaimed. He looked at Sonia, pitch black circles forming around his eyes out of shock. He then looked at Komaeda, who simply cocked his head. He coughed into his hand in a not-so-smooth attempt to cover himself up and reoriented himself. “I mean, yeah , of course I am. I’d be happy to be of service to you, Sonia-san.”

“Souda-san, you, of all people, agreed to give me advice about forming a relationship with Tanaka-san?”

“I, uh, what- I mean, yeah, yeah, I did that. I mean...I guess that’s it...pretty much.”

Sonia looked over Souda’s shoulder, straight at Komaeda. She brought up her scarf to cover more of her face, dabbing a bit at her eyes. “Komaeda-san, I was so grateful that you went out of your way to help me out. Please, please, please don’t tell me this was all a setup.”

“Haha, you kidding?” Souda chortled, gesturing wildly to Komaeda. “Komaeda and I are bestest of buds, there’s no way that this is a setup-!”

“It was a setup,” Komaeda said, plainly.

Souda was about to make another poor attempt to cover everything up, but Komaeda cut him off before he could even open his mouth.

“I agreed to get Souda-kun a date with you, Sonia-san. I saw an opportunity in how distressed you were about Tanaka-kun, and I took it. It’s as simple as that.”

“What the shit, dude?!?” Souda grasped onto the collar of Komaeda’s jacket, yanking him down beneath his level so that he stood domineeringly above him. “You’ve just ruined everything ! Were you trying to humiliate me from the very start?!”
“Souda-san, please release Komaeda-san from your grasp,” Sonia ordered. Souda couldn’t bring himself to glance behind him in the fear that her glare would cause him to cry.

The muscles in Souda’s fingers grew slack until they couldn’t support the weight of Komaeda’s body anymore. Komaeda dropped onto his knees, jeans chafing against the concrete pavement of the sidewalk. He nonchalantly stood up and brushed himself off, whipping his head around to get his hair out of his eyes. “No, Souda-kun,” he said, “I wasn’t trying to humiliate you from the very start. I wanted to help, but not for entirely selfless reasons.”

“Why…?” Sonia asked. At some point, she had walked up so that she stood by Souda’s side, arms crossed against her chest in disappointment. “What was your reason for this, Komaeda-san? If you didn’t do this out of selflessness, then what was your true motive?”

“That’s confidential,” Komaeda hummed, stuffing his hands into his coat pockets. “Whatever the reason was, it’s meaningless now. If there was still a point to it, I would have carried through with it, and perhaps you and Souda-kun could have become companions. But on the other hand, I might as well have messed it up. At least I’m controlling my own failures now.”

Komaeda laughed like the situation was just one big joke. It almost was, in the beginning stages, but now it was nothing but a tragedy.

Souda balled his hands into fists, the blue streaks of his veins visible even in the darkness. “Then why did you…,” he started, trying with all his might not to take a swing and consequently knock all of Komaeda’s teeth out. “Then why the hell didn’t you just call it off?! Why’d you have to wait until the last minute to tell us?!”

“Well, to be perfectly honest, I was feeling a little bad about doing this,” Komaeda chuckled, “So, I gave you and Sonia-san a chance to have some common ground! You both have to be furious with me, so use that to your advantage, Souda-kun! You two are the poor victims of my self-serving failure!”

Souda stayed quiet. He wanted to agree, but even he wasn’t that desperate. “Fuck you, dude. Can’t believe I even bothered thanking you.” He walked off coldly, not even uttering a goodbye to Sonia. Though, she wasn’t even paying attention to him. She was too busy trying to stare Komaeda down that she couldn’t even bother sparing a glance behind her.

“Komaeda-san, I...I genuinely thought you cared about how I felt, but I suppose I was wrong,” she
lamented, not being able to take the intense eye contact anymore. “More than anything else, I feel sorry for you. I hope that, one day, you’re able to change.”

“There’s a good chance I will change,” Komaeda replied, “Just in a way that you would never expect.”

Sonia stumbled off, sniffing to hide her whimpers. Komaeda wondered what getting hit by a car would feel like.

Yukizome stood at the head of the class, the tips of her fingers spasming as she held the paper in her hands that a few more tugs and she would rip it in half. Everyone was present, rattling in their seats with anticipation. The anticipation wasn’t for good news, nor was it for bad news, it wasn’t for news at all. It was just for something to happen since everyone was way past the point of doing nothing.

“I-I have an announcement to make,” Yukizome sputtered, trying and failing to compose herself properly. She thought she was going to accidentally spit on a student and promptly lose all her dignity, and that was the least she could do to ruin everything. “Headmaster Kirigiri has decided to allow Fuyuhiko Kuzuryuu to continue to attend Hope’s Peak Academy,” she read, eyes darting so quickly across the paper that she could barely comprehend what she was saying. “T-That is all. All of the details are to be discussed with Kuzuryuu-kun and Kuzuryuu-kun only.”

Kuzuryuu felt fourteen pairs of eyes on him, looking at him with resentment, or maybe frustration, or perhaps just bafflement. He couldn’t tell, his eyes were closed and he was planning on keeping them that way until Yukizome moved on to another topic.

“Are you kidding me?!” Koizumi shrieked, jumping up from her seat, and slamming her lean, delicate hands on to her desk. “He murdered somebody, and he gets to stay here? What the hell?!”

“You say that when your own friend committed murder as well,” Pekoyama remarked, calm and collected and still seated firmly in her chair.

“Yeah, but she’s dead, now isn’t she? And I bet that if she alive to speak for herself, she wouldn’t be given some...some...some second chance! It’s not like she had an entire family of Yakuza to save her!”

Kuzuryuu nearly launched himself out of his chair, hands so tense with anger that it looked as if he was about to stalk over to where Koizumi was standing and wrap his hands around her neck. “You think I want to be here?! This is worse than being expelled! People already treated me like a piece of
shit, what do you think it’s gonna be like now?! And, you know, it’s pretty fucking hilarious that you’re ragging on me for being a murderer when you had no problem with what your little bitch friend did!”

“Stop it!” Yukizome wailed, her voice messy and uneven. Kuzuryuu and Koizumi stopped their screaming deathmatch and turned to look at their teacher’s weary, upset face. “There’s no use in fighting...or using epithets. If we have to coexist together, this cannot go on.”

Koizumi whimpered, wiped the corner of her eye with the back of her hand, and burst into tears. With nothing else to do to save herself from the situation, she ran out of the classroom, leaving Kuzuryuu to be the last man standing. He grunted, and promptly sat back down, not saying another word for the rest of the day.

Hope’s Peak Academy had a dungeon.

Well, it wasn’t exactly dungeon. It was just a secret compartment of the basement in the main building of the school that happened to look like an abandoned psychiatric facility from the nineteenth century.

Both Komaeda and Hinata assumed that the physical exams would be done at the campus’ main medical facility, and that was fairly naive of them. The brain scans would have to be done by people that weren’t originally meant to actually practice medicine at Hope’s Peak, and away from anyone who might care.

The benches in the hospital were made of cold steel, like they hadn’t seen the light in over a hundred years. Komaeda and Hinata situated themselves uncomfortably on it, watching the members of the Steering Committee have an elitist elderly version of a team huddle and trying to comprehend a single syllable of their incoherent mumblings.

“Do you think any dead bodies are hidden down here?” Komaeda asked, voice hushed as to not draw attention to himself.

Hinata frowned, secretly thinking that there actually were bodies hidden around in the various cupboards or underneath the floorboards. “I’d rather not think about that.”

