Puella Magi Makoto Magica

by zenonaa

Summary

'You mustn’t forget that everyone who forms a contract had what they believed to be a valid reason and this reason is very much a part of them. Once you fully appreciate that, you will begin to understand them more. Soul Gems are an accurate reflection of the heart - they do contain a human soul, after all.'

Makoto Naegi starts his first day at Hope's Peak but can't help thinking that he recognises two of the girls in his class. From a dream, no less.

Notes

I've been working on this for an embarrassingly long time but it's (almost) done! I know the title translates to 'Magical Girl Makoto Magica' and Naegi is a boy, but the reason for that is explained in chapter 3.

I'll try to update every Saturday. Later chapters will be longer.

There will be spoilers for the first DR game and for PMMM.
Art created by young children share many similarities. Thick black lines border everyone and everything within the picture. Clouds exist where the artist didn’t fill in the gaps between blue crayon strokes and as Makoto Naegi surveys the city he grew up in, he finds himself reminded of the many sheets of paper he stuck to his refrigerator with magnets once upon a time.

His parents and teachers used to praise what he had considered masterpieces, but no one applauds when the world transforms into a replication of the wobbly lines he and billions other children scribbled. No one claps at the inverted world, where buildings moan as they detach from the earth and are consumed by the sloppily coloured in sky. No one commends how he and everything else now look as though they were drawn by a preschooler who had just received their first box of crayons. It is as though someone plopped him and the rest of the universe into a child’s drawing and then pinned the picture onto the refrigerator upside down.

Even he is upside down and had it not been for the black ribbon cocooning his body, he would share the same fate as everything and everyone else. Like a blade of grass, the ribbon remains fixed to the ground that is now the ceiling. Except this ribbon squeezes and pulses, very much alive, while whatever grass that hasn’t been torn up is burnt and very much dead.

The ribbon pins his arms to his sides and prevents him from moving, so he can do nothing but watch the city scream as it ascends into the bottomless pit above his head.

Debris. People. Everything he has ever known. All meeting their end.

“Upupupu,” comes a voice. A small bear, left half black and right half white, toddles over as if gravity hasn’t been reversed. “I love the smell of despair in the evening. It works up quite the appetite.” It conjures a jar of honey out of thin air and dips its paw in.

There exists another also unaffected by the gravity change: in the distance roams a large animated ragdoll. And not large by won-at-a-carnival standards - it dwarfs any and all structures. Every time its arms smash into a building, more of the city crumbles away. It wears a cheshire cat smile while it regards the aftermath of its actions, dragging feet smearing destruction across the ground.

Fleeing from the monster is a violet-haired girl. At the beginning of her braid is a bow made of the same black ribbon encasing Makoto’s body. The ribbon extends to shoot out and curl around nearby structures, constricting to whisk the girl out of harm’s way and toward anything not yet demolished. She emerges from clouds of dust with a body covered in grazes and bruises. When she lands, she stumbles and gasps for breath in the seconds that lead up to the ragdoll’s next strike. The girl gives up fighting back, clenching but not using the pistol in her hand, once it becomes painfully clear that she doesn’t have enough time to prepare a counterattack.

Beads of sweat form on Makoto’s forehead.

“It’s quite the show, eh?” The bear follows his gaze, slathering its honey-glazed paw with saliva. “We have front row seats to the end of humanity. I can’t believe it took something like this to kill all you bastards. Humans sure are stupid. Not like bears. If bears ruled the planet, this never would have happened.”
A different girl launches herself into the sky, this one garbed in a camouflage dress. She extracts an impossibly large machine gun out of her too small sleeve and unloads a seemingly endless amount of ammunition into the ragdoll.

But the bullets just bounce off the ragdoll’s skin, splattering the girl instead.

He gasps.

The girl is still alive. Wounded but alive: most of the bullets missed. More stunned than in pain, she stares at her approaching opponent through matted black hair and blood.

Each step sounds like thunder.

Makoto inhales acrid despair.

“To defeat despair that concentrated, you would need an equal amount of hope,” the bear says while staring directly at him.

The girl pulls out a combat knife from underneath her skirt.

He rips his attention away from the scene and places it onto the bear.

“Luckily for you, you’re packed with the stuff! Gooey chewy icky wicky hope.” The bear tilts its head to one side. “So what’dya say?” It holds out a paw. “You want to make a contract with me and save the world?”

Makoto opens his mouth.

Then he wakes up in his bed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! <3

Next Time:

“Do you consider ordinary a bad thing?”
Do You Consider Ordinary a Bad Thing?

Chapter Summary

Naegi’s first day at Hope’s Peak.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

With a new morning came the same routine. Turn off the alarm clock. Roll out of bed. Shower. Get dressed. Breakfast. Leave for school. Even the weird dream that dissolved into the recesses of Makoto’s mind as he shampooed his hair presented nothing too different from usual. Sure, it differed greatly from the anime he watched during much of the previous month, but still. Nothing weird. Everything he watched must have meshed together with his imagination to create one hell of a dream.

The only new aspect of this new morning that greatly resembled its predecessors was today marked his first day at high school. A high school named Hope’s Peak: a completely average school for an average kid like him.

If one looked up ‘average’ in the dictionary, what would one find in the entry? Average’s definition. And what would said definition say? ‘Adjective. Having qualities seen as typical of a particular person, group, or thing.’ Not his photograph or his name because being in a dictionary would not be average. Being in an official dictionary would be decidedly cool. Even a teenager as well-known as Byakuya Togami did not appear in the dictionary. And, from what Makoto gleaned from the press and from the gossip spread by students at his old school, Byakuya Togami was not average.

Makoto jogged down the stairs, patting at the creases in his uniform. This time last year, he arrived to school late and fell flat on his face in front of the whole class. And his shoe came off. And someone laughed. No way would history repeat itself.

Upon entering the kitchen, a briny scent wafted over and warmed his face. It originated from the grill rack his mother was tending to, the device whirring as she flipped fish over. He seated himself at the table and slumped against his chair.

Their mother turned around as Makoto started his bowl of cereal. Milk from his spoon splattered back into his bowl.

“‘You can afford to slow down a bit,” she said, trying not to laugh. “Everyone will think I never
feed you. School won’t begin without you.”

“That’s not how schools work,” Makoto replied.

Komaru giggled.

“Oh, you know what I meant.” Their mother placed her hands onto her hips, voice light but eyes less so. “You take care, okay? Stick to the route we showed you and no shortcuts. I don’t want something to happen to you.”

As vague as ‘something’ sounded, he understood instantly. She meant all the recent disappearances. News correspondents claimed there to be no pattern among the victims. It didn’t matter what the person looked like or what they identified as: the only similarities to be found were they were approximately Makoto’s age and no one ever found the bodies. The victims simply vanished and baffled everyone, regardless of how long the police stared into the camera as they lied about making headway with the case.

“I bet Genocider Syo is killing them all,” Komaru said. “Going to all their houses and stabbing them while they’re sleeping.” She demonstrated with her chopsticks and rice. “Stab, stab, stab.”

“Don’t be silly, dear.” The fish finished grilling and their mother strode over with a plate which she set down in front of Komaru. “They found the bodies of those poor souls. But Makoto,” her brow furrowed, “you’re not to talk to any strangers. Once you’ve made friends, you can all walk to and from school together and keep each other safe. Okay?”

“Okay.” He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “I’ll see you both later.”

A short walk separated his house from Hope’s Peak and he arrived at school half an hour early. That sounded like enough time for him to locate his homeroom within the vast u-shaped multi-story building that made up the bulk of the school. During the entrance ceremony he attended with his family, various members of staff introduced themselves and informed him of the school’s expectations. They showed him and the other students in his grade their shoe lockers and otherwise ensured that school commenced without a hitch. Still... it took him little effort to imagine himself getting lost.

Much like the outside, the building’s interior encapsulated an austere simplicity. Not many students had arrived yet and he surveyed the entrance area for anyone who could be one of his classmates for the next year. The entrance ceremony gave him little opportunity to acquaint himself with his peers and he doubted he would recognise any of them by face, but asking was worth a shot.

Four girls loitered nearby, the shortest tugging on the dark purple hair of one of her friends. But before Makoto could go up to them, someone crashed into him.

While he managed to remain upright by shifting back his foot, his victim didn’t share in his luck and she tipped backward until she thumped into a sitting position on the ground.

Two girls snickered. The purple-haired girl mumbled, “how embarrassing,” while the fourth friend tutted.

School hadn’t started yet and he already messed up. What just happened was like a scene from an old manga. “Ah! I’m sorry!” He offered the girl his hand. “Are you all right? Did I hurt you?”

“It’s fine. I bumped into you so I should be the one apologising.” She took hold of his hand and rose to her feet. After brushing her hands against her pleated skirt, she addressed him further.
“Sorry about that... I was worried I would get lost so rushed in without checking where I was going. My name is Makiko Kabi, by the way.”

Makiko Kabi tuck a short strand of blue hair behind her ear and waited.

Five seconds crawled by until he realised he was supposed to respond.

“Oh! I’m Makoto Naegi.” Makoto cupped his palm around the back of his head and shared in her smile. “I’m new. Is this your first day?”

“Yes. I’m in Class 78.”

“Me too.”

“Wow.” She clapsed her hands in front of her thighs and tilted her head to one side. “That’s good. We can go to the shoe lockers and walk to our homeroom together. Unless,” the ends of her mouth drooped, “you would rather not?”

“No! I would love to!” He waved his hands. “I mean, I would be glad to!”

She giggled but he had not heard any malice in her laugh. From her soft blue eyes to her soft smell of flowers, she seemed incapable of bearing any ill intent toward anything.

He hid his hands in his pockets and followed alongside her as she chattered about television shows and what she did during the holidays. Her walk bounced as much as her voice and all too soon they arrived at their homeroom.

Someone else got there first. A boy with spiky black hair sat at one of the front desks and turned upon hearing their footsteps. What Makoto next noticed about this boy were his large eyebrows which gave him a permanently intense expression.

“Hi,” said Makoto. “Um... is there a seating arrangement or do we just choose where to sit?”

“If there is a seating arrangement, it is not in this classroom!” Makoto flinched at the boy’s unexpected volume. “I have checked extensively! You two must be my classmates.”

The boy stood up and held out his hand.

Makoto presented his own and the boy almost dislocated Makoto’s shoulder when they shook hands.

“My name is Kiyotaka Ishimaru!” The boy released Makoto’s hand. “I look forward to spending the academic year studying vigorously with you all!”

“I’m Makoto Naegi.” Makoto rotated his shoulder and winced. He was going to feel that in the morning. For several mornings even.

“And I’m Makiko Kabi,” Makiko piped up, spared from Kiyotaka’s vice grip. “Ishimaru-kun, are you by chance related to the Prime Minister?”

“How very observant.” Kiyotaka beamed. “He is my grandfather!”

Makoto didn’t follow the world of politics as vigorously as others his age might but even he knew about Kiyotaka’s grandfather - the man had risen to his current position two times. The first time, he had been forced to resign after a scandal, but recent evidence revealed him to have been set up to take someone else’s fall and he earned back his position.
“Wow, that’s incredible!” Makoto said. “To be elected again after he was framed... that must have taken a lot of work.”

Kiyotaka broke eye contact.

The door opened and half a dozen students wandered in. Makoto claimed a desk near the back by the window and watched the frequency of arrivals increase. Makiko sat at the desk directly in front of him.

“Everyone seems very friendly,” she commented, crossing one leg over the other.

He nodded, glancing her way as she fiddled with her ring. “Ah, Kabi-san, I like your ring.”

She tensed. “This?” Her expression thawed with her tone. “It’s a family heirloom that has been passed down for generations. I couldn’t bear to part with it... It means a lot to me.”

Just as he was about to compliment it further, the door opened and a girl with cropped black hair walked in.

That girl... had been in last night’s dream. No mistaking it. Although her internal features were fuzzy in his memory, a jolt jumped up his chest when his eyes homed in on her.

She didn’t acknowledge him, settling at the desk closest to the door with her head down.

Makiko looked between him and the girl several times. “Do you know her?”

“... Kind of.” He scratched his chin. “Last night-”

The arrival of their homeroom teacher cut him short.

Kiyotaka jolted to his feet and bowed. “Good morning, Sensei!” Everyone else soon copied his example, sitting down once their homeroom teacher gave them permission to do so.

After roll call, their teacher had them write their names onto paper nameplates, and then the first lesson commenced.

As the class progressed through four fifty-minute lessons, Makoto tried to catch as many glimpses of Mukuro as possible: a difficult task when she kept her face forward. Between each lesson, she left the room, so he contented himself with regarding the back of her head until lunchtime.

Some of the class ate in the cafeteria while the remainder ate their lunch in the homeroom. Makoto got up and stumbled toward Mukuro in case she planned on buying lunch elsewhere.

Fortunately, she only left her desk to eat with a girl seated in the centre of the room. But not just any girl: a violet-haired girl who wore a ribbon that cinched a braid to one side. A girl he recognised in the same way he did Mukuro. She must have slipped into the room while he was distracted by Mukuro.

His stomach squeezed as it had done when her ribbon cocooned him in his dream. This couldn’t have been a coincidence.

Mukuro greeted the other girl. Did they already know each other or was this their first time meeting each other? Did they know him? Was he still dreaming? He pinched himself. No, not dreaming. Ow.

He walked over. The violet-haired girl looked up while Mukuro peered at him from over her
shoulder. Connection or no connection, they both had the same vigilant look in their eyes. Which, if anything, he should have felt. After all, they had superpowers in his dream. Him? He just talked to a weird bear.

“H-Hey,” said Makoto. “I’m-!”

“Naegi-kun,” finished the violet-haired girl. “My name is Kyouko Kirigiri.”

“You... know my name?”

She steepled her fingers. On both hands she wore dark leather gloves: a weird accessory to wear for school, especially when the weather didn’t call for it. “... I heard your name during attendance.”

Oh. Of course. Duh.

“Hi!” Makiko popped into view beside Makoto, bento in her hands. “I’m Makiko Kabi. Pleased to meet you! Do you all know each other?”

Exactly what he planned to ask next.

“This is our first conversation,” Mukuro said. “Everyone else gravitated into social groups so I figured I would introduce myself to Kirigiri-san.”

“I was just complimenting Ikusaba-san’s ring.” Kyouko gestured toward Mukuro’s finger. She nodded at Makiko. “It’s almost identical to yours. You both must have bought them at the same jewellers.”

“Y-Yes.” Makiko laced her fingers together. “We must have. What a coincidence.” She perched onto the desk in front of Kyouko’s. “We must have lived in a similar area... so which schools did you guys come from?”

“I’ve been to many different schools,” said Kyouko, ducking out of view for a moment to retrieve her bento from her bag. “My father and I traveled a lot because he worked as a private investigator, and we settled in this city a year ago.”

She didn’t remove her gloves before she ate.

“Um...” Makiko eyed Kyouko’s gloves. “Your gloves... don’t they get in the way? I’m always so clumsy when I wear gloves. Even when it’s cold, I have to take them off if I want to handle anything small.”

“I had them custom made so they would fit my hands perfectly and not impede on my daily life.” Kyouko showed them her right hand. “Therefore I don’t have to take them off even when a task involves delicacy.”

“That’s neat. What about you, Ikusaba-san? What school did you go to?”

Mukuro said, “I was enrolled in a military camp for several years.” Her faded tan didn’t totally hide the freckles across the bridge of her nose. She enthralled them with stories about map reading and drills and skiing, and Makoto was disappointed when it was his turn to describe himself.

His life story was rather dull compared to theirs. He briefly talked about his regular family and his regular school experiences prior to now.

Upon being asked about herself, Makiko flapped a hand. “Oh, I haven’t done anything interesting
either. But I don’t mind. As long as I can live a happy life with friends, being ordinary won’t be hard.”

“Ordinary isn’t a bad thing,” Kyouko told her. “Naegi-kun, do you consider ordinary a bad thing?”

He blinked. “M-Me?” She sounded like she was interrogating him.

“You said it yourself just now... you consider your life average in every respect. Would you exchange it for one of excitement and danger? Would you throw it away if the opportunity presented itself?”

Mukuro directed her attention to him now as well.

Makiko frowned.

“Ah... that’s...!” Makoto stirred his rice as he stirred his thoughts in search of a suitable answer. “It’s hard for me to say. I wouldn’t exchange the life I have now for someone else’s. It’s something that belongs to me that I need to shape myself. But if it was to become not ordinary for whatever reason... that’s not something to shy away from. Being passive... sounds wrong to me.”

“Naegi-kun.” Kyouko stood up, tone calm but emotion in her eyes not. “While I respect and appreciate your outlook, I hope you recognise it will lead you into a dangerous lifestyle. Unless you’re willing to give your life to be extraordinary, you should content yourself with what you have now.”

The room continued bubbling with voices of nearby clusters of students but the immediate area fell quiescent as the four looked at each other.

“You are very passionate about a hypothetical situation,” Mukuro finally noted, balancing her lunch on her lap so she could interlock her fingers while she studied Kyouko. “If I didn’t know better, I would have thought it wasn’t hypothetical at all. But that can’t be true, right?”

Kyouko didn’t answer. She refused to speak for the rest of lunch and during the subsequent lessons. When the school day officially ended, she packed her things and exited the room before Makoto thought to catch up to her.

He gazed at her empty desk until Kiyotaka insisted he go home and do his homework.

Makiko met Makoto at the door and accompanied him to the shoe lockers. Remembering his mother’s suggestion, he asked her where she lived. At the implication of walking home together, she asked him for his address and said she lived the opposite way upon hearing his answer.

“It’s a shame,” she told him. “I’d love to walk home with you but it’s really out of my way...”

Makoto waved a hand. “It’s fine! So... I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And with that, they parted.

Overall, a decent day. As he set off for home, he reflected on the day’s events. He made a friend. Possibly more for while he could be certain of Makiko, Mukuro and Kyouko were more opaque. Those two came across as people satisfied with their own company. There was nothing wrong with this but he hoped to bond with them along with Kiyotaka and everyone else. Other than a redheaded teenager who spent more time admiring Makiko than his work, no one else stood out in Makoto’s mind. With luck, that would change.
He shrugged his shoulders to relieve them for a moment of the strain of his rucksack. Maybe Kiyotaka had been onto something. It would take him hours to get through today’s homework. Kiyotaka’s diligence couldn’t be faulted: it must have been an attitude he picked up from his grandfather.

A faded poster on a storefront grabbed Makoto’s attention. He paused to read it. A boy from his school, slightly older than him, went missing the week before. Makoto experienced a sharp pang as he recalled his mother’s lecture. Had this boy also heard something similar from their mother? Had he rolled his eyes and continued as usual, or did he heed her warnings and disappear anyway?

Makoto gripped the straps of his rucksack and resumed his journey. A minute later, he came upon the mouth of an alleyway. Although his mother urged him to stick to their agreed route, going this way would shave a few minutes off his journey. Besides, it was empty and well-lit and he could see the other end so he doubted anyone could jump him. Not in broad daylight.

But he decided not to dawdle and jogged through.

The alleyway was devoid of anything yet something scuttled across his shoes at the halfway point.

He jumped back and inspected the area. Whatever it was already scurried off, probably a rat or piece of rubbish. But even those things couldn’t have disappeared into thin air. Right? Right. Most likely, it didn’t disappear into thin air but he just couldn’t see it in the darkness.

Darkness. A few seconds ago, it hadn’t been dark. He had been able to see the other end of the alleyway a few seconds ago. Now he could barely see anything. And looking over his shoulder, he couldn’t make out that end either.

Breathing loudly, he felt around for the wall.

His surroundings lit up. Walls made of solid metal that chilled his palm replaced the brick walls standing there moments before. But he tore his hand away as if it scolded him, footsteps echoing as he backed away. Shortly after he removed his hand, the bit of wall he touched opened up to reveal an eye. More followed until dozens of eyes decorated the walls either side of him, each one following his every movement.

Wrong. All this was wrong.

He hunted for an explanation in the moss green sky. Finding none, he looked down and spotted several silhouettes approaching him from the end of the alleyway. No. He glanced over his shoulder. Both ends. His view of them improved as they drew nearer, confusing him more.

Suits. Sentient suits. Flimsy black suits with floppy pink neck ties and no one inside them. They drifted toward him in groups of about twenty from both sides.

Makoto pressed his back against a bit of wall with no eyes on it, flattening himself against it as if doing so would make osmosis occur. But it didn’t. It didn’t and he shut his eyes and prayed these suit things would pass by and he would wake up in his bed and go to school and not find anyone from a dream there.

“Naegi-kun!”

He opened one eye. Then both as he gawped up at the owner of the voice.

“Kabi-san?” he cried out.
Makiko descended. No longer was she wearing her school uniform but a pastel pink dress. The short heels of her boots clacked against the bit of ground ahead of him. Her dress alternated between pink and white layers from the waist down, reminiscent of a candy cane.

In an outfit like that, she belonged on a stage. Not in a dim alleyway.

“Kabi-san?” he repeated. Where? What? How?

“It’s okay, Naegi-kun.” She threw him one of her radiant smiles. “Leave it to me. I’ll take care of you.”

Leave? Take care of-? Did she mean to protect him from the suits that bobbed in a semicircle around them? Granted, the suits carried no obvious weapons, but that didn’t mean his wariness wasn’t justified.

She extended one arm forward. Her palm glowed and she used her other hand to pull out from the light a long knife. “Please stay where you are, Naegi-kun.”

He would have remained against the wall without her instruction.

Inhaling deeply, she raised a leg and brought her thigh as close to the rest of her body as possible. When the suits entered her knife’s range, she spun on her toes and swung out her arm. She sliced through the suits and once most of them had flopped to the floor, she flicked the knife up into the air.

The last suit raised a sleeve and charged toward her.

“To your left!” Makoto yelled.

A large saucepan materialised between her and the suit. She turned, grabbing the saucepan handle and whacking the suit.

The suit rolled over itself as it crumpled.

She caught the knife she threw upward moments before and flung it toward her opponent. Her knife ripped through the suit and slammed into the floor behind it with a loud clang.

“Come with me, Naegi-kun.” Makiko seized hold of his hand. “These are just familiars... The real enemy is nearby.”

“Familiars? Real enemy?”

Rather than elaborate, she tugged at his sleeve and he staggered after her. They sprinted down the alleyway. With each step, the end brightened until they arrived at a door covered in what appeared to be vines. She released his hand and caressed the door with gentle fingers.

“What the hell is going on?” Makoto rested his palms against his thighs and doubled over. He dragged his eyes up her body, from her boots to her skirt to the white lace of her bodice to her face. “What were those things? How did you make those weapons?”

“I will tell you after this is over. I promise.” Her expression turned serious. “Do you believe me, Naegi-kun?”

“Even if I had a choice, I would believe you.” Plus, she saved him. That scored her big points.

“That means a lot to me. When we go in, you must stay back. Okay?”
“Okay.”

Her smile widened and she pushed the door open.

Inside resembled a house minimalist in design, with plain white walls embellished with sleek wooden borders. Makoto closed the door behind him, leaning against it while Makiko ventured forward. The more he examined his surroundings, the more neglected he realised the area was: the white on the walls peeled and a thin layer of dust coated the linoleum flooring. This coating of dust vibrated, humming as if alive. As if the whole room was alive from the armchair in the corner to the light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

On the furthest wall hung a painting of three blob-shaped silhouettes. Its frame rattled, getting louder and more frantic as the room’s shaking intensified.

Makiko splayed out her fingers.

From the painting emerged the silhouettes, as if it wasn’t a painting but a window, except three beings didn’t come out. Just one. It had a slick, long body like that of a snake and the silhouettes formed its three heads. The creature surveyed the room with vertical slit pupils and when it spotted Makiko, it slithered toward her at a leisurely pace.

When it was dangerously close, Makiko spread out her legs and clenched her hairclip. She pulled out a knife as if her hairclip contained a portal or was a pink, heart-shaped pocket of some kind.

The creature lunged one of its heads forward.

She sliced its cheek with the knife.

It whined, shuddering as it bledched.

Makoto sucked in air.

Makiko pinched the blade of her knife and dragged it sideways. While her hand moved, the knife did not. Instead the knife duplicated so she held five of them. She twirled upward to an impossible height, hanging in the air and hurling her weapons at her foe.

The creature reared its heads and hissed as knife blades pierced its skin.

“I’ll only be a moment, Naegi-kun.” Makiko swooped down, pulling a knife out of her gloved palm. As soon as she landed, she ran toward the creature.

It writhed.

She slowed.

It smashed its tail into her chest.

“Kabi-san!” Makoto reached a hand toward her.

She smacked into the ground.

The creature bared its pointed teeth at her fallen form and opened its mouths wider. Wider until Makiko would easily fit inside one of them.

She shielded her face with her arm.
No. No, no, no, no-

The door ripped open, knocking Makoto over. His face cracked against the floor.

Gunfire rang out. He lifted his head.

He stared.

Kyouko. It was Kyouko wearing what she wore in his dream: a purple pinafore dress that matched her gloves and tie with a white long-sleeved blouse underneath the dress. Her dark socks went most of the way up her legs, leaving only a narrow strip of skin showing. Like in his dream. Exactly like in his dream.

The creature screeched as Kyouko unloaded her pistol’s ammunition into it.

Makiko rose, trembling slightly. She tapped her fingers individually around her knife before bounding toward the creature. Screaming, she kicked off the ground and stabbed it just below where the three heads connected to the rest of its body. Then she pulled out an egg timer from the neckline of her dress and slammed it against the creature.

Kyouko ceased firing. The egg timer detonated and Makiko flipped away, the explosion engulfing the creature in smoke. As the air cleared, the room seemed to melt before Makoto’s eyes until the three students were in the alleyway he jogged into.

He bolted over to them, not speaking until he caught his breath. “That... That was incredible!” They killed a vicious, gigantic snake. Not many people could put that on their résumé.

Neither acknowledged him. Kyouko picked something off the ground and presented it to Makiko. It looked like a black bulb, its skin decorated with grey veins.

“Take it,” said Kyouko. “You did most of the work and protected Naegi-kun. You deserve it.”

Makiko accepted it. Her fingers twitched into a fist around the bulb. “How did you know where to find us?”

“I stumbled upon the barrier during my patrol,” Kyouko replied. “When I went to confront the witch, I found the two of you.”

“Barrier? Witch?” Although he said those words aloud, it didn’t make their definitions any clearer. “Can someone please explain to me what just happened? One minute I was walking home and the next I was teleported somewhere and then Kabi-san saved me with... with magic!”

Makiko hummed. “Oh, I did say I would explain everything afterwards, didn’t I? You stumbled into a witch’s barrier. It’s an otherworld witches hide in.”

“But what’s a witch? That... snake? Was that the witch?”

It seemed nothing like the witches prevalent in fairytales.

“I don’t mean those kind of witches,” said Makiko.

Makoto stared. “How did you-?”

“I’m an esper.” She pressed a fist against her lips. “I’m joking. I have good intuitions. Witches are monsters created from curses and they try to kill people. It’s up to us magical girls to destroy them before they do harm.”
“And you’re a magical girl? Both of you?”

“Yep. I didn’t know Kirigiri-san was one though. Magical girls are born from wishes. They’re the opposite of witches.”

“You were born from a wish? How?”

A different voice answered. “I would be happy to explain, upupupu.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

"Don’t you think she’s a mysterious girl?"
“Oowada-kun, that is not an appropriate way to sit. I insist you remove your feet from that chair and place them onto the floor!”

The argument originated from the other side of the room to where Makoto and Makiko were seated. Today marked the third day of high school. Approximately a quarter of the class left to eat in the cafeteria as soon as the fourth lesson ended, and more excused themselves once Kiyotaka took it upon himself to maintain order in their homeroom.

His present victim was Mondo Oowada, a large boy with a pale brown pompadour and a preference for oversized clothes he never tucked in and many other things Kiyotaka abhorred. Mondo stared at the ceiling with half-closed eyes, idly fiddling with a toothpick inserted between two of his teeth. The front legs of his chair had lifted from the floor when he leaned back and his feet rested atop the currently vacant chair ahead of him.

Kiyotaka drew in breath, giving Mondo an opportunity to defend himself.

“I’ll put ‘em down as soon as that kid returns from the cafeteria,” Mondo said. “So quit your bitching and mind your own damn business. Don’t you have lunch to eat, President Junior?”

“My grandfather is the prime minister, not a president.” Kiyotaka puffed out his chest. “And I most certainly do! My mother prepared my lunch for me in the early hours of the morning and it would be a disservice not to honour her hard work. Speaking of which,” he pointed at Mondo, “I don’t see you eating anything!”

“... I ate a big breakfast.”

“Even so, allow me to split some of my lunch with you! You won’t be able to concentrate if you don’t replenish your energy. That must be why you are always daydreaming instead of taking notes. That and because you’re awake half the night with that gang of yours!”

The front legs of Mondo’s chair slammed to the floor. His raised fist trembled. “If you wanna get on someone’s case, get on Kuwata’s! He hasn’t been here since the first day: I heard he flunked out of school to focus on his band. We went to the same junior high and that kid wasn’t there half the time. He’s lucky he scraped a pass in the exams for this place.”

“Oowada-kun, you shouldn’t spread rumours about fellow classmates! I am sure Kuwata-kun will return in the immediate future. You must believe in his spirit! And his absence doesn’t excuse your laziness!”

“The hell did you just say ‘bout me?”

Makiko twisted around and looked at Makoto, the two boys’ bickering dissolving into background noise.

“Naegi-kun.” She kept her voice low, curling a hand around her mouth. “Have you thought about what Monobear said?”

Monobear. The bear that approached them after their visit to the witch’s barrier introduced itself as
Monobear. It claimed it was a bear but it resembled no bear Makoto had ever seen. For one thing, this bear talked. And it walked on its hind legs. Its fur consisted of two distinct colours: black and white. But not like the coat of a panda, as one might expect, for its left half had been black and its right half white.

Makoto peered at his lunch. “I’ve... thought about it.”

An understatement. After he and Monobear had been acquainted, Makiko invited everyone present to her apartment so they could discuss what transpired in depth. Soon he found himself sipping tea in her living room. As Makiko’s father worked late hours, it had been just the three of them. Four if one included Monobear, though Makoto didn’t know what to classify Monobear as. Monobear insisted it was a real bear but he doubted this. Bears couldn’t do what Monobear did.

Like grant wishes.

“It’s exactly what you think,” Monobear had said. “I can grant you whatever your heart desires. Money. Fame. True love. Murder. I’ll use my magic to bend the universe to your pleasing. But where’s the fairness in me scratching your back and you leaving me with an itch I can’t reach? All I ask is you become a magical girl and protect the world from witches! It’s almost like me scratching your back twice, you know. Fighting baddies like that... upupupu! It’s a gift in itself.”

Despite the misleading name, boys could also become magical girls. They were only called magical girls due to some narrow-minded old coots but Monobear liked to think itself revolutionary.

“Think of it like the word ‘dude’,” Monobear had explained. “Everyone’s called dude by default. But if you don’t want to be called dude, you call yourself dudette or whatever you want. The same goes for magical girls. You can call yourself a magical boy or whatever you want. I don’t care.”

Besides, others had just as much hope. Why, Monobear had granted the wishes of boys who sought its services more desperately than many female clients. One wanted to be swamped with hot women. Another wanted his mother to remember him. And another wanted his very own fairy friend. The list went on and on and restricting who could pledge themselves to a life of hope wasted so much potential. And Monobear was all about potential and hope.

“Kabi-san...” Makoto fidgeted. “Do... you think I should become a magical girl like you?”

Makiko frowned. “Monobear mentioned you would be a powerful one if you accepted. I’ve known Monobear for a while and they’ve never said anything like that. Do you want to be one? Why?”

“Oh, well... It’s silly but I thought about what Kirigiri-san told me.” He rubbed the back of his neck, feigning interest in the window beside him. “She said I must be prepared to give my life if I don’t want to be ordinary... For as long as I can remember, I’ve been a completely average person. But you and Kirigiri-san... you’re both... not ordinary. You’re incredible.”

“That’s sweet but you misunderstood my question. I should have been clearer.” Makiko lay her arm across her desk. “I meant what would you wish for to become a magical girl?”

“I meant what would you wish for to become a magical girl?”

“Of possible wishes had lulled him to sleep for the last two nights. He considered wishing for money to support his family with. He also considered opting for something more altruistic, like ending world hunger or obtaining world peace or finding all those teenagers who disappeared or discovering the true identity of Genocider Syo. So many factors needed to be taken into account,
such as the wish’s widespread impact and the short-term and long-term benefits. All this comparing ended up giving him headaches he tried to smother by pressing his pillow down on his head.

“Naegi-kun.” Now it was Makiko who wouldn’t maintain eye contact. “I don’t think you should become a magical girl unless you absolutely need to. It sounds glamorous but it’s lonely.” Her fingernails scraped against her desk as she balled her hand into a fist. “You won’t have time to retain friendships... It will impact your family life and school life... and you can’t just take a break or retire.” Her pupils twitched and Makoto felt almost as afraid as she looked. “It’s a lifelong commitment. Even if you regret your wish, you have to continue being a magical girl until you die.” She rubbed her knuckles against her eyes.

The homeroom chattered. A bird flew past the window.

Makoto bit down on his lower lip. “Kabi-san...”

She dropped her hands to her lap a moment later, seemingly back to her usual cheery self. “I have an idea - you can come with me on a few witch hunts. That way, you can see what it’s like and we can spend time together. It will be fun having someone with me for once. Unless,” she nibbled one of her fingernails, “you don’t want to?”

“I’d lo-!” Makoto caught himself. “I mean I would be happy to. You were amazing against those familiars and that witch.”

Familiars, Monobear had informed him at Makiko’s apartment, were the witch’s minions. The suits from last time had been familiars. They developed into witches with time. Another difference between them was only witches dropped Grief Seeds upon dying. It was a Grief Seed Kyouko gave Makiko after the battle.

Grief Seeds cleansed Soul Gems which contained their owner’s magic powers. Makiko wore hers on her hairclip as a magical girl and as a ring everywhere else. Magical girls needed Grief Seeds so they could replenish their magic. That meant facing off against witches regularly.

Yet despite all these risks, Makiko made a contract with Monobear to become one.

Makoto hesitated. “Kabi-san, you don’t have to tell me... but what did you wish for?”

She stirred her rice with her chopsticks and didn’t let her eyes stray from her lunch. “Please don’t get mad but... I don’t want to think about that now.”

Fair enough. A part of him anticipated her not disclosing something so personal. Although disappointed, he couldn’t hold it against her. If anything she was entitled to be affronted by his question.

“It’s fine. You were curious. I understand.” She grinned, shaking her head slightly. “I’m glad you’re not offended.”

She did it again.

“How did you know I was thinking that?” he asked.

“I can read minds.”

Was this one of the powers a magical girl acquired?
Makiko giggled. “I’m joking. I just have good intuitions.”

“R-Right...”

During the last two lessons, Makoto’s attention flitted between the velocity of balls when they hit the ground and the doodle in the corner of his notes. When their teacher dismissed the class at the end of the day, he started to gather his things.

A gloved hand landed onto the pages of his still open notebook.

“I overheard your conversation with Kabi-san at lunch.” Kyouko parted her fingers so they no longer obscured his doodle - a doodle of him and Makiko brandishing weapons as they fought off various monsters. Her lips pursed. “You agreed to join her on excursions, correct?”

“He did.” Makiko re-entered the room, having most likely deduced that something was holding Makoto up. “You’re welcome to accompany us, Kirigiri-san. That way we can both watch over Naegi-kun.”

The two girls unblinkingly stood opposite each other.

“Wouldn’t it be safer not taking him with you?” Kyouko folded her arms over her chest. “You heard what Monobear said. Naegi-kun has the potential to become one of the most powerful magical girls ever created. It would be in Monobear’s interest to find an opportunity to pressure him into making a contract.”

“Upupupu, how astute!”

Makoto almost tipped off his chair. Monobear’s stumpy legs dangled from the edge of Makoto’s desk. Neither Kyouko nor Makiko appeared surprised by its sudden entrance. And none of the few students still in room did either, not so much as even glancing in their direction upon hearing its voice.

“Monobear only exists to us,” Makiko explained in a volume barely above whispering. “Monobear has the ability to make themselves invisible to most people. And the reason no one else can hear them is because they communicate telepathically. When we’re nearby, we can also talk to each other with our minds.”

“Is that how you know what I’m thinking sometimes?” Makoto asked. “Like just now?”

“I told you, I have good intuitions. Here, Naegi-kun, I’ll show you.” She closed her eyes. “Can you hear me?”

“I... Yes! I can!”

“You try. If you want us to hear what you’re thinking, we’ll hear it.”

“Okay... am I doing it right?”

She opened her eyes. “Yes!”

He beamed. Even without being a magical girl, he could hold conversations with his friends in his mind. Not his imagination, but his actual friends.

“There will be times where we don’t want other people to hear us. This will be very useful then.” Makiko turned to Kyouko. “Kirigiri-san, I am sure you mean your intentions toward Naegi-kun to
be good but I think they are misguided. Naegi-kun should see for himself what being a magical girl involves.”

Kyouko smiled faintly. “I suppose you are right, Kabi-san. I think I will come with you after all.”


Kiyotaka rounded on them.

“You have spent enough time loitering!” He made shooing gestures with his hands, continuing to do so even after Makoto headed toward the door with the others. “You can resume discussing your plans for the evening outside where you are not obstructing us from cleaning!”

Monobear left last.

Kiyotaka stepped to the side to let it pass.

“So how do you find a witch?” Makoto asked once they departed the school grounds.

Cherry blossoms were in bloom, subdued pink against pale blue sky. Tree branches waved in a gentle breeze, casting faded shadow puppets across the pavement. The weather reflected this mildness as did nature’s hum.

There must have been occasions when magical girls were forced to hunt witches in the rain or snow or even in storms. Not very appealing but Makoto doubted magical girls could simply take a week off. Maybe the climate never phased them or their magic protected them from nature’s fury.

Either way, they were truly astounding people.

Kyouko followed Makoto and Makiko from half a dozen paces behind, Monobear prancing along in the space separating them.

“Soul Gems can trace the aura of witches and familiars I’ve come across but failed to defeat before they escaped.” Makiko pulled off her ring. It glowed in her palm, morphing into a pink egg-shaped orb.

She closed her fist around it. The orb pulsed light sporadically through the gaps between her fingers.

“But if I haven’t got any to track down, like now, all I can do is search for places where they like to hide. For example, abandoned buildings or other areas people commit suicide in. Witches live off despair and will try to lure regular humans into their domain.”

“They can also hide themselves in churches and hospitals,” Kyouko said. “The people in those locations are vulnerable and make for easy targets.”

Makiko nodded.

“How do you if there are any witches in a place?” Makoto asked.

“Our Soul Gems will react,” said Makiko, “and a portal will appear. We’ll start in the city centre and go from there.”

Venturing toward the heart of the city felt surreal. He had been there before with friends and family, but he came now with a new perspective. How many of the teenagers he passed were
magical girls? How many times had he dismissed a stranger who risked their life daily to protect everyone? And the stores and closed down buildings, had they housed witches once? Claimed the lives of innocent victims?

Monobear hopped across the sidewalk as if the slabs were squares of a hopscotch. Did it ever feel remorse for forming contracts with teenagers? How could Monobear seem so carefree... or was it simply careless about the whole thing? Makoto didn’t know which was worse.

He hoped that Makiko and Kyouko didn’t regret their wishes.

They arrived at the entrance of a rundown building Makoto recalled being a hotel until a fire ravaged it. Rather than repair it, the owners shut down the establishment. There had been talk of using the lot for an apartment building, but currently it hosted only vagabonds and teenagers with strict parents and those with gambling problems. Much of the street had devolved into attempts at businesses that left a row of shuttered buildings plastered with advertisements faded by rain.

“Hm.” Makiko glanced at her hand. Her Soul Gem flashed more frequently than a minute ago. “There must be a witch in the hotel. Naegi-kun, stay close to me. I’ll look after you.” She winked. “Think of me as your personal assistant.”

“Upupupu.” Monobear placed its paws against its mouth and wiggled. “This sounds like a trope from a shoujo manga! Not that I’m familiar with that crap... I don’t have any thumbs so I can’t turn the pages without using my teeth... and not only that, but I’m a bear! Bears can’t read Japanese without a translator! Bears steal picnics! I’ll have to come along to see how this plays out.”

Makoto’s ears warmed. Makiko blushed though that might just have been the light radiating from her Soul Gem.

“... Do whatever.” Kyouko held out her own Soul Gem. It was in the shape of an egg but purple instead of Makiko’s pink, pulsing light as well. She approached the web of police tape blocking the hotel’s doorway.

The three students tore away the tape. Kyouko entered first, stopping several steps in to look at Monobear from over her shoulder.

It and the other two students lingered by the doorway.

“I expected your cowardice to keep you outside,” she told Monobear. “Or do you wish to come so you can coax Naegi-kun into forming a contract if we are temporarily overwhelmed?”

Monobear bowed its head. “Eh... It looks like Kirigiri-san has no confidence in me at all. I only want to see how this all develops. I can’t make Naegi-kun do anything. I can’t even tell him what to wish for yet you keep picking on me... It’s like Bear School all over again. If I wore glasses, I bet you would throw them into a puddle and tread on them... That’s the kind of cool girl you come across as.”

“Kirie-san isn’t like that at all,” Makoto said.

Kyouko advanced into the building with no comment.

Makiko moved behind Makoto and nodded. He nodded back and turned forward again.

The stench of alcohol and vomit washed over them and Makoto buried his nose into his sleeve. A desk was halfway across the room with what looked like a map pinned behind it on a noticeboard. If this had been a video game, he would have taken it to help in their exploration, but Makoto
didn’t want to delay them so ignored it.

Paying no regard to whether the others were still following, Kyouko narrowed her eyes and progressed further in, passing through slits of light that infiltrated the gaps between askew wooden planks nailed onto the building's windows.

From what Makoto could make out with his impaired vision, patches of paint had been scratched off the walls. In their absence graffiti had been spraypainted almost everywhere, of obscene pictures and tags and profanity. Relatively near the entrance had been spraypainted ‘Queen of Liars.’ Makoto hoped it was red paint and nothing else.

“So you think Kirigiri-san isn’t an aloof person?” Monobear asked as they left the lobby. All they could see of Kyouko was the flickering glow of her Soul Gem on the far side of the corridor. “Those are big words coming from a short guy. You’ve only known her for a few days. Don’t you think she’s a mysterious girl?”

Makoto averted his gaze. “She likes to keep to herself. That’s all.”

“Ah, but she is very mysterious! If she had a rank, it would be High School Mysterious. Super High School Mysterious. Super High School Level Mysterious. No, that last one is dumb. But that’s not the point. See,” Monobear chortled into its paws, “the thing is.... I don’t even know what Kirigiri-san wished for! And I grant everyone’s wishes!”

Makoto slowed down. Makiko bumped into the back of him.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I keep everybody’s wishes confidential but this isn’t invading her privacy because I really don’t know how Kirigiri-san became a magical girl!” Monobear twiddled its ear with a paw. “You see, I’m the only Monobear here. I drew the lot for this planet. Maybe Kirigiri-san is an alien or someone else granted her wish. I’ll have to have a word with my siblings... I bet it was Monomi. Monomi has always been jealous of Mono-me ever since she got Pluto. Get it? Mono? Me? I am Mono so me is Mono?”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Makiko said.

“My pun?” Monobear’s shoulders sank. “Yeesh. You kids only understand memes these days.”

“I meant Kirigiri-san’s wish. You must have forgotten it. You do grant a lot of wishes...”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Monobear flailed its arms. “My memory is as flawless as my beauty line. Well, it would be if it ever got off the ground. You see, whenever I test my honey face masks on myself, I can’t resist having a taste. But I am one hundred percent serious and sincere about this. What kind of bear would I be if I granted people’s wishes and forgot them? I’m a bear, not an untrained goldfish.”

Makoto opened his mouth to reply.


They hurried down the corridor. Various shades of red and brown swirled directly in front of some elevator doors like paint water going down the drain. Makoto assumed this was the portal. The portal’s edges distorted the surrounding area, making it tremble and crackle as if it was a dying fire.
“We should transform before we proceed,” Kyouko said.

Them transforming should have been obvious. They set off wearing their school uniform and hadn’t stopped along the way to change outfits. Even then, they would have drawn attention to themselves if they journeyed through the city as magical girls.

Just as Makoto thought he understood their lifestyle, more mystery and wonder forced him to evaluate his supposed knowledge.

Both girls exploded with colour - an almost white tinged with the colours of their respective Soul Gems. This light enveloped their bodies, so bright Makoto needed to shield his eyes with his arm in order to watch. The almost whiteness enclosing them gradually popped out of existence from around their various body parts, rippling and fragmenting to reveal limbs now in magical girl attire.

Makoto wasn’t given time to admire them after they transformed. Makiko took hold of his hand and led him through the portal. Instead of walking into the metal doors of the elevator, he stepped into a cage. It was the same size as an elevator and had prison bar walls.

Kyouko and Monobear joined them soon after.

“What-?” The cage plummeted and the rest of Makoto’s sentence lodged itself in his throat.

While he lost his balance, the two girls spread out their legs and strengthened their stances. Monobear yawned, trying to pick its nose. Their only source of light shone from Makiko’s Soul Gem until the cage descended into a well-lit open area.

In this space fluttered hundreds of paper bags almost torn in two. They flapped their not quite halves like wings, rustling as they circled closer.

Kyouko took out a pistol from the holster on her leg and fired between the bars.

Makiko reached into her hairpin and pulled out a throwing knife. She flung it at one of the bags, tearing through to the other side, and she reached into her hairpin for more.

As they descended deeper, the scenery evolved. Plastered across the far stone walls were tatty posters illuminated by the growing fire beneath their cage. Makoto peeked between the bars to get a better look and realised the posters were not posters for they were animated, the blush-inducing busty women on each one shifting into different suggestive poses.

He swallowed, staring. His heart thumped loudly. “Is it taking us to the witch?” A burning bag lapping at the bars nearest to him and he jumped back.

Flames licked at the cage, continuously growing, herding everyone to the cage’s centre. Makiko got out a knife from her hairpin and lanced at the bag homed in on Makoto.

Kyouko glanced to the side. “Kabi-san, can you create an exit?”

Nodding once, Makiko slipped her hand down her neckline and got out an egg timer. She twisted it then threw it at the bars. It exploded upon impact.

The air cleared. Makiko’s egg timer had distorted several bars, leaving a big enough gap for them to escape through.

“We’re supposed to just jump off?” Makoto couldn’t see the bottom. Only fire. “That doesn’t seem safe...” Especially for the one person present who wasn’t a magical girl or a psychic bear.
“Naegi-kun,” said Kyouko. “Get on my back.”

“What?” he asked, thinking he misheard her.

She crouched. “I’m not giving you a piggyback ride for the fun of it. You need to hold onto me so we can escape.”

He climbed onto her back.

Makiko scooped Monobear into her arms and stepped through the gap in the bars. She conjured a saucepan and landed onto it, riding it through the flames. Fire swiftly filled in the tunnel created in their descent.

Kyouko followed after them. Makoto tightened his grip on her upper arms and planted his face into her hair.

Heat coursed through him but the temperature was bearable. Makoto heard something whip the air and peeked up to investigate. Kyouko’s hair ribbon had extended upward then bent downward at an angle halfway, whirling around them like a propeller and fanning out nearby flames.

Once they made it through the fireball surrounding the cage, they fell a bit farther before lurching back and traveling the other way.

No sooner had Makoto processed the inversion of gravity when his back slammed into something solid. The ceiling. No... the floor?

Kyouko rolled off him, rising to her feet and offering Makoto her hand.

He accepted it and surveyed the area. Lewd posters still decorated everywhere, but the floor was now beige and had what looked like throbbing boils - a definite improvement over the plummeting cage and fire, even if this new environment was kind of gross.

It seemed they fell into a room. Similar blemishes like those on the floor also riddled the ceiling. Directly above the pair appeared to be a hole bordered by a funnel, its conical mouth pointed at the floor. Had they come through there?

“Watch out!” Makiko yelled from some distance away.

A giant arm shot out of the funnel. It curled its fingers around Kyouko’s body.

She squirmed, feet lifting from the ground.

Makiko darted to Makoto and threw him over her shoulder, bolting into an empty space.

What he had assumed to be a funnel was not a funnel as such. Makoto had been staring up a skirt, its waistband attached to the ceiling. Makiko set him down and sprinted toward the skirt which he realised was the witch.

“Let her go!” She leaped into the air and tossed a knife at the witch’s hand.

The room bellowed. The witch splayed out its fingers, freeing Kyouko.

She landed beside Makiko. “Thank you.”

Another hand emerged. By the time Makiko looked up, it already grabbed her.
Kyouko aimed her pistol at the hand.
Makiko stared at her.
Kyouko closed her eyes and aimed her pistol at the floor.
“Kabi-san!” Makoto reached toward her.
“Upupupu,” said Monobear. “Could it be Kirigiri-san doesn’t intend to save her?”
Makoto glared. “There’s no way Kirigiri-san would ever do that!”

“It must be peaceful living with an empty head like yours. You can convince yourself your lies are facts.” Monobear jumped up and rapped Makoto’s forehead with its paw. “Listen up because I’m going to give you a dose of reality, Naegi-kun. If a magical girl wants to survive, they need to obtain all the Grief Seeds they can get their little hands on. Other magical girls are competition. It’s a bear eat bear world.”

“You’re wrong!” Makoto shouted. Kyouko flinched. “They’re friends!”

“Upupupu!” Monobear threw back its head. “My cave is getting a bit small. Maybe I can move into your head.”

Kyouko fired at the floor.

The witch’s arm, that had almost completely retreated back into the skirt, splayed out its fingers and released Makiko.

But rather than return to the ground, she raced up the witch’s arm. Makiko plucked out several egg timers from beneath her bodice, twisting each egg timer before lobbing them. They disappeared into the darkness within the skirt and exploded seconds later. She jumped back and fell through the air, throwing more egg timers.

Three arms flopped out of the skirt, hanging limply before detaching themselves and flumping to the floor. One almost landed on Makoto but Kyouko wretched him out of the way.

Their surroundings dissolved into the hotel corridor.

“That... That was incredible!” Makoto said, unable to curb the smile straining his cheeks. “You’re both amazing!”

“It was nothing.” Kyouko’s cheeks coloured.

“No, Naegi-kun is right.” Makiko took hold of Makoto’s and Kyouko’s hands. “It’s been so long... since I had friends like you two.” Tears welled in her eyes. She giggled. “With you both by my side, I feel like we can do anything.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Don’t want to lie anymore.”
I Don’t Want to Lie Anymore

Chapter Notes

There is a mention of suicide in this chapter as a heads-up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Police have provided no new hope in the search for Chihiro Fujisaki who was reported missing five days ago. Twenty officers are reported to be on the case—”

Bzzt.

“Earlier today, the Prime Minister for a second time accepted the resignation of him and his cabinet. In a televised address, he confessed to—”

Bzzt.

“An early morning motorcycle accident has claimed the life of a man named Daiya Oowada on—”

Bzzt.

“Hot on the market is a new jewellery line that has taken the country’s teenagers by storm. Developed by a currently anonymous—”

Bzzt.

“Newly released details about the serial killer Genocider Syo suggest the killer may be a high school student. Many of the murders happen late on weekdays or on the weekend from noon ’til—”

Bzzt.

“Today marks the eighth anniversary of the deaths of Japan’s once leading idol group—”

Bzzt.

Makoto’s father pointed the television remote at the carpet. “The news is all doom and gloom these days.”

His son said nothing.

The doorbell rang before Makoto left for school on Friday. He assumed the visitor was for his mother so continued eating breakfast while she answered the door. Sometimes his mother’s friends stopped by in the morning to gossip and exchange stories about their families, and he hoped the person at the door wasn’t the woman who knew about his childhood bedwetting. No matter how many times she rattled on about her daughter’s ‘completely normal’ bedwetting experiences, Makoto always cringed whenever she popped in.

“Makoto, it’s for you!” his mother called. “She says she’s in your class.”

He rose and headed to the front door, passing his mother in the hall. She cocked an eyebrow at
Komaru puckered her lips and made kissing noises.

Initially Makoto thought the visitor was Makiko but coming here would be an unnecessary detour for her. Hope’s Peak lay between their respective dwellings and if they needed to discuss something, they had the opportunity to do so in school or during an excursion. But neither expressed such a desire after their last witch hunt nor at school the following day.

The person who greeted him at the door wasn’t Makiko but Mukuro. Neither had spoken to each other since Monday. Not because they fell out or because one avoided the other. Their first week simply progressed without them conversing. Kyouko and Makiko kept Makoto company while Mukuro seemed content alone.

He blinked. “Ikusaba-san?”

“Let’s go to school together,” she said cheerfully, wiggling the fingers on one hand.

“S-Sure.” He followed after her.

His mother meant to pluck out their garden’s weeds and cultivate an area for a flowerbed but gardening didn’t rank high on her list of priorities. In their younger years, Makoto and Komaru approved of this neglect and pretended they lived beside a baby jungle. Their pretend games petered out in a negative correlation to their age and although he tolerated its unruliness, he was conscious of it when visitors stopped by.

Mukuro made no comment about the garden. Her face gave nothing away either. Maybe she had no particular reason for going to his house.

Not until they walked a quarter of the journey to school did she speak again. “I heard you went on an adventure with Kirigiri-san and Kabi-san two days ago.”

“We did.” He studied the cracks in the pavement before looking up.

Her attention remained forward.

“Who told you?” he asked.

“Ishimaru-kun. I met with him after school.” Only footsteps for five seconds. “Did you know his grandfather recently stepped down?”

“I... caught it on the news last night. I hope Ishimaru-kun is all right.”

She didn’t reply.

A girl jogged up to them then around and away, brown ponytail bobbing. Aoi Asahina. The girl was Aoi Asahina, a classmate Makoto had so far only exchanged a few words with. She excelled in sports and was often with her best friend Sakura Oogami, a muscular girl who already earned the nickname ‘the Ogre’.

Other than Kyouko and Makiko and Kiyotaka, Makoto hadn’t spoken much to his classmates. This included Mukuro. Most of what he knew about her, he learned from their first lunch together: she participated in a military camp aboard and wore a ring similar to Makiko’s.

A ring which later turned out to be her Soul Gem.
Her fists stayed rigidly against her outer thighs. A second furtive inspection of her ring convinced him of their similitude. The girls wore them on the middle finger of their left hand and both rings were grey with arcane symbols engraved onto them. It couldn’t be coincidental.

He peered sidelong at her. “Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you know what a magical girl is?”

She stopped after taking three more paces.

He took four before turning on his heel.

“Do you mean... can I perform magic tricks?” Her hand hovered in front of her mouth. “Can I pull a rabbit from a hat? Is that what you mean?”

“Not exactly...”

Mukuro shrugged. “Then I suppose I’m not a magical girl.”

“But your ring-”

“- is a gift from my sister and I don’t understand the connection between them.” She briefly looked to her left, tone darker than sentences ago. “As a part-time model, Junko-chan knows what’s in fashion and bought this for me. A lot of teenagers own similar accessories.”

Believing her would make things a lot simpler. Many of the details of the dream in which she played a cameo role long since slipped his mind, a fate most of his dreams shared, but she had been present. And Kyouko. For them, who he met afterwards, to be in it surely meant something.

A gust of wind blew an empty beverage can across the road beside them. The can clattered, bumping into the edge of the pavement.

Mukuro’s skirt quivered in the passing breeze.

“Ikusaba-san...” Makoto clenched his fists. “Did... you and I meet before we met...?”

“Huh?” She widened her eyes, recoiling slightly. “First you ask if I’m some kind of anime character and now this. What’s the big idea?”

Makoto’s gaze wandered to the row of houses on the other side of the road. “I... had a dream the night before school started.” He realised how absurd it sounded out loud but elaborated anyway. “You and Kirigiri-san were in it. You were magical girls. Magical girls are people who fight witches and you-”

“Naegi-kun.” Mukuro’s smile showed teeth. “Is that all?” Her shoulders fell. “Geez, you had me freaked out for a moment. I’m a normal-looking girl. There are tons of people with a face like mine. You must have mistook me for someone you saw in passing and they appeared in your dream. If you want an expert on interpreting dreams, you’re better off asking Hagakure-kun. But that’s my take on this.”

That made some sense. Not a lot, but some.

“Even so,” he said, “Kirigiri-san was definitely in my dream and I hadn’t met her.”
The ends of her mouth drooped. “It’s funny you mention that. See, that’s why I wanted to talk with you. Don’t you think Kirigiri-san is a bit weird?”

“... Weird?”

“Yeah. Weird.” Mukuro examined the fingernails on one of her hands. All painted red. “Remember what she said on the first day? What was the deal with her bringing up that whole ordinary versus extraordinary thing? It sounded like a threat to me.” She put her hands onto her hips. “And have you noticed how she keeps looking at you? What’s up with that?”

He hadn’t noticed. He stepped back, palms clammy. “Ikusaba-san... why are telling me this?”

“Eh? Why am I telling you this? You’re lucky I’m a happy-go-lucky type of girl because I’d slap you if I wasn’t. Isn’t it obvious?” She craned her neck and stared down at him. “We haven’t spoken much but I consider you my friend... maybe my only friend. And friends don’t let friends do stupid things, right? Kirigiri-san said you needed to do dangerous things to have a fulfilling life and she harped on about yours being normal and boring. And now she is spending so much time with you... Don’t you think it’s suspicious?”

Makoto looked away.

Her expression softened. “Let’s drop it for now. We’re going to be late if we keep standing around chatting.”

He couldn’t drop the matter. Even if they refrained from discussing it for the rest of the journey, or even the rest of the day, he couldn’t not process the information she fed him. Her insight contradicted his former conclusions. Kyouko’s actions suggested she was adamant he not form a contract. Mukuro’s conjectures hinted the opposite. That he didn’t know Kyouko as well as he thought, which contained some truth. Monobear pronounced itself ignorant on how Kyouko became a magical girl. A lot about Kyouko was shrouded in mystery. He couldn’t assert he was correct and Mukuro not.

Makiko met them on the way to the shoe lockers. With Mukuro present, they avoided the topic of magical girls, and Mukuro didn’t bring up her concerns regarding Kyouko. He wondered whether Mukuro broached the subject to Makiko already. Kyouko was Makiko’s friend too, after all.

At their homeroom, Mukuro took her seat by the door and unpacked her bag.

Makoto was halfway across the room when he caught sight of Kiyotaka’s back. Recalling the Prime Minister’s resignation, he altered his route and approached Kiyotaka’s desk.

Upon hearing footsteps, Kiyotaka turned his head and offered Makoto and Makiko a closed-mouth smile. “Good morning, Naegi-kun. Kabi-kun.”

“H-Hey,” Makoto said, caught off-guard by what would have been a normal greeting from anyone else. “I heard what happened to your grandfather.”

Makiko laced her fingers together and dangled them between her legs. “Yeah. It’s really sad... I’m so sorry...”

“Sorry!” Kiyotaka snorted.

Makoto and Makiko flinched.

“There’s no need for you to apologise,” said Kiyotaka. “You didn’t cast a spell to make him cause
the scandal he did. You didn’t force him, a genius, to run a society filled with ordinary people like you and I that he refused to relate to. He was his own undoing both times.”

“Kabi-san only meant to express her condolences,” Makoto explained. “What happened to your grandfather must be hard... I’m not sure I could face going to school so soon after that happened.”

“I wouldn’t be able to face myself if I used his failings as an excuse to miss out on my education even for a short while,” Kiyotaka replied. He had in his hands a piece of paper that he folded in half twice. “In fact, my grandfather has only strengthened my dedication to adhere to the solidity of hard work! I shall surpass him... and not let myself make the same mistakes!” The piece of paper crumpled in his fist. “I shall persevere and contribute toward a society that rewards hard work rather than geniuses!”

Makiko clapped. Their homeroom teacher strode in so they all took their seats.

After what Mukuro said, Makoto regularly glanced away from his notes to check on Kyouko. Once or twice they caught each other’s eye. Each time, he pretended to be daydreaming. If only he could read minds, then all his questions would be answered. Questions such as what she wished for. How. Whether she wanted him to become a magical girl. Why she had been in his dream.

At lunch, Makiko led him to Kyouko’s desk where they ate. Monobear sprung out of nowhere two minutes later and sat on a nearby desk.

Mukuro stayed in her corner.

Even if Makoto had felt confident enough to accost Kyouko, Makiko swiftly took charge of the conversation.

“On the way to school, I found a familiar but it managed to escape.” She looked at everyone in turn. “With my Soul Gem, I should be able to trace its aura and maybe even find the witch it belongs to. So that’s what we should do later.” She furrowed her brow. “It’s odd. There are so many witches about nowadays. There must be a lot of despair drawing them here.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” Monobear asked. “Think of it this way: you’ll create a lot of hope counteracting it. Doesn’t that turn you on?”

Makiko hid her mouth behind her knuckles. “Um...?”

“It’s not a hard concept to grasp.” Monobear leaned forward and rested its cheek on its paw. “Hope and despair are two sides of the same coin.” It shuddered. “I can’t believe I had to say something so cliche to get my message across. If you don’t want all that despair, you’ll have to have an abundance of hope. Ain’t that right, Naegi-kun?”

Makoto’s pupils jerked up from his lunch. “S-Sure...”

“Are you feeling okay?” asked Makiko. “You’ve barely said or eaten a thing. I haven’t offended you at all, have I? Is it because I’ve been pushing you into attending these-?”

Kyouko coughed.

Makiko shut her mouth. “Sorry. I mean, because I’ve been pushing you into attending these witch hunts.”

“It’s not that.” Makoto adjusted his grip on his chopsticks. “I... didn’t get much sleep last night. That’s all.”
Maybe despite her good intentions, Mukuro was wrong about Kyouko. Maybe. Hopefully.

Before the class was dismissed at the end of the day, their homeroom teacher asked whether anyone could deliver the last two days of class work to Mondo’s home. Until then, Makoto hadn’t noticed his absence. Mondo barely contributed to class discussions and wasn’t a social butterfly like some other classmates. But it made sense. Daiya Oowada was probably a relation to Mondo so the latter staying off school due to the former’s sudden death was understandable.

Kiyotaka’s arm shot up. “I shall deliver it with utmost haste!”

Across the room, someone giggled. Someone else said, “Oowada better hope Ishimaru doesn’t leak any of it to the press.”

As promised, Makiko showed Kyouko and Makoto where she stumbled upon the familiar. It took the three of them (four if one included Monobear) a short time to get there. The street was full of people returning from school or work, some skipping down pavements while others dragged their feet. A pair of children toddled across a low wall of mismatched bricks opposite the three students, their mother walking parallel to the wall and holding the younger child’s hand.

No one seemed to be in any danger. And unlike what happened in the hotel, neither Makiko’s nor Kyouko’s Soul Gem reacted.

Makiko stroked a streetlamp, grimacing. “This is where I found it but like I said, it escaped. Hopefully it didn’t go too far.”

She took to the front of the group and led them out of the street.

With her distracted, Makoto used this opportunity to question Kyouko. “Kirigiri-san,” he kept his voice low, “can I ask you some things?”

He thought she didn’t hear him over the voices of students passing by until she glanced his way.

“You may,” she said.

“What did you wish for?”

Monobear, waddling just ahead of the pair, spun around on its heel and proceeded to walk backward. “I want to know as well, Kirigiri-san.”

Kyouko continued looking past Monobear. “... Why do I have to tell you that?”

“Oh. Um,” Makoto rubbed the back of his neck, “you don’t have to tell me.”

“If I don’t have to, I think I won’t.”


“You can wonder and think what you wish.” Kyouko quickened her pace so she was beside Makiko.

Makoto didn’t attempt to catch up. Her unwillingness shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Makiko declined answering the same question as well. And in a way, he wasn’t surprised. But by refusing, Kyouko supported Mukuro’s surmise on her character. A negative surmise. One that would put him at risk if proven to be correct. One he didn’t want to be true.

Makiko stopped and pointed a finger forward. They had arrived at the edge of the city’s industrial
Across the road from them, a man staggered toward an abandoned warehouse. His dark suit and gelled back hair were incongruous to the area’s grime.

“See the mark on his neck?” Makiko nodded, eyes following the man’s bumbling. “It’s a witch’s kiss.”

Makoto stood himself next to Makiko and squinted. Indeed, on the man’s neck was a small black cross that reminded him of a tattoo. “A... witch’s kiss?”

“It’s the mark witches leave on their targets. It’s how they control humans and make them kill themselves.” She frowned. “Before we enter the witch’s barrier, we should make sure he doesn’t harm himself. Kirigiri-san, can I trust you with him while I go ahead with Naegi-kun?”

Kyouko nodded.

Makiko grabbed Makoto’s hand and the two went inside, the door groaning shut behind them. Sunlight beamed through the metal roof’s missing panels, catching on corners of wooden crates stacked in rickety towers and pyramids. Here and there, freshly disposed trash glinted among debris. Makoto pinched his nose with a thumb and forefinger.

Their footsteps kicked up dirt clouds on the discoloured concrete flooring. Makiko’s Soul Gem glowed after five paces.

On the other side of the room appeared a black Greek cross that hovered one metre above the ground. Blue gas spread out from behind the cross and formed a large circular border.

“Stay close.” Makiko transformed into a magical girl and sprinted toward the portal, Makoto at her heels.

They passed through.

The warehouse’s interior appeared not to have changed - the crates Makoto spotted earlier were still there, either nailed shut or pried open to reveal emptied insides. Pillars holding what was left of the roof bore the same graffiti: initials of names and embellished punctuation marks.

Makiko jogged toward a door with an exit sign above it. He followed after her.

