Never Say Never

by hunterofcomedy

Summary

A single event can change the course of history. Circumstances change when the students of Hope’s Peak Academy decide to stand together against the Mastermind. == Massive spoilers for the entire first game. You have been warned.

Disclaimer: I do not own Danganronpa or the characters associated with it.
**Prologue**

Chapter Summary

And so...it begins. Or rather ends...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ahhhhh, such lovely despair! How does it feel to know that the one you trusted all this time actually helped *put* you into this situation? That she decided that her sister’s despair was more important than *your* hope?”

Junko Enoshima, the real Ultimate Despair, laughed hysterically as she posed the question to her classmates, feeding off their negativity and hopelessness. Her eyes sparkled with euphoria as she glanced to all of them, knowing there was no way they could forgive—

“No…you’re wrong!”

All at once, the despair enthralled woman ceased her laughter as the voice of the little punk who’d ruined everything spoke up. Narrowing her eyes, she glared daggers at Makoto Naegi as he met her gaze with an even more determined look than before.

“Even if what you say is true, she decided to side against you! She chose *hope* rather than *despair*!” Makoto insisted, the fire in his eyes lighting the flames of hope within his classmates.

“She saved my life…and for that, I can’t condemn her!” a blue haired idol concurred.

“Without her, I’d have been pounded with balls to death! There’s no way I’m letting her die *that* way!” a fiery red haired ballplayer also agreed.

“She was kind and supported me…even knowing my secret!” a petite programmer chirped.

“And she worked hard to help keep everyone alive!” a biker gang leader insisted.

“She followed your cruel rules to the letter and never gave up! Despite how unfair it was!” a certain moral compass joined in.

“Not to mention that she did a fantastic job at cosplay!” a fanfic creator praised.

“She helped all of us be who we really are, despite not being able to be herself…” a gambler insisted, placing one last huge bet.

“And she didn’t make excuses for her actions or even ask for forgiveness…” a muscular fighter stepped up.

“Yeah! So what if she betrayed us before! She’s on our side now!” an enthusiastic swimmer chimed in.

“And she would totally kill *you* to get us out of here! Hahahahaha!!!” a murderous fiend commented,
all too gleefully.

“And she did make a promise to get us out of here,” a lazy clairvoyant added.

“Hmph, she has been a great asset and I would like to continue utilizing her in the future, if you don’t mind,” a affluent progeny said harshly, glaring menacingly at the mastermind.

“She solved the greatest mystery of this school and led us here to face you. It would be a betrayal on our part to condemn her for her actions now,” a stoic detective countered, a smirk slowly appearing on her lips.

Faced with all this positivity made Junko want to vomit blood. However, she didn’t need to because she still had one final trick up her sleeve.

“Hmph, whatever. It doesn’t matter what you think of her…because it’s time for the final vote!!”

A chill ran down everyone’s spine as Junko forcibly got the final trial back on track. They had all but forgotten that this was indeed a class trial and there always had to be a vote. Even now, at the end of the game, the rules were still absolute.

Knowing this, a gleeful smirk erupted on Junko’s lips as she continued, “This time, you'll be voting to either punish hope…or despair! And if even one of you votes for the despair of living here forever, then you all lose! But…if you decide to punish despair, then you have to punish both of the Ultimate Despair!!”

Glancing across the courtroom, her maniacal grin widening even more, Junko pointed a painted nail toward their friend and savior.

“Isn’t that, right?! Mukuro Ikusaba!!”

Chapter End Notes

Greetings my beautiful readers! I am the Hunter of Comedy and this is my very first Danganronpa fic. I’ve written a lot of stories for Bleach on Fanfiction.net before this but never really branched out. But after playing Danganronpa (and becoming obsessed with it), this little plot bunny hopped into my brain and refused to leave me be!

So, here I am, writing a long term story for a game that I love and characters that stayed with me long after their own demises.

A big thanks to Dixxy Mouri for making this story possible! Thank You!! :D
Ch. 1 Act 1

Chapter Summary

The students of Hope's Peak Academy get to know each other and begin their journey into despair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This couldn’t be real…it had to be a dream. No, it was a nightmare.

Makoto Naegi told himself over and over that he was still unconscious after passing out in the school lobby, but the shaking of his legs forced him to realize that he was wrong. That strange half and half bear, Monokuma it called itself, had just informed all of them that the only way to leave this place was to commit the ultimate sin…murder.

Hesitantly looking to all sides, Makoto found himself completely surrounded by all his ‘classmates’:

There was Sayaka Maizono – the Ultimate Pop Sensation. The most popular idol in all of Japan and lead singer of an all girl group, whom she cares for as her closest and most dearest friends. Quite popular among boys and girls alike.

Near her was Leon Kuwata – the Ultimate Baseball Star, who had broken out into a cold sweat. He’d been named one of the best baseball players in Japan but despite his overwhelming talent, he openly voiced his dislike of the sport and his desire to change his talent to the Ultimate Musician.

Just beyond them was Junko Enoshima – the Ultimate Fashionista. A model whose beauty and grace were known throughout the world. Meeting her in person, however, something felt a bit off with this girl.

Almost fading into the background just behind her was Toko Fukawa – the Ultimate Writing Prodigy. Being a master of literature, she had already written a best-selling romantic novel. In addition, it was well-known that she tended to avoid contact with anyone as much as possible, especially in public.

Turning to glance the other way, Makoto saw one of his classmates scratching his head with a dull expression on his face. This was Yasuhiro Hagakure – the Ultimate Clairvoyant. A man who is either entirely honest or just plain stupid, he claims to be able to glimpse into the future with a 30% accuracy rate. He was held back many times, making him much older than all of his classmates.

Beyond him stood a fidgeting Hifumi Yamada – the Ultimate Fanfic Creator. A young man who’s passion for the 2D and the arts had earned him recognition though all forms of fandom, going so far as to claim that he had absolutely no interest in anything 3D.

Not far from him stood Celestia Ludenberg – the Ultimate Gambler, who was also eyeing her fellow classmates. She was a strange girl dressed in Gothic Lolita, who claimed to have gambled her entire life. No one could see through the passive mask, behind which she hides her true emotions.

Growling angrily to her left was none other than Mondo Owada – the Ultimate Biker Gang Leader.
He was one of the students who stood out the most, with his pronounced pompadour and duster. Even at his young age, his reputation preceded him as the well-known de facto leader of almost every biker gang in all of Japan.

Trembling slighting at the biker’s enraged visage, Chihiro Fujisaki – the Ultimate Programmer, glanced around timidly. Although small and frail, she was considered a master of computer programming and even built a fully functional AI that was capable of learning on its own.

Sterling but cautiously glancing around nearby, Kiyotaka Ishimaru – the Ultimate Moral Compass, carefully observed the situation. This diligent young man was dedicated to the honor and rules of not only education but of the laws which govern the country. He believed in stern discipline and hard work above all else…much to the chagrin of anyone in close proximity to him.

Shifting his gaze over his shoulder, Makoto saw the overpowering gaze of Byakuya Togami – the Ultimate Affluent Progeny, glaring at him. Heir to the prestigious Togami Family, it was obvious that he’d been groomed since birth to lead not only his family, but the entire world as a born leader. He cared little for others as he did not see them as people, merely tools for him to use.

Averting his eyes away from the ferocious heir, Makoto instead focused on the nervous Aoi Asahina – the Ultimate Swimmer. Her usual bright and cheerful demeanor was slightly stilted but it seemed that, even in this situation, she trying to keep a positive attitude…also she has an insatiable love for donuts because reasons. She has won various sports championships but held the most records for swimming competitions.

Standing next to her, as if to watch over and protect her, stood Sakura Ogami – the Ultimate Martial Artist. Her imposing figure was enough to prove that she had won numerous tournaments, even some overseas. She was also known as a revered and formidable warrior, as well as an honorable woman. Due to her large size and massive build, she was given the nickname “The Ogre”.

And then, standing far in the back, observing everyone quietly, stood Kyoko Kirigiri – the Ultimate…the Ultimate…what was her title again? She neglected to discuss her title, much to everyone’s chagrin. Otherwise, she remained eerily silent.

And finally, the completely normal and unexceptional…Makoto Naegi – The Ultimate Lucky Student. Having been given his title for winning a lottery, he certainly was the most average of average students, with no noticeable talents or ideals…or at least Makoto thought of himself that way. Although he did consider himself to be more optimistic than others…

Normally, being in this school with such exceptional people was nerve-wracking enough, but given their current situation, Makoto found that these people could be far more terrifying than he had ever imagined.

Steeling himself as best he could, Makoto glanced around at everyone and saw the same picture of fear and despair spreading over them all.

All of the new faces he’d met only a few minutes ago were now glaring at each other, some with apprehension, others with disdain, and few in utter shock. No one had been prepared for this startling announcement.

“There is one way for you to leave this school. If one of you murderers another, then they will graduate and be allowed to leave!”

The demented half and half bear had chuckled to itself as it had watched the despair shroud the eyes of the now hopeless students. And an instant later, he disappeared from sight, leaving them all with
feelings of distrust and fear.

For a moment, Makoto didn’t honestly believe that any of his classmates would be capable of such a thing. Murder was not something anyone one of them would normally think about…right?

However, as he glanced around the room at the faces of his classmates, he was forced to realize that he really didn’t know any of them at all. Added to that, the pressure of knowing that there was no way to escape and the notion that you may be betrayed by anyone at any moment, it was a boiling pot that could only be contained for so long. Sooner or later, one of them might give in to the temptation and actually commit murder.

No, judging by the look in everyone’s eyes, the maddening fear and mistrust that was hidden away in all of them, it was not a matter of ‘if’…but of ‘when’.

Kyoko Kirigiri gazed around at the petrified faces of her fellow captives and sighed.

“At this rate, it’s only a matter of time before someone snaps.”

As this idea flooded her mind, she noted one thing that surprised even her. Her mind was clear and calm, despite the panic that should have been overtaking her. It’s true that she was frightened, even fearful for her life, but somehow she was able to bury that terrifying notion and maintain her composure.

Glancing around to her classmates, she could only frown. The fear had quickly taken root in all of them, that much she could plainly see. Some hid it better than others, but for some reason, with only a single glance, Kyoko could see through them. Even Celeste, who held a perfect mask of indifference, held great terror in her crimson eyes.

“Perhaps this is my talent,” Kyoko briefly wondered as she finished inspecting everyone. “Was I the Ultimate Observer?…No, that doesn’t feel right.”

A dull ache gnawed at her head as she tried to recall her talent and she squeezed her eyes shut. Now wasn’t the time to worry about such things. As the only person here with a completely clear head, she felt inclined to do what no other seemed willing to attempt.

The students’ gazes flickered between each other, all wondering who would be the first to break…the first to commit the ultimate sin of murder. It was just at this moment that one of the students seemed to break free of such terrors and was able to speak.

“So then, what are we going to do now?” a stern, female voice cut through the air, startling everyone.

Makoto slowly turned around to see the origin of the voice and was partially unsurprised at who had spoken.

Kyoko stood behind all of them, one hand resting on her chin in thought, as she questioned the nature of their situation aloud. Whether it had been to purposefully break them all out of the fearful stupor that they had been trapped in or simply an automatic reaction of her own devices, no one could tell.
But in either case, it was exactly what everyone needed to hear, even if it wasn’t particularly hopeful or meaningful. That simple question had forced all of their minds back into working order and it soon gave way to much discussion.

“I can’t believe I let myself get flustered by something like this! I am the Ultimate Moral Compass. If I cannot be a symbol of morality and order at a time like this, than no one else can!”

Kiyotaka cursed to himself as a cold sweat slid down his neck. He, too, had let the fear overtake him and in those brief moments of terror, his mind had briefly considered how far he was willing to go to get out of this school.

However, the moment Kyoko’s voice had reached him, calm and decisive as it was, he realized that it should have been him taking the lead and settling his classmate’s fears. It was fortunate he was not a jealous man, or else he might have been infuriated with his female classmate for doing what he could not. But as a man who could recognize his own faults, he felt only gratitude for her interruption.

For he was the Ultimate Moral Compass, one who aspired to keep order and preserve the honor and diligence necessary to achieve one’s goals. And right now, everyone’s goal should be to find a way to escape!

Now was not the time for thinking, now was a time for strict words and decisive actions!

“She’s right. We need to plan out our next move, very carefully,” Kiyotaka said to everyone, trying to bring order in this chaos. “I’m so ashamed that I let something like this startle me! Someone please, hit me!”

From across the room, Mondo scoffed and said, “What the hell is wrong with you, man? If you’ve got time to be a dipshit, you’ve got time to actually do something.”

“Perhaps, but…what exactly is our mission here?” Hifumi asked carefully, still trembling after hearing the horrific news.

“Stupid! We have to find a way out, duh!” Leon blatantly answered, shouting at him incredulously.

“I…I already know that!” Hifumi wanted to shout back at Leon but felt compelled to stay silent.

After all, he didn’t want to make any unnecessary enemies. Being one of the smarter and more artistic students, he felt rather outmatched by the brawn of his classmates, which translated to him that he could be seen as an easy target for murder!

So, for the time being, he would bide his time and try to stay out of everyone’s way. He had no plans to kill anyone but if he was threatened, he’d show them the power his manga characters had bequeathed him!
The air around everyone was tense but luckily, a quiet voice was able to bring everyone to their senses.

“Sh-Shouldn’t we take a look at the handbook then?” a timid voice suggested. Everyone turned to see Chihiro slowly lowering her hand. “We should probably get familiar with the regulations, so that we don’t accidentally break them while trying to find a way out.”

Everyone gave a quick glance at Mondo for a brief second, remembering his foolish attempt to harm Monokuma and the explosion that occurred moments afterward. As if a silent agreement was shared by all, as one they pulled out their e-handbooks and turned them on.

Chihiro breathed a quick sigh of relief, happy that everyone had taken the suggestion without incident. The Ultimate Programmer didn’t even want to think about what would have happened if anyone had refuted.

“It’s not like I would have insisted…but still.”

Shaking off the negative statement that went through her head, Chihiro quickly followed suit with everyone else and opened up her e-handbook. The smooth technology in her hand gave her renewed courage as she began her work on the device.

However, the instant she turned it on and her name flashed on the screen, another symbol appeared to torment her…the symbol that designated her sex as male.

“Whoa!” Yasuhiro shouted in excitement, gaining everyone’s attention. Holding out his handbook for everyone to see, he grinned and said, “My name came up when I turned it on! This thing is awesome!”

Makoto grimaced as he could almost feel the anger radiating off his classmates due to Yasuhiro’s comment. Tension was quickly rising and everyone was beginning to grow infuriated with him for not only acting like a fool but for his outright denial that this situation was really happening.

“Thanks, genius. We already figured that out!” Leon shouted before going back to reading the rules.

Everyone else did the same and for the next few minutes, they all stood there and read the rules that would dominate their lives for the foreseeable future. However, it didn’t take long before they all heard Mondo shouting in frustration.

“You piece of shit! Like hell I’m gonna let these rules hold me down! This is more bullshit than all the time I spent in juvie!”

His rage seethed and just before he exploded again, a soft but stern voice said, “Then by all means, feel free to go against these rules.”

“This is just another gamble…”
Celestia Ludenberg smiled as her classmates turned to glare at her, particularly the biker she had just insulted. However, even under their accusatory stares, she held her composure perfectly, not letting a hint of fear seep through her guise.

There was absolutely no way for them to know the utter terror she was experiencing at this moment. Her eyes flickered down to the screen of her e-handbook, the name Taeko Yasuhiro mockingly staring back at her.

She had gambled, bet away many precious ornaments, and even wagered her own body in many a match. However, this was nothing like her previous games. In all of her former wages, never once was there a possibility of defeat—a way for her to lose. But now, she was trapped in a place where a single misstep would lead to her own death. And that wasn’t the most horrifying part.

“I can’t stay trapped in this shit hole! I have to get out of here! I’m so close…so close to achieving my dream!”

Just beyond these walls, there was a life of luxury and pleasure awaiting her. However, the price to leave this place was steeper than she wanted to pay.

A life…she had never bet her life before, much less put her own against another. And this time, to win, meant that someone here must die for her. For her to have the life she’d always dreamed of, the life she’d risked everything to attain, she had to become a killer.

And like it or not, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

That is why her mind kept repeating that single phrase, the one notion that gave her the strength to once more risk everything, her life included, just for that single, solitary goal. It was time to lay her cards on the table and ask for a new hand…

“This is just another gamble…right?”

All heads turned to see Celeste, her hands folded under her chin, staring at Mondo with a tilted smile.

“I would love to see what happens when someone officially breaks one of the rules,” she added almost playfully, sending chills down everyone’s spine.

“B-But I don’t think he’d respawn after another offense. We all saw what happened last time,” Hifumi warned, coming to Mondo’s defense.

At the mention of that, the pompadour haired bike gritted his teeth and lowered his gaze. “Ever since I was a kid, my brother always told me, ‘When a man makes a promise, he’s gotta keep it, no matter what!’”

As those words set in, a look of confusion spread over all who heard. When it was clear that Mondo was finished, one of the students took it upon herself to speak up.

“Uh, so what?” an insensitive Junko questioned, folding her arms and scoffing at him.

Snapping his head toward her, Mondo seethed, “So! I’ve got a ton of promises that I have to keep on the outside! I can’t afford to die here! That’s ‘so what!’”

Strangely enough, even though he was shouting directly at her, Junko didn’t seem to flinch. She
merely stood there and took his assaulting words with the same frown she’d had plastered on her face for a while now.

“Oh, anyway,” Junko said while fluffing her hair, “Does anyone have any idea what we should do now?”

“What about just waiting for the police?” Asahina asked, trying to be logical. “Surely someone’s noticed that we’ve gone missing.”

“That may not be true,” Celeste said, twirling her hair with her gaze downcast. “As far as we know, we may not even be in Japan anymore. And there is no guarantee that anyone is even searching for us, given that we have only been ‘missing’ for a single day.”

The group all lowered their heads, forced to admit that she might be right. No one had said it because it was almost unthinkable, but nevertheless, each student had pondered the same question.

Why had this been allowed to happen? Where were the police? Would they ever find them?

It was a grim reality that all of them had to face. Because, at least for now, they were all on their own with no one else to depend on. And with the looming threat of someone betraying them hanging over their heads, it felt nearly suffocating to have to accept.

“But…then what are we supposed to do?”

Asahina’s legs shook as she tried to keep composed. However, even she could feel herself beginning to break inside. All this talk about killing and escaping, being trapped with no way out, it was all too much for her to handle. She wanted to go home, she wanted to go swimming, and she wanted to eat donuts!

Ever since she’d awoken in this place, she suppressed her growing fears. But now that there was virtually no escape and everyone was getting more and more agitated with their situation, Asahina felt as if she was going to explode. She wanted to do something but just didn’t know what she could do to help!

“Someone…anyone…tell me what I need to do!”

As the silence dug into everyone, Asahina was overcome with the will to speak.

“B-But surely someone will…notice…that…we’re—”, the Ultimate Swimmer tried to protest before a hand gently landed on her shoulder.

Looking over her shoulder, Asahina found the tall, massively muscled Sakura giving her a solemn look.

“Let’s not worry about that for now,” her deep voice softly said, trying to calm down her classmate. “It hasn’t been long since we got here. Perhaps no one has noticed as of yet. We should focus on what we can do to keep our spirits up.”
Sakura gently smiled down at her classmate, having watched her slowly begin to panic under the weight of the situation.

Such perilous and life-threatening circumstances were not uncommon for the Ultimate Martial Artist, and unlike her classmates, she had experienced various touches with death in her life. And as such, she was utterly at peace with this desperate battle for survival. However, she knew her classmates were undoubtedly terrified. And even though she, too, held fear for her own life, she was prepared to be a pillar of strength to hold them all up.

At the very least, her new friend, Asahina, needed her to stay strong for her.

“Even if that is all I can do for them, I will use all of my strength to assist them!”

Hearing her newfound friend’s kind, yet powerful words, Asahina felt newfound strength flow into her and she wiped away the barely formed tears from her eyes.

“Yeah…you’re right!” she proclaimed, pumping both fist enthusiastically.

“So…what are we supposed to d-do now then?” Toko suddenly asked, her cheeks flushed from having to speak up. As everyone turned to her, she meekly pulled her shoulders in and continued, “I-It’s not as if w-we have any idea what’s g-going on. We could be w-walking right into t-that creepy bear’s trap!”

“W-W-Why is t-t-this happening to m-me?!” Toko practically shouted in her head, grabbing her skull and raking her nails across her scalp.

Her mind was racing and the fact that no one bothered to answer her frustrated her even more! Did they think less of her for speaking? She should just give in and let her other side take over and—

“NO! I can’t let that happen! If it does…they’ll kill me for sure!!!”

But what if…she saw a dead body! Or blood for any reason! Or if she even sneezed too hard!

If this was one of her novels, a dashing prince would swoop in and save her before she turned and then lead her out of this hellish situation! A handsome and dashing young man…with honey-colored hair…and eloquent glasses…who spoke with such authority that it made her feel—

She almost slapped herself as she felt her body begin to heat up. Now was definitely not the time to be fantasizing about her classmate…err…Prince! Because, unfortunately, it felt like it was only a matter of time before her deadly secret eventually came to light.

For the time being, she decided to force herself into silence, fearing the monster that could be unleashed with a single nostril flare.

A collective silence overcame everyone. No one was quite sure what they should be doing. And she did have a point. Who knew what that psychotic bear had planned for them or if he was even telling the truth to begin with. What made it all the more frightening was that none of these students had
ever imagined themselves being in this situation and it was more than daunting.

Or at least, for some it was.

“For now, we should split up and search the area,” Kyoko’s calm voice answered, again bringing everyone back to reality. “We won’t get anywhere just standing around here, waiting for someone else to help us.”

Oddly enough, Makoto found it refreshing that someone had managed to bring about a sense of calm while not upsetting anyone. And no one could deny that there was a calm and collected aura that just made whatever Kyoko said feel right. As if she had seen these kinds of situations before and knew how to handle them.

Makoto didn’t have time to ponder the thought before another student abruptly spoke out.

“That’s right! We have far too many questions that need answers!” Kiyotaka concurred, waving his arm out to point at everyone. “We’ll need to find food and supplies as soon as possible! So, everyone, let’s go and search for a way to escape!”

“Damn straight! Let’s all start looking around!” Leon abruptly shouted, obviously feeling motivated.