“Understandable. I probably shouldn’t have asked that in the first place,” Komaeda said, trying to ease the mood. Hinata stayed as tense as before, rocking back and forth on his heels and focusing a bit too intently on the floor. Komaeda cocked his head, tugging the corner of his lip to the side.
“What’s wrong, Hinata-kun?”

“I’m just worried,” Hinata answered, short and to the point.

“Just worried?”

“No. I’m also frustrated, a bit nauseous, and honestly just done with everything. I just...I just hope everything goes okay.”

Komaeda scooted toward him, close enough so that they were connected at the shoulders, hips, and knobs of the knees. “I feel the same way. I mean, I don’t know if it comes off that way on your side of things, but my hands are growing clammy. I’m starting to sweat too.”

The Steering Committee was still conversing among themselves. Jin Kirigiri was nowhere to be found. At some point, he had simply walked off back to the real world. The circumstances were too much for him to witness.

Komaeda wriggled his arm out of the space between them and placed a hand on Hinata’s shoulder, feeling him jolt in surprise underneath him. “You know, this is the final stage. We really have nothing to lose, so you can tell me what’s on your mind.”

Hinata turned his head to the side to look at Komaeda, instinctively flinching back due to the close proximity. “I hate the reserve course,” he admitted, ducking back to the side to hide his face. “And the reserve course hates me too.”

“And why’s that?”

“I don’t know! They’re exactly like the people at my old high school. Every time I wanted to do something they all just wagged their finger at me and told me I couldn’t. But...I’ll show them. I’ll show them that I’m better than that.”

“That’s a pretty vengeful goal, Hinata-kun,” Komaeda laughed breezily, “All those faces from back then blur together for me. They all hated me, but that’s just a fact of life. I can’t feel anything toward someone I have no emotional attachment towards.”
“I don’t care about them, I just— they’re other people, and if they think of me that way, then who’s to say the rest of the world doesn’t?”

“Maybe they’re right,” Komaeda said, shrugging. Hinata shot him a scowl, to which Komaeda backed away and raised his hands in front of him defensively to diffuse any malintent. “I mean, aren’t both of us a bit arrogant? I know my desires are selfish, and so are yours, but...if the self-centeredness in my decision now can possibly lead to several selfless decisions as Super High School Level Hope, then isn’t it worth it?”

“So you’re okay with everyone judging you for wanting to be treated with respect?”

“Everyone already judges me anyway, so it makes no difference! What really matters is the end result of it all.”

“Maybe.” Hinata leaned back against the wall, the cold metal chilling his back. Komaeda slid back to his side, arms brushing together. Hinata didn’t flinch this time, but was too embarrassed to say anything, settling for gazing down at Komaeda’s knee caps. He couldn’t feel much with both their blazers between them, but he could sense that Komaeda’s skin was cold.

“You’re warm,” Komaeda hummed, letting his eyelids fall shut lazily.

“And you’re way too touchy-feely for this kind of situation.”

“I don’t see any issue with it. You’re the one who’s always so insistent that we’re friends, after all.”

Hinata rolled his eyes. This was getting to be stupid. He was about to get his brain scanned and there was this other guy pressed up against him, his chin nearly nuzzled against his shoulder. Komaeda was stupid. Nearly everything he did contradicted himself in some way, and he had to have a pretty low sense of self-awareness to not realize this himself. Hinata smirked. Komaeda was right, he was way too insistent on them being friends, and in Hinata’s experience, friends don’t hold back when teasing each other.

“You know, if you’re tired, you can lay your head on my lap.”

The suggestion rolled off the tongue so smoothly that Hinata knew he couldn’t possibly be doing anything but joking, but Komaeda jumped backward as if the two were magnets of the same polarity,
Hinata chuckled, snarky and amused. “I was joking, Komaeda! Joking! Haha, now who’s the embarrassed one!”

Komaeda didn’t respond, simply twirling a tendril around his finger as if he’d just been proposed to. Hinata huffed. It would have been even more hysterical if Komaeda’s reaction wasn’t so goddamn sad in its own way.

Breaking the air, the members of the Steering Committee walked over, forming a semi-circle around Komaeda and Hinata. “The preparations have been made,” one of them started, his voice low and crackled with age. “You two can come with us. Trust us, the process will be quick and easy.”

Komaeda and Hinata looked at the men, then looked at each other before standing up and following them through the corridors of the underground department.

Komaeda was given simple instructions, and he already knew how to follow them. He knew the men that were going to operate on him were different from those at all the ordinary hospitals he had been to, however. They could do things that no one else could, fix all of his deterioration and turn him into a superhuman without any kryptonite.

He lied flat on his back, watching the surface of the tube he was nestled in rotating back and forth. It should have been claustrophobic, but Komaeda thought it was calming. There was nothing to overstimulate him. He could faintly hear voices from outside, which wasn’t really supposed to happen, but he couldn’t imagine it being that terrible of a thing.

His eyes fluttered closed, and he was suddenly in a different world. This wasn’t a standard part of the procedure, but it was Komaeda’s favorite part, to imagine the metal tube he was in as an entirely different universe, one where things would always go his way.

He’d be Izuru Kamukura. His main occupation would be a hardcore philanthropist, going around town and helping everyone in need with his plethora of different abilities. He’d be celebrated for his good deeds, given a medal, or a trophy, or even his own statue. However, at the end of each day, he’d come home to a nice warm house. Komaeda wasn’t thinking about getting married, but it would be nice to have a roommate. Maybe if his memory was intact after the operation, he’d get back in contact with Hinata, and eventually, their friendship would become so strong that they’d end up living together. They’d share the same space, the same food, the same clothing, the same bedroom. They’d go out and meet other friends from Hope’s Peak, like Souda or Kuzuryuu or Sonia, who’d all like him now because he wouldn’t be a human failure any longer. Komaeda didn’t know if he would truly experience everything as himself, but that didn’t matter, because he didn’t want to be
himself anymore, and he wouldn’t have to be in this world.

It’s like everything would be perfect.

“No…”

Jin scanned his eyes across the computer screen once more, twice, three times. He couldn’t believe what he was reading. Maybe it was a falsification, or even just a mistake. Either way, his stomach churned, stirring around the thick acid so slowly and sickly that he could have just thrown up all over his desk right then and there.

Kizakura looked up from the newspaper in his hands, eyebrow twisting in concern. “Yo, Jin...are you...okay?”

“No,” Jin gulped, barely registering the fact that Kizakura was in the room. “No, no...no! This can’t be happening. This is all wrong. I-I made sure that this sort of thing would never happen, I even...p-promised…”

His mouth hung open. He had too many words to say yet no control of his own thoughts. Kizakura got to his feet and walked over, leaning down to Jin’s level so that he could get a single idea of what was going on. “Jin? Jin, buddy, what is it? Are the Yakuza on your tail? Did they put a hit on you? Did they-”

Komaeda and Hinata stood side-by-side, arms planted rigidly at their sides. Jin faced them from behind his desk, rubbing his hands together nervously as he found the words to start with. The friction made his skin hot and rubbery. “I would ask you two to take a few deep breaths, but let’s face it, there’s no reason why either of you should be calm,” he said. It was supposed to be a quick joke about the situation to lighten the air, but neither of them laughed.