Only the door didn’t take them outside the building but to a stairwell which twisted toward a ceiling that made Makoto’s head ache when he stared upward. Every twenty steps, the stairwell branched off into another spiral of stairs that too branched off every twenty steps. Makoto and Makiko kept to the central flight of stairs, running around and around. The acute smell of disinfectant stung Makoto’s nostrils.

Makiko halted.

Makoto stopped belatedly.

She pulled out a knife from her palm.

A female-bodied mannequin teetered down the steps ahead of them. Its face bore no features and it wore what may once have been a mutton sleeve dress, though now only rags stained carmine red remained. It stumbled, high heels twisting, then accelerated. In one of its fists was a hypodermic needle which it aimed at Makiko.
She blocked the mannequin’s attack with her knife, its needle clinking against her blade. Makiko twisted her wrist, sending her opponent tumbling sideways and off the stairwell. Once she glanced at Makoto to make sure he hadn’t been harmed, they pressed on.

Makiko took out three more mannequins before they reached the top. The staircase ended two metres below the ceiling. On the ceiling, directly above where the staircase finished, was a door bestrewn with question marks of different colours. Red, green, yellow and more.

He turned to Makiko, anticipating instructions on what to do next, and was surprised to find her crying. “Kabi-san? What’s wrong?”

“Before we continue,” she curled her fingers around his hand and squeezed, “I want you to know I’m happy you’re here with me.”

“It’s fine,” he said, flustered. “Really.”

“You’re the first friend I’ve had for a long time.” With her free hand, she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “And I mean a very, very long time. I might look tough but I’m not. I made a stupid wish to become a magical girl and it’s stopped me from making friends... until now... Please... Naegi-kun...”

She sandwiched his hands between hers.

Makoto’s ears warmed.

“... Don’t make the same mistake I did,” she said. “Think long and hard so you don’t end up regretting it.”

“I will, Kabi-san! And then... And then we can fight together.”

A smile spread across Makiko’s lips. “I look forward to it. Let’s go on... together.”

She released his hands and jumped, grabbing the knob above their heads and wrenching the door open.

The ceiling dropped and she landed next to him. Instead of crushing them, the ceiling phased through their bodies, stopping at the soles of their feet where it solidified and became the new floor.

They found themselves somewhere completely different; it looked like an island. Sandcastles bordered the area: some tall, some short, some with articulate designs and some looked like a child constructed them. The sea shimmered beyond these sandcastles underneath a clear sky as though they weren’t inside a building but at the beach.

From a sandcastle opposite the students emerged the witch - a magazine open on its middle pages that flapped its two halves as if they were wings. On the front cover was a large eye and on the back cover were lips poised in a grimace. Behind these facial features, printed on the magazine itself, was a boy and a girl and a woman with a cloud for a head. They held hands, standing in a row, the woman split in half by the spine of the magazine with a child either side of her.

Makiko extracted a knife from her hand.

The magazine witch fluttered closer.

She tightened her grip.
It beat its wings.

At the same time, they charged forward.

Only a short distance separated them. Makiko kicked off the sand and slashed at her foe.

Pages spewed out from inside the magazine witch and it reared backward, more pages erupting as it flailed.

Makoto caught a glimpse of one page and widened his eyes. Four girls grinned at him, one with an uncanny resemblance to Makiko. The only difference between the girl and his friend was the girl on the piece of paper had much longer hair.

She sliced through the image. On the rest of the loose pages were similar photographs of the same girl - of her posing, or singing into a microphone, or waving at the photographer. Makiko hacked at them all, screaming nonstop. Shreds of paper swayed in their descent, some alighting onto Makiko’s hair while others collected at her feet.

The magazine witch circled her from above, releasing more and more pages, continuing to do so even after Makiko fell to her knees and dropped her weapon. Her knife sank into the sand and disappeared from sight.

Makoto’s legs wobbled. “Kabi-san!”

Sand exploded from near where he stood. Out sprung Kyouko, now in her magical girl outfit. She took a pistol out of her holster and fired at the magazine witch.

More pages burst out of the witch but these ones differed from the ones Makoto saw after Makiko’s attack. One contained a photograph of Makiko sitting cross-legged in loose shorts. Another showed Kiyotaka and Mondo back-to-back wearing dresses, the former’s white and the latter’s black. Another had two people Makoto didn’t recognise - a blond boy with glasses standing beside a girl with braids. The last one Makoto could examine was of Mukuro in the green outfit he remembered her wearing in his dream.

All these pages were soon punctured with holes from an unfazed Kyouko. She aimed at the magazine witch itself and fired until it crumpled to the floor.

They appeared back in the warehouse. Makiko continued squatting, sobs wracking her body.

Makoto stepped toward her but groaning distracted him. The man who had been controlled by the witch had awoken outside, visible through the gap in the ajar door of the warehouse. After surveying the area, the man shook his head at what he found and stumbled away.

When Makoto returned his attention to Makiko, she had buried her face into Kyouko’s shoulder.

Kyouko hugged her closer.

“Those pages...” Makoto wet his lips with his tongue. “What were they? What did they mean?”

“It... It knew!” Makiko wheezed. “How... did it know about that?” She flung herself backward, eyes puffy. “That witch...! It...!” She tucked her legs against her chest and clutched her head, cheeks glistening. “W-Why... did it know?”

“Mind-reading,” Kyouko said. “It unearthed memories and intended to use them to drive us into despair.”
Makoto turned his head. “Does that mean... when you attacked it...?”

“You mean those images that appeared?” Kyouko hooked a thumb beneath her chin. “Some may have been from my future... but that’s not important right now.” She touched her palm against the back of Makiko’s hand. “Kabi-san...”

Makiko’s shoulders quaked. “Please... don’t call me that... I don’t want to lie anymore. I’m not... I’m not Makiko Kabi...”

Makoto’s skin prickled.

Kyouko watched with half-lidded eyes.

“I guess... it’s time I told you both what I wished for.” Makiko swallowed. She curled her fingers inward and disheveled her hair even more. “I was called Sayaka Maizono... until she died eight years ago. Until I died eight years ago...”

“Eight years?” Makoto shifted a foot back. “How is that even possible? You’re a high school student like us, aren’t you?”

“I was more than that.” Makiko lifted her face from her knees. “I was also the lead singer in one of Japan’s most popular idol groups. It was a dream come true for me. Growing up, I only ever had my father. But he finished work late, every day, so I was raised by idol shows on television... They stopped me from getting lonely. Those girls inspired me to become like them, giving strength to other people like they gave me strength. I was just like them. I was happy. But then I realised... what about when I got too old? What would I do?” Her expression hardened. “Then I met Monobear. They offered me anything in the world in exchange for my services, and I chose for me and my band members to be able to keep doing this forever. So...”

“You stopped aging,” Kyouko said.

Makiko nodded. “At first things seemed like they would be okay. I juggled performances with hunting witches. People complimented us on our youthfulness, wanting to know our secrets... One day, I confessed everything to my fellow idols. I couldn’t keep lying about where I disappeared off to. I thought they would understand but... they didn’t take it well. They... couldn’t... live with it...”

Makoto widened his eyes.

She hugged her legs closer to her chest. “They... Weeks after I told them... they killed themselves.”

Fresh tears pricked the corner of her eyes and she hid her face in her knees once more. “And I was too cowardly to do the same so... so I faked my own death! I changed my name, my appearance... I moved to a different city whenever I thought I overstayed my welcome. I made it my purpose to save people from despair by hunting witches before they could hurt anybody... so I could maybe still make a difference... e-even if no one knew...” Her breathing hitched. “But I want people to know. I’m selfish, aren’t I?”

Makoto tiptoed over and joined Makiko - no - Sayaka Maizono on the floor.

“Ka- Maizono-san,” he said with a lump in his throat. “What you did... wasn’t cowardly. It takes a lot of strength to keep living, especially after going through what you did. You’re incredible. One of the most incredible people I know.”

Sayaka revealed her face.

“When I think of a wish,” he said, “I would be honoured to fight alongside you and Kirigiri-san.”
“I... would like that,” said Sayaka. She dabbed at her eyes. “I... would like that a lot...”

Monobear popped up beside Kyouko. “Upupupu. Are you seeing what I’m seeing, Kirigiri-san? Is that a romance flag I’m seeing?”

Kyouko balled her hands into fists.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

"I’m not afraid of anything anymore."

I'm sure everyone guessed Makiko was Sayaka but here are some fun facts. Sayaka Maizono is voiced by Makiko Ohmoto, who also voices Kirby (Kābī).
Makoto often slept in when he didn’t have classes on a Saturday. He liked waking up due to rays of light gradually pouring through his window as opposed to the shrill ringing of his alarm clock. A period of tranquility existed on these occasions, starting from when he became aware of his closed eyes to when he drew back his bed covers and swung himself up and around into a sitting position.

Indeed, he would have slept in on this particular Saturday morning had Sayaka not asked him if he wanted to go out with her and Kyouko in the afternoon - an invitation he accepted with alacrity. Not just because he wanted to hunt witches with them but also because he wanted to check on Sayaka. The three didn’t part in the best of spirits after Sayaka’s revelation and he needed to know how she had been holding up since then.

Deciding to attend to his studies prior to this arranged outing, Makoto set his alarm clock to wake him up earlier than usual. But rather than rise from bed immediately, he peered at the ceiling and picked up from where he left off last night in regards to ruminating the past week’s happenings.

He started high school. Okay. He made friends. Great. On his way home from school on the first day, he was attacked by a witch and her henchmen. Not so great. Makiko Kabi saved him and revealed herself to be a magical girl as did Kyouko Kirigiri. Now he was caught up in... something. Him and Sayaka and Kyouko.

Kyouko...

Mukuro’s warning wafted through him and her piercing eyes resurfaced from the recesses of his mind.

‘Don’t you think it looks suspicious?’

Yes. Makoto’s bedsheets bunched up in his clenched fists. It did. No longer wishing to think about it for the time being, he rolled out of bed.

Makoto’s mother flinched upon hearing the kitchen door open. Her shoulders lowered when she realised it was only her son and she let out a sigh. Komaru was still asleep and his father already left for work, leaving just the two of them in the kitchen.

He seated himself at the table.

“You’ll have to wait a bit for breakfast,” his mother apologised. She placed a pot of green tea in front of him.

Makoto watched the pot’s steamy breath, leaning forward so its warmth hugged the underside of his chin.

“I didn’t expect either of you to be up until later,” she added, fetching clean cups. “Do you have plans for today?”

“Yeah.” Makoto adjusted the angle he had his neck stretched out at. “I’m going out with Kabi-san and a few other friends and thought I’d do my homework first.”
‘Few other friends’ being Kyouko and Monobear, but he didn’t know whether they fitted into this category. Monobear was Monobear and as for Kyouko... she seemed like his friend but the last battle added more misgivings onto those from Mukuro. He couldn’t help but be sceptical that the images he saw during their previous battle weren’t from Kyouko’s future like she claimed. But with no other explanation coming to mind, he could only believe her to be right. For all he had seen of the witches and magical girls, foreseeing future events wouldn’t be too out of place.

Even if he hadn’t seen any of Sayaka’s future.

What he witnessed raised other implications. If Kyouko told him the truth about the origins of her images, that meant Kiyotaka and Mondo would become magical girls at some point. Assuming they hadn’t already. He didn’t know how to feel about that.

“Again?” said his mother.

It took Makoto a moment to realise she was responding to what he just told her about his plans for later that day. He nodded.

She shook her head with a smile, turning away to continue preparing breakfast. “I’m not complaining if you’re keeping up with school and staying out of trouble, but don’t forget the family you have at home.”

Both chuckled. He poured some tea into his cup and sipped.

Family... that aspect of a magical girl’s life hadn’t crossed his mind until then. Or at least not as much as now, with him drinking tea in the safety of his kitchen. Sayaka mentioned she lived with her father and Kyouko hadn’t spoken of her family. He wondered how those sorts of relationships fit into their worlds, assuming they even did. Keeping his own family oblivious to his role as an onlooker was hard enough... he couldn’t imagine the difficulty his friends faced keeping their direct involvement a secret.

Komaru bounded in, slumping down onto the chair next to him and chattering about how the brother of a girl in her class recently got a tattoo. Makoto only caught a few words, too invested in stewing in his own thoughts to give attention to hers.

Breakfast proceeded as usual and he promptly retired into his room once finished. After he completed his homework, he still had time to spare so he reread some of his manga collection. All of it was mainstream, most of them recommendations from his junior high school friends. Since starting high school, he had yet to meet up with them again. Probably, like him, they were too busy.

Hopefully they hadn’t been caught up in the world of magical girls. Although he enjoyed his own immersion in it, it would be better if they remained ignorant.

They were probably fine. There couldn’t be too many magical girls.

His mother called for him from the bottom of the stairs after he spent an hour lying on his stomach engrossed in manga. Not bothering to finish the page he was reading, he cast the magazine aside and hurried to the front door.

Both Sayaka and Kyouko greeted him, the former waving while the latter inclined her head. Now it was the weekend, both wore casual clothes rather than their predominantly brown uniform.

Sayaka’s attire consisted of a cream dress that flared out at the hem and a belt located at her waist. Kyouko opted for a purple jacket and a checkered skirt. Compared to them, he felt underdressed in
his hoodie and favourite pair of jeans. But neither seemed bothered so he decided not to be as well.

His mother pecked him on the side of his face as he stepped out of the house. She wished them a good day and closed the door once all three left the garden.

Several minutes passed before his cheeks cooled. The mortification of his mother kissing him farewell in the presence of his two friends lingered longer.

“Where are we starting our search?” he asked once they set off down the street, Sayaka walking abreast while Kyouko followed from behind.

“Actually,” Sayaka raised a hand to her chin, “Kirigiri-san proposed we take some time off to relax and just hang out as friends. You don’t mind, do you?” Her forehead creased. “After what happened... yesterday, we thought we could recover and be normal teenagers for a day.”

“I don’t mind at all.” Makoto shrugged. “So where are we going instead?”

Sayaka smiled. “I’m glad you’re fine with it.” Although her forehead remained creased, it was with a different emotion than before. “I thought we could go to the arcade and then have a picnic in the park.” She raised the arm furthest from him to show off the wicker basket hanging from the nook of her elbow. “We can all eat together. So what sort of games do you think there will be? I’ve never been to an arcade before but they have dance machines, don’t they? I’d like to have a shot on one of them.” She glanced over her shoulder. “What about you, Kirigiri-san?”

Makoto listened only somewhat attentively to Kyouko so he could better admire Sayaka’s demeanour. It seemed despite what transpired with the last witch, she more or less returned to heightened spirits. He grinned.

Clouds were abundant in the sky but pale with no obvious signs of rain. Optimal conditions for a picnic although he had not partook in enough to trust his judgement on such a thing. All he knew for certain was he wouldn’t mind being outside in such a climate for an extended length of time. Nonetheless, they took the bus to the arcade rather than travel on foot. After they got off, they were required to walk a short distance before they arrived at their destination.

The arcade stood out from the dour buildings adjacent to it, ‘Super Adventure’ painted in bright red on the sign above the glass doors. On the sign, below ‘Super Adventure’, an image of a cowboy with a toothy grin bulged outward. Although caricatural, with its protruding chin and distinct nose and curled moustache, the way its beady eyes followed the group as they entered gave the impression it was alive and that they should not dawdle outside.

Inside, speakers boomed J-pop music and none of the three students heard the door wheeze shut behind them. Multi-coloured lights pulsed from the rows of arcade games that striped the tiled floor, many occupied by students like themselves or individuals slightly younger or far older. Explosions rang out from machines, evoking from players either cheers or moans depending on the explosion’s nature. Pockets jingled with coins as people called their friends over to vacant machines, jogging while they directed their companions over in case someone else attempted to beat them to the game.

With the vast number of genres at their disposal, and the multitude of games within each, Makoto didn’t know where to start.

Luckily Sayaka did.

“Kirigiri-san, let’s go on that one!” She grabbed Kyouko’s hand and gestured with her free hand
toward two side-by-side dance platforms no one was currently using. The arcade cabinet adjoined to the platforms flashed the title of a dance game.

Kyouko allowed herself to be towed along. “Very well, Maizono-san, but I doubt I’ll be much of a challenge. These sorts of games aren’t my forte at all...”

“It’s not about getting a high score or winning,” said Sayaka. “It’s about having fun.”

Once the girls stationed themselves onto separate platforms, Sayaka delved her hand into her pocket and inserted a 100 yen coin into the slot. She tossed Makoto the picnic basket, which he juggled then nearly dropped upon catching. She browsed through the songs and difficulty levels. The music she picked was an upbeat song he heard on the radio and one Komaru had hummed in the bathroom for a week.

Sayaka turned to Kyouko who faced her shortly after. Both nodded.

Arrows scrolled up the screen and the two girls sprung into action. Their feet slapped against the acrylic glass pads; there were four built onto each platform, all arranged so the arrows glowing on them pointed in orthogonal directions. The contrast of their adeptness at this game soon became apparent. While words such as ‘marvellous’ and ‘perfect’ cropped up around the anime girl on Sayaka’s half of the screen, Kyouko’s avatar earned mostly ‘almost’s and the sporadic ‘good’.

From what Makoto could see reflected on the screen and from what wasn’t obscured by the sheen from the arcade’s lighting, Sayaka looked like she was having the time of her life while Kyouko looked down as if contemplating a complex puzzle. Sayaka moved fluidly and gracefully, hips swaying and arms waving, and he could visualise her vividly on a stage performing to a crowd.

After four songs, the game listed their scores and asked Sayaka to input her name. The maximum character length was three so she entered ‘MOS’.

Makoto admired the leaderboard. “Maizono-san, you scored the second highest on one of the songs!”

“Impressive,” Kyouko remarked. She cupped her chin. “Your score wasn’t much lower than the person at the top: ‘S.I.H’.”

“Whoa, you knocked my score down to third place!” This comment came from a tall man that, if one viewed him from afar, it would be understandable if one mistook his silhouette for a palm tree. “Man, it took me months and you beat it just like that...”

Kyouko stepped off the platform. “Your name is Yasuhiro Hagakure, isn’t it? We’re in the same class at school.”

Yasuhiro Hagakure’s distinctive hairstyle made it hard for one not to recognise him, even if he sat at the back of their class and contributed to lessons nearly as intermittently as Mondo. His other distinctive characteristic, if it could be called that, was the crystal ball he brought out of his desk at lunchtimes and told fortunes with. At a price, of course. Even now he had it in his possession, rolling it over in his palm.

“That’s right. M'name is Yasuhiro Hagakure.” He flicked his wrist, spinning the crystal ball on the back of his hand. It toppled off and would have smashed against the floor had Kyouko not caught it.

She returned it to him.
“Thanks, Kirigiri-chi. It would suck if I broke this...” He grimaced. “It cost me a lot...”

If that was true, Makoto didn’t understand why he messed around with it in the first place.

Yasuhiro pointed at him. “And you... you’re Hajime Hinata, ‘right?’”

“No.”

“Nagito Komaeda?”

“No.”

He jabbed the air. “Shinji Ikari!”

“It’s Makoto Naegi.”

Yasuhiro, who with each guess leaned more and more forward, straightened up and grinned. “That was going to be my next guess, ‘right? All the ones before were leading up to it.”

“But... none of those names you said were similar to mine at all.”

At that, Yasuhiro laughed.

“Are you hanging out with your friends?” asked Sayaka, hands clasped together in front of her.

“Nah.” Yasuhiro scratched the back of his head. “Never had any of those. I mean I was sort of friends with Kuwata-chi but he dropped out of school. Apparently he wanted to focus on his music but my divinations tell me he went to some kind of elite school run by zoo animals.” He motioned toward himself. “I work part-time here when I’m not busy with other stuff. I mop up spillages and sometimes test out games when no one’s looking.”

Sayaka furrowed her brow. “Doesn’t our high school prohibit students from working part-time during the school term?”

Makoto was very sure their school did.

“... Maybe,” Yasuhiro admitted. “But money’s money, ‘right? I’ve got a huge debt that needs paying off and because I was held back three years, no one realises I’m a student. Don’t fix what isn’t broken, ‘right?”

“Is your debt due to your crystal ball?” Sayaka asked.

He thumped the hand not holding his crystal ball against his chest. “Sure.” He looked like he intended to carry on their conversation until a stout middle-aged man in a suit strode toward them. Yasuhiro made eye contact with the man and yelped, seizing the mop he had propped up against the arcade cabinet before introducing himself to them. He whacked the mop’s bundle of yarn against the floor as he dashed away.

A group of girls wandered over to the dance game so the three students moved away to give them room. Makoto recognised them vaguely as the girls he saw on his first day only the redheaded girl in their group was absent.

The shortest of the girls pounced onto one of the platforms, gesturing wildly for her friends to come closer. “Oi! I need an opponent! But not the fat cow because she’ll snap the platform in half with her chunky legs!”
Sayaka motioned for Kyouko and Makoto to follow her and they searched for another game.

They chose to play a light gun shooter that allowed two players to work together. Kyouko and Makoto inserted their coins while Sayaka observed from behind. This game played more to Kyouko’s strengths than the previous one and she zapped zombies with flawless accuracy. Onlookers clustered around as the pair progressed through the game.

By the time Makoto’s health bar had diminished, they were at the halfway point and Kyouko still had most of hers intact. He let Sayaka insert a coin for an extra continue and take his place. She wasn’t much better than him but she lasted until the penultimate boss. Sayaka put in another coin and aided Kyouko against the final boss - a grotesque gyaru with gravity-defying breasts that took up most of the screen.

They won. Applause broke out. Kyouko acknowledged none of it, replacing the gun into its case and slipping through a gap in the crowd. Makoto and Sayaka pursued her.

Next they played a racing game, the three sitting in a line on leather chairs as they competed in a 32-bit multiplayer race. Their avatars tore down serpentine roads, greenery flitting past as the players accelerated and threw their riders into powerslides around corners. Traffic cones and other bits of scenery blasted off their motorcycles upon collision, music beeping tunes. Of the four levels they played, each with three laps, Makoto won all but one.

While ambling past a row of games in pursuit of one that captured their attention, Sayaka spotted a claw crane.

“I’ve always wanted to win a toy from one of these,” she said, hunting for change in her pocket. She found a coin and held it to the light.

“Don’t they have a low success rate?” Makoto asked. “You’re probably better off buying a plush toy from the store.”

She pouted. “But that isn’t the same as winning one, is it?”

A counterargument didn’t spring to mind so he voiced no further objections. She inserted a coin and steered the claw with the joystick, directing it toward a pink cat plush. When she pressed the trigger button, the claw descended and caressed the plush. The claw rose, empty, and moved back to the opening in the corner of the case.

“Shoot,” she muttered under her breath. She dug her hand into her pocket, glaring at the claw crane’s glass window. Her next three attempts were equally fruitless and she gave up.

Makoto flicked one of his coins into the slot and maneuvered the crane toward the plush Sayaka attempted to procure. He succeeded on his first try and presented it to her.

“You won that for me?” She accepted it, cheeks glowing. “Thank you, Naegi-kun... I’ll treasure it forever.”

He suspected his cheeks glowed more than hers.

They agreed to have lunch after one more game which turned out to be air hockey. Yasuhiro mopped his way over and suggested they have a mini tournament.

Within six minutes, Yasuhiro and Makoto had lost to Sayaka and Kyouko respectively as well as spectacularly.
Makoto and Yasuhiro watched the final round. Sayaka and Kyouko seemed evenly matched, the puck rattling as it bounced between the table rails and the girls’ mallets.

“Does your supervisor know you’re doing this?” Makoto asked. “He didn’t look too pleased at you earlier.”

The puck slipped into Kyouko’s goal and leveled the score.

Yasuhiro visibly blanched. “H-Hey, you’re not planning on tattling on me, are you?”

“No!” Makoto waved his hands. “I... I was just wondering.”

“Good.” Yasuhiro relaxed. “I mean... it’s not like I have any messes to clean up, ‘right?” He cast his gaze back toward the girls, expression wistful. “It must be great having friends like that.”

Makoto recalled what Yasuhiro touched upon earlier. “Do you really not have any friends?” Sure, Yasuhiro seemed eccentric, but having no friends at all sounded incredibly lonely.

“Yeah...” Yasuhiro puffed air out of his mouth melodramatically. “I’ve never had anyone to talk to about my own problems. If you find people who don’t mind listening to you, Naegi-chi, you should keep them close. Usually I just help other people with their problems... I mean I’m a fortuneteller so it’s not too hard. The police even asked me for help in tracking down Genocider Syo, but all I got was he’s a fan of Edward Scissorhands and cosplays regularly. Which he might because my predictions are true sixty percent of the time.”

“Sixty?”

“It used to be thirty but then I... uh, got a hold of this crystal ball I have here.” Yasuhiro showed it to Makoto again. “I even have a prediction in place for you already, Naegi-chi. I’ll tell it to you for ninety thousand yen. That’s including the ten thousand yen discount I’m giving you for listening to everything I said just now.”

The time frame for doing such a thing seemed too small but Yasuhiro resumed speaking before Makoto could protest against the high cost.

“Heh heh...” Yasuhiro squinted at the crystal ball. “It looks like you’re going to have a run in with a billionaire soon! Man,” he ran his fingers through his dreadlocks, “I should have predicted predicting this prediction and charged more.”

Makoto hoped his prediction proved to be correct because he didn’t see how he could otherwise pay for the reading. Not that he intended on paying any of it back in the first place; it wasn’t like he entered the deal willingly.

Kyouko won. Yasuhiro wanted to play Makoto for third place but the stout man from before glanced their way so he scuttled off. Thereafter the three friends left the arcade.

They arrived at the park five minutes later. Makoto tagged along behind the girls and appreciated the landscape. Near his house was a park but it differed to the one here. This park lacked the playground equipment his neighbourhood’s park contained, instead boasting a shimmering lake girdled by a dirt path. The three friends followed this path for a while, breathing in the fresh air. On blades of grass played insect orchestras and cars rumbled in the distance.

Fairly close to the lake was a tree, its longest branches not quite reaching the proximity of the water. Sayaka placed her basket underneath the tree, opening it up and extracting from it an aqua blue tarp.
Once it had been laid down, Makoto and Kyouko removed their footwear and knelt onto it.

The shade the tree cast was subtle, making discerning the shadow’s edges a hard task. Sayaka had prepared various foods for them to enjoy - bento boxes that contained pickled plums and salmon flakes and other salty foods, packed alongside onigiri wrapped in crispy seaweed. In addition to that, there was chicken and noodles and sweets made out of bean paste and rice.

Talk pattered out as they ate and basked in the day’s faint warmth.

“I wish we could do this more often,” Sayaka finally said, much of the picnic now eaten. “It’s nice sitting here, not having to worry about witches and Grief Seeds...” She planted her hands down either side of her and reclined.

“Maizono-san,” Makoto turned toward her, “I know you made a contract to do this for the rest of your life, but I still don’t understand why you can’t retire. Your wish... didn’t really work out. It’s not fair.”

Sayaka didn’t answer straightaway, her attention on the rise and fall of the lake. “You’re right. My wish didn’t work out the way I expected, but... I can’t say it didn’t work out at all. It’s because of my wish I met the two of you and everyone else, and it’s because of my wish I can continue saving people.”

Makoto looked down, reluctant to voice the implications of her wish.

“It’s not ideal,” Sayaka admitted, wincing slightly. “I mean you can spend the rest of your lives with me while I can’t do the same... but I don’t think you will ever leave me. You’ve already imprinted on my heart.” She blushed and covered her mouth with her palm. “Gosh, that sounds corny, doesn’t it?”

“No at all!” Makoto’s hands thrashed around. “You’re right, we won’t ever leave you completely. But how did you know I was thinking about that just now?”

“I’m an esper.” She caught sight of his face and giggled, flapping a hand in his direction. “I’m joking, of course. I have good intuitions. But I’m serious.” Her face turned sombre. “I’m going to miss you a lot. But I’ll definitely keep you with me even when I meet new people.”

Kyouko, who had been listening, smiled. “I’m sure you will until the very end.”

Sayaka reached her arms out toward the other two. “Here.” She balled her hands into fists and extended out her little fingers. “Let’s promise right now that we’ll get through all of this together. Let’s promise to stay friends.”

Makoto and Kyouko hooked a little finger around hers.

“And you two as well. You should both promise each other.”

They did so, completing the circle.

“We’ll have to go back to hunting witches tomorrow,” said Sayaka, “but I won’t forget today. With you two by my side... I’m not afraid of anything anymore.”

Chapter End Notes
Next time:

"I'm sorry."
The next day, Makoto answered the front door to Sayaka who greeted him with her usual smile and twitch of the hand. Outside had begun to darken, clouds tinting the sky various shades of blue and grey. In the distance was an orange glow that faded into a dull gradient.

“It’s just the two of us for now. Kirigiri-san and I came across a witch on our way here,” Sayaka explained, pulling at her sleeves so they covered more skin. Once she satisfied herself with their positioning, she raised her chin. “She offered to stay behind while I went on ahead to fetch you.”

Makoto nodded at her before glancing over his shoulder. “I’m going out for a while with Kabi-san!”

“Be back before nine,” came his mother’s voice.

Sayaka stepped to the side to let Makoto out and waited for him to close the door. “A few of the girls in our class had a sleepover at my place last night,” she said, turning right once they left the garden with Makoto following alongside her. She counted along her fingers. “There were five of us. Me, Kirigiri-san, Ikusaba-san and Oogami-san and Asahina-san. I’ve always wanted to style Oogami-san’s hair; it’s so pretty. And those two are really nice. They even invited me to jog with them every morning. Anyway...” While she described what happened at the sleepover, she flicked her wrist in various directions. “We did each other’s makeup, had a fashion show... and we even discussed boys.”

A coy smile developed on her lips.

“Naegi-kun,” she said, “this might seem out of the blue but... do you have a girlfriend? Or anyone that you like?”

Her narration had sent his mind into repose but the last two questions pulled him out of it. He flinched. “N-No!” He scratched the back of his neck. “I mean... not yet, anyway. Why do you ask?”

She shrugged, facing forward again. “I was just curious. I’m sorry for startling you with a sudden question like that. My lifestyle has always meant I can’t do things like dating. It’s only natural I want to know whether a friend has their eye on someone, isn’t it? All I know about this kind of thing is from books... Touko Fukawa’s are my favourite. She’s a fantastic writer.”

Ah. So Sayaka asked because of curiosity.

Neither spoke for a while. They passed a streetlamp. Its glow reminded Makoto of a Soul Gem.

“Well?” Sayaka hunched up her shoulders and moved closer to him, nudging Makoto with her elbow. “Aren’t you going to ask me if there’s someone I like? Just because I’ve needed to repress those kinds of emotions, doesn’t mean I’ve been able to stop myself liking people... All I can do is put on a mask.”

Part of him wanted to know yet another part didn’t.

He opened his mouth.
Sayaka’s Soul Gem pulsed light.

“Hm?” She stopped. They had arrived at the entrance of a park. “There’s a witch here. Kirigiri-san will have to wait. I’m sure she can handle things by herself. She’s a strong girl, after all.”

Makoto had frequented this park in his youth but as he and Komaru grew older, their visits dwindled. In his childhood, it had been popular with young children and families, but a gang of teenagers and drunkards soon made it their territory. The last time he had been there with a friend, many teenagers haunted the swing sets and climbing tower. Although they never directly communicated to him, they whispered and pointed and laughed as they stubbed out their cigarettes on the peeling paint of the equipment. They breathed out either smoke or condensation while they objectified women when not discussing other vulgar topics.

The difference between the reality of the park and what Makoto saw through nostalgia goggles was stark. What was a sandpit now only contained wood chippings. Where the roundabout had been, which on more than one occasion had flung him off because he let go of the bar and rewarded him with grazed knees only a mother’s kiss could heal, was the opening of a steel pipe embedded in the ground. As he and Sayaka cautiously advanced, Makoto alternated between searching for the witch’s portal and comparing his memories to the present. It shouldn’t have mattered that the park changed overtime. He no longer bothered with the place, but it nonetheless tugged at something tight in his stomach.

“It’s close...” Sayaka squinted. “Huh?”

A group of five men loitered by a nearby swing set, their facial features lit up by the cigarette lighters in their hands like how Sayaka’s Soul Gem brightened the students’ faces. Although it wasn’t too dark, fog had settled across the area and made smaller details harder to distinguish. Each man wore an oversized coat and stood in a loose circle around a pile of branches mixed in with other waste. Whatever the other waste was, its stench stung Makoto’s eyes.

They seemed distracted so he thought he and Sayaka could sneak past, but then the men turned away from the branches and leered at the teenagers instead. Most likely, they heard footsteps approaching or Sayaka’s exclamation or both.

One man broke away from the others and swaggered toward Sayaka and Makoto.

Sayaka tightened her grip on her Soul Gem.

“Ain’t it a bit late feh pretty thin’s like yeh teh be out?” The contents of the bottle in the man’s fist sloshed. “Ain’t yous got a mummy an’ a daddy back home wonderin’ were yous are?”

Makoto said nothing. Neither did Sayaka.

The man bared his teeth into a grin that made Makoto’s skin crawl. “Nos matter. We’ll... We’ll take goods care o’ yeh... None o’ us gots nobody... Come stay wid us an’ we’ll go to a beddah place... where we won’t ‘ave teh to worry ‘bout makin’ money or bein’ what so-titty wants us teh be...”

“His neck,” Sayaka whispered, pointing.

On the man’s neck was a small flower shape. A witch’s kiss.

When the other men staggered over, Makoto realised they all possessed one. The men extended their arms forward and charged forward like zombies, their heads rolling back. Their eyes glinted almost as much as the bottles in their fists.
One whipped out a knife.

“Naegi-kun.” Sayaka shunted one foot back and bent forward. “I’ll need some space.”

He took a step back.

She transformed in a pink flash and created a large frying pan, which she positioned directly ahead of them.

The men crashed into it and floundered, slapping her shield as they blindly sought for a way through.

While they were distracted with this new obstacle, she pulled out from underneath her skirt a smaller frying pan. “I’m going to knock them out so they can’t hurt anyone or themselves. As soon as I’ve done that, we’ll go defeat the witch together.” Sayaka threw Makoto a reassuring smile and dodged around the large frying pan.

Makoto couldn’t see what was going on. He could only hear howls of pain and metal hitting skin and skin hitting skin and metal hitting metal. Instincts told him to run out and help her, but he trusted Sayaka to deal with it by herself.

Besides, what help could be provide? He wasn’t a magical girl like Sayaka. He didn’t have super strength or magic powers. Makoto Naegi was a regular high school student with nothing outstanding about him.

The fog intensified. At first he dismissed it as his imagination only for the fog to become too opaque to be fictitious. Even the noises from the fight grew muffled, developing into mumbles and thuds until all he could hear was his heavy breathing and pounding heart.

What happened? Had he... entered the witch’s barrier? Without Sayaka?

His idea not to wander off so she could find him easily was disregarded when from either side of him sprouted flowers. They didn’t seem organic but looked like they had been cut out of paper. They stepped out of the ground with flat roots and two-dimensional bodies, hand drawn dot eyes and curved line smiles bordered by confetti petals. These flowers flocked toward him, their leaf arms creating a prolonged warble with their flapping.

Before they could crowd around close enough to prevent him from escaping, Makoto darted through a gap between two flowers and ran.

And ran and ran and ran.

And the flowers tottered after him.

The fog thinned as Makoto progressed deeper into the barrier. Either side of the path danced flowers that were interspersed by seashells and silver bells like in the nursery rhyme. Overhead, the sky became more saturated and the dirt path opened up into a flat lime green terrain with a hill at the far back.


Makoto backed away from them and stepped into the green terrain. When he first saw it, he assumed it was covered in short blades of grass, but he had been mistaken. Beneath his sneakers,
the floor squelched and bounced. It reminded him of a wet trampoline.

“S-Stay back!” He raised his fists and hoped they wouldn’t call his bluff.

The paper dolls continued pursuing him. Makoto spun around and jogged away from them. Spikes lined the enclosure’s edges like a fence made of crocodile teeth and quashed any chance of escaping through them. Beyond the spikes was a forest with trees which had crooked witch finger branches and hollowed eye sockets, so he would have most likely got lost even if he could pass through the spikes. He looked up. From the distance, he had thought there to be a hill at the far end, but up close he could see it was actually a flap attached to the ground.

And when he studied the ground, he noticed there were single blades of grass dotted around.

No. They weren’t blades of grass - they were hairs. Dark hairs.

And this wasn’t ground at all.

He walked into a venus flytrap.

Before he could react, the paper dolls dragged their legs across several of the plant’s hairs.

In one of his classes, years ago, Makoto’s teacher presented to him and his peers a venus flytrap. Everyone had been eager to feed it. Their teacher informed them that to trigger the plant into shutting its leaves, one needed to touch two of the hairs on its inner surfaces within half a minute.

Maybe he should have paid more attention in class.

The flap swooped downward.

Makoto braced himself. If only he had been a magical girl, able to fight... able to defend himself... able to save himself...

Roaring ripped him out his thoughts and out of the venus flytrap. Something seized his hood and jerked his head back. His feet lifted from the ground.

He had scrunched his eyes shut as soon as he saw the venus flytrap start to close and he opened them again five seconds later.

Below him was the shut venus flytrap. The upper leaf tilted back so it rested against a solid blue wall, revealing the familiars that had followed him into its mouth. They squealed and melted away.

That would have been his fate had it not been for... for...?

“You a’ight?” came a familiar voice from just above him.

Makoto jerked his head back so he could look up. “O-Oowada-kun?”

Somewhat recovered from his near-death experience, Makoto soaked in the situation. He was sandwiched between Mondo’s arm and side with his neck beneath Mondo’s armpit. Next he noticed that they were on a motorcycle. A flying motorcycle.

Mondo turned the motorcycle around and put more distance between them and the venus flytrap. Upon feeling Makoto squirm, he set Makoto down behind him.

The motorcycle purred, its seat vibrating.
“Y-You’re,” Makoto’s gaze flicked up and down several times, “a magical girl?”

“I ain’t a girl but yeah.” Mondo twisted his grip on the handlebars. The motorcycle hummed louder. “I’ve been one for a few days. Ain’t had too much experience. See this?” He raised his fist. On the back of his hand was a diamond-shaped Soul Gem much dirtier than Sayaka’s; within it swirled a mould-like substance. “The darker it is, the more impure it is or something. I need to get hold of a Grief Seed... that’s what that fucking bear told me...”

“Monobear?”

“Yeah.” Mondo narrowed his eyes and snarled. “Hey, you’re not a magical girl, are you? Why did you come here without transforming?” He barked the next sentence. “You trying to get killed?”

Makoto waved his hands in protest, wobbling and nearly tipping off sideways. He caught himself and became upright again, gingerly holding onto Mondo’s coat.

“I’m... I’m not a magical girl,” Makoto replied, digging his fingers into Mondo’s coat. His coat was black with a golden motif on the back made up of diamonds that all rotated around a single point. Sort of like a flower. Around this shape were two circles that overlapped slightly with the emblem's furthest outer points. “Maizo-! I mean, Kabi-san and Kirigiri-san are though. Magical girls.”

Mondo’s eyebrows pinched together. “They are?”

“Y-Yeah. I came here by accident after I got separated from Kabi-san.” Makoto wasn’t sure whether he should have revealed any of that but it was too late to take it back. “I’m still trying to think of a wish...”

“Wish?” If Mondo squeezed the handlebars much tighter, there was a good chance he would fracture them. His face contorted into a scowl. “You’ve got a good life, haven’t you? You’ve got a nice family and a nice house and friends... that’s why you can’t think of anything. Why the hell would you want to throw all that away when you’re fine as you are? You wanna be a fucking martyr or something?”

Makoto’s mind went blank. “I... I don’t... No, I mean-”

“Kyoudai, may I suggest you not rile yourself up over such things?” a familiar voice called out from below. “I don’t want you developing wrinkles prematurely!”

Makoto craned his neck to the side and peered down. “Ishimaru-kun?”

Suspended in the air upside down was indeed Kiyotaka. He saluted. “Good evening, Naegi-kun!”

Both of them were magical girls like in the magazine witch’s photographs after Kyouko attacked it. And from what he remembered, the outfits they were wearing matched what they wore in the pictures. Kiyotaka had on a white gakuran jacket, the shoulders golden and the buttons at the front leading down from the standing collar also golden. Below that he wore a white skirt that finished at his knees - the skirt was currently being pressed against Kiyotaka’s thighs with one hand.

Just as Makoto took in Kiyotaka’s appearance, Kiyotaka swung himself around and up. His laces, which had stretched out to attach him to the bottom of Mondo’s motorcycle, relaxed and snapped back toward his black lace up boots. He flew over the other two students and landed onto the motorcycle’s top box at the back.

Makoto looked from Kiyotaka to Mondo and then back to Kiyotaka again. “... What?”
“I overheard your conversation with Kyoudai.” Kiyotaka held his hands behind his back and puffed out his chest. “While I apologise for eavesdropping, I suggest you lower your voices next time you want to discuss private matters!”

“It’s okay, Kyoudai,” Mondo said. “Anything Naegi says to me he can say in front of you.”

Kiyotaka noticed Makoto’s confusion and laughed heartily. “You will catch more flies than that witch over there, Naegi-kun. If you are wondering about the banter between Kyoudai and I, do not be alarmed! When I delivered the schoolwork he missed, we conversed for a while and realised we are not so different after all. And where we are different, we fit together like a puzzle!”

“Nice one!” Mondo gave him a thumbs up.

Kiyotaka beamed.

“I should get that tattooed somewhere,” said Mondo.

“No, Kyoudai! Your body is a precious gift from your parents! We can get it printed on a jacket. You can have the first half of the sentence on the back of yours and I can have the second half on the back of mine! Then when we’re together, we will complete each other’s-”

“- sentences!”

“Yes! Ha ha!” Kiyotaka splayed out his fingers. “That is too funny, Kyoudai!”

“I hate to interrupt,” said Makoto, “but shouldn’t you be dealing with that witch?” He pointed at the still alive witch.

If Sayaka had been here, she would have already dealt with it. Speaking of which, she still hadn’t arrived. Those men inflicted with the witch’s kiss shouldn’t have posed too much of a threat to her. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach and he embraced Mondo tighter.

“Yeah.” Mondo stooped. “You’ll wanna hold on real tight.”

Before Makoto thought to ask why, the front of the motorcycle dipped and they blasted toward the venus flytrap witch.

Mondo shoved his hands into the other arms’ sleeves and pulled out two sledgehammers. He threw them at the venus flytrap witch’s inner surface and activated the hair triggers so the leaves would slam shut.

The motorcycle roared louder than its driver, but neither’s volume compared to the crunch of the vehicle impacting their opponent. Makoto buried his face into Mondo’s back and did not look up until they punctured both leaves and made it to the other side.

Once through, Mondo turned around and gave a thumbs up.

Makoto felt like vomiting.

“Let’s do this!” Mondo shouted at Kiyotaka, who had jumped off when they collided with the venus flytrap witch and whose face could be seen through the shrinking hole the motorcycle created.

Nodding curtly, Kiyotaka’s head whipped out of sight and Mondo drove the motorcycle up through the hole so he and Makoto had a birdseye view of the scene.
Kiyotaka sprinted across the outer surface of the top leaf, his route sharply steepening upward as the top leaf tilted toward him. Stumbling, he hitched up his skirt with one hand. He retrieved from inside one of his boots a katana longer than his footwear. A lot longer - when he pulled all of it out, it stood at a greater height than he did.

Upon reaching the edge of the upper leaf, he swung his katana forward and slashed through it and the leaf below.

Both leaves reared back and slapped together. Kiyotaka ripped through them and split the witch in half down the middle. He followed his katana’s descent through the stem.

A field of grass lay beneath the venus flytrap witch. Flowers grew on it in clusters of three - Makoto recognised some to be roses, other tulips and daisies and his gardening knowledge went no further. By the time Kiyotaka arrived at this field and sliced all the way through the witch, Mondo and Makoto had parked the motorcycle nearby. Kiyotaka chopped down the witch, katana cutting through the bottom of the stem, and the witch toppled over.

Their surroundings melted away and they appeared back in the play area.

“Shit, there’s no Grief Seed this time.” Mondo stepped off his motorcycle. It disappeared when Makoto got off after him. He scratched his head and pulled a face. “Shit.”

“Here.” Kiyotaka plucked a Grief Seed out of his chest pocket and pressed it into Mondo’s palm. “I’ve been saving this for emergencies and I consider your well-being one of utmost importance!”

Mondo seemed flustered and flattered. Mostly flustered. “You...You really think that about me?”

“All life is important!” Kiyotaka replied earnestly. “As I told you yesterday, Kyoudai, everyone has the potential to make a positive impact if they have the drive. And I know you do, even if it’s for something I’m not well-acquainted with.” He hung his head, ends of his mouth drooping. “If I fully knew the importance of hard work before, I might not have so hastily used my wish on my grandfather...”

“Wait,” Makoto said. “You wished your grandfather...?”

“...To be prime minister again, yes.” Kiyotaka clenched his fists. “He is a genius and I thought given the chance, he could win everyone back onto his side and make society a better place. I wished for someone else to be found guilty of his previous actions that led to his resignation. Even now, it disgusts me how I passed the blame to an innocent man. But I thought my grandfather would bring honour to our family name and improve our country... but he still didn’t understand the value of hard work nor how to connect to the people who depended on him. None of my family have been able to get a word out of him and he’s amounted a lot of debts which we may not pay off in this lifetime.”

While Sayaka struggled to admit her wish, and Kyouko refused to disclose hers at all, Kiyotaka told his willingly. A wish many would find shameful or deceitful. Rather than keep such humiliation secret, he wore it like the medal he wore on his chest in his magical girl attire.

“Naegi-kun.” Kiyotaka rested his hand onto Makoto’s shoulder and made eye contact. “My family’s income was barely enough to get by with. I was desperate and sought a way out. For all the natural talent the rest of my family has, it can’t substitute hard work which can take the most ordinary of people to great heights. Please do not make a wish on a whim. You must make your wish because your life calls for it.”
As in Sayaka’s situation, Kiyotaka had felt it to be his only option... which worried Makoto. Had this been what Kyouko meant? And what of Mukuro, who he had been led to believe would become a magical girl at some point in the future? Was she destined to go down the path of a magical girl, who dedicated their life to a wish they believed to be of equal value?

“Hey.” Mondo folded his arms over his chest. “Naegi... didn’t you say that girl was dealing with some guys back here? Kabi, right?”

Groaning resonated from nearby. Beside the swings, lying on the rubber mulch, were the five men. They sat up one by one, rubbing their unsullied necks. Going by the cuts and bruises Makoto could make out in the darkness, Sayaka did a sufficient job knocking them out.

“Huh?” He counted the figures again. Five. Only five. “Where’s... Where is Kabi-san?” Makoto stared at Kiyotaka and Mondo. “Before I got sucked into the witch’s barrier, Kabi-san was here. She fought these guys off and was going to go after the witch.”

“Kabi?” Mondo glanced at Kiyotaka who was just as mystified. “We didn’t see her when we got here... We didn’t even notice those guys so they must have been knocked out way before we arrived.”

Kiyotaka nodded in agreement.

“And if she went into the witch’s barrier, she should be here too.” Mondo hesitated. “Unless...”

“Unless what?” Makoto asked.

“Unless,” Mondo didn’t meet his eye, “she died in the barrier. That’s what Monobear said would happen when I asked him...”

Makoto stepped back. “No!” His gaze darted between Mondo’s and Kiyotaka’s expressions in a vain attempt to uncover the joke behind such an answer. “Kabi-san... can’t be dead...”

“Naegi-kun.” Kyouko slouched against a nearby climbing tower. She looked directly at Makoto when she spoke. “Oowada-kun is incorrect that this witch killed her, but it’s highly likely she is dead because of another. I’m sorry.”

He couldn’t process what she just told him. Or if he could, his brain refused to accept it as truth. As reality. But Makoto couldn’t think of another reason why Sayaka would abandon him like that... then again, the reason Kyouko put forth made no sense either.

Kyouko strode over and he barely noticed she was wearing her magical girl outfit. “You should go home. I’ll take care of the witch that killed Kabi-san. There isn’t anything you can do for her except keep safe... That’s what she would have wanted.”

No. Sayaka wanted them to fight together. She wanted to fight with Makoto by her side. She didn’t want to be alone anymore.

“Go... home?” The corners of Makoto’s vision blurred. “I... I can’t just go home when Kabi-san needs us!” His voice cracked. “Take me to her now!”

Kyouko’s stoic expression didn’t so much as wobble.

Mondo scraped his foot forward. “I don’t hit girls but if you’re not gonna act like a human then that won’t be an issue.” He cracked his knuckles. “What the hell are you talking about?”
“We’re wasting time.” She headed toward the park gate. Behind her, the postures of the three males slackened in surprise. “If you wish to follow me, I won’t stop you. The witch is in this area.”

Mondo raised his fist, deliberating, but lowered it when Kiyotaka cupped a palm over his knuckles. Gritting his teeth, Mondo dropped his arm to his side and trailed after her. Makoto and Kiyotaka lagged behind them, the former’s thoughts weighing him down while the latter meant to keep him company.

Kyouko had to be wrong. Sayaka... couldn’t be... not with her skill and passion. For her to be defeated by a witch... to be defeated at all... no. No.

“Naegi-kun.” Kiyotaka kept his voice hushed. “There is still hope. Kirigiri-kun can’t know for certain that Kabi-kun has been killed. It’s impossible for her to know what the future holds... she isn’t a soothsayer.”

Makoto answered with a grunt.

True to Kyouko’s word, the witch’s barrier was located nearby. Kyouko’s Soul Gem pulsed light and a portal appeared on the storefront of a closed down music shop. This portal hung in the air as a fireball that Makoto expected to scorch them when they leaped through, but they made it to the other side unharmed.

After Makoto landed onto solid ground, the room lit up to reveal a narrow hallway. Instead of originating from a lamp above their heads, the light came from a line of ground lights that led all the along the floor.

Fronting the group was Kyouko and they sprinted to the other side. She extracted from her holster a pistol.

Kiyotaka got out a regular size katana from his boot while Mondo pulled a sledgehammer out of his sleeve.

They came to a curtained doorway. Kyouko pushed it aside and slipped through.

Behind the curtain was an outdoor sports coliseum. Hundreds of baseball bats and noh masks with smokey bodies cheered from the seats situated at the coliseum’s circumference. Music notes floated up from crowd, popping into existence as they chanted ‘dream!’ over and over again. These notes danced in the air above their heads, setting aflame after a few seconds and raining ash. Dotted here and there among them were banners that had painted on them ‘Chase! Chase the stars!’.

And with her back to the curtained doorway, standing in the middle of the field encompassed by rows upon rows of seats, stood Sayaka Maizono.

“Kabi-san!” Makoto reached forward.

Kyouko flung out her arm and he stumbled into it.

He clenched his jacket, his hand over his heart. Seeing Sayaka lightened the weight in his chest to the point that he thought he could almost fly over to her. “She... alive!”

Kiyotaka laughed. “I told you, Naegi-kun! We made it in the nick of time!”

“No.” Kyouko bowed her head forward so no one could see her eyes. “We’re too late.”

“Too late?” Makoto’s smile wavered. “What do you... mean?”
“Look.”

Only then did he realise Sayaka wasn’t wearing her magical girl outfit but what she wore when she met him at his house. Makoto ducked under Kyouko’s arm and raced toward Sayaka. His heart thudded louder than his footsteps and when he was close enough, he grabbed her shoulder.

She didn’t react.

“Kabi-san?” He circled Sayaka, stopping abruptly at the sight of her face.

Embedded in her head was a knife that stained her porcelain skin with blood. It stained his vision with blood too. She looked as though she fell asleep with her eyes open.

“M-Maizono-san?” Nausea swiftly consumed the transient relief in Makoto’s stomach. He wrenched his hand off her shoulder. “W-W-W-?” He crumpled to his knees, glimpsing the combat knives pinning her feet to the ground.

“Naegi-kun!” Kiyotaka skidded to a halt behind Sayaka. He stepped in front of her and followed Makoto’s gaze. He flinched. “K-Kabi-kun...?” The colour drained from his complexion. “She’s-!”

Anything else Kiyotaka may have said was drowned out by Makoto’s screams. Kyouko and Mondo rushed over but Makoto didn’t care. All he knew was that Sayaka had a knife lodged in her head where she wore her Soul Gem and that her eyes only reflected her surroundings. They perceived nothing.

“She’s... dead?” Mondo paled. “What... the hell... happened?” He searched Kiyotaka’s and Kyouko’s faces, unable to fix his eyes on one of them for very long. His body trembled slightly and he gulped, steadying his voice but failing to reign in the slither of vexation in his tone. “Whoever did this... is gonna pay... I’ll make sure the bastard pays for it!”

The ground quaked. They steadied their stances, watching chunks of dirt spew out of a crack forming ahead of them that rapidly increased in size. From this opening emerged a baseball pitching machine that heaved itself out of the ground with its spider-like legs.

A spotlight beamed down. The audience in the stands applauded.

Kyouko aimed her pistol at the tube of baseballs attached to the witch. “Whatever you do, don’t throw anything into where it shoots out balls.”

“Really?” Lines formed across Mondo’s forehead. He still seemed a bit stunned at the turn of events, but he took a deep breath and readied himself for the oncoming battle by shaking his body. “I thought that would have been its weak spot. Like you throw something inside it and it messes up the witch’s insides.”

“That is the weak spot though not if you throw anything into it. If you do, it will regurgitate it back.”

“Like it did to Kabi?”

“If you attempt to use close quarters combat, it will shoot its balls at you... and those are deadly.” Kyouko eyed the witch and flexed her fingers. “We need to destroy its tube of balls without getting hit before we can target its weak spot. Ishimaru-kun, take out its legs. I’ll destroy its balls container. Oowada-kun, you then need to use your sledgehammer on it.”

“What about Naegi-kun?” Kiyotaka asked, casting Makoto a worried look. “Will he be safe if we
leave him unattended?"

“Yes. Let’s go. Now!”

Makoto heard them speed off. He doubled over and slammed his palms into the ground. Tears smudged his vision, dripping off his eyelashes and splattering against pulverized granite.

Sayaka died. He’d never see her smile or hear her laugh again. What had his last words to her been? Something about him not having a girlfriend yet - an unresolved conversation that would continue to be unresolved like everything else.

Kiyotaka sliced through the witch’s legs.

Kyouko fired at the tube container. It shattered and balls spilled onto the floor.

Mondo hurtled toward the witch and attacked, denting and smashing its body with his sledgehammer until the coliseum faded into the music shop’s storefront.

Sayaka was nowhere to be seen.

“Naegi-kun.” Kyouko stood over Makoto with Mondo and Kiyotaka either side of her.

Makoto continued staring down.

“I hope now you understand,” she said. “Is any of this worth trading your life away for a wish you don’t need?”

“How...?” Makoto’s nails bled as he dragged them across the pavement. “How... can you talk so casually? Maizono-san...!” His lips trembled. “Maizono-san is dead!”

“Maizono-san?” Mondo repeated, sounding confused.

“Kabi-san’s real name... was Sayaka Maizono.” Makoto’s entire body seized up. “She made a wish... that backfired... but she fought on! She still wanted to be a magical girl... and now-” He gagged. “She’s dead!”

Dead. The word rang in his ears. He glared at the three people before him in turn. While Mondo and Kiyotaka looked solemn, Kyouko’s expression remained blank. Unreadable. Cold, even.

She turned on her heel and started to walk off. “We should go home.”

“No!” Makoto tried to seize her arm but she was too far away from his fetal position on the floor. “Kirigiri-san! Please... how did you know she was there? Why didn’t you save her? What did you wish for?” He choked. “Tell me!”

Kyouko briefly stopped but didn’t look back. “I’m sorry.” He almost missed what she said, she spoke so quietly. “I can’t tell you right now but you will be okay. I know you are the sort of person who can get over a friend’s death.”

With that, she strode down the street.

“Maizono-san was your friend too!” Makoto shouted after her. “And... And I’ll never get over it! I’ll keep her memory with me... for as long as I live!”

Kyouko rounded the corner.
Mondo chased after her, almost tripping in his haste, and stopped at the end of the street. “She disappeared!”

Kiyotaka helped Makoto to his feet, keeping one arm around Makoto to support him. “Naegi-kun, allow me to accompany you home. What is your address?”

Makoto told him but it sounded wrong when he recited where he lived.

Then again, everything seemed wrong now.

“What are you doing?”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

"We are the snakes."

Also I edited a bit of this because one of the comments thought that Mondo reacted a bit too well to what happened. Hopefully I’ve improved it somewhat!
The slog back was a mess of nameless stores and faceless people that flashed in then out of Makoto’s thoughts. At some point during the journey, Mondo parted from the rest of the group, but only when Kiyotaka rapped his knuckles on Makoto’s front door was Makoto yanked out of his brooding even if just for a moment.

Makoto’s mother let them inside, his father’s and sister’s voices unintelligible from the living room. Kiyotaka did all the talking while Makoto forced himself to nod and agree that he invited his friend over for an impromptu sleepover.

Neither student spoke after they isolated themselves in Makoto’s bedroom. They sorted out Kiyotaka’s sleeping arrangements and flicked off the lights.

Only Kiyotaka slept. Or if he didn’t, he feigned sleep with remarkable authenticity. But why would he be disturbed? Surely he had seen magical girls die in the past and while Sayaka’s death possibly affected him to an extent, the two hadn’t been much more than acquaintances. Kiyotaka definitely hadn’t got as close to her as Makoto and even Kyouko had, though the girls’ bond couldn’t have been that genuine if Kyouko reacted to Sayaka’s death with such indifference.

Maybe she reacted that way because it didn’t surprise her. Sayaka’s death wouldn’t surprise the person who orchestrated it.

No. Kyouko couldn’t. She wouldn’t.

Makoto spent much of the night thrashing around in his bed. He lay on his side, or on his other side, on his stomach or on his back. Either curled up, in a rigid line or somewhere in between. With his head on top of his pillow, under it or with his feet where his head should be. Night gradually shifted to day outside his window and Makoto watched pinprick stars blend into the whiteness of a bleak morning.

Two birds tweeted a monotonous tune from an out of sight tree branch, by which time Makoto gave up trying to get any rest before school.

It occurred to him that he could skip a day of classes but Kiyotaka rejected the idea before Makoto got out more than a few words, instead suggesting they go to school as normal.

“Don’t misconstrue what I’m saying,” said Kiyotaka, already dressed. He set down the pyjamas Makoto had loaned him onto the foot of the bed. Another time, Makoto might have questioned why Kiyotaka had been wearing his school uniform on a Sunday night. “I too am most saddened by Maizono-kun’s untimely demise. She was a hard-working girl with a lot of spirit and dedication that the world can no longer benefit from. But it is like you said last night - you can’t allow her death to stop you from living. You must persevere!”

Makoto rolled over so he faced the wall instead. As obtuse as Kiyotaka’s words seemed, somewhere in them was a point. “Ishimaru-kun...” His voice rubbed at his throat. “Have you... ever seen any magical girls... die?”

“... I’ve happened upon the aftermath of several but I didn’t know any personally until Kyoudai.” The bed creaked under Kiyotaka’s weight. “Even then, he didn’t tell me initially - I inferred the
situation after a heated debate. Maizono-kun isn’t the first to give her life for this cause nor will she be the last!” Kiyotaka fist-pumped, his eyes shining. “Let’s strive to do our best!”

At breakfast, Makoto tried to eat a slice of buttered toast but it became flavourless mush that refused to be swallowed. Kiyotaka excused the two of them from the table and Makoto made empty promises to his mother that he would finish his toast on the way to school. She nodded but judging by how often she had glanced at him during the meal, she wasn’t convinced.

He spat it out in the garden.

They didn’t leave the house at the same time - Kiyotaka came out half a minute after Makoto.

“I informed your mother that you fell out with Kirigiri-kun and that’s what’s causing your strange behaviour,” Kiyotaka explained, leading Makoto down the path and toward the far gate. The condition of Makoto’s garden made Kiyotaka wrinkle his nose. “Which is completely true! Even in the most dire of circumstances, I won’t stoop so low as to lie! And you shouldn’t either, Naegi-kun! Remember that!”

True or not, it did omit the root of Makoto’s grief.

“Also, I suggest you weed your garden so you can grow your own vegetables!”

Makoto ignored that part.

After a while, Kiyotaka said, “It gets easier.”

“Hm,” went Makoto, and nothing else.

The silence was welcomed by Kiyotaka, who held his chin high as he marched in an almost robotic way.

Over the next few weeks, Makoto tried to focus on his new school life, but he found himself preoccupied with his lingering mental image of Sayaka. He often reminisced his day out with Kyouko and Sayaka - of their merriment at the arcade and the tranquillity of their picnic where they promised to remain friends. All that seemed a sick joke, with one dead and another apathetic.

Speaking of Kyouko, he wanted to ask her about what happened, but whenever he saw her, it wrung his stomach and she always slipped away at the first opportunity.

“There’s nothing to say,” Kyouko had told him when he did manage to catch up to her after class. “Maizono-san died... There was nothing we could do.”

And then she had left.

There had to be something he was missing. It still didn't make complete sense. Part of him still expected Sayaka to walk into class.

He sat at his desk, staring at his lap so he wouldn’t see the empty seat ahead of him. No one had done more than comment on her absence before shrugging and sitting down. She told Makoto she had a father but he suspected that had been a lie. Any family she may have had were disowned when she renounced her identity - an identity she reclaimed only recently, after years of living behind a mask.
Kyouko walked in minutes before class started. She took her seat without acknowledging him or anyone else.

Kiyotaka frowned at her briefly.

Mondo glared and gritted his teeth. His palms pressed against his desk as if he was about to stand up but ultimately he remained seated.

Just like everyday.

Makoto just wanted the day to be over and done with.

“Kabi-chan’s still not here,” remarked Aoi Asahina, peering at Sayaka’s desk from the other side of the room. Beside her, Sakura Oogami investigated as well. “Do you think she’s sick? She didn’t seem sick when we stayed over the last time we saw her. We should stop by her place after school and make sure she’s okay.” Aoi turned her head to the side, placing a hooked finger against her chin. “Or are you seeing Kenichiro then? I can go by myself if you are...”

Sakura sat at the desk next to Aoi’s. “Kenichiro is recovering from a recent treatment trial and the earliest I can visit him is Wednesday. As for Kabi, she is a diligent girl and must have overexerted herself. We should allow her to recuperate on her own - I anticipate her returning in the near future.”

Aoi shrugged and sat down.

Makoto bit his lip. Sakura’s words sank to the pit of his stomach and rotted there.

The morning homeroom period continued as usual until the end. Then the door opened.

“Ah, there you are,” said their homeroom teacher, smiling. “Everyone, we have a new student joining us. I hope you all make him feel welcome. Please,” he gestured toward the door, “come in.”

Through the doorway came a boy who crossed the room in a stiff manner and stood beside their homeroom teacher. The student faced the class with his shoulders pushed back, focusing on the far wall as if there was no one in front of him to look at.

Half a minute passed in which the class murmured amongst themselves. Makoto caught snatches of what they said.

“Is that-?”

“He’s so good-looking.”

“I can’t believe he’s being introduced at such short notice.”

“Do you think he’ll sit next to me?”

“Would you like to introduce yourself?” their homeroom teacher asked when it seemed the student was not inclined to do so himself without a direct cue.

The student wrote his name on the whiteboard, his free hand pushing his glasses further up his aquiline nose. “... My name is Byakuya Togami.”

Byakuya Togami was a lean boy with short blond hair, sharp blue eyes and prominent eyelashes. His name invoked more whispering. But why wouldn’t it? Byakuya was no average person. He had been born into a wealthy family and earned a considerable amount of money by himself. To
many, he was a name cloaked in fame, fortune and mystery that one could never hope to achieve. Such a person existed to most people in only newspapers or on television; he did not exist as a human being.

That wasn’t what caused Makoto to stare at Byakuya as much as he did: Makoto had seen him recently. More precisely, he saw a photograph of him when Kyouko fought the witch that resembled a magazine. It hadn’t occurred to Makoto before now that the face he didn’t recognise at the time belonged to someone like Byakuya Togami.

Apparently deciding that everyone had ogled him enough, Byakuya claimed the desk behind Kyouko’s and the first lesson began.

Unless called on, he didn’t speak. He solved whatever problems his teacher presented to him with ease, writing fluidly on the whiteboard while the class gaped in admiration. In the ten minute break after this lesson and before the next one, he packed away his books and left the room. No one saw him until their second lesson which was physical education.

The boys and girls split up and entered different unoccupied classrooms to get changed into their P.E. kits. By the time Makoto and a few others arrived at the sports field, Byakuya was already running laps.

Aoi pointed at his silhouette and nudged Sakura with her shoulder. “Sakura-chan, do you see that? Not only is he really smart but he’s fast too.” Her eyes glowed with determination. “I’m going to ask him to join our swim club.”

Sakura nodded. “Indeed. Togami seems to be in good health. He will make a valuable asset to your club.”

“Swim club?” said Kiyotaka from beside Makoto.

“Yep.” Aoi held up her fists. “Only... I need two more members before I can officially start it. But if I get enough people, we can start today after school. The sooner we get it going, the better. I was in five sports clubs at my junior high school and I really need to up my game now I’m in high school or else I’ll explode!”

Kiyotaka looked impressed. Makoto felt tired just looking at her.

“Hey, Ishimaru! You wouldn’t mind joining, would you?” She threw him a toothy grin and cupped the back of her head with one hand. “It’s a great way to stay healthy and boost your mood. And it’s fun! Super fun! And it’s all inside so the water’s not too cold... apparently that bothers some people. I can lend you a swimsuit for today’s session if you don’t have one on you... I brought a whole bunch to school so people couldn’t use it as a reason not to swim right away. That’s not weird, is it?”