“We should probably search in pairs, just in case something happens,” Sayaka suggested, smiling brightly to encourage everyone.

The group slowly began to nod and agree with this plan, as it felt like the best option. Not only that, they were slowly forgetting about Monokuma’s deadly offer.

Standing off to the side, Makoto smiled at everyone’s enthusiasm. He couldn’t help but marvel at how infections their determination seemed to be, as everyone tried their best to come up with a solution right away. Everyone was working together to try and find out what to do and it gave him hope that they could find a way out, together.

Seeing this suddenly made him feel a rush of motivation himself as he wanted to do his best for the group as well!

“Okay then, we can—”, he started to say before a sharp tone cut him off.

“I’ll be going on my own,” Byakuya’s harsh voice interrupted, startling everyone. Turning to look at him, the Ultimate Affluent Progeny folded his arms and turned his head away from the now staring crowd.

“A-Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Makoto tried to reason with him, unsure of why he refused to join them. “I mean, we all have to work together to—”.

“Shut up, will you?” Byakuya cruelly commanded, freezing Makoto where he stood. Turning his head back to glare at the Ultimate Lucky Student, the Togami Heir scoffed and said, “You don’t actually expect me to go along with your little group outing, do you? Not when someone could be plotting to stab any one of us in the back at any time.”

Another heavy silence fell upon the unfortunate students as they were forced to recognize his words. He had said what they had been keeping to themselves all this time, afraid to speak such a horrific possibility aloud. It was an inescapable fact that no one wished to acknowledge, and yet, they all knew to be true.

Even so, some of the students didn’t wish to be reminded of this horrifying predicament.
“Such ignorance from all of them.”

Byakuya Togami seethed to himself as he folded his arms and glared at the peasants before him. The weak always gathered together to feel strong but watching such imbeciles forming a plan this foolish —no, this dangerous was more than he could stand.

If they wanted to get themselves killed, it was of no concern to him. However, they were trying to put his life in danger as well, and that he could never stand for.

Out of everyone here, he was the only one that truly deserved to survive. After all, the future of the Togami Family…no, the entire world, was resting solely on his shoulders. He had come too far, sacrificed too much for pathetic fools such as these to pull him down. And if they needed to be dealt with for him to survive, then so be it.

“They must learn what happens when you make such foolish choices...”

“B-But, you don’t really think that—”, Sayaka tried to say before she was rudely interrupted.

“Don’t even bother finishing,” Byakuya cruelly answered, almost seething at her. “You were about to say that no one among us would actually kill someone, am I right?”

“Uh…well, yes, but—”, she tried to continue but found herself immediately cut off again.

“How can you be certain of that? Didn’t all of you seize up with fear the moment the graduation rule was announced?” Byakuya questioned, turning his harsh glare onto everyone.

As he stared out across the room at his classmates, he watched as many of them hung their heads in shame. Aside from Kyoko and Celestia, everyone seemed to have a look of guilt plague them as they registered his words. Turning his fierce glare back toward her, Sayaka felt as if she was suffocated by his harsh gaze and fell into an embarrassed silence along with the rest of her classmates.

“Do you understand now?” the Ultimate Affluent Progeny mockingly pointed out. “None of you can say for certain who you can truly trust or not. I’m simply acting in accordance with what I believe is best for me. And because of that, I have decided not to foolishly put my life into the hands of untrustworthy commoners such as yourselves.”

Not even giving anyone time to react, he began to move toward the door, leaving almost everyone in a state of shock. However, he didn’t get far before a surprising figure moved in front of him and blocked his path.

“Hey! What’s your problem?!?” Junko shouted at Byakuya, hands on her hips and leaning forward aggressively. “Saying stuff like that will only make this harder—”.

“Hmph, I won’t waste my time with peasants like you, now step aside,” Byakuya said harshly before pushing past the Ultimate Fashionista and heading for the door, ignoring the vicious glare she was shooting him.

“Asshole…” she grunted under her breath, tempted to flip him the bird.
Before she even had the time to fall to that temptation, someone shot past her and rushed in front of Byakuya, blocking his way again. The Ultimate Affluent Progeny slowly lifted his gaze to see Mondo cracking his knuckles and standing between him and door.

“Hey, asshole! You’re not going anywhere! Not after pulling a stunt like that! Now apologize to the girl or else—”.

“Move aside, plankton.”

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“W-What the hell?”

It honestly took a moment for Mondo to understand what had happened. Most of the time, when he made a demand, people fell over each other to do it. And anyone who was stupid enough not to listen to him, well, they knew what was coming!

That’s why, when that arrogant prick Byakuya didn’t move, hell didn’t even flinch, something inside of Mondo began to twist. And unfortunately, just looking at the Ultimate Affluent Progeny made him feel like he was going to snap at any moment!

“You think you can look down on me! Don’t fuck with me asshole!”

The entire room seemed to freeze as Byakuya had clearly insulted the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader. Even Mondo found himself caught off-guard by the odd but thoroughly disrespectful comment. However, the shock only lasted for a moment before he gritted his teeth and angrily shouted in the rich student’s face.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, huh?!” he demanded, feeling his anger boiling over.

With a mocking scoff, Byakuya pushed up the frame of his glasses and answered, “One insignificant little plankton floating aimlessly in the vast ocean. That is all you are and all you will ever be.”

Mondo practically felt a vain in his head pop at the demeaning explanation and he furiously pounded one fist into his palm, emphasizing how badly he was going to have to hit something.

“You piece of shit!!” the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader roared as he reared back and prepared to attack.

Just before he let his fist fly, someone threw themselves between him and Byakuya. Seeing that, Mondo ceased the attack and instead glared ferociously down at the young man that stood in his way.

“P-Please, both of you calm down! We can’t afford to fight like this!” Makoto insisted, trying to calm the delinquent as he continued to glare at him. Unfortunately, the Ultimate Lucky Student discovered that his luck truly was as poor as he believed as Mondo turned the full force of his angry, monstrous gaze down on him.

“And just who the hell do you think you are?! Trying to be some goody-goody little bitch!” the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader shouted, raising his fist menacingly. “Do you think you can tell me what to do?! Huh?! Do you, punk?!”
Suddenly backing away from the menacing Mondo, Makoto waved his arms frantically to try and avoid the fate he’d set upon himself.

“No, no! That’s not—!”

“Fuck you!”

Before anyone knew what happened, Mondo’s powerful fist slammed directly into the side of Makoto’s face, sending the small young man flying backward. Just before he lost consciousness from the sheer impact of the punch, Makoto felt a deep despair begin to take root in his mind.

“I’d almost forgotten…I’m trapped in a school filled with Ultimates…I really shouldn’t be surprised by…” Makoto briefly thought before his body made brutal contact with the hard wood floor.

This was a surprising new development but one that wasn’t entirely without merit.

Beneath her masterful disguise, Mukuro Ikusaba watched in shock as Makoto literally was blown off his feet from the force of the punch, sending him flying back and landing in a heap near the center of the gym.

Not many things could send a body flying like that, as least not without considerable firepower. Despite that, it was clear that the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader had done so much damage with only a single punch!

If she was Mukuro, it wouldn’t be an issue and crushing him beneath her heel would be simple. However, as “Junko Enoshima” she had to maintain her position as a dimwitted, almost defenseless woman whose sharp tongue was her most deadly weapon.

With that in mind, she followed everyone else’s lead as they stared in utter shock at what Mondo had done. The delinquent himself actually seemed surprised as well, obviously not expecting Makoto to have flown back so far! And in this awkward silence, no one dared to see if the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader had just committed their first murder.

Mukuro watched them all carefully, wondering who would make the first move. Her eyes flicked around, gauging everyone. She had thought that Byakuya, his interest peaked now that something interesting had happened, would be the one to move first. However, he remained rooted in place, more than likely not willing to dirty his hands and check if the boy was still breathing.

Beyond that, Mukuro was also surprised that Sayaka didn’t appear to be moving. Even with her memory erased, she should still have remembered Makoto from their earlier days, and possibly might have been worried. But no, she also remained fixed in place, her hands covering her mouth in pure shock.

For a good two minutes, everyone remained still and Mukuro worried that, against her better judgment, she might have to step in just to keep the game going. She was trying not to stand out too much, but if no one checked to see if Makoto was alive, she knew that Junko would get bored and that wasn’t good for anyone. To that extent, she prepared to go and check on him when she suddenly noticed someone had beaten her too it.
Everyone was shocked as Kyoko Kirigiri bravely marched toward the unconscious boy and fearlessly placed her hands on his neck and wrist, obviously feeling for a pulse.

“Is…Is he…?” Sayaka finally found the courage to ask, barely taking a step forward as she inquired.

Shaking her head, Kyoko rose to her feet and turned around, folding her arms. Her glare focused entirely on Mondo as he continued to stand there, fearful of what he may have done.

“Please learn to control your temper. He’s lucky you didn’t kill him,” Kyoko’s icy voice pierced through the silence, sending a mixture of shock and relief through everyone present.

Underneath her disguise, Mukuro almost snickered. Makoto truly was ‘lucky’ that Mondo hadn’t hit him hard enough to kill him. But was that really the case? Being the Ultimate Lucky Student is what trapped Makoto here in the first place, but all it seemed like was that the boy simply had the worst luck in the world!

“Ironic really…” Mukuro thought to herself as she watched the scene unfold.

Finally breaking free of his paralyzing fear, Mondo’s face reddened as he shouted, “W-Well! He shouldn’t have gotten in the way! I didn’t have any problem with him until he started treating me like I was the one being an asshole!”

No one was surprised as the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader defended himself but they were shocked as Kyoko walked toward him and stood directly in front of him, taking his harsh glare without an ounce of fear in her.

“You let your pride get the better of you, it’s as simple as that. If you don’t learn to control your temper, you may actually end up killing someone.” Kyoko’s eyes narrowed and Mondo practically flinched as he registered her words.

In any other setting, her comment wouldn’t have brought much more than embarrassed anger. However, with the aspect of the killing game in effect, her choice of words took on a more frightful meaning. She was practically telling him that losing his cool and flying off the handle would lead to an early grave.

Still, he couldn’t deny how frustrating this whole situation made him and controlling his wild emotions wasn’t as easy as she insisted. And while he completely agreed with her, his pride wouldn’t allow himself to admit it.

Confident he understood her implications, Kyoko continued, “There are no doctors here and no one to help us if we get injured. We can’t afford to make reckless mistakes…especially when they can cost us our lives.”

For a minute, it appeared as if Mondo was about to explode in rage once more, gritting his teeth with his face reddening. However, much to everyone’s surprise, the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader let out a furious scoff before taking in a deep breath to calm himself. Exhaling slowly, he turned back to face Kyoko’s stern gaze.

“You’re right…sorry,” he hesitantly admitted, obviously not used to apologizing. “I’ll…uh, try to keep my temper under control.”

“Good,” Kyoko answered swiftly before turning back to the unconscious Makoto. “But we need to
Scratching his head, Yasuhiro frowned as he looked down at the unconscious boy.

“Wow, the guy at the top of the Academy must be pretty crazy to set up a stunt like this! But I’m sure they’ll call a doctor for the kid if we just leave him. I mean, they wouldn’t let anyone actually get hurt…right?”

He didn’t think that anyone would get hurt by this strange entrance exam but the Academy guys probably had everything under control. After all, they set up this whole thing, right? They were probably gonna jump out any moment and tell them it was all a show…that’s how it would go.

He was certain of it. All of this it had to be a lie…right?

“We could just, you know, leave him here,” Yasuhiro suggested, making everyone glare at him.

“We can’t do that!” Sayaka abruptly protested, moving over to Makoto and kneeling next to him. “We should at least try to find him a bed or something.”

“If I recall correctly, we all have an assigned room in the dorm area. Perhaps we could find his room and allow him to recover there?” suggested Celestia, a bored expression on her face.

Sayaka’s face lit up at that suggestion and she nodded firmly before grabbing hold of Makoto and trying to lift him. However, even though she was able to pull his arm over her shoulder, the moment she tried to stand and lift him, she lost her footing and fell to the floor.

“Ow…” she muttered, rubbing her knees.

Leon looked around at his classmates as they merely watched as she tried to lift a boy, who was clearly heavier than he looked, up off the ground.

“What the hell? Is no one else gonna help her?”

It wasn’t until she lost her footing and her knees harshly hit the floor that the red haired baseball player scoffed loudly and made his way over to her.

“Here, let me help.”

Before she could turn to see who was speaking, footsteps sounded behind her and she felt Makoto’s weight be lifted off her. Turning around abruptly, she found none other than Leon Kuwata hoisting the unconscious boy onto his back.

“It wouldn’t do to let a lady do all the heavy lifting,” Leon half-joked and half-flirted, winking at her as he adjusted his weight to carry Makoto easier. Turning to face everyone else, the Ultimate
Baseball Star said, “Sayaka and I will take this guy to his room. Is that cool with you, Sayaka?”

Although initially stunned by his good-nature and suggestive comment, it didn’t take the Ultimate Pop Sensation long to smile brightly and nod firmly.

“Yes, and thank you.”

Giving her a slightly cocky grin, Leon readjusted the boy on his back and answered, “Not a problem!”

Sayaka kind of wanted to sigh, knowing that Leon was being a little flirtatious. However, she couldn’t deny that she enjoyed his willingness to help her and found herself smiling cheerfully as she turned to face her fellow students.

“Alright then, we’ll take care of Makoto. The rest of you can get started without us.”

“Very well then! We shall begin our search of the school in the meantime!” Kiyotaka brazenly announced before turning and randomly assigning everyone places to search.

Leon and Sayaka quickly exited the gym, with Makoto in tow. Once they were gone, everyone began to spread out to fulfill their role in searching the building they were being held captive in.

Watching from afar, Mukuro found herself slightly impressed with all that had transpired. She never expected any of them to be willing to work together, especially after Byakuya’s distrusting attitude. But, it seems that both she and Junko underestimated Kyoko’s resolve. And it was as frustrating as it was fascinating.

Even after losing her memories, Kyoko Kirigiri still recalled exactly how to handle a body. Although that also meant that she could pose a problem down the line.

One of the reasons for blanking most of her mind was to keep the Ultimate Detective from solving each murder case as it came up. Not only that, Kyoko was the only one who was confident enough to stand up to anyone in the group, making her somewhat of a peace-keeper. That alone could derail all that the Despair sisters were trying to accomplish.

Even so, as she watched everyone begin to decide where they would search, Mukuro felt a strange stirring in her chest. Watching her classmates band together and vowing to find a way out reminded her of her days with Fenrir.

Strangers banding together to fight and survive, that is what the famed mercenary unit had truly been like. Mukuro never saw her fellow mercenaries as friends or family but she recognized their talents and indomitable spirits. And over time, she grew to trust them with her very life.

And, for a fraction of a second, as she stared at her determined classmate’s bold visage, she wondered if she could ever feel that way about everyone here…

“Impossible…” Mukuro told herself silently, lowering her gaze to the floor “They’ll all be dead before long… and the despair will continue to spread to the entire world… just as it did with—”.

“Hey, Junko!”

It took Mukuro a moment to realize that someone was speaking to her. Immediately resuming her air-
headed nature, she turned to see Asahina and Sakura approaching her. Instantly resuming her guise, she turned and raised an eyebrow at them.

“What’s up?” she said almost aimlessly, trying to appear absentminded.

“We were thinking it may be best to search in groups of three. That way, even if someone decided to do something…foolish, there would be another person there keep their intentions at bay,” Sakura announced, her muscular arms folded tightly over her chest.

“Oh,” Mukuro answered immediately, a bit surprised at the well thought out plan. “That sounds totally cool!”

Both Asahina and Sakura nodded to each other, pleased that their group was now complete. However, Mukuro had a very different reaction to this new arrangement.

Glancing out of the corner of her eye, the Ultimate Soldier briefly spotted Byakuya as he departed on his own. Silently, she wondered if his initial comment about wanting to travel alone had intentionally been used for this purpose. If he hadn’t mentioned it, then everyone would have gone off in pairs, thus allowing for the stronger students to pick off the weaker ones.

And although she highly doubted that it was his intention to avoid that situation, she also couldn’t deny that he seemed rather smug about something, evident by the grin she saw on his lips just before he disappeared from view. She made mental note to observe him more closely as, even with his memory wiped, he was still a most dangerous foe.

“Yeah, let’s get to searching! And since we still don’t know much about each other, it’ll be a great way for us to learn more about each other! I’ve always wondered what it’s like to be a model! You have to tell me your secrets!” Asahina enthusiastically shouted before rushing over to stand right in front of the disguised Mukuro.

The Ultimate Soldier had to fight her reflexes as the swimmer girl grasped her hand and pulled her forward. All of her instincts told her to retract her hand and forcibly subdue Asahina but she successfully fought off that urging. Not only would that reveal too much about herself, she was certain that Sakura wouldn’t take kindly to it, either.

And more than that, something about this whole situation was beginning to excite Mukuro. Oddly enough, she knew that it wasn’t from all the despair her fellow classmates would soon be feelings. No, it was an odd sense of…belonging. A feeling of lightheartedness at being asked, or forced really, to spend time with the other female classmates.

And though Mukuro’s mind thought of this event as nothing more than an opportunity to study her classmates as her future foes, somewhere deep within her subconscious, she was looking forward to simply chatting with girls her age.

“Gathering information is the first step to defeating your enemies,” Mukuro reminded herself as she and everyone else began to leave the gym. “And although I already know far more about them than they realize, it wouldn’t hurt to see exactly how much they can remember.”

“Come on! Let’s get to searching!” the excited Asahina proclaimed as she practically dragged Mukuro from the room, Sakura only a few feet behind.

“A musician?!”
Sayaka almost lost her footing as she walked beside Leon on the way to Makoto’s room. Luckily, she caught herself without missing a step but the sudden movement drew the attention of the Ultimate Baseball Star.

“Yeah…is that so weird?” Leon asked, almost as if he was silently asking for permission.

In an instant, Sayaka realized that the normally laid-back and cheeky Leon was being completely serious for once. He’d been subtly flirting with her a few moments ago, inviting her to get something to drink with him after they dropped off Makoto, but then he sprung this on her. Honestly, she didn’t know the best way to react.

“I’m just surprised,” she answered honestly, trying not to sound apathetic. “I suppose there’s nothing wrong with wanting to change your title.”

She watched as her words brought a goofy and reassured grin to Leon’s face. “Yeah! That’s right! I have no reason to be ashamed or worried about not wanting to play baseball anymore! I’m here to follow my dream of being the world’s greatest Musician!”

Strangely, it seemed that he was more trying to convince himself than her. Sayaka felt her chest tighten as she watched her classmate continue on toward the dorms, smiling like an idiot who had no worries.

However, the Ultimate Pop Sensation had lost all interest in smiling at the moment. She had been in the music industry for quite a long time and knew how difficult and disastrous it could be. Even at her young age, she’d seen so many people with dreams like Leon’s be crushed underfoot, leaving them a broken shell of who they used to be.

And for some reason, she didn’t want that to happen to Leon. He had been be a bit annoying, with all his flirtatious comments, but he seemed like a genuinely nice person. Watching a person as sweet and naïve as him go down this path, only for him to eventually become heartbroken and empty, wasn’t something she could allow herself to do.

Sayaka had experienced that feeling of brokenness once herself, at the start of her career when no one would even give her an audition. No one encouraged her or even tried to comfort her. They all abandoned her and she had to find the strength to continue on by herself. It was a dark and nightmarish time in her life and honestly, she didn’t believe that anyone should have to feel that kind of despair.

Not even the foolishly optimistic Leon Kuwata.

To that effect, she felt as if she needed to test Leon, see how serious he was about this dream of his and if he could handle the pressure of living that kind of life. It wasn’t something just anyone could deal with. It required being merciless to your competition and doing anything…*anything*, just to get noticed.

Even if it meant utterly destroying a fellow singer’s dreams and aspirations.

Sayaka knew that better than anyone. After all, she had personally destroyed a number of people’s lives in the pursuit of the same dream. And if he wasn’t prepared to do the same…the industry would tear him to pieces!

“So, why do you want to be a musician?” she asked carefully as they rounded a corner and headed toward the entrance to the dorms. “It’s not just to impress the girls, is it?”

Flinching as if she’d hit the nail on the head, Leon laughed nervously and grinned at her. “N-No
way! I wouldn’t do something as petty as that! I’d just stay with baseball if that’s all I wanted!”

Although his logic did make a great deal of sense, Sayaka wasn’t fooled. She knew Leon was someone who craved attention but this was downright idiotic! However, seeing as he was rather talented in his own field, it wasn’t inconceivable that he’d be able to play music if he was passionate about it.

To that extent, she smiled at him and continued, “I was just kidding. But does that mean you can play an instrument and sing pretty well?”

Hearing that, Leon’s grin widened even more as he answered, “I actually play the guitar and even though I only started playing it a few months ago, I think I’m a natural! And though I’ve never actually taken a singing lesson, I just know that my voice is made for the stage!”

Almost immediately, Sayaka’s eyes narrowed at his comment. In other words, he had absolutely no experience playing or singing. Disgust rose up in her as she wanted to scream at him for being such an idiot but she managed to control herself.

Many great singers and musician didn’t start out as great as they became. Perhaps Leon would be like them and he just needed time, and an experience coach, to get him ready for it. However, something about his dismissive and lazy attitude told her that even if he did go for it, he might become bored and quit long before he even had a chance to get on stage.

However, she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and instead asked, “Okay then, why do you want to become a musician? You know it’ll be a lot of hard work, right?”

Sayaka made sure she was being very serious with him. She wanted him to know that it wasn’t going to be as easy as he imagined and that she, as the Ultimate Pop Sensation, was trying to get him to realize that. Luckily, it seemed that he was slowly beginning to understand her subtle warning.

“Oh, well…” he hesitated at first, seeming rather nervous for the first time since they’d left the gym. “I suppose it’s because I like the idea of it all, you know? Going around to different places, playing music for people and making everyone have a good time!”

That comment actually confused Sayaka even more. How was that any different from what he was doing as a baseball player? He went to different places, excited the crowds and played the game well enough that everyone always enjoyed watching him. As far as she could tell, being a musician and being a sports star was practically the same thing to him!

Only that the latter was less emotionally draining, as all you had to do was hit a ball and run! He already had all the attention he wanted and everyone who watched him play loved him. He was practically a celebrity and had the carefree life he seemed to so desperately want.