“Anyway, since this is a pretty climactic moment for both of you, let’s do a quick recap. You were chosen to participate in this because I saw potential in you. You have both shown a tremendous amount of love and devotion to Hope’s Peak Academy, and because of that, I saw two candidates for the first Super High School Level Hope, a culmination of all possible talents in the world. In other words, you had a chance in being the strongest, fastest, smartest individual in the entire world, and as a believer in talent, I think that you would use your newfound powers for the better. And so, I put you two to the test. I wanted to see just how far your devotion would go, and through ups and
perhaps a few downs, I’ve been thoroughly grateful to see what would arise. In fact, I was a bit surprised. I wasn’t expecting that you two would find friendship in this, but I’m sure the opportunity will rise again far after this is all over.”

Jin felt this throat becoming dry. He wished he had a bottle of water on him so that he could continue stalling. “...there was another thing that I was surprised about, though it wasn’t as pleasant. From the start, I had only meant to judge you on your moral characters, as the doctors here are so skilled that any physicalities shouldn’t have been an issue, but...I guess one of you is just out of luck.”

“Goddammit,” Hinata snapped. Jin’s gazed at him in shock, not expecting the sudden cursing. “S-Sorry, Headmaster Kirigiri! It’s just that like...I thought my concussion from a few years ago wouldn’t have much of an impact on this. Damn, I’m dumb! Shit- sorry again- I just-”

“Concussion?” Jin asked, raising an eyebrow. “I didn’t hear anything about a concussion. You’re not the one I’m talking about. In fact, you should be happy. You’ve won the competition. You’ve been chosen to become Izuru Kamukura.”

“I...what?” Hinata’s face went blank. A moment passed, then two, and the tufts of his hair bristled in elation. He was choking, sputtering, jumbling up the words to express how utterly happy he felt. Komaeda looked over at him, noticing the wet splotches on the collar of his uniform. “I...I won?”

Jin nodded, sucking in his bottom lip. “Yes, Hinata-kun, you did. Congratulations. You’re the best choice we could have made.”

“I-I won? I won! Oh my god, I- thank you, Headmaster Kirigiri!” Hinata was so excited that he nearly leaped over the desk and into Jin’s arms. Instead, he leaned over, reaching out his hand for a shake. Jin dutifully reciprocated, noticing the sweat slick across Hinata’s palms. “Sorry! Is this awkward? I think I’m being awkward! I just don’t know how to process it!”

“No worries. You’ll process it by tonight. Fairly ideal given your surgery’s starting tomorrow.”

“Already?!”

“Of course. They don’t want you having any second thoughts, but it doesn’t seem like you’re having any now.”
“No, no, no. Not at all. Like, I did it! I’m gonna get a talent! Hell, talent s! I-I’ll finally have something to prove!”

“Yeah! I’ll be an elite! I’ll be special! Holy shit, I’ll be special! You hear that, Komaeda-”

In his burst of joy, Hinata had forgotten what the other side of him winning was. Komaeda was still standing in the same position he was before, the only alteration being the slight sagging of his muscles. Hinata’s smile dropped. He couldn’t feel guilty, but bad moods were always contagious.

“Komaeda…”

“Congratulations, Hinata-kun,” he murmured, not looking Hinata in the eyes. Instead, his gaze cast down to his feet, concentrating on his messily-done shoelaces.

“Komaeda-kun,” Jin sighed, having dreaded this moment for the past twelve hours. “Don’t think of this as a mark against your character. It isn’t your fault.”

“I believe you, Headmaster Kirigiri,” Komaeda clicked his tongue, “After all, you made it perfectly clear to me that it was a thousand marks against my character that made me the perfect candidate. Because you pitied me.”

“That is not true-”

“But isn’t it? You may have seen the same qualities in both of us, but it was still different. You nominated Hinata-kun because you believed in him, and you nominated me because you didn’t.”


“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not mad!” Komaeda threw up his arms over his head and smiled with glee and patheticness. “How could I be mad? You somehow saw something worth saving in me and decided to do a good deed and give me a chance to live a better life. But you ended up completely underestimating my capacity for worthlessness. You even underestimated my own talent. Though,
really, I did too.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa- what are we talking about?” Hinata interjected, a gleam of sweat across his forehead and the tips of his ears.

Komaeda lightly pushed his question aside, focusing on his rant instead. “You see, Headmaster Kirigiri, when you told me that the surgeons were so skilled that they could bypass any difficulty, including my own condition, I chose to trust that, but like everything else in my life, things aren’t that simple. Even the most proficient doctors out there couldn’t account for all those missing brain cells!”

“Komaeda-kun, shouldn’t we continue this conversation in private?” Jin asked sheepishly, feeling as if he was being recorded. “I mean, we didn’t intend for Hinata-kun to know that-”


“You have... what?” Hinata gasped, mouth agape.

“Mmhmm. Frontotemporal dementia, the behavioral variant, and lymphoma too, but that’s more of an afterthought. Sorry I hadn’t told you earlier. I could have easily gotten you to drop out of this whole experiment with how utterly depressing that fact is- I mean, who deserves a second chance at life more? A nobody who wanted to be a somebody or a living, breathing piece of garbage who could drop dead any second?”

“I’m not-”

“A nobody? Don’t flatter yourself, Hinata-kun, of course you are. Everything about you is disgustingly ordinary- your clothing, the way you speak- even your name is generic. You- you just wanted this opportunity, but I need it! So...so please…”

For a few moments, the room was completely silent. All three of them stood in their places like ticking time bombs, waiting to explode at any second with the utmost rage. And then, Komaeda’s lip quivered. The skin of his cheeks followed, then came his shoulders, and suddenly Komaeda was shaking like he had been left outside in the freezing cold ass naked.

His knees grew too weak to support him any longer, and he slumped to the floor, supporting his arms on top of Jin’s desk. “S-So please,” he uttered, voice cracked and broken. Streaks left behind across
his face from tears shimmered in the light. “...please, choose me! I’ll do anything!”

Jin looked down at Komaeda’s sorrowful face with surprise. He didn’t even think Komaeda was capable of crying. “Komaeda-kun...I’m sorry, but I can’t—”

“I-I don’t care! I don’t care that they say it’s impossible- my luck will pull through! A-And...even if I just end up dying during the procedure anyway...I’d take it over living another day in the world I’m in now!”

“Komaeda...,” Hinata said, almost in the form of breath. He leaned down to rest a hand on his back like a friend usually would, but was instantly shrugged off like the gesture was a violent trigger. “I-I’m sorry...”

Komaeda lost his grip on the desk and collapsed onto the floor, sobbing uncontrollably and choking out unintelligible syllables. Jin tried his best to formulate a reasonable course of action in his head. “I’ll call a nurse,” he said, having a hard time sounding the slightest bit authoritative.

A nurse came by and escorted Komaeda back to his dorm room. Hinata presumed that he should leave as well, but was promptly stopped. “I still want to talk to you, Hinata-kun,” Jin said. Hinata, still a bit jittery from the past twenty minutes, startled, and then scrambled back to the front of Jin’s desk awkwardly. “I’m deeply sorry that you had to see a colleague in so much anguish. I was expected a negative reaction, but this was especially hard to digest.”

“It’s alright,” Hinata said, not finding a comfortable position to situate his hands. “I’m just...worried, you know? Is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll be fine. Perhaps not in his best mood the next few days, but he shouldn’t be a top priority of yours. What’s important is that he’ll always remember you and all the nice things you did for him. Lots of people will feel the same way, Hinata-kun. I know that this whole thing has focused on the betterment of your current conditions, but your accomplishments as Hajime Hinata will stick with you forever.”

“I don’t think I’ve accomplished that much,” Hinata lamented.

“Really? I mean, you haven’t earned any titles, but I was expecting a bit more reminiscing about things like, let’s say your childhood, or your parents.”
“I kinda feel bad about lying to my parents.”