“Not at all,” Kiyotaka assured her. Personally, Makoto would have given a different answer. “I’ve yet to decide on a club but I think I will join yours!” He thumped himself on the chest. “Please sign me up along with Oowada-kun and Naegi-kun!”

“But I...” Makoto relented when Kiyotaka and Aoi beamed at him.

Maybe a swim club was a good idea; a boost in mood sounded like what Makoto needed. Hopefully, Mondo wouldn’t be too peeved at being signed up for a club without his consent, though judging by how he got on with Kiyotaka these days, Makoto didn’t think much conflict would arise. And Aoi seemed like a nice enough girl from what Makoto could tell - and Sakura too,
even if her stature and the scar across her face intimidated many.

Today’s lesson focused on track and field. It soon became clear that Byakuya’s exceptional ability wasn’t restricted to the classroom - he outperformed everyone except Sakura and Aoi. Then again, it would be a feat to surpass someone as well built as Sakura or someone with an ardent passion for sports like Aoi. Byakuya finished running his three laps shortly after the two girls and applause broke out, most of the class gathering around him at the end of the lesson to unload plenty of praise.

Aoi gave Sakura a bottle of water and peered over her shoulder at Byakuya, who had walked away from the rest of his class without saying a single word to them.

The first opportunity anyone got to properly introduce themselves to him was at lunchtime.

“I’m eating,” he said to the crowd of students around his desk. “Go away.”

They reluctantly did so. Only Kiyotaka refused to budge.

“Do you need your ears cleaned?” Byakuya didn’t look up from his food. “I said I’m eating. I’ve no interest in talking to the likes of you.”

“Oi,” said Mondo, one of the few students who hadn’t yet attempted to talk to him up until now. “What’s your problem? You think you’re too good for us just because you’re rich?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I know I’m better than you and it’s for a variety of reasons. I came here for an education, not to kill brain cells by listening to your attempts at composing a conversation, so be quiet.”

“The fuck did you just say?” Mondo cracked his knuckles.

“Did I use too many syllables? Let me make myself clear in a way even someone like you should be able to understand.” Byakuya drawled the next part. “I came here to learn. Not to talk to twits like you. Now shut your mouth and don’t speak to me.”

Mondo lurched out of his seat.

“Kyoudai, please!” Kiyotaka stepped between them, his hands held up in protest. “Violence will only get you into trouble! There is no need to brawl. We’re all friends here!”

“Friends?” Byakuya scoffed. “What did you pull that idea out of? I’m not ‘friends’ with any of you.” He glared at Kiyotaka. A smirk slowly spread across his lips. “Hey... aren’t you the grandson of the former prime minister?”

Kiyotaka flinched, his hands sagging slightly.

Byakuya carried on. “You are. I overheard some students talking about you and him. Tell me, what does it feel like to be related to a worthless failure like that? I wonder if it’s genetic.”

It was not Mondo who reached Byakuya first - another classmate leaped to Kiyotaka’s defence.

Aoi.

She slammed her fists against Byakuya’s desk, earning a scowl from him. Her fiery eyes clashed with his frosty gaze. “What’s your problem? Everyone’s been trying to be nice to you all day and you’ve just been a complete jerk!”
Sakura left her seat and rested her hand onto Aoi’s shoulder. “Asahina, you should leave Togami to his own devices. You will not get far with someone as abrasive as him unless you are seeking further strife.”

“Finally, one of you is making sense.” Byakuya rose. “I will take my leave now. I no longer feel welcome here.”

“You’re not,” said Aoi, seething. “Trust me.”

No one spoke until he strode out of the room. It was probably for the better. Starting a fight with Mondo and Sakura sounded like a death wish that even Byakuya Togami couldn’t buy his way out of.

“I don’t care if he’s an Olympic swimmer,” Aoi muttered, attention still on the door. “Who in their right mind would want someone like that in their club? He’s such a-!” She stamped her foot. “A snotty lemon!”

Mondo grunted. “Damn straight.”

Kiyotaka sat at his desk with no comment, shoulders hunched up.

Makoto, who was seated at his desk and watched the scene unfold, continued eating his lunch in silence.

It didn’t take long for the rest of class to discern Byakuya’s disposition. By the time school ended and everyone either went home or to a club, around him had formed a barrier no one wanted to penetrate.

Aoi’s mood didn’t improve until well into the swim club’s first practice. The three males who had been inducted earlier that day were given spare swimming trunks, which Aoi shoved into their arms as soon as they were dismissed by their teacher, and the trio entered the poolside together.

With each step, the tiles chilled the soles of their feet, and the boys hop-skipped their way over to Aoi and the others. There were only six members if one included Aoi - her, Sakura, the three boys and Mukuro.

Makoto joined Mukuro on the plastic bench everyone was either situated on or near.

Mukuro sidled up to him.

“Hey,” Makoto said.

“Hey,” replied Mukuro just as quietly. “It’s been a while.”

They started the session by running through safety rules before moving onto swimming laps. Each member took turns to swim up and down the length of the pool for two minutes or less, depending on whether they were too exhausted to continue.

Kiyotaka and Mondo volunteered to go first. Mondo did a cannonball while Kiyotaka dived into a different lane.

Aoi blew her whistle, pushing the start button on her stopwatch. She stationed herself on a lifeguard chair, talking down to Sakura.

Mukuro and Makoto stayed on the bench.
Water splattered across the poolside.

“I didn’t think I’d find you here,” Mukuro remarked in a light tone, watching the swimmers. “You’ve been keeping to yourself a lot lately.”

“I didn’t expect to see you either,” he admitted.

“Huh? Why not?” She stared at him. “You boys might have come here to gawp at Asahina-san’s figure but not me. Don’t I look like a kind of person that enjoys swimming? When I lived overseas, I always went to the beach if there was one nearby. So when Asahina-san came up to me and asked if I wanted in on this, I couldn’t not say yes.”

“Oh!” Makoto waved both hands frantically. “I didn’t mean to be rude!”

She giggled.

His hands dropped to his lap.

“Don’t sweat it.” Mukuro positioned one of her hand’s fingers into a peace sign. “You didn’t know. It’s no biggie. I even taught my sister how to swim. I’ve told you about Junko-chan, right?”

“You said she worked as a part-time model.”

“So you did listen!”

“Of course. What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t?”

Mukuro’s face fell for a moment. Then she beamed. “Oh ho ho, so I’m your friend now? I wouldn’t have guessed, what with how buddy-buddy you’ve been with Kabi-san and Kirigiri-san and those guys over there.”

His gaze hit the floor.

“Eh?” She leaned into his field of vision, head tilted to one side. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No... it’s the opposite, actually.” He gripped his thighs. “You were right about Kirigiri-san. I trusted her and—”

He gagged as his mind conjured images of Sayaka in the coliseum. Of her pale skin and how at peace she looked in death. But had she been at peace? Had she died instantly? Alone? Painfully? The image shifted to that of Kyouko’s cold gaze. Then to how his fingers bled like Sayaka’s forehead bled and how it felt like he was bleeding right now.

Makoto slumped forward.

Mukuro caught him.

“Naegi?” Aoi blew her whistle, reaching him just after Sakura. “You’ve gone all white.” She crouched in front of him. “You’re not going to throw up, are you? Do you want to get in the pool and see if that makes you feel any better?”

“I don’t think that kid should be anywhere near the pool,” Mondo said. He and Kiyotaka had risen from the water by now, dripping moisture. Droplets from Mondo’s hair plinked a tune against the tiles. “He should go home. I’ll take him.”

“I’ll come with you.” Mukuro stood up, keeping her arm around Makoto. “I know where he lives.”
Aoi bowed her head. “I guess we’ll have to call it quits for today then, huh.”

“That won’t be necessary!” Kiyotaka said, perking up. “I won’t allow your club to be canceled, especially on its first meeting! I’m more than willing to stay.” He raised a fist. “If Oogami-kun stays as well, that leaves you with two people, and everyone will be at our next session tomorrow!”

As if trying not to get her hopes too high, Aoi lifted her head very slightly.

“I would be happy to continue with Ishimaru,” said Sakura. She nodded at Makoto. “Naegi, go. I hope for a swift recovery.”

The three students left to get changed into their uniforms. Makoto’s vision spun as he dressed himself and he allowed Mukuro and Mondo to guide him out of the school.

“What the hell happened back there?” Mondo asked once they were outside.

“We were talking about swimming and he drooped all of a sudden,” said Mukuro. “Naegi-kun, do you think you can walk on your own?”

“Y-Yeah.” He concentrated on his footing, wobbling, and the other two stepped away to give him space. “I’m sorry... about what happened...”

Mukuro waved a hand. “It’s fine. You’ve probably been working too hard. All the stress built up and popped out. Though we better take you home in case you faint again.”

Walking down the street with Mondo on one side and Mukuro on the other made Makoto feel like he had two bodyguards. None of them could think of a suitable topic to discuss so contented themselves with their own thoughts. Makoto didn’t know whether he liked this - all his thoughts, no matter which topic he veered them toward, kept returning to the same subject. Sayaka. Sayaka and how she had died and how Kyouko reacted. She reacted like Sayaka was a lesson to be learned from rather than a death to mourn.

Mukuro led the way. Mondo followed alongside.

Makoto allowed her to lead them toward his house. He couldn’t care less about focusing on his surroundings to make sure they went the right way. That wouldn’t bring Sayaka to life. He hadn’t even known her for a week yet she left such an impact with her departure.

“Hey,” said Mukuro. “I hate to leave you and all but I’ve got plans, you know? Think you can make it back without me?”

“It’s fine,” said Makoto in a tired voice. He looked around, recognising the street. She had brought them to a route that he didn’t usually take on his way to school. Mukuro must have been more familiar going this way.

“Thanks,” she said and she waved before jogging off.

Luckily, it seemed that Mondo knew where they were and he tugged on Makoto, prompting them to continue the journey. Makoto chewed on his lip, eyes fixed on the ground, eyes as heavy as his body.

“Shit,” Mondo said.

With a jerk, Makoto forced himself to lift his head. They had halted at the mouth of an alleyway but alone wouldn’t have held Makoto’s attention for long. Bricks floated out of the alleyway’s
walls and exploded, sending debris in all directions. In their absence, the wall darkened and when the alleyway was completely black, green numbers surged through it and coated the walls, ceiling and floor.

Mondo pulled a ring off his finger, grimacing when it changed into the orb form of his Soul Gem. “I think it’s just a familiar. Still... it might kill someone so I better take care of it ‘fore it turns into a witch.” He glanced over his shoulder. “You don’t come any closer, a’ight?”

Makoto stepped back. Mondo’s brown jacket glowed, stretching downward until it reached his knees. He punched his fists together, sending a shock wave that made his jacket billow out. When gravity sucked it down a second later, the jacket had transformed into the coat he wore when Makoto saw him as a magical girl.

During their last outing together, Makoto hadn’t paid much attention to the front of Mondo’s magical girl outfit, and Mondo presented the opportunity for Makoto to do so when he turned on his heel to face them. While his upper torso was bare, there were bandages wrapped around his midsection. Beneath the bandages and above his short baggy skirt glinted a belt buckle resembling the face of a dragon.

“... Yeah.” Mondo coughed into the back of his hand. “Like I said, don’t get in trouble and... Yeah.” He spun around and ran off.

Makoto chased after him, heart thumping. This probably wasn’t what Mondo had in mind with his instruction of not getting into trouble, but Makoto didn’t want to just abandon Mondo. Though he couldn’t fight, he could always provide moral support... or something.

Wheezing, Makoto skidded to a stop shortly after Mondo did.

A pixelly lizard flew over their heads. Riding on its back was a scrawny rabbit covered in blue pixels that resembled tears. The rabbit emitted beeps as it drove away.

“The fucker’s trying to escape!” Mondo yanked a sledgehammer out of his sleeve and hurled it. Just before impact, a chain came out of nowhere and coiled around the sledgehammer’s handle. It swung the sledgehammer away from the rabbit.

Music reminiscent of that on game over screens in older video games rang out. The rabbit and lizard fled to the far end of the alleyway.

One by one, the green numbers extinguished until the alleyway reverted to normal.

“Oowada-kun?” Makoto swallowed, surveying the area. “What... just happened?”

“I happened.” Byakuya descended from the sky. After the soles of his well-polished boots met the ground, he pulled on the sickle in his hand. Attached to the end of his sickle was the weighted chain looped around Mondo’s weapon, and the sledgehammer thumped to the ground when the chain had unraveled completely.

Mondo flushed. “You’ve got to be shitting me! You’re a magical girl too?”

Byakuya motioned toward his white ruffled shirt. “Why else would I be wearing this?”

“This’ also consisted of a dark green waistcoat and skirt. He wore translucent black tights on his long legs, which were currently positioned in a way that meant his feet were wide apart, and the only hint of saturation came from the lime coloured t-shaped gem on his breastbone that the frills
of his shirt almost obscured. So unless he was on his way to a conference or an important meeting, Byakuya was indeed a magical girl.

“If you’re a magical girl, why the hell did you let that thing get away?” Mondo threw up his arms. “That familiar’s gonna kill someone!”

“So there is something inside that head of yours...” Byakuya lifted one side of his mouth in wry amusement. “I’m nearly impressed. As I’m sure you already know, familiars don’t drop Grief Seeds. Witches do, and familiars only evolve into witches once they kill someone. They should be left alone until they bring half a dozen humans to despair... That would be enough to ensure they drop something. You would have killed it prematurely if I hadn’t interfered.”

“You mean...” Makoto widened his eyes. “You want to wait... until it kills people?”

“What, was I not clear enough? Yes. That is precisely what I meant. Honestly,” Byakuya rolled his eyes, “that much was obvious. I can’t believe I had to spell it out for you.”

“I can’t believe you can say that so freely. We’re talking about human lives!” Makoto tried to find even a scrap of compassion in Byakuya’s face. He found none. “How can you disregard them like that?”

“Are you seriously lecturing me? You’re not even a magical girl. You have no business sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong so shut up.” Byakuya’s kusarigama jangled as he folded his arms over his chest. “When a snake sees a caterpillar about to get eaten by a shrew, does it save the caterpillar? Does the snake take it upon itself to protect every single caterpillar? No. It lets the shrew feed because the snake depends on it to survive. If it doesn’t let its food eat, then the shrew will die off and so will the snake. By allowing the shrew to feed, the snake guarantees itself a meal. The same applies to the life of a magical girl.”

He turned on his heel.

“We are the snakes,” Byakuya said. “Witches and familiars are the shrews. Regular humans such as yourself are just insects. That’s all there is to it.”

He walked away.

“You can’t be serious!” Mondo snarled. “Is this just a fucking game to you? Why the hell... is someone like you a magical girl? What could you wish for that your slimy hands can’t get with your parents’ money?”

The answer came in the form of a laugh that twisted Makoto’s gut. None of the magical girls he had been acquainted with so far acted like this. Not Sayaka or Mondo or Kiyotaka. Not even Kyouko, who despite her recent actions had aided Sayaka in their witch hunts and treated this way of living seriously.

Mondo retrieved two sledgehammers from his sleeves. “I’m sending you back to hell.” He sprinted after him.

“Togami-kun!” Makoto shouted.

Byakuya whipped around and intercepted Mondo’s attack with his sickle. Their weapons connected in short, sparse encounters as Byakuya zigzagged backward while Mondo staggered forward with his teeth bared.

Instinct urged Makoto to rush out to intervene but his brain pulled him back in time, so he watched
with a feeling of uselessness.

Mondo aimed his sledgehammer at Byakuya’s knee.

In response, Byakuya jerked his knee out of harm’s way and flung the weighted chain of his kusarigama at Mondo’s sledgehammer, wrapping the chain around where the handle connected to the flat head of the weapon, and he flung Mondo’s sledgehammer over his shoulder. He snatched the other sledgehammer away in the same fashion.

Unarmed, Mondo stumbled back and reached into his sleeves.

Byakuya pounced, slashed Mondo’s chest with his sickle and strike the wound with his foot. Mondo flew backward from the impact. Makoto rushed over to Mondo’s fallen form.

“Be thankful I don’t consider you worthy of my time,” Byakuya sneered, leering down at them. “Otherwise I would end you right now for that cheap move. You’re pathetic.”

“N... Naegi...” Mondo coughed up bloody saliva that dribbled down his chin. He rolled his head to the side, his neck supported by Makoto’s arm. “Why... the hell... did you rat on me?”

“I thought you were going to kill him.” Makoto tightened his grip on Mondo’s collar. “You’re... You’re both magical girls.” His hands trembled. “You should be working together!”

“You really are an idiot,” Byakuya said.

Makoto looked up.

Byakuya was no longer there.

Just outside the city stood an abandoned house and this was the house Kyouko visited that night. It served no purpose other than to purport real life ghost stories and would have been demolished had no one believed these stories to be legitimate, so it made for a good place for a sceptic to go to if they wanted to enjoy a spell of seclusion.

The windows had been boarded up and many of the planks sagged with rot which allowed moonlight to sneak inside. Kyouko picked her way along the overgrown path that led to the front door. Or, rather, where a front door should have been. Instead there was a gaping hole that she ducked through.

Inside was light enough for her to see the silhouettes of broken furniture but nothing more substantial. The only hint of what lurked in the darkness was the faint smell of blood. Musty blood that reminded her of the crime scenes she used to investigate with her father, mixed in with the smell of coins clenched in one’s hand on a warm day. Like when she waited by the window for her father’s return because he promised to buy her ice cream.

She dodged forward. Something thumped behind her and resonated a hollow sound that momentarily filled the room. Kyouko looked over her shoulder. In the moonlight was an arrow wedged into the floorboard segment she had just been standing on.

Something creaked overhead.

“I’m only here to talk.” She flashed her empty palms upward. “I mean no harm.”
“T-Talk?” The owner of this voice dropped down from the ceiling and landed in front of Kyouko.

Kyouko got out her Soul Gem from her jacket pocket. Its glow did a poor job lighting up the room but it was sufficient enough. Stacks of books filled in the majority of gaps between remnants of furniture, though a few books were scattered across a sofa that had springs bursting out from where cushions should have been.

Pale eyes belonging to a pale face glared at Kyouko through a pair of large circular glasses. “I-If you want to talk... talk. Right now. You’re like me... a m-magical girl!” The person, a girl, aimed her crossbow at Kyouko’s Soul Gem. Kyouko eyed the weapon cautiously. “H-H-How did you know I was here?”

“That’s not important right now,” said Kyouko.

“Not important?” The girl snorted. “W-Who are you to decide what’s important and what’s not?”

“You’re being noisy.”

“N-N-N-?”

“I need you to pass on a message to Togami-kun.”

The girl paused. “Did you say... T-Togami-kun?”

“I’m in his class,” Kyouko explained. “Today was his first day at my school. I also know you,” she got out a Grief Seed from her pocket and threw it, “Touko Fukawa.”

Touko Fukawa caught the Grief Seed. She quivered. “This... is for me?” Her face contorted and she made to throw it back. “I don’t need your pity!”

“It’s not pity. A veteran such as yourself should know what it means to reject this.”

For a second time, Touko paused. She studied the Grief Seed from different angles, her brow furrowing in thought. After ten seconds, she tightened her hold on it and dropped her hand to her side.

“I assure you I come with no ill intent,” said Kyouko. “You don’t know who I am but I know both of you. I would be foolish if I tried to become the enemy of a formidable magical girl duo.”

“So you do know us... and you saw Byakuya-sama... D-Did he... tell you about me?” Touko’s lips twitched into a faint smile and she touched a hand to her cheek.

Kyouko didn’t answer straightaway. “Fukawa-san, it’s important you relay this message to Togami-kun. I don’t think he would be pleased if you withheld invaluable information. I would tell him myself but he isn’t one for company nor does he hold me in high esteem. You, however, are... different.”

This seemed to please Touko greatly for she laughed under her breath. “... Fine.” She met Kyouko’s eyes. “W-What do you want me to tell him?”

“Tell him to research a magical girl by the name of Sayaka Maizono. She used to be an idol. The sooner he starts, the easier it will be for him. I recommend he begin his investigation with our class. That’s all.”

“S-Sayaka Maizono? Why...?”
Kyouko already left.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

"Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts."

Also thank you for all the kudos and comments so far! <3 Seeing them really improves my mood and I am glad people are enjoying this.
“Energy is the capacity someone or something has to do work. It can’t be created nor can it be destroyed. It can, however, be converted into other forms of energy. Can anyone give an example of a kind of energy we use on a daily basis? Kirigiri-kun?”

“Energy can be used to boil water.”

“Good answer. Heat is one of the seven major forms of energy - or thermal, as one could say.”

Paper scratched as the class noted it down. Someone smothered a cough.

“Does anyone else have an answer? Oowada-kun, can you think of any?”

“What? Uh... energy? Like... a light bulb? Kinda?”

“That is an excellent example. Light bulbs convert electrical energy into light and thermal energy.”

More scratching.

“There are four more energy forms yet to be touched upon. Can anyone tell me what they are? What about you, Ishimaru-kun?”

“Nuclear?”

Snickering.

Kiyotaka kept his attention forward.

“Correct. Nuclear energy can be manmade or produced naturally. Naturally, stars give off heat and light from these reactions. Artificially, machines called nuclear reactors use it to provide electricity. These reactions can also occur in hydrogen and atomic bombs. Of course the last example isn’t something one would use on a daily basis.”

The student sitting behind Makoto muttered to the person at the desk beside theirs, “It could be if your grandfather was a prime minister.”

“Know any guys like that?”

They tittered.

Everyone wrote down the example. Kiyotaka noted it down last.

“That leaves three,” their teacher said, listing the answers given so far onto the blackboard and writing the last word with a flourish. “Does anyone-?”
He was interrupted by tinkling accompanied by bubbling low-pitched music. Chords of a higher key pierced the noise, rising in frequency until the discordant sounds developed into harmony. The music waned ten seconds in to give way to the singer’s voice that rang out in an explosion of synthesisers.

“Shooting love, shooting heart!”

Makoto jolted back, chair legs squealing.

“Surely rising higher and higher forevermore, everyday trotting to where only anxiety lies!”

“You all know phones are to be switched off during lessons!” their teacher shouted over the buzz of his students and the other-worldly whirlwind of technopop. “Whoever that belongs to please-”

“It’s mine.” Byakuya rose. He retrieved an expensive-looking cellphone from his trouser pocket. “It’s my mother; she insisted I choose something by Sayaka Maizono for her personal ringtone. I need to take this call outside.”

Sayaka Maizono. Makoto knew he recognised the singer.

“You most certainly do not, Togami-kun.” Their teacher’s nostrils flared. “I know you’ve only been here for three days but that doesn’t excuse such impertinence. Switch that thing off and give it to me this instant!” He thrust out his hand, palm facing upward. “You can collect it at the end of the day from the teacher’s room.”

Byakuya strode to the front of the classroom, each footstep in time with the thudding between Makoto’s ears. His grip shifted on his phone and he surveyed his fellow students as he declined the call, pressing his phone into their teacher’s hand.

“Now go back to your seat and we’ll resume the lesson.” Their teacher cleared his throat. “Togami-kun, can you tell everyone what the last three forms of energy are?”

“Chemical, mechanical and sound,” Byakuya answered without missing a beat. He sat at his desk and picked up his pen, not making eye contact with anyone.

“Yes.” Their teacher coughed. “Good. Moving on then... Today, we’re going to be looking at potential and kinetic energy.”

“He missed two,” said Monobear, its feet dancing shadow puppets over Makoto’s notebook. “Hope and despair. It’s beary interesting how easily one can be converted into the other.”

Makoto didn’t look up from his notes.

At lunchtime, most of the class delayed going to the cafeteria in favour of congregating at Yasuhiro’s desk. Despite their tendency to keep to themselves unless approached by someone else, Kyouko and Mukuro stood at the edge of this group, making Byakuya the only student on the opposite side of the room.

Leaving his lunch on his desk, as many others had done, Makoto went to investigate. He shimmied through the throng of students, apologising on behalf of his elbows and feet. Rows of heads obscured his view. Even Aoi, who he guessed to be of equal height, towered over him by sitting on Sakura’s shoulders.

Kiyotaka spotted Makoto’s struggle and made shooing gestures at nearby students so Makoto could get through. Again, Makoto found himself apologising though this time he did so with a
small smile.

It turned out Yasuhiro had a black eye.

“So there I am…” Yasuhiro dramatically swept his arm across his desk. The students nearest to him jumped back. “I’m cleaning up some soda I spilled - I mean, someone else spilled, when what’s-his-name comes to me and says we’ve got a new game. Arrived just that day, ‘right? And he wants me to make sure the kids don’t squabble over it.”

Aoi tilted her head to one side. “‘What’s-his-name’? Who’s that?”

“My boss, ‘right?”

“He’s your boss and you don’t know his name?” Aoi asked, incredulous.


“Only the first half? He’ll think you’re mumbling. You should write it onto your palm three times.” Aoi illustrated what she meant by drawing on her hand with her finger. “That’s what I do.”

Kiyotaka coughed into his knuckles. “Let’s not digress from the subject. Did you get that injury during a fistfight, Hagakure-kun?”

“Not exactly.” Yasuhiro plucked his collar. “So anyway… I’m hanging out by the game, ‘right? It’s based on an anime… Hectic Angel Mushy Mushy or something… and no one was in line for it so I thought I would have a go.”

“While on your shift?” Kiyotaka stared. “That is inappropriate behaviour! You should turn yourself in! High school students aren’t even supposed to have jobs!”

Yasuhiro’s response consisted of incoherent excuses and a mess of hand gestures.

“Relax, Kyoudai,” said Mondo, patting Kiyotaka’s shoulder. “Let him get on with his dumb story. Don’t you want to see how karma kicked him in the ass?”

A pause.

“Continue,” said Kiyotaka.

“Okay!” Yasuhiro straightened up. “So this game... it was a vertical shoot-em-up where you have to blast bubbles to clear the level. Not my kind of genre but I got into it. Then out of nowhere came this guy, ‘right? I couldn’t understand what he was raging about but he knocked me clean off my feet and started playing. I didn’t want to start a fight so I let him be but then these kids wanted a go and he wouldn’t get off no matter how many times they asked. They told me to reason with him but when I tried…”

He motioned toward his eye.

Everyone looked at it in acknowledgement.

“I thought he was going to kill me but these big security dudes forced him out,” Yasuhiro said, shivering slightly. “They needed to get a whole bunch of them too. The guy kept rampaging and saying Bucko was his wife and only he could see her… It was real weird. But yeah, that’s what went down yesterday.”
No one spoke for seven seconds.

“That’s it?” Mondo folded his arms over his chest. “You got a black eye from a kid?”

“Hey, hey! The guy was at least twice as big as me... horizontally, anyway.”

“Whatever.”

Yasuhiro’s audience dispersed.

Makoto turned around and bumped into Byakuya. “Togami-kun!” He stumbled back. “Sorry, I didn’t realise-”

“You’re Naegi, aren’t you?” Byakuya brushed his hand against where Makoto’s head had touched his jacket.

“What? I mean... I am. That’s me.”

“You’re to take me to the teacher’s room after school.”

Byakuya returned to his desk before Makoto could reply.

Makoto also went back to his desk, his brow furrowed. Two days ago, Byakuya called him an insect low on the foodchain. Neither spoke to each other the following day and it had seemed as though he wanted nothing more to do with Makoto. Even Mondo had left Byakuya alone since then, if only because Kiyotaka persuaded him that Byakuya wasn’t worth the trouble nor was Byakuya worth getting detention over despite their confrontation on Monday. He had told Mondo something similar in regards to Kyouko.

If Byakuya didn’t know the location of the teacher’s room, he would need to find someone to lead him there... but why Makoto? Why not ask a teacher for directions?

Byakuya’s demand dried Makoto’s mouth.

At the conclusion of their final lesson, Makoto told Aoi he needed to make a detour on the way to the swimming pool. When she asked why, he faltered but she nodded with more understanding than he felt and she set off with Mukuro and the other two males in the swim club.

Instinctively he wanted to accompany them. He imagined Mondo and Kiyotaka’s banter, with Aoi gawking at it while Mukuro and Sakura watched with suppressed amusement. Yesterday’s swim club had abated Makoto’s grief, if only by a bit, and the previous night he fell asleep as the sky stained brown. The pool water soothed him with its coldness which relaxed not chilled, and counting laps lulled him in a less passive way than counting sheep. Yet the opening lines of Byakuya’s ringtone refused to budge, replaying in his head at a distorted pitch that threatened to hollow him out again.

Sakura hoisted the nylon strap of her bag onto her shoulder and jogged down the hallway in the opposite direction to the swimming pool.

He watched after her for a while, fixing his wandering gaze onto Byakuya when the blond stepped into his field of vision.

“Let’s go,” said Byakuya, walking the same way as Sakura.

Makoto alternated between glancing at Byakuya’s stony face and examining the hallway. A few
students milled about, reluctantly relocating when Byakuya refused to bend his intended route around them. All Makoto could offer them were sheepish grins as he spied blurred figures through the vision panels of classroom doors. The other side of Makoto offered a fogged up view of outside through full length windows, green leaves trembling in rain which muttered condensation against the glass.

They passed the teacher’s room but only Makoto stopped.

“Togami-kun, the teacher’s room-”

“Is irrelevant,” said Byakuya.

“But what about your phone?”

“That cheap thing?” Byakuya stopped walking and turned around. “I could buy one million of them if I wanted.”

“You told me to take you here.” Makoto widened his eyes. “I assumed you wanted your phone back.”

“Don’t blame me for conclusions you yourself jumped to. I invited you because I want to know what’s so important about Sayaka Maizono.”

The back of Makoto’s neck prickled.

“Don’t look so gormless, Naegi,” said Byakuya. “Someone suggested I research Sayaka Maizono who I’ve been told was not only an idol but a magical girl.” He tucked his chin between two bent fingers. “I read her casefile once in the past but made little progress in solving it. For someone to communicate to me in such a way about her, as well as the characteristics of who recommended I inquire into her, there had to be obtainable evidence not available to me previously. And searching for it led my investigation to you, who also knows about magical girls.”

Nothing after the third sentence made sense. “Me...?”

“You reacted strongly when you heard my ringtone in class as well as when I mentioned her just now. You’re hiding something.” His glared down at Makoto. “Tell me the relevance of Sayaka Maizono.”

“I... I don’t...”

“You’re so easy to read it’s almost painful. Speak. What is your connection to Maizono? She supposedly went missing eight years ago on the same day her idol group committed suicide. Is she still alive?”

Running off would have caused a scene but Makoto couldn’t find an alternative way out. However, his desire to escape dwindled as he mulled over the preceding conversation. Someone informed Byakuya of Sayaka - someone who knew her to be in their class. Only three people fitted this criteria: Mondo, Kiyotaka and Kyouko. The first two seemed unlikely which meant Kyouko told Byakuya. But why? Why tell him how to find out instead of giving him the answer? Had she meant Byakuya to confront Makoto?

Despite Kyouko’s actions, she warned him about what happened to Sayaka. She took him to the witch’s barrier and showed him the body, forming a wall between them. Maybe she knew something about Sayaka’s death he didn’t, and she wanted him to be the one to uncover what... like it appeared she did with Byakuya. And if talking to Byakuya shed light on Sayaka’s sudden death,
Makoto couldn’t rebuff the opportunity even if it meant invading her privacy.

“I’ll tell you outside,” Makoto said.

Fat droplets pelted the pavement, leaving coin-sized patches that bled into each other. Byakuya and Makoto stood below a tree, water whipping Byakuya’s umbrella from the maze of branches above.

Makoto made good on his promise. He recounted his meeting with Makiko Kabi and the disclosure of her identity, ending the narration with her demise. The abridged account lasted two minutes. With the details he omitted, including their trip to the arcade and some minor conversations, it could have perhaps lasted longer, but it nonetheless highlighted the painful shortness of their acquaintance.

“Maizono attended your class under the alias ‘Makiko Kabi’?” Byakuya rubbed his chin. “Yes, I know of Makiko Kabi... She was a powerful magical girl located in this vicinity until very recently. Interesting...” He narrowed his eyes. “Take me to her apartment.”

“Huh?” Makoto blinked. “But... she’s dead.”

“We’ll have to break in. It shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“That’s not the problem!” Makoto just stopped himself from thrashing his arms. “She’s dead. We can’t go through her stuff!”

“Perhaps a person with your conscious feels like they can’t but I don’t share that delusion. I can find out where she lived by myself but I’m letting you escort me. It’s more than someone like you deserves.” During this pause, only rain and distant traffic could be heard. “Are you coming with me or not?”

“... Yes.”

Byakuya smirked. “A wise choice. There’s somewhere I want to go first so try not to slow me down.”

All attempts at asking where they were going were snubbed and Makoto soon became too out-of-breath to allocate his energy toward asking futile questions. By the time they arrived at Byakuya’s first stop, Makoto accepted he had no chance of showing up at swim practice that day.

Reds and yellows defined the clouds’ foundations, downpour ceased for the time being. So far Makoto had only been present for the entirety of one swim practice and he hoped his absence wouldn’t irk Aoi. Or become a habit.

They stood outside the decaying fence of a house, its panels either lopsided or non-existent. Byakuya shuffled sideways through a gap in the fence and didn’t wait for Makoto to follow.

“Should we be here?” asked Makoto, eyeing the straw-like tufts of grass that scuffed Byakuya’s legs. Empty drink cans were spotted around like flowers, many trampled down by earlier visitors. Visitors hopefully gone by now.

“Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts.” Byakuya stood beside the building’s doorway. His glasses glinted in the glow of sunset that made it through the clouds, the rest of his body fragmented into light and shadow. “You shouldn’t be afraid of things that don’t exist when there are worse things out there that are very, very real.”

Was that supposed to comfort him?
Splinters of wood scraped Makoto’s jacket as he infiltrated the garden through the same gap as Byakuya. After Makoto caught up, Byakuya ducked through the doorway. Makoto followed.

The stench drove Makoto’s sleeve to his nose and he choked into it. He couldn’t find the source, only seeing books and remnants of furniture littering the stained floors.

Something dropped from the ceiling, throwing up dust when it landed. A tower of books collapsed.

Makoto recoiled, eyes watering.

Byakuya said, “This is Makoto Naegi. Naegi...” His nose wrinkled. “This is Genocider Syo.”

“Darling!” It wasn’t a something that had fallen from above but a someone. Perched on what may once have been a bookcase was a scrappy girl. Her wiry aubergine braids shuddered as she slapped her hands to her cheeks. “I was wondering where you were. You told me to phone you hours ago and I did but you didn’t answer. Did you ignore me because you were with your new friend? Were your hands too busy with him to pick up your phone?”

Makoto tweaked his collar to allow in air to cool his skin.

Going by Byakuya’s face, he was used to such questions and hadn’t grown to like them whatsoever.

Syo’s expression sobered. Her thick tongue somehow didn’t impede on the quality of her speaking; it hung out of her mouth, impossibly long, and Makoto couldn’t stop staring at it. “Eh... He’s not my type... hell, he’s not even hot enough for me to kill, but if it’s with you, Byakuya-sama, I’m up for a li’l threesome!” She threw back her head and cackled. “I’m in need of some all-night-long lovin’! Genocider Syo is feelin’ mighty low!”

“Genocider Syo?” repeated Makoto, forcing himself to meet her eyes. They immediately made him think of blood. “You mean... that’s...?” Oh God. “Y-You’re...?”

“The number one hit at birthday parties, Genocider Syo?” She giggled, clutching her stomach. “Or should I say cut? That’s me! The murderer you love to hate!” All this was spoken in a sing-song voice. “The well-worn premise of many a B.L.! It’s always great to hear from a fan!”

Makoto’s legs refused to cooperate and get him to safety.

“She’s Genocider Syo, yes,” Byakuya said too casually. “She’s the alternate personality of a girl called Touko Fukawa, who was the one who received a message two days ago about Sayaka Maizono. Unfortunately she wasn’t able to get a good look at the person who told her.” Touko Fukawa. The name sounded familiar. “She won’t lay a finger on you without my say-so, so there’s no need for you to fret. There’s a long story behind this I don’t feel like telling.”

“Yeah.” Syo rapped her heels against the bookcase. “Touko Fukawa is a boring name and who wants to hear lame old exposition? She’s she and me’s me. We don’t even share the same memories. We’re just two people who happen to share one body... though let me tell you, the only person I want to be one with is Byakuya-sama.” She nodded slowly. “We could get away with yapping about our backstory if this was some kind of fanfiction or visual novel but all you need to know is it’s your typical heterosexual love story!” She blushed crimson. “Homicidal girl meets tsundere boy when-”

“Shut up. You’ve said more than enough.” Byakuya turned his head toward Makoto. “I assume you’re aware you can’t tell anyone about this. I’m willing to pay for your silence. Name a price and I will see to it.”
“Or I can snip you!” Syo got out a pair of scissors from underneath her skirt and cut the air. “I could use your tongue as a door wedge... though first I’ll need to get this dump a door. Adiós, gaping hole... I’m gonna miss the breeze up my skirt.”

Makoto flashed her his palms. “That won’t be necessary!” Whatever questions about this he had could wait. “I’m not going to tell anyone.”

Who would believe him?

“As I anticipated,” Byakuya said. “It would have been in your best interest to accept payment even if you intended to agree in the end, but I see you’re as much of an idiot as I first thought.” Did he consciously put people down or was it second nature to him? Byakuya turned his attention to Syo. “We’re going to visit the home of a classmate and we need you to get us inside. I doubt anyone’s reported her missing yet and we don’t want to leave evidence of our visit.”

Syo jumped to her feet. “Of course, Darling! Lead the way and I’ll follow your behind. And before you say anything, I don’t mean from behind.” She scrunched her eyes shut. “Gaahaaheehaa!”

Byakuya procured a piece of old cloth from a broken chest of drawers and curled it around Syo’s neck so she wore it like she would a scarf. Although it obscured from sight her tongue, her eyes remained just as visible and they unnerved Makoto almost as much.

Makoto wondered how the people in the city perceived the three of them but no one supplied them with more than a glance. Not the blond heir, not the serial killer and definitely not the plain boy walking slightly ahead. Then again, the sky had darkened to the point where it would be difficult to distinguish facial features of people they only knocked elbows with at most.

Store signs lit the buildings either side of the road beside them, illuminating half of Syo’s face as she skipped alongside Byakuya and chattered about how she could fling a pair of scissors into someone’s eye from fifty metres away and should she demonstrate on that guy? Or that guy? Or that guy? Not that guy though. He wasn’t hot enough. Nothing she said got a response out of Byakuya, who merely stared at something in the distance ahead of them.

A lengthy walk lay ahead of them and Makoto was starting to feel the drop in temperature. He tucked his hands under his armpits. “So... you’re both magical girls?”

“Yes,” said Byakuya.

“What did you wish for?”

Syo beamed. “No idea.”

“No idea...? You mean you forgot?”

Byakuya pinched the bridge of his nose. “She didn’t make the wish. Fukawa was the one who contracted with Monobear and they don’t share memories.”

“Blondie’s right!” said Monobear, prancing alongside Makoto. “I granted Fukawa-san’s wish, not that weirdo’s! Though it doesn’t make a difference, upupupu.”

Makoto twitched. “You again?”

Monobear’s pace slowed and it bowed its head. “You sound disappointed. I’ve got a life outside yours, you know. There’s no need for you to act like a protagonist who has an entire world revolving around them. If Maizono-san were still alive, she would be happy to see me.”
He bit his lip and clenched his fists.

“Aw, you don’t have to pull a face like that,” Monobear said, inappropriately cheerful. “Magical girls make a wish and then they die for it. Fukawa-san had a wish she thought needed granting and I did my bear-st to grant it. The same with Togami-kun. Ain’t that right, Togami-kun?”

Byakuya kept his eyes forward. “... I’m tired of listening to your drivel.”

“Yeesh. What got into your porridge?” Monobear popped out of existence.

It started to rain again so Byakuya put up his umbrella, reluctantly letting Syo take shelter with him so long as she refrained from physical contact.

They arrived at Sayaka’s apartment complex half an hour later. Inside’s glow seeped through the windows and pricked dots in Makoto’s vision.

Byakuya spoke into the intercom. “I’m here to deliver homework to Makiko Kabi.”

One of Sayaka’s neighbours let them in and the three students soon stood in the warmth of an elevator that smelled of aftershave and takeout food. Syo and Byakuya stayed in the centre as they ascended while Makoto slouched against the wall opposite the doors.

The elevator spluttered to a stop, emitting a ‘bing’ as its doors moaned open.

Makoto breathed in the tang of cleaning materials. A vacuum cleaner hummed behind one of the doors they passed, louder than their footsteps. He led the other two to Sayaka’s door.

Syo hitched up her skirt to reveal a holster containing scissors. She took out a pair and used them on the door. Byakuya watched over her shoulder.

Although the bottom of Byakuya’s trousers had seen better days, he still looked out of place next to Syo. Her blouse and skirt were covered in dirt and stains and stitches where her clothing had ripped and she had tried to repair the damage. Makoto didn’t recognise her dark sailor uniform and he hadn’t seen her at Hope’s Peak either. Had Byakuya met her before he transferred schools? How did one even meet a serial killer like that?

“Oi.” She glared at Makoto. “Quit staring at Togami Conglomerate property. My ass belongs to my White Knight only.”

Makoto choked on a mouthful of air.

Byakuya glowered at her. “Have you got it open yet?”

“Yep!” And with that, Syo opened the door.

They trooped in, closing the door behind them. The apartment was small but not claustrophobic, the kitchen area to the right of the door and the living area to the left. Slotted into the sink rack were dry plates that Sayaka must have planned on tidying away after she returned from her last witch hunt. Next to the rack was a bottle of dishwashing liquid that, as Makoto discovered when he squirted some onto his finger, smelled of strawberry and apricot.

As he smudged his finger against his trouser leg, its scent bloomed inside him. It reminded him of Sayaka, of her silky hair that she plaied absent-mindedly during class. Of her perfume that skimmed across his nostrils whenever she walked by and of the cake she served him after his first encounter with a witch. But it too faded.
Byakuya inspected the bookshelf by the bedroom door. “Her taste in literature isn’t too bad...”

Makoto forced himself not to yell at Byakuya, who picked up a book and flicked through it. Soon Byakuya moved onto other areas of the apartment with Syo following close behind. She walked on tiptoe so she could peek over his shoulder and waggle her tongue until he batted at her face and demanded she go somewhere else, after which she would resume her position half a minute later.

Watching them uneased Makoto so he searched the kitchen area. On the dinner table, underneath a tea towel, was a digital camera. He switched it on.

The photographs on it were from the sleepover Sayaka mentioned hosting the night before she died. She, Kyouko, Mukuro, Aoi and Sakura had put on a fashion show. One photograph showed Sayaka strutting down a newspaper catwalk, a pink boa entwined around her arms. Each girl had various snapshots of them wearing pyjamas, costume jewelry and makeup. Mukuro and Kyouko even seemed to be getting along.

In the last photograph, Sayaka and Kyouko were in a tight embrace, both grinning at the camera while behind them Aoi and Mukuro held up peace signs. Sakura’s cheek was pressed against Aoi’s, her arm extended forward so she could take a photograph of them all together. At the back of the picture was Sayaka’s bed with the plush Makoto won at the arcade lying on her pillow.

‘Maizono-kun isn’t the first to give her life for this cause.’

‘Magical girls make a wish and then they die for it.’

‘You can’t allow her death to stop you from living!’

But she hadn’t wanted to die. She wanted to live.

“Is that yuri?” asked Syo, resting her chin on his shoulder.

The camera thudded onto the table, landing next to a dismantled egg timer. “No! They were just having a sleepover.” Makoto frowned. “I don’t understand... Kirigiri-san must have wanted me to come here for a reason.”

Byakuya retrieved the camera and examined the photographs. “Naegi, you told me she died when her knives rebounded.” He eyed Makoto. “That doesn’t sound like a mistake you would expect from magical girl with more than eight years experience. Don’t you agree?”

“W-What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said.” Byakuya returned the camera to the table. “I think we’re done here. I’ll call my chauffeur to take us home. Naegi, you can contact your family and tell them you’re staying the night at my residence. They won’t complain about you being out late if you’re with someone like me.”

“What about me?” Syo waved an arm.

“What about you?” said Byakuya. “I’ve no spare rooms for the likes of you.”

“We can share your room! You don’t snore, do you? Though what I plan on us doing will be louder than nose farts.”

“That’s disgusting. As if I would ever let you anywhere near where I lived.”
“Thanks for the offer but I would rather go home.” Makoto looked away. “I have a lot to think about.”

“Suit yourself,” said Byakuya. “At least accept a ride home.”

Makoto did.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

"I can still fix things."
I Can Still Fix Things

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a lot harder for me to edit than I expected. A lot of these chapters were written months ago so editing them is quite the experience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aoi sprung to her feet when Makoto entered the homeroom. He steeled himself, expecting to be reprimanded for missing swim club the previous day, but she plastered a wide grin across her face and latched her hands onto his shoulders.

“Did you hear what happened?” she asked, shoulders shaking. “Kenichiro’s in complete remission!”

Makoto blinked. “Kenichiro?”

She released him though her hands quivered as if she was fighting back the urge to grab him again. “Sakura-chan’s boyfriend. He was diagnosed with something terminal but this morning the doctors couldn’t find any trace of the illness. They’re keeping him in the hospital for a bit longer to do some tests but isn’t it great? Every week since he got sick, Sakura-chan has been visiting him and it must have finally healed him!”

He laughed. “That is amazing!”

“Asahina-san has told this to everyone who’s come in so far,” said Mukuro, digging through her bag for a kitten print pencil case that she then placed onto her desk. “It’s nothing short of a miracle.”

“Yeah.” Aoi scratched at her cheek. “The doctors said he only had a few months to live and he just magically got better overnight.”

Makoto’s smile melted away, leaving the corners of his mouth downturned. “Magically...?”

No. Sakura couldn’t have...?

Someone thumped him on the back and the rest of Makoto’s musing burst out of his mouth in a squeak.

“Oi, Naegi.” It was Mondo. He gave Makoto a thumbs up. “I need to take a piss before attendance.”

“Good for you?” said Makoto.

“Yeah, yeah. Real clever.” Mondo draped his arm across Makoto’s shoulders. “You can practice your comedy routine when we get back. Come on.”

Before Makoto could object, Mondo steered him out of the room. Makoto looked over his shoulder but Aoi and Mukuro merely offered him a small wave. Yasuhiro didn’t even bother opening his eyes, instead snoring gently with his head tilted back.
According to the clock they passed on the way to the bathroom, school officially started in five minutes. By now, most students had retreated to their homerooms. The lack of people made it feel like Makoto and Mondo arrived at school before everyone else, with the almost empty hallways dim but not dim enough to camouflage the dust particles that floated in gentle rays of morning sunlight.

Mondo maintained his hold on Makoto’s shoulders until they marched into the bathroom, after which he let go of Makoto. Also in the bathroom was Kiyotaka, who currently had his back to the pair.

Above them whirred the ceiling fan, stirring the smell of cologne around them.

Kiyotaka turned his attention away from the anti-bullying poster sellotaped to one of toilet cubicle doors.

“Ishimaru-kun?” Makoto didn’t know who to look at. “Oowada-kun? What’s going on?”

“We have one minute.” Kiyotaka dropped his hand to his side, his wrist watch glinting in the flush light. “Naegi-kun, you ought to have arrived to class sooner!”

Makoto rubbed his nose. “I didn’t know we were going to-”

“We’re going after that familiar me and you saw on Monday once school ends,” said Mondo, cutting into Makoto’s excuse. “It’s still alive... I mean that’s what my Soul Gem’s trying to tell me. I think. You’ve got until we get back to tell us if you’re coming or not.”

Kiyotaka opened the bathroom door and the boys made their way back to their homeroom.

The honeydew walls of the hallways bore the same posters as the one in the boy’s bathroom, albeit with different people. One had on it a crying girl wearing a brown skirt with suspenders.

“Why couldn’t you tell me this at lunch or after school? Or even in our homeroom?” asked Makoto.

“’Cause I don’t want that slimeball Togami listening in,” Mondo said, footsteps heavy. He kept his face forward. “If he knew what we were doing, he’d stick his slimy nose into our shit. The bastard would start a fucking familiar sanctuary if he had the chance. He’s everything wrong about magical girls... He’s just as bad as a witch!”

They reached the hallway containing their homeroom.

On a poster they passed was a chubby boy holding a generic manga magazine. Its eyes seemed to follow them.

Makoto chose his next words carefully. “I’ll come with you guys after school but maybe you could try to get along with Togami-kun too? If you worked together as a team...”

“Look, Naegi, I know you mean well.” Mondo rested his palm against the door of their homeroom. “But that isn’t going to work.” His fingernails scraped against the wood as he balled his hand into a fist. “Togami won’t budge and I sure as hell won’t. I’m stronger than him and I’m not going to let anyone else die!”

He shoved the door open before Makoto could respond.

Not that Makoto knew what to say. None of what Mondo said was necessarily wrong, as much as
he hated to admit it.

Kiyotaka’s face hardened, mouth a thin line, and he said nothing as he went into their homeroom as well.

Makoto sat at his desk and sighed. Weeks had elapsed since his last witch hunt. Since Sayaka’s last witch hunt. The back of his throat stung. If he had gone with her to the witch’s coliseum, could he have saved her? Did she lose because no one was there to fight with her? To support her? It couldn’t happen again. He wouldn’t allow it to happen to anyone ever again. To triumph, to fight another day, his classmates couldn’t fight among themselves.

His eyes narrowed.

They all needed to work together.

Their fifth lesson was physical education. Four cones had been set up on the field, forming the corners of a large square. At each cone was a task card with instructions detailing what a student needed to do at that corner before they could move onto the next cone.

The class split into four groups, Mondo and Kiyotaka opting for the corner diagonally opposite the one Byakuya chose.

Makoto joined the latter. “Togami-kun?” He stepped forward, inhaling as he bent his knees while keeping his upper body vertical. His back leg tingled.

Byakuya performed the same stretch.

“Togami-kun?”

“What?” Byakuya snapped.

“Oh. Uh...” Makoto coughed. “I was wondering what you’re doing after school today.”

“Nothing involving you.”

“Are you hunting for witches?”

“I said nothing involving you.” Byakuya swapped legs, lacing his fingers together and pressing his hands against his thigh. “I found out all I needed to know yesterday. For now, anyway. You’re no longer of any use to me.”

“Oowada-kun and Ishimaru-kun are searching for the familiar we met on Monday,” Makoto said in a tone he made conscious effort to stay upbeat. “I thought you could come with us. If you tried to get along with them, you could destroy all the witches.” He looked down. “And you would be less likely to die against one like Maizono-san...”

“You followed me here so you could badger me about such idiotic things?” Byakuya straightened up and shot Makoto a scathing glare. “You’re wasting your time. I don’t need their protection or anyone else’s and I don’t associate with losers. Go play with your loser friends in your loser world where all the losers have loser competitions together.” With that, he jogged toward the next cone.

Each ‘loser’ stabbed Makoto in the chest despite how ridiculous the word sounded. He stared after Byakuya until a weight fell onto his shoulder. Makoto investigated, finding that Yasuhiro had put a hand there.
“Naegi-chi...” Yasuhiro strengthened his grip. “How does a loser competition work? Like... if you win a loser competition, you can’t be a loser because you won, ‘right? But if you lose a loser competition, you aren’t a loser. What does that mean?”

“... I’m not sure.”

The conversation with Byakuya went as expected and only demonstrated the stubbornness Mondo described him to have. But Makoto tried. Even if he failed getting Byakuya and Mondo to put aside their differences, he had tried. Other than continue trying, little else could be done.

Yasuhiro let go of Makoto’s shoulder and went to find that corner’s task card.

At the end of the day, after the homeroom had been tidied, Aoi waited by the door for the other members of the swim club. She rocked on the balls of her feet, bag swinging back and forth.

“Sorry, Asahina.” Mondo directed his eyes toward the space above her head. “We can’t swim today.”

“Can’t swim?” she said, her bag shaking to a stop beside her leg. “Why not?”

“Stuff came up, a’ight?” Mondo barked, cheeks noticeably pink. He lowered his voice and added sheepishly, “We’ll be there tomorrow. Man’s word of honour.”

Kiyotaka clasped his hands behind his back. Makoto scuffed the heel of his shoe on the floor. Mondo puffed out his chest, trying not to let Aoi’s sharp gaze deflate him.

A queue started to form behind the boys.

Aoi pouted, continuing to stand in the doorway. “If you guys aren’t going to be there then I’ll have to cancel it. Sakura-chan’s visiting Kenichiro for a week and there’s no point if it’s only me and Ikusaba-chan.”

“I’ll come!” said Yasuhiro from behind Makoto. “I even brought my own swimsuit.”

“Really?” Aoi jerked back her head. “Wait.” Her brow furrowed. “Why do you have a swimsuit?”

“To swim in, of course.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “I mean why did you bring a swimsuit with you to school?”

This was said by the person who brought a bag of them to school at the beginning of the week.

“Huh?” Yasuhiro’s face broke into a grin. “Oh, that. See, the arcade wasn’t working out so I quit and thought I would try my hand at swimming. That’s my calling right now. I’ve got a good feeling about it.”

Mukuro, standing just outside the door, said, “We can race each other and see who’s the better swimmer. That sounds like fun.”

“Oh... kay. Great.” Aoi nodded at the floor. Then she threw out her arms so her fists were either side of her cheeks. “That’ll work!” Her eyes twinkled. “But you guys better be here tomorrow. I’m not accepting any more excuses, got it? Especially from you, Naegi.” She focused her eyes on him. “Sakura-chan isn’t back until next Wednesday so we need all the members we can get.”

“S-Sure,” said Makoto.
Aoi finally moved out of the doorway, unblocking the exit, and the rest of the class filed into the hallway.

Mondo bumped his arm against Makoto’s. “Hey, that reminds me. Where did you go yesterday? Asahina said you went on a detour but you never showed up to swim club.”

“Ah!” Telling them about his trip with Byakuya probably wasn’t a good idea. Makoto smiled nervously. “I... I felt ill so went to the nurse and she told me to go home.”

“Again?” Kiyotaka said. “Naegi-kun, there must be a deficiency somewhere in your diet. You must note down what you eat in a food journal and give it to me next week! Now, Kyoudai,” he turned away from Makoto, “you recall Attack Pattern Five Three which we discussed at your house last night? I wish to run through it once more!”

Kiyotaka and Mondo discussed battle tactics all the way to the shoe lockers. The ideas they exchanged left little to Makoto’s imagination, and seeing as he would witness what they described later, he tuned out until their conversation shifted to a different subject.

“Did someone put something in your shoe locker? What’s it say?” asked Mondo, trying to snatch a piece of paper from Kiyotaka. He smirked. “Is it from a girl?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Kyoudai!” Kiyotaka crammed the note into his jacket pocket and bent over to shut his shoe locker. “I can’t afford to fritter away time on frivolousness like that.”

“What is it then? You’ve been getting notes for a while now.” Mondo chuckled lightly, eyes not quite agreeing with his tone. “Sounds to me like you’ve got a secret admirer.”

Kiyotaka led them away from the shoe lockers. “The contents are irrelevant!” He quickened his pace so he walked ahead of the other two. “As I have said many times, my motto in life is simplicity and fortitude. Everything else must take a backseat on the road to success. No matter how onerous such a task may be, I cannot-” He stepped into a halt. “Togami-kun? And...?”

Standing by the school entrance was Byakuya and who at first appeared to be Syo, only she wasn’t how Makoto remembered her. She seemed smaller but that may have been due to her hunched posture, and her tongue didn’t dangle out of her mouth. Her tongue remained in her mouth as she fidgeted and studied an anti-bullying poster someone drew black caterpillar eyebrows on.

Mondo’s face darkened. “You. What do you want?” Realising the girl was with Byakuya, he added, “And who’s that girl?”

“That g-girl... I have a name, you know. It’s T-Touko Fukawa.” She glanced at him. “Not that I expect you to remember it... No one ever does...”

“She’s my assistant.” Byakuya said. “Anyway, let’s get down to business. Naegi told me you plan to hunt the familiar from earlier this week.”


“Don’t worry, I don’t plan on obstructing you.” Byakuya positioned his lips into what might have been a smile. “I’m here to propose a game.”

“A... game?” Mondo said with as much uncertainty as Makoto felt.

Byakuya reached into his pocket and took out a ring Makoto had seen many times before. It morphed into a dark green orb. “I overheard what Ikusaba suggested to Asahina and applied it to
this situation. We will have a race to see who locates the familiar first, assuming it hasn’t already turned into a witch. That would be a bonus.” He tilted his head back slightly. “Me and Fukawa against you three. Unless, of course, you’ve realised you don’t stand a chance and wish to forfeit.”

“Nah, I’m game.” Mondo slipped his ring off his finger. “Someone needs to put you into your place. Try not to be a sore loser about it.”

“Tch.” Byakuya clicked his tongue.

Touko jabbed the air with her finger. “If anyone is going to lose, it will be you three!” She took the affront a lot more personally than Byakuya, who tapped his finger against his arm as he waited for her to finish. “All brawn and no brains, that’s what you are!”

It wasn’t exactly getting along, nor were they seeing eye-to-eye, but healthy competition appealed to Makoto more than the scuffle on Monday which could have escalated to who knew where. Though healthy might have been too strong a word.

Kiyotaka straightened out his arm, jabbing the air with his index finger. “I fully endorse this bonding activity! I will count us down from five! Five! Four! Thr-! Where are you going? I haven’t finished!” He chased after Mondo and Makoto, who had both left the school soon after Byakuya and Touko.

Mondo peered at his Soul Gem. It flashed once. “The familiar’s not close so we’d better get a move on. I would ride my motorcycle but I don’t have a sidecar for you guys.” He huffed.

“Togami’s probably in a limousine by now.” A gust of wind blew past, causing his pompadour to tremble. He squinted. “Rich bastard.”

The most obvious place to start their search was where they found the familiar on Monday so they went there. Since their last visit, it had rained, and the alleyway floor was flecked with illegible sheets of newspaper.

A white cat heard their footsteps and leaped into a trashcan.

“I’m more of a dog person,” said Mondo when the trashcan stopped rattling. “Used to have a Maltese called Chuck.” He kicked an empty water bottle and watched it sail into the air and land on the other end of the alleyway. “I tried to teach him how to swear ‘cause I was a dumb kid. He couldn’t do that but he always brought me the paper every morning, wagging his tail and smiling up at me. I never read the thing but hey, he was a smart dog.”

“I had a crossbreed once.” Makoto’s palm grazed against bricks as he stepped over a torn carrier bag of rubbish. “I was always trying to teach him new tricks. I taught him to roll over and he knocked over my parents’ favourite vase. They couldn’t stay mad at him for long though... with a face like his, it would be hard to.”

“Yeah, dogs are the best,” Mondo said. “Cats are cute but they’re not dogs, y’know?”

Kiyotaka picked up the bottle Mondo had kicked and dropped it into a trashcan. It thudded against the bottom and the white cat clambered out and scampered off. The trashcan tipped to one side but Kiyotaka caught it and set it upright. “Kyoudai, how far are we from the familiar?”

Mondo checked his Soul Gem. “I think it’s moving... or maybe we’re moving... but we’re not too far.”

Once they reached the other end of the alleyway, they headed right.
“If you asked me two months ago what I thought I’d be doing now, it sure as hell wouldn’t be this.” Mondo’s lips purred as he exhaled. “I should be keeping my brother’s gang together, not doing this shit, but there’s no point. You can’t be in a gang forever.” He put his hands into his pockets. “Y’know, I played with the idea of being a carpenter. I’ve spent so much time breaking stuff and messing things up, it’d be nice to fix things for once.” Mondo sighed. “But that plan’s been shot in the ass.”

“You can still do that,” Makoto said. Kiyotaka nodded in agreement.

“You think so?” Mondo blinked at them. “But what about being a magical girl?”

“Nothing’s stopping you from doing both,” said Makoto. “I mean I still don’t know what I want to do when I’m older but there are plenty of opportunities waiting for us. I’m not sure I’ll ever find one thing. But that’s okay... even if one thing comes and goes, I’ll find something else.”

“Yeah.” Mondo didn’t meet Makoto’s eye. “That’s... Yeah. Come and go. Right.” He glanced at his pulsing Soul Gem and then looked across the road. “The familiar’s in that church. C’mon.”

Makoto had never visited this church before nor did anyone in his family attend one regularly. Just inside the church, beside the door, was a bookcase of donated books with bent spines and pages that had been heavily leafed through. On the top shelf was a metal bowl of coins that sheened in the subdued light bleeding through the church’s tinted windows.

It caught Mondo’s eye and he traced his finger around the bowl’s rim. “Aniki used to borrow money from these so he could buy me and him something to eat. He said he did it so he’d go to hell instead of me.” Mondo barked. Maybe he meant to laugh. “If he’s in hell, they’re gonna have to make a whole new tier for our folks.”

Kiyotaka said, “You should pay those churches ba-”

Mondo looked at him and Kiyotaka fell silent.

The main area of the church lay behind a set of transparent doors bordered with slick wood. Makoto peered inside. Occupying the nave were wooden pews and it was too dark to discern anything more.

Mondo shunted the door open with his shoulder and raised his glowing Soul Gem. Their vision didn’t improve much but the light from the Soul Gem defined the white noise texture of the carpet and the grains in the pews.

Other than their breathing, they heard nothing. The smell of incense lingered.

Makoto opened his mouth. “Wh-?”

The altar on the far side of the church suddenly set alight. What they first thought to be smoke shrouded it, only for them to proceed toward it warily and realise the area had actually pixelated. Red and orange and yellow squares combined into a flickering, floating checkerboard. After five seconds, the pixels in the middle dissolved into a fiery crosshair.

Mondo discarded his school bag and cracked his knuckles.

Hearing the sound made Makoto wince and when he opened his eyes again, both Mondo and Kiyotaka were in their magical girl outfits.

Despite the number of times Makoto had jumped through a witch’s portal, he still expected it to
attack him as he passed through. But he leaped into it and came out the other side unharmed, landing in front of the altar.

A stone bridge existed where the carpeted walkway used to be. Also gone were the pews, replaced with two deep ditches.

Mondo started toward the bridge only for Kiyotaka to throw out an arm to stop him.

Ahead of them swung wrecking balls, moving in a pendulum motion across the width of the bridge at different momentums. They were like those found in obstacle courses, where contestants had to dodge past them and reach the other side without getting hit and consequently knocked off the edge.

“... You’re kidding me,” said Mondo.

Kiyotaka patted up and down his body. “This will necessitate several calculations... Does anyone have any pen and paper on hand?”

“Don’t sweat it, Kyoudai. I got this.” Mondo retrieved a sledgehammer from his sleeve and charged toward the closest wrecking ball. The collision between his weapon and the wrecking ball cracked the air, vibrating through Mondo as he strengthened his stance.

He withdrew his sledgehammer and now that the wrecking ball hung limply from the ceiling, motionless, he could climb over it with ease.

“See?” Mondo winked at them. “I got it.”

This felt like cheating. Makoto played video games with platform stages much like this witch’s barrier, and one was required to correctly time their avatar’s jumps in order to win the level. Then again, he had many extra lives to fall back on when playing video games. In the real world, he only had one.

Makoto’s first step onto the bridge depressed the stone beneath his foot. He jumped back, expecting a trap to activate, but nothing happened. The stone rose after he lifted his foot and Makoto noticed that it had the number zero written on it. Curious, he checked the other stones and found they all had either a zero or a one on them.

Each wrecking ball was stopped in the same way as the first and the three students soon reached the other side of the bridge. The door in front of them wasn’t the same one that they entered the room through: this was a rotating door.

And inside the next room wasn’t the familiar from Monday but an upside down umbrella. It floated above a large computer keyboard that made up the entirety of the floor. In the cracks between the buttons bloomed white gladioli, their leaves and petals shining with moisture.

Computer monitors were affixed to the lime green walls, water spouting from their screens.

Makoto felt his feet dampen and looked down. More water. Streams of water wound through the crevices between keyboard buttons.

The umbrella witch, that glitched like a faulty image in a video game, was also wet. When it glitched, Makoto swore a face stared back at him, with the canopy of the umbrella being its mouth and the shaft its nose. Not only that, but during these glitches, he saw brown eyes that completed the witch’s face.

“That’s not a familiar!” Mondo snarled. “I knew we shouldn’t have left it... when I see Togami’s...
snake face again, I’m going to punch him inside out!”

Kiyotaka bit his lip. “Kyoudai, I don’t think that’s quite necessary. We need to get along so we can work toward the same righteous cause, not—”

“Don’t you get it?” said Mondo, spit flying from his mouth. Kiyotaka flinched. “If it’s a witch, that means it killed someone, right? What if it had been your mum it killed? And it was a familiar that became a witch that killed Kabi or Maizono or whatever the hell her name is. Togami’s a murderer. He’s scum!” His nostrils flared. “Murderers don’t deserve to live!”

Mondo swung his sledgehammer.

The witch swayed out of the way.

He tried again with more force and missed, as did his subsequent attacks.

Kiyotaka drew a katana out of his chest pocket, slashing at the witch and managing to snag one of its corners.

It cartwheeled higher, spinning out of control. When the witch steadied itself, it gushed out water that splattered against the ‘s’ key.

“Initiate Attack Pattern Five Three!” Kiyotaka shouted, running toward Mondo.

Mondo dropped to one knee and cupped his hands together. Kiyotaka stepped onto Mondo’s hands and was then hurled into the air.

“We thought that one up last night,” Mondo told Makoto in a gruff voice, watching Kiyotaka soar over to the witch. “He even made flashcards to help me remember them.”