And yet, for some reason, he was unhappy with achieving it through baseball. What did being a musician offer him that playing baseball couldn’t?

With that in mind, she asked, “So then, what got you interested in music anyway?” Her question was polite but rife with a need to understand his reasoning. “I mean, you don’t really seem the type, being the Ultimate Baseball Star and all—”.

“And that’s the problem,” he interrupted her, stopping suddenly and turning toward her. “I never wanted to be a baseball star. I’ve always hated that stupid sport. I only used it to get into Hope’s Peak so I could try and change my status. Once we get out of here, I’m quitting, cold turkey!”

Genuine shock overtook Sayaka’s face as she heard her classmate, a boy who had never had a bad
game or even failed to hit any pitch thrown at him, openly deny his own talent. He had been blessed with a gift that most people would kill to have and all he could feel was resentment for it.

Didn’t he understand how fortunate he was?! Could he not see that he had it better than so many people his age??! He never had to fight and struggle to obtain his title, it all came naturally! He could have the life he wanted, making a crowd happy and just reveling in the popularity of being a sports sensation!

But instead, he foolishly wanted to go into music! A career that he didn’t take seriously and thought he could make it in only because he wanted it! He didn’t even realize how much you had to sacrifice just to get one single show! He had no respect for the business and barely any for himself! And he thought he could become a famous punk rocker!

And the thing that was the most infuriating…was that Leon had the gall to smirk as if he was proud of himself for being such a fool!

Sayaka’s eyes darkened as she glared at Leon’s back, her hands balled into fists. If she had a blunt object in her hands, she would have been tempted to crack it over his overconfident head! Just as she was getting ready to give him a piece of her mind, she saw him come to a stop just outside the entrance to the dorms.

A bit shocked, she could only stand there as he turned around to look at her. To her utter surprise, he wore an incredibly nervous expression but attempted to hide it with a smirk as he stared at her for a moment.

“So…do you think you could give me some pointers?” he abruptly asked, obviously not comfortable asking such a thing. “I-I mean, you’re obviously way better at that kinda stuff and I thought that… maybe you and I could try, like, singing a duet or something?”

All at once, all of the rage that had built up in Sayaka vanished. She finally realized why Leon had come to help her with Makoto before anyone else. He wanted to talk to her about this, about his dream to be a musician…and he wanted to ask for her help.

The proud, stubborn, overly confident Leon Kuwata was actually asking for her help to achieve his dream.

Whether he would ever know it or not, the mere fact that he had gone so far just to ask for her assistance really impressed her. Sure, he was practically blindly rushing into the music business on what seemed like a selfish whim, but at the very least he knew enough to ask for help from someone who actually was in the music industry.

It didn’t change the fact that he was being an utter fool, but at the very least he was passionate and determined to follow his dream.

And even though she should have declined him, crushed his dreams here before he had a chance to feel the pain of having his aspirations be trampled, in that moment, Sayaka just couldn’t refuse him.

Against her better judgment, she smiled as brightly as she always did and replied, “Sure! I’d love to help you sometime!”

Although shocked, Leon felt a surge of joy as he registered her answer. “S-Seriously! You’ll help me out?!”

Sayaka nodded to him with a smile before hardening her features and saying, “But bear in mind that I’m a strict teacher. And if I don’t think you’re cut out for it, I won’t hesitate to tell you. Do you think
you can handle that?”

Seeing her so serious stopped the Ultimate Baseball Star for a moment, realizing that she was not going to pamper him simply because of who he was. However, that didn’t seem to deter him in the least, as he recovered an instant later and grinned back at her firmly.

“I can take whatever you throw at me! I won’t let you down! I promise!” he excitedly proclaimed, assuring her that he understood.

A light chuckle escaped Sayaka as she answered, “Alright then, it’s a deal.”

Leon’s face lit up with pure excitement and he couldn’t help the enthusiastic shout that followed. Because of that, he almost dropped Makoto but managed to catch him before the unconscious boy fell from his shoulders.

Readjusting himself, Leon grinned happily at Sayaka before saying, “Alright then! Let’s get this guy to his room so we can start looking for a way out of here! And maybe later, we can get some practice in!”

“…Right.”

Leon barely noticed her lackluster answer as he increased his pace and headed through the entrance to the dorms. He didn’t notice that Sayaka lingered behind for a moment, a melancholy expression on her face.

Mentally, she scolded herself for giving in to him and offering to help. She was convinced that he wouldn’t cut it as a musician and by hiding her opinion from him, he was only going to be that much more disappointed when she told him the truth.

However, seeing his smiling face, so vibrant and full of happiness, she couldn’t bring herself to deny him. And in a weird way, she didn’t really want to refuse him anyway. She actually wanted to help him, wanted to try and help another entertainer rise to fame…instead of utterly destroying their hopes and dreams.

However, that is what made the decision all the more difficult for her. She could already tell that Leon was far too kind and laid-back to be able to succeed in the industry. All he wanted was a free ride that would be fun and attention grabbing, something to get more people to notice him. And while he wasn’t necessary a bad person for wanting that, it did revive a hint of her previous anger toward him.

“Don’t get into the entertainment industry with such frivolous thoughts…Leon Kuwata!” she whispered to herself.

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…

One student does not have the will to kill:

-Makoto Naegi-

14 students ‘remain’
Greetings, my beautiful readers! I wanted to get this chapter up sooner but my beta and I had an argument at 3AM about the proper use of an ellipsis in writing…sort version; she won. Plus, we needed to review this chapter in its entirety.

Also, if you haven’t gone to check out her stories yet, you should. Her story, “Haunted” got me very eager to write again and we’ve been helping each other with our respective stories ever since. So, give her a look and enjoy it!

Other than that, I will say that this story will be updated on a bi-weekly basis, so that I have ample time to edit and write without pressure. I have a real person job that I go to almost every day and it eats a lot of my time. So please bear with that and enjoy the story!

Leave a review to tell me what you think of the story or give theories or if you have question! And as always, keep on smiling and have a wonderful day my beautiful readers.
Ch 1 Act 2

Chapter Summary

The Despair Sisters have a heart-to-heart talk while the other students begin to grow accustomed to their new lives...kinda.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ch.1

Act 2

“Okay then, we’ll see you tomorrow at the food court!” Asahina shouted as she and Sakura began walking away from ‘Junko’s’ room.

“I’ll totally be there! Laters!” the disguised Mukuro replied, waving her hand enthusiastically to hide her growing need to be separated from them.

Before either of the girls were out of sight, Mukuro swiftly unlocked her door and stepped inside, closing the door shut and immediately locking it. Making sure it was bolted tightly, the Ultimate Soldier let out a sigh before turning around. It wasn’t any kind of fear that made her lock the door. Rather, she was certain that ‘someone’ would want to speak with her the moment she entered her new dwelling.

And just as she predicted, as she walked into the main area of her room, she found Monokuma playfully juggling an assortment of combat knifes.

“Welcome home!” the bear proclaimed, barely taking its eyes from the difficult task. “Are your accommodations to your liking, dear sister?”

Hearing Monokuma address her so flippantly, Mukuro folded her arms and glared down at the automaton.

“So, I’m not required to keep up the act when I’m alone with you?” the Ultimate Soldier questioned, feeling that her sister was testing her again.

Junko often said, and did, contradictory things, mostly to combat her constant boredom. But there was more to it than that. The despair loving twin simply adored pushing people to their limits, testing the very reaches of their sanity, and her own sister was no exception. In fact, Mukuro found her sister ‘testing’ her more often than any other.

For the most part, Mukuro didn’t blame her. After all, the Ultimate Soldier had practically abandoned her once before, joining Fenrir without even speaking to her sister about it. It was only natural that Junko would wish to be certain her sister wouldn’t betray her again. Even though Junko hid it rather well, the older twin knew that her younger sister did truly care for her and didn’t want anything to come between them again.

Because of that, Mukuro knew she would do almost anything for her sister. After all, Junko was all
she had left in the world; especially after all they’d done in the last few months. She had destroyed
the only place she could have called home…all for the sake of her sister’s ambition of world-wide
despair.

A deep chuckle escaped Monokuma and as it did, the voice resounding from the automaton shifted
and became more and more feminine and familiar. Soon, only Junko’s almost-mocking tone came
through the bear’s mouth. However, the bear still continued to juggle the deadly blades all the while.

“Oh, Mukuro, why would you need to keep up the charade here? The one place where none of our
classmates can hear us? Or do you really think so little of your own sister?”

Another test, like so many others Mukuro had endured before. Luckily, it seemed that this was a
simple one and she already understood her sister’s meaning. With little more than a huff, the Ultimate
Soldier unclipped the hairpins beneath the pink haired wig and pulled the almost suffocatingly huge
lock of pink from her head.

Running a hand through her slick, sweaty black hair, Mukuro set the mass of pink fluff on its wig
form on her nearby dresser.

“I’m just surprised, is all. I know how desperate you are to keep your identity hidden,” the black
haired twin chided, before a glint of light flashed at her.

Her reflexes kicked in and her hand shot up and grasped an object that had been speeding toward her
face, stopping it only moments before it would have grazed her cheek.

Mukuro’s sky-blue eyes narrowed as her hand slowly retracted and she glared at Monokuma.
Clutched tightly in her palm was one of the combat knives the bear had been juggling only a few
moments ago, the rest lying scattered on the floor at the bear’s feet.

“Impressive,” Junko’s voice spoke through the bear, “I’m glad to see that you’re still as spry as
ever.”

Even though she couldn’t see her, Mukuro was certain that her sister was grinning at her. And
despite the fact that she should have been more angry with her sister for throwing the knife, the
Ultimate Soldier couldn’t help but smirk at her sister’s aggressive jest.

Junko knew that something as weak as that would never be able to take her sister down. There was a
reason Mukuro still had perfect skin, free of scars, bruises and blemishes. She could see an attack
coming a mile away. And Monokuma’s obnoxious juggling of the deadly blades had been the
clearest giveaway. Even a civilian could have predicted the oncoming attack.

Flipping the knife up and gripping the tip with two fingers, Mukuro snapped her wrist toward the
bear and sent the knife flying back at it. Monokuma almost seemed to tense as the blade whizzed past
his head and became deeply embedded into the wall behind him. Slowly turning its head back, the
bear stared at the knife for a moment before snapping back toward the Ultimate Soldier.

“Hey! Watch it with those! You almost violated the rules and attacked the Headmaster!” Junko
shouted, changing her vocal tone to sound more like Monokuma without actually switching back to
the bear’s voice. “And the punishment for harming the Headmaster…is death!”

A light chuckle escaped Mukuro for half a second, believing this to be a joke. However, an instant
later, she took in the nasty glare Monokuma was giving her. As if she could see through the bear’s
eyes, she could have sworn that Junko was glaring at her just as fiercely. The Ultimate Soldier fought
the fear that began to seize up her entire body, a deep frown settling in on her face.
Junko has spoken at length about how the rules of the game would need to be enforced, but she failed to mention if those rules applied to herself and Mukuro as well. The black haired twin had assumed that since they were in control of the situation, they were above the rules…but perhaps she was mistaken.

She began to wonder if possibly, just maybe, if that knife had hit Monokuma…would she face ‘punishment’? Would her sister truly enforce the rules on her as well? Even though she was needed to realize Junko’s plans of bringing ultimate despair to the students? Was her life in as much danger as her classmates?

As her complexion paled and her frown slipped into a worried expression, the sound of her sister’s laughter shattered her thoughts.

Mukuro was shocked as she swore that Junko’s laughter sounded positively jovial…which was practically unthinkable! There was always a darker and more sinister tone to her chuckles or giggles but there wasn’t a hint of that now! It wasn’t until the laughter slowly subsided into a few amused huffs that this oddity was made clear to her.

“That’s hilarious!” Junko’s voice called out as Monokuma pointed at Mukuro, “The look on your face was priceless! Oh…I haven’t laughed that hard in years!”

Another spontaneous bout of feminine laughter roared from the mechanical bear and Mukuro found herself breathing a huge sigh of relief.

The Ultimate Soldier shook her head and let a melancholy smile overtake her lips. This had just been another of Junko’s tests. And it seemed that, even though she apparently failed, her sister was more than amused with the situation. But more than that, it put Mukuro’s mind at ease, knowing that her sister had only been playing mind games with her, as she always did.

“I’m pleased I could bring you some amusement,” Mukuro said swiftly as she moved over to the bed and sat down, feeling exhausted from the long day.

All at once, the sound of Junko’s laugh ceased and Monokuma looked up at her as she sat there.

“Anyway, you spent a lot of time with Milk Jugs and the Ogre. Did you manage to find out anything useful?” Junko asked through the bear, amusing herself by giving nicknames to her former classmates.

It kept her increasingly deadly boredom at bay, and Mukuro was pleased that, so far, the game was entertaining her sister enough for her not to interfere.

One of the greatest threats to this game was actually Junko’s flippant personality. She technically could shut off the air purifier at any time and kill them all, if she decided that the game was becoming too boring for her. Mukuro was fairly certain it wouldn’t come to that, but then again, considering that the reason Junko decided to host the Mutual Killing Game was to alleviate her boredom, it wasn’t inconceivable.

Sure, the game served the purpose of spreading more despair, but the original intent had simply been to give Junko something to distract herself from her own “lameness”, as she called it. In addition, it fed her need to be surrounded by despair…almost drowning in it as she would watch her former classmates attempt to kill each other in a live broadcast.

Because of this, Mukuro remembered that there had indeed been a purpose to her accepting the girls’ invitation earlier. Junko had instructed her to gather any information she could out of their
classmates, to see how much their personalities would change without certain memories. Not only that, she also wanted to see how much they remembered about their school lives. As in, if they remembered anything at all, it would pose a problem. Plus, she also wished to gauge who among them might be more easily manipulated, if need be.

And that information would hopefully be enough to sate Junko’s thirst for something that didn’t bore her.

“There wasn’t much to garner from either Sakura or Asahina, aside from them rekindling their friendship almost immediately,” Mukuro explained, standing up and beginning to move toward the make-up dresser that Junko had gifted her with.

“Lame. But that makes sense. Those two became friends almost immediately after they met the first time. So, no surprise there,” Junko answered through Monokuma, the bear waddling after her sister. “What about the time you spent in the dining hall with everyone? Learn anything interesting?”

“From what I’ve gathered, none of them have any recollection of the two years we all spent together. It seems that the Memory Eraser you perfected worked just as expected,” Mukuro continued, sitting down at the stool in front of the dresser.

“Well, of course it worked perfectly! We couldn’t have the damn thing screwing up like it did the first time!” the voice of Junko responded before falling eerily silent, although Mukuro knew why.

Junko absolutely refused to even mention the time she had spent as Ryoko Otonashi. Whether it was because it was the single most embarrassing moment of her life, because her amnesiac state made her embrace hope rather than despair; or because it brought up memories of someone that she actually wished to forget, no one could be sure.

Either way, Mukuro didn’t wish to discuss the matter any further. It had been a hard time for her too, believing she had lost her sister to a memory wipe that she agreed to.

And ever since regaining her memories and murdering the Ultimate Neurologist, Junko had been changed. She was still the despair-addicted woman she’d always been, but something far more twisted had awoken. And although she wasn’t sure what it was, Mukuro knew it had to do with the despair her sister had reveled in as she had killed the only man she could ever have loved.

Pushing that thought away for the moment, the Ultimate Soldier cleared her throat and continued, “In any case, there wasn’t much to gleam from most of the students. The only exception would be Taeko Yasuhiro, or rather, Celestia Ludenberg. She imposed a night-time rule upon everyone, even though most of them believe they agreed to it willingly. She’s a frighteningly intelligent adversary—”.

“I already know all that. Or did you forget I’ve been watching?” Junko cut her off as Monokuma pointed to the camera, her tone rife with disappointment. “I want to know if you found a suitable… target, for the first murder.”

Simply using the word ‘target’ was enough to get Mukuro’s attention. The Ultimate Soldier couldn’t help the rush of excitement that abruptly coursed through her veins.

“Out of all of them, the one who will break first and try to ‘Graduate’, will undoubtedly be Celestia Ludenberg,” Mukuro answered with utter conviction as she picked up a sheet of make-up remover.

Monokuma tilted its head at her response. “Oh? I’m surprised you’d think that. Especially considering that we haven’t revealed the first motive to them yet.”

Feeling confident for the first time since the game began, Mukuro rubbed off the layers of foundation
that caked her face as she continued, “Celeste is the Ultimate Gambler and the one who is the most
desperate to get out of here. She knows the risks and will evaluate them accordingly, but she also
doesn’t believe she can lose. Not to mention her initiative of installing the nighttime rule, which will
allow her to move around freely during the evening.”

“Hmm. Hmm.” Monokuma nodded its head in understanding before lifting a hand up to silence her.
“I have no doubt that ‘Celestia Ludenberg’ will attempt to Graduate at some point. However, she’s
far too careful to let herself fall into the trap of being the first murderer.”

Finishing expunging the make-up from her freckled face, Mukuro turned toward the automaton with
a raised brow.

“Why do you say that?” she questioned, pulling the loose tie around her neck over her head and
tossing it aside. Monokuma’s eyes flickered to the discarded accessory for but a moment before
settling back in on Mukuro.

“Victory isn’t something she leaves to chance and there are too many things she doesn’t know,
including most of the conditions of this game. Because of that, she’s going to let someone make
those mistakes for her, so that she can learn from their failures and perfect a method of committing
her own crime without raising suspicion.”

Resting a hand on her chin, the Ultimate Soldier considered her sister’s observation.

“That is a definite possibility. But if not her, then I can’t imagine who might be tempted to commit
murder. As far as they know, the world outside is just as it was before the World’s Most Despair
Inducing Incident. Because of that, none of our classmates truly have the will to kill. At least not
yet,” she speculated aloud, waiting for her sister’s input.

“Are you so sure?” Junko implicated, the menacing grin on Monokuma’s face giving away her glee.
“Trapped in a building they don’t recognize, with total strangers that could slaughter them in their
sleep; combined with the knowledge that they may never see their family and friends again, it makes
for a quite a desperate plea to leave…by any means necessary.”

Now it was Mukuro’s turn to huff. “All of them still believe the world is as it used to be. Meaning
that they still believe the act of murder will be met with harsh punishment. And aside from Byakuya,
none of them believe they could get away with it. The lack of knowledge is acting as a deterrent for
them.”

“But if that’s true, what about Byakuya Togami?” Junko immediately countered with skepticism,
“Your theory doesn’t apply to him, considering he still believes his family controls the world from
behind the scenes. Doesn’t that make him the most susceptible to giving into the temptation?”

That stopped Mukuro for a moment, but it didn’t last long before she shrugged nonchalantly

“It would, if he was motivated enough to leave here immediately. At present, however, he seems far
more interested in the situation he’s found himself in. And until he is given a proper motive that
outweighs his curiosity, I can safely speculate that he will continue to be nothing more than an
observer until he finds the perfect time to attempt his ‘graduation’.”

“That’s true, I suppose. A proper motive is the key to everything,” was Junko’s only response,
strangely quiet as her sister kept speaking.

“Celeste, on the other hand, desires to leave more than anyone else,” Mukuro said plainly, earning a
curious gaze from the automaton bear.
“I’m surprised you came to that conclusion. Her façade of encouraging everyone to adapt almost fooled me…until I saw her rampaging in her room, flinging her pillow and kicking the walls out of sheer fury at being forced to stay here,” Junko spoke through the bear.

A confident smirk crept over Mukuro’s lips as she answered, “It’s precisely because she puts on such a façade that she gives herself away. Besides, her advice on adapting to her surrounding is more for herself than for the others. Like a child desperate to convince an adult that they didn’t steal the last cookie or something to that effect.”

Mukuro expected her sister to counter her, perhaps provide a different theory on who might attempt to ‘graduate’ first. But much to her shock, Junko opted to remain silent, something she rarely ever did. Although perturbed by the new silence, the Ultimate Soldier decided it was best to finish explaining herself.

Moving closer to her bed, Mukuro tugged at the collar of her shirt to cool down before she continued.

“To that extent, Celeste would still desperately hold onto her dream of having the European castle with vampire-esk servants. If she was Taeko instead of Celeste, I wouldn’t think she’d be capable of turning on everyone. But since she’s forgotten the level of trust she put in everyone to keep her name secret…then out of all of our classmates, she’s the one who has the highest susceptibility to giving in to the pressure of ‘Graduation’.”

“Hmm. Hmm,” Monokuma nodded, as if conceding a point before Junko’s voice said, “Then, would you like to make a bet on it? I’m dying to know whose gonna crack first and a little wager is just the thing to tide me over.”

Mukuro gulped on reflex, realizing that her sister was already becoming bored with their little killing game. If she was already having to invent little events like this to entertain herself, then it wouldn’t be long before Junko decided to interfere with the game…personally.

Hiding her anxiety with a smirk, Mukuro shook her head and answered, “I’m afraid not. Unlike you or Celeste, I have no interest in gambling. Besides, isn’t the idea of betting on an unsuspecting person’s life more than enough to bring you despair?”

“Upupupupupupu! That’s interesting! I never considered that!” Junko announced, imitating Monokuma’s signature laugh.

“I’m sure you didn’t,” a disbelieving Mukuro muttered under her breath but said no more. For the time being, she’d pervaded her sister boredom and shifted the conversation to keep her entertained.

Taking a moment to unbutton her blouse, she pulled the top half of her outfit from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Unhooking the clip on her short skirt, the Ultimate Soldier shed the garment and was left only in her undergarments – the lacy bra and pretty pink panties her sister had assigned her to wear.

Letting a relived sigh escape her as she plopped down on the bed near Monokuma, Mukuro stared up at the ceiling for a moment before she heard her sister calling out to her.

“So, how did it feel?” Junko abruptly asked, making her sister turn toward the bear.

“How did what feel?” Mukuro said with a raised brow, to which she received a scoff.

Hopping up onto the bed and spinning around to stare at her, Monokuma continued to speak for Junko, “The despair, the despair, silly! The despair at being completely forgotten by all of your
former friends and having to develop a persona that you have little to no experience understanding? How is the despair of being erased from this world?"

For a moment, Mukuro didn’t speak…No, she couldn’t speak.

Until those words reached her ears, not once had the Ultimate Soldier even considered the implications of what her sister had said. She hadn’t even registered that her existence had, for all intensive purposes, been erased. She had so completely thrown herself into the role of Junko that she had failed to realize that she had effectively killed Mukuro.