“Reasonable.”

“But...I don’t think they’ll even notice I’m gone. Sure, they loved me, but they never really had expectations for me. You know, they paid a lot so I could go there, but they never understood why I cared so much.”

“So, they’re basically like the rest of the world, are they not? Ordinary people who don’t realize how ordinary they are.”

“You know, when you say things like that, you remind me of Komaeda, Headmaster.”

“You remind me of Komaeda-kun too. But, there is one difference between you two, something that may have given you the upper hand from the start.”

“What...would that be, Headmaster?” Hinata asked, feeling like he was diving headfirst into a whirlpool.

“Komaeda believed the world when they told him he was worthless. You, however, knew they were- excuse my language- full of shit,” Jin explained, “You want to prove to other people that you’re not just some slab of leftovers. Komaeda did too, but he would always find himself agreeing with them.”

“I think you’re making me out to be more self-confident than I actually am.”

“Every detail of how you feel about yourself isn’t any of my business. Regardless of how little you believe in yourself now, you’ll certainly believe in yourself after the surgery is over. Hinata-kun, you have the determination, you have the will to spread hope throughout the world. With just one talent your scope of possibilities widens in the largest degree. I trust that you’ll make very good decisions when you come back to my office as Izuru Kamukura.”

Hinata felt weird. Not good, not bad, just weird. “Will...will the other students in the reserve course get to see me in person afterward?”

Jin shrugged. “If you’d like that, yes.”
Hinata felt a lot better.

Komaeda was knocked out on his bed, eyes heavy and cranium full with what could have easily been some spare tears. The nurse hadn’t said much to him, just muttered frantically under her breath. It didn’t feel real. In fact, it felt like a dream. Maybe it was. Maybe everything involving the Hope Cultivation Project was just something Komaeda’s mind conjured during a good night’s sleep. He’d accept that easily.

A knock at his door jolted him awake. He rubbed his eyes a few times to get situated to the light and stumbled over to the door, not even bothering to give a warning that he was coming. When he opened it, Hinata was on the other side, giving no strong indication of how he was feeling, though maybe it was just too dark for Komaeda to see his expressions.

Komaeda flicked on a light switch. “Hinata-kun? What are you doing here?”

“What the hell do you think? I came to see you.” Hinata pushed his way inside without even asking, promptly closing the door behind him. “You okay?”

“I don’t know,” Komaeda answered. Hinata couldn’t be bothered to pry for a more detailed answer. “How did you get in here, anyway? I would think you would have been caught.”

“I told one of the security guards that I had to go to the bathroom really badly. But whatever, that’s not the point. What is the point is that this is the last time I’m going to see you, as myself at least.”


“You’re not mad?”

“Of course not. I did say that you deserved to win, didn’t I? I apologize for acting in such poor taste. I didn’t mean to call you a nobody in front of Headmaster Kirigiri.” Hinata didn’t say anything, just looked at him. Komaeda stared back through half-lidded eyes. “What is it?”

“Komaeda, this is the final stage. You have nothing to lose, so why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind?”
Komaeda rolled his eyes. “What are you, an AI? Just regurgitating what I’ve said to you in the past isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

Hinata frowned, but pushed the comment to the back burner. Instead, he took notice of Komaeda’s bookbag, deciding to do a bit of rummaging.

“Hey, Hinata-kun, what are you-”

Hinata pulled out at least five different pill bottles, setting them down side-by-side on the floor. Komaeda shook his head, not wanting to believe what he was seeing.

“These are all yours, huh?”

“They are,” Komaeda admitted, “If you dig deep enough, you can probably find some needles I happen to inject myself with too.”

Hinata heaved, not bothering to put the pill bottles back in the bag before standing up again. “Komaeda, I have lots of plans for when I’m Izuru Kamukura. I want to be known, to be looked up to by those who told me what I wanted was selfish- hell, even just a feature on Hope’s Peak Heroes would be great. But like, there are some specifics too…”

“Like what?”

“You know, like, since I’ll be talented in a lot of sports, I think it’d be cool to win an Olympic medal, and since I’ll be able to sing, maybe head my own rock band someday. And, well, since I’ll have talent in the medical field, I guess I’ll…”

“…you’ll do what?”

“…I’ll find a way to cure whatever the hell you’re going through, so that there will be at least one reason for you to keep on going in life.”
“Hinata-kun…”

Komaeda lurched to his feet, and nearly caused both him and Hinata to fall to the floor as he leaned up against him, pressing his head against the juncture between his neck and his shoulder. He prodded his nose against Hinata’s neck, and gently, slowly wrapped his arms around his waist. “Thank you…”

“Gee, um, thank you too.” Hinata tried to reciprocate the hug by looping his arms around Komaeda’s upper back. It was a peculiar sensation, but they got used to it fairly quickly so that the two of them were steadily rocking back and forth in a rhythm. “Just…don’t give up hope, Komaeda,” he said, not particularly hating the feeling of Komaeda’s hair against his nose.

“You don’t truly understand me if you think that I could ever truly do something like that.”

Hinata snorted, letting his arms fall back to his sides. Komaeda didn’t get the cue instantly, taking some moments to figure out the hug had ended. “I wish I had done that sooner,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Hinata chucked, “You’ll get other chances in the future.”

Chapter End Notes

if anyone who's actually had an MRI wants to correct me on stuff that's okay with me
The Funniest Joke All Year

Chapter Summary

Things can go alright until bad news knocks at your door.

People were stupid, Komaeda thought. Maybe they weren’t idiots, but they were definitely naive. They were naive for thinking that behaviors could just be unlearned, that someone could, with enough effort, change their way of thinking. It was as foolish as thinking the Earth was flat. Sure, someone could alter how they express certain parts of themselves so that the ugliest, most vile aspects of their personalities never see the light of day again, but they can never rid themselves of them. This proved true for mental disorders. A rehab facility couldn’t cure someone of their addiction, but it could give them a means necessary of combating their compulsions effectively. Komaeda himself didn’t know where this line of thought bridged over to innate personality traits, but it somehow did.

It just seemed so obvious, as he watched Kuzuryuu break into a fit of hysterics at the restaurant, exasperatedly shouting at Pekoyama in a language no one else could understand. There was no buildup to it, or at least no visible signs of it. Pekoyama had just said that she’d like eggs for breakfast, as that was what Kuzuryuu would want her to have, and that was enough of a trigger.

“Goddammit, Peko!” he exclaimed, clamoring his hands out in front of him like he was the resisting to the urge to grab her by the collar of her outfit and shake her until she understood the point. Pekoyama was far taller than Kuzuryuu, almost laughably so, but the way she would bow her head and fold her hands across her abdomen as he talked to her made it seem like he was leagues above her. “I don’t care if you eat the damn eggs or not! I don’t want you to eat stuff, or read stuff, or do stuff just because you think I want you to. All I want is for you to start making your own damn decisions for once!”

Pekoyama nodded, slowly like she was just feigning interest and truly hadn’t been listening to a single thing Kuzuryuu had told her. “I understand, Young Master.”

For a moment, Kuzuryuu seemed genuinely relieved. Saionji pointed at his face and giggled condescendingly. “You really believe her, don’t you?”

“Hiyoko-chan,” Koizumi said sternly, almost in a whisper.

Saionji crossed her arms, the long sleeves of her kimono obscuring her hands, still fairly small and dainty despite her growth-spurt. “What? I’m just telling the truth. Kuzuryuu thinks that because he’s
not playing gangster anymore that Pekoyama can change too, except he wasn’t the one being beaten with a baseball bat for his entire childhood.”