The witch parried Kiyotaka’s attack with its handle, blasting out a torrent of water that slammed Kiyotaka into the ground.

“You fucker!” Mondo threw his sledgehammer into the air. It transformed into a motorcycle that he leaped onto.

Trembling, Kiyotaka lifted the top half of his body off the floor.

Makoto ran over to help him up.

“Naegi-kun, stay back!” Kiyotaka swatted at Makoto with the back of his hand. “It’s not safe for you to be so close to the action!”

“Are you okay?” Makoto asked, stooping over his friend. He wiggled his fingers, undecided on whether to ignore Kiyotaka's order or not. “That looked like it hurt.”

“I’m fine!” Kiyotaka rose without Makoto’s help, face determined but the rest of his body still shaking. “I’m fit as a fiddle, Naegi-kun.” His mouth stretched into a grin that failed to reassure Makoto. “Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself!”

Kiyotaka turned his head sharply toward Mondo so Makoto only caught a glimpse of Kiyotaka’s grin lessening.

Mondo continued to chase after the witch, weaving through the waterfalls created by the computer monitors on the walls. He pressed his lips together tightly and charged at the witch.
It giggled as it swerved out of harm’s way at the last moment, giving Mondo no time to avoid the wall behind.

Gritting his teeth, Mondo raced after it again, but another headlong rush resulted in only a repeat of the previous crash. The motorcycle fell to the ground as Mondo jumped off, and he pursued the witch by foot instead. He conjured a new sledgehammer from his sleeve.

“We’ll corner it!” Kiyotaka let out a laugh and sprinted toward the witch, katana poised. “I’ll confront it head-on while you strike it from behind!”

Mondo turned to acknowledge Kiyotaka but instead of responding, he looked down and froze up. He broke into a sweat, his focus solely on the puddle beneath the umbrella.

Kiyotaka skidded to a stop in front of Mondo. His brow furrowed slightly but he kept smiling. “Kyoudai, what’s the matter? With our powers combined, we can defeat it. Together, we are strong enough!”

“Strong...” Mondo’s shoulders heaved. He bowed his head.

Makoto took a step forward. Whatever Mondo was seeing in the puddle caused him to clench his fists, and Makoto could almost see the sensation that consumed Mondo's body in tremors eating at him internally. More shakes consumed Mondo's body. His sledgehammer threatened to slip out of his clammy hold. It was like he was under some kind of spell.

“Yes!” Kiyotaka said, apparently not noticing the full extent of Mondo's sudden shift in demeanour. Either that or he mistook it for excitement. “Strong!”

A dead laugh left Mondo. “That’s me... Strong... I’m strong...”

“Kyoudai?” Kiyotaka finally dropped his grin.

Mondo whacked Kiyotaka’s head with his sledgehammer.

Like an unsupported rag doll, Kiyotaka collapsed in on himself and hit the ground.

“Ishimaru-kun!” Makoto stumbled forward and fell to his knees beside Kiyotaka. He tried to find a heartbeat but his hands shook too much to be reliable.

Mondo’s sledgehammer thudded against the floor and Mondo joined it shortly after, his body doubled over.

Makoto forced himself to look away from the blood on Kiyotaka’s forehead. “Oowada-kun? Why did you attack him? He’s your friend!” His voice grew louder. “He’s our friend!”

“Naegi...” Mondo’s arms almost gave way. He balled his hands into fists against the ground. “My reflection... it ain’t just me...” His teeth gritted. “I can see... me and Aniki...”

“Your brother?” From where Makoto knelt, he could only see Mondo’s face in the puddle. Crawling over to it in an attempt to improve his view didn't enlighten Makoto at all. Only Makoto's reflection gazed back, young and tired.

“Yeah... Me and him... and I’m holding him...” Mondo gulped, still staring. His pupils twitched. “This is me... the real me... the me that killed him...”

“Killed...? Oowada-kun, you’re not making any sense!”
“Aniki announced his retirement a few weeks back.” Mondo spoke as if reading from a script. “He said he was going to hand over leadership of the gang to me... but the guys don’t respect me like they respected him. They thought I wasn’t cut out to replace him... I heard them say it behind our backs... and then Monobear turned up.” He snorted. “I wanted to prove to those bastards I was strong, stronger than everyone including Aniki... so I made a contract. I wished to beat him in a race before he retired. Then...” Mondo’s face scrunched up. “The truck... it came toward me... I was too caught up in winning that I didn’t know what the hell was happening until Daiya shoved me out of the way and got hit in my place.”

Mondo’s eyes gleamed.

“Before he died, Aniki told me to lead the gang to greatness... He told me I could do it. He said I was strong enough but that’s a fucking lie!” Mondo punched the floor, baring his teeth. Tears dripped off his cheeks. “I was too weak then and I’m too weak now... and then, when I saw Aniki in the water and I looked up, I thought I saw him for real, staring straight at me... calling me strong... calling us strong... saying he believed in me... I thought I saw Aniki taunting me but it was Kyoudai! And I killed him again!” Mondo pressed his forehead against the floor. “I’m as bad as Togami!”

Makoto found he could speak again but only in a strangled voice. “Oowada-kun, that’s not true. Ishimaru-kun might not be dead... when Maizono-san died, she reverted back to normal. Ishimaru-kun is still wearing his magical girl outfit. I think he just lost consciousness.”

Kiyotaka groaned but didn’t rouse.

Remembering the witch, Makoto directed his attention toward it. The witch levitated some distance away.

“It’s not attacking us,” said Makoto. That should have been a good thing.

“It knows we’re not strong enough to win.” Mondo stood up, face streaked with tears. “It’s waiting for us to fall into total despair before it feeds. Of all the times for Togami not to show up... at least he’s not here to see what a fuck up I am. Shame...” He chuckled. “The bastard would have liked to see my last fuck up...”

“Your last...?” Makoto widened his eyes. “Oowada-kun, you don’t mean...?”

Mondo aimed the back of his hand at Makoto’s face to show off the black mist in his Soul Gem. “I reckon I’ve got it in me for one last attack. I’m not going to last long, Naegi. I never was a good magical girl. But this time I’m gonna do something right. I can still fix things... like you said.” He snorted and made sure Makoto couldn’t see his face. “Make sure Kyoudai doesn’t beat himself up over this. And tell him I-!” Mondo shook his head. “Just make sure he’s okay. Sorry I talked so long... I wanted to get it off my chest before I died and you were there. I’ve never told anyone that crap. Not even Kyoudai. I guess I just wanted one person to know my story.”

“Oowada-kun?”

Mondo removed his Soul Gem from his hand and pulled a stop sign out of his pompadour. He flipped the Soul Gem over in his hand, other hand gripping the sign.

“Oowada-kun!”

Mondo struck his Soul Gem like how one may strike a baseball with a baseball bat.

His Soul Gem crashed into the witch.
Then... it exploded

and then

then

silence.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough, Aniki.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

"I want to trust you."

As I'm sure you're all aware, each witch in this fic is based on a canon character (the first three are from Dangan Ronpa Zero). This one is Chihiro. Unfortunately, I couldn't fit every character into this fic properly. I wanted to make sure every 'main' character has an important part to play rather than shoehorn them in, so a few only appear as witches.

Anyway, I don't think I made it clear in this chapter, but part of Chihiro's barrier is that it shows those trapped inside their hidden pasts and secrets, in reference to the second chapter of DR. It's how the witch destroys its victims. That's why Mondo saw Daiya in the puddle. Naegi, bless him, doesn't have any hidden pasts or big secrets so saw nothing unusual.

And although Mondo is dead, there is still a fair bit of Ishimondo left in this.
“Whoops-a-daisy, it looks like Mako-chin went and got himself killed. That wasn’t very clever. GAAHAAHEEHAA!”

The ache in Makoto’s everything blurred his vision. Above him were two distorted faces jumbled together with the kaleidoscope of a ceiling behind them. His left eye throbbed and he squeezed it shut, groaning at the stars that burst forth from the self-induced darkness. With his right eye, he squinted and tried to make sense of his surroundings.

Makoto realised the identifies of the two faces as soon as the second person spoke.

“Give me that.” Byakuya snatched from Syo the twig she had been poking Makoto’s eye with and tossed it over his shoulder. Makoto’s vision unclouded more, rewarding him with a clear view of Byakuya’s disappointment. “Oh. Naegi’s alive after all.”

He could have tried to sound relieved.

“So Mako-chin was only having a nap?” Syo inclined her head to one side, throwing up her hands. “That’s a funny place to take a snooze. Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey, Naeggy-eggy!”

“Wh...? What?” Carpet scratched the back of Makoto’s neck as he shifted and gathered enough strength to overcome the heaviness in his limbs. He pushed himself forward and rubbed his left eye with the heel of his hand.

Church. They were inside a church, him sitting on the carpet in the nave. No. Not a church. The church. Only the room was brighter than he remembered and Byakuya and Syo hadn’t gone with him. Mondo and Kiyotaka did. And the portal... the bridge... the witch... rain... Kiyotaka... Mondo...

Makoto widened his eyes and jerked his head left to right then back again. “Where are they?”

“Ishimaru is over there.” Byakuya motioned toward Kiyotaka, who sat motionlessly behind Makoto some distance away with his back to them. “When we got here, he was fending off the witch without making any real progress in defeating it.”

“And Oowada-kun? Where is he?”

“Dead.”

Kiyotaka tensed.

“D-Dead?” The word tasted of vomit. Pieces of his last conversation with Mondo replayed in his mind. Makoto swallowed down a scream. Screaming could wait until later. Besides, he doubted a scream would be able to squeeze its way through his throat. “So he defeated the witch... and died? He sacrificed himself for us?”

Byakuya folded his arms over his chest. “Not exactly. The witch overpowered him so we finished it off.”
“You should have seen us!” Syo clawed at her rosy cheeks, tongue squirming. “Byakuya-sama and I fought as one... and became one! We came together to make a whole like the perfect cup of ramen!”

“Shut up.” Byakuya glared at her. “I fought with you because Fukawa passed out when she saw Ishimaru’s head wound. Though I can’t say I enjoy her company much more than yours.” He stared at Makoto sidelong. “Naegi, I suggest you stop feeling sorry for yourself and leave. The cleaner will think you’re a piece of trash and sweep you away.”

Byakuya and Syo made to leave.

“Wait!” Makoto stretched out his arm, his fingers curling into a loose fist. “Why did you guys get here so late? You could have-!” The skin around his eyes bunched. “You could have saved him!”

“I never planned to participate this pointless game.” Byakuya stopped walking for a moment but didn’t turn around. “I knew there was something here and thought this would preoccupy you while I accomplished something worthwhile... only it turned out you found a witch after all. Then Monobear told me Oowada died and that you two were defenceless, and as Fukawa and I were nearby, I decided to finish it off for a Grief Seed and pay you back for warning me of Oowada’s underhand attack on Monday. Don’t bother asking for the Grief Seed- it’s useless to someone like you.”

He set off again.

Makoto bowed his head.

Byakuya’s retreating footsteps contrasted with Syo’s, both brisk but in a different way. Hers were irregular and loud, only inaudible when the church doors closed behind them.

Makoto’s nails bit crescent-shaped marks into his palms.

Dead. Mondo Oowada. Dead. Like Sayaka. Dead. His breath sawed the back of his throat. Mondo’s death shouldn’t have been a surprise. It should have been obvious. Magical girls contracted with Monobear for a wish worth dying for. Monobear said so itself. Sayaka made a wish she thought was worth dying for. As had Mondo. And Kiyotaka. Byakuya. Touko. Kyouko. They died how they wanted to die- for the wish they craved the most to be granted... or the wish they thought they craved most... He needed to persevere like Kiyotaka said... after Sayaka died...

The door creaked open.

“Naegi-chi... is that you?” It opened wider and Yasuhiro slipped into the room.

“Hagakure-kun?” Makoto disentangled himself from his thoughts and blinked. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey, I’m the one who should be asking you that.” Yasuhiro pointed at him, his sandals slapping along the nave as he clumped over.

Yellow light leaked from between Yasuhiro’s fingers that he quickly hid behind his back.

“So... uh... what are you doing here? Did you skip Asahina-chi’s club to pray? That’s not cool, man.” Yasuhiro shook his head. “You shouldn’t hide what you believe in... The walls have eyes, y’know. I saw one wink at me once after I set a boobytrap for Santa Claus, ‘right?” He suddenly looked thoughtful. “Though that might have been a mirror...”
“Is that a Soul Gem behind your back?” asked Makoto.

Yasuhiro yelped, flailing his arms and dropping what was indeed a Soul Gem orb. It thudded to the floor and rolled away. He crawled after it. “Naegi-chi, you know about Soul Gems?” His Soul Gem almost tumbled out of his grip again. “Y-You're not an esper, are you?”

“I just have good intuitions.” Makoto forced himself to smile, his face feeling like someone had dragged their fingers down it. “I’m not a magical girl myself but I know some people who are.”

“Is Ishimaru-chi one?”

Kiyotaka had barely moved since Makoto regained consciousness. He sat with his arms around his legs and with his chin resting in the dip between his knees. Had Kiyotaka not reacted to Byakuya’s mention of Mondo’s demise, Makoto would have thought Kiyotaka died while sitting down.

“... Yeah, he’s a magical girl too,” Makoto said, standing up and walking over to Kiyotaka. His feet dragged during the short journey and he laid his hand gingerly onto Kiyotaka’s shoulder. No reaction.

Dry blood clung to Kiyotaka’s hairline, staining his forehead like melted crayons left on a warm radiator. A few of the droplets clumped the hairs of his eyebrows together. Magical girl or not, a blow to the head with a sledgehammer must have hurt, especially from his best friend. Yet Kiyotaka’s expression gave away nothing, so empty it perhaps couldn’t be classified as an expression. An absence of expression better described it.

“Ishimaru-kun?” said Makoto.

Silence.

“Is... he okay?” Yasuhiro stood next to Makoto. “He’s a lot quieter than normal... You know,” he grinned, “it makes a nice change, him not shouting, ‘right? His voice always gives me a killer headache.”

Makoto suppressed the heat behind his eyes that begged to be fired at Yasuhiro. “Oowada-kun just died against a witch.”

“Ah.” Yasuhiro nodded. Then he screamed. “Ahhhhh! O-Oowada-chi?” He nearly tipped over backward, his arms windmilling. “N-N-No way!” Barely managing to regain his balance, Yasuhiro clapped his palms over his ears as if to block out the revelation. “Like... dead-dead?”

“Yeah. Dead-dead.” Whatever that meant. “We should take him home.” Makoto bit his lip. “Do you know where he lives?”

“Nope! But you know what? I have a better idea,” said Yasuhiro, recovering remarkably quickly from the news.

Anger spiked in Makoto’s gut but it soon melted into guilt. Of course Yasuhiro cared about what happened; however, someone needed to take charge now. And as a magical girl, Yasuhiro had most likely seen other magical girls die before. It desensitised him, something that made Makoto feel uneasy.

Yasuhiro rubbed the end of his nose. “Ishimaru-chi needs us to raise his spirits, ‘right? How about we go find a familiar or something? That’s what I was doing before I came here. Ikusaba-chi wanted to check out this shop that sells charms, only she didn’t know the way, so I took her and then what’d you know! My Soul Gem led me here to you guys.” He smiled nervously. “Maybe a
bit late but yeah. That’s why I’m here.”

A bit late.

“How would finding a familiar help Ishimaru-kun?” Makoto asked. “I don’t think he’s in much of a state to fight... or do anything.”

“He will be after he sees me take out a familiar.” Yasuhiro wagged a finger at Makoto. “It’ll inspire him, ‘right? Like... to keep moving forward. Something like that.”

“Hey, that might actually work.” Makoto looked at Kiyotaka. “Ishimaru-kun?” Receiving no response, he added, “Maybe we should get him outside first... I think this is one of the last places he wants to be in at the moment. Right, Ishimaru-kun?”

Kiyotaka didn’t respond.

“Right,” Yasuhiro said.

Together, they prised Kiyotaka’s arms away from his legs, draping his right arm over Makoto’s shoulders and putting his left arm around Yasuhiro. They shuffled along the nave and out into the entrance area of the church, Kiyotaka making no effort to walk by himself. To their left was a door with a translucent glass window, voices mumbling on the other side.

While someone died in their church, the staff had been in their office having a coffee break. None of them could have prevented Mondo’s death nor did Makoto expect them to, but their ignorance nonetheless burned his face.

Yasuhiro wrenched the front door open and shoved his shoulder into the shrinking gap. Makoto slunk through after the other two and the door thumped shut behind him. Ideally they would have sat down for a short rest but nowhere suitable initially caught their eye- the church stood upon a flat bit of land so boasted no steps and they couldn’t locate a bench. The only suitable seats were those by the tables inside a coffee shop opposite the church.

Burrowing a hand into his trouser pocket and hearing the jingle of coins, Makoto figured he could afford to treat them all to a drink. At least until Kiyotaka recovered a bit. Perhaps some caffeine would rejuvenate him and set his feet back onto reality.

First they found some public toilets to wash themselves in. Yasuhiro dabbed at Kiyotaka’s wound with wet tissues while Makoto inspected himself in the mirror. Mondo’s attack had given him a few cuts and a bruise on his left cheek. Along with the twinge in the back of his head, that seemed to be the only noticeable damage. He splashed his face with cold water.

Tidying their appearances took roughly five minutes, Yasuhiro plopping used tissues into a toilet and flushing them.

Kiyotaka frowned at the sink the entire time.

The coffee shop housed a variety of flavours: caramel, mint, chocolate, cinnamon and other spices. They combined into an inviting warmth which coaxed the students to a table away from the window front. Several customers sat around an oblong desk in the centre of the room, all using laptops and all too absorbed in whatever their headphones hummed into their ears, as well as the colours on their screens, to pay attention to three scruffy boys. Once Yasuhiro and Kiyotaka were seated, Makoto went to join the queue.

He reached the front soon after and placed his order. Now all he had to do was work out how he
was going to carry three hot cups to their table. Maybe he would be lent a tray.

“Do you need any help, Naegi-kun?” someone asked.

Makoto turned his head sharply.

Kyouko stared at him.

“Kirigiri-san?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Kirigiri-san!” he said again.

“That’s right,” she said. “May I sit with you?”

Makoto scratched the back of his head. “S-Sure.”

They returned to the table together. Only Yasuhiro greeted them, waving at Kyouko and moving along to the next chair so she wouldn’t have to wiggle past him to sit down.

The other vacant seat was beside Kiyotaka and opposite Kyouko. Makoto sat there.

Yasuhiro took an experimental sip of his drink. Then he took several before saying, “It’s awesome to see you, Kirigiri-chi!”

“It’s nice to see you too,” she replied. “You three were just the people I wanted to talk to.”

“Really?” He grinned. “Wow, what a coincidence you bumped into us then!”

‘Coincidence’ was perhaps not the right word to use.

“I spoke with Togami-kun and Fukawa-san earlier,” Kyouko said, clasping her hands together and setting them onto the table. “They informed me of your battle against the witch and of Oowada-kun’s death.”

Kiyotaka looked up without lifting his head.

“Fukawa-san?” said Yasuhiro. “You mean Togami-chi has a lady friend?” He clapped a hand over his mouth. “You mean Togami-chi has a friend? And he’s a magical girl too? And you as well?”

Kyouko averted her eyes, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I am a magical girl, yes.” Her gaze flicked back to Yasuhiro. “The witch in the church weaponized its victims’ weaknesses rather than using a weapon of its own, drawing out a person’s fears and anxieties until they succumbed to despair. Depending on the person, the growth of this despair could increase at a dangerous rate, perhaps even distorting an individual’s perceived reality. I didn’t anticipate Oowada-kun’s death, especially with Naegi-kun and Ishimaru-kun there to alleviate his turmoil... If I had been there, I might have been able to prevent what happened. But,” her face scrunched up for a moment, “I wasn’t. I failed...” The next sentence was whispered. “...Like I failed Maizono-san.”

“I don’t think any of us saw it coming,” Yasuhiro told her, setting down his paper coffee cup. The coffee stain on his upper lip curved down at the edges. “Don’t beat yourself up over it. So... is there anything else on your mind, Kirigiri-chi? You look like you’ve got more to say.”

She cut straight to the point. “In two weeks, a powerful witch will come to this city. As we are now, none of us can hope to defeat it when it arrives.”
Makoto let go of the plastic stirrer he had been using to swirl the cream on his coffee’s surface.

Steam floated out of Kiyotaka’s untouched drink.

“That’s why we need to form a team,” Kyouko said, her face hardening. “Me, you two, Togami-kun, Fukawa-san... and any other magical girls in this city.”

“Hang on.” Makoto raised his hands. “Kirigiri-san, how do you know so much about the witch they fought in the church? How do you know about this powerful witch? And how are you going to persuade Togami-kun and Fukawa-san to cooperate?”

“Yeah,” Yasuhiro said. “No offence, Kirigiri-chi, but Togami-chi’s not much of a team player. Also those other things.”

Kyouko closed her eyes. “I have fought a witch much like the one in the church and Togami-kun’s description of it confirmed the similarities. As for Togami-kun and Fukawa-san, I told them what I told you. I’m hoping they will warm up to us even if it’s not by much. We shouldn’t blindly distrust them... it’s as dangerous as blinding trusting them.” The corners of her mouth twitched into an almost smile. “In any case, they aren’t as bad as what they make themselves out to be.”

“Okay but what about the other witch?” Makoto persisted. “How do you know about it?”

“... Does it really matter how I know? Are you asking because you don’t believe me?”

“I do believe you,” he said. “That’s why I want to know. I went to Maizono-san’s apartment yesterday and realised you were her friend. And you’re my friend too.”

She stared at him, her lips parted.

“I want to trust you, Kirigiri-san,” Makoto said. “And... And I want you to be able to trust me! I want to know we’re doing the right thing.”

No one spoke for ten seconds.

Kyouko allowed herself a small smile. “I will try... trusting you a bit. For now, I can only share what I know to be fact. There are many things I don’t understand which I’m still investigating... but I know in two weeks, a witch will plague this city and it’s in our best interests to not make enemies with each other when we are against a common foe.” Her smile vanished. “But we must make sure we know who this foe is.”

Yasuhiro said, “It’s the witches, ‘right?’”

“Is that what you think? Naegi-kun, you’ve seen Maizono-san fight. Do you remember what tools she used?”

Makoto replied, “Well... she used knives... and I remember her using egg-timers as bombs... and frying pans as shields...”

“Yet she didn’t shield herself when her knives were thrown back.” Kyouko folded her arms over her chest. “Don’t you find that odd?”

Makoto opened his mouth. Then he closed it and tasted his drink. It was too watery. Too bitter.

Kyouko said, “I don’t want to go into details right now because I’m not completely sure myself and I don’t want to plant ideas into your head that turn out to be false. However, I don’t think
Maizono-san’s defeat was due to an error on her part.”

The cup in Makoto’s fist collapsed inward. Coffee scalded his hand but he didn’t care. Not even when her words chilled the rest of his body.

Yasuhiro’s gaze wavered. “You guys lost me at Maizono and everything else. How many magical girls are there?”

“How more than we know,” said Kyouko. She stood up, her chair scraping back. “I’m sorry I have to leave so soon but I’ve got homework. Take care.”

By ‘take care’, she most likely didn’t mean ‘as soon as the bell on the door jingles behind me, go find a familiar to destroy’. Yasuhiro drained his cup of its last few drops and rolled his head back as he waited for Makoto and Kiyotaka to finish their drinks. In the end, Yasuhiro snatched Kiyotaka’s cup from the table and gulped it down on their way out.

Sunset’s glow kissed the tops of skyscrapers in its gradual descent into evening. Kiyotaka regained the ability to walk unaided though he still didn’t talk. Not that it mattered- Yasuhiro gave him little opportunity to do so, silence or Makoto’s occasional comment punctuating their rather one-sided conversation.

“So my wish was for a crystal ball with sixty percent accuracy. Why didn’t I wish for one with one hundred percent accuracy? Dude, that’s not cool. Who would believe that? Sixty percent is way more legit, ‘right? ‘Sides, I would have the mafia on my back again if they knew I owned something that always predicted the future right. Naw, sixty percent is a good number. And with my thirty percent from before, that’s ninety! That’s nine in ten. And the one person who’s wrong? Talk about luck! Of the ten people, they were told the wrong thing. That’s pretty sweet, ‘right?”

“Not really,” said Makoto, stepping onto the road.

Yasuhiro tugged him back and told him to look both ways first.

Once they did and were on the other side, Makoto remarked, “It sounds unlucky to get an incorrect reading. Why didn’t you wish for a completely accurate crystal ball and then claim it was sixty percent accurate?”

“How long would that charade last for?” Yasuhiro asked. They came to the alley Makoto had passed through earlier with Kiyotaka and Mondo. “Naegi-chi, you’re making this way more complicated than it has to be.”

“I think you are.”

Yasuhiro turned his head toward Kiyotaka. “What do you think, Ishimaru-chi?”

Kiyotaka didn’t reply.

“Good answer.” Yasuhiro whipped out his Soul Gem from his pocket and grimaced at it. “I’m not picking anything up... Kirigiri-chi and Togami-chi must have done this place while they were in the area. Bummer.” He exhaled dramatically, combing a hand through his dreadlocks. “We’ll have to check out another part of the city. I hope my feet don’t get blisters. Asahina-chi might not let me swim if I’ve got flakey feet.”

Makoto could think of many things he would rather do than more walking so he volunteered to pay for everyone’s bus fares. While they waited for the bus to arrive, sitting in a row on a bench inside a transparent bus shelter, he watched Kiyotaka.
“Ishimaru-kun...” Makoto reached a hand toward Kiyotaka but ultimately withdrew it, laying it onto his lap instead. If only he had a way with words like Kiyotaka, whose voice always boomed as he demanded order in the homeroom. Kiyotaka, who sat on the end of Makoto’s bed the morning after Sayaka died and told him to persevere. Who now needed Makoto to do the same.

But no words sprung to mind.

Not including the driver, three other people were on the bus: a sleeping middle-aged man with his cheek pressed against a window, a boy slightly younger than Makoto and the purple-haired girl he saw on his first day of school and at the arcade. Those three sat relatively near the back and after Makoto paid for the bus fares, he and his companions chose seats close to the front. Kiyotaka sat next to Makoto while Yasuhiro twisted around to face them from the pair of seats ahead of them.

The journey was silent only in words. At each stop, the doors hissed and squeaked. Around them, the air trembled with intermittent coughs and the window beside Makoto buzzed. Yasuhiro seemed to have run out of material to discuss earlier and dozed off after a minute. Kiyotaka kept his fists on his lap, his mouth a pale line.

A bump in the road jolted Yasuhiro awake and they got off at the next stop. Separating them from Makoto’s house was a five minute walk. They headed in its general direction, Yasuhiro fronting the trio with his Soul Gem held toward the sky.

It pulsed light three minutes later.

“We’re close to something!” Yasuhiro’s pace quickened and he dragged Kiyotaka along. “You guys ready? Ishimaru-chi will be right as the angle of a boomerang in no time!”

His Soul Gem led them between two houses and into a woodland area. Makoto had toured there a few times with family- in the summer, it was a pleasant location for picnics. A dirt trail threaded through the trees, eventually leading to shrubbery and a gate. In the past, there had been geese on the other side of the gate, and Makoto and his sister often saved bread from their sandwiches so they could feed them. The geese left a few years ago and the excursions fell out of habit.

They forged through, their footsteps cracking the undergrowth. Darkness shifted in the fading light. Shadows of tree branches and creatures shuddered in the corners of the students’ vision, never staying still long enough for the boys to discern their exact nature.

An airplane rumbled from above.

Yasuhiro’s fingers found Makoto’s sleeve. “Rin... Pyou... Tou...”

“Hagakure-kun?”

“Sha... Kai... Jin... Retsu... Zai... Zen!”

Nothing happened.

“Hagakure-kun?” Makoto repeated.

Yasuhiro wet his lips with his tongue. “Don’t worry... It’s safe. All we’ve got to worry about now are rogue squirrels and witches, but I’ve got the feeling this is just a familiar.”

“Just... a familiar,” Kiyotaka croaked.

“... Yeah.” Yasuhiro straightened up, beaming with pride. “That’s right, Ishimaru-chi.” He blinked
at the ground and squinted. “What’s that?”

Buds popped out of the grass in a circle formation around them, maturing before their eyes. Red stems shot upward, branching off near the top and blooming yellow button-shaped flowers. Tansies— that was what they were. Makoto knew this because his mother identified them during various picnics. But these tansies lit up the surrounding area like fireflies, brighter than Yasuhiro’s Soul Gem.

“Stand back, Naegi-chi,” said Yasuhiro.

Yasuhiro’s transformation consisted of a lot of smoke and smelled of fireworks.

Makoto coughed, flapping his hand at his face.

The air cleared. Yasuhiro was wearing his magical girl outfit: a saffron off the shoulder shirt, a rope belt and a layered dark olive skirt that matched the cape pinned to his shoulders.

One of the tansies exploded. From its yellow remains unfurled a strawberry-haired cherub. The other tansies shared the same fate as the first that exploded and more cherubs emerged. Each were unique— one had a topknot, another a ribbon around its waist and a third wore a mint cream dress. They flew in a circle aloft of the boys, thumping their fluffy white wings until there were six of them.

Then they soared away. Tansies popped out of their shadows.

Yasuhiro whipped off his headscarf and flicked his wrist. His headscarf straightened and from its folds fell out a grenade that landed in his palm. “Try to keep up, Naegi-chi.”

With unexpected speed, Yasuhiro sprinted after the familiars. He squeezed the grenade, pulled out its pin and tossed it at them. Crackling that sounded like thunder drowned out the familiars’ squeals and the grenade’s detonation discharged metal fragments.

One familiar was too slow and a bit of grenade sliced through its cheek. It melted into pink liquid that dribbled onto the grass.

The next grenade was acquired in the same way as the previous grenade. But this time, one of the familiars kicked the grenade back, singing the top of Yasuhiro’s hair as he threw himself to the ground.

“Hagakure-kun!” Makoto stopped beside Yasuhiro.

Yasuhiro shooed at him with one hand and rose. Where he had been lying on his stomach was a cannon. He kicked it and jumped on once its wheels started rolling. It drove over stones and other bumps in the path. To manipulate the angle, Yasuhiro transferred his weight from one foot to the other and aimed at the familiars.

A cannonball struck one of them.

His grip on his headscarf tightened but soon slackened when a figure swooped down from a tree near the current location of the familiars.

Kiyotaka.

Blood-curdling screams punctured Makoto’s ears. Kiyotaka’s katana separated a familiar’s head from the rest of its body and he turned toward his next victim. The remaining three disbanded,
fleeing in different directions.

Kiyotaka pulled out a pair of katanas from his chest pocket, bringing his weapon count up to three. Two were hurled at different familiars, piercing their hearts, while he kept hold of one katana and gave chase to the final familiar.

Moonlight defined his body’s contours as he hacked at the final familiar. When his feet slammed into the ground, he continued slashing.

Makoto and Yasuhiro caught up to him.

“See?” Yasuhiro said, panting. “Watching me fight got him all fired up. Yo. You can stop now, Ishimaru-chi.”

Kiyotaka continued slashing.


Kiyotaka continued slashing.

“Do you guys reckon the other flowers back there made more?” Yasuhiro groaned. “I hope not. I really need to go to bed.”

“I’ll destroy them,” Kiyotaka muttered, breathing loudly. He continued slashing. “I will destroy... every familiar... every witch... for Kyoudai...!”

Yasuhiro laughed. “That’s the spirit!”

It required a lot of strength for Makoto not to punch Yasuhiro’s mouth. “Ishimaru-kun... What happened to Oowada-kun wasn’t your fault. You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“Those words...” Kiyotaka dropped his katana, his shoulders trembling. “Am I... so low... that you have to console me...? That you feel the need... to convince me... I couldn’t have stopped him? But if I had been strong enough... I could have stopped him in time... before he-!”

Makoto grabbed Kiyotaka’s shoulder.

Kiyotaka staggered out of his reach, spinning around on his heel so he could glare at them.

“Ishimaru-kun, do you remember what you told me when Maizono-san died?” Makoto’s extended hand trembled. “You told me to keep living! You have to do it for Oowada-kun and for yourself! Please... don’t beat yourself up over this. It’s okay to be upset... I’m upset too... but you can’t let it destroy you! Me... Hagakure-kun... Kirigiri-san... We’re your friends! We’ll help you!”

“You are weak, Naegi-kun!” Kiyotaka pointed at him, his eyes glistening. “Wearing your emotions on your sleeve like you do! Weak! Pathetic! You... You can never hope to understand! No one can!”

“Ishimaru-kun...”

Kiyotaka escaped up a tree.

Yasuhiro squeezed Makoto’s shoulder. “I think the best thing to do now is let him find his own way. Let him get out all the bad vibes messing up his humours.”
Next time:

"You’re becoming what you hate the most."
You’re Becoming What You Hate the Most

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I don’t get it,” said Aoi, her elbow hitting her desk with a clonk. Around her, the homeroom buzzed with conversation much louder than its usual noise level. “First Ishimaru and Oowada were bumping heads, then they were laughing and finishing each other’s jokes, and now Ishimaru is stomping around all grumpy-looking.” She cupped her chin and sighed. “Guy friendships are a complete mystery.”

Kyouko looked away from her lunch to give Aoi a small smile. “Friendships in general can be quite difficult to understand.”

Aoi exhaled through her nose. “I guess. Hey, Naegi, you’ve been hanging out with them a lot recently.” She turned her attention to Makoto. “What’s up with those two?”

Before Makoto could answer, Yasuhiro glanced up from his crystal ball. “It’s like you said, ‘right? Dudes bond differently. Well, that’s what people claim, anyway.” He dragged his palm up his forehead and blew out a puff of air. “You know what’s real confusing? Circular theorems.”

“Mm,” went Aoi, starting her yakisoba bread. She furrowed her brow. “Even so, Ishimaru has still been acting really weird today.”

Kiyotaka was the first person to exit the room at lunch time. Sighs of relief had swept across the majority of students like dominoes toppling over, not waiting until he was gone before they sounded. He hadn’t demanded his classmates bow that morning and he refrained from patrolling the homeroom between lessons; most of the class were in no rush to question him about his sudden shift in character.

“Maybe they fell out and that’s why Oowada didn’t come today,” Aoi suggested, sitting up. She tapped her chin. “Or maybe Oowada is sick. I think there’s something going around. He could have caught what Kabi-chan has.”

“If you ask me, Ishimaru has at long last learned his place.” Byakuya curled his mouth into a smirk, eating alone at his desk but situated near enough to overhear their conversation. “It’s about time. For someone like him who parrots about teamwork and getting along, it’s inevitable his psyche would finally break.” He closed his eyes, still smiling slightly. “It’s a good thing too: his contrived optimism was beginning to grate on me.”

Aoi glared. “No one asked you.”

Byakuya retaliated with a glare of his own, no longer smiling. “And no one asked you to attach your worthless comment to my observation, but did that stop you? I’m not telling you about your little friend to be unkind. I’m simply stating the truth. Perhaps you could learn a thing or two from Ishimaru and join the real world as well.”

“Aori’s tone set aflame and she slammed her hands onto her desk, red in the face.

Byakuya retaliated with a glare of his own, no longer smiling. “And no one asked you to attach your worthless comment to my observation, but did that stop you? I’m not telling you about your little friend to be unkind. I’m simply stating the truth. Perhaps you could learn a thing or two from Ishimaru and join the real world as well.”

“Aoi’s gaze dropped to her barely eaten bento. In a tart voice, she said, “One of these days, I’m
going to slap him so hard.”

For once, Makoto wanted Kiyotaka to demand that Yasuhiro not wear earphones during class and Mukuro not text her sister from under her desk. As long as Kiyotaka showed even a bit of his former self, then Makoto would have been satisfied. However, Kiyotaka didn’t even attend school on the following Monday and Makoto hadn’t seen him at all during the weekend.

Swim club commenced with three members. Four if one counted Yasuhiro’s late addition though any hesitation to label him an official member was understandable - his third appearance at the club was his fourth time attempting to swim, but he didn’t like talking about the first occasion. Apparently that involved the mafia.

“Stomach up!” Aoi shouted, thrusting out her chest to demonstrate but there was little chance Yasuhiro could see her with all his splashing. “You’re getting water in your mouth because you’re not aligning your spine with your neck. You’ve got to suck in air, not breathe it all out!”

Yasuhiro arched his back, swallowing more water and spluttering as he flailed his limbs in a body of water he could safely stand upright in.

Aoi ran her hand down her face. “You’re not doing the position right. Get out and we’ll go over it where it’s dry.”

Near where Yasuhiro was waddling toward the ladder, Mukuro had reached the pool wall and she kicked off it. She raised her head to breathe as she passed Makoto in the adjacent lane, both students grinning at each other before submerging their faces.

After so much drama and stress, swimming made a refreshing change from witch hunting. While one presented danger, the worst Makoto feared to receive while in the pool were cramps or a leak in his goggles that stung his eyes with chlorine. Swimming offered a different freedom to that of a magical girl’s - his feet fluttered, his arms rotated and it almost felt like he was flying. It reminded him of Sayaka’s graceful leaps and of the motorcycle Mondo produced with his magic. Only Makoto’s alternative was safer: he didn’t fear swimming. He didn’t fear for his safety nor for the others, what with Aoi on lifeguard duty.

Practice concluded with a game of freeze tag in the shallow end of the pool. Aoi blew into her whistle and gathered them around, volunteering herself as ‘it’. According to the lesson plans she obtained in a google search, an unstuck player needed to swim through a person’s legs to unfreeze them, but she said they only needed to tap someone’s shoulder to free them for Yasuhiro’s sake. Not just because he could barely swim but because of the daunting size of his hair.

“It’s a shame everyone else isn’t here,” Aoi said before the game started. “You can barely play it properly with only four people. Sakura-chan’s dad told me she got ill while visiting Kenichiro in the hospital so she has to stay there until she gets better, and I don’t know where Oowada is. And it’s weird for a guy like Ishimaru not come to school at all...”

“Ogre-chi got sick?” said Yasuhiro, his hand flying to his mouth. “But she’s huge. It’d have to be a pretty big cold to get the better of her, ‘right?’

Mukuro cut in before Aoi could reprimand him. “As for Ishimaru-kun, his grandfather got forced out of office. He probably needs some space. We should leave him alone for now.”

Freeze tag took up the last half hour. After Aoi tagged everybody within the first five minutes, she
bequeathed the ‘it’ role to Mukuro who spent a lot of time chasing Aoi. The two boys stood still for the most part, feeling the water lap at their thighs as they waited for Aoi to dodge around Mukuro and free them. By the time Mukuro managed to tap Aoi’s foot, only a few minutes remained so the four students sat in a line at the edge of the pool.

Aoi kicked out her feet, flicking up water. “Even if this club isn’t very popular, I love running it.” She tilted her head back and studied the off white ceiling. “I used to be in five clubs at my old school and swimming was always my favourite.”

“Five clubs?” Mukuro repeated, wringing her hair. Droplets rippled the surface, distorting her reflection a bit. “I can barely bring myself to do my eyeliner every morning.”

Mukuro’s face lacked any smudges so she must have put on waterproof makeup. Or none at all - Makoto had no idea what the default thickness for girls’ eyelashes was.

“Eh?” went Aoi, snapping her head forward. “Is it... weird?” Her body tensed. “Me being so sporty?”

“Of course not,” Makoto said.

“But it’s not feminine, right?” Aoi averted her eyes, her shoulders drooping. “Everyone tells me that. My parents, the guys at my old school... but I’ve never really cared about anything except sports. Sports gets my heart pumping. But it also scares people away.” Her forehead creased. “So maybe... I shouldn’t...?”

“I think you’re fine the way you are,” Makoto told her, leaning forward so he could see her better.

“You think?”

He nodded, feeling a smile stretch across his mouth. “That’s what I like about you, Asahina-san. You’re enthusiastic. It’s inspiring. People who find it weird aren’t worth your time.”

So maybe Makoto was fine the way he was even if he wasn’t a magical girl.

“You know what? You’re right!” Aoi perked up. “Why should I have to change who I am when I’ve got friends like you guys?” Her eyes seemed to sparkle. “We should totally hang out this weekend. All of us.” She looked away from Makoto, still grinning. “Hey, is that...?” Aoi squinted. “Kirigiri-chan?”

Indeed it was. Kyouko’s bare feet slapped as she approached, her eyes focused on Makoto. She wasn’t wearing a swimsuit, still in her school uniform, and her skirt flapped against her thighs.

Mukuro narrowed her eyes.

“Kirigiri-chan!” Aoi scrambled to her feet. “You’re too late to join in today but you can swim with us tomorrow. I was just saying how we should all go somewhere this weekend. Do you want to come too? The more the merrier, right?” She cupped the back of her head. “Heh heh!”

“I’d like that,” Kyouko said, reciprocating Aoi’s smile with a smaller one. “We could go to the arcade. But I’ll have to decline your invitation to join this club for now... I’m only here to talk to Naegi-kun.”
Makoto adjusted his collar as he left the changing room. Waiting just outside the door for him was Kyouko. She walked away and Makoto followed after her, neither speaking until they arrived at the shoe lockers.

“I have a request,” she said.

“S-Sure.” Makoto closed his locker. He shouldn’t have felt wary: he and Kyouko reconciled last Thursday. However, neither had spoken since about this powerful witch nor about the circumstances surrounding Sayaka’s death. By now, Makoto had realised Kyouko would tell him these sorts of things in her own time, and so his throat tightened as he turned his head. “What is it?”

Kyouko said, “I want you to come with me to see Togami-kun and Fukawa-san.”

“With you?” He stared. “To see...? Now?”

“Yes.” She scraped back a loose strand of hair, her cheeks tinged with pink. “I know I’m springing this on you but I need to discuss with them the thing we talked about last Thursday.”

“You mean the witch?” asked Makoto. “But... didn’t you say you already told them what you told us?”

“That’s right.” Kyouko retrieved her outdoor shoes from her locker and shut its door. “But I also said we need to form a team. To do that, we need to ensure we’re all on the same side.”

They departed the school together. Outside was typical spring weather: not as chilly as winter but not hot enough for Makoto to remove his jacket. A blonde girl and a grey-skinned boy walked past them at the front gate of the school, too enthralled in the four hamsters poking out of folds in the boy’s scarf to pay attention to Makoto and Kyouko.

Nevertheless, Kyouko waited until those two were out of earshot before speaking. “I wish to invite Togami-kun and Fukawa-san to Asahina-san’s day trip. They’ve never been a hobby of mine, social outings, but at the arcade with you and Maizono-san...” She looked down, fighting back a smile that partially leaked across her face. “I had fun.” Kyouko lifted her gaze from the floor. “And I think you would be the best person to convince them to tag along.”

“Me?” Makoto thumbed his chin, giving a short and shaky laugh. “I don’t know if that will work. Togami-kun doesn’t really see me as a friend and Asahina-san doesn’t seem to like him all that much. And Fukawa-san... I’ve only met Fukawa-san a few times.”

Once if he omitted his meetings with Syo.

“I believe if anyone’s able to persuade them, it’s you,” Kyouko said, her face as self-assured as the tone she spoke in. They set off down the street, Kyouko’s hair swishing as they rounded a corner. She kept her eyes ahead. “You are honest, Naegi-kun. Foolishly so. There’s a goodness in you that I’ve never encountered in anyone else. Those two are unlikely to trust my motives but they will see you’re genuine in your offer of friendship. Showing emotions on the outside...” Her eyelids twitched. “That isn’t how I do things.”

Foolishly honest. Had she meant it as a compliment?

“I’ll try,” Makoto said. “I’m not sure that I’ll succeed but I’ll try.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”
Kyouko took Makoto to the house where he had first met Syo. Makoto didn’t know how Kyouko knew about it but decided if it was important for him to know, she would tell him. Besides, she was already acquainted with both Byakuya and Touko. Knowing about this place wouldn’t be too strange.

Only Touko was inside, seated at a desk with uneven legs. She didn’t notice them at first, her braids sitting either side of a yellowing piece of paper. On one corner of the desk was a candle that threatened toward the end of its lifespan, its glow accentuating her poised lips and half-lidded eyes while the rest of her lay in shadow. Touko breathed loudly as she wrote and she didn’t hear them until Makoto stepped on a loose floorboard.

Her pen ripped through the paper as she jerked her head up, anger swiftly consuming her confusion.

“It’s you!” Touko shook her fists. Her right hand was smudged with ink. “Y-You...! I remember you... I remember both of you...! Just now, you crept up on me on purpose, d-didn’t you?” She attacked the air with her index finger. “Y-You wanted to s-sneak up behind me and steal my story so you could show them to your friends and laugh!”

Makoto jumped back, almost tripping over a concrete brick. “We didn’t even know you were writing. I-!” He waved his hands. “We’re here to invite you and Togami-kun to the arcade on Saturday!”

Touko let out a hollow laugh. “You’re not going to fool me... I’m wise to these games! W-Why would you want us... me... to go with you on some kind of double date?” She curled her fingers into her palms. “It’s s-so you can make her feel prettier by putting her beside someone ugly like me, isn’t it? And you want to embarrass me b-by making me ask Byakuya-sama... when he has better things to do...”

‘Her’ must have been Kyouko.

Makoto’s cheeks burned. “It’s not like that at all. It won’t be just us four, I promise! Some people in our class are going out as friends and we thought you might like to come along...”

“F-Friends! What kind of idiot do you take me for? F-Friends indeed!” Touko pointed at him. “Y-You just plan to stand me up... I’ll be waiting in the rain for you to never come while you all laugh about it at home where it’s warm!”

She sported the largest persecution complex he had ever seen.

“We wouldn’t do that,” he said. “That would be cruel.”

“But it wouldn’t be beneath you... to do such a thing...” Touko looked away, calming down slightly. “P-People do it all the time... making others the punchlines... to the sick jokes of their fleeting boredom...”

Makoto dithered but ultimately came over.

Touko shielded her paper with her arm, still looking away. “Your shadow is blocking my light...”

“You write?” he asked, trying for a light tone.

Her tongue played with her answer for a moment. “Yes,” Touko said. “After all, I don’t fight
witches all the time... and I prefer studying here than at home. It’s... a hobby of mine. Writing. I
write novels... I even had some published before I... before.”

By now, Kyouko had joined them. Her shadow bled into Makoto’s.

“It’s nothing you would be interested in,” said Touko quickly. “It’s... mostly romance. Go ahead.”
She glanced at them. “Laugh. T-That’s why you asked, isn’t it?”

I’ve never been very good at it. Do your plots come from your imagination or do you draw from
experience?”

Touko whined. “It’s fantasy! A-All of it is fantasy! There, I said it!” Her pen cracked in her
tightened grip. “Are you happy?” She loosened her fist and shards of plastic pattered against the
desk. Momentarily anxious, she stroked her hand in search of any injuries, but her anger soon
resurfaced. “Are you s-satisfied? G-Getting an ugly girl like me to admit n-no one will ever want
her in reality?”

Footsteps from outside substituted for an answer.

“What are you raving about now?” Byakuya ducked through the doorway. He spotted the other
two and his grimace deepened. “And what are you doing here?”

“They invited us to go to the arcade with them this weekend!” Touko jumped up. “T-They barged
in like they own the place... It’s like they were raised in a barn!”

Byakuya folded his arms over his chest. “It’s not like you own this building any more than them.
Perhaps they mistook this dump for a barn. It certainly smells like one or maybe that’s just your
stench. Seriously, go jump in a river or roll around in a ditch. Either one will improve your smell.”
Makoto glanced at Touko, fearing that Byakuya had upset her, but Touko seemed unruffled by the
barrage of insults. “What’s this about an arcade?”

Makoto explained. Byakuya listened. Touko chewed a fingernail.

“So you’re trying to win me over?” Byakuya smirked. “Does my approval really mean that much
to you that you came crawling here offering cheap amusements? I told you before,” he glared at
Makoto, “I don’t need you guys protecting me nor do I need you holding me back. You’re wasting
my time.”

Kyouko finally spoke. “Togami-kun, the witch due to come here within a fortnight will reign ravoc
you’re not in any position to defeat. You will lose.”

“I never lose.”

“I’ve seen this witch before,” she said. “Once... and it ripped apart an entire city.” Byakuya was
unimpressed. “Now it’s on its way to this city.” Still unimpressed. “That’s why I believe there are
so many witches and magical girls here. They are anticipating its arrival. It’s what drew you to this
city, isn’t it, Togami-kun? This city is becoming the heart of despair and it led you here... and you
took Fukawa-san with you.”

That got a reaction out of him. Byakuya’s mouth twitched. “What are you getting at?”

Kyouko’s features hardened. “I’m saying there is more to this than you think and even more to it
than I know. Alone, neither of us stand a chance, but together we might find the answers we’re
searching for and survive. If you don’t want a friendship, fine.” Byakuya stared at her. Kyouko
turned her head away. “Your blood will be on your hands. But I gave Fukawa-san a Grief Seed and she accepted it, which means she didn’t object to working with us nor does she intend to act hostilely toward us. It’s Magical Girl code she and I are both familiar with.”

“You what?” Byakuya rounded on Touko. “Is this true? When did this happen?”

Touko winced. “M-My Soul Gem was almost completely corrupted when she gave it to me! That m-murderer, she never b-bothers with Grief Seeds... and then Kirigiri came to me with one on the first night after we moved here!” She poked a finger into the corner of her mouth. “Kirigiri said she knew us!”

The day they moved here? Kyouko knew Touko at that time?

Byakuya reluctantly placed his gaze onto Kyouko, regaining some composure. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, Kirigiri, but I may find it in myself to consider your offer. There are admittedly several things bothering me and you all might help me solve them.” He turned away. “How about we go find a witch? If we’re going to be working together, I want to see how you fight.”

“Now?” said Makoto. “But it’s getting late...”

“Oh?” Byakuya glanced over his shoulder. “You’re still here? No one is stopping you from obeying your curfew. Unlike us three, you aren’t a magical girl so I don’t care what you decide to do. You have to return to the city to get home so it’s not as though it’s out of your way.”

Even so, it sounded like another tedious journey lay ahead.

They filed out of the building and crossed the garden, pausing at the gap in the fence as only a single person could pass through it at one time. Touko went first, Byakuya followed after and then Makoto stepped through.

Makoto held onto a stake as he transferred his weight between feet, accidentally pressing his hand onto a sharp splinter of wood. He yelped.

“What’s wrong?” Kyouko asked. The other two turned as well.

Makoto studied his finger. “I cut it... It’s nothing.”

“I-Is it bleeding?” Touko asked.

“A little.”

Byakuya stepped between Makoto and Touko. “Fukawa, don’t look. I don’t want to deal with that other personality of yours.” He noticed Makoto’s confusion. “Fukawa is hemophobic. It’s what triggers her into switching to Genocider Syo... that and sneezing. Now stop dawdling. Our ride is only a minute walk from here.”

Their ride was a yellow taxi. A taxi was not what Makoto had expected. Makoto had imagined a limo with tinted black windows and maybe a bowling alley in the back, or a limo with an interior like that of a spaceship in a science fiction movie. Not a vehicle driven by a balding man wearing a too small jacket and a nicotine-stained smile.

Byakuya claimed the seat beside the driver while everyone else sat at the back with Kyouko in the middle. Touko huddled up by the window, her breath leaving condensation.

The taxi rumbled forward without Byakuya informing anyone of his desired destination. Ten
minutes later, the four students stepped onto a street in an area of town Makoto’s parents forbade him from ever going to.

“Do you usually take a taxi when you visit Fukawa-san?” Makoto asked.

“I don’t make a habit of doing either,” Byakuya replied as he paid the taxi driver. He cast the street a disapproving look.

Restaurants and clubs flashed neon signs at them. Makoto had once gone to one of the restaurants here with family but his parents’ distrust rested not with them but with the underground establishments beneath the neighbourhood’s tawdry surface.

Tourists often stopped by the area, taken in by men with fake grins. Here, money frittered away after a few drinks and memories blurred after strange-tasting beer, at least according to the rumours and stories friends of friends’ cousins told.

A pair of men passed the group, hugging each other as they stumbled and gulped down beer. It wasn’t a safe place for a student like Makoto, but perhaps it wasn’t as dangerous for three magical girls.

Byakuya pried his ring off his finger, frowning when it changed into an orb. “Keep walking. We’ll come across a witch soon enough. I’m sensing something nearby.”

Touko tucked her hands into her armpits and shivered, walking behind Byakuya and abreast with the other two.

“So...” Makoto scratched the back of his neck. “Fukawa-san, how did you meet Togami-kun? Did you go to school together?”

She stiffened. Byakuya apparently hadn’t heard Makoto over adjacent traffic and music pounding from inside nearby clubs. Touko judged the distance between them to be safe enough for her to answer. “W-Why are you interested in that?”

“Well... I thought if we’re going to be working together as friends, we should know more about each other. Us three are in the same class but I haven’t seen you at school.”

“I already told you I don’t do friends!” Touko checked whether Byakuya heard her outburst. It seemed he hadn’t. She lowered her voice. “But... if it’ll make you shut up... I guess I can tell you a bit about myself. I’ve b-been homeschooled for a while now. I met Byakuya-sama when I was hunting for witches and he...!” She grabbed her head with both hands. “Ah! You... You said you wanted to be friends so you could solicit blackmail material from me... and get me into trouble with Byakuya-sama! Ah... ha ha...! And to think I almost fell for a trap crafted by a simpleton like you!”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” said Makoto. “It wasn’t my place to ask. I’m sorry.”

Touko seemed stunned, looking away shortly after. “You’re p-probably trying to guilt trip me into telling you but it’s... fine. I won’t fall for it again. Except I called you an idiot!” She pressed a finger against her lips. “I can’t control my smelly mouth and n-now you’re going to make me pay for it!”

She definitely sported the largest persecution complex he had ever seen.

“I wouldn’t hate you over something like that,” Makoto said. Whatever she went through to acquire such anxiety must have been terrible, but he decided against asking her about it when she
responded so negatively to his previous question.

Byakuya came to a stop outside a manga store, the green gleam of his Soul Gem intensifying. Above the door was a picture of a busty anime character. Though the rest of the outlets in the street were open, brightly lit and full of people, a notice on the window of this shore explained that it was closed for the time-being due to a recent case of vandalism.

What looked like candyfloss spread across the door, eating at the glass until it was big enough for them to enter through.

This was the first time Makoto had seen Touko in her magical girl outfit. She wore a royal purple dress that ended mid-calf and flared out at the bottom. Her Soul Gem was a feather shape, pinned like a brooch to her black bow collar. Touko’s attire reminded him of a Victorian librarian, with its cuffed sleeves and ruffles and corset.

Everyone wore something unique. Makoto wondered what his would be like if he ever chose to form a contract. But did he still want to become one? Yes, he wanted to help his friends and everyone else, but was it worth the pain? Not just the pain that would be inflicted inward but the pain he would bring other people. How would his parents cope if he died? And his friends? What about them?

“Oi, Naegi,” Byakuya said. “Are you coming or are you just going to stand there monologuing into space? I don’t care which one you do but I want to know whether to lower my expectations of you now or later.”

Makoto twitched. “I’m coming!”

They hopped through the portal. On the other side was grass streaked with bookshelves that towered over the group, all tightly packed with manga volumes and other related merchandise. Cherubs flitted between the aisles, searching for any gaps they could slot more manga into. Makoto recognised them as the familiars he encountered with Yasuhiro and Kiyotaka.

Byakuya eyed the familiars. “There’s definitely a witch here.”

Touko wrinkled her nose. “And in a manga store of all places... I’m not surprised a witch made its home here. This building is an exemplar of dirty culture... filthy, vile, smutty culture...! I can feel it tainting me with vile thoughts!” She hugged herself, not as outwardly repulsed as her words would lead one to believe.

Kyouko aimed her pistol at one of the familiars and fired. It squealed, splattering pink liquid.

“Clean up on aisle five,” said a gravelly voice over an intercom. More familiars descended from the ceiling, clad in blue aprons. They attacked the pink aftermath with mops and spray bottles.

Touko, who on her left forearm wore a circular shield, pulled out from behind it a crossbow. She placed its stirrup onto the ground and loaded it with a bolt. The bolt glowed purple and she aimed at a familiar. “Let’s... get this over with.”

The familiars sensed the oncoming battle and shrieked, floundering in the air as Kyouko and Touko shot at them.

Byakuya swung his kusarigama’s weighted chain in a circle above his head, whipping it forward to ensnare one of the familiars. He yanked the familiar toward him, rushing forward and slicing it in half with his kama.
Another familiar charged at him from behind only to crash into Touko’s shield. Byakuya glanced over his shoulder and looked like he was about to something but decided against it. Instead he targeted a different familiar while Kyouko shot at the one flattened against Touko’s shield.

More familiars swooped down with cleaning products.

“Where’s the witch?” Makoto asked, ducking out of the way of a familiar.

Touko reloaded her crossbow and fired another bolt.

“Kirisuhi, you and Naegi search the left side. Fukawa and I will go right.” Byakuya sprinted off, not waiting for them to acknowledge his command. Touko responded first, stumbling as she chased after him.

Kyouko stood in front of Makoto, shooting at the familiars closest to them. When she needed to reload her pistol with a new magazine, black ribbon burst out of the ground and wrapped around nearby familiars, squeezing them until they exploded.

She reloaded her pistol.

“Can’t you make more guns appear?” Makoto asked. “It must be a pain having to reload during battle.”

“This isn’t my primary weapon,” Kyouko explained. “I don’t know how to create guns with magic so I have to use my grandfather’s. Doing so is most likely underhand but the universe doesn’t give a damn whether something is fair or not. It only cares about the outcome.”

“So what is your primary weapon?”

“A spear but I rarely use it.” Kyouko adjusted her hold on her pistol and surveyed the familiar-free aisle. “We might as well do what Togami-kun said and search the left side.”

None of the familiars in the adjacent aisle seemed interested in fighting but Kyouko fired at them anyway. She browsed through the shelves, searching for a hidden button.

Makoto plucked a book from one shelf and flipped through it, glimpsing images of monochrome loitas. He carried it under his arm and skimmed through a few more, examining the gap his actions left. Finding no secret switch, he replaced the manga.

Familiars flocked toward him.

He yelled.

Kyouko spun around and fired at them. “What did you do?”

Chest heaving, Makoto pointed feebly behind him. “I... I just looked through a few books. I even put them back afterwards! I swear!”

She quirked her eyebrows. “Did you return them to the right place?”

Makoto rubbed the back of his head. “I might have mixed them up a bit.”

“I wonder...” Kyouko kicked down the shelf beside Makoto. It crashed into the next row of shelves and so on, sweeping across the room in a wave of chaos. Above them, familiars thrashed and picked at the mess with brooms and tubes of glue. “Naegi-kun.” She shot at a pile of books. “Destroy as much manga as possible.”
That was something he could do. Makoto picked up a magazine and ripped it in half. One of the familiars noticed and clawed at its face. When he tore another magazine into two pieces, the familiar screeched and exploded into a puddle of pink liquid.

Touko and Byakuya ran over.

“‘If you’re going to demolish the place, tell us beforehand,’” Byakuya said, his gaze darting between Makoto and Kyouko several times. “‘If I had been a less attentive person, one of those shelves might have fallen on me. What the hell are you doing?’”

“‘Yeah,’” Touko said. “‘W-What’s the big idea? I knew you couldn’t be trusted!’”

Kyouko tugged at her tie and pulled out a spear, which she stabbed through a nearby familiar. “‘Naegi-kun discovered the familiars can’t stand to have anything out of place or damaged. If I’m right, the witch will come out to deal with us shortly.’”

“So... we just have to destroy this trash?” Touko fired a bolt at a manga volume and immediately readied herself for the next one. “‘That’s fine with me!’”

It was not fine with the witch that came out after half the shelves’ contents had been damaged. The witch was a mountainous mass of sludge that moved in a succession of squelching lurches. A few familiars didn’t dodge out of its way in time and were absorbed into it, their cries melting away along with their bodies.

Touko fired a bolt at it. The witch’s body wobbled and the bolt rebounded.

“‘W-What are we supposed to do now?’” Touko shifted a foot back, staring at the witch in horror. “‘It’ll just deflect or eat whatever we attack it with!’”

“Maybe if it eats too much, it’ll explode?” suggested Makoto.

“In that case,” Byakuya said, “feel free to sacrifice yourself so you can further our knowledge. Alternatively, you can shut up and not offer any more stupid ideas. We need a diversion so those of us with a positive IQ have more time to think up a solution.”

“I can distract it for a bit,” Touko said. She furrowed her brow, concentrating. Her Soul Gem shone a beam of light onto the floor. A pair of feet materialised within the light, then a pair of legs and a torso and more until a duplicate of Touko stood before them.

Touko’s replica leaped toward the witch to capture its attention and dashed away when the witch gave chase.

“It’s not powerful to destroy the witch,” Touko told them, “but I d-don’t think the witch is competent enough to realise it’s pursuing a fake... so...” She bit her lip. “What do we do now, Byakuya-sama?”

Byakuya stroked his chin. “Even if the witch has a limited stomach capacity like Naegi said, it’s unlikely we have enough to satisfy it. Judging by what happened to the familiars when they touched the witch, as well as the mucus it leaves behind, making direct contact isn’t a viable option either.”

“What about Kirigiri-san’s spear?” said Makoto. “Maybe she could slice through it or poke a hole in it?”

“I doubt she’ll cut all the way through before her weapon melts... but that’s actually not a bad
idea.” Byakuya lifted his head. “If Kirigiri carves an opening, Fukawa can use her magic to create an explosive bolt that will destroy it from the inside. Naegi, you and I will need to preoccupy it in the meantime. Take whatever intact manga you can find and throw it.”

They split up, Touko with Kyouko and Makoto with Byakuya. Makoto scavenged around for unscathed manga and threw whatever he found at the witch.

It groaned as paper disintegrated against its skin. Where the manga touched it were cavities coated in what looked like burned sugar.

Kyouko sprung into the air and attacked the witch from behind, lacerating one of its cavities. Touko fired a red bolt into the incision. The witch collapsed in on itself, yowling, and Touko fired more.

Chunks of sludge spewed everywhere.

Their surroundings dimmed until they were all outside again by the glass front of the manga store. Makoto doubled over and wheezed, relief washing over him. No one died. They all lived. He laughed. They all lived this time.

Byakuya bent down to pick up a Grief Seed and held it against his Soul Gem. The blackness in his Soul Gem transferred to the Grief Seed which, after a pause, he then offered to Touko. “Here.”

“Eh?”

He pressed the Grief Seed into her palm. “Use it before I change my mind.”

She blushed as she cleansed her Soul Gem into a bright purple colour. “Byakuya-sama... r-really does care about me! If I’m dreaming... I don’t want to wake up! Or... Or if I do, l-let it be beside Bya-!”

“Keep your fantasies to yourself. I could give you a handful of mud and you would make a shrine for it. You’re more useful with a pure Soul Gem, that’s all.” Byakuya turned his head away. “...And you deserve it. You did a fine job back there.”

Kyouko nodded.

Makoto gave a thumbs up.

Touko squeaked, the happiest Makoto had seen her.

Kiyotaka sheathed his katana. The final familiar - a wispy fox - disappeared in a passing gust of wind.

His skirt fluttered. He closed his eyes.

“Your parents told me you haven’t gone home since Friday and they don’t know where you are,” said Kyouko.

She threw a Grief Seed at him.

Kiyotaka turned to catch it.
Crickets chirped.

Kyouko’s eyelids drooped. “Ishimaru-kun, your Soul Gem is corrupted with a lot of despair. I don’t think you’ve just been going after witches... You’ve fought whatever familiars you’ve come across as well.”

A train thundered along the bridge above their heads.

“You’re depleting your magic faster than you’re gaining it,” she said. “Your recklessness will be your undoing if you don’t take care of yourself. You’re becoming what you hate the most.”

“Are you saying familiars aren’t worth my time?” Kiyotaka’s eyes glinted. “Why should I differentiate between witches and familiars? They both kill people... like Kyoudai... and I’m not going to let that happen again! And if any of you bastards stand in my way, I’ll slaughter you as well!”

The Grief Seed struck the ground, rolling onto the pavement. Another train approached and Kiyotaka leaped into the air, soaring upward and landing onto it.

Kyouko bit her lip.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

"I can’t afford to make mistakes."
The updates will be more irregular now, I imagine. Sometimes it can be hard for me to write things due to concentration problems and motivation problems and being-really-really-picky-about-wording problems. Also I'm hopefully going to be pretty busy in a few weeks so yeah.
to get away for a bit and think. We... We think some of the kids in school have been saying unkind things to him about his grandfather, but Kiyotaka’s never been one to talk about his feelings.” She stood abruptly, leaving her barely touched drink on the table. “It’s getting late. If he contacts you, please tell us right away.”

Makoto couldn’t make eye contact. “... I will.”

They barely fitted inside Yasuhiro’s apartment, ‘they’ comprising of Makoto, Kyouko, Byakuya, Syo and Yasuhiro himself. Sayaka’s living space had been cosy. Yasuhiro’s was cramped. He slept on a sofa, judging by the pillows tucked into its crevices, and he ate meals off the coffee table in front of his outdated television, judging by the dirty plates on it. The room smelled of tea despite there being no tea as well as a blend of herbs and spices despite there being no soup.

What Yasuhiro’s living room didn’t lack were playing cards, musty secondhand books and a disgruntled blond heir.

“Someone enlighten me,” said Byakuya, one of three settled on the couch. Maybe not settled - he sat with one leg crossed over the other and drummed his fingers against his folded arms as he spoke. Little seemed to be stopping him from springing to his feet and leaving. “Why are we meeting here when I have a commodious mansion?”