The Ultimate Soldier had willingly severed ties with her former friends, the mercenary unit that she’d called family, the school she’d called home, and now even her true self; all to fulfill her little sister’s desires. However, it wasn’t until this very moment that she realized that she had, of her own free will, discarded all of the things that made her into who she was today.

Only now did a deep pain sting in her chest as she fully comprehended what she’d done.

And even though she knew she couldn’t hide it, Mukuro still put on a stern and unaffected visage as she answered, “Honesty, I never thought of it until now. So, this is the despair of being completely cut off from you own identity…”

“Exciting! Isn’t it?!” Junko’s voice resonated from Monokuma as the bear hopped up and down with utter glee.

“Exciting? Is that what I’m feeling?” Mukuro asked herself as her sister’s words sank in. “No…no, that’s not it. This isn’t excitement or any kind of joy. It’s more like…a feeling of… emptiness…”

A deep hollow pressure ached in Mukuro’s chest as the despair began to engulf her. Her sister had described this feeling to her before, this pain that came from deep within and threatened to consume you. However, something was missing from her sister’s explanation…

Junko had spoke of a feeling of unparalleled ecstasy that would give the body and mind more pleasure than you could possibly imagine. It sounded heavenly and Mukuro indeed wished to experience it. She had joined Fenrir in pursuit of this and fought through so much hope to reach despair. And yet, even now when she was threatened with non-existence and despair closed in on her…she felt only the pain and none of the pleasure.

Why, then, was it not coming to her? Why had it never come to her, no matter how much despair she inflicted on herself and others? Why was she denied that immeasurable feeling of excitement and contentment when her sister could revel in it practically every day?!

“I see that you’re enjoying yourself,” Junko’s voice resonated through the half and half bear, filled to the brim with a mixture of elation and jealousy. “I wish I could be the one to be forgotten, unloved, throw away like filthy garbage! Ahhh, just imagining it sends shiiivers down my spine!”

Mukuro’s teeth sank hard into her lower lip, a trickle of blood emerging a moment later as she fought to keep from breaking. She wanted nothing more than to question what her sister found so pleasurable about this but knew the consequences of such a foolish action. If her sister discovered that she felt absolutely no satisfaction while in the throes of despair, then it would only serve to give Junko yet another method to torture her with.

And more horrifying, it would utterly disappoint her despair loving sister and Mukuro would do anything to keep that from happening.

Swallowing the guilt and pain, the Ultimate Soldier widened her lips into a lustful grin as she said,
“Ahhh, this…despair! It’s more than I ever imagined…I…Ahhhhh…”

Shame overtook Mukuro as she was forced to fake arousal at this monumental agony. She wrapped her hands around her semi-nude body and gripped herself tightly, a hint of drool mixed with blood running down her chin. Her fake crimson nails dug deep into her sides, holding in the torment as best she could while keeping up appearances.

However, it seemed that her actions had been successful as Monokuma chuckled to itself before it leapt off the bed and began waddling toward the door.

“I’ll leave you to your business,” Junko’s voice echoed in the room as the bear approached the door. “You deserve some private time…”

A momentary feeling of relief washed over Mukuro as she heard that, ready to end the charade. However, as Monokuma reached the door and stood on its toes to reach the handle, he abruptly spun around and extended its claws menacingly.

“I certainly hope you enjoy this despair to its fullest. You may not have time to revel in it for much longer,” the voice of Junko warned as the bear angrily stared toward Mukuro.

The harsh and deep jealousy in Junko’s voice sent a fearsome chill down the Ultimate Soldier’s spine.

“W-What do you mean—?”

“Sorry! No more time! Gotta go!” Monokuma cut her off sharply, suddenly returning to his usual cutey bear voice. Opening the door and slipping out, the demented bear stuck its head in one last time to say, “And just to let you know…I enjoyed your little performance tonight and can’t wait to see what you’ll do next!”

Mukuro froze at those words, unable to move a single muscle. The implication the bear had just spoken left her breathless as she tried, in vain, to assure herself that her sister hadn’t seen through her ruse, hadn’t discovered that the despair she was feeling caused her nothing but agony and pain.

And in all honestly, she wasn’t even sure if Junko cared if she had felt that pleasure in the first place. The maniacal grin on Monokuma’s face reflected how elated her sister had to be at that moment and it was in this state of humiliation that Mukuro realized that she had just failed another of Junko’s tests.

Before she could say a word, Monokuma slid out of the room and slammed the door loudly, leaving the distraught and shaken Mukuro to wallow in the despair of uncertainty and fear.

“…At least these wounds aren’t recent,” she surmised as she continued to examine her damaged
hands. Strangely, the more she investigated, the calmer she began to feel.

Judging by the extent of the scarred tissue, it was obvious that her hands had suffered third degree burns, possibly even worse. The damage was extensive but didn’t seem to hinder her mobility much, flexing her fingers as quickly as possible to test the severity of nerve damage. More than likely, these wounds were treated not long after being inflicted, or else there would have been more hindrances.

Unable to tear her eyes away from the horrific burns, a single thought was burned into her mind.

“How…could I ever forget this?”

Over the course of the next few days, everyone spread out into their own separate groups to investigate the school. Being limited to only the first floor, everyone became familiar with the layout of the school rather quickly. However, that also showed them how small their world truly was.

Despite that, everyone was determined to keep their hopes up by preoccupying themselves with something or another. Behind her guise as “Junko”, Mukuro watched on as her classmates prepared for an ordeal they had no idea how to handle.

She watched Makoto, being led around by Sayaka as his ‘assistant’, take a decorative sword back to his room. She overheard Yamada requesting to be named the one to take out the trash, for ulterior motives no doubt. She observed Leon, Kiyotaka and Mondo as they continued to test the doors and windows, hoping to find a weakness.

At one point, due to keeping up appearances, Mukuro had a cup of tea with Celeste and they were soon joined by Sakura and Asahina, who couldn’t find anything useful to help them escape. She held back a groan of discontent as Yasuhiro continued to foolishly believe the whole ordeal was merely a joke arranged by the school.

In fact, the only people she seemed to see so little of were Kyoko, who spent her time off alone and possibly investigating the school, Byakuya, who elected to stay as far away from the others as possible, and Toko, who mainly stayed within her room unless called upon.

Due to the lack of motivation her fellow classmates had to give into murderous temptation, Mukuro found herself becoming quite anxious and decided to separate herself from her classmates for a time. To that extent, she decided to spend her time in the laundry room today, washing her unmentionables that she felt uncomfortable wearing.

All the while, Mukuro couldn’t stop thinking about her sister’s words from that night:

“I wish I could be the one to be forgotten, unloved, throw away like filthy garbage!”

Simply recalling the memories of those words cut her to the core. The strange thing was, she wasn’t quite sure why. She had willingly chosen the path of despair, betrayed all who trusted her to follow after her sister’s ambition. She was one of the Ultimate Despair Sisters, she should be reveling in all the lovely despair surrounding her.

Instead, all she could feel was that suffocating pressure in her chest that made her want to scream with frustration. To make matters worse, the notion of being completely forgotten had never upset her until Junko mentioned it.

“Dammit…why did she have to bring that up now?” the Ultimate Solder whispered to herself. “If
she had just kept quiet…then maybe…”

Mukuro sulked as she knew the answer to her own question. She hadn’t felt any such despair since the Mutual Killing Game began, having been too busy throwing herself into the role of ‘Junko Enoshima’. Obviously, her sister didn’t want her to forget the reason they were going through so much trouble.

They were the only ones capable of spreading Ultimate Despair to the world…and to each other. It was a duty that only she and Junko could accomplish. She should feel proud of her work…but she didn’t! Bringing despair to anyone, even herself, brought no such feelings of accomplishment or pride…only that crushing pressure that threatened to consume her.

Just like the laundry spinning in the machine before her, there were so many questions piled up in her mind, swirling around in a flurry of unexplainable frustration. Watching her wet clothes slosh against each other, she did her best to conceal her rage as she felt her mind going in even more circles than the laundry.

Finally after what seemed like an eternity, the washer dinged and the spinning clothes came to an abrupt stop. However, unlike the laundry, Mukuro wasn’t finished discovering the answer to her questions and for some unexplainable reason, she felt as if the washer was mocking her.

“Dammit all!!” she shouted as something inside her snapped.

Without thinking, she slammed her fist into the window of the washing machine, the loud clacking echoing all around the small room.

She breathed heavily through gritted teeth as she seethed, “Why is this happening to me?! I never asked for any of this crap! Why the hell do I have to be feeling like—?!”

“H-Hey, Junko…?”

Mukuro’s eyes bulged and she quickly spun around to see Makoto Naegi standing in the doorway. As she would expect, he wore a nervous smile that did little to hide his concern.

Immediately she resumed her sister’s flippant persona and said, “What?! Can’t you see I’m busy?!”

She almost cursed again as she realized she couldn’t control her anger and was lashing out in a way that, if Makoto had recalled the real Junko, he’d have been able to see through her guise. Luckily for her, the herbivore boy merely flinched at her words before cautiously inching his way into the laundry room.

“Y-Yeah, I can see that but…I heard a loud bang and thought that, you know, something might be wrong…?” he answered carefully, obviously trying not to probe too far into her business.

Mukuro gritted her teeth and averted her gaze. Of course Makoto would come running if he thought someone was in trouble. Even though he could barely defend himself if need be, he still found ways to butt into other people’s business.

It might have been endearing, if it wasn’t so incredibly reckless and stupid.

Forcing herself to be composed, the disguised girl took a deep breath before letting out an even deeper sigh. She shouldn’t have been surprised that nosey, friendly, Makoto would be the one to find her like this. After all, he had a knack for being in the wrong place at the right time.

“Right, that makes sense. I guess I was being a bit too loud,” she shamefully admitted, hoping that
statement was enough to satisfy him.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t.

“So, what happened? Did you throw a red sock in with your whites?” Makoto purposefully joked, giving one of his signature pleasant smiles.

“…Something like that,” she grunted, keeping her eyes away from him. “What do you want anyway?”

Nervously scratching his head, Makoto answered, “I, uh, just wanted to see if everything was okay.”

“Well, I’m fine. Are we done here?” she dropped another hint at wanting to be left alone but he didn’t seem to register it.

“Actually, I was kind of hoping we could…you know, talk for a bit. Get to know each other and stuff,” he hopefully suggested, obviously not accustomed to asking to talk with other people.

If she wasn’t in the position she was in, she might have appreciated this trite attempt at cheering her up. However, at the moment, his upbeat and pleasant attitude only grated on her nerves.

Didn’t he realize how desperate his situation was? Was he really so stupid enough to put his faith in people he had ‘just met’ the other day? And did he honestly believe that no one was willing to kill to get out of his hell hole?!

Strangely enough, she got her answer to these questions quicker than she would have thought.

“I know it can’t be easy for someone like you to be cooped up here. I mean, it’s not easy for any of us and I bet you’re worried about your responsibilities as a model…but you can’t let that get to you,” Makoto insisted, his tone tempting her to gaze toward him.

However, she fought off that urge and kept her eyes focused on the laundry machine in front of her, mockingly scoffing at his comment. Makoto either didn’t notice her distain or simply chose to push past it, because he decided to continue nonetheless.

“I know it’ll be hard, but we all have to work together and just tough it out for now,” he suggested, obviously doing his best to cheer her up. “I mean, I know it’s no walk in the park but, at least living here isn’t as horrible as—”.

“Are you for real?” she harshly interrupted, earning a light gasp from him. Finally, turning toward him, she scowled fiercely and shouted, “How can anyone live like this? I’m going freaking crazy from boredom here and you’re telling me to just tough it out?! It’s impossible!”

Mukuro watched as the Ultimate Lucky Student flinched at her words, immediately falling silent. Honestly, she wasn’t entirely sure if her frustration was born out of her desire to keep up her ‘Junko’ act or if she was still bothered by what she’d been thinking about before. Either way, she was in full-throttle and wouldn’t let anything stop her now.

Pointing up at the nearby camera, she shouted, “Hey, whatever dumb bastard trapped us here! Let us out of here! Just tell us what we have to do to get out! Are you listening?!”

Silence filled the room after her tirade until she let out a deep sigh.

“Nothing, huh? That pisses me off!”
Her eyes flicked over to a round object sitting on the nearby table. It appeared to be a glass ball, probably belonging to Yasuhiro, resting comfortably on a decorative pillow. An idea formed in her mind and without hesitation, she reached out and grasped the ball.

Out of the corner of her peripheral, she saw Makoto’s eyes bulge as she reared her arm back to throw the glass orb at the camera. A smirk spread over her lips as she felt a surge of satisfaction. This would teach that hopeful little boy that just having a positive attitude and kind words wouldn’t be enough to—

“You can’t!!”

Suddenly, something wrapped around her arm and a great weight pulled it down, causing her to let the glass ball slip from her grasp. Caught off-guard by the abrupt shift in weight, she felt her body fall backward toward the floor. Mukuro reacted instantly and spun around, using the force of the fall to slam whatever had latched onto her arm into the floor.

On instinct, Mukuro was about to twist her elbow and inflict more damage when a weak grunt reached her ears. Her sky-blue irises bulged as she saw that she was now pinning Makoto harshly to the ground. Despite the obvious pain he was experiencing due to her joint pressing against his abdomen, he still desperately held onto her arm.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Mukuro shouted at him, trying to free her arm. However, Makoto tightened his grip and furiously held on.

“Y-You need to calm down, Junko!” the Ultimate Lucky Student insisted, grunting from her continuous attempt to retract her arm. “Remember what happened to Mondo! I don’t want you to get hurt!”

All at once, Mukuro’s struggles ceased and she stared, wide-eyed, at the boy restraining her.

Was he…trying to protect her? Why the hell would he do that? Even considering Makoto’s soft-hearted nature, she’d never seen him act this desperately before. At least not since they had arrived here. Jumping in between Mondo and Byakuya on their first day, and now physically tackling her to stop her from violating a rule…it didn’t make sense.

He’d never been so reckless when they were at the Academy, so why now?

Could it be that the explosion that occurred when Mondo attacked Monokuma instilled something in him? Did the threat of their lives actually being in danger cause him to have a radical change in behavior?

If so, it was the exact opposite of when Mukuro had first been exposed to life-threatening dangers.

The first time her life was in danger, she thought only of her own survival, killing her attacker with the knife they had planned to end her life with. At first she was surprised at how easy it had been to take a life, but now, it was second nature. To her, to live meant for others to die…it had always been that way. It was a fact of life that absolutely everyone understood.

Then…why did Makoto, whose life was threatened by the killing game, continue to put other’s ahead of himself? Why did he have the strength to try and help others but didn’t have the drive to protect himself?

These thoughts left Mukuro in a state of utter confusion for nearly an entire minute as she stared blankly at Makoto as he continued to grip her arm.
Seeing that she had calmed down somewhat, Makoto finally felt confident enough to release her. The moment he did, the disguised woman finally came to her senses and pushed herself away harshly, causing him to groan as her elbow dug into him moment longer before being retracted. Propping himself up onto his elbows, he could only watch as “Junko” quickly rose to her feet.

“Why do you care?” Mukuro insisted, fixing her clothes and glaring down at him. “It’s not like we’re friends or anything. So, what if I decided to break a rule? It’s my decision and no one else’s!”

A hint of shock registered on Makoto’s face at those words and he lowered his gaze away from her. Mukuro almost smirked, realizing that he had finally begun to understand how powerless he truly was here. Maybe now he would get that no matter how hard he tried, he’d never be able to stop the —

“Maybe so,” he interrupted her thoughts, his hazel eyes looking up at her with such resolution that she almost felt her heart skip. “But if I just stood by and let you do something that I know will get you killed, then it would be the same as if I killed you myself! And I won’t let that happen! I’ll do whatever takes to help everyone! I won’t let any of my friends die!”

…

…

…

If anyone other than Makoto Naegi had said those words to her, Mukuro would have swiftly countered them with verbal jab before briskly walking away. She would have kept up her guise completely, not letting even a hint of shock show through. And she certainly wouldn’t have felt that strange stinging sensation in her chest return…like it was right now.

However, because it was Makoto and because of how determined and hopeful he appeared, Mukuro couldn’t stop herself from letting out the tiniest gasp. And an instant later, a perplexed looked overtook her features, unsure of why that confusing chest pain had resurfaced upon hearing him call her his friend.

Makoto, the boy who smiled at her even back during their academy days, was still able to smile at her and make her feel like it was okay to reciprocate.

Only it wasn’t.

In front of her, she could see the security camera pointed down at them, fixated on them as if the mastermind wanted to get a closer look. As if a cold bucket of water had doused her, Mukuro’s senses quickly reset and she managed to pull herself together. A deep frown formed on her face as she glared down at the still smiling boy.

“Idiot. We’re not friends. So don’t act like it.”

Her cold, harsh words instantly shattered the warm smile that Makoto had given her, making his features sink into a perplexed and hurt expression. Without even letting him say another word, Mukuro turned on a heel, abandoning her laundry as she practically sped toward the door. Furiously flinging the door open, she paused only for a moment to glare at him one final time.

“From now on, just stay away from me!” she shouted as she moved into the hall, slamming the door behind her. She thought she might have heard him calling out for her to stop but she hoped it was merely her imagination.
As she made her way down the hall toward her dorm room, she clutched her chest and gritted her teeth, willing that ache in her chest to pass quickly. All the while, a single thought consumed her mind.

“Stupid Makoto! All of your friends will be dead soon anyway…and so will you.”

Sitting in the monitoring chair and watching as her sister sped into her room, Junko held a very shocked expression. Before long, it slowly morphed into a frown and from there it shifted into angrily grit teeth.

“Okay…what the hell was that, Mukuro?!”

Her sister had completely lost it, the guise had almost completely slipped and if anyone but Makoto had been there, they would have noticed in a heartbeat! Flying into that rage earlier and nearly throwing something at the camera was totally something the real Junko might have done but storming out into the hall while shouting made her look like a drama queen!

And while many would expect the Ultimate Fashionista to be a drama queen, Junko knew that she was far above that kind of petty crap and would have simply put that pathetic little herbivore boy in his place with a few choice words.

If Junko had been there herself, she might have given him a serious look and warned him about how she could have smothered him with her undergarments and no one would be the wiser. Then she would have pretended it was a joke for a second, but then would actually do it just to get the game going!

Hell, Mukuro could have done that or even something better!

But what did she do? Ruined the perfect opportunity to either start the killings or at the very least, make Makoto fear for his life so that he either was tempted to kill later or would get himself killed! And to top it off, she let her disguise slip and that could cost both of them the entire—

Suddenly, Junko unclenched her teeth and let out a great sigh.

“Ahhh, I’m tired of being angry…”

Getting up from her chair, Junko’s hips swayed as she walked over to a box sitting on a desk only a few feet from her. Pulling the top open, a large number of DVD cases, all labeled with a student’s name, were now visible. Reaching in, she fumbled through them until she found the one she was looking for – “Junko Enoshima”.

A malicious grin spread over her face as she said, “I think I’ll make some…modifications!”

Chapter End Notes

Greetings everyone! This chapter was a mainly about fleshing out the relationship between the Despair Sisters. And this certainly won’t be the last time they butt heads! Also, my beta Dixxy Mouri (or just Dixxy) should be updating her story, Haunted, around this time as well. Please check it out, she’s been a great help with my story…
plus now I will never see mashed potatoes the same way ever again…(read her fic to understand).

I hope you enjoyed it and I’ll see you all in the next update!
Ch 1 Act 3

Chapter Summary

The first motive is revealed and the students feel the chill of despair...each and every one of them.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is VERY spoiler heavy. If you haven't finished both games or know much about Danganronpa: Another Episode, then there will be a few spoilers here. You have been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 1

Act 3

“It’s settled then! We’ll all meet here each morning for breakfast!” Kiyotaka proclaimed to everyone, ignoring the awkward glares he received from those who had opposed the morning ritual he’d imposed on everyone.

A few of the more unruly students, such as Leon and Mondo, grunted with grim acceptance of this newfound rule, obviously only agreeing to it to make the Ultimate Moral Compass shut his trap. Asahina and Sakura remained silent, thinking this idea would be good to bring everyone together. And the more laid back students, Hifumi, Junko, and Yasuhiro, decided to go with the flow rather than voice objection.

Meanwhile, Sayaka, Chihiro and Fukawa, the more reserved of the students, simply nodded in agreement, not finding much fault with the idea. Makoto also didn’t voice objection, but that was because he honestly believed this would be a good way to prevent anyone from falling to the temptations Monokuma had laid out for them.

Finally, the highly intellectual students, Byakuya, Celeste and Kyoko, opted to remain silent. Voicing their opinions on the matter wouldn’t serve a purpose and either way, the plan had some merit.

Even so, that didn’t mean that they weren’t cautious of this new situation they had found themselves in.

Standing next to a table far in the back, Kyoko couldn’t stop herself from pondering Kiyotaka’s motives. Was he truly trying to unite everyone, as he said, or was this simply a ploy to learn the strengths and weaknesses of others?
His earnest nature and title would suggest otherwise but for some reason, Kyoko just couldn’t
discount the possibility. However, even she had to admit that he was more than likely genuine in his
methods. With that in mind, she made a mental note to keep a closer eye on him from time to time,
just to be safe.

Glancing around the room, Kyoko took in the faces of the other students and frowned. Most of them
were wearing their hearts on their sleeves, openly showing their fear and increasing desperation.
Only those like the overly confident Byakuya Togami or the naturally deceitful Celestia Ludenberg
were exempt to this observation, herself included.

In her case, however, it was even more important not to show any weakness in front of them.
Because she was missing something that no one else seemed to go without. She had noticed it almost
immediately, but then again, who wouldn’t?

After all, it’s not every day you wake up in a hellish situation with little to no memories of your past.

“A fine time for amnesia…almost as if it were orchestrated by someone. I can’t even remember my
parent’s faces or what I’ve been doing for the last few years. Or, for that matter, why I am even here
at this school.”

No one seemed to mind that she had elected to wait until everyone else had finished gathering their
food before getting anything herself. And when she had collected her meal, once again she ventured
back to her lonely table to eat. All the while, she kept up her calm demeanor and acted as if nothing
was wrong…but it was.