Mioda stuffed the last of her breakfast into her mouth and stood up from the table, sheepishly pointing over to the exit with her thumb. “This is getting awkward. I think I should bail.”

She dashed down the stairs in the blink of an eye. Teruteru scuttled after her. Owari attempted to make an escape herself but was stopped by Nidai’s firm grasp on her shoulder. She relented and stayed where she was.

“I think we should stop,” Hinata suggested, pacing around like he was a superior at an office building, and was doing a terrible job at managing all of his employees. “This can all be sorted out at a later time. Gradually.” He looked over his shoulder at Sonia, hoping for some sort of affirmation, but the only thing she had to offer him was her eye contact.

“In my opinion, there’s no need to stop this,” the Imposter said, pushing up his glasses while chewing on the remnants of his breakfast. Everyone looked at him as if he was insane, except for Komaeda and Tsumiki, who sported subtle smiles under their noses. Komaeda wasn’t looking at Tsumiki. He didn’t want to look, because catching a glimpse of her expression might have completely ruined his mood. “Don’t act so surprised,” the Imposter scoffed, “If everyone just keeps their feelings bottled up, it might as well just lead to more conflict, or worse.”

Kuzuryuu gritted his teeth. “What are you implying?”

“I’m not trying to offend anyone. It’s just that when things are handled in private, there’s more of a chance for meddling and manipulation. Don’t you think things could have gone better if I had just alerted you all I had received a threat for murder? I learned the consequences for my actions, and if I’m not mistaken...it’d be best if you all did the same.”

Komaeda could understand consequences, or at least on the physical level. It was a simple cause-and-effect problem, but somehow he missed a key piece in the puzzle. The consequences for explaining yourself are usually the other party understanding, but whenever Komaeda did this, it would just make them angrier.

Kuzuryuu seemed to understand the concept well enough, evident in how he picked up his glass of water and downed it almost at a ninety-degree angle, plopping it back on the table harshly. It was an unconventional way of surrendering, but it was a surrender nonetheless. “I don’t think anything else needs to be said,” he grunted, “I know that my whole family treated Peko like shit, like a dog. I’m just trying to convince her otherwise.”
“Your whole family’s rotten,” Koizumi said, her voice soft and wispy but still loud enough to be heard. Kuzuryuu ducked his head, feeling ashamed yet resentful at the same time. “You know you’re all horrible, yet you’ll apologize for each other at a moment’s notice.”

Sonia glanced at Hinata, who then glanced at Komaeda. Komaeda looked back at him and smiled.

Nights at Jabberwock Island were peaceful, calming. It was enough to make one think that they were actually on a resort island, just retreating there for the summer to escape from the typical stressors of life. Compared to the daytime, they almost never came with surprises.

When Komaeda came back to his cabin that night he found a picture of Enoshima on his bed. She was leaning over, staring down at something or someone, breasts hanging out of her shirt and her face wild with excitement and emptiness. Komaeda ripped it shreds and threw the little bits of paper into the trash can. He would have burned it, but no one really trusted him with matches.

Feeling the need for some air, he opened a window and stuck his head outside, a cool breeze blowing by and ruffling his hair. He could see through the window to Hinata’s cabin, though it’s not like anything interesting was going on in there to begin with. He was just walking back and forth like there was nothing else he could do. He was so earnestly wrapped up in his thoughts that Komaeda thought it was kind of adorable.

“Hinata-kun!” he shouted. Hinata startled at the noise, then saw Komaeda through the glass. Rolling his eyes, he walked over and pushed his own window up.

“What is it?” he asked. Komaeda noted the dark circles under his eyes, illuminated by the light coming from his room. They were much like his own.

“I’m bored.”

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?”

Komaeda shrugged. “Keep me company, I guess?”

Hinata looked at him with a deadpan expression and shut the window. He was so tired with Komaeda’s antics, and he wasn’t trying to hide it in the slightest, but he was starting to respond to them as if it was a simple teasing dynamic between friends. A minute later, he opened the door to Komaeda’s cabin, not even bothering to knock.
“Hinata-kun, you came!” Komaeda cheered, positively delighted.

“I sure did.” Hinata took a seat on the bed, feeling tempted to just plop himself down and fall asleep right away. “I’m so tired.”

“Tired of what?”

“I don’t know—everything? I think I need more sleep, or more coffee. Every day you get the same things. I deal with you, I deal with Tsumiki, I attempt to deal with other people’s problems but in the end, they’re all interconnected and it’s just become so routine lately. It’s so...what do you call it…”

“...boring?”

Hinata didn’t say anything, didn’t even bother opening his eyes to see Komaeda looking down at him cheekily.

“Did I hit a nerve?”

“Shut up.”

“Sorry, sorry. Though, look on the bright side, Hinata-kun. As you always say, progress will come eventually.”

Hinata chose to ignore Komaeda’s obvious mockery. “I guess. I mean, Mioda tried to approach Tsumiki earlier today, just to be friendly. She just like...totally ignored her, had a face on that made it seem like that if Mioda got any close, she’d claw her eyes out.”

“Sounds like Tsumiki-san,” Komaeda huffed, “You know, I found a picture of Enoshima on my bed just a bit earlier. She must have put it on there.”

“Don’t let it get to you. She’s going to be doing a lot more of that.”
Komaeda hummed, dragging his fingers along the spines of books lined up on his shelves absentmindedly. “Who’s the bigger pain, me or her?”

“I don’t know. Probably her- I mean, you both want us all to die, but at least with you, it’s because of how we’re all terrorists. With Tsumiki it’s because she’s the terrorist herself. But at the same time, Tsumiki doesn’t want anything to do with me, so there are less occurrences of her actually pissing me off, where you insist on talking to me.”

“It’s because I like you.”

“Yeah, alright.”

Komaeda blinked, honestly baffled at the response, his face faintly turning pink. “What, are you just going to accept it?”

“Sure,” Hinata sighed. “I mean, last time I didn’t believe a word you were saying, it led to us all getting in a clusterfuck that could have been solved a lot sooner if I just used my head. I mean, I don’t feel sorry about it, because I had a good reason to feel all distrustful, but I at least get it now. What you say you believe is what you believe. What you say you’re trying to do is what you’re trying to do. Now I kinda wish I had believed you when you said you were trying to help all of us, because it’s not like you have the same aspirations now.”

Komaeda smiled, if only the slightest bit, and that alone was warmer than the sand of the beach on a hot day. “Wow, um...you’ve really come a long way, Hinata-kun.”

“How couldn’t I?” Hinata scoffed, “After seeing all your medical history after getting out of the simulation, there was no way I couldn’t have seen it. You’re a liar, but like, you lie about lying. That seriously pisses me off, by the way. Like, I can’t believe you just took everything back. You ever think about the mental effect that would have on me?”

“Did it cause you distress?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Well,” Komaeda clicked his tongue, “I don’t know how that could be. I thought you’d just go back to disliking me, and if that’s what kept you safe, I was satisfied with that.”
“There’s more depth to people’s feelings than you think, Komaeda. And what do you mean about keeping me safe? From what? Emotional attachment?”

“If things continue like normal on this island for a while, just like this, you might be able to see what I’m talking about.”

“Fine by me.”

Komaeda took out a random book from the shelf, hoping it wasn’t something about dementia like he had when he was with Sonia. Instead, he took out something even more random, a book about the history of video games. Completely unimpressed, he pushed it back in its place. “So, you have no problems with me liking you then?”