Kyouko, also on the couch, leaned forward so she could look past Syo and see him properly. “I don’t doubt you have cameras in every corner of your residence. We need complete privacy.”

Byakuya clicked his tongue but didn’t correct her.

“Ooh, we’re going to be doing something seeeeecret?” asked Syo with glowing cheeks. “Are we going to have an orgy? You three go in that corner,” she pointed, “and me and my darling will have the couch to ourselves!”

Yasuhiro waved his hands, nearly backhanding Makoto across the jaw. “Whoa, hold on! I haven’t even cleaned this place up... or put on cologne... and I don’t want you guys doing any of that here!”

Personally, Makoto would have mentioned the third objection first.

Kyouko shook her head before looking at each of them in turn. “I’m sure most of you have already guessed the topic.”

“This supposed witch due in a little over a week,” Byakuya said. His frown deepened. “Yes, I want to talk about that as well. Just how do you know it will come here as you claim it will?”

“You don’t need to know how I came to this conclusion.”

“I believe I do.” He uncrossed his legs. “If you expect me to play along with whatever you’re roping us into, I want proof you’re not feeding me a bunch of crap. Monobear hasn’t mentioned anything about this.”

“Monobear isn’t a reliable source.” Kyouko laced her fingers together and balanced her chin on top of them. “Hagakure-kun, would you mind making us tea? This might take a while.”

Yasuhiro headed toward the kitchen that was located in a nook within the living room.
Makoto got to his feet as well and gathered into his arms as much of the clutter on the coffee table as he could. The table had been completely covered except for the small spaces he and Yasuhiro cleared so they could sit on it.

“And you’re a reliable source?” Byakuya sneered at Kyouko.

Plates clacked as Makoto unleashed the contents of his arms onto the sink rack.

The kettle boiled. Mugs clinked in Yasuhiro’s hands.

“It’s not my style to play all my cards at once while others keep theirs hidden,” Kyouko replied. She flicked back her head, sitting up straight in the process. “Right now, I can’t trust any of you with my source of information. Until I know we’ve all got a common goal in mind, it would be improvident to share what I know. And any objections to this, Togami-kun, would only show me you’re hypocritical and not worthy of hearing what I will say when the right time presents itself. You can’t deny that you have your own share of secrets.”

Byakuya turned his head away and didn’t speak until Yasuhiro pressed a saucer into his hands. “...What needs to be discussed then?” he asked. “If you’re right, we can only wait for this witch’s arrival.”

“There’s more,” Kyouko said. “Togami-kun, you will have to relay some of this to Fukawa-san when Genocider Syo switches over.”

“Which is hopefully not any time soon.” Syo kicked out her legs and rested her heels on the table. Makoto shuffled away to give her more room. “I want to make a presence, you kn-!”

“THAT'S GENOCIDER SYO?” Yasuhiro’s cup fractured at his feet and tea stained the carpet. He fell backward and off the table. Rather than return to his feet, he pointed a trembling finger at Syo. “She’s...? Don’t kill me!” He scampered away on all fours. “My blood isn’t virgin!”

Silence.

A minute later, Byakuya said, “Oh. You didn’t know.”

“And you did?” Yasuhiro clutched his head. Makoto was tempted to fetch a pillow and fling it behind Yasuhiro before the poor guy fainted. “Way to keep me in the loop!”

“You know me?” Syo chirruped. “It’s always great to hear from a fan! Do you want my autograph?” She whipped out a pair of scissors and snipped the air. “You’re not cute enough to kill so I’ll just carve my initials and a message. Who should I address it to? Shall I cut it onto your behind?”

Syo darted past Makoto.

He tossed a pillow at her.

She turned around just as the pillow hit her in face and sneezed. The pillow landed by her feet.

“W-Where...?” No longer Syo, Touko inspected her surroundings with wide eyes. Byakuya had been right - sneezing triggered her into changing personalities. “Byakuya-sama, where are we?”

Yasuhiro blinked a few times but it didn’t clear the bewilderment from his face.

Byakuya noticed. “She has two personalities. How much will your silence cost?”
“... Two hundred thousand yen,” Yasuhiro replied.

“Deal.”

And Makoto had vowed to keep silent for free. Unbelievable.

“So... she won’t kill me now?” Yasuhiro stared at Touko, evidently not convinced.

“She’s been rather stagnant in that regard for the last month or two,” Byakuya said. He sipped his tea and grimaced.

Touko fidgeted. “Can... we ch-change the subject... instead of talking about that... that demon’s hobbies?”

Yasuhiro rubbed his chin. “Aren’t you the same person?”

“No!” Touko shrieked. Makoto swore the room shook. “We are not the same person! We’re not alike at all!”

Yasuhiro dived underneath the table and cowered, his head hidden below his arms.

“Fukawa. Hush.” Byakuya tasted his tea again and made a face. The tea wasn’t that bad, in Makoto’s opinion. “This discussion has veered off course enough. We’re in Hagakure’s apartment talking about important matters. Kirigiri, what else do you need to tell us?”

Kyouko, who during the last several exchanges had simply looked on with a bemused expression, nodded. “Our battle against the witch will be taxing. We’ll need to use a lot of magic so it’s important we have plenty of Grief Seeds at our disposal. On top of that, we’ll have to pool our magic and abilities to win. Therefore we should shed light on our strengths and weaknesses so we know how to counterbalance them. My unique ability is to create ribbons that can hold things and people.”

Yasuhiro came out from under the table but stayed on his hands and knees. “Uh... I can predict attacks with above par accuracy. That’s useful, ‘right?’”

They looked at Makoto.

“I’m not a magical girl,” he reminded them.

Byakuya gestured toward Touko. “You go next.”

She cast her eyes downward. “I... I can make copies of people or enemies... like you saw during our fight with the sludge witch. If I can imagine it, I can make it... usually.” Her hands wrung together. “And my crossbow’s bolts... have various properties too.”

Everyone turned to Byakuya; he placed his saucer onto the armrest beside him.

“... I can sense active magical girls, familiars and witches up to a certain distance away - a distance larger than what most magical girls can detect with their Soul Gems.” Byakuya pointed his nose at the door. “I’ve yet to be able to distinguish between witches and magical girls but I can tell how many are in one location.”

With an ability like that, he could have sounded happier.

“Togami-kun, your ability is indispensable to our victory,” Kyouko said. “It’ll make finding witches a lot simpler. And with all of us working together, we should use less magic individually
and have a lower mortality rate.”

Mortality rate. She spoke so casually of it.

Kyouko stood up. “I propose we hunt for witches now. We’ll need all the Grief Seeds we can get our hands on. As I mentioned before, I’ve seen this witch and it destroyed a city. Let’s go.”

She strode toward the door.

Makoto caught up to her. “Kirigiri-san, what did you do after you came across that witch?”

Behind her, everyone waited for an answer.

“I made a contract.” Kyouko had reached for the door handle but now she dropped her hand to her side. “Then I started over. I’m not going to do that again.”

Five minutes after they left Yasuhiro’s apartment building, Byakuya said, “I sense something. Don’t talk to me until we get there.”

Everyone trailed after him. He didn’t need to take off his ring and turn it into a Soul Gem; he already seemed to know where they needed to go, yet he had used it on their last outing to locate a witch. Perhaps not using his Soul Gem required more magic.

Touko adjusted the strap of her satchel, walking alongside Kyouko and Makoto. Yasuhiro dawdled somewhere behind them.

They had all found a note in their shoe lockers earlier that day telling them to meet Kyouko after school, and Makoto assumed Kyouko either contacted Syo or Byakuya did. Either way, they met Kyouko outside of school after swim club and went to Yasuhiro’s home once she volunteered his residence as their meeting point.

That failed to explain why Touko was carrying a satchel if she didn’t come straight from school.

“Fukawa-san,” Kyouko said. “How clean is your Soul Gem?”

Touko flinched at the sound of her name. “It’s fine!” She touched a hand to her chest. “What, are you disappointed?”

A mejiroweeted from a tree branch.

Kyouko’s heels clicked against the pavement at a steady beat. “I wanted to make sure you’re taking care of yourself. With Maizono-san and Oowada-kun dead, it would be bad if you died as well.”

“What Kirigiri-san is saying,” Makoto interjected, “is that we don’t want to lose any more friends.”

“Friends! A-Again!” Touko let out a shaky laugh, directing her glower not only at Kyouko but at Makoto as well. “You keep saying that... b-but that’s just to indulge me, so you can use me until someone better comes along, right? I’m just a way for you... to kill time... you don’t know anything about me...!”

Ahead of them, Byakuya tensed.
“You write novels,” Makoto said. “Romance novels. I remember Maizono-san telling me she liked your latest one. You were,” past tense stung, “her favourite author.”

They all stopped. A car rumbled down the road they were standing perpendicular to. Then they crossed the road.

“You’re making that up.” But Touko smiled slightly. “I’ve... got one of my stories in my bag... I was going to lend it to Byakuya-sama but he probably... He’s always got a lot on his mind... so here.” She fussed with the buckle on her satchel.

Makoto tried to imagine Byakuya requesting a romance novel from Touko. He couldn’t.

“After our last battle, I asked him what kind of book he was reading... and he said he had nothing presently, so I offered him one of mine and he agreed.” Touko passed Makoto a pristine hardback. “Don’t lose it. This will prove whether you mean what you say...!”

“I won’t lose it,” Makoto promised, slipping the book into his rucksack.

“Are you done running your mouths?” Byakuya asked, turning on his heel to face them. He twitched his head toward the building behind him. “In there.”

The building in question was a restaurant with white walls, a black shutter roof over the glass door and a sign that flashed the name of the establishment at them. It was still open for business with half a dozen people visible through the large window beside the door.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Yasuhiro squinted. “You’re not just hungry, Togami-chi?”

Byakuya scowled. “I’m positive.”

“It’s okay if you are, dude. I’m peckish myself.”

“I’m not hungry!”

“Um...” Touko pointed a finger at the window. “I... think there is something... not right... in there...”

Makoto followed her gaze. The people inside were sluggishly moving deeper into the restaurant, their shoulders hunched and their arms dangling by their sides. They all went into the same area - the space behind the counter where the kitchen door was, and the door shut behind the last customer.

Kyouko burst into the restaurant, the rest of the group close behind. Her ring grazed against leather as she plucked it off her finger. “Their necks... The people here, they’ve-!”

“-been inflicted with a witch’s kiss,” Byakuya finished. “So there is a witch here. I suppose we should knock those people out. It will make the aftermath easier to deal with.”

“Knock them out?” Makoto hesitated. “Won’t they call the police afterwards?” He was surprised no one already had.

“No. You don’t remember what happens while you’re under a witch’s control.” Byakuya turned away from the others. “There’s... a blank space in your memory. They’ll blame it on a gas leak or something similar. But none of that is important. Let’s go.”

Everyone except Makoto transformed into magical girls and rushed into the kitchen. Makoto
straggled behind, trying to decide what weapon to bring with him. He could have borrowed one of the stools and used that as a weapon. Or a menu. Or perhaps a kitchen utensil.

No. That reminded him too much of Sayaka. No weapon for him.

By the time Makoto skidded across the kitchen’s rubber tiles, his friends had dealt with most of the possessed customers and employees. Yasuhiro whacked a chef’s head with a frying pan until the chef toppled over. Then once more for good measure.

Byakuya unravelled the chain of his kusarigama from around a portly businessman’s ankles. “All we need to do now is locate the portal and defeat the witch.”

Touko stopped nudging an unconscious woman with her foot. In the woman’s fist was a knife. “I’ll find it, Byakuya-sama!”

Her offer wasn’t needed: steam spilled out of a nearby saucepan, pouring over the rim and spreading across the floor. Not normal steam - this steam glowed green and didn’t thin out as it covered a greater area.

“There!” Touko stumbled into the steam, her shield-bearing arm raised. “I c-can see-!”

She fell through the floor, screaming.

“Fukawa-san!” Kyousuke positioned her feet farther apart and tugged at her braid’s ribbon. Rather than unravel it, she drew out from her ribbon a spear and charged into the steam after Touko. Her violet hair whipped upward as she descended.

Yasuhiro pinched his nose and jumped in after them. “Cannonball!”

“Naegi.” Byakuya shifted one foot back, his eyes on the approaching steam. “I’m not going to hold your hand so try to keep up with me.”

Makoto was heartbroken. Really.

The only thing Makoto had to worry about getting broken was his wrist: Byakuya wrapped his kusarigama’s chain around it and tugged, making Makoto feel like a reluctant dog on a leash held by a very impatient owner. Together they stepped into the steam and dropped through.

Everything tilted sharply. Byakuya rolled over in the air and landed on his feet.

Makoto’s head smacked into kitchen tiles.

“Get up,” Byakuya demanded, looking away and examining the witch’s barrier.

Head throbbing, Makoto investigated too. If he hadn’t known better, he would have thought they were still in the kitchen. But he did know better. The steam from before now filled most of the room, though it wasn’t as dense as it was a minute ago, fogging the fluorescent tubes above them and desaturating everything slightly. Dots of light from the kitchen appliances pricked their vision and when Makoto inhaled, he smelled food cooking.


Liquid gurgled.

“The others must have proceeded into the next room.” Byakuya started to walk off and Makoto tipped forward onto his face, still attached to Byakuya’s kusarigama. “As fitting as you wallowing
Makoto lifted himself from the floor, making a mental note to give Touko more credit for putting up with Byakuya.

After Byakuya freed Makoto from his weapon, they went through the door. What had been the eating area now bore more semblance to a house of mirrors; there were no tables, chairs or menus. Just mirrored surfaces. It was more like a maze of mirrors than a house of mirrors with several pathways branching off the one they were currently in.

Byakuya’s reflection was clear-cut on the floor. He slowly stepped forward and said, “If you value your life, keep close to me and don’t lag behind.”

“Which way should we go?” Makoto asked. He counted three options - they could take the first right, the second right or the first left.

“Heh. The likes of you may have to resort to guesswork but not me.” Byakuya closed his eyes. Ten seconds later, he opened them. His brow furrowed. “Hm... I can’t tell which aura belongs to the witch. All of them are moving.” He sighed. “We may have to catch up to the others and regroup... Perhaps we’ll find the witch on the way. Let’s go.”

They trekked down the pathway immediately to their right in single file, footsteps echoing.

Makoto rubbed at his arms, trying not to stare at any of his many reflections. Every surface was mirrored so he ended up looking at Byakuya’s back. If Makoto had been with someone else, except maybe Touko, he would have felt more at ease. With Byakuya, he wasn’t sure what he could say or should say if he wished to keep off Byakuya’s bad side. Still, he would have rather been with Byakuya than no one.

“So, Togami-kun,” Makoto said in a hesitant tone. “Your ability is really useful in this kind of situation, huh. Do you choose your ability or is it random what one you get?”

“I don’t care for small talk,” Byakuya replied. “If you don’t have anything worthwhile to say, shut up.”

The tunnel forked at the end and Byakuya decided to go down the tunnel to their left.

“Togami-kun...” Makoto frowned. “Why are you so...?”

“Hm?” Byakuya went. After three more steps, he spoke again. “Speak clearly if you can’t stop yourself from talking.”

“Like that!” Makoto’s eyebrows twitched as they lowered and he glared at the back of Byakuya’s head. “I don’t understand you at all.”

“I don’t expect you or anyone else to. We are from completely different worlds.” Although Makoto couldn’t see the other boy’s face, he knew Byakuya was smirking. “In fact, I’m almost surprised that I even belong to the same species as you.”

“Yeah.” Makoto smiled a short-lived smile. “I mean I’m just a regular guy while you were born into—”

Byakuya stopped walking and swung around. His eyes narrowed. “What did you say?”

Instinct urged Makoto to flee but his feet stayed rooted to the spot and common sense kept them
“You know nothing about me,” Byakuya said in a low voice. “You and all the other commoners, flapping your lips and pretending I rely on luck to make yourselves feel better about your worthless lives...” He stuck out his chin. “You don’t know what I had to accomplish to be selected as the Togami Family’s heir. I wasn’t merely born the man I am today.”

“Selected...?”

Byakuya elevated one fist. “Yes. My father doesn’t have a single wife. He chose women from across the globe he considered to be of an exemplary standard and had children with them. This generation, there were fifteen of us, and we were pitted against each other. The winner was to become the heir to the Togami Family and I was the victor. The youngest of them all... It was the first time the youngest ever won. My half-siblings were consequently killed—”

“K-Killed?”

“Banished. Exiled.” Byakuya waved a hand. “Whatever you wish to call it. They’re all the same thing, really.” He turned around and continued walking. “The life of a magical girl is no different to how I grew up. I can’t afford to make mistakes nor can I let my guard down even for a moment.” Byakuya seemed to be talking mostly to himself now. “Whatever needed to be done to win, I did it. No matter the cost, I was willing to sacrifice anything and everything to succeed.”

“Did you,” Makoto swallowed, “make a contract with Monobear... to...?”

Byakuya scoffed, “Of course not. I earned my title without the aid of magic. It required hard work and hard work alone. Now be quiet. I told you this so you would have no reason to speak and make incorrect assumptions about me. You should be honoured,” he closed his eyes, “I’ve not told what I just told you to many people.”

“Who have you told?”

“... Fukawa.” Byakuya set off down the pathway again. “But she listens to everything I say...” He came to an abrupt stop. “And there she is.”

Touko jogged over, hands clasped over her chest and seemingly unharmed.

“Have you seen the others?” Byakuya asked her.

She shook her head.

Byakuya curled his lips in indignation. “It can’t be helped.” He glanced at her. “Let’s continue our search then. There is someone or something not too far from where we are.”

The someone or something was Yasuhiro. Yasuhiro saw them first and bounded over, raising his hand. When Byakuya didn’t high-five him, Yasuhiro greeted Makoto with a headlock.

“That just leaves the witch and Kirigiri,” Byakuya said as Makoto gasped for air. “They’re in completely different directions.” He stroked his chin. “How perfectly in character of her, making things more awkward for us.”

“Maybe we should split up?” Touko suggested.

“Only Togami-kun knows where Kirigiri-san and the witch are,” Makoto pointed out. “We all need to go with him or else we’ll get lost.”
“... That’s right,” Byakuya said.

As they journeyed deeper into the barrier, Makoto wondered where the witch’s familiar were. He gladly welcomed their absence but it felt off, them not being there at all. Was the witch strong enough to not need the help of assistants? Or were they lost in this maze of mirrors as well?

No, Byakuya still would have sensed them. He hadn’t mentioned anything about familiars.

“Around the next corner will be either the witch or Kirigiri,” Byakuya said, disrupting Makoto’s pondering. “Hagakure, Fukawa - get ready.”

Touko and Yasuhiro nodded.

Byakuya swung his kusarigama’s chain over his head and went around the corner.

The weight on the end of its chain hit the floor. “What?”

Makoto ran to Byakuya, joining him physically and then joining in his confusion.

Ahead of them stood Touko Fukawa.

“What?” Yasuhiro sprung up between Makoto and Byakuya. “Why are there two Fukawa-chis?”

The first Touko, standing behind the males, extended a hand toward her doppelganger. “Why does it look like me?”

“It?” The other Touko snorted and smacked her hands onto her hips. “W-Who are you calling an it, you... you knock off!”

“My head hurts,” whined Yasuhiro. “Geez, one Fukawa-chi is loud enough and now there’s two?”

“There’s only one of me!” the first Touko snapped. “That thing over there is a witch!”

“Which witch is the witch?” Yasuhiro held his head in his hands and doubled over.

Makoto patted him on the back and studied the two Toukos. He couldn’t spot any differences no matter how many times he compared them, throwing his head back and forth until he pulled a muscle in his neck. They were identical.

Byakuya tapped his chin with an index finger. “I can’t use my magic to distinguish between them, which means one must be the witch and the other the real Touko Fukawa.” He glanced over his shoulder at the first Touko. “Oi, you. Stand beside her.”

The first Touko shuffled over, fingers fidgeting against her chest. “That poor imitation is obviously fake! It looks nothing like me.”

“I’m not an imitation, you are!” The other Touko’s face reddened and she threw up her arms. “W-What sort of sick joke is this? Did you copy me b-because I’m the ugliest and you want to rub it in my face?”

“Fukawas, shut up,” Byakuya demanded. “I’m going to ask you both a question.”

They ceased bickering immediately.

“Hm. You passed that test.” Byakuya stroked his chin. “Fukawas, show me your palms.”
The first Touko hesitated while the other Touko held hers out for inspection.

“Oh?” Byakuya raised his eyebrows at the first Touko. “Is something wrong?”

“No!” The first Touko flipped her hands over, keeping them against her chest. “S-See? Normal.”

Yasuhiro ogled their hands. “They look the same to me.”

“Fukawas,” said Byakuya nonchalantly, “pull up your skirt and show me your left thigh.”

Both Toukos blushed. Makoto felt his cheeks burn.

“Yo, Togami-chi!” Yasuhiro choked on air, flailing his arms. “That’s not subtle at all, ‘right? Take her on a few dates first.”

It took a few seconds for Byakuya to realise how he had phrased his command and he shot Yasuhiro a disgusted look.

“Just do it,” said Byakuya.

The other Touko bent over and reached for the hem of her skirt.

"No,” he said. “You wait. She goes first.”

The first Touko slowly pulled up her skirt and showed him her thigh.

“Tch, just as I thought.” Byakuya pressed his kama against her neck. “You don’t have her scars.”

“I...!” The first Touko widened her eyes. “I don’t-!”

“Not only that, but you didn’t stutter until you heard the real Fukawa stutter.” He pressed down harder. Black smoke escaped her wound instead of blood. “You also apparently forgot about my ability earlier when you suggested we split up. And you’ve got your hands over your chest because there isn’t a Soul Gem on your bow.”

The other Touko - the real Touko - squealed with joy. “B-Byakuya-sama knows me so well!”

“Unfortunately,” Byakuya said, holding back a sigh. “Now, let’s take care of this witch so we-”

Makoto didn’t hear the end of Byakuya’s sentence as all the mirrors simultaneously shattered. From the fragments emerged them: clones of Byakuya, Touko, Kyouko, Makoto and Yasuhiro, all identical to the originals except from the lack of visible Soul Gems on the Toukos and Byakuyas.

“Keep them away from us!” Byakuya barked as glass rained down. He swung his kama at the witch’s neck but she dodged back, absorbing his blows with her shield as their duel moved down the tunnel.

A fake Touko fired a crossbow bolt at the genuine Touko.

Touko deflected it with her shield. “Y-You heard Byakuya-sama! While he saves the day, we’ll fight here!” She fired a bolt at a fake Makoto, hesitating when she aimed at a fake Byakuya.

“It’s not him,” Makoto reminded her, swerving out of the way of a fake Kyouko’s spear. He regretted not taking a stool to use as a weapon.

“I know!” Touko shot the Byakuya and winced. The fake Byakuya exploded in a puff of black
smoke. She displayed no such reluctance in shooting a fake Kyouko’s face.

Yasuhiro took off his head scarf to reveal a yellow Soul Gem shaped like an eye glinting on his forehead. A grenade tumbled out of his scarf and he caught it, pulling out its pin before hurling it into a mass of imposters.

The grenade exploded.

“It’s a shame I have to kill so much handsomeness,” Yasuhiro lamented as he blew up a fake Byakuya.

Touko’s next bolt detonated inside a fake Yasuhiro. “It’s n-not really Byakuya-sama... so it’s fine!”

“Huh? I’m talking about myself.” Yasuhiro slapped himself on the chest. “I never knew I was so ruggedly handsome.”

Touko clapped a hand to her forehead.

Makoto figured that him standing in the middle of the battlefield wasn’t a smart thing to do so he made a beeline for Byakuya and the witch. Along the way, he picked up a large shard of mirror and used it to slice through the neck of a fake Touko obstructing his path. She disintegrated.

Byakuya and the witch were still fighting. The witch ducked behind her scratched shield, yelling out when Byakuya whipped his kusarigama’s chain forward. It wrapped around her shield, which he then ripped out of her hold.

He charged forward and beheaded the witch with his kama.

Black smoke billowed out of her neck and she stumbled backward, her balance momentarily lost. She managed to regain her footing and shunted her shoulders forward, still alive.

Instead of having Touko’s head, the witch now had Makoto’s.

“What’s the matter, Togami-kun?” the witch drawled, eyes burning with vicious amusement that was not Makoto-like whatsoever. She cricked her neck, maintaining eye contact. “You can defeat me, right? It shouldn’t be hard for a big shot like you. You can do it! I believe in you!”

Byakuya sliced off her head again.

Kyouko grinned back at him. “Togami-kun, did you honestly think that would work? I anticipated a greater challenge from the heir to a financial giant like the Togami Family. I’m disappointed. You don’t live up to your persona. Then again, this is same person who can’t figure out my agenda.”

The next head was Mondo’s.

“Oi, Togami! Couldn’t you afford a better weapon than a crappy thing like that? What, you think you’re Jacob Marley and the Grim Reaper’s illegitimate offspring or some shit? Or do you think it makes you look tough?”

He chopped off her head again.

His own face stared back. “Tch. If you’re trying to bore me to death with your performance, you’re almost succeeding. Why don’t you run along and gather your little collection of failures to help you? That’s the only company you keep.”
“I don’t need anyone’s help,” Byakuya said, tone scathing and eyes wide. “I’ll annihilate you... with my own hands...!”

Makoto had never seen him this angry.

“That’s funny,” said the witch. “If memory serves me right, as it always does, didn’t you almost succumb to a-?”

Byakuya dealt a series of attacks. Black smoke erupted out of the witch’s gashes as he cut and cut and cut.

When the smoke cleared, they were back in the kitchen.

All of them.

“Kirigiri-san!” Makoto saw her nearby. He restrained himself from hugging Kyouko and just touched her shoulder. Real. Laughing, he wiped his hand across his forehead. “You’re okay!”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Flush swept across her cheeks and Kyouko combed her fingers through her hair. “You weren’t worried, were you?”

“Of course I was,” he said, the weight in his chest lightening. “We couldn’t find you, and then the witch-”

“I got lost.” She looked at Byakuya, who had his back to them. “I assume we have Togami-kun to thank for our victory?” A customer groaned. “Though we should go outside first.”

Kyouko stooped down to pick up a Grief Seed on the way out.

Yasuhiro draped his arms around everybody’s shoulders and pulled them into his sides, Byakuya and Kyouko underneath one arm and Touko and Makoto underneath the other. “We were awesome back there. Man, my heart was pumping the whole time and wow! Talk about teamwork, ‘right?”

“L-Let go of me,” Touko said. “You too, Naegi.” She turned to him and recoiled, staring at Makoto in horror. “Naegi, you’ve got bl-bl-bl-”

She fainted, slipping out of Yasuhiro’s grip and to the floor.

“Hey, that wasn’t me,” said Yasuhiro, letting go of Makoto. His hand hovered by his chest. “I was wearing deodorant, ‘right?’

“Fukawa-san isn’t in any danger,” Kyouko told them. “She must have passed out when she saw Naegi-kun’s face.”

“Yo, that’s not nice, Kirigiri-chi.”

Kyouko coughed. “I mean because of her hemophobia.”

Makoto wiped his forehead and examined his hand. Blood. He had cut his hand in the barrier, most likely with the shard of mirror he picked up near the end, and he thought back to what had happened after the battle against the witch in the church. “Togami-kun said Fukawa-san couldn’t stand the sight of blood...”

The body on the floor sat up and Syo opened her eyes. “Eh? Eh?” She blinked, tilting her head to one side. “What the hell is going on? Are we having that orgy after all?”
Chapter End Notes

Next time:

"There are people worth investing in."

There has been an order to the witches' appearances but this witch doesn't follow it. This isn't Celes's witch, as one might have expected. I wrote this chapter after I wrote the next two chapters, and in one of the following chapters is Celes's witch. However, I thought that there were some things I needed to focus on first so I wrote this chapter and included a witch based on another character.

Also: I've read a few PMMM!DR headcanons and they either had Togami wishing to become rich or to win the heir selection process. I thought that would be pretty out of character for him, as like heck he would think he was going to lose or that he couldn't be successful without being given money, so deciding what he would wish for took me the longest out of the characters.
There are People Worth Investing in

Chapter Notes

I was very tempted to cut this chapter in half but my update schedule is pretty (¯\_(ツ)_/¯) so whatever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spiderwebs were slung across every corner of the room, covering the mahogany furniture as well - the grandfather clock, the lampshade, the bookshelf, the plastic fruit in a bowl on the table and everything else. Makoto reached out a hand and clasped the doorknob, twisting it and pushing the door open. The next room was swathed in even more webs and as he could not go far in without brushing past one, he stayed by the door.

From the ceiling descended a large spider attached to a length of silver string, half its orb-like eyes red and the rest purple. Its body was a two-dimensional, black inkblot that had a wobbling outline so it never kept to a rigid shape, and its legs seemed to be braided hair.

A dark figure stood with their back to Makoto, situated between him and the spider. They weren’t like the marionettes from the other rooms that had smiling faces painted on and puppet strings made of web. Some of the marionettes were here now, their limbs entangled in spider silk. This person was human, all their features indistinct as if they were trapped in thick fog so he couldn’t recognise them or describe them in any more detail.

But they were definitely human. Makoto just knew it.

The person took calculated steps forward, dragging the metal chain of their kusarigama along the floor behind them.

With each approaching step, the spider tensed until it grew too impatient and lunged at its victim.

Makoto extended forward his arm, aiming his staff at the witch.

__________________________________________________________________________

He woke up.

__________________________________________________________________________

There existed a shrinking time frame between when Makoto opened his eyes and when the weight of Sayaka’s and Mondo’s departures crashed into his chest. This delay got smaller everyday but had yet to disappear, and he didn’t know if it ever would. It was sort of like how, no matter how many times he fell asleep reminding himself to check his body’s position in the morning, he would wake up and move before he remembered to check, and by then he would have forgotten the initial placement of his limbs.

That gap of ignorance leading which led into harsh reality, he suspected, would always exist and maybe always hurt.
Someone knocked on his bedroom door.

“Come in!” He sat up, rubbing his eyes in an attempt to rejuvenate them.

The door opened. Black hair was soon followed in by the rest of his father. According to Makoto’s alarm clock, it was nine in the morning.

“Your mother told me you returned home at ten last night,” Makoto’s father said in a low voice, closing the door behind him. He seated himself on the end of Makoto’s bed, twisting his body around so he could see who he was talking to. “According to your mother, this is a regular thing you do. And... well... I think I know what’s happening.”

Makoto bit his lip, refusing to break eye contact first.

His father steepled his fingers. “You’ve been going out a lot with friends from school. To the arcade... on walks... really random places at times. Now I understand why you kept it secret.” He drew in breath, giving Makoto a smile that was meant to be reassuring. “It’s scary and your friends are undoubtedly all taking part in this sort of lifestyle and you’re thinking about following in their example. I know I’m not the most hip of dads but what you’re going through isn’t a new thing. It’s been around for centuries and... well, I’ve lost good friends due to it.”

Time seemed to slow down. Makoto grabbed his blanket and pulled it close, his fingers curling inward. Could his father... be talking about...?

The mattress creaked under Makoto’s father as he leaned forward, eyes fixed on his son. He folded his arms over his chest and said seriously, “What’s her name?”

“... What?”

“Or his name. Their name.” Makoto’s father waved his hands. “Whoever they are, it’s okay. I mean we’d rather you think about dating after high school but we’re not going to be mad. Your mother told me there’s a Kabi girl and a Kirigiri and an Ikusaba... Is it one of them?” He pressed a hand to his thigh, hunching over. “Or is it this Ishimaru boy you had over?”

“I’m not dating anyone.” Makoto felt a smile creep across his flushed face. A laugh tickled at his throat but he held it in: laughing would only confuse his father more. “Really. We hang out after school and sometimes we lose track of time. That’s all...” The smile on Makoto’s face faltered so he forced it wider. “I promise.”

His father gazed at him with a wrinkled brow but Makoto supposed that had he been in his father’s position, he wouldn’t believe himself either. Though what Makoto said wasn’t a lie. Not really. A white lie, perhaps, but not an outright lie.

“Well,” said Makoto’s father after a pause, “you know where to find me if you need to talk.” He ruffled Makoto’s hair, getting up and leaving the room.

Two seconds after the door closed, Makoto flopped back onto his bed and sighed at the ceiling.

“Dads, huh?” said Monobear.

“Yeah,” said Makoto. Then, realising, he jolted upright and stared at Monobear who was sitting by his feet. “Huh?”
“Huh?”

“You!” He pointed. “What are you doing here?”

Monobear tilted its head to one side. “Could you say that again with an adverb or a stronger dialogue tag? You’ve making me read between the lines and all I’m seeing is a lot of blank space tainted with animosity.”

“Just tell me what you want,” said Makoto angrily.

“Hey, hey! Wrong adverb!” Monobear flailed its arms. “That’s no way to treat your saviour! Or did you forget that you would be despair stew right now if I didn’t get Togami-kun and Fukawa-san to save you?” It put its paws on its mouth, wiggling. “You know, that time Oowada-kun tried to be a tough guy by blowing himself up. I did that out of the kindness of my heart.”

“No.” Makoto glared. “You got them to save me because you wanted me alive so I could make a contract.”

“Eh?” Monobear prodded itself on the chin twice before somehow making a clicking sound with its paw, much like how a human would make the sound by snapping their fingers. “Oh, that’s right. Bears don’t have kindness in their hearts. They’re more economical so they have a little shelf for honey and berries instead.” It folded its arms over its chest, nodding. “Y’know, I would have made a contract with you back then but I was held up by Kirigiri-san and you bastards lost record-breakingly fast. By the time I became available, you were in Dreamland and Ishimaru-kun was in his own little world. As for your other remark, what difference does it make if a subjectively bad motive has an outcome equal to that of a pure motive?”

Monobear jumped up and toddled over to Makoto, rapping his forehead with its paw.

“You’re different to Maizono-san and Oowada-kun,” Monobear said. “You’re oozing so much hope out of your ears that I don’t know whether to talk to you or your second head made out of hope excrement. With that much hope, I would never have to make another contract again!” It clutched its stomach, stretching its grin outward. “I could retire and kick up my feet in a condo.”

Makoto tensed. “You mean if I became a magical girl, no one else would have to become one?”

No one else would have to die.

“Way to up the word count by repeating what I just told you,” Monobear said, shakings it hips from side to side. “But yes, I could get in my spaceship and whiz back to my home planet if you came to your senses and made a wish. I can’t tell you what to wish for but I can tell you this is the opportunity of a lifetime.”

As cliche as it sounded, this sounded too good to be true.

“Why do you need to make contracts?” Makoto asked slowly. “And why me? What’s so special about me?”

“That’s a no-brainer. Much like how a young adult might write fanfiction, I like making hope. It gives my life purpose and you would fill my quota.” Monobear cupped the back of its head with both paws, elbows pointed forward. “As for your last questions, maybe it’s because you’re so despairingly boring that you have a lot of emptiness to fill with hope. Or maybe it’s because you give someone else lots of hope...” It slapped its paws over its mouth and said gleefully, “I said too much!”
Monobear popped out of existence, leaving Makoto to think about what he heard. He thought about it at breakfast, during which Komaru spoke at length about how her favourite model was promoting her latest fashion line next week in the city centre. He thought about it as he worked through his maths homework, intermittently chewing the end of his pen.

He thought about it in the shower and afterwards on his bed, his head angled away from the book Touko lent him so he didn’t drip water onto its pages.

‘With that much hope, I would never have to make another contract again...’

Makoto answered the door to Kyouko, his mind still in turmoil. His parents said goodbye to him on his way out and he saw them exchange knowing smiles when they thought he had completely turned away from them.

“I thought we were meeting the others in the arcade at two,” Makoto said once they had left his garden and started toward the bus stop. That was three hours from now.

Aoi had wanted them to meet up at ten only for Mukuro and Yasuhiro to object, one wanting more beauty sleep while Mukuro needed to run errands first.

“We are,” Kyouko replied. “But-”

“-there’s somewhere I want to go first,” they said together.

A gentle breeze blew past.

“Am I that easy to read?” she asked with raised eyebrows, turning to him.

If only. “I can read minds.”

Makoto had said it without thinking.

She stared.

“I’m kidding,” Makoto said with a small grin, conscious of the heaviness in his chest. “I just have good intuitions.”

In the daytime, Touko’s hideout embodied a less intimidating air. The garden was still overgrown with weeds and trash, and all the windows were boarded up like usual, but birds chirruped from a dead tree and the hoary sky didn’t shroud the area in a depressing darkness.

They found Touko squatting in the first room they walked into, her back to the door. This startled neither visitor but what did make Makoto freeze was the fact she wasn’t alone, for sitting in a circle in front of her was... him. Not just him but Kyouko and Byakuya and Yasuhiro and people he didn’t recognise.

Touko hadn’t noticed the pair and continued speaking to her present company, her unintelligible mumbles a soothing hum. The lookalikes watched her, listening with rapt attention. Directly opposite her was Byakuya, his smile very out of character.
“Fukawa-san?” Makoto said loudly. “What...?”

She cringed. The ring of people disintegrated into purple flecks. By the time she jumped to her feet and rounded on them, cheeks suffused with colour, all evidence of her previous guests no longer existed.

“You... You brown-nosed busybodies!” Touko jabbed at the air with a finger. In her other hand was her Soul Gem. “I c-can’t believe I almost thought we were friends... You were just waiting until you caught me doing something like this and now you’re going to make fun of me!”

Makoto’s eyes darted around the building’s interior for an explanation because he couldn’t find one in Touko’s words nor in her face. “Fukawa-san,” he focused again on her trembling form, “who were those people?”

“No one!” She seized a notebook from a nearby desk and shook it close to his face.

Dense silence hung over them.

“They... were made up, like my stories,” Touko explained in a quieter tone, shaking the notebook again albeit with less force. “I u-used my Soul Gem... to pretend I had real friends.” The pink in her cheeks, although it didn’t disappear or change visually, developed into a more solemn emotion as she averted her eyes. “Before, I had to make them from scratch, but this time I had r-real people to base my delusions on... People who I thought were my...” Her notebook creased in her hold. “You can laugh now...”

“Fukawa-san,” Makoto murmured. He raised his voice. “If you don’t want us to, we won’t tell anyone what you were doing, but it’s not anything to be ashamed of. It’s an honour to be considered your friend. Right, Kirigiri-san?”

Kyouko nodded.

“An honour...” Touko’s Soul Gem shifted in her hand so it rested in the loose cradle formed by her hanging fingertips. “I... didn’t expect you to say that... but it doesn’t matter. I’ve... already accepted that no one... likes me really... no matter what I do...!”

Her notebook smacked into the floorboards and her Soul Gem threatened to slip out of her slackened grip. Both of her arms dangled by her sides and she rolled her bottom lip into her mouth, holding it in place with her teeth.

“You’re wrong,” Makoto said quietly.

She looked at him with wide eyes.

“We like you,” he said, meeting her gaze and speaking louder. “And I’m sure other people do as well. That’s why we want to be with you. If we were with you because we had bad intentions, that would make us terrible people. It wouldn’t make you any worse of a person. But Fukawa-san, I really do consider you my friend.”

Touko winced at the last word. “You’re pretending to pity me.” But she sounded less distressed. That was a start. “You... d-don’t understand...” She bit at a fingernail. “No one does...”

“So tell us,” Kyouko said. The other two turned to her. Kyouko’s arms were folded over her chest.
“How can you expect us to understand if you don’t try explaining? If you’re not willing to put your trust in other people, how can you expect them to put their trust in you?”

“And it’s not so we can get blackmail material or whatever,” Makoto added quickly. “There are people who genuinely care and I want to prove that. Please... give us a chance.”

He offered his hand to Touko.

She glanced down but didn’t take it. “F-Fine... if it’ll get you off my case... fine. You are being very persistent... so I think I’ll humour you.” Touko clenched her fists, eying him warily. “I’ll... give you one more chance. I-It’ll give me something to do, and it would make things inconvenient for Byakuya-sama... if we weren’t on good terms, e-even if me and you are just superficial f-friends.” He had the feeling she needed to justify allowing herself to continue relations with them so didn’t correct her, but he hoped she would see their intentions in a different way later on. “Why are you here so early?”

A good question. Makoto turned to Kyouko for an answer.

“I want you to come home with me so we can get ready together for our trip to the arcade,” said Kyouko.

“You d-don’t want me to... embarrass you, right?” Touko grumbled, one hand wringing her wrist. “You don’t want your precious club... to see you with someone s-smelly and ugly like me...” A smile twitched across her face. “Heh... That’s quite the nerve you have... Ha... ha ha...”

But she took the bus with them, hiding in Kyouko’s shadow for the most part and fidgeting and sneaking glances at passersby. She probably did so in an attempt to make herself inconspicuous though her shifty behaviour made her anything but, especially with her unwashed clothes and dragging feet. Some might have found being with her an embarrassment, and Makoto saw a few people whisper with disapproving looks, but the small smiles that teased her lips as she stared out of the window and when she peeked at the other two were infectious and he wouldn’t have traded away her company for anyone else.

Kyouko lived in a house that lay between Makoto’s home and the arcade, slightly closer to the former. Little furnished the living room; it contained barely more than a table, a rug, a sofa and a small television, but it felt cosy as opposed to the crampedness of Yasuhiro’s apartment. The room didn’t smell of much either - something flowery teased Makoto’s nose but he couldn’t say the exact scent.

“It’s rosemary,” Kyouko said, as if reading his mind. She gestured toward the sofa for him to sit down. Once he was seated, she motioned for Touko to follow her out of the room. The last he heard before they left his range of hearing was Kyouko explaining how to change the temperature in the shower.

While he waited for them to return, he twiddled his thumbs and looked at the few contents of the room. Coffee table. Cream walls. Lilac rug. He studied its fibres until he heard the door open several minutes later. Kyouko walked over and joined him in comfortable silence.

On the shelf opposite where they sat was a photograph. It had been turned around so all he could see of it was its brown craft paper backing.

“What you did was really kind,” Makoto said, turning to her.
“You would have done the same,” she replied. “In fact... it’s actually you who inspired me.”

Makoto blinked, rubbing his cheek with a finger. “Me?”

“Your love of people... is something to be admired,” she explained, staring down at her hands which were on her lap. “It’s something I usually stay away from yet you make it seem not only easy but enjoyable. The first time we met, I thought you nothing special. I forced myself to keep you company but I started to find that I...” Leather creaked as she balled her gloved hands. “...like being with you.”

Kyouko stood up and crossed the room. She took the backward photograph off its shelf and flipped it over in her hands. After a moment of stillness, she brought it back with her to the sofa.

Three faces peered up at Makoto from the photograph: one belonged to a man who looked to be in his late twenties, beaming at the camera. A woman stood beside him, the corners of her eyes wrinkled and her skin sallow. Seated on the man’s lap was a toddler who smiled as radiantly as the other two.

The toddler seized most of Makoto’s focus; she wore a familiar black ribbon in her violet hair.

“That’s me,” Kyouko confirmed. “Me... and my family.” She brushed a finger across the bottom edge of the photograph, her eyes half-lidded. “It’s the only photograph I own of us three together. My mother died not long after this was taken and my father left me with my grandparents to chase after his dreams. Or so he liked me to think... He most likely used it as an excuse to get away from his problems.” Her tone was bitter. “Other than a handful of memories, all I had left to remember him by were photographs and the pistol he didn’t take with him. Years later, I started to track him down... I wanted to see him again and let him know I wasn’t trash that he could cast aside... I wanted to find him so I could cut off all ties and move on, and return his pistol, and that’s why I came here to find him. Except... I never did. He’s probably living happily with his new family right now.”

She rubbed small circles against the glass front of the photograph. Makoto had to watch her lips to understand what she said next.

“I considered using my wish to find him but more pressing matters came to my attention. In a way, I’m glad. To form a contract for him after he put me through all that... It would make him... a truly despicable father...”

“Kirisaki-san...” Makoto set his hand down on top of hers.

“But I suppose he isn’t the worst.” Kyouko coloured, smiling at Makoto’s knuckles. “After all, it led me to realising there are people worth investing in.”

The door of the arcade whistled shut at their heels.

“You made it!” Aoi pounced on Kyouko, who reciprocated the hug after a few seconds of standing rigidly. They swayed from side to side several times before Aoi pulled away, having spotted Touko hanging back with Makoto. “Oh... Who are you?”

Makoto thought Touko would introduce herself but she remained silent, instead shooting Aoi a reserved look.
“This is Touko Fukawa,” said Kyouko, still slightly winded. “She’s homeschooled and I thought it would be nice if I introduced her to you all. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Nah!” Aoi laughed. “I said the more the merrier, didn’t I?” She scratched at the nape of her neck. “I just didn’t know you were friends with her.”

Touko glowered. “And I didn’t know you were friends with a bimbo who glued balloons to her chest...”

“What did you say?” But Aoi was instantly distracted by Byakuya who had come in through the door. Touko’s quip forgotten, Aoi squinted and said in a sharp tone, “What’s he doing here?”

Even outside of school, Byakuya wore smart attire. His navy pea jacket was immaculate, lacking any creases as though it had never been worn before, and his leather shoes were recently polished. He analysed the bright colours and crowded machines in the immediate vicinity with heavy disapproval.

“We invited him too,” Makoto explained, beginning to wonder whether having those two together was a good idea.

Byakuya smirked and waited for Aoi’s reaction.

Sensing hostility, Touko glared at her.

A variety of expressions flittered across Aoi’s face, none of them favourable. With forced politeness, she said dully, “Hagakure and Ikusaba-chan are playing a light gun game.”

They followed her deeper into the arcade. It was about as busy as the last time Makoto went there, with students and adults strewed among the arcade games.

Finding their two friends proved a simple task: Yasuhiro’s bushy hair caught their eye within seconds. Both he and Mukuro were stationed at the game Aoi described. Makoto recognised it immediately - it was the one he played with Sayaka and Kyouko.

Yasuhiro’s health bar depleted so he inserted another coin. They were on the penultimate level, snaking their way through a quarantined school of zombies. Mukuro’s accuracy rivalled Kyouko’s, her shots never missing and her health bar containing only a slit of black.

Byakuya watched from over Yasuhiro’s shoulder. “So rather than buy a game console, you go out and pay a fraction of the price for short-term use?”

“Yup!” Yasuhiro sprayed bullets at everything except his target. “Haven’t you been to an arcade before?”

“I don’t have time for such things when I need to prepare myself for headship of my family’s company,” Byakuya replied. He fell silent for ten seconds, following the action on screen with mild bewilderment. “I’ve never played a video game before. What’s their purpose?”

The next zombie took advantage of Yasuhiro’s stupefaction and sank its teeth into his character. His health bar halved.

“Dude, how have you never played a video game before?” Yasuhiro stared at him in disbelief. “Like... how have you got through life until now without playing video games?” His health bar emptied and he inserted another coin. This time he gave the plastic gun to Byakuya. “Give it a shot! Ha! Get it?”
Aoi rolled her eyes.

Byakuya inspected the gun before aiming it at the screen. After he fired six shots, only one hitting a zombie, ‘RELOAD’ flashed across his half of the screen.

“There’s an auto-reload trigger just in front of the gun trigger,” Mukuro said, shooting at a zombie before it could claw Byakuya’s half of the screen.

The ‘RELOAD’ disappeared and Byakuya continued firing.

Touko jutted out her chin. “B-Byakuya-sama has never played before yet he’s fast approaching a professional level!” She clasped her hands together, eyes sparkling.

‘Fast’ and ‘professional’ might have been a bit generous.

“Fukawa-san, have you ever been to an arcade?” Makoto asked.

“Me?” Touko hesitated. “Once or twice... people invited me..” She pursed her lips. “B-But they never showed up. I heard them laugh about it at school when I still went there... They used to dare each other to do things like that...”

“Seriously?” Heat flushed through his body. “That’s-!”

“-just one example of how infantile commoners can be.” Byakuya reloaded and gunned down a zombie.

A cutscene started. The camera panned over a courtroom where a gigantic gyaru with exaggerated proportions waited for the players, after which the sprite rambled on about her evil plan in an awkward attempt at including a last minute storyline. Eventually, the cutscene ended and the final battle began.

Mukuro fired at the gyaru’s miniature weak spots with accuracy that made Byakuya press his lips together tightly.

“Ikusaba-chan’s really good,” Aoi said, bouncing on her toes. She held up her fists when Mukuro shot off the gyaru’s left hand. A fluffy ghost drifted on screen and possessed the hand, though it swiftly died after Byakuya and Mukuro both shot at it. “You’re an expert. Do you play these kind of games a lot?”

“You could say I’ve done this before.” Mukuro fired at a malformed rabbit that charged toward the screen, spraying white and pink pixels across the courtroom floor.

Kyouko glanced at her, brow furrowed.

Byakuya’s health bar emptied. He retrieved his wallet from his trouser pocket.

“Ikusaba-san attended a military camp,” Makoto told them, having found Mukuro’s choice of words slightly strange.

“Oh,” went Aoi. “That makes sense. They’re practically the same thing, aren’t they?”

Makoto wasn’t qualified enough to refute that.

“Bingo,” Mukuro said, reloading and shooting the gyaru’s exposed heart.

It died a dramatic death, reaching toward the sky as it sunk into a crater of lava. When the game
ended, it asked for Mukuro to input her name for the high score table and ‘I.A.M’ soon flashed at the top of the list of past players.

Byakuya returned the gun to its case and checked his pocket watch. “That’s ten minutes I’ll never get back. Are there any real benefits to this kind of entertainment other than distasteful fanservice and hand cramps?”

Yasuhiro slapped himself on the chest. “Hand eye-coordination, stamina and teamwork. That’s what I tell my folks whenever they catch me playing on one of my homework breaks, right?”

“That explains a lot about you,” Byakuya muttered. He cupped his hand over his eyes, scanning the room for an available machine. “What about that game over there?”

The game he spotted was one involving the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles traveling through time. Its joystick for the fourth player was missing, which meant only three players could use it.

“I’ll pass,” said Byakuya once they had gathered around it and Yasuhiro told him what happened in the game. “It looks like it’s for children.”

That didn’t deter Yasuhiro, who thrust his hand into his pocket. Then into his other pocket. Then he took off his sandal and checked the sole of his foot for what Makoto could only assume was spare change.

Byakuya gave Yasuhiro four coins from his wallet. “Use these.”

“Wow!” Yasuhiro raised them to the light. “These are for me?” He bit into one of them, finding it to be authentic. “Do I have to pay you back with interest?”

“They are for you and whoever else wishes to join you,” Byakuya replied. “This is all pocket change for a person like myself...” He turned his head away. “Consider all of today’s expenses paid by me.”

“I will,” Yasuhiro assured him. “Hey, Asahina-chi, you want to be the Donatello to my Michelangelo?”

“Sure.” Aoi cocked her head to one side. “I think? Which colour is that one again?”

“Orange. Who else wants to play?” asked Yasuhiro, flourishing the four coins between his fingers.

Mukuro and Makoto stepped forward at the same time.

“You go,” he said. “I’ve played it before.”

She smiled, choosing Raphael, and they were left with one coin for whoever lost first.

Everyone else watched them play the first few levels; ninjas were thrown at the screen or struck with weapons as the turtles proceeded horizontally through the level. The game was old, older than anyone present, and the bright colour scheme began to strain Makoto’s eyes. Aoi was the first person to run out of hit points but she bought herself another continue with the spare coin.

By that point, Byakuya’s gaze had wandered to the rest of arcade in search of a suitable game. He inhaled slowly through his nose. “Hm...?” Byakuya sniffed, turning his head sharply to Touko. “Oi. Fukawa. Did you bathe recently?”

Touko jumped, hands twitching. “Y-Yes!” She looked away from the game. “Y-You said I should
have a bath so I did! Do... you like it?”

“... I was just curious, that’s all.” He cleared his throat and turned away, his discouraging answer not affecting the sense of fulfilment her body seemed to tremble with. “What other games are there?”

The only unoccupied machines, other than the claw cranes and coin pushers, were ones with dance platforms.

“No,” Byakuya said once he got close enough to see what they were.

Kyouko smirked, closing her eyes briefly. “I thought someone of your calibre would know how to dance.”

“Of course I know how to dance,” Byakuya snapped, getting out his wallet and pressing two coins into Kyouko’s palm. “We’ll all play with the same song and see whose skills are superior. You and Naegi use that machine. Fukawa and I...” He trailed off, attention again on Touko. “I’ve never seen you wear that before.”

Touko’s outfit consisted of a navy dress and white leggings. She interlaced her fingers. “Is... it okay?”

“I...” Byakuya shook his head, the most confused Makoto had seen him yet. “Yes, I... suppose. But that’s not saying much, seeing what you usually wear.” His features hardened. “Now hurry up so we can get this over with.” He quickly got onto one of the dance platforms and skimmed through the list of available songs. “I don’t recognise any of these. Fukawa, you choose.”

She dithered but ended up selecting a love song with an easy difficulty. Their avatars faded in on screen, the backdrop a neon mess containing an audience of quivering silhouettes.

Not until arrows scrolled up the screen did Makoto fully appreciate how competent Sayaka had been at this game. ‘Almost’ and ‘Good’ accompanied most of his stumbles, Kyouko faring only marginally better with ‘Great’s and ‘Good’s. Occasionally, he peeked to the left to see how Byakuya and Touko were coping. Neither could compare to Sayaka, Touko on a par with Kyouko, but Byakuya regularly earned ‘Great’, ‘Perfect’ and the odd ‘Marvelous’ after the halfway point.

The game allowed three songs per payment so Kyouko chose the next stage. When it was Makoto’s turn, he went through the list of songs for anything he remembered having a slow tempo.

“You should have heeded my warning,” Byakuya told them. “I possess both the dexterity and the endurance required for this game.”

“I’m glad you’re having fun,” said Makoto, picking a song his father was prone to warble when in the shower.

“Fun?” Byakuya huffed. “Having fun is irrelevant. Winning is what’s important, not how you feel while doing it. That’s the outcome you have at the end.”

But Byakuya seemed to be having fun in spite of a lack of tangible outcomes, stepping onto the arrow tiles with less stiffness than Makoto.

None of them obtained a high score but they finished to a round of applause. The other three had apparently got tired of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and came over to spectate their dancing instead.
Yasuhiro burst forward, giving Byakuya an enthusiastic pat on the back. “Way to go, Togami-chi! Those were some sick moves.”

Byakuya adjusted his glasses. “Sick? Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“You were right, Togami-kun,” said Kyouko in a comically serious tone that Makoto expected was intentional. “You are the best dancer out of all of us.”

“That’s not much of a feat,” Mukuro said quietly, looking at Kyouko. Kyouko turned her head and the two were soon locked in an intense stare which only ended when Yasuhiro called them over to play air hockey.

They all agreed that the winner would stay on and play the next person. Within ten minutes, Aoi had defeated all the boys and Touko with ease. Her match against Kyouko took longer, their mallets cracking against the skirling puck with speed that kept both up on their toes. If this had been a sports anime, they would have been rivals and this would have taken place in the season finale. In Makoto’s opinion, anyway.

Yasuhiro rubbed his hands together. “Hey, Togami-chi, remember you said you’d pay for everything today? My divinations are telling me I’m going to win something on a claw crane. I’m thinking of winning Ogre-chi something with healing properties so she owes me a favour, ‘right? I seriously could do with someone tall painting my bedroom... and I’ve got some mafia people on my tail too...”

Mafia people? Makoto thought it better not to ask.

Aoi glared at Yasuhiro, giving Kyouko the opportunity to score an easy goal.

Byakuya shook his wallet over Yasuhiro’s outstretched hands. “Of all the things in this place, those machines are the absolute worst. Working on a frivolous thing like luck rather than skill...” He begrudgingly gave the others a handful of coins from his seemingly bottomless wallet.

Only when Mukuro remarked to Makoto and Touko that most machines were programmed to tighten their claw after an approximate number of attempts did Byakuya gain any interest in them. After he lost five times, Byakuya stationed himself at the machine next to Mukuro who was holding a rabbit with googly eyes under one arm and a basketball under the other.

“Ikusaba,” Byakuya said. “You seem to know a lot about these games. What strategies do you have for securing victory?”

“Do you want to win Fukawa-san something?” Mukuro asked with a coy smile.

Byakuya shot a glare at her. “That wasn’t my question. I wish to defeat luck.”

“Well, you need to decide on your target. Anything with a limb trapped beneath another toy is a no go, as is any beside the glass.” Mukuro peered inside the claw crane. Byakuya followed her gaze, nodding at intervals. “These machines operate with a joystick so you’ll want to stand in front of the machine when moving the claw to your left or right, but it’s best if you stand beside the machine when you’re moving the claw toward or away from you.” She leaned her body to the side so she saw the toys through a different pane, nearly lifting one foot off the floor as she stretched. “That way you won’t get screwed over by the dodgy mirrors.”

“I see...” Byakuya cupped his chin.

Makoto looked away so he wouldn’t laugh at how serious his friend was.
“The claws in these have three prongs,” Mukuro continued, pointing. “You’ll want to try to get the claw to land on the chest area of the toy.”

“You have a rather... extensive knowledge on an incredibly worthless hobby,” Touko noted from nearby. A horse plush fell from her claw’s prongs and she hissed, flicking another coin into the slot.

“What can I say? I did a lot of people watching back when I lived on the streets,” Mukuro explained with a shrug, winning a dalmatian plush which she presented to Makoto. “Here, you take it. Consider it thanks for letting me be Raphael. Anyway, so like whenever I collected enough coins from gutters, I used some to win toys for Junko-chan and a few made for good target practice.”

“You lived on the streets?” said Makoto, tearing his eyes away from his plush.

“Yes.” Mukuro watched Byakuya fail to grab a purple unicorn plush. “It wasn’t a glamorous lifestyle but that’s what happened between semesters at school. Junko-chan scouted for whatever pageants she could in the meantime, and everyone soon realised how amazing and pretty and all so perfect she is.” The last adjective was muttered with faint bitterness.

Makoto stared at her. “That’s incredible, Ikusaba-san... It must have been scary being homeless.”

Mukuro blinked at him, flushing slightly. “You think so? Maybe it was a bit scary at times but it was nothing I couldn’t handle. See?” She posed. “There isn’t a single scar on my body. No one could lay so much as a finger on me.”

Byakuya finally succeeded in winning the unicorn plush. It tumbled through the chute and into a hatch. He held it by the leg with his thumb and forefinger, examining it critically, before walking over to Touko and giving it to her.

“It’s ghastly,” he said. “Therefore you would be a more suitable owner.”

A true romantic.

Touko hugged it to her chest. “You... mean it? A-And I don’t have to pay you back?”

“No. Consider it payment.”

She shook her head, wide-eyed. “But I do that for free! I don’t need payment! I... I like helping you!”

Byakuya frowned, looking like he was struggling to understand only to conclude what she told him was absurd. “I’m tired of this place. Is there anywhere nearby worth going to or can I go home?”

“There’s a bookstore down the street,” Kyouko said, walking over with Aoi. Both seemed equally satisfied with their match of air hockey so Makoto couldn’t tell who had won. “Perhaps something there will take your fancy.”

“My personal library has more than enough books to satisfy me.” Byakuya folded his arms over his chest. “However, I’m a man of my word and I said I would pay for everything today. Let’s go there now.”

“Books?” Yasuhiro blew air out of his nose. “Can’t we eat instead? Besides, don’t you do enough
reading already? That’s why you and Fukawa-chi wear glasses, ‘right?”

Touko and Byakuya looked equally offended.

“I was kidding,” Yasuhiro quickly said, glancing at Byakuya’s wallet and patting the air with his hands. “How about you two go buy books and we’ll get a headstart on ordering food? There’s a real nice McDonalds here that you guys need to check out before you die. You two can catch up to us there when you’re done and we’ll all eat a burger or drink coffee or something.”

“At a fast food restaurant?” Byakuya said, appalled. “I refuse.”

“Don’t be a party pooper, Togami-chi.” Yasuhiro waggled a finger. “It’s the best in Japan and has the Hagakure seal of approval.” He winked. “Trust me, you won’t regret it.”

Judging by Byakuya’s face, he already did.

The McDonalds that Yasuhiro led them into didn’t appear particularly different to other branches. It smelled of nothing unusual, was crowded, advertised the same meals and nothing stood out about the furnishing. Makoto judged there to be no real difference after Yasuhiro explained that the atmosphere here was calmer due to the lack of zashiki warashi.

“Are you sure Togami-chi and Fukawa-chi aren’t dating?” Yasuhiro asked at the end of his spiel about spirits that liked to swipe french fries, talking loudly so they could hear him over the restaurant's noise level. Almost wistful, he added, “He’s never given me a free toy or complimented me on my cologne...”

“Don’t tell me you want him to do all that,” said Aoi. “He’s a jerk!”

Yasuhiro shuffled the wad of money that he had received from Byakuya. “A jerk with lots of cash.”

“He’s still a jerk, even to Fukawa-chan. I don’t know what she sees in him. When I think of him, I want to puke. Bleck!” Aoi mimed throwing up and Yasuhiro jumped back from her nonexistent vomit, bumping into the man standing behind them in the queue.

“Sorry, dude,” said Yasuhiro.

The man grunted.

“I suspect Togami-kun isn’t used to dealing with people on a personal level,” Kyouko said. “Regardless of his demeanour, he still volunteered to pay for everything.”

Aoi’s stomach growled and she pouted. “I guess...” Something caught her eye through the windowed door and she craned her neck to improve her view. “Hey... is that...?”

She dashed outside.

The others chased after her but they didn’t need to go far as Aoi had skidded to a stop by the time they exited the building.

“We just lost our place in line!” Yasuhiro said, face aflame. “You better have a good reason, Asahina-chi!”

“I...” Aoi gulped, staring down the street. “I... just saw Sakura-chan...”

Sakura’s physical stature made it fairly easy to pick her out in a crowd but looking down both ends
of the street several times, Makoto had no luck in finding her.

“It was definitely her,” Aoi said, refusing to give up and go inside empty-handed.

Mukuro raised her eyebrows. “I thought you said she was staying with her boyfriend until she got better?”

Aoi bit her lip. “... That’s what I thought too.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

'I don’t mind sacrificing my humanity.'

Fun facts:

1. The very first scene was something I added in later.
2. Fukawa's confrontation with Kirigiri and Naegi was rewritten quite a bit.
3. I love TMNT.
4. Spot the Komaeda and Monomi reference.

ALSO this nearly has 100 kudos and ahh thank you for reading this! I hope you are all enjoying it. The plot really picks up in the following chapters, as does the Sakuraoi and other ships.
“Nam# T#p# #4... #t has a capac#t# #f #i#ht ####nds. #t’s n#t n# #f th# #a###i## ###s##ns b##ca##s# #f #t was, #t w####d ha## a sh##t## t###### #a###d. Th####h that w####d’#t b# a p##b##m f## ###, #i#ht? What w#th #### fanc# #####s and a##. S# c#### m#, h#w’d #### #t #### hands #n th##s?”


Gravel crunched underfoot.

“I’m really happy you’re here,” Aoi said to Makoto, hitching up the strap of her satchel. She led him off the road and into a sparse woodland area.

He responded with a wave, too exhausted to communicate in a more extravagant way like using words. One day, one distant day, he would go a week without trekking across the city with a member of his class. Walking to and from school gave him exercise. P.E. class gave him exercise. Swim club gave him exercise. Going with friends in search for witches gave him exercise. Life gave him more than enough exercise yet here he was, accompanying Aoi, with her endless amounts of energy, across the city. Across the city to a rural part so different from the maze of buildings and paved roads and the smell of restaurants and exhaust fumes.

But she asked him to come with her after swim club and he had found himself unable to decline.

Overhead, clouds scudded across the late afternoon sky, and cherry blossoms the size of fingernails fluttered off the trees. Although there weren’t many trees, the branches of each stretched horizontally so they overlapped with their neighbours’.

A blossom landed on Aoi’s shoulder. She broke into a jog; the blossom curled and was thrown off her.

The woodland soon opened up into a clearing wherein they found stone steps in front of a dojo. Beyond the dojo, a lake could be seen, the building’s brown and yellow exterior reflected in the water. Makoto once took martial arts classes here: he had not been very good and much preferred the animal rearing club that his mother suggested he go to instead.

Aoi knocked twice on the dojo’s door, straightening up when a man with a receding hairline answered. His angular face contrasted with the soft warmth of his eyes.

“Oogami-san,” Aoi bowed, “is Sakura home? I’ve got more work from school to give her. We’re
going to write a group report on a book, and she’s in my group so I thought I’d lend her a copy of what we’re meant to be reading.”

“Sorry, Asahina-kun, but Sakura is still with Kenichiro-kun and won’t be back for a while,” the man replied. “She’s not one to get sick easily but hospitals are full of all kinds of diseases so it’s not too strange. If you leave her work with me, I’ll give them to her as soon as she returns and say you stopped by. She should be back in a few days.”

Dejected, Aoi unfastened her satchel and handed Sakura’s father two plastic folders. Another bow and the door closed.

The two students descended the steps together with Aoi hopping down individual steps, her focus downward until the dojo lay some distance behind them.

“It doesn’t make sense.” Aoi scuffed her toes against a clump of dirt. Grass tickled her bare ankle but she didn’t so much as smile. “I saw Sakura-chan last Saturday. It had to be her! I thought maybe she wanted to surprise me at school but she didn’t even turn up today.” She exhaled a sigh with a giveaway shaky quality. “It’s not Sakura-chan-like at all!”

“I’m sure she’s okay,” said Makoto.

“Sakura-chan is just a regular person like us! I saw her on Saturday and she’s not been answering her phone and... and I phoned Kenichiro yesterday and he said that she left last Monday and-! And-!” Aoi clasped her wrist. “I don’t know! I don’t know who to tell. If there was something wrong, she’d tell me, right?” She searched his face for confirmation. “That’s what friends do. That’s what best friends do. If Sakura-chan was in danger, she’d tell me, wouldn’t she? Naegi, wouldn’t she tell me?”