“What’s odd is that it seems to be certain memories. I remember parts of my childhood, my name
and that I was accepted into this school, even if the reason eludes me. But…what was my title?” she
thought to herself as she ate in silence.

These questions whirled around in her mind and though she kept herself from being overwhelmed by
them, she still felt quite uneasy. Just as she sat alone at the back table, Kyoko herself felt cut off from
the others.

She couldn’t reveal that she didn’t remember her title or that she had amnesia. There was enough
tension between everyone and she didn’t want to increase their fears or apprehensions. Not to
mention that revealing such a fact would instantly cast suspicion on her and would alienate her even
more than before.

Unconsciously, she gripped her gloved hands together. Her eyes drifted down to her form fitting
gloves and she shuddered as she recalled removing them the other night. The horrific burns had left
her shocked…no, terrified. Not because of their appearance but because, no matter how hard she
tried to remember, she just couldn’t recall how she’d gotten such a life-changing injury.

How could she forget something as traumatizing as severe burns on both her hands?!

Losing one’s memory is a frightening enough ordeal, but having to cope with that loss while being
forced to survive a killing game…would undoubtedly break anyone’s spirit. However, simply
acknowledging that fact is what was keeping Kyoko Kirigiri sane.

And it was for that reason that, in the next few minutes, she was able to keep her composure.

“All right then, now that we’re all agreed, I’d like to make a personal request of all of you!” Kiyotaka
continued shouting even as his classmates began their meals.

“If we are to get along and establish rapport with each other, then it’s necessary to get familiar with everyone. To that effect, from this moment on, I would like to be addressed by the nickname ‘Taka’.”

“And why the hell would we want to do that?” the skeptical voice of Mondo called out, his mouth already full of food.

Glaring fiercely at his delinquent classmate, Taka puffed out his chest and answered, “So that we can feel more comfortable with each other! My mother always calls me Taka and it is rather soothing…in a sense.”

Despite his demands, it was obvious that ‘Taka’ was rather uncomfortable with being called by a nickname. He was doing his best to smile as if it didn’t bother him but it was obvious that his attempt to unite everyone was an utter failure.

Or at least it would have if Aoi hadn’t stood up and said, “Well, in that case…”

Everyone stopped and turned as she spoke, clearly surprised that she had spoken up at all.

“As you guys know, I’m Aoi Asahina…but my friends just call me Hina. So, feel free to call me that too! Let’s all get along everybody!”

For some reason, Hina’s cheerful smile and affectionate tone seemed infectious, almost immediately resolving much of the tension that everyone was feeling. Even the stern faced Byakuya was feeling slightly more at ease among these commoners, if only because everyone was now silent.

Unfortunately for him, that did not last long.

“T-That’s the way…Hina!” Taka expressed loudly, trying to get used to not properly addressing his classmate. “Anyone else?

“Yeah! I have a long name too!” the overly lazy voice of Yasuhiro called out, earning a good deal of eye rolls and grumbles. “I’m Yasuhiro Hagakure but you can just call me Hiro from now on!”

A collective groan sounded from most of the students but Hiro didn’t seem to notice, as he was too busy laughing at how cool he thought he was being.

It was then that a blessing in disguise abruptly coughed violently, making everyone turn and blanch as they saw none other than Monokuma sitting in one of the chairs in the back of the room.

“Bleagh! How can you people stomach such melodramatic crap? I feel like vomiting dead puppies just listening to you people! I mean, if it were me, I’d be using my fork to poke out a few people’s eyes by now!” the demented bear said before groaning loudly once again.

Being one of the closest ones to the bear, Toko immediately leapt out of her chair and shouted, “Y-Y-You! What do y-you w-want?!”

Instead of directly answering her question, Monokuma pulled itself up to its feet, standing on the seat of the chair as the rest of the students turned to face him. All of them were instantly on guard, with Mondo and Sakura taking a step toward the bear while keeping everyone behind them. Seeing their petrified faces obviously pleased the half and half bear, and it slightly chuckled to itself as it stood on the seat.
Once the bear was certain that everyone’s eyes were on itself, Monokuma finally answered, “You know, I’ve been trying to figure it out…but I just can’t. Maybe it’s because I’m a bear and I have no real human emotions but…since your lives here have already begun and a couple of days have gone by, I can’t understand why nobody’s killed anyone yet!”

“Of course we haven’t killed each other!” Makoto furiously interrupted, slamming his hands down on the table in front of him. “There’s nothing you can say that’ll make us want to kill anybody!”

Even as Makoto shouted at him, it was obvious by the bored look on Monokuma’s face that he wasn’t even listening to what the herbivore boy was saying to him. Instead, he suddenly snapped his head up, as if inspiration had just descended upon his despair inducing mind.

“Wait, I see now! Ding! Ding! Ding! I’ve got it! I just realized that there is one very important piece missing from this scenario! And that would be…a ‘motive’! I need to give you all a proper ‘motive’ to get this game a-going!”

As the entire class paled at Monokuma’s announcement, Mukuro did her best to be as surprised as her classmates. It had only been a matter of time and it seemed that Junko had finally gotten bored enough to bring out their first motive.

“It’s a bit sooner than I expected, but I suppose this is Junko we’re dealing with,” she thought as she pretended to be as shocked as her classmates.

After telling everyone to go to the A/V room, Mukuro watched as Mondo volunteered Makoto to be the one to go and confirm if the bear was telling the truth. And as the Ultimate Lucky Student found himself unable to refuse, she couldn’t deny that it was kind of amusing to see him so flustered.

“Serves him right for trying to interfere with my business,” Mukuro thought with a hidden smile, still a little ruffled over what had happened in the laundry room the day before. “Maybe this will teach him that not everything works out just because you want it to. If not, I may have to teach him a lesson myself!”

At the time, Mukuro had absolutely no way of knowing just how accurate her predictions could be.

-In the A/V Room-

Makoto Naegi’s mind and body froze as he stared at the image on the screen. Only a moment ago, his family had been there, cheering him on with such enthusiasm that he had momentarily forgotten where he was and what was happening. And then, the blackness of the screen startled him and the next image is what made his blood run cold.

His wonderful and beautiful home was torn to pieces, the windows shattered and his family nowhere to be seen. And then, those horrific words appeared on the screen…

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

A surge of desperate anger rose up inside the normally optimistic boy and he furiously smashed his fists against the video console that had shown him such despair.
“God Dammit!!! I have to… I have to make sure everyone is okay!!!”

The Ultimate Lucky Student had no idea that standing just behind him, completely befuddled by his change in attitude, were the rest of his classmates. For a moment, no one said anything, even the stoic Kyoko was at a momentary loss.

That was when Sayaka, who had led everyone there and was standing in front, snapped out of her trance.

“M-Makoto… What happened?” she asked timidly, unsure of what could make her very hopeful friend radically change like this.

Although still in shock, Makoto’s head snapped up at hearing her and he slowly turned to see his classmates still staring at him. He felt ashamed that they had seen him so desperate and full of fear, when he had been the one telling them all to stay calm and work together. However, after seeing that video, his mind was in a state of disbelief and he wasn’t quite sure if anything that was happening was still real.

Without a word, he pointed to the box of DVDs that Monokuma had left them, the ‘motive’ the bear had promised to show them.

A moment passed before everyone silently approached the box, taking out the disk marked with their own name. Everyone dispersed and everyone paled as they watched the images unfold before them.

“Good luck at your new school, honey! Don’t get into bigger trouble with the yakuza and remember to change your clothes, it’s hard making new friends when you smell like incense. Oh, and for the love of all that is holy, DON’T GET HELD BACK AGAIN!”

Hiro didn’t understand why everyone seemed to so terrified of these DVDs. I mean, it was nothing but a nice, heart-warming video message from his beautiful and (for the most part) loving mother, Hiroko. Briefly looking up from his console, the Ultimate Clairvoyant watched as his classmates faces began to twist in horror. He was just about to take his headphones off and shout to Asahina, who was a few feet away, when a hissing noise filled his ears.

Snapping his head back to his own screen, Hiro’s irises widened as he saw the new image.

The camera that had been recording his mother had been knocked over and sounds of a struggle could be heard. A piercing scream rang out and Hiro couldn’t stop himself from smacking both hands on the screen and leaning in. And then, something fell in front of the overturned recording device and he instantly recognized it as his mother.

Hiroko, her eyes wide with terror, scrambled to get away from something off camera. Hiro was forced to watch as his mother’s once smiling face upturned in fearful panic. All at once, two pairs of hands shot out and grasped her legs, pulling her roughly and dragging her off camera. She turned to face the lens one last time and as she opened her mouth, either to scream or shout something, the screen blackened.

Before Hiro could even think, that sickly sweet voice of the headmaster called out:

“Oh dear! It seems that 30% accuracy in fortune telling was just enough for our Ultimate Clairvoyant NOT to see this coming! Oh me, oh my, whatever happened to poor Yasuhiro’s bombshell of a mother!”

Less than a moment later, those ominous words appeared before him.
“Meoooooow…”

For a long stretch of time, Celeste could only stare blankly at the video screen. She had been expecting some sort of threatening message and feared that someone may have discovered her true name and identity. The last thing she expected was to see a pudgy black cat with a frilly collar glaring at her through the camera lens.

However, it wasn’t just any feline that was caught on film. This fine specimen was none other than Grand Bois Cheri Ludenberg, a most beloved pet of Celeste’s.

Having been forced to leave her treasured companion at home, due to the academy not permitting pets unless they were tied to one’s Ultimate Title, Celeste never expected to see his adorable face here. She fought back the feeling of relief that rose up inside her, already knowing that the spoiled feline’s appearance was an ill omen.

And just as she guessed, Monokuma’s voice quickly came through her headphones.

“Ah, the majestic house cat. Such a delightful and heartwarming little ball of fur that surely wishes to see its mistress again.”

Abruptly, Grand Bois Cheri Ludenberg hissed loudly as a shadow loomed over him. With speed unlike anything Celeste had ever seen, her beloved cat leapt out of view and could be heard clawing and hissing for several moments. The Ultimate Gamble foolishly allowed the faintest smirk to grace her lips before the horrific sound of a feline yelp reached her ears.

It was quickly followed by a smashing noise that sounded as if a metal pipe had just struck a particularly large mass of fur. Celeste’s milky white skin became even paler as the shadow once again loomed over the camera. The screen began to darken but just before it faded to black, a frilly collar with a fresh bloodstain flashed in front of the camera.

Despite every single command that her brain sent her, Celeste couldn’t stop the terrified gasp that escaped her. Her beloved feline companion…the only real friend she had ever known…the only creature in this world she had shared her life-long dream with was…was…!

It was then that Monokuma’s dulcet tones came back.

“Oh don’t freak out! The kitty’s not dead…I think? If only there was a way to be sure, a way for Miss Ludenberg to go home and see her beloved little furball again. Oh wait! There is!”

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

Deep down inside, buried beneath a mountain of false pretenses and practiced mannerisms…Taeko Yasuhiro burned with a furious rage.

“You little bitch! Whoever you are...for what you’ve done to Grand Bois Cheri Ludenberg…you’re fucking dead!”

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*
Leon honestly snickered as he looked at the monitor in front of him. On the screen was an obviously hastily put together video of his old middle school baseball, standing on the field next to their old school. They all crowded together to fit into the frame and from off-screen, persistent shouting could be heard.

“Oh, come on, guys! We only get one shot at this! Just bite the bullet and huddle up! For Leon!”

The Ultimate Baseball Star smirked as he recognized the voice of his overly energetic cousin and wasn’t surprised when she suddenly appeared before the lens. Her blonde hair was tied in a bow and she gave an enthusiastic grin as she moved to join the team. Clearing her throat, the former manager of the team brushed off her dress before staring directly at the camera.

“We know it’ll be hard getting used to Hope’s Peak. But we all know how hard you’ve worked for it! You’re gonna do amazing Leon! And even though you’re a bit lazy and don’t need to practice…”

Suddenly, as one, the rest of the team joined in and shouted:

“Don’t give up on baseball, Leon! We know you can do it! Take it all the way to the nationals!”

Leon chuckled to himself and slightly lowered his head; it was just like his cousin to pull this kind of stunt. If they had been standing in front of him, declaring their determination for him, he would have merely shrugged it off playfully. But here, trapped in this school, that little bit of encouragement resonated deep in Leon’s chest and he felt lighter than he had for—

Abruptly, a hissing noise flooded Leon’s ears and his eyes shot to screen to see the image shifting into a nightmare.

The once peaceful ball field was now littered with the bodies of Leon’s former teammates. Blood-stained and beaten, none of his friends seemed to be moving at all. Dented and bloody baseball bats lay scattered around the field, filling the Ultimate Baseball Star with utter horror. However, the most frightening thing wasn’t what could be seen…but what couldn’t.

Leon’s eyes frantically scanned the entire field through the screen and while his stomach churned as he looked at each and every corpse, the one he failed to find among them was his cousin, Kanon Nakajima.

It was then that the hated bear’s voice came through the headset:

“Would you look at that? It seems that after you left them, Leon, you’re team just fell to pieces… literally! Oh, but it seems that one member of the team seems to be missing. A certain Ultimate’s little cousin is nowhere to be found! I wonder whatever happened to her?”

Even before the words came up on the screen, Leon smashed his hands against the monitor and screamed with rage.

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

“…What…what the hell is this?” Mondo questioned aloud as he looked at his monitor.

On the screen, his gang, the Crazy Diamonds, had their bikes all lined up and were revving their engines furiously. All of them wore a similar duster that bore their gangs name on the back and strung above them, supported by two poles, was a long paper sign that read:
Give ‘em Hell, Leader!

Just then, one of the bikers kicked his stand up and dismounted his motorcycle. He brazenly walked up toward the camera, stopping just in front of it with a cocky grin on his face and his arms folded. Mondo instantly recognized him as his number two guy: Takemichi Yukimaru.

“Yo, Leader! We know you’ve got your own problems to deal with, bein’ in that new school with all those weirdos and all. But we wanted to let you know that, no matter where you go or what you do…you’ll always be our Badass Boss! And if you ever have need of the Crazy Diamonds! We got your back!”

Despite knowing how it would look if his classmates saw him, Mondo didn’t fight the tiny smirk that stretched over his lips, a hint of moisture in the corner of his eyes. His boys’ display and Takemichi’s words resonated deep in his soul and for the first time since being trapped here, Mondo felt that he could stay strong for—

Suddenly, a huge explosion came rattling through the headphones and Mondo practically slammed his face into the screen as he leaned in.

His gang was visibly startled by the noise and some of them had fallen over due to the force of the explosive. Luckily, none of them seemed to be hurt but just as they began to pick each other up, a vicious shout echoed.

From out of nowhere, a rival gang that the Crazy Diamonds had trounced before suddenly appeared. All of them were armed with metal pipes, baseball bats or brass knuckles and with no hesitation, they began to mercilessly beat down Mondo’s crew. There was no quarter given as the rival gang’s weapons cracked bones and shattered skulls.

Mondo’s eyes widened and pure rage coursed through him as he stood there, helpless, as he was forced to watch his boys get beaten…some to death. The Ultimate Bike Gang Leader balled his fists and cursed as he thought of how cowardly those rival gang shit bags were for pulling such a bullshit stunt while he was away!

And just as Mondo was about to ram his fist into the screen to make it stop, he saw a familiar face dragged in front of the camera. He gasped aloud as he saw those other gang bastards holding Takemichi in a kneeling position. The number two Crazy Diamond struggled furiously to get free but froze as a shadow loomed over him, his eyes bulging in terror. And in the next moment, a metal pipe made brutal contact with Takemichi’s head, a thick splatter of blood darkening the camera lens.

“Such violence to such—” Monokuma’s voice began.

However, Mondo didn’t even hear it as demented bear continued jeered about him not being able to protect his gang and he didn’t notice the sugary sweet words that would have come up after the video. Because his fist had already smashed through the console and embedded deep within the machinery.

“…You…SON OF A BITCH!!!!!!!”
friends. But then, when she opened her mouth to speak again, the video suddenly changed.

Now the setting was a dark room with a dim light hanging above, giving the room an eerie glow. In the center was a single chair and tied to that chair, beaten and exhausted, was Takaaki Ishimaru… Taka’s father. His graying dark hair was frazzled and it looked as if he hadn’t shaved for a while, which Taka noted was very unlike his stern and professional father.

The scene was almost like a police interrogation, which oddly made sense because Taka’s father was a police officer. However, why was his father the one tied to the chair? Why was he the one being questioned? Surely his father had noticed the disappearance of his son and the entire class with him?

So then…how was it that Takaaki was the one to be interrogated! How could such a thing happen?! Japan’s justice system had never faltered and his father had always been on the right side of the law! Both he and his father were law-abiding citizens! How could such terrible things happen to them!? What happened to the Civil System and the Order of Society?!

As all these thoughts raced through Taka’s mind, the voice of that loathsome bear echoed:

“Takaaki Ishimaru, a well-mannered police dick from Towa City. He’s being held in custody under the pretense that he won’t tell us where to find his god-damn wife!”

Hearing this, Taka foolishly let the faintest glimmer of hope seep into his mind. Even though the Ultimate Moral Compass had no idea how this situation had come about, it gave him renewed strength to see that his stern and tough father was still fighting and struggling even now to keep his beloved wife safe! This surely meant that his mother was still alive and hadn’t been caught up in whatever had happened to both him and his father!

It filled Taka with pride that he had such a dedicated and strong parents who would never give in to —

“Bring it in!” an unrecognizable voice on the video abruptly shouted, disturbing Taka’s thoughts.

A dark shadow came out from behind the camera, wheeling in a cart with a large square object secured to it. It took Taka less than a moment to recognize it as an electric generator. All at once, paralyzing fear gripped him as he watched the dark figure hook up two long corded clamps to the generator. Moving toward the chair, Taka could only stare frantically as the other ends of the cords were attached to the chair his father sat in.

Takaaki tensed for a moment, obviously feeling a hint of the electricity. However, the experienced police officer only hardened his glare before spitting at them.

“You punks think you’re tough?! I was putting little bastards like you behind bars when you were in diapers! And you think I’m gonna—”

A loud click sounded and Takaaki abruptly ceased speaking, his body tensing and twisting. His voice came out as a gargled snarl as the electricity coursed through his body.

Utter horror warped Taka’s face as he watched his father’s body convulse. However, he held his composure, no matter how much he wanted to break, because of the look on his father’s face. Takaaki was still glaring furiously at his captor, even through the pain and burning his body must have been feeling. He hadn’t given up…he was standing up for his family by not breaking.

That is…until another click was heard and Takaaki’s face twisted in agony and he let out a pain-filled scream. It was then that the screen abruptly went black and Monokuma’s voice returned.
“I wonder whatever happened to that stubborn cop. Did he give in and tell them where his wife was, to end his own suffering? Or did he just die in a pool of his own excrement?”

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

Surprisingly, Taka was no longer gaping at the video. In fact, he had found a strange sensation of calmness. All of this felt wrong…no, more like it felt impossible. How could his father, a reputable police officer, be captured and tortured without anyone knowing of the incident? And in only the few days since Taka had been imprisoned?

“It must be fake…that’s it,” Taka said quietly, as if trying to convince himself. “And even if it was…I know that…Dad would never give in…never….”

“…and that’s about all I have to say for now. Just remember, Chihiro, I’m always on your side. No matter what choices you make in life…I will always support you. Your mother may not be with us anymore but I guarantee you that I’ll always be here for—”

Static erupted on the screen and the on-looking Chihiro blinked rapidly as the video abruptly changed.

Fire…blazing high and scorching the sky. Thick, billowing clouds of smoke raising out of the house that Chihiro had called home since birth. A home filled with so much advanced electronic computer systems that even NASA would have been shocked at what they found inside. And now, it was all going up in flames…

“W-W-Why is this…happening?!” Chihiro squeezed out, barely able to take in air due to shock.

Only a moment ago, Chihiro’s father, Taichi Fujisaki, had been telling the programmer all about his recent work with technology…and now all of it was up in flames!

Suddenly, the video changed again and it was focusing on the door leading to the inside of the burning house. Standing outside, staring up at the blaze, a man with light brown hair stood just outside the door. The Ultimate Programmer stiffened as they recognized the figure.

“D-Dad! What are you doing?! Get away from there!” Chihiro said aloud, not caring if anyone heard.

To the programmer’s utter horror, Taichi defied the unheard wishes of his child and brazenly dashed into the burning home. Chihiro’s hands slammed into the screen, as if trying to reach in and pluck the man from danger.

“No! No! No! Get out of there! It’s not worth—” Chihiro shrilled in desperation, clawing at the screen in a frenzy…but it was too late.

A moment later, the roof of that home gave way. The flames shot up even higher and larger patches of black smog rose up from the decimated home.

It was then that the sickening voice of the headmaster came on.

“Oh no! Someone call the fire brigade! I knew that having all that technological stuff lying around was a bad idea! Don’t you know that having too many electronics is a fire hazard?! And what about that guy who ran back in to try and save his beloved computer equipment? Do you think he made it
All color faded from Chihiro’s cheeks before the programmer collapsed to the floor, hot tears streaming from reddened eyes.

When the video began, Toko honestly couldn’t understand what was happening. It appeared as though someone was carrying a handheld camera around, filming their travels outside and into a small garage.

For a brief moment, the Ultimate Writing Prodigy thought that this kind of angle would be perfect for a romantic rendezvous. Meeting a tall, handsome stranger in the darkened space for a passionate love confession! Heat rose up in Toko’s collar just thinking about it!

“M-Meeting in such a secluded place! Ohhhhh, what delightful feats of passion will two lovers achieve in such a location!!” she thought furiously, panting like a dog in heat.

However, a loud slam from the video startled her and Toko turned her sights back to the movie.

The figure behind the camera had turned and was now looking down at a strange canister on the floor. It had a long tube with a spray handle attached to it and an image of a cockroach with a large red X through it printed on the canister itself. Obviously this was some kind of insect repellant or poison but why would that be in a romantic—

In mid-thought, Toko watched the camera turn and face the center of the small garage. Sitting there, doing absolutely no harm, was a small but very familiar bug cage.

Fear seizing her up, Toko couldn’t make a single sound as the camera began to move closer and closer to the bug container. Each step made the writing prodigy flinch and she began to shake her head back and forth, as if trying to deny that what she was seeing was real.

And then, only moments before the figure would have reached the insect container, the hose of the canister was lifted for the viewer to see, the nozzle aimed directly at the bug cage. It was then that the lens zoomed in and Toko finally caught a glimpse of the exact insect that was trapped inside.