“I mean, yeah. It’d be weird if you didn’t like me. Friendship can’t work if one person just doesn’t like the other, right? Or, well, whatever this is, if it’s a friendship or not.”

Now it was Komaeda’s turn to roll his eyes. “Naturally.”

“Ah, young love,” Tsumiki sighed wistfully, eyes fluttering and mouth forming into an ‘o.’ It was uncomfortably erotic, it was meant to be uncomfortably erotic. Komaeda and Hinata both knew this, but it still made them feel like they had been transported into a really bad porno. “The feeling of warmth you find from each other…it’s so enticing, isn’t it? It was the same with me and Junko-sama, but it was a lot more raw, more mature. I’ll give this situation two years before it falls apart.”

Hinata was going through the motions again trying to talk to Tsumiki. On one hand, it was to help her come to her senses. On the other, it would have been fine enough if he could just get some information out of her, any at all. Komaeda offered to tag along that day, half out of interest himself and half out of the desire to get back at her for trying to goade him, despite Hinata telling him to just ignore her tricks beforehand.

“What are you talking about?” Hinata groaned, splaying his hand across his face. “Stop messing around. Neither of us is even into guys...or at least, Komaeda isn’t. Whatever.”

Komaeda and Tsumiki both quirked their eyebrows in sync. They looked at each other and Komaeda stared at her like he wanted to stab her just for daring to have the same thought as him.
Tsumiki shrugged. “Whatever you say. I just know what it means when two people spend such a large amount of time together. Mnhmm, now you’ve got me remembering again. Every Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, I’d sneak out of class to spend some precious alone time with her. Oh, the things we would do together.”

“Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday exactly?”

“She always told me she was at her best on those days, so she’d only see me then, and with how wonderful she acted, I was inclined to have believed her.”

“Jesus, that’s really controlling. Like, really unhealthy,” Hinata remarked. Tsumiki leaned back and kicked her legs up, expressing just how much she didn’t care.

“There were fifteen of us,” Komaeda said, “She had to budget her time wisely, and it’d be fairly messy if all of her interactions overlapped with each other.”

Tsumiki put a finger to her bottom lip, dragging it down so that the digit was lightly brushing against her tongue. “I do remember there being a good deal of intertwining. That’s irrelevant though. She spent the most time with me, and that’s all that matters.”

Komaeda grimaced, feeling his insides tightening. Intertwining. What the hell did that even mean? “The woman didn’t give a single damn about you.”

Hinata braced himself, suddenly realizing that putting the two in the same room would be a horrible idea. “Komaeda-”

“Aw, is someone mad?” Tsumiki preened. She propped herself up on her knees, leaning off the bed as far as she could in Komaeda’s direction. “It seems like you still misunderstand. I suppose my assumptions were wrong, there isn’t anything at all. You’re still living life without anyone who can love you like Junko-sama loved me.”

“She didn’t love any of us. The fact that you fell for this facade just shows how weak-minded you really are.”

“Goddammit, Komaeda, just let me-”
“No, let him keep talking,” Tsumiki said, having the time of her life. “I’m having fun with this.”

“Well, I’m not-”

“Komaeda, do you remember what Junko-sama was like? Keep in mind, I’m the only one here with any memories of our school life, so wouldn’t that mean I’m a fairly reliable source?”

Hinata shook his head. “That’s bullshit. I saw Enoshima too, and so did Owari, Kuzuryuu, Sonia, and Souda. She told us up front that we were all being used. Monokuma said something like that too, that we were just being exploited. There’s really no way you can get around that fact, Tsumiki.”

“She doesn’t care. She probably likes being exploited like this.”

“Jesus, Komaeda-” Hinata pointed to the door, not knowing where or who to direct his frustration out. “Go. Go outside.”

“I can’t say he’s wrong,” Tsumiki said, rolling her shoulders back nonchalantly. “Junko-sama could have been manipulating me, but I wouldn’t care. I’ve been exploited my whole life, but at least her exploitation didn’t involve beating, bruising, hurting- it was loving. And it did more good for me than anything else that had happened beforehand.”

Komaeda and Hinata looked at her, how she sat on her knees so submissively at the edge of her bed. She picked at the palm of her hand with the overgrown nail of her index finger, and her gaze kept flitting away from them as if it was becoming too hard to look. The anger drained out of Hinata’s muscles, letting them go slack. Komaeda just stayed silent, not being able to imagine a potential comeback.

Hinata threw his arms up over his head. “I think it’s time to leave.” He quickly opened the door and stepped outside, his shoes clapping against the wooden steps from the cabin. It took a call from him to snap Komaeda out of his thoughts and get him to follow.

Kuzuryuu slid into one of the park benches. It wasn’t a stealthy motion. After all, every single park bench was completely empty. What was meant to be a prime spot on the island to kick back and relax had become desolate, completely abandoned other than the occasional sap who needed to sit down and think through his feelings.
He overheard footsteps drawing near him, and snapped out of his mental fog. Sonia stood in front of him, which he didn’t mind. Sonia was a comrade. However, Koizumi stood next to her, if a few feet behind her, trying to disguise herself among Sonia’s long tendrils of nearly floor-length hair. Koizumi wasn’t a comrade. She was supposed to be, but she couldn’t be farther from it.

Kuzuryuu sighed. This was way too predictable, and way too annoying. “What’s she doing here?” he asked, gesturing his shoulder to where Koizumi stood. A bit irritated with his tone, she took a step forward in defiance. “Wait, don’t tell me. I know this is about Peko, or maybe what happened back at Hope’s Peak. It’s something important, I know that.”

Sonia looked at Koizumi, who nodded reluctantly and took another step forward so that she was at her level. “We need to talk,” she said, words coming out like a broken faucet.

Kuzuryuu rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

Sonia coughed into her hand. “Ahem, Kuzuryuu-san. We’ve come here to have a formal discussion, not an argument.”

“Ah, I see...this is kinda what Togami was talking about. Sonia’s a third party so that nothing gets ugly between us, right Koizumi?”

Koizumi dipped her chin. It wasn’t quite a nod, but it was something of the sort. “Right.”

“Listen,” Kuzuryuu started. His knees bowed outwards, showing off the cloth that covered his inner thighs and everything in between. Koizumi wrinkled her nose, but she didn’t say anything. It wasn’t worth getting angry about, it wasn’t the point of this conversation. “You don’t have to forgive me, Koizumi. I can beg on my knees all I want, but nothing’s gonna happen until you’re ready to make that decision. You get me?”

Koizumi wrapped a piece of hair around her finger. It was brittle and worn. It was always thin, hence why she always wore it so short, but she hadn’t recalled it feeling so damaged since she woke up. “I don’t really know if I have anything to say to that.”

“Then don’t? Look, I killed your friend, and your friend killed my sister. It’s a moral paradox of absolute bullshit. And then there’s the shit that happened back in the simulation, which you know I’m sorry about. Like, I’ve told you a thousand times, and I don’t care if you never spare me a second glance because of it. Okay? Capiche?”
“Capiche. But this isn’t about us. I came here to talk about you and Peko-chan.”

“Is that so?” Kuzuryuu raised an eyebrow. He tried to search Sonia’s face for a good sign, but she was absolutely blank, so reserved that no one could even imagine what she was thinking. Kuzuryuu supposed you had to do that sometimes when you were literally royalty. “Look, I get that we shouldn’t have secrets and all that, but is it really your place to know what goes on between Peko and I? Like, you’re already the person who I definitely don’t want to talk about it with, so I don’t know why the hell Sonia brought you along with her.”