His tongue slipped, the concern that he harboured cracking his ‘yes’ into two syllables. Mukuro’s remark about Kenichiro’s recovery from his terminal disease being a miracle, a wish come true, echoed in his mind and it took a good deal of strength for him to not hide his face and betray the conclusion he reached. As much as he wanted to tell Aoi, it wasn’t his place to do so.

She pressed on, “Ishimaru’s parents called Saturday night and they haven’t seen Ishimaru for more than a week. Then there’s Oowada, Kabi-chan... I stopped by Kabi-chan’s apartment yesterday but she didn’t answer the door. No one where she lives has seen her for ages.”

Her toes nudged into a stone half-embedded in the path. She stopped walking, her chin and shoulders trembling.

Makoto stopped too.

“Sakura-chan and I don’t keep secrets from each other... at least I thought we didn’t...” Aoi’s lips quivered. “What if Sakura-chan’s in trouble? Kuwata... Kabi-chan... Oowada... Ishimaru... a-all those other people... no one knows where they are... a-and what if... she ends up like them? W-What if...? What if she-?”

He opened his arms, inviting a hug that she fell into with no forethought. Aoi buried her face into his shoulder and sobbed. She squeezed and he gingerly patted her on the back, wishing he could do more for once other than offer words of comfort.

“I don’t know what to do!” Aoi clung tighter. “If... If I could just see her again! All of them! I... I would-!”

“You would what?” asked Monobear.
Aoi jumped away from Makoto. A twig snapped beneath her foot.

A sharp pang struck Makoto’s chest. His eyebrows lowered, darkening his face into a wary frown.

“W-What?” Aoi stared down, holding up a loose fist in anticipated defence. “Is that stuffed toy... talking?”

“I’m not a toy. I’m a bear!” Monobear hammered at the ground with its feet and flung up its arms. “Monobear! I left the official papers in my cave so you’ll have to take my word for it. Pleased to finally meet you, Asahina-san.” It calmed and offered her its paw. “I see we both have a mutual friend in Naegi-kun, upupupu.”

She glowered. “Hagakure, is that you?”

“Me? Controlled by an oaf like that?” Monobear turned around so it had its back to them. “Like... with a remote?”

“... Togami?”

“I’m way too cute to be made by someone like him.” It slouched. “What a cruel thing to say... and just as I was about to take you to your Sakura-chan...”

Cautious relief tinged with confusion spread across Aoi’s face. “You know where Sakura-chan is?”

“Of course! How could I not when she’s so big? She’s one of my latest recruits.”

Aoi gasped. “She’s in a cult?”

The nearest tree rustled as the birds on its branches flew to another tree further away, wings whooshing.

Makoto looked at Monobear. “So Oogami-san did become a magical girl.”

Monobear shrugged but its smile told him all he needed to know.

“A magical what?” Aoi shook her head. “Naegi, you’re in on this too? What the hell is going on? What happened to Sakura-chan?” Her eyes flicked between the other two. “Is she in a cult or not?”

“Cult is such a strong word. It’s easier if she tells you herself,” Monobear said. “I’d be more than happy to take you to her. Trust me, I’m not going to hurt you. Naegi-kun can vouch for me on that.”

She turned to Makoto. He nodded and she looked back at Monobear.

Makoto had a very bad feeling about this.

Her stance relaxed somewhat. “Thanks... Chronobear?”

Monobear poked its paw into one of its ears. “Monobear.”

Aoi traced its name onto her palm three times before talking again. “Monobear... um... no. I’m still kind of confused about that but... you said you know where Sakura-chan is. That’s what’s important. Though if this is a joke or a trap,” she glared, “I swear I’ll... I’ll...!”

“The only joke here is Naegi-kun’s hairstyle.” Monobear waved a paw. “Follow me and you’ll
understand what your Sakura-chan has been doing behind your back, upupupu.”

Patting at his hair, Makoto told himself bears had no right to judge what made someone’s hair a joke.

Monobear skipped off and they trailed after it. Loose cherry blossoms landed in their hair as they passed through the shadow of a tree. At the edge of the woodland was a road and they kept to the parallel ditch beside it all the way to the city. This would have been a good time for Makoto to explain to Aoi what this was all about, to tell her about magical girls and witches and friends he couldn’t save, and friends he had made and secrets that had been kept, but he couldn’t. So desperately did Makoto want to spare Aoi, happy Aoi, friendly Aoi, from the life of a magical girl. And Aoi spent the trip talking to Monobear, from who she could get no satisfactory answers other than, ‘I’m a bear,’ and ‘wait and see! Or skip a few paragraphs. I don’t care.’

His fatigue reemerged, pinching at his side, but he persisted until they came to a street he recognised. He had come here what felt like a long time ago. The smell of spices drifted from a newly established restaurant opposite the building Monobear led them to: an abandoned hotel.

No, not an - the abandoned hotel. This was the hotel that he, Kyouko and Sayaka defeated the witch with long arms in, back when everyone was alive and Sayaka was Makiko Kabi. Fresh police tape had been slung across the doorway which the two students quickly ripped away.

Little had changed inside since their last visit. More graffiti decorated the walls; next to the entrance where someone had painted ‘Queen of Liars’, someone had drawn a silhouette of a person wearing a poofy dress and slit its throat with a dotted black line. Alcohol and vomit stung Makoto’s eyes and when they passed the reception desk, newspapers crackled.

He and Aoi froze while Monobear toddled on ahead. From behind the desk scuttled out a grey fox that rounded the corner and further into the building.

“Sakura-chan...” Aoi chewed her bottom lip, hugging herself as she scrutinised the room. “Why would Sakura-chan be here? It’s all dark and smelly... and she doesn’t do drugs or gamble.” She slapped her hand against her mouth and gulped, pinpricks of water in her eyes. “It smells like someone died.”

“Probably,” Monobear said, looking around as if prospecting a house for sale. “What’d you know, another witch made its home here. Fancy that. If you’re fast enough, you can catch up to Oogami-san and reunite in an explosion of lilies.”

Monobear’s ulterior motives dawned onto Makoto with a jolt. Nausea pooled at the bottom of his stomach.

“How are we supposed to find the witch’s barrier?” asked Makoto. “And how are we meant to catch up to Oogami-san? Neither of us are magical girls. If we go alone...” He didn’t want to think what would happen, let alone say it out loud.

Monobear stretched its arms upward. “I knew I forgot something. Oh well, you’ll have to form a contract then.” It whipped out a clipboard from thin air, a pair of spectacles balancing on its snout. “What will it be? Here or to go?”

Salvation came in the form of the main door opening. In strode Kiyotaka, his coat billowing behind him like a cape and the evening sky his backdrop. Already in his magical girl outfit, the face of his wristwatch glowed a faint red.
Makoto laughed.

Kiyotaka glared.

Makoto’s laughter rotted in his throat. In Kiyotaka’s eyes, where passion had once burned, smouldered hostility that clenched Makoto’s chest. His skin was dirty, a stretched yellow.

“You?” Monobear said angrily. “What are you doing here? Is this some kind of deus ex machina? Someone fetch me my lawyer!”

“I persuaded him to come here,” said Kyouko, leaning against the doorway behind Kiyotaka, though unlike him she had yet to transform. “We shouldn’t dawdle.” She stepped toward everyone else. “Oogami-san may need our help.”

Steam erupted out of Monobear’s ears. “Kirigiri-san? I don’t what you’re doing but your monkeying around is getting on my nerves! Don’t you have a social life? Homework? A hobby? Why do you keep godmodding and following me around?”

She pulled her ring off her finger. It changed into a pulsing orb. Her footsteps resonated across the room as she walked through it and everyone else was inspired to move with her.

Kyouko’s Soul Gem guided them to the out-of-order elevator. While she waited for the portal to appear, she transformed into a magical girl in a series of purple flashes that burst across her body.

The portal appeared. It resembled a blood stain suspended in the air, trimmed with black lace that connected into a circular border. Kyouko grabbed hold of Aoi’s hand and they leaped through together with the other three following after.

When they went in last time, the elevator transformed into a cage which plummeted into what felt like hell. This time, though Makoto once again stepped into a cage, it didn’t travel vertically but instead with a horizontal lurch that knocked him off his feet and onto his face. He assumed it was a cage, anyway, for he could barely see a thing until they were brought into a brighter area. His fists found metal bars and he pulled himself upright.

A factory awaited them, pulling the cage in on a conveyor belt. Makoto struggled to locate where the conveyor belt led to: it veered off in a upward zigzag multiple times and into a mesh that his eyes got lost in.

Beside him, Kyouko readied her gun.

Kiyotaka extracted a katana from his chest.

The conveyor belt maze didn’t make up the entirety of the witch’s barrier and their cage wasn’t the only thing on the conveyor belt. Dolls sat in a single file line ahead of and behind the cage. On the ground, a teacup with steam arms loaded dolls onto the bit of conveyor belt by the gaping hole that the cage had entered through. All the dolls were clothed in greyscale dresses and petticoats bearing frills and bows. In fact, everything outside the cage was greyscale, from the dolls’ unseeing eyes to the walls swathed in silver cobwebs.

Several slashes at the cage bars with Kiyotaka’s katana proved futile.

“Is it taking us to the witch?” Makoto asked. The cage climbed higher.

“Witch? What witch?” Aoi pressed her face against the bars. “Where...? I think I’m going to faint...”
“Fainting would be inconvenient,” Kyouko said, still holding Aoi’s hand.

Aoi wiped hair from her forehead with the heel of her palm. “Y-Yeah...” She tried to laugh. “You’re right...”

Kyouko peered out. What she saw didn’t seem to please her so Makoto investigated.

Below them, for by now they had ascended some distance, the conveyor belt eventually provided a route out of the labyrinth and down again. At the end of the conveyor belt stood a teacup familiar wearing a dinner suit that strained at the buttons. Every time a doll chugged past it, the familiar hooked its spout beneath the doll’s arm and tossed the doll into a cavity in the wall. Flames clawed out from within and it occurred to Makoto with frozen realisation that the dolls were being thrown into an incinerator.

“We... We can’t fit inside there.” Makoto’s legs shook, threatening to give way. “We’re too big, right? The cage is too big.”

Aoi’s back slammed into cage bars and she thumped into a sitting position. Her fingers laced through her hair. She looked ready to vomit. “This is a dream. This is a really messed up dream and I’m going to wake up and see Sakura-chan beside me and I’ll go to school and say hello to Kabi-chan and Kirigiri-chan, and Oowada and Ishimaru will bicker about homework like usual while Hagakure naps at his desk and-”

Kiyotaka’s katana blade pierced the air beside Aoi’s ear.

She shrieked.

Makoto yanked Kiyotaka’s arm away from her. “Ishimaru-kun!”

Kiyotaka shrugged Makoto off but didn’t aim his katana at her again.

“Ishimaru,” said Aoi, “you almost st-st-stabbed me in the face! W-What’s the matter with you?” Her back pressed even more against the cage and her feet pushed at the floor as she tried to force herself to phase through the bars. “Y-You’re freaking me out!”

“What’s the matter?” Kiyotaka repeated, turning on his heel so he had his back to them. His voice rasped his throat. “Nothing is the matter. It’s quite the opposite. I’ve seen things. I’ve seen things for what they really are. I’ve seen the people I’m meant to be saving. I’ve seen the people meant to do the saving and I wonder if any of them are worth my time when they’re all so ungrateful. Kyoudai gave his life and here you speaking so lightly of him.”

Monobear yawned.

“Of course they’re worth your time,” said Makoto.

Kiyotaka’s eyes flashed. “Don’t fucking act like you’re any better! You shut your goddamn mouth!”

Makoto recoiled.

Kyouko’s face creased; Makoto suspected that she intended to contribute to the conversation, but she was interrupted by a crash from above which dented the top of the cage. As the cage had a solid ceiling, no one could see beyond it, and only when the cage ceiling was peeled away did they discover the cause.
Aoi rose, teetering. “Sakura-chan!” A smile cracked her cheeks and unleashed a wave of colour across her face. “You’re all right!”

The cage shifted but remained on the conveyor belt. Sakura dropped down, landing next to Aoi. She didn’t say anything, instead craning her neck back and raising her gauntleted fists.

Makoto saw the witch through the top of the cage. Over its body hung silky red cloth cinched at the top where its neck was. The cloth was a diamond-shaped poncho that covered its head, and under the diamond’s middle corners poked out crooked arms with a tree branch texture. One arm held a smiling theatre mask to its face while the other held a fan with the same colour scheme as the portal.

Sakura jumped up and out of the cage, her cream dress fanning out and its sapphire trimmed hem whipping at her thighs. She punched at the witch but missed - the witch danced around her, and Sakura crashed into the conveyor belt. Two dolls tumbled off.

Grimacing, Sakura rubbed her knuckles across her bleeding lip.

Kiyotaka sprung out of the cage and swung his katana.

The witch didn’t dodge fast enough and he managed to slice a segment off the bottom of the witch’s cloth. What little he detached dissolved into ashen rain. With a howl, the witch flicked its wrist and flipped the mask over to the other side. Where there had been a smiling face now existed one of anger, and it swooped away from him as it threw its fan.

His katana cut through the fan. A fragment of it gashed his neck. Kiyotaka rolled backward in the air, flung back, and he slammed into the conveyor belt. Four dolls tumbled off.

Kyouko looked at Makoto over her shoulder. “Naegi-kun, stay here with Asahina-san.” The ribbon on her braid extended and propelled her out of the cage.

He joined Aoi on the floor.

Monobear lay on its back. A snot bubble joined to its nostril inflated and deflated in time with its snores.

“I don’t understand,” Aoi mumbled, her hair a complete mess. “How can they do that? Where are we?”

Makoto touched her shoulder. “Oogami-san is a magical girl. She made a deal with Monobear: he granted her a wish and in return, she became a magical girl who has to fight witches like what they’re fighting now. Witches try to make everyone despair and it’s a magical girl’s job to counter them with hope.”

“A wish?” Aoi tensed. “Sakura-chan must have wished for Kenichiro to get better... but why didn’t she tell me?” She squinted at the floor. “Why did she avoid me? I would have believed her if she told me... I would have supported her!”

He didn’t doubt her claim to support Sakura but her claim that she would have believed Sakura didn’t ring quite as true. But what did he know about their relationship? They seemed to know each other better than he knew either of them.

Monobear’s snot bubble popped and it rocked itself forward. It yawned. “Oogami-san has been far too busy fighting witches to spend time with you. I’ve been with her making sure she doesn’t goof up too early. That’s what they do. They fight witches like a teenager browses the internet or a
“For how long?” asked Aoi.

“For how long?” Monobear tilted its head to one side. “When you put a slice of bread into the toaster and it becomes toast, can you make it into bread again? When cheese goes rotten, do you use a time machine to revert it into the prom queen it used to be in cheese school? No. That’s just silly. Once a magical girl, always a magical girl until you pop your clogs.”

“But she could die!”

“Ain’t that a stinker?”

Aoi gagged, hiding her face in her hands, and Makoto draped an arm over her shoulders.

Kyouko’s ribbon grappled a bit of conveyor belt, swinging her around like she was a jungle girl holding a vine, before snapping back to normal size as she soared forward. Her gun’s bullets ricocheted off the witch’s mask and fan. Two bullets tore holes through its gown and she landed onto the bit of conveyor belt on the other side of the witch.

Sakura bounded across the conveyor belt, crushing dolls in her wake, and leaped off to attack the witch from above. This time she dealt a blow, cracking its mask with her fist before landing on another part of the conveyor belt.

The witch floated backward and down, black liquid oozing from the fracture in its mask. It raised the hand holding the fan upward. All across the conveyor belt, doll familiars stood to attention and marched toward the magical girls.

Pistol out of ammunition, Kyouko put it back in its holster. Her ribbon lengthened and transformed into a spear which she brandished at the familiars.

Aoi’s hair bunched in her hands. “Naegi... who... who else do I know that are magical girls?”

He shifted. “There’s Togami-kun, Fukawa-san, Hagakure-kun...”


“The first two were. Ikusaba-san...”

“She never formed a contract with me,” Monobear interjected, swishing its paw to an invisible tune.

“And I have no idea about Kuwata,” finished Makoto.

“You said Oowada and Kabi-chan were,” said Aoi. “So they’re dead...?”

She saw the answer in his face and cried.

Kiyotaka’s next attack failed and his laces stretched out to loop around a conveyor belt to stop him from falling. Familiars greeted him when he returned to the conveyor belt, forming clusters around him faster than he could cut them down.

“Do you think... all those people who went missing... were magical girls?” Aoi hugged her legs closer, resting her chin in the dip between her knees. “And their families... friends... they’ll never know what happened to them, will they?”
“I... don’t know.” But Makoto did know. He knew and it made him want to vomit.

The witch flung its fan at Kyouko’s hand.

Kyouko dropped her spear and clutched the freshly made wound. Her knees buckled and she bit into her lower lip.

“Kirisu-san!” Makoto jolted to his feet and nearly lost his balance when the cage declined.

Declined.

His heartbeat thrashed between his ears.

They were headed toward the incinerator.

“We have to get off!” Makoto seized Aoi’s arm and she shakily got up as well. He dropped to one knee and gave her a boost. Once she was on top of the cage, she hoisted Makoto out with difficulty and the pair sprinted up the conveyor belt. They stumbled over waking familiars, Makoto’s hand locked around Aoi’s as they tried to get away.

Now he was grateful for all the walking and swimming everyone made him do.

“What about me?” Monobear hopped rapidly. “You’re not going to leave me here, are you?”

Makoto turned away from Monobear and spotted another teacup familiar. It stood beside a switch on the wall nearby and he swore it winked at him with a button eye.

Then it prodded its spout against the switch.

The conveyor belt quickened.

Kyouko noticed the two non-magical girls’ predicament. Her ribbon shot out to scoop them up and raised them to her level. She set them down beside her and winced, her nails biting into her wrist as she hardened her grip on herself.

“Kirisu-san, your hand!” Aoi fumbled with Kyouko’s wrist, inspecting the injury. Jaw rigid, she whipped off her school jacket. “It’s okay, I know first aid. I know what I’m doing.”

“Thank you.” Kyouko angled her head to the side.

Sakura charged into another attack. The witch veered out of her way so her fist instead collided with one of the doll familiars. More familiars gathered around Sakura as she landed, which she kicked off the conveyor belt in a sweeping movement. Her shoes sparkled blue.

“I... need to return to the fight...” Kyouko created a new spear with her ribbon and used it to knock an approaching familiar off the conveyor belt.

“But you’re hurt!” Aoi took out her hairclip and fiddled with the makeshift bandage. “You need rice!”

Makoto scratched his head. “I think she needs medical attention, not a snack.”

“What? No, I mean R-I-C-E,” said Aoi. “Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation!”

The witch retrieved another fan from beneath its gown and aimed at Aoi. But before it could throw its weapon, Sakura crashed into it and pinned it to the conveyor belt with her fist. She pummeled
its face, roaring, until a spiderweb of fractures ruptured the mask.

When the fragments fell off to reveal its true face, a doll no different from the others on the conveyor belt stared up at Sakura.

She leaped back. The witch remained sprawled across the conveyor belt and cocked its head to one side, as if confused.

It arrived beside the teacup at the incinerator and was tossed into the flames with all the others.

Their surroundings blurred into a white and grey mess before solidifying into the hotel corridor. Aoi stopped fussing with Kyouko’s wrist so she could fret over Sakura’s beaten face, rummaging a hand through her school bag as she looked for any major injuries.

Nearby, Kiyotaka patted at his bloody neck while Kyouko watched him wordlessly. Their main source of light originated from Sakura’s and Kiyotaka’s Soul Gems; Kyouko’s was not visible.

“I will be fine, Asahina,” said Sakura, but she allowed Aoi to mop at her injuries with alcohol-free wipes. “You need not worry yourself over my condition. I have endured no permanent damage. Even my dress is intact.”

Sakura’s words held truth. Her dress contained no rips, nor did the veil of translucent white pinned onto her waist by a sakura flower. The outfit gave the impression of a princess, disturbed only by her bloody wounds and the gauntlets she wore on each hand that ought to have belonged to a knight of some sort. Therefore Sakura’s outfit was best described as that of a knight princess. Which, Makoto thought, suited her well enough.

“You need to go to a hospital.” Aoi stroked Sakura’s face, which had by now been cleaned. “I’ll call an ambulance. We’ll say... We’ll say you...!”

“Please,” Sakura placed her hand onto Aoi’s and squeezed gently, “I appreciate your concern but there is no need for us to go to such lengths. The damage that I have sustained is manageable and requires only time to heal. If I am correct, you should be able to witness my magical ability restoring my body from all its recent injuries.”

That they could witness. Where Aoi had cleaned her face, the scratches and other wounds had already healed into obscurity.

“You nearly died!” Aoi’s hand fell from Sakura’s cheek and hovered by the blue lace of her friend’s bodice. No matter how much Aoi looked for the vanished injuries, she found only the scars that Sakura had before she became a magical girl. “It’s only a matter of time before one of those... those witches kill you!”

“It is a fate I acquiesced upon becoming a magical girl.” Sakura looked away. “In exchange for my services, Kenichiro’s body will no longer atrophy. I am indebted to Monobear and bound by my honour to serve him.” She gestured toward the murky blue sakura-shaped Soul Gem on her choker. “This is my Soul Gem that contains all my magic... It is my responsibility to maintain upkeep of it lest it become unusable.”

What happened next happened in a blur that ended with Aoi holding Sakura’s ripped choker. Aoi’s other hand gripped Kyouko’s spear.

“I’m not going to let you die!” Aoi pressed the spear’s pointed head against Sakura’s Soul Gem, and her eyes welled up as she backed away. “Sakura-chan, I’m not going to let you kill yourself!”
Sakura reached out a hand. “Asahina!”

The spear unraveled into black ribbon. Kyouko, no longer in her magical outfit, grabbed Aoi by the shoulders and shook her with surprisingly force. “Asahina-san, do you know what you almost did?”

Horror flushed down Aoi’s face. She struggled but couldn’t break free. “You’re hurting me!”

“Answer me!” Kyouko’s eyes glinted. Makoto felt as afraid as Aoi looked.

“I was going to save Sakura-chan!”

“You were going to kill her!”

Aoi flinched, her cheeks shining wet. “W-What... do you mean?”

Kyouko bowed her head, slackening her hold though Aoi seemed no longer interested in freeing herself. “Do you know why they are called Soul Gems?”

Aoi didn’t answer.

Kyouko answered for her. “When a magical girl makes a contract, their soul is torn out of their body and placed into a Soul Gem. Our bodies are empty shells. Mere husks. Puppets controlled by our Soul Gem. So when you destroy a magical girl’s Soul Gem, you kill their most human part.”

“W-What?” Aoi stumbled back, tripping in her haste to put space between herself and Kyouko.

Sakura slowly raised her hands to her face, flexing her fingers as if controlling them for the first time in her life.

Makoto had barely even begun to process what Kyouko had just revealed.

“You’re lying,” said Aoi. She turned to Monobear, who through all this had been picking at its ear. “Kirigiri-chan’s wrong, isn’t she? Monobear, you don’t turn people into zombies, right? Right?”

“... You want me to lie and say she’s wrong?” Monobear cupped the back of its head with its paws and sighed loudly. “Because she ain’t. Your puny human bodies wouldn’t last five minutes against a witch so really, I’m doing you all a favour by keeping your souls tucked away and safe in a gem. I wonder how Kirigiri-san knew that already.” It peered at Kyouko. “How suspicious, upupupu.”

Aoi sobbed.

The floor seemed to wobble so Makoto steadied himself by resting his hand onto the wall closest to him.

Kyouko’s focus moved to Kiyotaka. “Ishimaru-kun, do you realise now? By allowing your Soul Gem to be corrupted by despair, you are corrupting yourself with despair.”

Kiyotaka didn’t respond straightaway. He stared at her for a moment and then chuckled. “I thought you sought my help so you could save Naegi-kun and Asahina-kun, but really you wanted to use this opportunity to show me I’m a walking corpse.” His head rolled back, smiling a twisted smile. “You’ve shown your true colours, Kirigiri-kun. I considered you a smart girl, always getting on with your work and staying out of trouble. And you had Naegi-kun’s best interests at heart, so trusting you made sense... but you planned to weaken my resolve with this, didn’t you?”

He staggered toward her. Kyouko didn’t flinch even when they were nose-to-nose.
“All this has been a ploy,” he hissed. Her eyelids fluttered. “I don’t know what your motives are but if they jeopardise the lives of those I protect, I will not hesitate to fucking murder you.” He prodded her on the chest. “I don’t mind sacrificing my humanity if I have to in order to save lives... it’s inevitable... and you can keep your fucking Grief Seeds to yourself. I don’t need your fucking sympathy.”

Kiyotaka’s outfit morphed into his school uniform and he strode off, Monobear by his side.

“Kirigiri-san...” Makoto swallowed but his mouth dried almost immediately afterwards. “Monobear, why didn’t you tell them?” He shouted. “Why the hell didn’t you tell them?”

“Because they never asked,” said Monobear.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to leave a comment, please do because I have no one really to talk to about this AU in much depth.

Fun facts:

1. The first scene makes sense if the #s are replaced with the right letter. Good luck with that - it hides a pretty big spoiler.
2. That was, as you can probably guess, Celes’s witch.
3. Someone dies in the next chapter.
4. Someone’s backstory is explained in more detail in the next chapter.
5. Someone punches Togami in the face in the next chapter.

Next time:

'I just want someone to be with me.'
“Naegi-kun.”

Makoto slumped forward and rubbed at his eyes with his knuckles. According to his alarm clock, he needed to get ready for school in two hours, which left him with plenty of time to go back to sleep. Surprisingly, falling asleep the first time had proven easier than anticipated. After the revelation about the Soul Gems earlier that week, he thought he would suffer through a chain of restless nights, but on the first night Makoto had fallen into a gentle slumber within an hour. The following nights developed in much the same way, all hosting an hour in which he stared at the ceiling.

This hour of staring at the ceiling was dedicated to his friends, spent in near entirety to wondering if Byakuya, Touko and Yasuhiro would ever know that their souls had been relocated but failing to present a conclusion that loosened the knot in Makoto’s gut. Sayaka and Mondo never found out. How would they have reacted? How would anyone of them react? Makoto missed them terribly still.

Remembering why he woke up, Makoto strained his ears for the voice but hearing nothing out of the ordinary for thirty seconds, he dismissed the voice for a lingering snippet of a dream and set his head down onto his pillow.

“Naegi-kun!”

He opened his eyes.

“The dude’s probably snoozing, ‘right? Lucky guy...”

“O-Or he’s too immersed in anime and manga! I bet he’s reading something dirty... ah! It’s making me feel dirty... j-just thinking about him sitting in the dark... all sweaty... the only light coming from his lamp and the lust in his eyes...!”

“Fukawa. Stop talking.”

“Technically she’s thinking, ‘right?”

“Stop thinking then.”

Okay, Makoto heard that. Thought that. Whatever. Makoto rolled out of bed and shuffled over to the window. In the fuzzy early morning light and with his tired vision, he could make out four people standing in his garden.
“Eh?” he said. They wouldn’t be able to hear that. “Eh?” That was better.

“Naegi-kun, get dressed and meet us down here as soon as possible. Don’t wake anyone.”

Makoto nodded though he didn’t know if they saw. He hauled on the first pair of jeans that his fumbling hands found in his drawers and he grabbed his hoodie off the floor on the way out. The upstairs landing was quiet but not silent: his father’s snores thrummed, bedroom door ajar.

Hearing no signs of consciousness, Makoto crept down the stairs. One step groaned and he paused. No one woke. Relief was heaved out in a sigh and he continued his descent. At the front door, he slipped on his shoes and zipped up his hoodie; the door was creaked open and then creaked shut behind him.

His friends were waiting below his window. Drawing closer, Makoto saw Monobear was with them as well; Monobear must have been so short that Makoto had failed to discern it from his window.

“Is something wrong?” Makoto squeezed his upper arms for warmth. Something had to be wrong: he couldn’t see why else Kyokou, Yasuhiro, Touko, Byakuya and Monobear would be outside his house at such an early hour requesting to speak with him. Or think with him. Whatever.

Monobear rocked back and forth on its heels.

“It’s Ishimaru-kun.” Kyokou met his eyes with a heaviness that weighed down his shoulders. “You remember his behaviour, don’t you?”

It hadn’t been that long ago. “Yeah... he wasn’t acting like himself at all.” Makoto’s stomach jolted, waking him up fully. “Did something happen to him?”

“Not yet, I hope.” Kyokou turned her head to one side. "Though Monobear decided to tag along with us to your house, it refuses to say anything," Monobear nodded and mimed zipping its mouth shut, "so it seems that it is up to us to find him. Before,” Kyokou looked down, “it’s too late.”

Touko chewed on a thumbnail, unable to decide whether to look at the person speaking or at the person being spoken to: she settled on Kyokou. “T-Too late? You mean... this Ishimaru...?”

“... Has an almost completely corrupted Soul Gem.” Kyokou clenched her fists. “I don’t know for certain when despair will consume it, but I doubt that we have much time left. My idea is to have all of us convince Ishimaru-kun to use a Grief Seed. With his friends by his side, he may be persuaded to save himself.”

Byakuya raised his eyebrows. “That’s why you brought me here at such a ridiculous hour? To play hide-and-seek with a magical girl washout? I couldn’t care less what happens.” He folded his arms over his chest and pointedly stared into the distance. “In fact, I think I’m interested to see what becomes of him. Will his demise be instantaneous? Prolonged? Painful?”

Monobear shrugged its shoulders.

Makoto widened his eyes. After all this time... “Ishimaru-kun is our friend. You shouldn’t talk about him like that.”

“Oh?” Byakuya smirked, turning to Makoto and straightening his back to emphasise their height difference. “I don’t recall being his friend or ever claiming to be. Do you always assume people who know each other are friends? How foolish of you.” His smirk lessened but his eyes stayed frosty. “Ishimaru inflicted this fate onto himself. He latched onto Oowada and collapsed inward
when Oowada lost against that witch. Someone who allows themselves to get close to somebody to the point that they depend heavily on them deserves whatever reality gives them. He destroyed himself.”

Twitches prickled in Makoto’s arms as he remembered how Kiyotaka’s parents had sat in his kitchen, and how he had lied to them about what happened to their son. His stare melted into a glare that burned white at the edges of his vision. “Ishimaru doesn’t deserve this. He only wanted his grandfather to have another chance at being prime minister. He wanted the best for his family. He wanted to make the world a better place.”

“Well, he didn’t do a very good-“

Makoto punched Byakuya Togami in the face.

Had Aoi been there, she would have been proud.

Monobear burst out laughing.

The punch was over in a few seconds, and Makoto’s fist dropped limply to his side, but the aftermath dragged to a painful degree. Byakuya yelled and stumbled back - though stronger than Makoto, the punch took him off-guard - and only a few hasty steps stopped him from falling onto his back.

He adjusted his knocked askew glasses. Next to him, Touko looked ready to scream, her body shaking with horror and then rage. Yasuhiro jumped behind Kyouko and peeked over her shoulder at Makoto.

Without a word, Byakuya turned on his heel and flounced away. Touko scampered after him.

“... Dude,” Yasuhiro finally said, voice strained. “Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

Kyouko said nothing out loud, but said enough by placing a hand to her mouth.

These puppets need replacing. Just look at this one.

A puppet is held up. Geez, who styled this one’s hair? The tufts are uneven and the strings are knotted. Why are there so many strings, anyway?

All of these puppets have too many strings. It’s needlessly complicated. They get tangled so easily. You try to take one out of the box and the rest will follow after. Whoops, more of Loyal-chan’s strings got tangled with Buff-chan’s strings. And, uh oh, Pride-kun’s new string is about to snap. And just after I gave him a brand new one... To fix it, I’ll just tie the two pieces together in a knot once it breaks. Again. Why can’t these puppets behave like Boring-chan?

A second puppet is held up. She needs a new coat of paint but her strings never snap! Unfortunately, they still get tangled with the other puppets’ strings: they seem to have an affinity with Plain-kun’s and

I sometimes wonder if the puppets remember their earlier performances. Do they fall in love, again and again, even if they don’t remember falling in love? Does that love linger and carry over between performances?
Lonely-chan and Cactus-kun are given a rough shake.

Don’t be silly. They’re just puppets.

Why. Why did Makoto do that? What compelled him to do that? What part of him thought that punching one of his friends in the face was a good idea? Because, even though Byakuya said those things about Kiyotaka, Makoto still considered him a friend.

Sleep evaded him and he was a dull sort of awake when his alarm clock finally rang. Makoto went through his morning routine. Swat at the alarm clock and accidentally thwack the book Touko had lent him. Crawl out of bed. Shower. Get dressed. Breakfast. He spent longer in the shower than he normally did, his forehead pressing onto chilled wall tiles as water splattered against his skin. In the shower, time seemed to pass more slowly, and he forced himself to finish up with a reluctant groan.

Tired, but not tired enough to sleep, not that he could go back to bed, Makoto’s feet soon thumped down the stairs.

At school, he would apologise even if Byakuya scorned him. Because even if Makoto didn’t regret what he did, he needed Byakuya: tracking down Kiyotaka would be near impossible unless Byakuya or Monobear helped, and getting Monobear to assist them seemed to not be an option. It appeared whenever it felt like appearing and helped whenever it felt like helping.

Before he entered the kitchen, Makoto said, “Monobear,” under his breath.

Monobear didn’t materialise. The one time Makoto wanted to speak with it, Monobear was nowhere to be found. Typical.

Komaru and his mother were already in the kitchen, and his sister was showing off something on her hand. Makoto was halfway across the room when he caught sight of Komaru’s finger. He froze.

On her finger was a grey ring with arcane symbols engraved onto it.

“Hey. Komaru.” Makoto kept his head tilted slightly forward. “Where did you get that ring?”

Komaru extended out her arm. “In town.” She continued admiring it.

He approached with dragging footsteps. “Komaru, when did you get that?”

“Last weekend.”

His pace quickened.

“Why, do you want one?” Komaru asked. “They’re really cheap. They only cost-”

He seized her wrist and she shrieked. “Komaru, who gave it to you?”

She tried and failed to wiggle out of his hold. “You’re scaring me!”

“Makoto!” His mother’s exclamation slapped sense into him and he released Komaru. “What on Earth has gotten into you?”
“I bought it in a store,” Komaru said, on the verge of tears and clutching her wrist. “A-All the girls... in school... have one...”

A lump formed in Makoto’s throat and he backed away, staring at his hands as if they weren’t his. “I... I don’t know...” He balled his hands into fists. “I don’t know why I... did that.”

But he did know why. His mind had conjured an image of his little sister in a poofy dress. Of her holding a wand, of her in a battlefield filled with monsters that were Monobear clones, and Komaru stood in its heart, her body that of a decaying zombie. He couldn’t tell them that.

“I don’t know’ isn’t an acceptable answer,” his mother scolded, wagging a finger. “Makoto, this has gone on long enough. You’ve been acting out-of-character ever since you started school...” Concern bled into the crevices in her face. “Have Ishimaru-kun’s bullies been targeting you as well?”

All he could bring himself to say was, “Sorry.”

Makoto’s mother stood by the door as she watched her son jog down the street.

Bullies. Kiyotaka had been bullied? Makoto only recalled small quips at Kiyotaka’s expense, mostly about his grandfather. Nothing major. Nothing serious. Nothing Kiyotaka couldn’t handle... right?

He opened his shoe locker.

“What’s that in your shoe? Is it from a girl?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Kyoudai. I can’t afford to fritter away time on frivolousness like that.”

“What is it then? You’ve been getting notes for a while now. Sounds to me like you’ve got a secret admirer.”

Makoto turned around and surveyed the room, finding himself to be alone. He walked over to Kiyotaka’s shoe locker and, giving the room another glance, tried to open it. The locker remained shut without the correct key but someone could slot a piece of paper through the narrow gaps around the door.

“Naegi-kun?” Shoe heels clicked, getting progressively louder, and he saw who they belonged to when he turned his head.

Kyouko.

She instead obtained a lock pick from her pocket and fiddled with the lock of Kiyotaka’s locker. Why she had one, he didn’t know, but the sound of the door opening plucked him out of his thoughts.

In one of Kiyotaka’s indoor shoes was a folded piece of paper.
Another quick look over his shoulder assured Makoto that they were alone, and he picked up the piece of paper. He could see pen mark indents - a fuzzy blue that he couldn’t decipher without unfolding the note.

“What do you think it says?” he asked.

“Why don’t you read it?” she suggested.

Makoto put it back, his gaze downward. The locker shut with a clang. “Togami-kun won’t want to help us anymore, will he?”

“Your punch, though I empathise with your reasoning, was ill-timed.” Kyouko ran her fingers through her hair and looked away, shaking her head a bit so her hair trembled. “While I don’t think Togami-kun will hold it against you forever, we don’t have much time remaining.” Her hands fell to her sides. “A witch is to arrive this weekend that will require all of us if we want a shot at victory. Moreover,” she looked at him again, fists tight, “Ishimaru-kun is a friend of ours.”

Neither conversed on the way to their homeroom. Students milled in the hallways as usual, chatting and giggling, totally unaware of the witch due within the next two days that, according to Kyouko, once destroyed a city.

He and Kyouko passed by an anti-bullying poster. Memories were fitting together into a puzzle of Kiyotaka’s heart, into a puzzle that made too much sense. Makoto tried to swallow the sour lining on his tongue but it refused to be washed away with saliva.

They arrived outside their homeroom with ten minutes to spare.

Before they went in, Kyouko asked, “Naegi-kun, have you noticed a connection between the special abilities of a magical girl and their wish?”

Makoto rubbed at the back of his neck. “Should I have?”

“Think about it now.”

“Well…” His brow puckered. “I… can kind of see how Hagakure-kun’s, Oowada-kun’s and Oogami-san’s powers relate to their wish…”

“The others may require more thought,” Kyouko said. “It is possible to connect each magical girl’s unique abilities to their wish. I’m not saying how Togami-kun acts is in any way right or should be condoned, but you mustn’t forget that everyone who forms a contract had what they believed to be a valid reason and this reason is very much a part of them. Once you fully appreciate that, you will begin to understand them more. Soul Gems are an accurate reflection of the heart - they do contain a human soul, after all.”

She opened the door to their homeroom. As expected, Kiyotaka was absent. Aoi waved to them and Sakura nodded in their direction. Byakuya and Yasuhiro had yet to arrive.

Makoto sighed and sat at his desk.

Despite the number of weeks that rolled by, his stomach still plummeted when he saw Sayaka’s empty seat. Then there were Mondo’s and Kiyotaka’s desks. How long would it be until Kyouko’s, Sakura’s, Byakuya’s and Yasuhiro’s desks were vacant too? And who else but Makoto would know why?

Byakuya walked into the room.
Determined to make amends, Makoto forced himself to Byakuya’s desk. “Togami-kun,” he started, hesitating when Byakuya raised a hand.

“If you’re here to grovel, don’t.” Byakuya flicked his wrist in Makoto’s direction. “I don’t care to hear it. Your pathetic outburst didn’t do any harm. You are rather weak, you know.”

“But I-”

“Don’t interrupt me.” Byakuya sat down and got out a hardbound book from his leather satchel. “I’ve agreed to help you find Ishimaru after school... Isn’t that enough to pacify you?” He started to read. “Be thankful it was Fukawa and not Genocider with us back then.”

Makoto’s shoulders sank. “You’re... not mad?”

“You’re not worth the effort of something like that.” Byakuya flicked to the next page. “Some people can’t handle reality and you, among many, are but a mere exemplar. Just don’t do it again.”

The words were harsh but Makoto grinned. “I will! And... I’m sorry about last night. It won’t happen again, Togami-kun, I promise.”

Byakuya clicked his tongue.

What Kyouko had told Makoto about magical girls’ wishes and their powers gnawed at the back of his mind for the rest of the school day. By the second lesson, he had made a weak connection between Sayaka’s wish and her power. Saucepan. Shield. She wanted to protect her fellow idols who she thought of as family. Saucepan. People cooked for their families.

He twirled his pen. If Kyouko was right... then what? What exactly did she want him to do? Fill in the gaps? Work out everyone else’s wishes? Why? How did she realise this connection? His life seemed full of hows and whys these days.

At lunch, Makoto resisted the urge to outright ask Kyouko about these hows and whys. If they had been alone together, he might have considered asking, but Yasuhiro, Aoi and Sakura had also gathered around his and Sayaka’s desks to eat. He couldn’t ask Kyouko with them nearby.

“Ishimaru’s still not here,” said Aoi. Her sandwich deformed in her grip and her features darkened in concern. “Sakura-chan and I are going to look for him after school. Do you guys want to come?”

Kyouko tapped Sayaka’s desk with her index finger. “We were actually planning to search for him after school as well. You and Oogami-san are more than welcome to accompany us. Togami-kun’s magical girl ability will make finding him a lot eas-”

Yasuhiro erupted into a loud coughing fit.

Sakura whacked him on the back and his face slammed into his lunch.

“Hagakure-kun?” Kyouko’s eyebrows arched.

“Kirigiri-chi!” Yasuhiro sat up properly and mimed slitting his throat with his thumb. A grain of rice dropped off his nose. “What are you talking about? Togami-kun’s a dude, not a girl. Magical girls... that’s so weird, right, Asahina-chi?”

“Asahina-san knows about magical girls,” said Kyouko.

Aoi nodded.
“Huh?” Yasuhiro flushed. “Seriously, guys! Again? You all keep leaving me in the dark. Is there anything else I need to know?”

Makoto glimpsed the ring on Yasuhiro’s finger and looked at the rest of the group. He realised that he was looking at lifeless bodies controlled by rings, all except Aoi.

Across the classroom, someone sneezed into their hands.

Byakuya turned to the next page of his book.

Mukuro tensed.

Kyouko took a sip of milk. She moved the bottle away from her mouth for a moment to answer. “There’s nothing else you need to know at this time.”

Touko sat outside the school gates, seated on the kerb with her feet on the paved walkway which led from the school to the rest of the city. She had one hand cupped around the spine of a book, her thumb inserted between its pages, so her other hand could fan her face. The weather didn’t strike Makoto immediately as any particular extreme: it was a kind of warmth that one felt at their hairline and under their armpits. A wipe across his forehead sufficed for now.

Hearing multiple footsteps, Touko looked up and craned her neck. Her hunched shoulders relaxed at the sight of the approaching group. “Byakuya-sama!” She jolted to her feet, dropping her book in her haste.

Yasuhiro waved.

“... And... you guys,” Touko tacked on, crouching down to retrieve her book and standing up immediately after. The book was hugged to her chest. “So... we’re going to find Ishimaru now?”

“Yes!” Aoi punched at the air with a fist. “We should split into groups. It’ll be quicker if we do that, I think. But wait...” She tapped her chin twice. “I don’t have your numbers on my phone... You guys all have phones, right? This way, we can call each other if we find something.”

Everyone except Byakuya started to take out their phones. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a pocket watch, connected to his pocket with a silver chain. The Hunter case of the pocket watch obscured the watch-dial from view and once opened, Byakuya’s ring could be seen at the centre of the clock face. For a few seconds, perhaps ten, he watched its second hand move. Makoto couldn’t quite place Byakuya’s expression: his lips were slightly parted, as if in interest, but his eyes seemed below this level of focus.

“There are a few nearby,” said Byakuya, his face hardening into its usual steadfast state. He snapped shut the lid of his pocket watch.

Aoi, who was holding her phone toward Kyouko, turned her head. “A few what?”

“Magical girls, witches, familiars...” Byakuya returned his pocket watch to his jacket pocket. “As Kirigiri told you earlier, I am able to sense nearby magical girls and witches... though there is a chance none of what I’m sensing is Ishimaru. He may be out of my range, not in his magical girl form or dead.”

“D-Dead?” Aoi shunted one foot back, flinging up a hand that slapped herself on the chest.
“There’s no way he can be...!”

Sakura touched a hand to her chin and rested her other hand onto Aoi’s trembling shoulder. “We must not jump to conclusions. We should not discount the possibility that we are too late to provide him succour, but we should also appreciate Ishimaru’s strength. I believe we have time to save him.”

Aoi’s shaking lessened and she managed to smile up at Sakura, even if her eyes betrayed some of her lingering worry.

“I’m sensing three auras,” Byakuya said, swivelling around so he looked down the walkway and at the city. “One is that way, toward the city centre.” He pointed in its vague direction with a certain finger. “Another is in the direction of the arcade and the third in the industrial district. I suggest we split into three teams.”

Everyone nodded. Byakuya’s hand dropped to his side.

“Naegi and Fukawa, you go where I pointed to first,” Byakuya said, either not noticing or most likely ignoring how Touko’s face contorted in indignation. “Hagakure, Asahina and Oogami, you are to investigate the arcade and the surrounding area. I will go with Kirigiri to the industrial district. Should we come to a red herring, head to the next nearest location.”

He didn’t wait for them to vocalise their approval, heading down the walkway with large strides. Kyouko followed, in no real hurry to catch up. After a short delay, Yasuhiro, Aoi and Sakura departed too.

Neither Touko nor Makoto moved for ten seconds. Once this time elapsed, Touko turned her head to the side.

“... Come on then.” Touko trudged away, not checking to make sure Makoto was following. Her fingers curled around her Soul Gem and she glared down at it. “I-I can’t believe Byakuya-sama dumped me with you and took that Kirigiri with him... If she lays a finger on him, I swear she’ll rue it. A-And you...” She shot Makoto an annoyed look. “You’re lucky Byakuya-sama still thinks you’re useful after what y-you did to him...”

They reached the end of the walkway.

Makoto didn’t doubt Kyouko would rue it. “Togami-kun must trust you a lot if he left me with you,” he said in a light but cautious tone. “I mean, I’m not a magical girl like you guys... If anything, I’m just a hindrance.”

There were roadworks up ahead so they made a detour through an alleyway. Neither spoke for two minutes - by that time, as Makoto observed when he looked over his shoulder, other closer buildings had since blocked Hope’s Peak from view. Buildings that were all grey and angular, their outlines merging slightly with the sky’s dullness.

Touko’s long skirt swished. “Naegi...” She continued facing forward even when speaking to him. “You d-don’t still think being a magical girl... is a totally good thing, do you?” Her hands latched onto her skirt, hitching it up a bit. “Is... there anything you think is worth forming a contact for...?”

“I... don’t know.” Makoto glanced at her; she still hadn’t turned her head toward him. “I’ve been discouraged from making a wish by almost everyone but if it came down to it... maybe.” He shrugged, feeling a small, uncomfortable smile tease the ends of his mouth. “If it would make
things better for everyone.”

“You truly think that?” Touko snorted, finally gifting him a glance. “You know... that’s what I th-
thought you would say... You’re so easy to read sometimes.” She fell silent for a minute, taking
interest in the pavement. “Did you... read the book I lent you...?”

Makoto grinned, relieved at the change of topic, and he adjusted the strap of his rucksack by lifting
one shoulder. “I finished it two nights ago. You have a way with words, Fukawa-san. I’m more of
an action fan but I ended up reading the romance parts without skimming over them. You’re great
at making the story more about the characters’ emotions than an instruction manual. And I’m glad
Yuki got a happy ending after what happened to Akiko, even if it’s bittersweet.”

She stared with cheeks tinged pink, faltering into a near standstill. “Y-You’re not just repeating
what you read on a wikipedia article, are you?”

“No!” Makoto’s exclamation came out louder than intended and he waved his hands. “I genuinely
loved it, Fukawa-san. Whenever I try to write a story, the sentences are always fragmented and the
similes seem forced. That’s what my teacher at elementary school said.” He let out a weak chuckle.
“Then I gave up writing as a hobby.”

“Th-That’s... almost funny...” Touko laughed under her breath. “It was my elementary school
teacher who encouraged me to write.” She inhaled and pushed back her shoulders, chin raised.
Determination shone in her eyes. “... Growing up, I always found it hard to make friends.” Her
voice only faintly wobbled, each word deliberate. “No one liked me... Some pretended to be my
friend, some outright told me that they hated my guts... It was because I was poor, and ugly, and
smelly... My parents... were only there... so I was mostly alone. No one bothered with me except...
a boy.” Her chin snapped down. “H-He was the only person I could trust, who I could sit with and
be myself with... and then, one day, he told me he was moving to another city.”

The wind nudged her braids so they thumped against her back.

Makoto smelled fried dough; a nearby vendor nodded at the pair when they passed by.

Touko said, “I... I convinced myself that I loved him and wrote all my feelings in a letter...” She
wrung her hands. “I s-spilled my soul into it, inked it with words that I’d never say to him in
person... and then... th-the next day, I found the letter pinned to the noticeboard in our classroom.”
Her eyes went wide and vacant. “It... It turned out he hated me. N-No one else cared about him,
like how everyone hated me, so he made do with me, and e-everyone at school mocked me more
because of the confession!” She buried her fingers into her hair and stopped walking. “My teacher
saw... and she told me I had a way with words, that I should try writing...”

“Fukawa-san, that’s horrible what he did...”

“But it didn’t end there.” Touko resumed walking, slowing when she came to a broken slab riddled
with cracks. Her feet danced onto each pavement fragment and it seemed to calm her a bit. She
tightened her fists so her skirt bunched up more and pressed on. “Years went by... I was bullied,
again and again. One day, s-someone put a razor blade in my desk with a note that said ‘please’...
and a girl, who feigned sympathy for a dare, scattered pages of my current story across the school.
It took me hours to find most of them... I finally broke down and cried into my pillow that night.”

Her face was almost white.

“That’s when Monobear came to me,” Touko said.
A chill festered on Makoto’s fingers.

Touko must have felt it too for she wrapped her arms around herself. “My wish... I wished for him back. M-My childhood friend. I wished for him to love me so much that he would come back for me and never leave me again. R-Risking my life... fighting witches... th-that seemed worth it. I was hurting on the inside, so it was worth it, right? A-And I thought, given the right circumstances, he would come to love me. I th-thought... we would both be happy, right?”

They came to an alleyway. The aroma of fried dough and old wood disappeared. Touko went on ahead.

She checked her Soul Gem. “It’s not picking up anything... th-that might mean Byakuya-sama sensed a magical girl here.”

Makoto jogged up to her and kept to her side. His toes caught on a loose slab in the pavement and he stumbled.

“S-So...” Touko hitched up her skirt so its hem wouldn’t get dirty from the trash around her ankles. “He... My friend, he returned. I don’t know what strings he pulled... but he came back for me. And... And I was happy for the first time in ages.” Her eyelids fluttered. “Only... th-things didn’t stay that way for long. He wasn’t like how I remembered... He was possessive, he stalked me...” She stepped over a split binbag, brushing her palm across the brick wall beside her. “At first, it flattered me, but soon... i-it got scary. I c-couldn’t hunt witches with him phoning me and going to my house all the time... and I realised something. I realised that he d-didn’t love me, really. Magic... Monobear’s m-magic messed up... and th-then, one day, he found me after school, and he grabbed me, and... and he tried to... do... he t-tried t-to... he...!”

She clapped her hand onto her mouth and doubled over. Makoto grabbed her shoulders and held her up, wondering if she had fainted.

“Fukawa-san?” he murmured.

“She snapped,” Touko whispered at the floor. Her knees buckled. “I snapped and when I woke up, he was crucified to a wall with scissors. Geno... cider Syo. I r-ran away and when I got home, I found a note in my pocket from her. She told me that she had been around for a while but never got out much, o-only scaring a few bullies here or there or taking over for me on a bad day... and it explained some things that I couldn’t account for. Now... N-Now she wanted to communicate with me, wanted thanks for cutting him out of my life, but I wanted nothing to do with her so she stopped trying. Every time I found a guy that I liked, she killed him... so I gave up... with people... I dropped out of school, I learned at home... I wrote more stories with happy endings... fought witches... I always thought I deserved what happened to me...”

“You didn’t deserve any of that,” said Makoto. “No one does. But it’s okay, Fukawa-san.”

“It’s not okay!” Touko broke away from him, her grimace almost splitting her face. “Y-You think you can just say the right things and it’ll make everything better? Th-That I’m... I’m broken until the right person comes along and fixes me? And th-then I’ll mend my ways and become a good person, right? Like they do in my stories? In everyone’s stories? I’m just a puzzle that needs to be solved and then I’ll be normal! B-But that’s wrong. I can’t be fixed, not by you or a wish or by anyone else. I just...”

Anger drained out of her, leaving behind a teenager that had been pushed to breaking point by expectations and an unfulfilled desire to be loved.
“I just want someone to be with me,” said Touko quietly. “I want a... a...”

“Friend?” Makoto reached forward and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back, ever so slightly. “Fukawa-san, we’re your friends. Me, Kirigiri-san... Togami-kun... all of us. And we’ll be there for you, no matter what.”

Touko glanced away, face pink. “Heh...” She couldn’t completely restrain herself from smiling. “Th-That was one of the corniest things I’ve ever heard. But... I might take you up on your offer... as you are my... friend... even after I said all that stuff...” She frowned at him. “You can let go of me now.”

“Ah.” Makoto flushed and let go.

She wiped her palm across her skirt. “You know... recently, I’ve been inspired to write another novel... I think you sparked something. I’m planning on writing about me and Byakuya-sama... H-He understands what it's like not to be able to trust others, to have to survive rather than just live, and he's confident and smart and g-gorgeous... but also... you. You can be my friend in it... if you allow me to base a character on you.”

“I would be honoured,” he said.

Momentary silence.

Makoto coughed into the back of his hand. “I guess we should try to find Ishimaru-kun. Let’s see...” He tried to work out where exactly they were based on their surroundings. While listening to Touko’s narration, he had barely paid attention to where exactly she had taken them, yet he recognised the alleyway within seconds: Makoto had been there more than once. A white cat had been in that trash can, and to the right of the alleyway was a café that served nice coffee, and opposite the café...

Opposite the café was a church.

His eyes widened.

“I know where he is,” Makoto said.

The church was how he remembered it. Makoto didn’t stop or even slow down to appreciate the entrance hall, with its windows which tinged sunlight or its recently restocked bookcase. He cut straight through and shoved open the doors to the main area.

There, at the far end, was Kiyotaka Ishimaru. Kiyotaka knelt, facing away from them, his head bowed forward and clad in his school uniform. The first time that Makoto came here, the room had been shrouded in darkness, but there was no such darkness now. Its stained glass windows glowed and the altar had fresh flowers either side of it.

“Ishimaru-kun!” Makoto sprinted over, his feet pounding as loudly as his heart seemed to throb.

Kiyotaka didn’t turn around. Even when Makoto was right behind him, Kiyotaka didn’t turn around.

Touko cautiously advanced, dipping her hand into the front of her blouse. She got out a Grief Seed.

“Ishimaru-kun,” Makoto repeated, less enthusiastic than before though he maintained his grin. They weren’t too late. There was still time to save Kiyotaka. For once, Makoto could save someone rather than be the person needing to be saved.
“Here. Take it.” Touko reached out her arm and pressed the Grief Seed into Makoto’s palm. “It should have two uses.”

Makoto crouched beside Kiyotaka and showed off the Grief Seed. “Ishimaru-kun, this is for you.”

“Naegi-kun.” Kiyotaka stared forward, his voice devoid of any lilt of emotion. Without looking down, he opened his fist to reveal his Soul Gem. It bubbled with a black mould-like substance that Makoto remembered seeing in Mondo’s impure Soul Gem. “I don’t deserve it.” Kiyotaka’s fingers curled around his Soul Gem. Despair leaked through the gaps between his fingers and stained the nearby air like tea on facial tissue. “I failed as a magical girl.”

“You didn’t,” said Makoto in a hushed tone. “You saved lots of people. You saved me.”

“But I didn’t save my grandfather,” Kiyotaka pointed out. “I made things worse for him. And I didn’t save Maizono-kun. I didn’t save Kyoudai.” Whatever specks of light that had been dancing in his eyes were snuffed out. “When Kyoudai needed me most, I failed. If I had been stronger, I could have saved him.” He gritted his teeth, tears pricking his eyes, but his tone remained cold and steady. “Meanwhile there are people I don’t want to save. People I think who deserve to die. A witch possessed one of our classmates, one who had mocked me, and it occurred to me to let the witch feed on them because of my own petty selfishness... so I waited until the witch ate him. That makes me a truly despicable being for judging people’s value like that... like I am some kind of god.”

Makoto bit down on his bottom lip.

Kiyotaka rose and took a step forward, bending back his neck. All the colour on him seemed faded, leaving his hair grey and his skin sepia. “When Kyoudai died, I realised I wasn’t strong. I succumbed to the pain of his loss because I opened my heart to him. After that, I made the decision to never feel pain like that again, but I failed. No matter how hard I try, I can’t discard my emotions... doing so only fills my emptiness with hate and anger. What sort of world am I trying to protect?” He raised his voice but added no extra emotion. “What sort of person am I? Do I want to be part of this society? This world?”

“Ishimaru-kun, the world isn’t all like that,” said Makoto, fighting the heaviness in his limbs and getting to his feet slowly. “I’m your friend and-”

“You!” Rage consumed Kiyotaka’s tone. He leered at Makoto from over his shoulder for a few seconds and then his face softened almost unnoticably. “No, you weren’t like others. But you watched passively. You were a member of the audience and that, Naegi-kun, makes you no better. I don’t need to hear any more platitudes from you.”

In vain, Makoto racked his brain for words to respond with.

“Staying silent maintains the status quo,” Touko remarked.

“You understand me,” Kiyotaka said. He laughed a single note and jutted out his chin. He raised one arm - the one carrying his Soul Gem. “This is fair punishment for wishing for success rather than earning it with hard labour. I thought myself above regular people... and I became like my grandfather.”

Finally at peace with himself, he shut his eyes.

His Soul Gem cracked.

“This is justice,” he said.
The doors slammed open and Kyouko stormed in, spear raised and pointed at Kiyotaka. Her left arm hung limply by her side. “Fukawa-san, destroy his Soul Gem!”

Touko spun around. “W-We’re meant to be saving him, aren’t we? And wh-why...?” She slapped her hands over her eyes and staggered backward. “Y-You’re bleeding! I’m going to faint...! W- Where’s Byakuya-sama? What happ-?”

Kiyotaka’s Soul Gem shattered

and then

then

silence.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough, Kyoudai.”

“Who cares?”

Chapter End Notes

Very rarely do Monobear's wishes go the way the magical girl expects it to.

Next time:

"I’m ready to make a contract with you."
I’m Ready to Make a Contract with You

Chapter Notes

I got some fanart recently from people and they are amazing!! If you want to see them, they are on my tumblr @zenonaa.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With a new morning came the same routine. Turn off the alarm clock. Roll out of bed. Shower. Get dressed. Breakfast. Leave for school. Even the weird dream that dissolved into the recesses of Kyouko Kirigiri’s mind as she shampooed her hair presented nothing too different from usual. What had happened in her dream, anyway? Something to do with a toy box and animated dolls. Unable to recall anything more substantial than that, she gave up trying some time between getting out of the shower and washing up her breakfast.

Soap suds tickled at her skin. She turned her head toward the window and sighed.

The only new aspect of this new morning that greatly resembled its predecessors was today marked her first day at high school. A high school named Hope’s Peak: a completely average school.

During the entrance ceremony, a tour guide had shown the new students where their shoe lockers would be. Kyouko and her classmates had followed the tour guide around the school, walking in family groups - everyone except her and two other girls, who all came alone. Maybe, like her, they didn’t have any family that lived nearby. Perhaps they didn’t have any family at all.

When she arrived at the door of her homeroom, Kyouko saw one of these girls already inside. The girl’s pale skin seemed to glow and her spiky blue hair didn’t quite reach her shoulders. Her hair looked like it hadn’t been cut by a professional but rather had been crudely hacked at with blunt scissors. This girl sat at a desk on the far side of the room, her face angled toward the boy seated at the desk behind.

If Kyouko wanted to, she could have sat with them: a perimeter of vacant desks surrounded them and a seating plan hadn’t been pinned to the wall. The loud boy at the front of the class made sure to tell everyone as such when they came in. For a few seconds, she thought about introducing herself to those two, but in the end she chose to sit away from them. She claimed a desk not in their immediate area, mentally shaking her head at herself as she unpacked her bag. Considering to involve herself with someone else... that had never happened before, at least not for a long time. After the first few schools, her desire to involve herself with her peers waned. Or more precisely, her desire vanished as abruptly as her father had on the other side of the front door all those years ago.

Kyouko hesitated.

... Could he really be here? In this city?

Her pencil met her desk with a loud clack. She pushed down on it, harder and harder, until she remembered that he wasn’t worth the effort.

Nothing of particular interest occurred in the first few hours of school. After roll call, the students
wrote their names onto name plates, and she learned the names of the girl and her friend. The blue-haired girl was called Makiko Kabi and the boy Makoto Naegi.

What Kyouko learned next about them was derived from the conversations held that lunch time.

“Hey.” Makoto smiled down at Kyouko. He stood in front of her desk, holding his bento close to his chest. “Can we eat together?”

Ah. Pity. Pity for the only person sitting with no one else.

Kyouko shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

Makoto’s grin widened and he dragged a chair over to her desk.

“Hi!” Makiko popped into view beside Makoto, boxed lunch in her hands. “I’m Makiko Kabi. Pleased to meet you.” She too hauled a nearby chair over and sat down. “You’re Kyouko Kirigiri, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Kyouko thought the ‘we’ that Makoto mentioned would only contain the three of them but then a girl with cropped black hair carried a chair over and set it down by Kyouko’s desk, making their ‘we’ of three into a four.

The girl looked at Kyouko with unreadable eyes. They were a dull blue, almost monochrome.

Kyouko said, “You’re Mukuro Ikusaba, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Mukuro Ikusaba replied. “Everyone else gravitated into social groups so I figured I would join you guys.” She waved a hand, giving Kyouko a glimpse of the grey ring on her finger, and finally broke eye contact. “So how about we introduce ourselves properly so we’re not complete strangers, yeah? I’ll get the ball rolling. I was enrolled in a military camp for several years...”

When Mukuro finished, Kyouko took over.

“I’ve been to many different schools,” said Kyouko. “My father and I traveled a lot because he worked as a private investigator, and we settled in this city a year ago.”

Just not together. She started her lunch.

“Um...” Makiko eyed Kyouko’s gloves.

Kyouko looked up, noting that Makiko wore a ring similar to Mukuro’s.

“Your gloves,” Makiko explained, “don’t they get in the way? I’m always so clumsy when I wear gloves. Even when it’s cold, I have to take them off if I want to use them for anything small.”

“I had them custom made so they would fit my hands perfectly and not impede on my daily life.” Kyouko showed them her right hand. “Therefore I don’t have to take them off even when a task involves delicacy.” Her shoulders tensed for a moment. While all they saw was leather, she saw scars. Mistakes. Regret. He wasn’t worth it, he wasn’t worth it. She cleared her throat. “What about you two? Ikusaba-san and I have spoken about ourselves... It would be unfair if you shared nothing in return.”

Makiko and Makoto, in that order, claimed to have nothing interesting to share about themselves. They lived ordinary lives and would continue to do so.

Mukuro laced her fingers together and rested them onto her lap. “Ordinary isn’t a bad thing.”
Now that a friendship group of sorts had formed, there was the matter of walking home together. Makoto brought up the subject, explaining doing so was of the utmost importance what with all the missing teenagers and Genocider Syo.

Genocider Syo... Kyouko had studied that case back when she still lived with her grandfather. All the victims were male, they were each crucified with unbranded scissors to a wall and it had been a month since the last murder. Some people speculated that the latest victim had almost been Byakuya Togami, who reportedly returned home one night looking as though he had been in a scuffle. Despite him denying Syo’s involvement, the media had intended to weave this loose end into a contrived front cover story and only refrained from doing so when the Togami Conglomerate apparently offered money in exchange for silence.

Had Kyouko’s family not been elite detectives out of the public’s eye, she wouldn’t have known much if anything about Syo or the mysterious incident. Her grandfather often allowed her to aid him in his investigations and they spent many nights at a desk together, only stubbornness and a half-empty mug of lukewarm coffee keeping Kyouko awake in the early hours of morning.

Makiko lived in the opposite direction to everyone else so Kyouko walked home with Makoto and Mukuro.

“As far as first days go, today wasn’t all that bad,” Mukuro remarked, situated between Kyouko and Makoto. “I could get used to it. And Kabi-san already has a...” She pouted. “I would call it secret but it’s really not; she has an admirer. I mean you saw how Kuwata-kun was ogling her, didn’t you?” Grinning, Mukuro nudged Makoto’s ribs with her elbow. “You saw, right? Naegi-kun?”

“W-Why are you asking me?” Makoto asked, his cheeks lightly flushed.

Mukuro shrugged. “You sit behind her and you seem to be really good friends. I’ve never seen anyone hit it off like you two.”

He went even redder and mumbled something that made Mukuro laugh.

A poster on a storefront captured Kyouko’s attention and she paused to read it. An older boy that attended their school went missing a week ago. His name was Yasuke Matsuda.

“The other two stopped to read it as well.

“His family must be really worried,” said Makoto. He tugged on one of the straps of his rucksack and averted his eyes. Shortly after, they set off again.

They soon reached an alleyway that Makoto claimed would get him home quicker. The three students jogged through it in loose single file with Makoto in the lead and Mukuro somewhere behind the other two.

“Gah!” Makoto jumped back and a well-timed sidestep saved Kyouko from a headbutt to the face. He smacked a hand to his chest and seized a handful of fabric. “S-Sorry, Kirigiri-san. I thought I saw something but it’s too dark to,” he blinked at the blackening sky, “see...?” His eyebrows shot up.