Before she had time react, the hissing of the hose reached her ears and she watched the spray of poison fly toward the unsuspecting insect.

“K-K-K-Kameko!!!!”

Just as Toko called out to her insect companion, the screen blackened and Monokuma’s voice chimed in.

“…Seriously….who the hell has a stink bug as a freaking pet!? Hell, who cares for a stink bug, period!? Anyway, wanna see if we crushed or poisoned it?”

“Forgive me, Young Master. I have failed you.”
Byakuya honestly couldn’t believe what he was seeing. On the monitor in front of him, a grey haired old man dressed in butler attire was staring back at him, surrounded by several armed gunmen with their crosshairs pointed at the restrained elder. The Ultimate Affluent Progeny instantly recognized his faithful butler, Aloysius Pennyworth, but that fact alone was startling.

If the Mastermind was trying to use hostages as bargaining chips, as Byakuya surmised, how then did they discover his connection to Aloysius?

Very few outside of the Togami Family knew of the butler or that he was Byakuya’s personal aide since he was born. In fact, if Byakuya was pressed to admit it, the elderly man could be considered the only person in this world that he actually placed value in. After all, the Togami Heir had been in Aloysius’ care longer than he could remember.

But then, who could have known about that and would be in a position to use it against him in this killing game? No one readily came to mind, and that troubled Byakuya even more.

Even so, it was difficult to believe that someone had been smart enough to use Aloysius against him like this. Having no love or affection from anyone in the Togami Family, Byakuya never had anyone to turn to aside from his faithful butler. During his long battle with his siblings to reach the top, the only person who had been there to witness his rise to glory had been this old man.

And while Byakuya wouldn’t call Aloysius a father figure…he had to admit that he didn’t completely find the servant to be without merit. Even so, the Togami Heir valued the elderly man for his loyalty. That is why, when he saw his butler with his hands tied behind his back, as if awaiting for a firing squad to gun him down, Byakuya saw red for the first time in his life.

Although Aloysius appeared to have no physical injuries, the shame on the elderly man’s face spoke volumes. However, as Byakuya stared into that wrinkly old face, he suddenly noticed something he’d seen far too often in the butler’s eyes.

Almost scoffing to himself, Byakuya whispered, “I see. So that’s the kind of game this is.”

The look that Byakuya recognized from his butler was not one of shame or even a cry for help…it was a silent command that he make whomever had opposed his young master pay for their crimes against him!

It was the same look that Aloysius had given him many years ago, when Byakuya had been unsure if he could really outwit his siblings and become the heir to the Togami Family. It was this look that gave the young Togami Progeny the strength to stand up to all the odds and defy all expectations.

“Age does not matter. All that matters is ability. And you possess that, Young Master…”

That is what Aloysius had said to him and now, even though it was silent, the aged butler was telling him the same thing. He had faith in his protégé to fulfill his destiny and it was all the encouragement Byakuya would need…even if he hadn’t asked for it.

Taking off the headset, the Ultimate Affluent Progeny didn’t bother listening as the demented bear began drolling on about what may have happened to the butler. For Byakuya, that was already irrelevant. He knew what needed to be done.

“This is no different than my rise to the top of the Togami Family. No matter the cost, I will be the one standing victorious at the end of this game…I swear on my family name!”

The Mastermind behind this ordeal had no idea that instead of inspiring fear and despair in the young heir, he had given him the motivation to endure and win this twisted game.
“T-This can’t be real! This has to be fake, right?!” Hina almost shouted as she stood, appalled by the video she’d just seen. Her body shook and she wrapped her arms around herself to keep steady.

Her video had been straightforward, to keep her from getting confused. It showed her younger brother, Yuta Asahina, sitting in front of a camera with a perplexed look.

“This is a video for my sister? What am I supposed to say? Something encouraging? Why? My sister’s amazing! She doesn’t need any encouragement!”

Hina had almost laughed at that. It was great to know her brother had such confidence in her, though she already knew as much. This definitely wouldn’t have been the first time she heard Yuta compliment her on her prowess as an athlete. If she hadn’t been under such dangerous circumstances, she might have turned the video off right then.

Unfortunately, that was when things took a turn for the worse.

A dark figure walked around to the other side of Yuta as he struggled to come up with something to say. The figure then proceeded to pull out a cloth and a bottle of something from behind their back. Hina gasped as she watched the figure slowly put some of whatever was in that bottle onto the cloth and set it just behind her brother.

At the same time, Yuta finally seemed to come up with something to say, because his whole face lit up with excitement. However, as he opened his mouth to speak up, the figure behind him thrust the cloth over his mouth. It took less than a second for the Ultimate Swimmer’s younger brother to fall limp in the figure’s grasp.

Frozen in place by what she’d seen, Hina could only listen as the voice of Monokuma came to torment her.

“Well, at least that finally shut the little brat up! Seriously, if they hadn’t done that, he would have talked us all to death! But anyway, yeah, he’s still alive. Where is he? How is he doing? Is he still an annoying little brat that you want to cut the tongue out of?!”

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

Those sugary words still illuminated the screen as Hina backed away from it, a hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. Never in all her life had she so desperately wished that everything was a dream, but no matter how hard she pinched herself, she wouldn’t wake up. Almost against her will, tears spilled down her cheeks as she begged for this all to be a nightmare.

Only it wasn’t…this was real…and no amount of tears would change that.

Sakura’s massive figure trembled with anger and her hands were clutched tightly into fists. In her family, the dojo where they all trained was more than sacred; it was a place of peace that was the symbol of strength for the Ogami Clan. It was a place that was treated with utmost respect and was never to be tarnished by the working of the common man.

So when the video screen flickered on and Sakura beheld the state of her family’s ancestral training ground, it took every ounce of strength to keep her rage from surfacing.
The walls and floor of the dojo had fallen into disrepair, and large holes in the ceiling allowed for light to stream in from above. However, the most enraging feature was the massive amount of graffiti that now cascaded almost every inch of the once sacred training ground. The various obscene colors of the offensive paint were drawn with purpose, as they all seemed to connect to form a gigantic mural vaguely resembling Monokuma.

The instant Sakura noticed this, she became even more infuriated, glaring at the screen as if doing so would reverse the damage done. However, much to her dismay, only the melodically annoying voice of Monokuma greeted her.

“Wow, you have really let the place go! You really should take better care of your family’s dojo. I mean, you were entrusted with its protection and all, weren’t you? But now that I think of it, isn’t it odd that, since your family lives just next door, that they would allow such disgrace to befall such a pitiful heirloom? *Gasp* Could it be that they’ve all been…defeated?!”

*Sakura almost flinched as the monitor clicked off but she held her composure. Even if the demented bear’s insinuations were true, and her family had been…overpowered by some unnatural force, it was not in her family’s nature to defy their fate. If they were to be beaten, they accept whatever punishment the victor decides for them, as it had been for generations in the Ogami Family.*

What was truly unforgivable…was the retched sight of their family’s dojo being disrespected in such a way! Even more humiliating was that Sakura, as the current head of the Ogami Clan, was tasked with the responsibility to preserve their family’s honor by maintaining the dojo. If those images were in fact real…then she had failed in the sacred duty that had been passed down to her by her father.

And as much as she hated to admit it, it appeared as though she had utterly failed not only her family…but also her ancestors.

“…and don’t forget to change your underwear every day. I know you have a bad habit about that so don’t let yourself go. You’re in high school now, so be a little more responsible. Well, that should be it for now. Take care of yourself, Hifumi! And be sure to become one of the four Legendary Manga Artists by the time you return!”

Hifumi felt winded after watching his video. From the moment it turned on, it appeared to be nothing more than a message from his sister, Fujiko Yamada. And while it was nice to see her again, Hifumi couldn’t help but feel embarrassed that his sibling had spent over five minutes of the video reminding him how to take care of himself!

Despite that, he wouldn’t deny that he felt more at ease than before. Perhaps his sister’s powers of natural calmness had seeped into the video and were empowering him to stay strong. Yes! He had to persevere! Just as Princess Piggles did when she was forced to fight against her mind controlled friends!

“Okay, how was that?”

Hifumi snapped out of his reverie as his sister’s voice continued to come through the headphones. She was now looking off-screen and talking to someone whom Hifumi could not see or hear.

“Is that really all you need from me? I guess it was a nice thing to do for my brother but…it feels kinda awkward to record an encouragement video after he’s already at school. Well, I suppose it’s...
just something you Hope’s Peak people like doing for your students. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Watching the screen intently, Hifumi felt a strange unease settling into him as he saw his sister’s face upturn in amused perplexion.

“M-My autograph?! Surely you can’t mean…you’re a fan of my work! Oh, that’s quite a shock! I thought only kids seemed to enjoy my work these days. But if you insist…I suppose a signing or two couldn’t hurt!”

The Ultimate Fanfic Creator sighed at seeing his sister become so flustered at merely being asked for an autograph. He would never become so reddened with embarrassment! He would have held his head up high and produced the paper and ink from his own pocket!

In the midst of his thoughts, he watched as his sister stood up from her seat.

“One moment! Let me get my official signing papers!”

Fujiko must have been rather excited because as she ran past the camera, she accidentally bumped it. The forced spun the lens to the side and Hifumi gasped as he finally got a clear look at the people who had ‘interviewed’ his sibling.

All of them were wearing expensive looking business suits but that wasn’t the frightening part. Each of them was equipped with a large Monokuma mask that completely obscured their heads! They almost appeared to be snickering as they approached the camera and abruptly shut it off.

And to Hifumi’s horror, the voice that belonged to the bear those masks embodied suddenly came through his headphones.

“Well, I never! Those greedy guys! Getting an official autograph from Fujiko Yamada! I’m so jealous…or at least I would be if they had actually gotten such a trophy! But don’t worry, they got themselves an ever better souvenir from their trip…they got to take the famous doujin author home with them! Do you think she’s having a good time with such ‘strapping’ young men?!”

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

Before putting on her video, Kyoko took a moment to glance around at her classmates. Judging by the terror and desperation that spread among them like wildfire, the amnesiac girl assumed that this ‘motive’ had been planned from the beginning and that everyone’s initial refusal to go along with the killing game had incited the mastermind to do this.

Turning her fierce gaze around, she found that Junko had only just put on her headphones and begun watching her video. Was it because she had been one of the last to find their DVD or could it be that she had hesitated out of fear? In either case, Kyoko couldn’t stop herself from believing it was suspicious and made a mental note to inquire about Junko’s trepidation later.

Picking up her own headphones and sliding her own ‘motive’ into the player, the amnesiac girl was actually quite curious as to what would appear. If the mastermind didn’t know of her amnesia, then this would prove a valuable clue to her identity. However, if, as she suspected, her memory loss was somehow planned, then this disk would reveal it all.

As the screen flickered to life, Kyoko felt perplexed as nothing but a single photo of an older man
slowly appeared on the monitor. She didn’t recognize the elderly man nor did she feel any kind of recollection at seeing his face. Even so, something about him was…familiar, though Kyoko felt that word was too strong to accurately describe the feeling she got by looking at the picture.

It was then that Monokuma’s voice came to her, making the amnesiac girl suppress a groan.

“This man is Fuhito Kirigiri. He is your only living relative and he is quite close to our current location. In fact, he is waiting for you just outside the school and he holds the key to something precious that you’ve lost. But I can’t say for how long. He may not survive long enough for you to learn why you’re here and what your true purpose is. Think carefully on what you want to do next.”

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

Despite how shocking this information was, Kyoko didn’t even flinch. The bear had sounded much more serious that she’d ever heard him before, as if it knew that provoking her would only strengthen her resolve. Not only that, Monokuma hadn’t seemed concerned about revealing that her memory loss was not a coincidence, confirming her suspicions of the amnesia somehow being purposefully inflicted on her.

And while it was frightening to think that anyone would be able to intentionally take away someone’s memories, it was even more terrifying that the mastermind paid no mind in revealing that they had done so. Monokuma may not have directly stated it, but the way it nonchalantly spoke showed that whoever controlled the demented bear wasn’t concerned if she discovered the truth.

Even so, this was a boon for Kyoko, as she now knew that the mastermind had considered her enough of a threat to take away something as precious as her memories. And while she couldn’t deny that it was more than tempting to be free of this place and meet with her supposed ‘only living relative’, the cost of attaining that freedom was just too high.

“Patience,” Kyoko told herself, slipping off the headset and running a hand through her long hair.

“Right now, I have to focus on what I can do. If the mastermind believed me to be such a threat, then it must mean that only I am capable of solving this mystery. Otherwise, he would have done the same to my classmates as well.”

Feeling empowered by what she had learned, Kyoko hardened her features and waited in silence for her classmates to finish watching their own ‘motives’.

Mukuro honestly didn’t know what to feel as she watched her classmates’ expressions shift from hope to utter despair. She made sure that hers was the last DVD to be acquired and was quietly observing the others as she made her way over to her own console.

Being careful to appear as distressed as the others, the disguised young woman supposed she did feel a hint of contentment at seeing their terrified visages. Not for herself but because she knew that Junko, who was undoubtedly salivating at the scene, would be appeased with this. Everything was going according to her sister’s plan and it was only a matter of time before the first killings started.

“It’s taking longer than Junko had suspected but then again, we both know that without a motive, these guys would never be willing to kill just to leave here,” she thought as she found a console that was just far enough away from the others that, even if they peeked, they’d be unable to see the screen.

Taking one last glance around the room, Mukuro was almost shocked to see Kyoko was doing the
same! She didn’t even have her headphones on! And now her head was turning and would be on Mukuro in a matter of an instant!

Quickly averting her gaze to her monitor, Mukuro pretended she didn’t notice the inquisitive gaze of her classmate as she hesitantly took her DVD out of the case and slid it into the player. Picking up her headphones, she carefully slid them over her ears, very mindful of the wig that snugly fit her head.

Just before she pushed play, Mukuro’s sky-blue eyes flicked over to find that Kyoko had finally turned her attention to her own DVD and was currently watching it. A relieved sigh escaped the Ultimate Soldier as she silently congratulated herself for not being found out. Shifting her gaze back to the screen, she pressed the button on the console and her video was almost instantly brought to life.

"Hmm, I wonder what Junko has prepared for me?" she wondered to herself as the blackness of the screen continued for many moments. “She doesn’t need to motivate me and she’s very aware of that. Perhaps she fabricated a video for herself? Just in case anyone happened to see it."

As Mukuro considered these options, the video abruptly flashed a bright light on the screen and if she had not been trained to anticipate surprises, the Ultimate Soldier might have been startled. However, she was experienced enough not to flinch even in the face of death and so, the flash did nothing but perplex her.

As the white on the screen faded, a figure became more and more visible. It was female, with luscious curves, an ample buxom and bright pink hair that….Oh dear lord!

This time, the shock of the image did startle the hardened soldier and she gave a noiseless gasp as she recognized the figure on the monitor was none other than her sister, and sitting in the surveillance room no less! The entire room was clearly visible and if any of her classmates saw this image, it would completely ruin everything the sisters had worked for!

Immobilized by the fear of being discovered, Mukuro was completely unprepared when the Junko from the video began speaking:

“Hey there sis! How’s the impersonation going? You’re doing pretty good, by the way. Not exactly an award winning performance but, meh, it gets the job done.”

So many terrifying thoughts coursed through Mukuro’s mind at seeing her sister on that screen. What was Junko thinking?! Didn’t she realize how much danger she was putting herself in by revealing herself, even if it was only to her?! What if one of the other students saw this?! Sure, she was in a place where she was certain no one could see her screen but that didn’t guarantee someone wouldn’t see the disk at some point! Now she would have to be sure to destroy this disk as soon as possible just to be safe!

But more than all that, Mukuro was startled by the fact that Junko had now paused and was merely grinning at her through the monitor, as if giving her time to think. Was it possible that her sister had expected this to happen to the soldier and that’s why she’d given a pause while recording it? It wasn’t beyond Junko’s capabilities and considering the length that the despair loving girl was going to, this certainly wasn’t a leisurely video she’d made to encourage her disguised sister!

Not only that, she could tell that her sister was angry. After all, she’d given her beloved older sister praise…and the only time Junko praised anyone was when she was utterly disappointed with them.

Just as she suspected, the Junko on the screen abruptly let out an annoyed sigh, her personality
shifting over to frustration:

“Gawd! I am sooo bored up here, big sis! There hasn’t been a single killing yet, for which you are partially to blame, and I’m crazy with boredom! I thought you were supposed to keep that away from me! You did say that after the game started, you’d keep me entertained! Uhg! It’s so lame, lame, lame, lame, lame—”

The Junko on the screen picked up her feet from the floor before kicking at the side of the computer next to her, causing her rotating chair to spin her round and round. All the while, she kept changing her ‘lame’ sutra.

Mukuro bit her lip hard as her sister groaned and complained. First the praise, and now the complaining, this was a sure sign that Junko had already decided to interfere in the game. However, the Ultimate Soldier knew her sister well and was certain that whatever she had planned, she wouldn’t be doing herself.

Plus, if Junko was dedicated to following the rules, as she had claimed, then it meant that the one to carry out her bidding would have to be—

“I know!”

Junko’s voice through the headset snapped her back to reality and she returned her gaze to the screen to see that her sister had stopped her spinning and was now giving a malicious grin.

“If the killings start…I won’t be bored anymore! Sooooooo, how about this?! Would you please kill Makoto Naegi for me? He’s been far too hopeful during all of this and it’s annoying me. Pretty please, with sprinkles on top?”

Mukuro’s eyes widened at the sudden request, not anticipating the extent that her sister’s boredom was pushing her to. Almost reflexively, the Ultimate Soldier swiveled her gaze around until she was able to see her new target. Makoto was standing near the door, obviously still reeling from what he’d seen in his video, waiting patiently for everyone to finish their own.

And even though his expression was wrapped in despair, Mukuro could still see a hopeful glint in his eyes. He hadn’t given up…even after seeing what had happened to his family, he was still able to keep himself strong and positive.

“It’s no wonder Junko would want him out of the way,” the disguised Mukuro unfortunately surmised, “Dammit, Makoto! Couldn’t you just give in like everyone else?! If you had…I wouldn’t be forced to…to…”

The words trailed off in her mind as she couldn’t force herself to finish the thought. The idea of ending Makoto’s life wasn’t impossible for her to imagine, which is what made the pain in her chest ache even more.

It was then that Junko decided to relay another terrifying message:

“And just to make things exciting, if that herbivore boy who smiles at you isn’t dead within twenty-four hours…I’ll tell everyone that your true identity is Mukuro Ikusaba!!!”

Snapping her head back to the video screen, an audible gasp rasped its way out of Mukuro’s throat as she heard that threat. Against her will, she started to take in quick shallow breaths, trying to force her racing heart to slow. However, nothing could forestall the panic that reached its way into the deepest recesses of her mind.
“Th-This can’t be true!” Mukuro tried to reassure herself. “There is no way that Junko would jeopardize my position! Not when it’s so vital too—”.

As if anticipating her reaction, the Junko on the screen sneered before continuing:

“I guarantee you, Mukuro, I am 100% serious. And while it would certainly affect my plans, I can always find a way around it. After all, I had to plan for if someone managed to kill you during the game. So rest assured, I will get by without you if need be.”

Her sister’s cold, unfeeling words dug into Mukuro like newly sharpened knives, twisting and turning inside her until she felt that her body was going to collapse. A chill ran down her spine as she realized that, contrary to her previous belief, she was expendable.

Frozen in place, she could only stand there as the voice of Junko from the video continued:

“However…”

Mukuro lifted her gaze and stared directly at the screen, unable to turn away. To her shock, Junko was looking directly at the camera with a serious but concerned expression.

“…I would like to avoid that if all possible. You’re my sister, after all. And I don’t want to have to lose you. I lost you once before…and I don’t want to have that happen again.”

Utter confusion warped Mukuro’s features as she heard her sister’s heartfelt confession. Never in all her life had she heard Junko express such honesty with her. And though there was a little voice in her head that said that her sister was merely lying to gain her favor, at that time, Mukuro couldn’t care less.

Junko had entrusted her with a task and tested her several times, a few of which she’d failed. This was obviously the final test to see if she could live up to her sister’s expectations. Mukuro had no one but herself to blame. After all, if she had just done as her sister had expected and killed one of her classmates sooner; she wouldn’t be forced to kill the only student that actually seemed to…care…about her…

“Is that why it has to be Makoto?” she pondered carefully, unsure of what to think. “Because he smiled at me…because he’s hopeful…because he’s a threat? Why did I never see that before? Why do I still not see him as a threat?!?”

With all these new thoughts tormenting her, the video of Junko finally relayed it’s last message:

“Whelp, my job is done here! Good luck to you, sis! Make me proud!”

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

And without further adieu, the video cut out, with those famous words at the end of it. It was most likely there so that if anyone happened to see it, it wouldn’t look suspicious but that mattered little to Mukuro right now.

She had barely realized that everyone around her was already finished and were arguing about if these videos were even true. And for a brief moment, Mukuro’s overly active mind actually dared to think that the threat might have been fake too. However, she knew that was a stupid thought.

“I…I made this choice all on my own. And now…I have to live with the consequences of that choice.”
Lifting her gaze up and turning toward everyone else, she hardened her features as she looked directly at Makoto. Taking in all of his features, listening as he too insisted that this was all fake, Mukuro knew that this would be the first time in all her life that she wouldn’t be killing to survive.

And whether or not she was aware of it, her hands began shaking as somewhere deep in her subconscious, for the first time in all of her life…she doubted herself.

“…For Sayaka, there’s absolutely no place left for her to return to. So here’s big question…what, oh what, could have caused her beloved idol group to fall to pieces?”

*Look for the Answer after Graduation!*

Sayaka’s entire body trembled as she watched her closest friends and rivals lying on the floor, unmoving. She had barely heard Monokuma’s jeer and with almost robotic movement, she pulled the headphones from her head, letting them fall from her grasp and onto the console. Her mind tried to deny what she’d seen, tried to force away the images that had burned into her retinas.

However, every time she squeezed her eyes shut, that horrific picture of her fellow idols appeared, unwilling to leave her be. And in that instant, Sayaka felt something deep within her snap.

At that very moment, a gentle hand landed on her shoulder, sending a way of shock through her body. Without thinking, she jerked her entire body away from whoever had touched her and flung herself backward, her back making brutal contact with the wall. She didn’t have the willpower to lift her head or courage to see who it was that had tried to get her attention.