“Sonia-chan didn’t bring me along. I brought her along. I volunteered myself to help you and Peko-chan heal what’s been damaged.”

“You what?” Kuzuryuu spat, nearly breaking out into a full-fledged laughing fit. “That is the biggest fucking joke I’ve heard in years. You can’t be serious.”

“She’s serious,” Sonia said, interrupting their conversation even if she hadn’t technically cut anyone off. “Koizumi-san doesn’t like seeing you and Pekoyama-san argue like the both of you are talking into brick walls. I know it’s hard to believe, but please have faith in her…”

Kuzuryuu snorted, getting him a bad look from Sonia. Suddenly feeling apologetic, he stood up from the bench and held his hand out to Koizumi, palm facing the side. “Okay, Koizumi, the pleasure’s all mine. Let’s shake on it.”

At breakfast the next day, Komaeda slid a book across the little window opening into the kitchen. Teruteru looked at it skeptically, thinking there was some sort of trap. Maybe he’s cut his index finger on one of the papers, and venom would flood his bloodstream, or perhaps Komaeda had left a note in there written in his own blood, one that threatened Teruteru life a second time. He noticed that Komaeda hadn’t moved from the other side of the window, simply waiting for him to open it. Feeling trapped, as if he had no choice but to open the book or else Komaeda would smash the window with his newly acquired robotic hand, leap over the counter, and slit his neck open, Teruteru took the book into his hands. There was nothing on the cover, just plain red threads wrapped around the cardboard. When he finally opened it, he was met with drawn images of graphic sexual situations. Women were contorted in exposing positions, their backs arched and legs spread so that both their vaginas and their breasts were on full display. Men weren’t drawn in such grotesque detail, but they were drawn with lean, full muscles and their cocks were very clearly pumping in and out of the any and every hole their supposed “partner” had.
Just a few second’s glance had Teruteru salivating. Komaeda chuckled. “I got it at the library. I thought you might appreciate it.”

The sound of Komaeda’s voice had Teruteru slamming the book closed. “T-Thank you, K-Komaeda-kun,” he stammered, shuffling into the obscured part of the kitchen to put the book in a place where no one else could find it.

Komaeda walked over to the table and took a seat, swivelng around in his chair. Hinata frowned at him. “What?” Komaeda asked, “What did I do?”

“What did you give Teruteru?”

“A book.”

“What was in the book?”

“Porn.”

Hinata sat back in his chair, not knowing what the hell to say to that. Komaeda broke into laughter. “You’re the one who asked.”

“I didn’t think you’d be *that* forward with it.” Hinata stabbed his breakfast with his fork, even though he should have cut it with a knife first. “Why did you give him porn, anyway?”

Komaeda shrugged. “I saw it while I was surfing through the library and I thought he’d like it. I mean, he’s not going to be reading anything else, is he?”

“You know what I mean. Are you trying to mess with him?”

“No. If I wanted to do that, then the library has a pretty extensive collection of mysteries about murders that occur at parties.”

“Then are you trying to get him to forgive you?”
“Of course not. I’m just a bit disappointed with his sheer amount of hatred toward me. Of course, everyone here hates me, so I shouldn’t be surprised, but he’s starting to short me on meals. I just don’t think that’s very fair.”

Hinata put his hands up in defeat. “Okay. Just making sure.”

Souda walked up to the pair, slouched over and his hands digging into his gigantic pockets. He instinctively drifted closer to Hinata’s side. “Yo, Hinata. We got some news.”

“Mhm?” Hinata hummed, his mouth still stuffed with food. He swallowed it down and wiped the remnants away from his lips. “What is it?”

“Uh, we got a signal from Naegi and his crew. They say something pretty urgent came up and they need to talk to us about it.”

“Everyone?”

“Nah, not everyone. Just you, me, Sonia-san, Owari, Kuzuryuu, and, uh...you too, Komaeda. We’re all supposed to come down for a video chat around four o’clock today.”

Komaeda pointed accusingly at himself. “Me? They want to talk to me?”

“Yeah, you. They said you were pretty crucial to this, actually. God knows why. You have any ideas, Hinata?”

Hinata shook his head. “No clue. We just had a video chat, anyway. I don’t know what could have come up in such a short time for them to need another call. Maybe there’s a supply shortage?”

“What the hell does Komaeda have to do with that?”

“I don’t know,” Komaeda said, “My existence does strange things to people sometimes. If Naegi-kun was hit by a meteor I’ll take full responsibility.”

After breakfast, Hinata was supposed to check up on Tsumiki, but he couldn’t bring himself to.
There was an invisible brick wall in front of the door to Tsumiki’s cabin that wouldn’t go away until he could get over his last visit. It hadn’t even been a complete failure, but it had been too much for him to bear for the next few days or so. Hinata wasn’t a therapist. Maybe Kamukura was— or was meant to be, as the concept was pretty hard to imagine— but Hinata was just a friend. He could help, but not in a way he knew was effective.

All of the pods where all of them slept for weeks on end were left in the condition they were abandoned in. No one had come in to clean them, so there was nothing to stop dust from accumulating across the edges and the floor of the inside. The fluorescent light that once shone from the sides were completely faded, making the whole room seem dingy.

In the middle of all the pods was a piece of machinery that stood even taller than Hinata. It wasn’t anything comprehensible. Maybe Souda could figure it out, but to Hinata, it just looked like the physical equivalent of gibberish, but he knew what it did. He knew that the machine is what trapped them all in a simulation of their current location, where they were all years younger, troubled, and spilling each other’s blood. It’s also what held Nanami. Both she and the world she lived in were completely gone, their data erased from existence. Hinata understood this intellectually, but thinking about how he’d never see Nanami again tied a knot in his heart.

“Hey,” he breathed, not even thinking about it. “Things have been pretty crazy since we got out of the program.”

This was insane. Hinata was probably insane. Nanami was dead, worse than that, she had never existed in the first place. She was created for the sole purpose of being a friend, every bit of her personality programmed specifically knowing who Hinata was, who everyone was.

However, Hinata couldn’t find himself caring. “I’d think you’d be pretty happy with how things are going, Nanami. It’s not perfect but it’s something. Everyone’s slowly healing, and no one’s lusting after Enoshima except for Tsumiki, but that’s to be expected.”

The machinery had been completely turned off, basically of null use since the last person awoke from their coma. “Even Komaeda’s making progress. Yeah, he’s still an asshole, but he’s at least under control. Hell, he even said that he’s cool with me, or something like that. I’m glad you weren’t that bitter toward him when he, you know...because if you were, this would have been a lot harder.”

“I would have disappeared anyway,” Hinata imagined her saying, “Eventually, you would have to move forward. Remember, you can control your own future. You’re strong, so you don’t need me to tell you to believe in yourself anymore.”
“You’re right,” Hinata sighed, suddenly feeling really stupid for trying to argue with a mental image of Nanami in his head. “One more thing: I still haven’t forgotten about you, not the slightest bit.”

The silence in the room was getting to be suffocating. Hinata suddenly felt painfully paranoid that he was being watched. He ditched the scene before his suspicions could be confirmed.

Komaeda nonchalantly walked back into the room with the big video screen. Everyone was already there, but it’s not like he was late. They were all early, the nerves prickling against their skin possessing them and making them show up before they had to out of pure anxiety.

“I’m sure everything’s fine,” Sonia said reassuringly, though it wasn’t very convincing. “We just may have a delay in supplies. It should be no problem at all.”