It hadn’t been this dark a minute ago. She couldn’t even see the end of the alleyway anymore.
The walls of the alleyway burst into light. No longer were they made of brick like seconds before; they were now glowing metal that stretched further than Kyouko’s eyes could discern. Parts of the walls peeled away to reveal giant eyes that were animated and undoubtedly alive.

Makoto backed into Kyouko, who without thinking held onto one of his shoulders as she surveyed the blackness at both ends of the alleyway.

From the blackness - both blacknesses - emerged silhouettes. As the silhouettes drew closer, more and more of their internal features bled into Kyouko’s vision, and she found herself even more confused. The silhouettes belonged not to people, as Kyouko first thought, but to what appeared to be suits. Suits that people typically wore only these suits had no one inside of them. They moved by themselves, their pink ties swishing like waggling tongues and the bottom of their trouser legs drifting above and parallel to the ground.

Kyouko’s mind set aflame with a barrage of heightened sensory details and she and Makoto pressed their backs against the wall as if doing so would make osmosis occur.

Mukuro pulled off her ring and closed her fist around it. Did she think the suits wanted to steal it? Or did she plan to use it as a weapon?

In a flash of green light, Mukuro answered Kyouko but by doing so sowed more questions. Following the flash, Mukuro was no longer wearing her school uniform. She wore a high-collared dress with two columns of golden buttons down the front. At her neck was a black bow.

“Don’t move,” Mukuro instructed, armed with a machine gun.

“Barrier? Witch?” Makoto balled his hands into fists. “Can someone please explain to me what just happened? One minute we were walking home and the next we were teleported somewhere, and then Ikusaba-san saved us with... with magic!” He gave a short, frustrated wave. “And Kabi-san,” he turned to her, “you did it too.”

Makiko clasped her hands behind her back and hummed. “Oh, I did say I would explain everything afterwards, didn’t I? You stumbled into a witch’s barrier. It’s an otherworld witches hide in.”

“But what’s a witch?” he asked. “That... snake? Was that the witch?”

“I don’t mean those kind of witches.”

Makoto stared at her. “How did you-?”

“I’m an esper.” Makiko pressed a fist against her lips, fighting back a smile. “I’m joking. I have good intuitions. Witches are monsters created from curses and they try to kill people. It’s up to us magical girls to destroy them before they do harm.”

“And you’re a magical girl?” Makoto said. “Both of you?”

Kyouko’s mouth hadn’t closed since the weird snake died nor had she said a single word. She curved one finger and brought it to her chin.

“Yep,” said Makiko, glancing at Mukuro. “I didn’t know Ikusaba-san was one though. Magical girls are born from wishes.” Makiko turned back to Makoto. “They’re the opposite of witches.”
“You were born from a wish?” Makoto’s brow creased. “How...?”

A different voice answered. “I would be happy to explain, upupupu.”

“It’s exactly what you think,” Monobear said, sitting atop of several cushions so its eyes were level with everyone else’s. “I can grant you whatever your heart desires. Money. Fame. True love. Murder. I’ll use my magic to bend the universe to your pleasing. But where’s the fairness in me scratching your back and you leaving me with an itch I can’t reach?” Monobear raised its paws to either side of its face and gave a lazy shrug. “All I ask is you become a magical girl and protect the world from witches! It’s almost like me scratching your back twice, you know. Fighting baddies like that... upupupu!” It cupped its paws over its mouth. “It’s a gift in itself.”

Makiko sipped her tea and nodded as if all of this made sense, from the bear sitting in her apartment to the idea of magic existing.

Much like Kyouko, Makoto didn’t seem to have wrapped his head around what had happened yet. “And I would really be a strong magical girl if I became one?”

“Yep. I don’t know why but you’re chock full of hope. You reek of it...” Monobear flapped a paw near its snout. “Someone get some air freshener in here. Naegi-kun is stinking up the place.”

Makoto raised one of his arms and sniffed his armpit.

“But how?” Kyouko asked, cross-legged on the carpet like the other three humans present. “How is any of this possible? Magic doesn’t exist.”

“You think too much with your small human brain,” Monobear replied, kicking out a leg. The tower of cushions shifted then collapsed and Monobear fell down with it. Muttering furiously, Monobear cycled its legs through the air for a few seconds before jumping back up. “Do you think this is a hoax for some kind of TV show?” It fluffed the pillows and restacked them, scrambling back up once the tower had been reconstructed. “That’s very self-important of you, thinking anyone would go through all that trouble just for you. You can accept it as truth or run in circles forever.”

It shrugged. “It’s your call.”

“... Fine.” Kyouko clinked her cup against her teeth and gulped down a mouthful of tea. She set it down afterwards and examined the grains in Makiko’s end table. In addition to everyone else’s cups and a teapot, there were also empty plates on the table: they had eaten all of Makiko’s strawberry shortcake by now. “So you grant people wishes in exchange for their services?”

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“You got it, Kiddo Kirigiri!” Monobear winked. “I’ve granted wishes for boys and girls and everyone else who needs me. One wanted a shot with the music industry, another all the babes he could dream up... and I remember a girl your age who wanted a buttload of cash. Then there was this bastard who wanted to find a girl who saved him from a witch... What a hopeless guy that one is.” It swatted at its ear. “You kids live tough lives... Ain’t it great that you have Monobear-chan around to help you through your hardships for such a small fee?”

Kyouko frowned. Monobear could do all that? It could help a person find someone? The cake in her mouth expanded and threatened to obstruct her breathing. She picked up her cup again and flooded her mouth with tea, but even after that she barely breathed. If Monobear could grant such a wish, could it tell her where her father was hiding? Where his new family lived? After his wife died, after Kyouko’s mother died, he wanted to start anew. That was why he abandoned his own
daughter. Kyouko couldn’t think of another reason.

She needed to know.

“Don’t be too hasty,” Makiko said, waggling a finger. “You don’t want to wish for something you don’t really want.”

Mukuro nodded, setting down her cup with a loud clunk. “Kabi-san is right. You don’t want to waste your only wish on a whim, do you? You’ve gotta make it count. I wished to protect those I love and here I am, never regretting a moment because I waited until the right time.” She flung up one hand and positioned her fingers into a peace sign. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you only wish for something important. I’ll be your guardian angel, yeah?”

Makiko held Makoto’s hand and Kyouko’s hand.

Mukuro held Makoto’s hand and Kyouko’s hand as well.

“It’s been so long since I had friends like you three.” Makiko’s eyes welled up with tears but she was smiling. “With you all by my side... I feel like we can do anything.”

“Police have provided no new hope in the search for Chihiro Fujisaki who was reported missing five days ago. Twenty officers are reported to be on the case—”

Bzzt.

“Earlier today, the Prime Minister for a second time accepted the resignation of him and his cabinet. In a televised address, he confessed to—”

Bzzt.

“An early morning motorcycle accident has claimed the life of a man named Daiya Oowada on—”

Bzzt.

“Hot on the market is a new jewellery line that has taken the country’s teenagers by storm. Developed by a currently anonymous—”

Bzzt.

“Newly released details about the serial killer Genocider Syo suggest the killer may be a high school student. Many of the murders happen late on weekdays or on the weekend from noon ‘til—”

Bzzt.

“Today marks the eighth anniversary of the deaths of Japan’s once leading idol group—”

Bzzt.
Mukuro shot at the witch. Pieces of paper burst out of it, most of them filled with holes.

One intact page had on it a photograph of Kyouko and Makoto. In it, she wore a purple dress and clenched a spear while Makoto brandished a staff at a smoky figure.

His dress was pink.

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Kyouko watched Makoto tiptoe over to Sayaka Maizono. He crouched beside her and took her hand in his.

“Ka-! Maizono-san,” he said, speech as thick as the atmosphere. Sayaka’s body continued to tremble. “What you did wasn’t cowardly. It takes a lot of strength to keep living, especially after going through what you did. You’re incredible. One of the most incredible people I know.”

Sayaka revealed her tearstained face and hiccuped.

“Once I think of a wish,” Makoto tightened his grip on her hand, “I would be honoured to fight alongside you and Ikusaba-san.”

“I... would like that,” said Sayaka. She dabbed at her eyes, a small smile growing on her face. “I... would like that a lot.”

Monobear popped up beside Kyouko and Mukuro. “Upupupu. Are you seeing what I’m seeing? Is that a romance flag I’m seeing?”

Kyouko looked at Mukuro.

Mukuro balled her hands into fists.

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Aoi Asahina tottered down a newspaper path, arms held out either side of her body. On one side of the line of newspaper sat Sayaka and Kyouko and opposite them was Sakura Oogami. The high heels that Aoi wore had been stuffed with tissue and she wobbled with every step.

Mukuro squinted behind a digital camera at the end of the newspaper path, tapping her finger as she snapped photographs.

Giggling, Aoi threw up an arm with a red feather boa wound around it.

“If you’ve got assets that you can flaunt, flaunt them,” Mukuro said, peering at Aoi from above the digital camera. She stooped her head and adjusted the angle of the device.

“Mwah!” Aoi blew a kiss at Mukuro and once she was sure that Mukuro had taken her picture, she stumbled out of her high heels and toward Sakura. “Okay, now it’s time to give Sakura-chan a makeover.”

Though Aoi wasn’t strong enough to pull Sakura to her feet, Sakura allowed herself to be rocked forward into a standing position. “I do not mind surrendering my turn in favour of you occupying the spotlight for longer, Asahina. You looked radiant on the catwalk while I fear I do not share the beauty you emit.”
“Of course you do,” Aoi said, rolling her eyes and frog marching Sakura to the stool in front of Sayaka’s vanity. “And with a teeny bit of makeup, you’ll be even prettier than usual. Ikusaba-chan,” Aoi snatched up a tube of foundation, “you get the face powder and eyeshadow ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mukuro saluted. “My sister says purple is great at accentuating blue eyes.”

Aoi and Mukuro fussed over Sakura, debating shades and laughing when Sakura sneezed after Mukuro applied too much face powder. Nearby, Kyouko and Sayaka drank hot chocolate and grinned at the flurry of limbs and makeup brushes and tissue paper.

“It’s been years since I’ve had friends over for a sleepover,” Sayaka remarked quietly, her knees up against her chest and clamped together. She sat with her back straight.

“Mm,” Kyouko responded.

“This must be your first sleepover since a long time ago too.” Her heels shifted inward. “Traveling around the country with your father, you must have had little time to get to know people before going somewhere else. That would make anyone lonely.”

“You get used to it.”

“I never did,” said Sayaka. “I only learned how to hide it better.”

“Sakura-chan,” came Aoi’s voice, “we can’t put any eyeliner on you if you keep scrunching up your face.”

Half a minute passed; neither Sayaka nor Kyouko spoke during this time. Kyouko inspected the surface of her hot chocolate and exhaled across it. A shriveled layer of solid was beginning to form over the top of the drink.

“Kirigiri-san, I think you were a bit lonely too. You just hid it like me.” Sayaka gave a soft laugh, looking down at the newspaper. “We’re not too different, though you seem like the kind of girl who confronts problems while I just run away from them. I think we could learn from each other.” She turned her head toward Kyouko. “Kirigiri-san, have you decided what you want to wish for yet?”

Kyouko glanced over her shoulder. Sakura and Aoi hadn’t overheard the question. Aoi was brushing Sakura’s hair while Mukuro perched on the vanity, flipping through the camera and viewing all the photographs taken so far.

What was Kyouko supposed to do? Lie? Or tell the truth and say that she wanted to wish to find her father so she could end that chapter of her life, so she could get a chance to disown him and move on and not be the abandoned little girl anymore?

Sayaka misinterpreted Kyouko’s reason for checking over her shoulder. “Ikusaba-san is doing a good job making sure Monobear doesn’t pressure you into making a wish. She must really care a lot about you and Naegi-kun... If she had been there when Monobear came to me, maybe I wouldn’t have made that wish...”

“You wouldn’t have met us if that was so,” said Kyouko.

“And I’m glad I got to meet you all as well.” Sayaka rested her hand on top of Kyouko’s. Both looked down. “I always thought you were a cool girl that didn’t like company, but that’s just a mask, isn’t it? Everyone wears masks for lots of different reasons and we have different masks for different people. It’s a rare kind of person who doesn’t bother with that at all. To be so honest and
open... not many people are like that.”

“Naegi-kun is.”

She nodded. “He is, isn’t he?” Her fingers fanned out to cover more of Kyouko’s hand. “I like that about him, but that doesn’t mean I don’t also like people who are more closed off...”

Kyouko opened her mouth.

“Hey!” called Aoi, cupping her hands around her mouth. “We’re having a group photo, you guys!”

The five girls crammed together. Kyouko and Sayaka stood at the front, Aoi and Sakura behind them. Mukuro squeezed in next to Kyouko and passed the camera to Sakura, who held it at an arm’s length and pivoted her wrist until she found an angle she thought would fit all of them into the next photograph.

Once it had been taken, they all settled onto Sayaka’s bed and looked through the photographs together.

Sayaka hugged herself, lacking a plush toy to hold to her heart. “Now we can all go through these pictures whenever we want and remember today.”

By the end of the next day, Kyouko discovered that some things didn’t need to be photographed to be remembered with faultless recollection.

She wouldn’t forget Makoto’s screams. She wouldn’t forget the sight of Kiyotaka and Mondo rushing ahead so they could fight a large, wooden puppet witch. And she definitely wouldn’t forget how Sayaka lay on a jigsaw floor, eyes wide and her everything dead. Kyouko remembered the hardness of the ground below her fists and how the bile in her throat burned and clawed it raw.

And she wouldn’t forget the shards of Soul Gem scattered around Sayaka’s body.

After Kyouko helped Makoto home and entered her dark, empty house, she peeled off her mask and cried.

“... He talked about magical girls like they were part of a food chain,” Makoto told Kyouko. “Then Oowada-kun ran after him... I thought they were going to kill each other.”

This was their first time eating lunch on the roof. Kyouko cared little for the view, of the dots on the grass far below. She cared for them as much as she cared about Mondo’s squabbles with Byakuya Togami.

People could be ever so exhausting. Why would anyone put up with others willingly?

Mukuro hummed.
Water lapped at Kyouko’s ankles, seeping through her socks and into her shoes. She shifted her weight between feet, squelching, and she proceeded to squelch as far back as possible. Makoto joined her side and the two of them watched Mondo, Mukuro and Kiyotaka fight an umbrella witch.

Mondo swung his sledgehammer in what Kyouko anticipated to be a finishing blow, only for the weapon to become entangled in a metal chain that swung the sledgehammer in a different direction.

The sledgehammer shattered one of the wall’s many computer monitor screens instead.

“No.” Mondo bared his teeth, crooking the fingers on one hand into a fist which then opened and closed several times. “I swear to fucking God if it’s that bastard again...!”

“Swearing in a church is rather tasteless, isn’t it?” Byakuya asked, landing in front of Mondo. He cocked his head to one side, a smirk playing on his lips. “This witch belongs to me. Fukawa,” he continued watching Mondo, taking great enjoyment in what he saw, “finish it off and give me the Grief Seed.”

A girl with unkempt everything twitched behind Byakuya and she aimed her crossbow at the umbrella witch. She fired a red bolt and quickly loaded another.

Though the umbrella witch managed to swerve out of the way of the first bolt, it didn’t dodge the subsequent bolt which exploded when contact was made. Moving erratically, the umbrella witch bumped into a wall like a housefly sometimes does against a closed window and the girl successfully landed another direct hit.

The church reverted back to normal and the smell of smoke lessened. Kyouko’s ankles remained wet.

Mukuro pointed her gun at the floor, her beret askew on her head.

Byakuya held out his hand, palm aimed upward, and the girl gave him the umbrella witch’s Grief Seed. He used it to purify his Soul Gem and once he drained it of all its magic, he threw it away. The Grief Seed bounced until it hit against a wall, after which it rattled on the spot until it came to a standstill.

Kiyotaka looked between the Grief Seed and Byakuya several times. “Togami-kun, we are the ones who located this witch and weakened it as a group.” He stared at Byakuya and jabbed a finger toward him. “You had no right to reap the rewards of something you didn’t work for!”

“Tch.” Byakuya’s eyes were dark and his mouth may have been in the shape of a smile but the similarities ended there. “Don’t you ever get tired of running your mouth? Then again, I shouldn’t expect anything sensible from the grandson of a deadbeat who labeled himself a genius.”

Kiyotaka cringed.

Mondo’s fists shook, soon sending shudders through the rest of his body. He started forward and
Kiyotaka threw out one arm, blocking Mondo from advancing any further.

Byakuya turned his back to them. “I stumbled upon this witch by tracking the aura of the familiar that I saw earlier this week. Most likely, this witch was either the same familiar or its parent. It’s because I stopped you from killing that familiar prematurely that you found this witch in the first place.”

“You mean...” Makoto stepped forward, pale. “That witch... could be here because you let it kill someone?”

“Let’s go, Fukawa,” said Byakuya, walking away.

Byakuya’s companion gave them a brief look over her shoulder before scuttling after him.

“Nambu Type 14…” Mukuro flipped over the pistol in her hands. “It has a capacity of eight rounds. It’s not one of the earlier versions because if it was, it would have a shorter trigger guard. Though that wouldn’t be a problem for you, right? What with your fancy gloves and all.” She glanced up. “So tell me, how’d you get your hands on this?”

Kyouko stirred her coffee with a spoon. “It’s my father’s.”

“Won’t he be wondering where it is?”

Kyouko set down her mug. “... If I became a magical girl, how effective would it be in battle?”

“Well, it’s not the best, but it’ll do.” Mukuro winked. “A little bit of imagination and magic can take you a long way.”

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_Touko Fukawa. A Japanese novelist best known for her vast work in the romance genre._

Kyouko’s finger hovered over her keyboard’s enter key. The rest of the article described Touko’s novels and listed the many awards she won. A small section referred to her personal life as one private from the press.

In her mind, Kyouko expanded upon the unofficial biography.


_Soul Gem on verge of total corruption._

More information could be seen in the scars on Mondo’s arm where Syo attacked him with scissors after he nearly cracked Byakuya’s head open during their fight with a sludge witch. And if Mondo wanted more, he could find her in a house on the edge of the city.

“You nearly died,” Aoi said, jerking her hand away from Sakura and stepping back. The floorboards creaked beneath her feet. She widened her eyes, unable to look away from her friend’s
face. “It’s only a matter of time before one of those... those witches kill you!”

“It is a fate I acquiesced upon becoming a magical girl,” Sakura replied. “In exchange for my services, Kenichiro’s body will no longer atrophy. I am indebted to Monobear and bound by my honour to serve him.” She gestured toward the Soul Gem on her choker. “This is my Soul Gem that contains all my magic... It is my responsibility to maintain upkeep of it lest it become unusable.”

“I’m not going to let you die!” Aoi tore Sakura’s choker off her neck and stumbled back, bumping into Mukuro. She snatched the military knife out of Mukuro’s loose hold. Eyes brimming with tears, she pressed its point against Sakura’s Soul Gem. “Sakura-chan, I’m not going to let you kill yourself!”

She stabbed through it.

Kyouko didn’t think people had lights inside of them until she saw them extinguish within Sakura’s eyes as if someone pinched the burning wick of a candle. Sakura crumpled to the floor, her magical girl outfit breaking apart to reveal her school uniform underneath.

Shards of blue fell from Aoi’s hands. She fell to her knees beside Sakura. “Sakura-chan?” She shook Sakura’s arm. “Sakura-chan? What...? Wake up. Sakura-chan?”

Mondo rounded on Monobear. “Oi, you better explain what just happened!”

“Upupupu.” Monobear stamped its feet excitedly. “Your puny human bodies wouldn’t last five minutes against a witch. When you make a contract, I prise your body open, take out your soul and put it in that gem. Why else would they be called Soul Gems? I’m doing you all a favour by keeping your souls tucked away and safe in a gem... well, safe from people who aren’t idiots, anyway.”

Kiyotaka stared down at his hands, wiggling each finger individually. “You... didn’t tell us that...”

“Huh?” Monobear tilted its head to one side. “Really? My bad.”

Makoto looked on in horror. Only Mukuro didn’t react.

“S-So...?” Aoi’s eyes bulged. “I... I k-k-killed...?” She threw herself across Sakura, uselessly pummeling her fists against Sakura’s arm. “No! Sakura-chan! Wake up!” She screamed into Sakura’s chest. “Wake up, Sakura-chan!” She rose and began performing CPR. “You can’t be dead! I won’t let you be!” Her body heaved. “I’m sorry! I’ll do anything... just, just wake up, Sakura-chan!”

Monobear’s ears quivered. “Anything?”

“Byakuya-sama?”

“Fukawa?”

“Byakuya-sama, I-”

Her Soul Gem cracked.

“Fukawa!”
Byakuya stared into an ink blotch portal with cobwebs slung across it. Behind the portal was an abandoned house just outside of the city that served no purpose other than to purport ‘true’ ghost stories and would have otherwise been demolished had no one believed these rumours.

“She isn’t a witch,” Aoi said, nearly whispering. She raised her voice. “She isn’t a witch! She’s like us. She’s a magical girl.”

“This is the fate all magical girls share,” Mukuro replied in an almost soft tone. “We are sustained by fallen magical girls until we succumb to despair and join them, and then we are defeated by magical girls.”

Kiyotaka gave a curt laugh. “That was a fine joke, Ikusaba-kun, but the time for games is over.” No one said anything. Unperturbed, he carried on talking. “It appears Togami-kun, Fukawa-kun and Ikusaba-kun collaborated for a bit of tomfoolery. Togami-kun, did you invite us here just to prank us?” He grinned at Byakuya and the skin next to his eyes crinkled. “Is this an attempt at friendship?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Byakuya asked, still looking at the portal.

“Dunno,” said Mondo, smirking. “You look constipated all the time so it’s hard to say.” Byakuya didn’t respond. Mondo wiped his hand up his pompadour and huffed out a sigh through pursed lips. “I can’t believe Naegi talked us into wasting our time here...”

Byakuya’s nails bit into his palms. “Ikusaba... You’re a veteran, aren’t you? Is it possible to get her soul back?” Mukuro said nothing. “Tell me right now!” He spun around, showing them emotion for the first time that day. “Can I get Fukawa back?” His eyes twitched. “Monobear, speak!”

Monobear, standing beside Kyouko, scratched at its nose. “It’s never been done before but that doesn’t mean it’s impossible.”

“Yeah,” Makoto piped up. “A bit of Fukawa-san must be somewhere inside that witch. And you rescued her body, didn’t you? So when you recover her soul, maybe you could put it in her body again somehow.”

Byakuya turned back to the portal, casting his eyes down to Touko’s body which lay at his feet.

“And how do you plan on recovering her soul?” Kyouko asked, her arms folded over her chest. “Like with all magical girls, when Fukawa-san formed a contract, her soul was relocated to her Soul Gem. According to Togami-kun, her Soul Gem turned into a Grief Seed. Do you expect her soul to fly into her body if you call her name enough times?”

But she doubted Byakuya had any better ideas. He resorted to asking them for help, after all, which he received largely due to Makoto’s insistence. None of the others would have gone otherwise.

“If Fukawa is in there,” Byakuya said in a low voice, “I’ll find her. You’ve told me all I need to know. You can leave now.”

He picked up Touko and held her in his arms. Her head rolled toward him and pressed against his chest.

The portal made Byakuya’s skirt flutter but he otherwise did not move. His head was bent forward a bit. Kyouko assumed he was looking at Touko. With his back toward them, no one could see his expression and Kyouko had no idea what to imagine. Could someone like him feel sad about
someone else?

Lightning struck the portal and Byakuya’s shadow mutated for a few seconds - his shadow lost its head and the body grew another four arms. Thunder crackled and his shadow returned to normal.

Kiyotaka finally realised that they were all being serious. Colour slowly drained out of his face and the red in his irises seemed to quiver.

Kyouko said, “Togami-kun, there’s only a slim chance of this working.”

“So?” Byakuya asked. “I have nothing to worry about for I never fail. Once I retrieve Fukawa, I can cut all ties with her. I’ll be indebted to her no longer.” He jutted out his chin. “You will all see. I shall return victorious...”

Byakuya stepped through the portal.

Five minutes later, the portal vanished and a Grief Seed landed onto the doormat.

Aoi sank to her knees and sobbed into her hands.

Sakura crouched and rubbed circles into Aoi’s back. “My girl, please...”

“They’re dead, Sakura-chan!” Aoi howled. “Don’t you see? And the same thing will happen to us... We’ll turn into witches, one day, and we’ll kill people too... All this time, we’ve been killing the people we’ve been working with! Who we’re supposed to protect!”

She cried harder, burrowing her nose into the nook of Sakura’s shoulder. Only it wasn’t Sakura, not really. No soul existed in this Sakura’s Soul Gem or even inside of her body. This Sakura knew what to say, what Sakura would say, but that was it.

“Kyoudai,” said Kiyotaka. “What time is it?”

“Huh?” Mondo lifted his left hand. “Oh, I... uh, don’t have a watch... Wait.” He started to turn toward Kiyotaka. “Don’t you have a wa-?”

Kiyotaka stabbed through Mondo’s Soul Gem with his katana. Then, before anyone could react, he sliced his own Soul Gem in half.

His dismembered hand thumped to his feet.

Aoi raised her head and shrieked, her face stained with wet horror. “T-They...!” She bumped her fists together before moving them away from each other horizontally. Between them materialised a trident which she grabbed and pointed at the seashell-shaped Soul Gem over her heart. Her whole body trembled. “We... have to do the same! B-Before we... turn into...!”

Sakura steadied Aoi’s hand and pulled it down and away from Aoi’s Soul Gem. “Asahina, the path ahead will be one of thorns but that does not mean we should allow fear to thwart our journey. I will be with you every step of the way as will all those we met along the way.” She removed her choker and pressed her fake Soul Gem against Aoi’s. “I will be with you until my last breath, I swear.”

It was what Sakura would have said.
When Kyouko stumbled upon their bodies that Saturday, their broken Soul Gems were touching. Mukuro had told Makoto and Kyouko to stay at home on Saturday and only as the sky darkened did Kyouko realise why: there were witches everywhere. A witch’s barrier engulfed most of the city.

They had to escape. All of them. Kyouko continued waddling through rubble until she arrived at Mukuro’s house. Memories of sleepovers and study sessions pushed Kyouko through the unlocked door, up the stairs and into Mukuro’s bedroom.

Mukuro wasn’t in there. She flipped the light switch, as if that would make Mukuro appear, but Mukuro remained well and truly absent. Had she gone to fight the witches? Was Kyouko too late?

Kyouko turned her head, intending to leave, and spotted a heap of papers on Mukuro’s desk. That made her hesitate. Was it homework? Or something that would tell Kyouko where Mukuro was?

She walked over to the desk and skimmed through the sheets on top. They were plans. Not battle plans or attack formations but a plan. The papers contained diagrams and flowcharts, all annotated and all going into detail about what happened from their first day at school to now. It was a timeline.

No, not a timeline. Kyouko read it more closely. A web of timelines.

Her hands shook as she read a section about herself on one sheet. According to this, her father was dead. In other timelines, she made a wish to locate her father, to finally catch up to him, and discovered his grave. Next to this was written ‘avoid if possible’.

“Upupupu, going by your face, you’ve figured out what’s going on,” Monobear said from behind her.

Kyouko kept her chin up and forced herself to say calmly, “Ikusaba-san has been replaying this period, over and over again.” Had what Mukuro said about wishing to protect those she loved been a lie? “But... why...?”

“Beats me.” Monobear shrugged. “I must have granted her a wish that let her replay this period as many times as she liked.” Monobear scratched at one of its ears. “I should ask Ikusaba-san to beat up the next version of me for doing something so dumb... huh.” It blinked. “Oh... Oh! I should do the opposite!” It wiggled its hips. “I should ask her to shake my paw!” It hugged itself and started to dance. “Oh, I see! Past Me was a genius! If only I would remember this.”

“Monobear.” Kyouko now knew what she needed to do. She needed to know. “I’m ready to make a contract with you.”

“Oh?” Monobear stopped dancing.

Kyouko said, “I wish for all my memories of this timeline to carry over to the next one.”
"A circus of witches."

The next chapter is a lot shorter, I promise.
“This is justice.”

“Fukawa-san, destroy his Soul Gem!”

“B-But we’re meant to be saving him, aren’t we? And wh-why...? Y-You’re bleeding! I’m going to faint...! W-Where’s Byakuya-sama? What happ-?”

Makoto was flung backward through the air. His body writhed, legs kicking aimlessly in search of solid ground.

Kyouko sprinted over to Makoto and caught him, her good arm hooking around his back in a single-armed hug. Her feet touched down asynchronously. “Naegi-kun, are you all right?”

“Y-Yeah,” he said, slipping out from her hold and returning to his feet.

The church had transformed. Metal rods barred the windows, like those in a prison cell, and the rich colours of the room had turned monochrome so only he and Kyouko retained their colours. Touko too, who he spotted lying facedown on the floor nearby. Kiyotaka was nowhere in sight.

“Kirigiri-san, what happened to Ishimaru-kun?” Makoto ran over to Touko and crouched down. Should he check for a pulse? His hands trembled. A touch in the wrong place would probably earn him a bolt to the forehead. Or a pair of scissors to the forehead, if she was wearing that holster of them on her leg. He turned to Kyouko and lifted his chin. “Did a witch appear while we were talking?”

“I’m sorry,” Kyouko said.

Makoto widened his eyes and watched her lips move as she spoke.

“Ishimaru-kun’s Soul Gem filled with despair and became a Grief Seed,” she continued, still quiet. “That seed gave birth to a witch. We’re in its barrier right now.”

A lump plummeted down Makoto’s body. Stomach acid dissolved the lump’s outer layers of surprise to reveal the nugget of horror at its core. “His... Soul Gem? It turned into a Grief Seed?”

Touko groaned and sat up. Her tongue unfolded out from her mouth and dangled against her chin, outrageously long. She was Syo, not Touko: the blast must have knocked her unconscious and caused her to switch personalities.

Having not received an answer to his last remark, Makoto shook his head and furrowed his brow. “Kirigiri-san, what you said... can’t be right.”

Kyouko stared back at him.

“That would mean Ishimaru-kun is a witch now,” he said.

“Eh...? Ishi-chin became a witch?” Syo sprung to her feet with such force that Makoto jolted back in a dodge that made him tip over. “What a load of hoo-ha.” Her tongue wiggled and she flicked her wrist so her palm was pointed at the ceiling. “If what you’re saying is canon, that means all us
magical girls are going to become witches. That sounds like a bunch of bullcrap."

“What I’m saying is true,” said Kyouko. “We’re cattle that Monobear is herding.”

“Really? Damn.” Syo huffed out air from her nose. “That’s a real kicker.”

Though Kyouko had proven to be correct about many things so far, she had to be wrong now. Being right would mean all magical girls would metamorphose into a witch if a witch didn’t kill them first. That would be cruel.

Makoto realised Kyouko was telling the truth.

The sound of drums being struck sounded and the floor started to quake in time with each beat. They whipped their heads around to face the direction that the noise originated from.

Nutcrackers trooped toward them, twice as tall as Makoto, performing a military march on various woodwind, brass and percussion instruments. Like the rest of the barrier, the nutcracker familiars all lacked colour, identical to each other save for the different instruments they played.

Kyouko threw her arms upward. Purple petals flaked off her body, tumbling down her limbs in loose curls. Her clothes fell apart too, and underneath where they peeled away was her magical girl uniform, and the petals melted at her feet and seeped into the floor.

Syo hitched up her skirt with one hand and got out a pair of scissors from her holster. She extended her other arm upward and pointed the scissors at the ceiling. Red light flickered down her body, beginning at the tip of her scissors, and the light burst into confetti at her feet to reveal her dressed in magical girl clothes. Other than a slit down one leg, her outfit was identical to Touko’s dress.

“Naegi-kun, stay back,” Kyouko instructed, pulling on her ribbon. The end of it transformed into a spear that she detached with another sharp tug.

It wasn’t like Makoto could fight with them. He bit back a retort, satisfying himself with spectating.

Three familiars fronted the procession. Kyouko rushed forward and swept her spear against and across their feet, knocking them onto their backs.

“Leave the rest to me,” said Syo, snipping the air twice. She darted over and impaled one of the familiars in the head with her scissors. Her fingers flashed and a new pair of scissors materialised on them, which she used on a different fallen familiar.

“Wait,” Makoto said, half-hoping neither would hear him as he dreaded their answer. “If Ishimaru-kun is a witch, does that mean you’re going to have to kill him?”

Because of the last attack, the familiars were now dispersing from their orderly lines. Kyouko vaulted over five of them and glanced down. “I’m sorry.”

A shiver shot up to Makoto’s chest but before he could digest the piece of news, a cluster of familiars ahead of him exploded.

“Nice shot!” Footsteps rang out and Aoi entered the edge of Makoto’s field of vision. She stopped next to him, panting, while Sakura and Yasuhiro sprinted past.

“And my ma said playing all those first person shooters would accomplish nothing,” Yasuhiro said, splaying out his hands. Playing cards appeared between his fingers. He closed his hands for a
moment and then flung the playing cards at a group of familiars, where they exploded upon impact. “And darts,” he added in a thoughtful tone. “Darts helped too.”

Sakura descended and punched the head off a familiar. Her knee cracked the floor as she landed and she took to the air again shortly after, chasing down another target.

More familiars trooped in, coming out of a doorway on the opposite side of the room.

“Asahina-san,” Makoto tore his gaze away from the fight and looked at Aoi instead, “what did you three find at the arcade?”

She scrunched up her face. “Monobear.”

Makoto blinked. “Monobear?”

“Yes.” Aoi nodded. “It almost felt like he was expecting us...” Her finger scratched at her chin. “He acted really odd: he said we were too late and then he started laughing so we headed here as fast as we could. Why?” She tilted her head to one side. “What did you guys find? Did you find Ishimaru?”

The fight suddenly appealed to Makoto a lot more now. More than answering Aoi did, anyway. “Yes.”

“So where is he?” she asked.

“He’s this barrier’s witch.” Byakuya stepped forward and stood on the other side of Makoto, forehead and magical girl waistcoat clawed up with dirt and blood. One of his arms was folded over his chest. “Ishimaru’s Soul Gem filled with despair and turned him into a witch.”

Yasuhiro’s playing card explosive missed its target. “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Togami-chi, what did you just say?” He gawked at them. “And what happened to you?”

Byakuya pushed up his glasses with two fingers. “Kirisaki and Ikusaba told me everything. Monobear ripped our souls out of our bodies and placed them inside our Soul Gems, and when our Soul Gems are overcome with too much despair, so are our souls and we are transformed into witches.” He prodded up his glasses again, but this time his hand shook faintly and alerted Makoto that Byakuya’s composure was artificial. “That’s what happened to Ishimaru.”

Aoi clapped her hands onto her mouth and shook her head.

Sakura stared at Byakuya from over her shoulder. “That is...!” Spasms pulsed across her face, contorting her features. “That cannot be true!”

Kyouko thrust her spear through the chest of a familiar.

Syo hesitated.

“Ikusaba-san?” Makoto repeated, rewinding through what he had just been told. “You mean our friend? Mukuro Ikusaba?”

Byakuya raised his chin and straightened his back, breathing still irregular. “Yes. Ikusaba lured Kirigiri and I to a warehouse... She said it would be fitting for her revelation to take place there, where Kirigiri had experienced another some time ago... All of it was talk in an attempt to stall us. For whatever reason, Ikusaba has a vendetta against Ishimaru.” He narrowed his eyes and cupped his chin in one hand. His thumb rubbed circles. “I can’t think of any other reason for her attacking
us so we didn’t get here in time.”

Makoto’s mind was wiped blank to make room for Mukuro’s face and her name. Her name echoed, again and again, dominating his thoughts, repeating until it didn’t sound like a word. Each letter, each syllable burned his throat so he wanted to vomit.

“You got that wrong.” Makoto whispered. Byakuya turned to him. Makoto spoke with more certainty. “Ikusaba-san can’t have anything to do with this. She’s not even a magical girl... She and Ishimaru-kun attended the same swim club, they-!”

Fanfare screeched from the other side of the room. No, beyond that, from beyond the doorway on the other side of the room.

“We need to move forward!” Kyouko shouted, gesturing for the others to follow.

Everyone except Makoto stirred into action. Makoto stood still for five seconds. He would have stood still for longer had Aoi not grabbed his wrist and hauled him along after her. They passed through the doorway on the other side of the room. The hallway they stepped into stretched as they hurried down it, lengthening as if they were really on a treadmill. Knights clad in metal armour patrolled the walls the students ran parallel to, their weapons vertical as they marched in sync to trumpeting.

“Be on your guard,” Kyouko said. “He must know we’re here.”

As if hearing her, the walls collapsed outward much like a box unfolding and then disintegrated. Gone was the monochrome of the previous area; vivid colours could now be seen from all directions. They could be seen on the painted banners held by crowds of grey nutcracker familiars either side of the road that the humans found themselves standing on, as well as on the cloudless, blue sky and the plated gold road.

Metal clanged in the distance. A white suit of kendo armour trudged toward the group, equipped with a pair of bamboo swords. Behind the bars in its helmet, where a face should have been - where Kiyotaka’s face should have been - lay darkness. The witch towered over the humans and the familiars, its size that of a monster from an old movie, and its brisk pace never faltered nor accelerated.

Makoto stared up at it. “If we talk to him,” he said, “maybe we could get through to-?”

“No,” Kyouko said. “Someone tried that before and failed. All we can do now is stop Ishimaru-kun before he kills anyone... for every person he has saved, he will bring despair to a greater number. Preventing him from harming any innocent lives is what he would have wanted.”

“And then what?” asked Byakuya. “We’ll wait for the same thing to happen to us?” He glared at her. “Kirisu, after we’re finished here, you’re going to tell me how you know so much. You’re going to tell me all you know about magical girls and witches, about what you wished for and how you knew Fukawa and where to find her on my first day at Hope’s Peak.”

Kyouko gripped her spear tighter. She didn’t look at Byakuya as she spoke. “I’m surprised you remembered such a small detail, Togami-kun.”

Byakuya tensed, rounding on her. “Everything about you is comprised of small unexplained details. Ikusaba told us Monobear didn’t grant your wish and you confirmed it for her in the warehouse... You know far too much. How do-?”

She slammed her shoulder into him and they both lurched sideways, ending up in a pile with
Kyouko on top.

The witch stamped its foot on the spot that Byakuya had been standing on moments before.

Syo’s eyes glinted. “Hey, what’s going on here? Chirigiri-Ki, you better not be making a move on my darling!”

Kyouko climbed off him.

Byakuya reached a hand up his sleeve and pulled out his kusarigama. “... That’s enough talking for now.”

He rose, swinging the weighted chain of his weapon above his head, drawing circles until he gained enough momentum. Following this, his chain was whipped forward where it wrapped around the witch’s ankles.

The witch wobbled, trying to mobilize its legs. Its arms thrashed, slicing the air with its swords. Each cut left a grey streak in the sky.

All the familiars booed.

Sakura backed away, putting distance between her and the witch, whereafter she bounded toward it. She sprung into the air once suitably close to it and hurled herself at her opponent’s red breastplate. The witch’s chest shuddered, ripples flowing out from where she had struck it with her fist, and the witch fell onto its back.

Byakuya strengthened his footing. “Genocider, cut through its face mask,” he instructed, pulling on his kusarigama so it was secured more tightly around the witch’s ankles. The witch squirmed. “Kirigiri, you and I shall impair its arm usage. Hagakure, throw in an explosive once its face is open. Oogami, focus on beating down its chest so it doesn’t rise.”

“Roger, darling!” Syo leaped onto the witch’s neck, scissors ready for action. She snipped the bars of the face mask as easily as one would cut through a block of butter. Eyes as red as hers leered from the darkness within.

Meanwhile, Kyouko and Byakuya sprinted off in different directions toward its hands. The arm closest to Kyouko rose and its sword collided with her spear as she parried its attack. Kyouko gritted her teeth, thrusting her spearhead through its hand and driving the witch’s arm back onto the ground. Instead of freeing her weapon, she pulled on her ribbon in order to obtain another spear. She charged headlong down the arm toward the witch’s shoulder. Along the way, she stabbed her spear through its forearm. More spears came out of her ribbon, and she impaled the witch’s arm with each one so it was pinned to the ground.

“They’re incredible.” Aoi remarked with shining eyes, watching Byakuya slice through the witch’s second sword with his sickle.

“They’re risking their lives while we’re...”

Aoi clutched her elbow.
“Yeah,” he agreed.

Syo cartwheeled away from the witch’s face to where Byakuya was. She landed near him and stabbed two pairs of scissors through the wrist on the arm that Byakuya was fighting. Now both of its arms were pinned down.

The witch’s hand unfurled out of its fist, flopping onto the ground and flattening four familiars with a crunch that made Makoto cringe. Under its body, the grass and road paled.

“But it’s like you said, isn’t it?” Aoi grinned at him. “I don’t need to change. I’m fine the way I am and I can support my friends like this.”

Makoto’s breath caught in his throat. “You know what, Asahina-san?” He joined in her smile. “You’re right.”

Yasuhiro threw a grenade at the witch’s face, following up his attack with several more. The witch’s helmet exploded and the rest of its body soon did too in a series of blasts. Lumps of leather and metal were projected upward. They didn’t ascend for long, however, and soon started to rain down. With a strangled yell, Yasuhiro dived out of the way, burrowing under a chunk of witch leg still on the ground.

Debris squashed fleeing familiars. Colour disappeared from the grass and road and abandoned banners when struck. Colour also disappeared from the bits of witch falling from the torn sky.

Aoi shrieked, zigzagging toward Sakura and huddling under her arm for shelter. Sakura punched anything that threatened to encroach on their personal space, keeping an arm around Aoi for protection and security.

Kyouko ran over to Makoto and lifted him up bridal style. She dodged through the still falling remains of witch and headed toward Byakuya and Syo.

By the time the four reunited, the air had stilled and they were in the church again. Yasuhiro, Aoi and Sakura walked over to join them.

“It’s dead,” Byakuya said, giving the pews a quick look. He removed his hands from Syo’s shoulders, ignoring the disappointment on her face.

“He. He’s dead,” Aoi corrected. She exhaled and hugged herself. “Th-That was Ishimaru-kun...” Tears pricked the corners of her eyes and she snorted. “And now... now... he’s...!”

“And now we must ensure his death paves our journey onward rather than hinders our growth,” Sakura finished, setting a hand onto Aoi’s shoulder and hugging Aoi into her side. “We cannot let his demise be one of vain. From it we have learned the final secret of a magical girl’s existence, and with this information we can achieve victory.” Her eyes bore into Kyouko’s. “Kirigiri, Togami mentioned Ikusaba and your lack of a contract. Let us begin there. To work together, there can be no more secrets.”

Kyouko glanced at Makoto.

He nodded.

She copied the action faintly and looked back at Sakura. “If everyone follows me, I can take you somewhere that will answer all your questions.”
Mukuro’s bedroom was cold. Makoto lost count of how many times he read the crumpled sheet of paper in his hands. Again he perused it, hunting for a change in the words scribbled down, for a change in their meaning, but they stayed the same.

Yasuhiro cleared his throat. “This is a joke, ‘right? Ikusaba-chi’s...?” He forced himself to smile, shaking his head and shaking the piece of paper in his hand. His eyes betrayed his lips. “You’re making this up. You’ve got to be.”

“Y-Yeah,” Aoi said. “Ikusaba-chan is our friend. She attended all our swim club meetings, hung out with us... This story is hard to believe.” Aoi peered down at the piece of paper in her trembling grip. “And you still haven’t explained how you know all this stuff...”

“Ikusaba attacked me and Kirigiri,” Byakuya reminded them. “Ikusaba is a magical girl, that is a fact. Kirigiri speaks the truth. While Ikusaba pretended to be your friend, you all played into her little game.”

“As did you,” Kyouko said. She rested her hand onto Mukuro’s desk and curled her fingers into a fist. “We all did. Ikusaba-san’s timelines are intricate... She must have reset this period many times if she is able to remember what happened in previous timelines with enough detail to recount them on paper. She has been using these to calculate our moves. Our reactions. She could control us.”

“So I really was a magical girl before?” Aoi reread her piece of paper. “It says so right here, after I killed-” She gasped. “I killed Sakura-chan?”

Sakura flinched and read Aoi’s piece of paper. Her grimace hardened as she progressed, and her expression only softened when she caught a glimpse of Aoi’s face.

“My girl, it is fine,” Sakura said with a small smile. “Those things didn’t happen this time around and your motive was understandable in such a predicament. Your heart was in the right place as it is now.”

Aoi rubbed at her eyes with her knuckles and sniffed loudly. “Y-Yeah...” She let out a short laugh. “I... I guess.”

Kyouko held out a piece of paper. “Togami-kun, can you recall Ikusaba-san once suggesting she race Hagakure-kun during swim club? This happened just before your competition with Oowada-kun and Ishimaru-kun.”

Byakuya took a step toward Kyouko and accepted the piece of paper reluctantly. He looked visibly uncomfortable. “Yes, I do remember that.”

“Ikusaba-san knew you would get inspired by that idea, and she knew you would then challenge Oowada-kun to a similar game,” Kyouko explained. “She planned it so you were nearby when they failed. It was so you could save Ishimaru-kun and Naegi-kun.”

“Eh?” Aoi curved her hand over her mouth. “But... then why did she let Ishimaru-kun die later?”

Syo tilted her head to one side. “Maybe Boku no Iku needed Kiyo-ken alive back then?” She returned to reading the piece of paper that Kyouko had given Byakuya to read.

“That could be part of the reason why,” Kyouko said. “However, I believe she wanted Naegi-kun to survive without him forming a contract and Ishimaru-kun was fortunately with him at the time. Showing Naegi-kun the fate of a magical girl was Ikusaba-san’s final effort to put Naegi-kun off
forming a contract and Ishimaru-kun was this timeline’s perfect candidate.”

Kyouko opened her fist and swept her hand across the desk.

Papers rustled.

Her eyes shut briefly. “I haven’t had much of a chance to read these papers. In the last timeline, I needed to make sure I made a contract before the period reset, and this building was destroyed seconds after. In this timeline, I couldn’t risk Ikusaba-san finding me here or else I would blow my cover. The more recent timelines Ikusaba-san has recorded seem to prioritise ensuring that Naegi-kun doesn’t form a contract.”

Makoto looked up from his piece of paper and saw them all waiting for him to answer. None of what they had just talked about had got through to him. Not totally. Their words merely smacked into him and dripped off his body like the words he managed to squeeze out next.

“Ikusaba-san killed Maizono-san.”

The knives in Sayaka’s feet hadn’t been hers, regurgitated from the baseball pitching machine witch. They belonged to Mukuro. He imagined Mukuro revealing to Sayaka that she was a magical girl too and offering to team up, saying Mondo and Kiyotaka had already gone after Makoto in the other witch’s barrier. He imagined them running down the corridor and through the curtained doorway together. He imagined them facing the witch in the coliseum and Sayaka throwing one of her knives at it. And when she tried to dodge, Mukuro pinned her feet to the ground with her combat knives.

Kyouko’s hair swung forward and hid her face from view. “I tried to save Maizono-san but these notes aren’t overly detailed... I sent her ahead while I sought the witch that I thought killed her; however, Ikusaba-san must have adjusted her plan accordingly and directed Maizono-san toward another witch. Even then the witch I found... wasn’t the one that killed her last time...!”

The slither of anger in her tone slid down Makoto’s back.

Aoi hooked her finger around the corner of her mouth. “Why would Ikusaba-chan do something so cruel?”

“To deter Naegi-kun from forming a contract,” Kyouko replied, her head still tilted forward. “A lot of thought was put into this. Ikusaba-san undoubtedly has had plenty of time to explore various courses of action in her attempts to achieve her overall goal, whatever it may be...”

“And enough help,” Syo added.

Kyouko raised her head slightly and blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Eggs-with-Yolko, don’t tell me you didn’t notice!” Syo picked up a random piece of paper off the desk and batted at it with the back of her hand. “This is a collab! At least two people mindmapped this shit. Some of the shorthand doesn’t match the rest among other things and it’s a total clash... There are practically two different languages in this like a poor fandub.” Her lips stretched into a wide grin and she squinted one eye. “Iku-lightsaber’s been parroting what someone told her and she mixed it in with her own style. And she did a shoddy job too.” She threw her head back and laughed. “GAAHAAHEEHAA!”

“How... can you tell?” asked Kyouko, stunned.

Even Byakuya looked impressed.
“How could I not?” Syo bounced onto tiptoe and then slammed her heels into the carpet. “Not only have I studied the similarities and differences between Gloomy’s handwriting and mine, as well as in how we communicate, but there are hundreds of wannabes writing into newspapers claiming to be me!” She waved the piece of paper. “Complete amateurs, mixing quotes I’ve said with their parodies of my lingo... It’s like a kid who’s been moulding playdough into cake trying to use real ingredients all of a sudden!” Letting out another bellow of a laugh, she hugged herself. “Fact of the matter is Icky-Wicky Spider ain’t a solo act!”

Yasuhiro rubbed the back of his neck and cast his gaze toward the door. “Hey, am I the only one who doesn’t understand why Ikusaba-chi would leave all these papers lying around? Like... she tried to beat up Kirigiri-chi and Togami-chi and didn’t think we’d come here after?”

Kyouko shook her head. “Ikusaba-san knew.” She took a deep breath, focusing her eyes onto the desk. “On Saturday, you will all forget this. There’s a good chance I will only remember the last period of time and not this playthrough because of how I worded my wish, but that couldn’t be helped...” A loose strand of hair was tucked behind her ear. “I’ve deduced that Monobear always puts a catch into every wish they grant so I decided I would choose what mine was rather than let them decide. Ikusaba-san is giving us the option to join her in the final battle and if that fails, this period will begin again. Ikusaba-san is out of options.”

She looked up.

“Monobear,” Kyouko said, “I know you’re here. You don’t need to bother hiding from us any longer.”

Mukuro’s curtains parted and Monobear hopped down from the windowsill.

“Monobear...!” Makoto’s eyes locked onto its small stature. “You... knew this was going to happen.” He felt his face grow hot. “You knew Ishimaru-kun was about to turn into a witch!”

“Well duh,” Monobear replied, poking a paw into its ear. “When a magical girl pops their clogs and turns into a witch, they release a lot of energy and it’s my job to collect that energy. You know when you turn on a light bulb? Some of the energy is wasted as heat when all you want from the darn thing is light. So us at the Mono Council said, ‘hey, we need to find a form of energy that doesn’t do that.’ Enter Earth with its humans and all their dreams and potential and hopes and ambitions and despair. Teenagers are a prime unlimited source for all that: it’s the point in your life when adults push you into making life-changing decisions.”

“So you’re using us?” Aoi stamped one foot and leaned her upper body forward. “You’re a murderer!”

Yasuhiro stabbed the air with his finger. “You’ll be seeing me in court!”

“Hey, hey! It’s not like we do this because we don’t like you,” Monobear said, waving it arms around erratically. “Well, I don’t like any of you, but that’s not the point. Togami-kun,” Byakuya’s body jerked at the sound of his name, “you and Fukawa-san wouldn’t have made any friends if it wasn’t for me. Also you all had a wish that needed granting and I granted them for you, didn’t I?” It turned away from them, holding its paws behind its back. “Only... Togami-kun made his wish because of his pride. And he thought being a magical girl would be fun, didn’t he? The wish itself was just a formality for him, and now it’s become a source of shame... not only that, but he just found out that his pride has condemned him to this fate!”

Byakuya looked down with no comeback.
“As for you, Kirigiri-san,” Monobear’s grincreeped wider, “how do you know you haven’t been in
more than two timelines already? Wouldn’t it be funny if you thought this is your last shot at
breaking the cycle when you’ve been on the brink of hope before, thinking this, only to fail every
time and unknowingly start again?”

Kyouko had no comeback either.

“Tomorrow there will be a circus of witches,” said Monobear, “and I’ve chosen you bastards as
volunteers from the audience. Upupupu... Good luck!”

Monobear vanished.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

'Shit fuck crap buckets piss in a shoe.'
“No,” said Makoto’s father.

Neither parent looked up. Makoto’s mother continued tending to the grill and his father flipped to the next page of the morning newspaper.

“You’re to stay at home today,” Makoto’s father clarified, having not received any vocal response from his son. He took another sip of coffee and furrowed his brow at the article he was skimming through. A few seconds later, he set down his mug with a dull clonk. “I’m sure your teachers have set you plenty of homework to do over the weekend.”

All Makoto could do was stare. The clock on the wall counted seconds, each tick throbbing between his ears.

Finally, Makoto asked, “Why?” It felt like his head was shaking. In reality, only his lips moved. “I don’t understand.”

“You father and I feel that you’ve spent too much time going out with your friends,” Makoto’s mother explained. She turned her head toward Makoto, chin high and gaze steady. “You’ll thank us later.”

Seconds passed.

“You can’t do this.” He shifted back one foot.

“It’s not up for discussion.” She turned back to the grill. In one of her fists was a spatula which she jerked toward the mackerel.

Makoto widened his eyes. “You don’t get it.” He spoke louder. “I have to go!”

“We don’t get it?” Makoto’s mother repeated, almost shouting. Almost laughing.

The spatula hit the floor.

“You’re right, Makoto, we don’t get it,” she said, her eyes piercing into his own. “And how do you think that makes us feel? You come home whenever you feel like it. Kids in your class have gone missing. We’ve tried giving you space, letting you figure out things for yourself, but can’t you see how worried we are?” Her voice cracked. “You could have seriously hurt Komaru yesterday and we don’t even know where you go off to most days.” She pointed in his direction, finger wagging. “And don’t you dare say you’ve been at study sessions again.”

No words left Makoto’s mouth. What she said clenched his throat so any objections he wanted to raise got snuffed out before they passed his lips.

If Kyouko and Monobear were right, people were going to die. His friends could die. Either he stayed at home and waited for destruction to befall everyone, or he cheered his friends on from the sidelines. Even if he was unable to fight like his friends, it was as Aoi had said: he could support them, and he would rather see what was going on than twiddle his thumbs in his bedroom.
Also, if worst came to the worst, he could form a contract. Should the others fail today, should Mukuro restart the timeline, who knew how many resets would occur before the world left limbo?

“Your sister trusts us enough to let us know where she’s going,” Makoto’s father remarked, adjusting the positioning of his hands. His newspaper rustled. “She went to the city centre with a few of her little friends to see her favourite model... Junko Enoshima, I think it was.”

Junko Enoshima. The name sounded familiar.

“But your ring-”

“...is a gift from my sister and I don’t understand the connection between them. As a part-time model, Junko-chan knows what’s in fashion and bought this for me. A lot of teenagers own similar accessories.”

Makoto forced out the next words. “She’s not here?”

“No.”

“When did Komaru leave?”

“An hour ago,” his mother replied. “She wanted to be near the front of the li-”

The front door banged shut behind Makoto.

For a part-time model, Junko Enoshima had already earned herself quite the following. Makoto expected only girls around Komaru’s age to be interested in seeing her but no. Other demographics had flocked to the city centre as well, not limited to just one gender. Threading through the throngs of fans proved nearly as difficult as getting there had been: cars and public transport congested all nearby roads and families occupied most footpaths.

Everybody’s conversations blended together as Makoto searched for his sister. Navigating through such a compact area had him panting within minutes: people stamped on his feet as they bustled past and early afternoon Sun shone down with no restraint.

“Naegi!” came a familiar voice.

He whipped around and caught sight of Sakura and Aoi.

They broke into a jog, Aoi bumping shoulders with anyone who obstructed her route. Only Sakura mumbled apologies, purposely weaving through the crowd, though no one seemed to care to listen. Everyone else was preoccupied in the oncoming event and now used to being knocked around in this crowd.

Due to the heat, Aoi’s t-shirt clung to her body. She plucked at her t-shirt and gave it a shake, trying to let in some fresh air to cool her skin. “Have you seen any of the others? No one’s answering their phone.”

Makoto shook his head. “I haven’t, sorry.”

Aoi’s shoulders slumped. “I thought you might not have had any luck but figured I’d ask anyway.” She rubbed at the back of her neck, flashing him a toothy grin that softened when she lifted her head a moment later. “Sakura-chan, give me a boost.”
Sakura crouched down so Aoi could scramble up her back and to her shoulders. Once Aoi was safely seated, Sakura rose to full height and Makoto found himself in awe at their combined height. Alone, Sakura was giant, but Aoi added a noticeable increase. No one in the area could compare.

Placing her hand to her forehead, Aoi scanned the area with narrowed eyes. “Still nothing...” She blew out a sigh, causing a few hairs hanging over her forehead to dance. “Of all the days for this witch to come, it had to choose the day when the centre’s packed.”

“It is hard to believe that such a convivial event is to shift into one of despair,” said Sakura, shuffling through the crowd with Makoto close to her side.

While people chose to disregard Makoto in his trek through the crowd, they couldn’t ignore Sakura so easily and were forced to let her pass lest they get mowed down. Makoto had the feeling that Sakura noticed the stares that she received from gawking onlookers but she purposely ignored them. Only a furtive glance gave her away, aimed at a huddle of giggling school girls.

One girl’s eyes wavered between Sakura’s face and Sakura’s pleated skirt.

“Do you think the sky will suddenly go black?” asked Aoi, squinting upward. Beads of sweat could easily be seen on her face even after she swiped the back of her hand across her forehead. “Kirigiri-chan never said when this witch is supposed to show up. She only told us that it would be here, most likely.” Aoi slouched. “That’s still not too certain, huh.”

“It is not,” agreed Sakura, gazing up at her. “Asahina, can you see any of our friends?”

Again, Aoi looked around, only this time she straightened up and grinned. “I see Hagakure! I’d recognise his hair anywhere. Hey,” she waved frantically, raising her voice, “Hagakure! Over here! Sakura-chan.” She flung her arm out and wobbled a little. “Go that way!”

Sakura slogged through the crowd, following the direction of Aoi’s finger.

Yasuhiro only spotted the others after Aoi gave another shout. He hopped his way toward them, almost immediately stumbling over a middle-aged man’s foot and ploughing through an unprepared family.

Only regaining his balance just before he reached them, Yasuhiro straightened up with a lurch and offered his friends a relieved wave. “Yo, Asahina-chi! Ogre-chi!” A wheeze. “Naegi-chi! Seen any witches?”

“No yet.” Aoi cast the crowd around them another long look. “Maybe the witch isn’t coming until this evening?”

Going home even for a little bit wasn’t something they could risk doing. Makoto ran his fingers through his hair. “My sister is here. I need to send her home and tell her to get my parents to safety.” An inward shiver trickled down him. “My parents... They’re going to be so mad when I come back.”


On the bright side, if they failed to defeat the witch, Mukuro would reset the timeline and his argument with his parents would never have happened. No one would even remember it.

That wasn’t an option. Makoto mentally scolded himself for considering such a thing, even if he hadn’t done so with any serious thought, but failing - failing was something that could happen.
It wouldn’t happen: he refused to let that happen.

“Yeah, we did,” he admitted to Aoi. The crowd around them hummed and swam across his vision. He lifted his chin. “Let’s try to get into a clear space. Maybe it’ll be easier to spot everyone else if we’re not a part of what we’re searching.”

Sakura nodded and led them through slithers of space, her muttered apologies lost in the noise and bustle. Yasuhiro latched onto Makoto’s arm and Sakura curled her fingers around Makoto’s wrist, so together they all formed a chain that helped ensure no one became separated from the others. They snaked their way over to a vacant set of stone steps in front of the door of a dentist surgery, and Sakura knelt onto one knee so Aoi could drop down.

Aoi plonked herself onto the top step. As soon as she had settled onto it, she twisted her satchel around so it thumped onto her lap. From it, she got out a bottle of water and she craned her neck as she watched the congregation. “Do you guys think Togami, Fukawa-chan and Kirigiri-chan are here somewhere?”

She swallowed a few gulps of water and then held out her drink toward Sakura.

“Kirigiri has experienced this day previously. I have faith in her knowing the optimal place to be when the witch presents itself.” Sakura accepted the bottle from Aoi and took a sip from it, forehead creased with worried thought. “However, Togami and Fukawa’s absence is troubling…” She stood up abruptly. “I shall scout the area for them. Hagakure, stay here with Asahina and Naegi. If something happens while I am away, it is your duty to protect them.”

Yasuhiro saluted. “You can count on me, ‘right?’

Sakura descended the stone steps.

Once she had penetrated the crowd, Yasuhiro heaved a sigh and reclined, the sole of one sandal slapping into stone while his other sandal dangled from his toes. He crossed one leg over the other and stared into the innocent blue beyond with wistful eyes. “I had to reschedule a reading with a client so I could go here today…” His facial features hardened. “That witch better show its face or I’m going to file a complaint.”

Aoi stopped sorting through her bag to glare at him.

“I mean,” Yasuhiro amended hastily, “if the witch doesn’t come, then hell yeah.” He half-heartedly threw a punch at the sky.

She averted her eyes and pulled her hand out of her bag, now holding her cellphone. “Today could turn out differently, couldn’t it? This time, Kirigiri-chan has known what was going to happen from the get go, so maybe we’ll be okay?” The reflection in her cellphone’s screen frowned. “Only Ikusaba-chan…”

“Yes. It wasn’t a glamorous lifestyle but that’s what happened between semesters at school. Junko-chan scouted for whatever pageants she could in the meantime, and everyone soon realised how amazing and pretty and all so perfect she is.”

Makoto’s eyes sprung open fuller.

“Attention, everybody.” Loudspeakers belonging to a public address system setup sounded, amplifying a male voice. “Junko Enoshima is backstage putting last minute touches onto a few of her outfits. She will be ready within the next ten minutes. We thank you for your patience.”
“Hey.” Makoto bunched his hands into fists against his lap. “Do either of you know anything about Ikusaba-san’s sister?”

Yasuhiro shook his head.

“A little,” said Aoi, pausing from texting on her phone. “She’s a model, isn’t she? When me and the girls had a sleepover ages ago, we saw some of her photographs in a magazine and...” Aoi clicked her fingers. “Oh. Oh! Yes! Junko Enoshima...! That’s who everyone’s here to see! Ikusaba’s sister. I remember Kabi-chan asking why they had different surnames and Ikusaba said her sister wanted a prettier one for modeling...” She laughed and slapped her phone against her forehead. The metallic dolphin charm on it squirmed. “How could I forget?”

How could she forget?

Aoi’s expression turned serious. “Their surnames aren’t the same so I guess that’s why I forgot, and Sakura-chan’s always been into fashion way more than me. Why?” She angled her head to one side. “Is it important?”

“Maybe there’s a connection between this witch and Enoshima-san visiting here,” Makoto explained, fighting to keep his voice steady and hushed. Not too hushed though or else Aoi and Yasuhiro wouldn’t hear him. “What if something happens to Enoshima-san that makes Ikusaba-san travel back?”

Yasuhiro sat up slightly, propping himself up on his elbow. “Hey, Naegi-chi, you might be onto something. But...” He ruffled his hair. “Ikusaba-chi could just want to save everyone, ’right? Maybe Enoshima-chi’s just a red herring... and what about you? I thought we said she was trying to stop you from making a contract.”

The rising optimism in Makoto’s chest threatened to deflate. “Yeah... maybe you’re right.”

With that potential lead trodden on, Yasuhiro lay back down and Aoi continued texting on her phone.

Makoto pulled his knees to his chin and hugged them loosely. “I just wish Ikusaba-san told us what was going on. Her blueprints didn’t mention anything about today.”

Mukuro’s betrayal still stung. It had yet to stop stinging. Memories flashed across his mind, of their first day at school. Of that time they walked to school together. Swim club. The arcade. Now she had given him images to fill in the gaps and he found himself again watching Mukuro pin Sayaka’s feet down with combat knives. He wished she had written down why she did those things, or at least tried to explain herself instead of running away from them.

Reincarnated terror was swallowed down but his body continued to tremble with fear. Makoto released a shaky sigh.

“Do you think we should try to contact Ikusaba-chan again?” asked Aoi. “She doesn’t live too far from here.” Her eyes narrowed. “With three of us and one of her, I bet we could make her talk.”

“It’s unlikely,” Makoto said. “I don’t think any of us have seen her since Togami-kun and Kirigiri-san did in the warehouse. She’ll be somewhere else.”

A smile slowly spread across Aoi’s face.

“I’ve got it!” Aoi jumped up. “Ikusaba-chan must be here. Even if Enoshima-chan isn’t the reason why Ikusaba-chan keeps resetting everything, she’ll want to see her sister again and if Enoshima-
chan gets caught in the witch’s barrier, Ikusaba-chan will want to be nearby to protect her.” She nodded mostly to herself rather than at the other two, body shaking as a rush of hope rejuvenated her. “Ikusaba-chan mentioned that she rarely gets to see her sister. I bet they’re here, hanging out before Enoshima-chan has to greet everyone.”

Aoi looked at each of them in turn.

“We need to sneak backstage,” she said. “Before the show starts. We need to go right now.” Then, spotting Sakura approaching, she brought her fists close to her chin and added, “Sakura-chan, we need to sneak backstage. We think Ikusaba-chan might be there.”

From the crowd emerged Sakura, unaccompanied by anyone else. Behind Sakura, a few people’s gazes lingered on her impressive form.

“Is it possible to execute such a task with as much security as there is?” asked Sakura.

Yasuhiro said, “That won’t be a problem.”

“Hey, watch it!” Aoi shoved Sakura backward.

Sakura stumbled away from Aoi’s outstretched palms and bumped into a girl with two braids and presumably her little brother.

The boy swore and his sister shielded him with her arm, leading him away from Aoi and Sakura and soothing his curses with gentle murmuring.