Sayaka was consumed with a single thought that bubbled up inside her until it unintentionally burst out.

“I…I have to get out of here! I have to get out of here right now! I can’t…I can’t be stuck here any longer!!!”

As she shouted her proclamation, she tore from the room, leaving all of her fellow classmates with a horrific feeling of unease.

“S-Sayaka! Wait!” Makoto called after her, still very startled that she had reacted so violently to his comforting gesture. As he prepared to head off after her, a harsh voice deterred him.

“Leave her be. There’s no point in going after her,” Byakuya sternly advised, not truly caring either way.

Startled by his classmate’s lack of empathy, the Ultimate Lucky Student fired back, “I can’t do that! She’s my friend!”

And without further interruption, Makoto also sped out of the room, calling out for Sayaka far into the distance.

Far away on a higher floor, watching the entire event unfold with bated breath, Junko could barely
contain her ecstasy as the despair of her former classmates washed over her in waves.

“And with that...ahhhhh, the game truly beings!!”

Her ecstatic moaning echoed throughout the surveillance room as she finally felt a small taste of the despair she was certain was to come.

Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

Greeting, my beautiful readers. So, now that the first motive is out of the way, we can get on to the really interesting parts in the next few chapters. Also, the vomiting dead puppies thing...that was something my beta and I came up with while being sleep-deprived, so forgive us.

By the way, go and check out the music video for Taylor Swift's “Bad Blood”, it’s the reason Sayaka’s band broke up...

Tell me, what do you think is going to happen? Will Mukuro actually kill Makoto? And if not, how will she be able to proceed? What did you all think of the motives that were presented? It took a while to come up with them all so I hope they were interesting.

Anyway, look forward to the next chapter and if you have any theories or questions for me, leave a comment or review to tell me what you're thinking. As some of you may know, review or comments are like crack to writers, so even if it's a simple "Good Job, can't wait for more" it's much appreciated because it shows that you like it and want more.

With that said, I'll see you next time!
Mukuro knew that there was absolutely no time to waste. She had to find Makoto before nighttime came. If she waited any longer, she might lose the resolve to…kill him.

The instant she thought that, her body felt heavy but she forced it to advance. Her legs felt as though they were made of lead as she practically stomped toward the dorms. She had to keep moving, keep focused on her task without wavering. She pushed aside any inklings of emotional thought as she resolved herself to do what her sister had requested—No, demanded of her.

“This is a battlefield,” she repeated over and over in her head like a mantra, “I am a soldier…and I will carry out my duty. Kill or be killed.”

Her emotions had almost completely shut down, anything that could distract her from her mission was buried deep within, not allowed to resurface until her task was complete. And with heavy steps, she continued to search for Mako—her target.

She knew he ran off after Sayaka and worried she would find them together, which would make her task more complicated. Almost on cue, as the disguised Mukuro passed through the door leading to the dorms, she spotted an obviously distressed Sayaka heading into the cafeteria, alone.

The Ultimate Pop Sensation was a mess but at least she seemed to have calmed herself.

“No doubt due to Makoto’s influence—”

Mukuro abruptly slapped herself across the face, forcing away any thoughts concerning her target. If she let those emotions back in now, they would jeopardize her entire mission. And she would not fail Junko…not this time!

Realizing this was the perfect time to strike, Mukuro almost broke out into a run as she headed for Makoto’s room. There was no guarantee that he had returned to his room but the soldier’s keen instincts were not to be doubted. It was the most likely place to find the target and sure enough, she found his door slightly ajar, meaning he’d only just returned. After only knocking on his door once, she heard his voice call from within.

“I-I’m coming! Just a second!”

In almost any other situation, Mukuro would have scoffed and questioned why he didn’t even bother to ask who had come to see him. But then again, Makoto’s optimistic nature is what made him so special to begin with—
Mukuro dug her fake red nails harshly into her palms, the skin barely able to keep from being torn.

“You’re not this weak! This is just another mission! When he opens the door, move in and—!”

Before she could finish that thought, the door swung open and Mukuro’s eyes widened at what she saw.

Makoto, whose voice a moment ago was strong and confident, looked exactly the opposite as he stared back at her. His hair was disheveled, possibly from pressing it into his pillow and despite the pleasant smile on his face, he couldn’t hide unease that radiated off him in waves. And even more distracting…was the fact that his eyes were strained and red, his face moist from what she only assumed were fresh tears.

In that moment, the Ultimate Soldier lost all will to kill, her emotions flooding in and taking over her judgment.

“I can’t…I…I just…I know I have to…but I can’t!”

Her entire body was frozen in place as Makoto continued to gently smile at her from just inside his room. He looked at her expectantly, obviously wondering why he’d been called out. Mukuro knew she needed to say something but the words failed her…all she could do was stare at the warm, yet fragile smile.

“Uh…is there something you need Junko?” Makoto finally worked up the nerve to ask, still very much surprised by her sudden appearance. His careful words snapped the disguised woman to her senses and she averted her gaze before huffing.

“I-It’s nothing really. I just…I wanted to say…uh, that…” she trailed off, desperately trying to come up with an excuse. And just as she was about to be overcome with embarrassment, she suddenly recalled their altercation yesterday. “I-I wanted to apologize for being such a jerk yesterday in the laundry room! So there! My bad!”

Without another word, she turned on a heel and headed directly for her room, which was thankfully only a few feet away. However, before she managed to reach the handle of her door, a hand suddenly gripped her arm and she spun around, ready to attack as always. But once again, she forced her reflexes to stop as, like she had expected, Makoto was now grasping her arm.

“W-What?! I already told you I was sorry! What more do you want?!” she protested, jerking her arm away and doing her best to appear angry.

However, she felt the heat rising in her cheeks and knew her face was flushed. She was about to tell him off again and disappear into her room when she saw him casually wipe away the last hints of moisture from his eyes, a bright smile overtaking his face as he looked at her.

“S-Sorry, I just wanted to say, thanks for worrying about me,” he said to her, continuing to smile warmly. If he had left it at that, Mukuro could have shrugged it off and departed, but he had to let his smile widen and finish, “And if you ever need someone to talk to or just want to hang out, I’m just right across the hall.”

He ended his comment with his typical nervous laugh, probably thinking he sounded pretty stupid, telling an ultra famous model that he’d be there if she needed him. But it wasn’t stupid and it wasn’t unappreciated at all…at least not to Mukuro.

In fact, for a fraction of a second, she completely lost herself in the warmth and vibrancy of Makoto’s smile and though many warning signals fired off in her brain, she couldn’t stop herself from
As her lips upturned, returning his sweet gesture, she felt her mind ease for the first time since the killing game began and she couldn’t stop herself as she replied, “Thanks, Makoto. If I do decide to kill someone, I promise that it won’t be you…”

The instant those words were uttered, the atmosphere between them completely changed…but for entirely different reasons.

Makoto immediately lost that mesmerizing smile and was instantly on guard, which was completely understandable. Mukuro was brought back to her situation and realized she had just promised the exact opposite of what she knew needed to be done.

“D-Don’t say scary stuff like that!” Makoto blurted out, obviously put off and wary of her now.

Knowing that her options were limited, Mukuro decided that the best way to resolve this situation…was by playing her part. Letting a mischievous grin spread over her features, she held up her hand in a peace sign and gave a cheeky laugh.

“Oh don’t freak out! I was only kidding! Geez, you need to lighten up a little.”

Hearing her words, Makoto slightly tilted his head in confusion, unsure if she was being honest or not. His perplexed visage offered her the perfect opportunity to flee, and so she spun around, pulled her door open and proceeded inside.

Sayaka quickly exited the cafeteria, the large kitchen knife nestled carefully against her stomach. She barely even noticed Sakura and Hina eyeing her as she left. Her heart was pounding and her mind was racing. She practically stumbled down the hallway back toward her room, knowing she would need to come up with a convincing story before heading to Makoto’s room. A part of her even questioned why she needed to fabricate a story for him to swallow…

“He’ll let me in…I know he will…he’ll believe anything I tell him…”

Even so, she didn’t have the courage to head straight for his room, even if there was absolutely no one in the hallway to witness her going to his room. She didn’t want to take that chance, she had to make sure there were no mistakes…when she turned on him.

“This is my only chance…he’s the only one…who’d let me get close enough…to…to…to kill!!”

Quickly shutting the door behind her, she pressed her back against the door, fearing that he might actually try to follow after her.

“Dammit…Dammit!!!!”

Her chest heaving and her heart beating furiously against her ribcage, the Ultimate Soldier waited to see what would happen next. To her relief, Makoto seemed to have gotten the hint and didn’t pursue her once she entered her own room. However, she could still feel her face was flushed and sweat soaked into the pink wig covering her head.
She didn’t know how long she stood there, back pressed against that door as she regained her breath. However, after she felt her breathing stabilize, something unexplainable happened…she got angry.

Gritting her teeth tightly, she felt a low growl work its way out of her throat. In a matter of moments, it grew louder and louder until she found herself screaming in frustration!

“HRRRRAAAAAHHHHH!”

Her hand shot up to her wig and she furiously ripped it from her head, the pins underneath that held it in place flying in all directions. With no hesitation, she flung the moistened wig across the room, the pink fluff smacking into the wall with a wet thud. Running both hands through her slick black hair, Mukuro fought to bring herself under control when a familiar voice called out.

“My, my, my, this is unexpected. I never imagined you’d get so frustrated over such a simple task.”

The Ultimate Soldier froze as the voice of her sister rang out and she snapped her head up to see Monokuma sitting on her bed, acting as a go between for the twin sisters. Strangely, the bear wasn’t keeping itself occupied with anything, merely sitting there calmly and staring at her.

Unfortunately, this meant that Junko had been waiting for her to return, and patiently it would seem. That alone was foreboding but the fact that her sister was questioning her made it all the more terrifying.

Mukuro’s mouth hung open, lips quivering as she tried to form words that wouldn’t come. She’d been caught and there was no escaping it.

She had no explanation for her sudden burst of anger, or at least none that Junko would accept without losing faith in her. It wasn’t so easy to say, ‘The boy was crying so I couldn’t kill him’, when she’d done the same to many of her targets in the past. Never mind that Junko would only grow suspicious of her for such a failing to complete a task that should have been done by now.

After all, Mukuro never showed mercy to her enemies, even if they had cried and begged for their lives, she still ended them without any hesitation. And yet, a single boy’s smile had stopped her cold before she even had a chance to get close to him. It proved one thing at the very least.

Whether he knew it or not, Makoto had influence over his fellow students.

“Perhaps that’s why Junko wanted him dead to begin with…” Mukuro quickly thought as she continued to try and explain herself.

However, before she managed to get even a syllable out, the black paw of Monokuma raised itself up in a gesture of silencing her. A heavy sigh came out of the bear as Junko spoke through the plush toy.

“You know, I figured that your little crush on Makoto would make you hesitate. But I never imagined it would paralyze you and keep you from fulfilling your duty.”

Rather than be shocked, Mukuro gritted her teeth in frustrated embarrassment. It was no surprise that Junko knew of her attraction to Makoto. They were sisters after all, and there were things that were obvious even if neither of them said a single word. Even so, it didn’t stop the soldier from feeling even more helpless and weak at that moment.

Gathering her courage, Mukuro lifted her gaze, glared at the bear and replied, “I’ll admit, he caught me off guard…and I failed this time. However—”. 
“No need to defend yourself. I’m glad you didn’t kill him.”

The Ultimate Soldier froze as her sister’s words invaded her ears. Surprise warped her features and she could only stare at the bear that resounded with her sister’s voice as it continued.

“You were just rushing to get it over with. Even if you *had* killed him, there would have been no way for you to cover it up. Sure, you would have thought of something but I doubt it would have ended well for you. And I’m sorry but if you get voted for in a class trial…I can’t save you.”

“W-Wait…what?” Mukuro managed to choke out, her face blanching. “You…You mean that…”

Before she could finish, Monokuma leapt off the bed and promptly landed on the floor before tilting its head quizzically at the soldier.

“Did you think you were exempt from the class trial? Did you *really* plan to kill Makoto without even taking the time to think of a way to cover it up?” Junko asked, her voice disappointed yet entirely serious.

Her sister’s cold tone sent chills down her spine and it took Mukuro a moment to realize that Junko had just confirmed her worst fear.

“H-Hold on!” the Ultimate Soldier desperately pleaded, fearful and confused. “What about our failsafe?! I thought that we initiated it so that when the first trial happens, I would get pulled from the game and not be punished if our classmates make the wrong choice!”

Monokuma gave a light shrug as Junko’s voice continued, “That’s only the case if *you* aren’t the first killer. I mean, it would be incredibly unfair of us to make them go through a class trial *without* the culprit present!”

Mukuro suddenly felt faint as her mind began spinning, unable to comprehend this new turn of events. Her shoulder pressed into the wall next to her, keeping her upright as she felt all of her strength fade. Her blue eyes dilated slightly she took slow breaths, the only form of coping she could muster.

“So then…you’re saying that if I kill someone—”

“In this case, Makoto!” her sister chirped.

Grunting slightly, Mukuro continued, “—then I have to play the game. Become the blackened and try to escape at the cost of our classmates lives…”

“Well, yeah! That’s how the game works! I mean, I thought that the reason you stopped yourself was because you realized that and wanted to wait for a better opportunity…was I wrong?”

Even though Junko said it so innocently, the soldier could feel the skepticism in her sister’s voice, mocking her for not realizing what should have been obvious. And because of that, anger rose up in Mukuro as she pushed off the wall to stand up straight, her eyes narrowing at the bear.

“Why did you give me a time limit then?! If you knew I needed to play the game accordingly, you shouldn’t have forced me to plan a murder in only a day!” she fired back, letting her rage consumer her judgment.

“Because Makoto is the easiest to pick off,” Junko reasoned, her voice already tired of having to explain. “He’d go along with anyone who asked him to meet anywhere! He’s sooooo trusting and its sooooo lame! Hell, anyone could do it at this point! Even with so little time to plan!”
An involuntary flinch seized Mukuro as the subtle jab for her hesitation sunk in. In reality, the reason she had lashed out wasn’t exactly clear to her.

“Even so, I’m just a soldier. I’m not used to planning out murders or even executing them. I take the lives of others…that’s been my purpose.” She paused for a moment before taking a deep breath and finishing, “But it’s different here. With all of my classmates surrounding us and some of them growing suspicious of others, it’s becoming a less than ideal battlefield.”

There was a heavy silence for a moment as Mukuro considered her own words. She felt weakened here, restrained even. On a true battlefield, one fought for their life and those who survived were the one able to adapt and learn how to kill the enemy. But, unlike the battlefield, this school was a place of deception and secrecy. One couldn’t simply pull a knife to defend themselves without fear of facing a class trial, though her fellow students were unaware of that as of yet.

Moreover, this place lacked something that Mukuro desperately needed…Challenge!

In war, she thrived on the feeling of hunting her enemies, fighting them to the bitter end only to emerge victorious and claim their lives as her trophies. For her, there was no greater feeling than battling a worthy adversary, discovering their weaknesses and exploiting them to achieve victory.

The struggle to survive…that is what made Mukuro feel the most alive! She didn’t care about the outcome or the despair that the struggle brought…only that fight for survival that she had never failed to achieve. If anything, the struggle for survival was more intoxicating than even the greatest despair that Junko so loved.

That is what made Mukuro Ikusaba feel as though she had something to live for. Even now, she was fighting a losing battle for Junko’s affections, and the struggle for it was almost as intoxicating as the prize itself. That and only that made her feel the euphoric pleasure that Junko derived from despair!

“I have to earn my sister’s affection. Otherwise it’s completely meaningless!” Mukuro quietly reminded herself, her body heating up just thinking about it.

Reminding herself of that resolve, she slowly turned to glance at Monokuma and to her utter shock, she saw that the demented bear was now glaring furiously at her. Taken back by the sudden change in attitude, she found herself speechless as the bear shook its head and Junko’s voice sighed through it.

“My dear sister …Why do you insist on referring to those pathetic bastards as ‘classmates’? Hmm?”

It was only for an instant, but as she said those words, Mukuro’s eyes slightly widened before quickly hiding her surprise. However, the camera lens in Monokuma’s eyes captured the whole affair and though her sister would never know it, Junko scowled fearsomely at the display.

“I know that neither you nor I hold any particular hatred for them, but addressing them as if they are equals seems…unbecoming, if you get my meaning.”

Despite how much she tried not to, humiliation began to well up inside Mukuro at her sister’s pin-point accusation.

It wasn’t until now that the Ultimate Soldier realized that she had been holding onto the thought of how her classmates had been before their minds were wiped. She didn’t see them as the strangers they saw her as. And even if she didn’t say it, she also couldn’t see them as anything less than Class 78, her fellow students that she had spent so much time with.
However, she quickly realized that *that* particular way of thinking was dangerous. They were no longer her *classmates* or *friends* or even *acquaintances*!

They were her *targets*.

When she had been in Fenrir, the concept of anyone being a target had been simple and clear. A target was not a person or group of people; they were creatures that had to be put down for the sake of the cause, whatever cause they had been paid to fight for at the time. And Mukuro had never failed to achieve the mission she and her mercenary companions were given.

This time, however, the cause she and her sister fought for was despair. And no matter who these young men and women were to either of them in the past was immaterial. That should have been obvious and all this time she had thought she understood that.

However, the realization that she hadn’t been seeing her classmates as targets was not only unwelcome, it was an embarrassment. If Junko hadn’t of pointed it out…she wasn’t sure if she would have ever realized it.

Standing there, frozen in place and teetering on the brink of despair, Mukuro suddenly heard her sister call out to her.

“Mukuro…if it’s all too much for you, I can pull you from the game.”

An audible gasp escaped the soldier’s mouth as she snapped her head back to the half and half bear. For a fraction of a second, Mukuro allowed herself to feel relieved but she quickly realized that feeling as such was beyond foolish.

“This is another of Junko’s tests!” she furiously thought, her features slowly transforming and hardening with resolve. “I have been enough of a disappointment…for the both of us! So, if it’s for Junko then…then…”

In the midst of her thoughts, Junko’s voice resounded from the bear again, “We’d have to do it in front of the other students but it’s certainly doable. So, if you think you can’t handle—”.

“I’ll stay.”

Junko’s voice abruptly ceased and the bear’s eyes shot over to see Mukuro glaring at it fiercely. Her sky blue hues were even more dangerous than usual and the hint of despair lying in them was enough to entrance Junko long enough for her sister to finish.

“I’ll finish my task. I…won’t disappoint you.”

The shock and hesitation from a moment ago had vanished as she spoke, clearly surprising her sister with such a determined statement. And even though she couldn’t see her sister’s face, it was obvious that Junko hadn’t been expecting her to refuse so adamantly. After all, the choice was meant to bring despair, not resolution.

However, if it did bother Junko, her voice showed no hint of it as the bear shrugged and said for her, “Do whatever you want then. Just remember that you’ve only got about 18 hours left before—”.

“I’m aware of that…” Mukuro cut her off, walking past the bear and toward her closet.

Pulling it open, her eyes brightened as an array of assorted military weapons glimmered on the walls and doors of the wooden closet. Knives of all shapes and sizes, hand-guns and magnums galore, even larger grade projectile launchers were carefully stowed within. All at once a wave of euphoria
struck her as she felt the anticipation of the struggle to come.

Deep down, a part of her reeled in disgust at this feeling, knowing that it would come at the cost of a life. The life of a boy whom had smiled at her like no other.

“Makoto…”

In an instant, the euphoric feeling faded as she shook her head and narrowed her gaze. Any one of these deadly weapons would be enough to send the boy to the next life, and with her disguise, no one would suspect her as the culprit. Even if they did, she knew the proper way to dispose of each and every weapon in her arsenal.

However, she wasn’t here for any of them, save for a small metal box tucked away in the back. Tugging it out from its hiding place, Mukuro carefully undid the clasps on either side before slowly opening it.

Inside, a long combat knife sat pristinely in the indent. What would have been the blunt edge on the opposite side had a row of jagged edges, almost making it a double sided blade. Dull scratches and markings littered the side of the blade and the handle seemed worn and ready to crack.

Picking up the knife and glaring at the sharpened edge, Mukuro barely ran her finger along the cutting edge of the blade. Pulling her finger away, a thin line of blood began to run down the length of her finger.

“Even in this condition…it’s as sharp as ever,” Mukuro marveled to herself before her concentration was broken by a surprised voice.

“Oh! Now that’s something I never thought I’d see again!” Junko’s voice resounded through the room, genuine shock encompassing her. However, it vanished as Monokuma grinned wide and it’s master’s voice continued, “Then again, I’m used to seeing it covered in blood and sweat. It looks like you haven’t been taking very good care of it either.”

An involuntary shudder overtook the soldier as her sister’s words brought back memories she shared with this particular knife. If she had been facing the bear, then Junko would have gotten to see the despair that came with those memories. Fortunately, Mukuro was able to regain her composure rather quickly, closing the metal box and returning it to its hiding spot.

“Hmph,” Mukuro scoffed as she closed the door to her closet and marched past the bear, taking a seat at her dresser. “If you don’t mind, I have work to do.”

Pulling open a small drawer, she reached in and produced a small kit marked with a wolf. Flicking it open, a wide variety of tools became visible. A whetstone for sharpening, polish for the rustic blade, and replacement handle pieces complete with screws.

Wasting no time, the Ultimate Soldier began repairs on the blade, leaving an increasingly bored Monokuma to look on. Unexpectedly, the bear stood there for a time, just staring at Mukuro as she worked on restoring the blade to its former glory. All the while, the soldier ignored it, deciding to remain focused on her task.

Just as the air began to thicken between them, Monokuma threw up its paws and waddled toward the door.

“Okay then! I’ll be going for tonight,” Monokuma suddenly said, it’s usual cutesy voice returning as it opened the door and prepared to leave. Just before exiting however, the bear turned around and practically snickered as it said, “Just be sure to get enough rest. Tomorrow will be a big day…”
Something in Monokuma’s words startled Mukuro’s concentration but before she had a chance to react, the bear departed.

With the demented bear gone, the Ultimate Soldier clenched her jaw and gritted her teeth. Mentally, she felt ashamed for having failed her sister and with that in mind, she raised a hand and furiously slapped herself across the face.

As a tint of redness formed on her cheek, she furrowed her brows and whispered, “No more. I won’t let myself show weakness again.”