“I hope we’re not gonna lose any food,” Owari grumbled, overgrown nails piercing the flesh of her arms. “I can’t keep my strength up if I don’t have enough to eat. Nidai’s planned out this whole diet for me.”

“Nidai, huh.” Hinata shook his head, more in satisfaction than anything else. “It’s cool that he’s still like that, even after everything.”

“Well of course!” Owari asserted, “He’s Nidai! If he wasn’t acting like himself, I’d beat his ass into next Tuesday!”

“I’d have to make another Minimaru,” Souda huffed.

“Don’t even joke about that.”

Kuzuryuu was leaning back against the wall, his eyes drooping. He looked exhausted, both physically and emotionally, and was anticipating the video chat to just worsen his condition. No one wanted to ask about it, as Sonia already told them to let him rest in peace until he’s feeling like talking. Nevertheless, a duty was a duty, and he had to be there.

The clock struck four, and immediately there was a signal going through the screen. Souda fumbled around with some buttons on the control pattern before it fizzled into static, then faded out into a picture of Naegi. Kirigiri stood beside him as opposed to just staying on the sidelines, and Togami was in eyeshot as well.
“Uh, hey, Naegi,” Hinata greeted, awkwardly putting himself plain sight. The screen was so big, even the most non-threatening presence made Hinata feel small. “What’s the news?”

Naegi bit his lip, then sighed, then looked at Kirigiri for some sort of guidance. Togami frowned, the wrinkle between his eyebrows etched so deep that it sure to become permanent, but before he could take control of the call, Naegi spoke up.

“There’s been a problem.”

“Yeah, well, we figured that already,” Hinata said, not meaning to come off as dismissive. “I mean, we were just talking about what it could be. It’s...not a big deal, is it?”

Sonia curtsied. “We’d be pleased to give you our utmost cooperation and assistance in fixing it.”

“You see, that’s the thing. The truth is that…” Naegi paused. Togami looked ready to shove him to the side and pretend like he had never been there in the first place. Kirigiri just shook her head. Hinata suddenly felt like he should be assuming the worst before it would be too late. “...there’s been activity in Towa City.”

Owari scratched her head. “Activity? Whaddaya mean by that? Do you mean people have been forming their own colonies or something?”

“...No. I mean, sort of. There’s been remnant activity in Towa City, or something like that.”

“Remnant activity?” Souda’s eyes flew open, the lids stretched so tightly that the whites were starting to become bloodshot. “You mean like us?! Are you saying we had another classmate and we never even knew about it?!”

“Oh, just shut up and let us explain,” Togami drawled. Kirigiri shot him a look, but she couldn’t deny how much she agreed with him.

“I think he means general uproar from those who got corrupted during the end of the world,” Kuzuryuu explained, “We may have been the big bads, but that shit fucked a lot of people up. This kind of stuff has got to be pretty normal, ain’t it?”
“It is normal, but...here, let me explain.” Naegi ran his fingers through his hair in a nervous habit, but it just looked like he was applying mousse. “You see, before we captured all of you and brought you to Jabberwock Island, there was an uprising of children in Towa City led by a group called the Warriors of Hope.”

“Uh...children?” Hinata asked.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but yeah, they were children, and their main goal was to get rid of all the adults so that they would be able to live without pain. Now, four of them are in our custody now, but their leader, Monaka Towa, has...been on the run for awhile now. You see, she had different goals from the other kids. While they wanted justice, she wanted...to become the second coming of Junko Enoshima.”

“Geeze, that’s a pretty out-there life goal for a kid,” Souda remarked.

“It sure is. Her first plan was thwarted, but she was able to gain enough resources to enact a second attempt, and...well, it seems like it’s going pretty well.”

“Well, it’s just a kid, right? It can’t be too hard to put her on the right path. She’s probably just...really confused.”

“We do want to rehabilitate her, but the path is harder than you could imagine. She’s just...honestly…”

Kirisu finished his sentence for him. “Sick. She’s sick. Her brother was sick too, and her dad was the sickest of them all. Just prepare yourself for the very worst.”

“Prepare ourselves?”

Naegi nodded sympathetically. “We’re sorry, but we might need backup. Not all of you, but the Future Foundation could barely handle the problem the first time around. We need strength in numbers.”

“Gotcha,” Hinata said. The three on the other side of the screen weren’t saying anything in reply.
“So, I guess that’s it then? Sounds pretty rough, but we’re here to help, just remember that.”

“I have a question,” Komaeda said. For the past few minutes, everyone had forgotten he was there, but he stepped out of the shadows, putting himself in clear vision of his three spectators. “Why was I asked to attend this?”

“That’s…” Naegi’s teeth grazed against his bottom lip, worrying indents that had already been made. “That’s because you gave Monaka what she needed to become the second Junko Enoshima.”

Komaeda chuckled like Naegi had just told the funniest joke he had heard in a year. No one else was laughing, however. Everyone but Komaeda stayed dead silent, their mouths falling open into gapes.

“It’s not funny,” Kirigiri said, “We already knew you were meddling with things in Towa City, but it wasn’t until recently that our expats gained intel that Monaka had specifically been working with you, alone.”

“That’s hilarious!” Komaeda beamed, “I mean, I know I’m awful, but to think that out of every member of Super High School Level Despair, I was the one to attempt to create the second Junko Enoshima! I don’t know what I did. Perhaps I opened fire on crowds of a thousand people, but to do that, and with a ten year old too, it’s wild!”

Hinata placed a hand on his shoulder. “Komaeda, calm down-!”

“Calm down! How could I calm down!? This is an absolute riot!”

“Here we go again,” Kuzuryuu sighed. Owari looked like she was about to pounce right on to Komaeda’s back and knock him off his feet, but Naegi put an end to it before the situation could escalate.

“Komaeda-kun, I know it’s hard to digest. But, I’ve already been told by Komaru- I mean, one of the Future Foundation’s employees that you were in Towa City in the first place to fulfill this goal. Whatever you were planning to do afterward, that’s the grey area. What I’ve been told is that first time around, you meant to put Monaka against an opponent, just to see her lose. If that’s the case, then it must have been the same the second time around as well. We wanted you to hear this because not only could you possibly have some information on how to deflect her new plans, but I thought it’d be important for you as well. I thought...maybe it could show you how far you’ve come…”
Togami clicked his tongue, then stood up and walked offscreen. Kirigiri stayed by Naegi’s side. Neither of them was making direct eye contact with Komaeda, but it still felt as if two holes were being bored inside his skull. He wanted to laugh some more, but the joke had run its course. Komaeda just had what he had done spelled out to him, and he couldn’t find a proper justification for it.

He ran out of the building without another word.

“Komaeda! Hey, Komaeda!”

Komaeda was halfway back to his cabin before Hinata’s voice started calling out to him. He heard approaching footsteps, a bit of panting, and suddenly Hinata was in front of him, as if he was coming from the opposite direction this entire time.

“Komaeda, I know it’s-”

“Don’t worry,” Komaeda said, “I knew we all committed horrible atrocities before being put in that simulation. In fact, you seem to be forgetting that I was the first to find about this. So please, none of this is bothering me, so-”

“Well, with how you just fucking ran out of the building, it sure feels like it bothered you.”

Hinata’s face was worried, genuinely concerned about whatever was going through Komaeda’s awful mess of a brain. It made Komaeda’s chest light up.

“I just find it weird. I find it weird that what I did can be so far removed from what I believe in, yet it makes it seem like I hadn’t changed one bit under Enoshima’s influence.”

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