“Oi!” Aoi thrust out her chest. “I got here first, you... punk!”

Sakura hesitated.

More people started to spectate.

Aoi twirled her hand, twitching her head in a small nod.

“You are mistaken,” Sakura said loudly, drawing the attention of a family of five as well as a pair of security guards. “I was standing here, anticipating the arrival of my idol, when you barged into me with no worry in the world. I advise you go on your way or else blight the merry atmosphere further with your pettiness.”

“You want to say that again?” Aoi brandished her fist. “It’s not my fault. You’re so big that it’s hard not to bump into you!”

“Yet you did not see me.” Sakura paused, searching for words. “You...?”

Five security guards were watching now.

“You... loser,” Sakura finished.

“Oh, it’s on now.” Aoi tore off her satchel and threw it to her feet. She bounced on her toes, fists up. “You’re going to regret calling me a...” Her giggle was hastily disguised as a growl. “A loser!”

She charged at Sakura and both fell to the ground, Aoi on top. Their legs tangled together as Aoi pounded her fists against Sakura’s shoulders. The security guards, who had been watching from
behind some pedestrian barriers, leaped over and pushed their way toward the brawl.

Yasuhiro and Makoto hopped over the barriers and sprinted to the stage. Makoto risked a fleeting look over his shoulder. Everyone in the surrounding area had their backs to him and Yasuhiro, distracted by Sakura and Aoi’s fight. He faced forward again.

The stage consisted of a grey platform with a raised catwalk at the front and also a white canopy. A blown up photograph was plastered to the back wall of the stage, and the person on it could only have been Junko Enoshima. Makoto noticed a few similarities between Junko and Mukuro - they shared the same eye colour and their noses were identical. They differed more than they resembled each other though; Mukuro had freckles, but Makoto supposed that photoshop could remove any Junko should have had on the poster, and Mukuro’s eyes were less round and her bust was smaller.

Most notably, Mukuro’s hair was short and black. Junko’s hair was long and strawberry blonde.

Just after the passed behind the stage, Yasuhiro nudged his elbow into Makoto’s side. “That must be her.”

What they saw told no lies: Junko Enoshima looked the same as she did on the poster. Half a dozen employees, all wearing black t-shirts and jeans, fussed over Junko, powdering her nose and dabbing their fingers against where her foundation hadn’t been blended sufficiently.

“Two minutes!” a woman barked out, lifting her wrist so she could check the time. She caught sight of Makoto and Yasuhiro. “Hey, you two shouldn’t be here. Where the hell is security? Someone get security. I don’t have the time to put up with these kids.”

“Please.” Makoto flashed his palms at the woman. “We really need to see Enoshima-san.”

“Like I haven’t heard that before.” The woman rolled her eyes. “You’ll see her on stage and then you can buy an autograph afterwards.” She raised her voice. “Someone deal with these kids.”

“It’s about Mukuro Ikusaba, her sister,” explained Makoto, heart pounding. By now, everyone was staring at him, including Junko. “Ikusaba-san is our friend at school, and we need to-”

“Eh? Mukuro?” Junko shoved two employees aside so she had a clear path that she could strut through. She peered at Makoto. “What’s this about my sister?”

Makoto’s mind went blank.

“Have you seen her?” Yasuhiro blurted out in his place. “She’s in danger.”

“We think,” Makoto added, able to form words now. “We thought that maybe, since you’re here, you might have seen her.”

“Let me think. Have I seen Mukuro lately?” Junko tapped a pink fingernail against her chin. “This might take a while because Mukuro is like, hella lame.”

“What?” Makoto narrowed his eyes at her. “Did you just say...?”

“All three D’s, you know?” Junko angled her head slightly to the right, her lips pursed into a pout. “Despairingly stinky, despairingly shabby and despairing gross. Let me explain. In the womb of the storyboard, I ingested all the worthwhile character traits while she was left with only a shallow characterisation of a side character meant to be killed off near the beginning. Unfortunate, but it can’t be helped.”
Makoto and Yasuhiro glanced at each other.

Junko shut her eyes. “Ah, the task has finished processing. Allow me to unveil the search results.” She poked out her tongue and opened her eyes as wide as possible. “No! Mukuro hasn't fucking shown her face even once since I got here!”

Yasuhiro cowered behind Makoto.

None of the backstage crew seemed at all surprised by her sudden change in personality. In fact, they seemed to lose interest and slunk off.

“What kind of bullshit is that, huh?” Junko thrashed her arms around, coming to abrupt stops between sentences but moving again once she resumed talking. “Does she think she’s fucking better than me because she’s been here since the first chapter? Crap! Shit fuck crap buckets piss in a shoe! Mukuro promised to meet me before the show! What’s the big idea, right?”

A girl in sunglasses jogged toward them, hesitating when she was close enough to see Junko’s face. Going by her expression, she would rather have waited until later to deliver her message, but the importance of what she had to say outweighed her wariness. Taking a deep breath, she strutted over to Junko.

“E-Enoshima-sama, I’m afraid we’re going to have to delay your show,” the girl said, hugging her clipboard to her chest. “There’s a disturbance going on in the audience. Two girls started a fight that’s escalated rapidly. A short girl, not one of the first two, this one wears glasses, a-and anyway, this girl is causing a scene too because I think her boyfriend’s nose got broken, and the commotion is spreading to the rest of the audience.” She hunched her shoulders. “Security’s trying their best to contain it all but one of the girls is an absolute... uh...”

“Ogre?” Yasuhiro suggested.

“Yes.” The girl coughed. “It... It shouldn’t be more than a few minutes though! Oh, and, um...” She cringed. “There’s someone with me who wants to see you, Enoshima-sama. She says that she’s your sister...?”

“Mukuro!” Junko clapped her hands together and squealed. “Yay, I was wondering where she was. Hip hip hooray... now go away.” She scowled. “I mean it. Give us some fucking privacy!”

The girl bent her body into a curt bow before scampering off, nearly tripping in her haste to flee.

Behind where the girl had been standing was Mukuro.

Yasuhiro gasped.

Makoto balled his hands into fists, willing Mukuro to meet his eye.

She pointedly refused to look his way.

“Big Sis!” Junko stepped forward, arms out.

“Junko-chan,” Mukuro said quietly, shuffling forward. Her cheeks coloured and she placed a hand against her chest. “It’s...” She swallowed. “It’s really you.”

“Duh? Who else could I be?” Junko pulled Mukuro into a hug, rocking herself and her sister from side to side. “You’re late.”
“That would be my fault,” came a voice. Makoto turned his head and saw Kyouko striding toward them. Shouting rumbled in the distance beyond her, too chaotic for any particular voice to be discerned. She flicked back her head and a loose strand of hair swung out of her face. “We had a little game of cat and mouse.”

Kyouko’s name seeped out of his lips in a murmur. “Kirigiri-san…” He followed her gaze to Mukuro. His voice wobbled only slightly. “Ikusaba-san, what’s all this about?”

Mukuro still wouldn’t look him in the eye. Junko’s hold loosened, allowing Mukuro to turn her body toward him. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” he said.

“What’s there to explain?” asked Mukuro. “Hasn’t Kirigiri-san told you everything already? Hasn’t she already told you what I did? You must know what sort of person I am, or were my blueprints not enough?”

She did know about them snooping then.

“I want to know why,” Makoto said. Pain flared up in the back of his throat. “Ikusaba-san, I thought we were friends.”

Her brow quivered.

Yasuhiro tried for a smile. “Naegi-chi’s right, isn’t he? All this is a government conspiracy or something. I can help you with any paperwork or new I.D, if you need it. We’ll take Monobear to court together and Kirigiri-chi can be our Edgeworth.”

Mukuro’s mouth stretched outward. Her brow continued to quiver.

Kyouko turned her head to one side. “She has been rendered speechless. I didn’t think answering a simple question would prove so difficult.”

“We were friends!” Mukuro blurted out, cheeks thoroughly flushed. Only Kyouko didn’t flinch. “It was easier the first several times, right? Going through the same period, making friends, only for the last day to go haywire so I had to start again. I wasn’t tired of it when it happened the first few times. The novelty hadn’t worn off yet. But then... then all that mattered was trying to break the cycle and fulfil my wish. I went through the motions, over and over... It was like military school. It was tedious. This is why I ran away to Fenrir as a kid, to escape that, and when I came back here, I thought it wouldn’t be so bad, being a normal high school student.”

Junko picked her nose with her little finger, disinterested.

Mukuro paced back and forth, hands gesturing. “So I came back here, yeah? Junko-chan was making a career out of modeling. Gone. I didn’t have anyone to attach myself to, to follow... I had no friends... no one... no direction, not until one boy smiled at me and introduced himself. He reached out to me. Protected me. Became my first friend. So when the witch killed him and my sister, I wanted to save the only two people who ever gave a shit about me.” Her eyes gleamed. “No matter what...”

Makoto’s mouth slackened. The back of his neck tingled. “You... You mean...?”

“I contracted to save you and Junko-chan.” Mukuro stopped pacing and finally stared openly at Makoto. “Whether Ishimaru-kun died... Whether Maizono-san, Oowada-kun... Asahina-san, Togami-kun... Fukawa-san, Hagakure-kun... Oogami-san... Kirigiri-san... whether any of them
died, it didn’t matter anymore. They were disposable. They had to be disposable.”

She gulped, showing the most emotion that Makoto had ever seen her express. Mukuro wasn’t calm. Mukuro wasn’t playful nor teasing. Her voice cracked and so did her stoic mask, and the pieces flaked off to reveal the tired, lonely girl inside.

“I needed to stop caring about them,” said Mukuro, the passion in her tone gone. She didn’t cry, for she had transcended that stage. “Only you and Junko-chan matter.” Her face scrunched up. “Only your lives make a difference anymore.”

Junko touched her fingers to her mouth and quirked her brow.

“What about Kirigiri-chi?” Yasuhiro asked, smiling uncertainly. He lifted a hand. “What made her wish to remember everything last time instead of... like... in an earlier timeline?”

Mukuro’s fingernails bit into her palms as she locked them inside of fists. “In most timelines, Kirigiri-san and Naegi-kun formed contracts and fought alongside me. They inspired each other and could develop a bond that surpassed mine with Naegi-kun.” She shot a glare at Kyouko but it lacked any real intensity. Kyouko was visibly affected by now, biting down on her lower lip.

“Eventually, I thought maybe if Kirigiri-san didn’t form a contract, Naegi-kun wouldn’t either. I thought they would ensure each other’s safety, leaving me to focus only on my sister.” She looked away. “That’s what Junko-chan theorised.”

“I theorised?” Junko said, blinking twice. “When did I do that?”

“Before,” said Makoto. “It happened before Ikusaba-san reset the timeline. You’ve been asking Enoshima-san for her opinion before resetting timelines, haven’t you, Ikusaba-san?” Mukuro’s silence confirmed what he said. He glanced at her anyway. “Genocider Syo mentioned that your plans looked like more than one person worked on them, even though the handwriting was all the same...” He pointed a finger at Mukuro, feeling like a video game character in a visual novel that featured courtroom scenes. “Enoshima-san has been giving you advice.”

“Advice on what?” Junko asked. “Big Sis, what are you all yabbering about? You can travel back in time?” She wiped a hand up her face in frustration. “All this amateur exposition is doing my head in.”

“Yes,” Mukuro managed to say. Her earlier pacing had put some distance between the sisters and Mukuro started to close the gap. With each step, her body shook more. “Junko-chan, I traded away my freedom to ensure your safety, only I can never get it right. You and Naegi-kun... Something always happens to both of you.”

Tears finally pricked Mukuro’s eyes.

Junko rubbed at the back of her neck and averted her eyes. “Wow... That kind of killed the mood a little.”

Kyouko squared her shoulders. “That must be why Naegi-kun has the potential to be one of the most powerful magical girls. Countless timelines hinge on the fate of him and your sister, and this potential for hope and despair that the world now revolves around grows with each reset and has manifested itself as their magical power.” She swept her gaze from Mukuro to Junko to Makoto. “Ikusaba-san can’t risk either of you becoming magical girls now in fear of the despair you could unleash...”

“Sis...” Junko pressed her fist to her mouth. “You did all this for me? Seriously?”
Mukuro nodded and stretched out her arm. All but one finger curled inward so she could show Junko her ring. “This ring is where my soul resides. I’ve never had the chance to explain everything to you before... not without something happening to you afterwards.”

Eyes watering, Mukuro removed her ring and let it morph into an orb. It glowed green with a gradient of black at the edges, nestled in her palm.

“Hm,” went Junko, clasping Mukuro’s wrist. “Your Soul Gem doesn’t look very despairy.”

“It’ll be okay for now and I won’t let it become corrupted until I save y-” Mukuro tensed. “How do you know they’re called Soul Gems?” Junko grinned. “H-Hey...” Mukuro’s eyes darted to Junko’s face. “Are those new hairclips?”

Junko wore a hairclip on each pigtail. Both resembled bears, only one was black and one was white.

“Yeah,” said Junko. She tightened her hold on Mukuro’s wrist. “I got them earlier.”

Mukuro stared.

“Last night, I had an interesting visitor come to my hotel room.” Junko’s eyes flashed. She showed teeth with her smile. “They called themselves Monobear. They told me everything and gave me quite the compliments.”

“No,” Mukuro said, jiggling her arm, trying to break free, but Junko was too strong. “You haven't made a contract before the show s-since...!”

“Surprise!” Junko prodded herself on the cheek and grinned. “After your friends went Scooby Doo on your ass, Monobear gave me a SparkNotes summary and we agreed it would be better not to wait. You fuckin’ got it?” She tossed her head back and laughed, lifting up her free arm. The ring on her finger morphed into an orb that she rolled into her palm.

The orb was black.

“See this, Mukuro?” Colour danced in Junko’s eyes. Makoto never liked to use the word ‘orb’ to describe someone’s eyes but for once the word fitted. “My Soul Gem filled up so fast, I can feel despair coursing through me!” She leaked drool. “Glorious, beautiful despair...! It’s all because of you, Mukuro, that I’m so super-despair-inducingly happy! And now... when I become one with it...”

Junko’s eyes clouded over. Euphoria ravaged her voice.

“There will be nothing but despair for you all!” she said. “Feast!”

Kyouko’s body flashed purple and she aimed her gun at Junko.

Her finger curled around the trigger.

Her finger curled too late.

Junko’s Soul Gem exploded.

Mukuro was thrown back. Fire consumed her Soul Gem.

Makoto inhaled acrid despair.
Next time:

"The smell of despair in the afternoon."
Kyouko tackled Makoto to the ground, sprawled on top of him as waves of hot and cold rolled through them, alternating, changing before his body could get used to either temperature. People screamed. A lot of people screamed but it wasn’t loud. It sounded like he was wearing earmuffs, muffling the noise, and he didn’t even feel like he was there. Makoto felt a detachment. This wasn’t his body. This wasn’t his city. His home. Mukuro wasn’t dead.

But she was.

They were on their last continue.

“Kirigiri!” Byakuya’s voice rang out, drawling more than usual. “What happened?”


“S-S-She’s dead?” Touko. “But... that means... th-that means she can’t reset!” Hair rustled. “If we mess up, we’re all... we’re a-all...!”

“We won’t be.” Byakuya again. “Kirigiri. Naegi.” A pause. “I can’t take either of you seriously when you’re lying in an undignified heap. Do something about that.”

The pressure on Makoto’s back lessened. Once it disappeared completely, he shakily stood up and looked around. His friends were all present and as a whole seemed to be in good shape with minor exceptions: Aoi and Sakura were panting, scratched and bruised in places, and Byakuya had what appeared to be an inflamed nose.

Makoto couldn’t speak as highly about the city centre. He could make out the stage where Junko should have performed her fashion show and also a row of shops in the distance, or at least what once had been those things. Now thick black lines wobbled around pencil scratches of colour, creating shapes vaguely similar to the buildings that had existed minutes ago. Even the sky resembled a child’s drawing, with clouds existing where the artist didn’t fill in the gaps between blue crayon strokes, and as Makoto surveyed the city he grew up in, he found himself reminded of the many sheets of paper he stuck to his refrigerator with magnets once upon a time. Only he and his friends hadn’t changed to conform with the aesthetic of the witch’s barrier.

His feet lifted off the ground. Black ribbon caught his ankle and when everyone else lurched upward a moment after, black ribbon claimed their ankles as well.

“Five of us are magical girls,” Kyouko said, spear out and poised. “When this happened last time, there was only me and Ikusaba-san. Hopefully, as there’s more of us, it will increase our chances of success...”

“Upupupu.” Along came Monobear, toddling over as if gravity hadn’t been reversed. “You think so?” Its single red eye glimmered. “The reality is that none of you five have anywhere near enough hope. Ah, I love the smell of despair in the afternoon, don’t you? It works up quite the appetite.”

Monobear conjured a jar of honey out of thin air and dipped its paw in.
Aoi pressed her hands down on her thighs, knees knocking together. “The city centre... Everyone in it, where are they?”

“Oh, the witch barriers located inside this one have either sucked them in or they’re hanging around. Upupupu, get it?” It gestured upward with a honey-glazed paw. “Hanging around?”

A long silence.

“I’m a honey bear surrounded by straight men...”

A pause.

“See what I did? It’s funny man, not honey bear, but I’m a bear so I changed funny to honey and-”

“Stop talking,” Kyouko said.

Steam burst out of Monobear’s ears as it stamped its feet.

She turned back to the others. “The discoloured clouds above our heads must be barriers that have formed within Enoshima-san’s witch’s barrier.”

Indeed, among white smears of clouds existed ones of different colours: red, grey, purple and pink, all floating as separate sparkling orbs in the sky. Other details bled into Makoto’s vision the longer he stared - he saw distant dark specks, faint, some shaped like people, drifting upward with flailing limbs, and bits of buildings that crumbled away from the city below.

His chin snapped back down. He widened his eyes.

In the distance roamed a large animated ragdoll and not large by won-at-a-carnival standards. It dwarfed any and all structures, smiling a cheshire cat smile as it swerved its arm into buildings. The witch was Junko, it had to be, with its yellow string pigtails pinched together with the hairclips that she wished for.

Around its head orbited three orbs of colour: red, pink and purple.

Beads of sweat formed on Makoto’s forehead.

“I hope you’re enjoying the show, Naegi-kun,” Monobear said, squinting up at him with its head tilted to one side. “I wanted to make sure you had a front row seat to the end of humanity before kicking things off. After all, we wouldn’t want other magical girls to scavenge around for enough hope to beat it when you exist, right? Enoshima-san will eat and eat, but she will still be hungry, and her barrier will grow and grow. I’ve never seen an enigma like her before. It’s as though despair itself birthed her.” It hid its paws behind its back. “Now, someone like you might have the hope it’ll take to blast her to smithereens. Your little friends, however...”


Mukuro Ikusaba.

“But what about me?” Makoto asked, unable to look away from the approaching witch. “Wouldn’t I, one day, become a witch like her?”

“Well, there’s that, but by then it’ll be the problem of another generation of magical girls.”
Monobear scratched at its ear. “Rather them than you, right? Rather them than your family and friends, right?”

Makoto’s lips quivered. “My family…”

“Naegi-kun.” Kyouko’s voice broke him free of Monobear’s words, if only temporarily. “Let’s not entertain that idea for the time being. Monobear is only trying to stall us. We need to put a stop to Enoshima-san first and foremost. Everything else can wait.”

“What about my sister? Can she wait?” Makoto’s voice cracked along with his frosted face, melting at the intensity of his eyes and swiftly spreading heat to the rest of him. “My family? Everyone in this city needs our help right now.” He raised his voice. “Don’t tell me we’re just going to leave them to die!”

Kyouko winced.

“What do you expect us to do?” Byakuya asked with an ugly twist to his mouth. “In case you haven’t realised, all of us can’t be everywhere simultaneously. People will die.” His eyes narrowed, softer than usual. “There’s nothing we can do about that, no matter how little we like it.”

Aoi’s eyes widened. “But-”

Sakura lifted a hand. “Enough. The less time we spend talking, the more people we will save. Hagakure, Fukawa, Kirigiri and Togami. You go on ahead. I will deliver Asahina and Naegi to outside of the witch’s barrier and join you shortly.”

Byakuya nodded and transformed into a magical girl in a flash of green light, pulling out his kusarigama from his sleeve.

Kyouko waited for Yasuhiro and Touko to transform as well before focusing on the black ribbons around their ankles. Their ribbons spurted in length, pushing her and the other three higher into the air and within seconds, Makoto needed to squint to distinguish them from the debris and sky.

He was allowed no more time to watch, for Sakura seized him and Aoi, each with a different arm, and carried them under her armpits as she charged through the city. Her feet sank into the ground, never more than one foot raised at any time, leaving behind a trail of craters and a taut line of growing ribbon. By the time Makoto managed to somewhat orientate himself against a backdrop of blurring scenery, Sakura set them down on a hill outside the witch’s barrier.

Makoto assumed she did, anyway, because his feet remained firmly on the ground as did the girls. At a glance, the sky appeared normal too, clear and blue and innocent to an almost taunting degree, and none of the trees next to them were floating away. All the sky received was a glance, though, as a dome of murky pink light soon grabbed his attention. Sakura hadn’t dropped them off too far away from it. He estimated that a five minute run separated them.

The comparison alone hinted at what he considered doing.

“I should go.” Sakura turned away so she had her back to them, facing the dome. A streak of white light flickered across its surface. “You two must evacuate as quickly as possible and do not stop running even if the barrier seems far behind you. Monobear mentioned that the barrier is expanding, and if this is the case, then it is essential you do not procrastinate.”

“And you’re just going to go back?” Aoi asked in a low voice, arms stiff by her sides and fists clenched. “Sakura-chan, what if…?” She swiped at her eyelids with a clumsy hand and then stared with watery eyes. “What if we never see each other again?”
Sakura stiffened. “That... is a possibility... nevertheless, losing you to a witch terrifies me more than my own fate.” She looked over her shoulder and forced herself to smile. “Asahina, please do not despond... You are the most important person to me, and if I must sacrifice myself to ensure your safety, I will not vacillate for even a second.” Wind teased her hair so locks of white fluttered. “The prospect of your future provides me with great strength and happiness.”

“What about your family?” Aoi glanced down and gulped, speaking louder. “And Kenichiro-san? He’ll miss you.” Tears shone shamelessly on her cheeks. “I’ll miss you!”

Birds flew off the branches of nearby trees. Their crows echoed. Aoi’s fists continued to shake and she scrunched her eyes shut.

“My family are presently absent from the area. As for Kenichiro...” Sakura’s features darkened. “I must apologise for not informing you of this sooner but after he healed, we fought one final battle. I was victorious and that is when my attraction to him ended. Over time, he became a goal to me and once that goal was reached, it felt like a chapter of my life ended and another started. We left with no ill-feelings.”

Tension dissipated from Aoi’s limbs. She swallowed and furrowed her brow. “Sakura-chan...”

“I do not regret my wish. I cared deeply for him and will continue to.” Sakura allowed herself to walk back to Aoi, to cup her chin softly in her hand and press her lips against Aoi’s forehead. “When this is over, there is something I wish to confess to you. I will not be defeated until I have told you what it is I intend to tell you. Now I must go. Farewell, Asahina.” She stepped back, fingers lingering on Aoi’s cheek, turning around before Aoi’s eyelids fluttered open. “Naegi, I will locate your sister. Take care.”

His throat was too tight to say anything so Makoto just nodded.

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The air whipped past Yasuhiro’s ears as Kyouko made the ribbon attached to his ankle heave him away from Junko’s fist.

“Could you try not cutting it so close next time?” asked Yasuhiro, unknotting his headscarf and flicking his wrist to unfurl it. He caught the grenade that fell from its folds and pulled out its pin, tossing it at Junko.

His grenade hit one of the three orbs circling her head and was absorbed into it.

Yasuhiro widened his eyes. “That can’t be good, ‘right?’”

“None of our attacks are working.” Touko said shrilly, firing a bolt at one of Junko’s button eyes. The button eye deflected her attack and the bolt pinged out of Touko’s field of vision. She readied another bolt, trying not to shake too noticeably. “Byakuya-sama, w-what should we do?”

Byakuya curled his fingers tightly around the kama of his kusarigama. “It must have some sort of weakness... Kirigiri, try trapping its arms with ribbon.”

The ribbon on Kyouko’s braid stretched out and twined around Junko’s arms, but before Kyouko could bind both of Junko’s arms totally to her sides, the ribbon in direct contact with Junko shriveled up with a hiss and burned to a crisp.

Infantile laughter boomed out of Junko’s cross-stitch mouth as she made a grab for the scorched...
end of Kyouko’s excess ribbon. Byakuya swooped over and cut through the leftover ribbon attached to Kyouko with his kama, and the two just succeeded in dodging Junko’s outstretched hand.

“Kiri-giri,” Byakuya said. “Lower Fukawa and I to ground level. We will target its legs and try to immobilize it. Hagakure, focus on its arms. Kiri-giri...” He nearly smiled at her. “Try not to get yourself killed this time.”

Kyouko’s face twitched as she reciprocated his almost smile. The ribbons connected to Byakuya and Touko retracted, wrenching the two magical girls downward. They came to a standstill once at the same height as the witch’s knees, swaying a bit as they floated.

Byakuya tilted back his head and opened his mouth to give another command, but his attention shifted to a fast approaching grey orb from above that had until now been whirling around Junko’s head along with two other orbs. He clenched his jaw and waited, vigilant.

The orb imploded like how a balloon pops, only slower. Its outer skin rippled and wrinkled into a wisp, revealing the witch inside: a black silhouette wearing a silver mask engraved with dot eyes and a horizontal gash for a mouth. White electricity danced from its shoulders to its hands, smoke peeled off its body, and a katana and wakizashi sprung out of its palms.

Shortly after, the two orbs near Junko’s head opened. One of them, red, contained a decaying snowman while the final orb, pink, belonged to wilting mummy totally obscured with bandages made out of snakes.

Yasuhiro and Kyouko glanced at each other.

“Despair, despair, despair,” sang Monobear from between Junko’s legs.

His house would be fine... Makoto’s house would be fine... How many times had he reassured the voice in his head of this? His house would be fine... It wasn’t in the barrier yet, so it would be fine...

Komaru, however...

Makoto skidded to a stop outside his gate and then staggered through his garden and fumbled with the door handle of his home, hearing Aoi’s footsteps close behind him. Locked. He punched the front door until his mother answered.

“You’re okay!” His mother pounced on him, caging Makoto in a hard hug. “You’re okay... You’re okay...” She patted him, making sure she wasn’t hallucinating, and buried her face in his shoulder. “Oh, Makoto, baby... The city centre’s in complete chaos. No one can get in. They think it’s a freak storm and your sister...” A few seconds dedicated to only sobbing ensued. “Komaru must still be there. Your father went to find her but he isn’t answering his phone. The entire area doesn’t have any signal.”

“D-Dad...? He’s gone?” Makoto’s elbows twinged for a moment. He could do little about his father. Mukuro travelled through time, not him. Well, she used to, anyway. “You need to go. Now. It’s not safe here. The storm, it’s getting bigger.” He wiggled until he slipped out of her hold and started to leave. “You need to go far away!”

She seized his arm before he could escape, tugging him back. “I need to?” she asked, hardly
understanding his words. “What about you?”

A good question. Could he live with himself if he left his friends behind when only his hope could challenge Junko’s despair? Could he let his friends and family die?

Aoi could only offer him a feeble shrug.

His mother locked him in a pained stare.

“I need to go back to the centre,” Makoto decided aloud, watching each of his words carve a new line into her face as if he was cutting his mother open. “I need to find Komaru and Dad, and I need to help my friends...”

She shook his arm roughly. “I can’t lose you too! I...” Her face crinkled. “I forbid it!”

Makoto looked down, his vision too hazy to let him see the individual stones in the gravel path. “I’m sorry. I love you.” He jerked his arm free and ran out of the garden without looking back. But although he could stop himself from looking back, he couldn’t stop himself from hearing his mother’s short attempt at following them. He couldn’t stop himself from hearing her stumble and trip and fall to the ground. He couldn’t stop himself from hearing her wail.

Aoi didn’t mention going back to her family. She relayed her decision to him by grabbing his hand and not letting go.

Wearing a ribbon shackle severely hindered the wearer during battle but it was better than wearing none, as Byakuya found out when the masked witch cut through his ribbon. Their weapons clashed and Byakuya tumbled backward through the air, beginning to drift skyward.

He swung his kusarigama’s chain and whipped it forward so it wrapped around Junko’s leg.

Touko saw that Byakuya would need a moment to position himself upright so thrust herself over to him, shield raised, and fired a purple bolt at the masked witch’s face.

Its mask cracked.

Byakuya’s chain started to melt.

She reloaded her crossbow and shot at the masked witch again.

The masked witch recoiled, arching back and crossing its katana and wakizashi over its face in an x shape. Another fissure fractured its mask.

Kyouko replaced Byakuya’s broken ribbon with a new one, knotting it around his ankle. Once it was secured, she turned back to the snowman witch and enveloped it a cocoon of ribbon.

Junko’s hand swerved toward Kyouko. She dodged out of the way, widening her eyes at feeling Junko’s fist push through her hair.

“You guys okay down there?” Yasuhiro yelled, his hands curved around his mouth. A short distance away, the mummy witch used one of its bandage snakes to bat away an incoming grenade. The grenade rebounded and just missed his head, though Yasuhiro failed to notice what happened until the grenade exploded somewhere below him.
Rather than untangle his practically useless chain from around Junko’s leg, Byakuya discarded his kama and created a new kusarigama with magic. “We’re fine.” He managed to snatch away the masked witch’s katana with his chain. “Focus on yourself.”

“Aw, you do care about me!” Yasuhiro clapped his hands together. When he drew them apart, a stack of playing cards appeared between them and landed in his palm. One at a time, starting from the top, he flicked the cards at the mummy witch in rapid succession. Each card sliced all the way through his opponent and after six hits, the witch’s arms became detached from the rest of its body.

The mummy witch attempted to retaliate, its bandage snakes ready to flog, but Yasuhiro’s next cards tore through them and left them in oozing tatters.

It screamed, the tail ends of its bandages flapping as it charged forward into Sakura’s fist. All at once, the rest of its body unravelled. Inside was a cluster of white clovers that swayed upward, beginning to disperse.

Not wanting to take any chances, Yasuhiro hurled a grenade at the ball of clovers and watched it blaze into non-existence. “Oogami-chi! You’re back!”

Sakura held black ribbon under her armpit, gathered into a thick loop that she collected on her way back. Kyouko turned her head and Sakura’s black ribbon faded away, a new one shooting upward to tie around Sakura’s ankle.

“Hagakure,” greeted Sakura with a small smile. She glanced at ribbon enclosure Kyouko had created, hearing its inner walls pound as the witch trapped inside tried in vain to escape. It seemed that Kyouko didn’t need any help so Sakura turned toward Junko. “Hagakure, let us weaken Enoshima until our friends are able to join us. Then we shall all fight as one.”

Yasuhiro saluted.

Byakuya pulled on his weapon’s chain and disarmed the masked witch of its wakizashi. He nodded at Touko, who fired a red bolt at the masked witch’s face.

On impact, the bolt exploded and shattered the mask completely. The witch stared at them through glassy eyes, its naked face that of a china doll.

Touko bit down on her lip and shot a purple bolt at its face.

A scream blared out of the gaping hole where its mouth once was, a few china shards that still remained resembling shark teeth. Then it went limp and drifted upward, body flaking until nothing remained.

“Fukawa.” Byakuya kicked himself toward her, paddling through the air as if in a pool of water. “Are you-?”

“I’m r-ready when you are,” she said, reloading her crossbow.

“Actually, I was going to ask you if you were injured.” He coughed, trying to loosen the strange, heavy sensation in his chest, but it refused to budge. How long it had festered inside him, he did not know. All he knew was that he became aware of its presence after he met Makoto, despite it never reacting to anything Makoto did or even to the thought of him. “I’m... glad you’re eager to keep going though. Fukawa.”

Touko flushed a little. “I... I am. I am eager! V-Very eager!” She grinned, cheeks aflame now. “Th-Thank you, Byakuya-sama!” Her next sentences were muttered. “Concern... Could it be... he c-
cares about me after all...? A guy like him... wouldn’t just say that... Am I more useful this way...?"

Byakuya tilted back his head, trying to ignore her. “Oi, Kirigiri. Pull us up...” He glanced down and felt like he had to say something else. “Oh, and Fukawa...” The sensation in his chest seemed to swell. “You did a good job against that witch. We make quite the pair.”

She opened her mouth.

The ribbons attached to their ankles extended, launching the duo upward. Touko shrieked, scrunching her eyes shut until she and Byakuya joined the rest of the magical girls.

“Fukawa,” Kyouko shouted, “fire a red bolt into here!”

‘Here’ referred to the cocoon around the snowman witch. Specifically, it referred to a gap in the ribbons that caught Touko’s eye, just large enough to allow in an accurate shot with a bolt. Taking a deep breath, she aimed her crossbow and fired at the cocoon. The bolt slipped through the gap and exploded.

Kyouko unravelled the ribbons.

All that was inside was slush that cascaded downward. Only a few droplets didn’t evaporate before reaching the ground.

Below them all, Monobear rubbed at its snout as it watched Junko swing a fist at Yasuhiro. He rolled out of the way, tangling the ribbon around his legs and squirming as he tried to roll the other way to free himself. “I’ll paw it to you, you bastards have exceeded my expectations by not dying yet.”

Yasuhiro slapped a hand to his chest. “Thanks, dude! That’s actually kind of nice of you to say!”

Kyouko sighed. Byakuya pinched the bit of skin between his eyebrows. Touko threw Yasuhiro a dirty look. Sakura cupped the back of her head.

Even Junko paused for a moment.

“... Anyway,” said Monobear. “Your smug faces have been getting on my nerves for a long time now. Each and every nerve. Even my Susie-From-Across-The-Street nerve has felt the smugness of your faces. But you’ve only just begun, upupupu.”

More coloured orbs fell from the sky.

“Don’t look so surprised.” Monobear cackled, clutching its stomach as the orbs closed in on them. “I told you yesterday that there will be a circus of witches, and I’ve chosen you bastards as volunteers from the audience. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got somebear to be. Upupupu. Bye bye now!”

Monobear disappeared.

“Naegi...”

“Yeah?”

“Are you going to form a contract with Monobear? They said you would be strong enough to win if
you became a magical girl.”

“That’s true, but I would eventually become a witch, wouldn’t I?”

“But if you died before then.”

Only footsteps and heavy breathing for a while.

“I’m sorry.”

“Asahina-san, it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay! No one can ask you to do something like that. I should never have said it. Naegi, what’s going to happen to everyone?”

Only footsteps and heavy breathing for the rest of the journey.

A colourful flip book witch that attacked by sending out stickfigure minions, sliced into pieces by Byakuya’s kama. Water spouted out of the rips in its pages until the witch shriveled up into a skin of monochrome.

A pink-and-blue vampire bat witch that attacked by screeching visible shock waves, obliterated when it inhaled one of Yasuhiro’s grenades. It burst into music notes that faded away.

A swan witch with wings like the sleeves of a furisode that tried to hypnotise Sakura with its fluid dance moves, pummeled in the stomach until it disintegrated.

“How many of these things are there?” asked Yasuhiro, slouching and putting space between him and everything else. He conjured two grenades and threw them at a witch flying toward Kyouko. This witch resembled a two-pan balance scale, its arms holding fists instead of pans. His grenades hit the witch’s fists and exploded, but failed to cause any noticeable damage. It continued toward Kyouko, blasting flames out of its base to drive itself.

She brandished her spear but didn’t need to defend herself because Touko fired a purple bolt at the balance scale witch, striking a pulsing red rock in its centre.

Shards of scarlet shattered, spraying outward, and the witch fell to pieces.

Kyouko flashed Touko a grateful smile that was returned to a lesser degree.

“Nice shot!” Yasuhiro yelled.

Blushing a little, Touko distracted herself with a witch that looked like a fox made out of smoke. The witch aimed its claws at her face, faster than anticipated, so she swerved to the right but did so too late. Hot pain seared through her face as she spiralled through the air, trying to prepare another bolt only to lose her grip on it, and the witch pounced before she could ready her shield.

Byakuya’s chain wrapped around the witch’s neck and wrenched it back. He pulled again, harder, propelling himself toward the witch and slashing its head off with his kama. “Fukawa?”

She turned her head. “Byakuya-sama, I-”

Junko grabbed hold of Touko, tugging hard enough to snap the ribbon on her ankle. The stitches
across Junko’s mouth ripped open, revealing two rows of sharp triangular teeth, and Junko’s hand started to direct Touko in between them.

Touko screamed.

Sakura, Yasuhiro and Kyouko spun around.

“Fukawa!” Byakuya swung his weighted chain forward and caught Junko’s wrist. He only delayed her for two seconds as after that, she began to move again, pulling on his chain that had now melded with her wrist, bringing him hurtling toward her.

His ribbon tore.

Yasuhiro clapped his hands together and drew them apart, keeping his fingers laced. A smoke grenade fell out from his palms. Furrowing his brow, Yasuhiro jerked the wire on top and tossed it. Thin smoke thickened, white smoke reddened, and it smacked into Junko’s face.

Byakuya’s feet slammed into Junko’s wrist.

“Everyone, attack!” Kyouko shouted, lengthening Byakuya’s broken ribbon and lashing it at Junko’s chest. Junko doubled over so Kyouko maneuvered her own ribbon to change her height and angle, enabling her to continue her onslaught on Junko.

Sakura and Yasuhiro nodded. Yasuhiro opened his fingers, playing cards between each, and Sakura swooped down then up to perform an uppercut on Junko’s chin.

Gritting his teeth, Byakuya slashed through Junko’s wrist with his kama, pressing and forcing the blade through even when it started to deform in shape due to the temperature of Junko’s body. Through and through he pushed. Through and through he pushed until he could cut no deeper.

A sliver of flesh kept Junko’s hand connected to the rest of her arm. Howls filled the air as Junko stumbled backward, shaking her severed arm along with Byakuya and Touko who were both still attached to her, as if the frantic action would shake off her injury. Touko pushed down with her hands and popped free, burnt but otherwise fine. Byakuya quickly caught the hem of Touko’s dress in one hand and hauled her into his arms, releasing his kama, and used his foot to kick off Junko and send them flying off in another direction.

Junko made another lunge for Touko and Byakuya but before she could catch them, Yasuhiro hurled a grenade into her outstretched hand. It exploded and Junko stumbled back again, roaring.

“Byakuya-sama!” Touko snuggled against his chest as they floated off together. “Y-You saved me...!”

“... I did,” he admitted. His heart thumped loudly into her ear.

Directly below them, Yasuhiro summoned a grenade out of his headscarf. A tornado witch rumbled toward him, the rotating column air swathed in silk, carrying a matryoshka doll in its heart.

“Y-You know...” Touko cracked a smile, face thoroughly flushed. “The way you’re carrying me, it’s called a bridal carry...” Her eyes narrowed a bit, smile not faltering. “For once, it’s a cliché I don’t mind...”

“Don’t make me drop you.”

Yasuhiro slam-dunked a grenade into the witch and it dispersed in the consequent explosion. The
matryoshka doll hung in the air briefly, brown and green and white and red, but most notable were the traces of pale paint where the eyes had been scratched off.

Sakura crushed it between her gauntlets, earning a congratulatory thumbs up from Yasuhiro.

“S-So...” Touko stared up at Byakuya, hands wrung together. “I... I guess after this...” She averted her eyes. “You’ve probably paid me back...”

“Hm?” Byakuya forced himself to look at her, momentarily confused. “Oh. That. Fukawa...” He held onto her tighter. “Forget about it.”

“Eh?” Her eyes flitted back to him, wide and confused. “B-But... you’ve always said you wanted to pay me back for... saving you... that time.”

Byakuya’s face hardened.

The witch that Sakura was currently fighting was a fairy princess witch, made of pieces of paper with brass fasteners at its joints. She punched its stomach, causing it to crumple around her fist, and then spread out her fingers, tearing through its body and puncturing the witch with holes.

It dissolved into golden glitter.

“Fukawa, it doesn’t matter,” Byakuya said, feeling his face grow hotter. He spoke louder. “I’ve decided I want to stay with you anyway. After this is all over.” His voice lowered. “That’s... That’s how I want to pay you back... for all this.”

Their faces were equally red.

“B-Byakuya-sama,” said Touko. She touched his cheek, feeling him slightly lean into her palm. Her fingers bent a bit. “I want to stay with you too but I need to tell you something. I-”

“Whatever it is you wish to tell me, I shall listen to it after we-”

Touko’s hand slipped to the back of his head and pushed, crashing his lips onto hers. Byakuya widened his eyes as their glasses knocked together. They separated momentarily, breathing loudly and staring at each other, lips almost touching.

Their lips pressed together again, slowly this time.

Yasuhiro happened to look in their direction, mostly because he was wondering why he, Sakura and Kyouko seemed to be more overwhelmed with witches than earlier.

“I hate to cut your moment short, guys,” Yasuhiro called out, gesturing wildly with his arms, “but Enoshima-chi witch? Remember?”

Byakuya pulled back with a jerk and repositioned his glasses. “I-! Yes. Of course.” He blinked a few times before looking up. “Kirisaki, Fukawa and I both need another ribbon.”

“I reconnected the pair of you about two minutes ago,” Kyouko replied.

So she had.
Next time:

... it's a secret.

Mostly because I haven't finished writing it yet.
There's A Strange Feeling Stirring Inside Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I knew you bastards would come running here again.” Monobear had its back pressed against the pink dome, eyes twinkling with amusement as it peered up at Aoi and Makoto. “That’s the thing about humans. You build these connections with other humans and feel the need to develop feelings for them. Even though it causes you a hell of a lot of pain, you do it anyway...” It heaved out a sigh and dropped its chin forward a bit. “Humans are weird.”

“Why are you here?” Aoi asked, staring down, hands clasped over her heart. “I thought you were with the others.”

Monobear’s ears twitched. “Weren’t you listening? I said I knew you bastards would come running here again.” It folded its arms over its chest and kept its gaze on Makoto. “Y’know, if you go back in, you’re just going to float into the sky.”

“That’s...!” Makoto bit down on his lip and looked away. He hated it when Monobear was right.

“Luckily...” Monobear cupped its paws over its mouth. “... I have the ability to keep my feet on the ground. If you want, I can go fetch one of the others, and I’m sure Kirigiri-san’s ribbons will pull you all back over. So what do you say?” It tilted its head to one side. “You want to go back in? Who knows, Naegi-kun might have a change of heart if he sees his chums.”

Aoi glanced at Makoto.

He clenched his fists.

“Don’t take your time deciding,” Monobear said. “This witch’s barrier is growing, your friends are probably dying...”

“Do it.” Makoto’s fingernails dug deeper into his wrinkled palms. “Tell them that we’re here.”

“Yeah!” Aoi nodded vehemently. “And we’re not taking ‘no!’ for an answer this time.”

“Oh, you’re even getting me fired up!” Monobear clutched its stomach and with a hearty laugh, it vanished.

The departure of Monobear, along with its voice that nearly always crept cold fingers down Makoto’s spine, released a heavy silence that sank into his shoulders. He inhaled sharply.

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Aoi turned her head.

Makoto accidentally made eye contact and felt like he needed to say something. “Asahina-san, you don’t have to go in too. I might have to make a wish, and you could get hurt, and-!”

Her hand fell hard onto his shoulder. “Naegi.” She combated the hot, white tension in his body with a smile that beamed gentle warmth. The furrow between her eyebrows deepened. “You can’t get rid of me that easily, okay? I’m in this until the end and nothing you say is going to make me change my mind.”

Despite the dread that wallowed in his gut, he managed to smile back. “Thanks.”
Part of the dome started to ripple, the size of a doorway. Monobear emerged out of it first, twirling on the spot once all of its body had passed through, and shortly after appeared Sakura. She brought with her no grins nor did she dance or bob up and down on her feet. Within seconds, she spotted the pair and bounded over with speed that either caused Makoto to jump back or be thrown back.

Or both. He regained his balance.

“Naegi. Asahina.” Sakura grabbed hold of Aoi’s shoulders and gave a rough shake that only caused Aoi to bow her head forward. “Why... are you still here...?” Telltale tremors betrayed Sakura’s hands. She stared in disbelief - disbelief that left little room for anger. “You should not be here. Did I not say that your future is what matters most to me, Asahina?”

“You did say that...” Aoi balled her hands into fists. “… but my future is with you! It is. It has to be. I...” A sob not totally choked back burst out of Aoi’s lips. “I love you, Sakura-chan, and if you weren’t there... then what kind of future is that?” Her face wobbled as she shot a wet glare at Sakura’s eyes. “Does that kind of future give you strength, Sakura-chan? Because it doesn’t give me any!”

“... I cannot say.” The answer came clenched in a thick tone. “I cannot say it does. I can, however, say that I love you as well.”

Aoi reached up and cupped Sakura’s cheek. A tear rode down over cragged skin, splashing against the curve between Aoi’s thumb and index finger. She forced herself to smile until Sakura smiled too, and then Aoi’s smile grew more genuine. Her eyes shone.

Dew hung from Aoi’s eyelashes, sparkling stars in an eyelash sky.

Then, rising up to tiptoe, Aoi pulled Sakura into a kiss.

Monobear scowled. “To think I could be watching kids get murdered right now. I bet Togami-kun wouldn’t allow something this gross to happen if he was here.”

I sometimes wonder if the puppets remember their earlier performances. Do they fall in love, again and again, even if they don’t remember falling in love? Does that love linger and carry over between performances?

Sakura stepped forward with Makoto and Aoi under her arms.

They phased through the dome’s surface and it rippled around them, intangible, as if a mere trick of the light or a mirage. How lovely it would be if it was a mirage. Makoto could have landed on his face and found himself in the city centre. A moment of confusion would transpire and then he would hear his name. He would look over his shoulder and see Komaru waving her arm as she broke into a jog, heading over to him. Weaving through the crowd would prove cumbersome but she would soon stand before him, and the others would be there. Byakuya would state that Makoto took too long and Touko would agree, and maybe they would be standing so close that no one could tell they were holding hands, and Kyouko would stand back from it all and listen. Yasuhiro, he ought to tell a joke, so he would, but no one would laugh. Maybe Sayaka would laugh, behind her hand, and Mondo and Kiyotaka would have their arms around each other’s shoulders and be absorbed in their own conversation. Sakura would twitch her hand and nod her head and finally,
finally, Mukuro would come forward and she wouldn’t lie, she wouldn’t wear her mask, and she would say,

“Naegi?” Byakuya asked in a sharp tone. “So you two really did come back?”

The lid of a jack-in-the-box witch screeched open. Out popped a jester that headbutted Byakuya in the stomach and launched him backward. His back arched and he needed a moment to steady himself, his ribbon slightly twisted around his leg.

More of the city had separated from the ground while Makoto was gone, shredding the terrain into an unrecognisable wasteland. No buildings, trees nor crowds obscured their view. Left now were ruins which served to remind Makoto that something used to be, used to live there, and witch barriers that danced above like fireflies in a mocking blue sky.

To Makoto’s relief, all of his friends were still alive. To his horror, so was Junko, approaching from the distance.

Touko fired a red bolt into the box just as the jester started to spring back inside.

Time seemed to still as if wanting to let Makoto have a proper look. He saw the witch’s black jester hat and its pink hair and pink pupils, and its jagged teeth bared in a grin and its hooked nose. The lid shut and an explosion went off inside. Thick fragments of metal shot outward, box destroyed, and the jester, once painted with saturated colours, sported crispy black hair in its greyscale colour scheme. Its spring extended and contracted a few times, flimsy, and the witch decomposed with tears streaming down its cheeks.

This witch was once a teenager like them. With a life, with friends, with family, with a favourite colour and their own unique laugh. Its box, that had been embellished with designs of cogwheels, might have meant something to the magical girl that it used to be, once upon a time.

“Well, Naegi-kun?” asked Kyouko, attaching a ribbon to Makoto’s and Aoi’s ankles. “What are you doing here?”

Sakura released her hold on them.

Makoto wet his lips with his tongue in an attempt to delay his answer. To give him more time to think of a way to phrase his feelings. “You’re my friends.”

“And we’re magical girls.” Yasuhiro splayed out his hand and pressed his fingertips against his chest. “If I was you, I would have hightailed it out of here...” He avoided Makoto’s gaze. “That’s what I want to do right now... That’s what makes sense, ‘right?’

Junko’s footsteps shook the ground.

Yasuhiro’s breath quivered. “But... you know, Naegi-chi, I don’t want to run anymore. I want to be in control and I can’t do that if I rely on my initial instincts all the time. Sometimes you’ve got to just go in and let it all hang out, ‘right? That’s how you live your own life.”

Each step sounded like thunder.

Over the horizon loomed the second Sun. Junko Enoshima with her flaming hair, orbited by orbs.

“To defeat despair that concentrated, you would need an equal amount of hope,” Monobear said while staring directly at Makoto.
Everyone tensed.

Makoto ripped his attention away from the scene and placed it onto Monobear.

“Luckily for you, you’re packed with the stuff! Gooey chewy icky wicky hope.” Monobear tilted its head to one side. “So what’dya say?”

The city screamed as it ascended into the bottomless pit above their heads. Debris. People. Everything he had ever known. All meeting their end.

Junko’s limbs dragged.

“Naegi-kun...” Kyouko’s elbows pressed inward into her sides.

Byakuya narrowed his eyes into slits.

Monobear held up a paw. “You want to make a contract with me and save the world?”

Makoto heard his friends’ ragged breathing, saw how their shoulders were bowed forward, and he swept his eyes up from their rumpled clothing to their tired eyes. Junko trudged onward, missing her left hand but otherwise intact. Where she had been amputated, he expected to see a wound, but inside her arm was pink polyester filling. It reminded him of candyfloss.

He opened his mouth.

“No.”

“... Huh?” Monobear’s paw dropped to dangle by its side. “Eh?”

“I said no,” Makoto clarified, allowing himself to look at Monobear. From where he was, up high, Monobear seemed so small, down there. “If what you’re saying is right, I have enough hope to defeat Enoshima-san and I won’t let you harvest any of it!”

He whipped his hand forward, extending a finger. Monobear flailed, nearly tipping back, as if Makoto had electrocuted it by pointing in its direction.

Makoto’s voice cracked slightly but he maintained his bravado. “Ikusaba-san repeated this period of time over and over again because she forced herself to alone be burdened by her wish, unable to choose where her loyalty lay, led on by the supposed hope you gave her. She isolated herself from her friends and it became too much for her in the end... all because you took advantage of her moment of greatest despair.”

The ground rumbled. Byakuya and Kyouko turned toward Junko, now not so distant.

“So?” Monobear asked. “I granted her wish, didn’t I? I granted everyone’s wishes. I get lots of energy and you get a gold egg or whatever you kids are into these days. Everyone wins.”

“You give teenagers false hope,” said Makoto. “Then you get them to despair even more when their wish goes wrong...!”

Touko turned toward Junko. Yasuhiro did too.

“Maybe they should think harder about how they word their wishes,” said Monobear. “Did you ever think of that?”

Makoto shouted, “You took advantage of them! You twisted their wishes on purpose. You never
cared about of them. You only care about converting hope into despair!"

“Yeah!” Yasuhiro chimed in. “I bet there isn’t even a Mono Council. You’re just a damn capitalist!”

Monobear flushed. “Without those wishes that I granted, we’d never be having this conversation. You’d be full of despair! Dead!”

“No.” Makoto’s nostrils flared. “We would all be alive. Many of us would have worked through that despair-induced period instead of making a wish because it seemed like things wouldn’t improve, and those who couldn’t work through it would end up dead anyway. But they wouldn’t have died for your cause.”

Touko aimed her crossbow at Junko. “That bear’s wishes... are just like putting duct tape over a growing crack...”

“Okay then,” said Monobear. “Okay, Mr. Know-it-all. Mr. Smarty-pants. Let’s see you use that hope of yours!”

Sakura brought her gauntlets to chest level.

Kyouko’s ribbons vibrated.

Only Byakuya’s lips moved when he spoke. “Naegi, unless you want to kill us all, do divulge how exactly we are meant to harness this hope of yours.”

Makoto narrowed his eyes, thinking. “I guess... you just have to believe in me.”

Byakuya allowed himself to glare at Makoto. “You’re not serious.”

Yasuhiro wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. His hand trembled. “Naegi-chi, I know you mean well but Togami-chi has a point. This isn’t a made for T.V. movie, and even that line I just said is becoming an unoriginal remark...”

“B-Besides...” Touko swallowed, forced to continuously readjust her aim because her body kept shaking. “... there are all those witches flying around too. Only Byakuya-sama managed to deal any noticeable damage to Enoshima earlier, w-when everyone attacked together... and you weren’t there to see it...”

“So do that again,” said Makoto.

Everyone turned toward him.

Junko was close.

“Ignore the other witches,” he said. “If you all work as one, you might be able to win! That’s where Ikusaba-san failed, I think.”

She was very close.

“You th-think?” asked Touko. “Y-You don’t sound sure at all.”

“We tried something similar near the beginning,” said Kyouko. “However, before we could all attack as one, we were distracted by the witches that she summoned. I wonder if that was Enoshima-san’s intention...”
“Let us give Naegi’s suggestion a try,” decided Sakura, and no one dissented.

Three orbs floated around Junko’s head but more winked up in the sky, hard to see in the bright blue but there all the same. They collapsed inward, these three orbs, liberating the witches inside. One witch looked like a clock face, the right side of it a cartoon sun with lines sticking out of its circumference, and the other half was white with craters much like the moon. Its centre dial spun around, and around, its dozen of hands flowing at different speeds, never stopping except for a split second to change direction, none satisfied with any of the unlabelled marks around the clock’s edge.

Junko threw a punch at the ground. Kyouko maneuvered everyone’s bodies out of the way in time but Junko’s fist pinned down their ribbons. The ribbons disappeared and new ribbons sprung up in the distance, pulling the humans over to safety.

“Hey!” Monobear waved its arms and stamped its feet. “That thing almost pancaked me!”

Another witch, a second one, was a clay birdcage with a flaming nightingale inside, or maybe it was the playdough pig that carried the cage over its head. It landed on the ground on its hind legs, zigzagging as it stumbled toward the magical girls. The clock witch descended and followed after it.

Kyouko glanced at Makoto and Aoi.

“Go,” said Makoto, smiling. “I believe in you guys. Don’t worry about us.”

She turned her back to him. “Naegi-kun...”

Makoto opened his eyes a bit wider.

Her skirt fluttered.

“You are honest, Naegi-kun. Perhaps foolishly so.”

His smile dropped a little.

“I said this before but it still rings true... There’s a goodness in you that I’ve never encountered in anyone else.” She looked over her shoulder and finally smiled.

Makoto’s smile regenerated.

Yasuhiro held up his hands. “If you guys want to kiss, do it after. Seriously.”

Everyone else reddened.

Kyouko extended the ribbons of everyone except Makoto and Aoi, shooting herself and the others upward and toward Junko. The ribbons around Aoi and Makoto, meanwhile, instead started to curl around their legs, looping up their bodies until everything below their neck was in a cocoon.

Monobear waddled over and watched the battle alongside them. “This is quite the show, huh?”

One of the arms on the clock witch pinged off. Touko deflected it with her shield but countered with no bolts, eyes on Junko.

“You know, I’m surprised. I didn’t think you would make it this far.” Monobear scratched at the back of its head. “It’s frustrating, actually, that something like this hasn’t overpowered you bastards yet.”
The pig witch wildly brandished its cage, knocking the bird inside it against the bars. Flaming feathers burst out through the gaps with each thump. They moved swiftly, the feathers, whistling through the air. Yasuhiro and Sakura plunged than swooped up, dodging the projectiles that zipped their way, eyes on Junko.

“But, I wonder...” Monobear rubbed its chin. “Upupupu... I wonder if defeating Enoshima-san will really solve your problems?”

Makoto turned.

Finally, the third witch attacked. Though it had a humanoid shape, its hands had been detached from its arms and stitched over its eyes. On top of that, a second pair of legs protruded out of its hips, spindly and longer than the rest of its body. The witch’s elbows were tucked into its sides and if its hands had been attached to its arms, they would have been cupped over its breasts.

Kyouko and Byakuya nodded at each other and whirled around the witch. Their ribbons wrapped around the witch’s legs, binding it. With it now immobilised, the two magical girls continued onward, eyes on Junko.

Monobear held its paws behind its back, rocking between heel and toe. “Naegi-kun, there has been a circus of witches, hasn’t there?”

All five magical girls situated themselves in a row in front of Junko’s face.

“Are you seriously going to keep this up?” asked Aoi. “Do you have to be such a sore loser about this?”

“Sore loser...?” repeated Monobear. “Is that it?”

Byakuya darted down to Junko’s feet. Kyouko positioned herself near Junko’s chest. Yasuhiro and Touko claimed Junko’s right and left arms and Sakura stayed level with Junko’s head.

Aoi furrowed her brow. “What do you mean ‘is that it’? You’re trying to scare us, aren’t you?”

Kyouko raised a hand, keeping it rigid. “On three, we attack simultaneously. Prepare your strongest attack.”

Everyone else nodded.

Sakura’s fists glowed white.

Monobear said, “Defeating Enoshima-san won’t revive the dead.”

“One...”

Yasuhiro straightened out his headscarf with a flick of his wrist. From its folds floated out a cannon that Makoto had seen before, only this one was bigger. Far bigger.

“Defeating Enoshima-san won’t destroy the other witches,” said Monobear.

Byakuya’s kusarigama shone golden.

“Two...” Kyouko pulled a strip of ribbon out of her palm. It transformed into a spear with lengths of black twined around its silver shaft. Her spear’s pointed head emitted purple that hung in the air as her weapon moved, as if the air was paper and the pointed head was a pen nib.
“You could wish for anything, Naegi-kun,” said Monobear.

Makoto chewed on his bottom lip.

Monobear tilted its head back. “On top of all those problems, none of-”

“Three!”

Kyouko charged.

Byakuya whipped forward his weapon’s weighted chain.

Sakura swung her fist.

Touko fired a green bolt.

Yasuhiro’s cannon boomed.

Pieces of Junko crashed into the ground.

Then chunks of the city did too.

As the magical girls took to the sky, dipping into witches’ barriers and reappearing when the orb around them vanished, to then throw themselves at a neighbouring orb, the only thing Makoto could think about was that Junko Enoshima had been defeated. She was dead. Makoto and his friends had departed from the crayon drawing of her witch’s barrier, from its cheery wasteland, to reality.

His smile burned his face.

“We won,” said Aoi for the however many time. He lost count. He didn’t care that he lost count. Tears stained her cheeks. She laughed. “They saved the day.”

The ribbons around them loosened and coiled at their feet. Neither of them floated off the ground.

Monobear didn’t comment, standing away from them with its back to them.

Aoi’s lips stretched into a smirk. “Well? How do you like that, huh?” She jumped up and punched the air, laughing again. Louder this time.

Makoto balled his hands into fists. The ground blurred. He didn’t stop smiling. “Kom...aru...” His fists tightened. “D-Dad...”

“O-Oh... Right.” Aoi winced. “I forgot about your family...”

“... U... pu... pu...”

A gust of wind blew past.

She shivered and hugged herself.
“Did you notice something about these witches?” asked Monobear, still facing away.

Realising that Makoto wasn’t going to answer, Aoi said, “I... don’t think so...?”

Monobear puffed out its chest, surveying the sky. “It isn’t something that the witches have. In fact, it’s the opposite. They are missing something...”

Aoi quirked her brow. “Missing something...?”

Witch barriers snuffed out above them, one-by-one.

“Choose a magical girl,” said Monobear, “and time the intervals between barriers.”

She lifted her chin. Sakura leaped from one witch’s barrier to another. As soon as Sakura phased through the barrier, Aoi pulled out her phone from her shorts pocket and clicked on its stopwatch app.

Four minutes.

Then the next witch.

Six minutes.

The next witch.

Ten minutes.

Aoi stared at her phone. “They’re... getting slower...?”

Her hand clenched tighter.

“Why... are they getting slower...?”

Makoto sucked in air, realising. “None of the witches dropped any Grief Seeds.”

“Huh?” Aoi turned her head. Her eyebrows lowered. “No... No. That’s... That can’t be right.”

“Your friends are tired,” said Monobear. “They didn’t have that many Grief Seeds in the first place, you know. They must have used them all by now. You can thank Ishimaru-kun for that.”

“Shut up,” said Makoto.

Monobear looked back. “Ooh, you’re getting feisty now. Did I strike a nerve talking about your Ishimaru-kun?”

“Shut up!”

“Upupupu!” Monobear spun around to face them. “Your hope might have been enough to beat Enoshima-san, but it won’t be enough to get your buddies through the aftermath. They’ll be too weak any moment now.”

As if on cue, his friends started to drop down within minutes of each other, beginning with Yasuhiro. Last was Kyouko, whose legs buckled a bit as she landed.

Makoto’s gaze jumped from Soul Gem to Soul Gem. Byakuya’s chest. Sakura’s choker. Yasuhiro’s forehead. Touko’s bow collar. Each was splattered with black but flecked with different colours.

“No,” said Aoi, clapping her hands to her mouth.

“Yes,” Monobear replied gleefully.

“Everyone...” Makoto stepped forward. He felt a pain in the back of his throat. “Your Soul Gems, I’m sorry...”

“Enough.” Byakuya’s face was flinty. “I don’t care to hear it. Magical girls are snakes. Witches are shrews. Snakes eat shrews but sometimes shrews eat snakes. That’s all there is to it.”

After what they had found out about the true origins of witches, the comparison to a food web was now as shaky as his voice.

Yasuhiro looked ready to throw up and sounded almost as ready. “Naegi-chi, it’s no big deal, ‘r-right?” He rubbed the back of his neck, trying for a reassuring grin and failing. “I could have run away ages ago but I didn’t... That’s gotta count for something, doesn’t it?”

Kyouko raised her right hand and closed her eyes. With her left hand, she peeled off her glove to show them the skin underneath. Her hand was covered in scars, likely from acid burns, and on the back of her hand was her dying Soul Gem.

“Kirigiri-san...” Makoto reached out to touch her hand but caught himself just before he made contact.

She shook her head and pressed her naked palm against his palm. Her fingers slipped through the gaps between his fingers, interlocking.

“Don’t worry about us, Naegi-kun. You mustn’t let Monobear use your hope and your potential.” A tear droplet dripped off her chin. “If you achieve that, you will have defeated him.”

Makoto’s jaw ached. His eyes were hot. “No.”

He stepped back.

Their hands fell away.

“I’m ready to make my wish,” he said.

Kyouko widened her eyes.

The others chorused his name.

“Upupupu!” Monobear conjured up a clipboard and pen. A pair of spectacles appeared over its eyes. “Do go on. Thanks to Ikusaba-san, you can wish for anything. Just what do you think is as valuable as your soul?”

Makoto pushed back his shoulders. “My wish... is for you and those able to create magical girls to be erased from existence. Past, present and future. That way, you’ll never be able to take advantage of teenagers like this ever again.”

Orange light radiated from his chest. He stretched out his neck and stood tall.

Monobear dropped its clipboard and shifted a foot back. It clasped its paws together over its chest,
trembling. “Jeg forstår ikke japansk eller engelsk eller hva språket denne fanfiction er i.”

Yasuhiro drove his fingers back through his hair. “He’s busting out google translate now...”

Byakuya folded his arms over his chest. “Pathetic.”

After a few more shakes, Monobear stilled.

“Upupupu. I have to paw it to you, Naegi-kun, I wasn’t expecting to hear you wish that.”

Monobear stared up into Makoto’s eyes. “I’m a bear obligated to grant every wish... but you should know that your wish will rewrite the universe, most likely. People might be born that weren’t before, or people who were born here might cease to exist, and others could be born in a different year.”

“That’s fine,” said Makoto. Orange light spread to the rest of his body. It tingled a bit.

Monobear’s red eye glinted as it leaned its head to one side. “Even I will come back, just in some other kind of form.”

“My hope will defeat you,” Makoto replied. “Each and every time, no matter what universe.”

In a flash of orange light, Monobear vanished.

Makoto looked at everyone in turn. At his friends.

Byakuya rolled his eyes. “Finally.”

“Finally,” echoed Touko, standing close to Byakuya’s side.

Yasuhiro let out a laugh. “I guess I’ll see you guys on the flipside, ‘right? You’ll still all owe me for whatever predictions I made in this lifetime.”

“You wish,” said Aoi.

Sakura nodded at Makoto.

Light spread out from his body and consumed all of his friends.

Almost all of his friends. Kyouko strode forward, through the orange glow, and rested her hands onto Makoto’s shoulders. Behind her, he thought he could see the silhouettes of a few of his friends. Sayaka... Mondo... Kiyotaka... Mukuro... They were all there. They would be waiting for him too.

“Naegi-kun...”

The outline of Kyouko’s body blazed and she began to disintegrate, like a piece of paper that had been set on fire, and Makoto disintegrated as well.

“I don’t feel sad to leave, but...” Kyouko gave a faint smile. “There's a strange feeling stirring inside me.”

She leaned in and kissed Makoto on the mouth.

He held onto her hips.

They flickered orange, one final time, and then disappeared entirely.
And that's it! Thank you so much to everyone who read this, left kudos, bookmarked it, commented, liked it, reblogged it, sent asks, drew fanart and whatever else! Writing this has been a big experience for me, like I've learned a lot about writing from writing this. Also a big thanks to everyone who has talked about this to me!!! You are all lovely people and I have made more friends because of this fic. I'll probably start working on another longfic for DR, though idk what yet...

Again, thank you!!! <3

Works inspired by this Puella Magi ☆ Konoha Magica by YumiStar

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