Staring down at the rustic knife, her hands began to shake before she grasped the blade tightly to steady herself. Suppressing her emotions for the good of her mission, Mukuro slowly resumed her work, letting herself be consumed by it.

“…I can’t let it all be for nothing. I have to finish what I started. I won’t fail Junko again…never again…”

“…I have to get out of here…I have to get out of here…I know that…but…”

Sayaka sat at Makoto’s desk, her eyes downcast and filled with confliction. In her lap, the kitchen knife she’d stolen earlier sat, completely clean. It should have been murky, covered in the blood of her foolishly trusting friend, Makoto. That’s what she’d planned after all.

Faking that someone was after her, getting Makoto alone in his room, stabbing him from behind when she got the chance, that was what she thought she was going to do.

Instead, she asked him to switch rooms, used sweet words of praise to gain even more of his trust and let him leave without even trying to stop him. No doubt he was already in her room, probably sleeping in her bed and reveling in her scent or something strange that boys do when they’re alone.

Why? Why had this happened? Why wasn’t she able to just stab him and get it over with?!

She’d been using him from the beginning anyway…hadn’t she? The only reason she’d befriended him was just a way to cope with this desperate situation. Yeah, that must have been why she’d done it. And, of course, offering to be his assistant was merely a way to earn his trust…there wasn’t any other reason. Even though she never considered killing him before seeing her video, the fact was that he was nothing more than a tool to her…right?

“…Then why the hell couldn’t I kill him?!” she shouted at herself, thankful for the soundproof rooms.

However, before the words left her mouth, she already knew the answer…and that’s what hurt the most.

Makoto was good, pure and honest. He was everything that she so desperately wanted to be. Sure, she appeared that way to so many…but she knew how rotten and disfigured her soul truly was. Many of her rivals had fallen victim to her ruthlessness during auditions. Even her own band mates were cautious of her when she was angry.

But Makoto was different. He wasn’t anything more or less than himself and he was genuinely a nice and caring person. He was the kind of person she had always strived to be, but fell mercilessly short.
That’s why, when Makoto smiled at her and told her he would get them both out, she truly believed him. Even though she was already planning to use him for her escape, she did really believe that, given enough time, he would have found a way to save them both.

However, she couldn’t wait for him to find a way. She needed to know that her closest friends were alright and that the video was a lie. Her mind was consumed with that thought and it drove her to collect the kitchen knife and go straight to his room afterward.

And, as luck would have it, she found him outside his room, talking to Junko of all people.

Makoto was being his usual self, offering to help the fashion model with whatever was troubling her. Sayaka had watched as the two separated and they headed back to their rooms. This was the perfect chance for her to strike!

However, just before Makoto opened his door, she was shocked to see him pull up his sleeve to his face, wiping away moisture from his eyes. It was then that Sayaka finally noticed his reddened face and the melancholy expression he bore as he entered his room.

“What…was he…crying?” she had thought after his door had closed, leaving her alone in the hallway.

The pure and honest Makoto…had been crying his eyes out? But why? What could he have to—?

Sayaka’s blue eyes widened as a thought occurred to her. “He wasn’t…trying to think of a way to get me out…but he couldn’t think of one and so he…”

Shaking her head, she tried to deny that he was weeping out of sadness or frustration. However, no matter how hard she tried, it was obvious that the weight of the promise she’d forced upon him was taking a huge toll on him. Her own words rang in her mind, recalling what she’d made him swear to.

“Promise me that, no matter what, you’ll always be on my side!”

“Makoto…” she whispered to herself, feeling guilt for her actions for the first time since she’d arrived.

And in that instant, somewhere deep inside, she realized she couldn’t kill him. That’s why she’d switched rooms and was now, once again, alone with her dark thoughts.

“What…what do I do now?!” she screamed, slamming her fists onto the desk. “I have to get out of here! But…but…”

She’d lost what might be her only opportunity to kill someone and be set free. No one else trusted her enough to be alone with her. She’d barely spoken to anyone else, spending so much time with Makoto. The only other person she’d even really talked to was—

“…Leon.”

A gasp escaped her as a plan already began to formulate in her mind. Without much hesitation, she reached for the pad of paper and pen on the desk in front of her.

Junko Enoshima was getting bored…not because the game wasn’t progressing but because she was losing faith that her sister would be able to play her role. Staring at the monitor in front of her, the
despair loving woman pursed her lips before breathing a heavy sigh.

Mukuro was still hard at work, polishing and sharpening that knife of hers that held more meaning than anyone else would know. Of course, Junko also understood its significance, which is why she elected to remain silent about using it.

After all, it was going to bring such lovely despair to both the wielder and it’s victim. However, the fact that Mukuro brought it out all together was disheartening.

“If this keeps up, she’s going to become a liability,” Junko murmured to herself, glancing over at another screen that deeply held her interest.

She had considered that her sister might not be able to fulfill the role properly and thus, decided that having a backup would be necessary. And of all the students, she couldn’t imagine a better mole to manipulate.

“Then again, I suppose that’s why I have you. Isn’t that right, Miss Ultimate Martial Artist?”

She smirked at the screen before hopping up from her chair and heading for the Monokuma control room.

Completely unbeknownst to her, on another screen not far away, Sayaka came into view just long enough to slip a piece of paper underneath a certain someone’s door.

“You would like me to…sleep over?” Sakura Ogami asked carefully, unsure if she had heard correctly.

Nervously fidgeting with her hands, Hina slowly nodded her head. “I-I mean, don’t feel pressured or anything! I just…I just thought it would be nice to, you know, hang out for a while?”

Sakura could only smile as she watched the only friend she had here desperately trying to hide how nervous she was. Hina was bluntly obvious about everything and always spoke her mind, so when she was trying to cover up her own anxiety, it shows through even more.

However, Sakura knew the source of her anxiety and therefore decided to consent to her request. Besides, Hina would never give in to temptation and murder anyone. She was too good of a person for that.

“Very well. Let me get a few things from my room and I’ll be right over.”

Hina’s face lit up with absolute excitement and she had to stop herself from jumping with joy as she replied, “All right, cool! I’ll meet you back at my room then. Just knock and tell me it’s you and I’ll let you right in!”

With a spring in her step, Hina bounded off down the hall toward her room. Left standing just outside the cafeteria, Sakura smiled warmly before lightly shaking her head and advancing toward her own room.

Even though it was at the end of the hall, it was still a short trip and she expected it would only take a few moments to gather her belongings.

Opening the door to her room and shutting it promptly, Sakura was about to pull open her closet
when a loathsome voice called out to her.

“Wow, so this is what it’s like being in a muscle-bound martial artist’s room. I expected more Bruce Lee posters, honestly.”

Instantly on guard, Sakura spun around and assumed an aggressive fighting stance before glaring furiously at the source of the voice.

“You. What are you doing in my room, Monokuma?!” she furiously shouted at the demented bear as it stood on her bed to try and match up to her height, failing in that regard.

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just paying a house call to one of my favorite students,” the bear reasoned, holding its hands up in mock surrender.

Slamming her fist into the wall, indenting the metal hidden beneath the sheet rock, Sakura gritted her teeth and seethed, “Enough of your games! Tell me why you’re in my room?!”

Shuddering in apparent fear, Monokuma waved its arms defensively and answered, “Whoa, whoa, whoa! Just calm down, Miss Ogami! I’m here because my students are all confused about those DVDs you all got!”

At the mention of the videos, the Ultimate Martial Artist flinched, recalling her own. Removing her hand from the wall, she stood up straight and folded her arms menacingly, ready to resume her stance and battle at any moment. She would take no chances with such a dangerous foe.

Glaring down at the bear, she calmed herself enough to say, “Is that why you’re here? To taunt me?”

“Oh goodness, no!” Monokuma falsely claimed, it’s voice becoming more annoying by the moment. “I just wanted to answer a question that all of my students have been asking about those videos.”

Sakura could already see though Monokuma’s intentions but knew that lashing out would only make the situation worse for her. After all, if she was here too long, Hina might come looking for her and stumble upon this. If that happened, everyone, including Hina, would grow suspicious of her. And as such, she would not be able to protect them if it ever came down to that.

Perhaps that’s what the bear wanted and Sakura was determined not to let it happen. She had promised herself to be strong for everyone and fight for them if need be, she would not let the deranged mastermind have their way with her classmates!

To that extent, she decided to let the bear get to his point.

“And, since you’re my favorite—” Sakura groaned at hearing this but let the bear continue, “—I thought that you should be the first to know.”

“And what would that be?” the martial artist questioned, narrowing her gaze.

Waving for her to come closer, which she reluctantly did, Monokuma put up its paws and whispered loudly, “Those videos...are all true!”

Hardening her visage, Sakura was about to tell the bear off when he abruptly continued.

“And of course, the image of your dojo was accurate as well.” Putting it’s paws on it’s sides, Monokuma boldly proclaimed, “As of right now, I am the official owner of that formerly historic dojo!!”
Hearing this, Sakura felt something in her mind snap. An aura of immense power seemed to flow out of her as she clenched her fists. Her teeth grit tightly as she reared her arm back and shouted, “BASTARD!!!!”

With lightning speed, the Ogre slammed her fist into her bed, splintering it into a million pieces. However, her intended target, Monokuma, flipped over her head and landed gracefully by the door. Caught up in her rage, Sakura spun around and was about to launch herself at her foe when the bear held up a piece of paper with her family’s crest on it.

Barely able to stop herself, Sakura could only stand there as Monokuma began to explain.

“This document transfers ownership of your family’s dojo to one, Mr. Monokuma. It’s all perfectly legal and in binding print.”

Feeling her rage increase once more, the martial artist shouted, “And you expect me to believe this is real?!?”

Shrugging it’s shoulders, Monokuma continued, “Whether you believe it or not is up to you. However, I have to say that I really don’t have any need for that place. I mean, have you seen it lately? Even my recent remodel didn’t make it any less filthy!”

Although the bear’s words sparked anger, Sakura couldn’t help but recall her DVD. Particularly the various broken board and Monokuma-esque drawings that were plastered on the walls and floors. Just as she felt herself building up rage for another attack against the bear, it rolled up the paper and held it out to her.

“So, I’ve decided that I want to give that crappy dojo back to you. Isn’t that nice of me?” Monokuma said, practically beaming menacingly.

For a moment, Sakura couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Then again, she couldn’t truly believe anything this bear told to her but this was the most unbelievable yet! Even so, she couldn’t deny the hint of relief that came with this sudden offer.

However, it was immediately replaced with suspicion upon remembering whom she was dealing with. And so, instead of reaching out for the paper, as the bear most certainly wanted, Sakura instead decided to place her arms at her side and merely glare down at the conniving bear.

“…And what do I have to do for you in exchange?”

For a brief instant, a hint of surprise warped Monokuma’s features, obviously not expecting such an intelligent answer. However, it was gone within a moment, replaced with a maniacal grin as it pulled the paper back and seemed to tuck it away behind it’s back.

“You caught on quicker than I would have liked, but no matter.” Walking over to stand directly in front of Sakura, the bear looked up at her and said, “I propose a simple trade for your dojo.”

“What kind of trade?” the martial artist asked offensively, half-prepared for any kind of demand.

Her worst fears were confirmed as Monokuma reared its head back and laughed manically, “Upupupupupupupu! What have I been asking of all of you since this little game began?”

Even though the implication was enough, Sakura still felt the need to confirm it with words.

“You want me to kill one of my classmates,” she said firmly, making it not a question but a certainly. Surprising, Monokuma didn’t even react to her words, tilting its head to the side as if in thought.
“Hmmm, that may be necessary later but that’s not exactly what I had in mind.”

Shock overtook Sakura as she heard this and she immediately questioned, “But, isn’t that what you have been asking of us since we were first imprisoned here?”

Looking over at the martial artist, Monokuma gave a confused look and answered, “Actually, I never asked any of you to kill anyone. I asked you all to live here in peace but gave you a way out just in case. Am I wrong?”

Sakura felt her rage returning at how the bear was twisting the facts. She wanted to question why the loathsome creature kept taunting them if that’s all it really wanted but there was a more prominent question to be answered.

“So then, what is it that you want me to do then? Just live in peace with my fellow students?” she finally asked, still not believing the bear’s lies.

“Well, to be more precise…I want you to do just that!” Monokuma shouted with glee, doing a spinning motion for a second before facing her again. “Only I want to hear allllll about it later! You know, because we’re so close and you are my favorite student!”

Once again, there was no need for Sakura to ask for clarification. She, unfortunately, was smart enough to read between the lines. Closing her eyes and scowling, she slowly said, “So then…you want me to spy on my friends…and report everything back to you.”

“Yup.”

The bear’s short and curt response was almost maddening but somehow, Sakura managed to keep herself under control.

“And you honestly expect me to do this for you? Just to have my family’s dojo returned to me?” she questioned further, trying a bluff.

Unfortunately, Monokuma could easily see through her and called her on it.

“If it means that you don’t bring dishonor to your entire family line…I think you’d bend over backwards and kiss your own ass if it meant getting it back!

Sakura winced at the vulgar language but could not retort. For it was true, for the most part.

The Ogami Family Dojo was an ancient and honorable place. And while serving as head of her family, it was her responsibility to safeguard it. Many had fought and died to protect it. Those sacrifices alone showed the devotion to her clan. And no matter how much it hurt her to admit, as a member of the Ogami Family, it was her duty to reclaim ownership of it…no matter the cost.

And so, if she had to betray her classmates, lie to them, do the mastermind’s bidding…even throw away her newfound friendship with Hina, she would make that sacrifice if it meant restoring her family’s dojo.

That is what it meant to be Head of the Ogami Family.

“Alright then, do we have a deal?” Monokuma disrupted her thought, holding out his black paw for her to shake. Staring down at the paw that was offered, Sakura felt something within her begin to twist and it made her hesitate.

“Hey! I don’t have all day!” the bear protested, waving it’s hand enthusiastically. “If you don’t give
me an answer, I’ll burn the damn dojo to the ground!!”

Gritting her teeth and tensing, Sakura regretfully extended her hand and grabbed the paw, squeezing so tight she felt the metal inside twist. With a firm jerk, they shook and just before Monokuma was about to pull away, the bear was pulled forward and forced to meet eyes with the Ogre. She stared through the lenses and knew that she was now meeting eyes with the mastermind behind them.

Feeling that connection, she scowled fiercely and said, “Know this. I only do this out of obligation. If you expect me to enjoy being any part of this...you are sorely mistaken.”

Even if it was only for a moment, she swore she felt the mastermind tremble behind the bear’s lenses before abruptly letting go and having Monokuma tumble backwards onto its ass. Hopping up and brushing itself off, the bear did it’s best to seem unaffected as it headed for the door.

“Well then, I guess I’d better get going, for now. Wouldn’t want you to be late for you sleepover, now would I? You can tell me allllll about it tomorrow! I hope you get some good info on the swimmer girl to share!”

Once more, Sakura tensed at the bear’s words. The mastermind was keeping her on a very short leash it seemed. From this moment on, she would be monitored constantly and she would need to report everything.

However, this was also an important opportunity to gain knowledge of the mastermind. Even though the mastermind would undoubtedly never meet with her personally, Sakura was intuitive enough to pick up on subtle hints and hoped that, sooner or later, the mastermind would let something slip. Something that might be the key to everyone getting out of here.

That thought alone gave Sakura the strength to endure this. She had to, for her friends that she had now betrayed, she needed to do all she could to help them without being caught!

And so, as Monokuma opened the door to leave, she was completely unprepared when, just before the door closed, the bear poked its head in one last time.

“Oh, and by the way, if no one dies within the next 24 hours...be a pal and kill someone for me!”

Those words sent chills through Sakura’s entire body, realizing the extent of what she had just agreed to. However, before she could call out or protest, Monokuma slammed the door. Not wanting to let this slide, the Ultimate Martial Artist quickly gave chase, ripping open the door and dashing into the hall.

Scanning all directions, she furiously glared around the area but alas, she could not find the hateful bear anywhere. Her fingernails dug into her palms as she felt rage overtake her.

She had thought she was only supposed to spy on her classmates, not kill them! Only now did Monokuma’s words from earlier come back to haunt her.

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“Hmmm, that may be necessary later...”

Shame overtook the proud warrior as she was forced to accept that she may as well have sealed her own fate! How could she be so foolish as to not realize the mastermind’s intentions?!

“That is not what I agreed to!” she seethed, preparing to slam her fist against the wall.

However, a fearful voice stopped her cold.
“S-Sakura! What happened?!”

Freezing in place, Sakura slowly turned to see none other than Hina staring up at her, concern plastered over her already exasperated face. For a few seconds, neither of them moved or said a word.

“H-Hina,” she finally managed to say, forcing herself to be calm. “I…I didn’t see you there.”

“Uh…yeah,” Hina replied sheepishly, trying to find the right thing to say. “I was, uh, worried when you started to take so long. I figured that something may have…you know.”

Sakura felt such shame, not only for losing her composure, but for making her friend worry for her. Even more than that, just looking at Hina’s troubled face reminded her of the arrangement she’d just accepted. She wanted to put her friend’s mind at ease but knew that telling her the truth was out of the question.

And so, she resorted to something that she had never done in her entire life…she lied to her friend.

Putting on a fresh smile, Sakura placed a gentle hand on Hina’s shoulder and said, “Your concern is appreciated but I’m afraid that this misunderstand is my fault. You see, I was searching my room for a…special protein drink that I cannot seem to find. When I realized it was gone, I became…angry.”

Hoping her lie was convincing enough, she waited patiently for Hina’s response. However, she only had to wait another instant before hearing a relieved sigh from her friend, followed by a bright and somewhat embarrassed smile.

“Oh, that’s all it was! And here I was thinking someone had attacked you or something. I feel kinda stupid now,” she confessed, nervously scratching her hair before continuing. “But I totally know how you feel! I’d be super pissed if someone took the last donut without even offering it to me!”

Breathing a quick sigh of relief that her story had been bought, Sakura removed her hand and said, “I’m sorry to have worried you over something so small. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Of course I can! That’s what friends are for, right?!” Hina bubbly answered, holding both hands up enthusiastically.

Unbeknownst to Hina, that apology was not meant for her lie but for the betrayal that she had committed. Either way, she had to continue on and decided to stand up straight before looking back at her room. She couldn’t let Hina see her room now, not with the broken bed and damaged walls.

“I am ready to follow you to your room, if you are ready to have me?” Sakura said convincingly, sort of wishing she could have at least brought a spare pillow. However, she was feeling in the mood to punish herself, for obvious reasons.

However, her lie worked perfectly on the ever so trusting Hina and she lit up with a shimmering in her eyes as she nodded firmly and began leading the way.

“Yeah! We’re gonna have a great time tonight! Staying up all night, talking about boys and eating lots of junk food! Especially donuts! Are you with me, Sakura?!”

“…Indeed.”

Walking patiently behind her enthusiastic friend, Sakura snuck one final glance down the hallway. Standing at the very end, Monokuma waved emphatically before disappearing behind a corner and
out of sight. Balling her hands into fists, the martial artist forced herself to smile as she turned around just in time for Hina to open the door.

“Welcome to the best night of your life!” Hina insisted ushering her inside.

The instant Sakura’s face was out of Hina’s view, an intense expression of despair warped the martial artist’s features. Even if she survived this…she knew her betrayal would follow her for the rest of her life.

“I am so sorry...Hina.”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

I know that some of you have been asking when the plot is going to diverge from canon. Rest assured, it’s coming soon. We’ve got just a little more to go before then, and I assure you it will be quite interesting.

But yeah, poor Sakura. She’s always been a favorite and I wanted to spend a bit of time showing her becoming the mastermind’s spy. And, what do you think is going to happen with Mukuro? Will her secret get revealed or will something else happen to her? You’ll find out soon enough!

Thanks for reading and if you have a comment or have a question for me, don’t hesitate to ask. In the meantime, have a wonderful day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Amidst all the confusion the DVDs caused, Leon heads to Sayaka's room, unaware that his life is about to take a tragic turn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The baseball flew up toward the ceiling before falling back down, caught by the hand of Leon.

The Ultimate Baseball Star lay on his bed, his jacket tossed aside on a nearby chair, continually tossing the ball upwards. He had hoped that doing such a repetitive task would take his mind off things, but it only further provoked thoughts he’d rather have forgotten. And eventually, his frustration gave way.

Furiously clutching the baseball as it fell this time, he rolled on his side and angrily threw the ball against the far wall. As it bounced off and rolled to a halt, Leon grunted before falling back onto his bed and sighing.

“Seriously…how the hell did it come to this?” he wondered as he stared at the bland ceiling. “I’m a normal…well, semi-normal guy. Why the hell do I have to worry about murders and being trapped and…Kanon…”

No matter how hard he tried, every single time he closed his eyes, he saw the image from his DVD flash into view. His old friends, the only people he actually enjoyed playing baseball with, might be dead. And his cousin, who admired and respected him, was either missing…or dead as well.

It was maddening and he felt so powerless! He wanted to smash one of his baseballs directly into the camera but the fear of punishment kept him simply lying on his bed, contemplating what he should do.

“There’s no way I could kill anybody…even if it meant getting out of here and seeing if that video was for real…I’d never be able to forgive myself. But then what the hell am I supposed to—?”

As if on cue, a small knocking came at his door. A bit startled, Leon shot up from his bed and glared at his door. He was about to call out to whomever was behind the door when he saw a small piece of paper slide under it. Giving it a sideways glance, he slowly got up and walked toward the door.

Instead of instantly picking up the paper, he cautiously cracked the door to his room and looked outside, hoping to see who had come by. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a single soul outside his door.

“That figures…it’s already after nighttime.” he murmured as he closed and locked his door. “But then, who the hell…”

Leaning down and picking up the paper, he was shocked as he read over the contents:

_There’s something I need to talk to you about. Just the two of us. In five minutes, meet me in my room. Check the nameplates to make sure that you don’t get the wrong room._
Sayaka Maizono

Before anything else, his eyes read the name at the bottom of the note. It was only afterward that he looked over the rest of the letter and was slightly perplexed by it. She was asking him to meet with her, alone…in her personal room.

At first he was shocked, Sayaka passing a note under his door was odd enough but looking over the contents, he began to piece together what she was trying to do.

“The music lesson!” he proudly declared, slapping the paper slightly as he went and sat on his bed. “I’d almost completely forgot! But it’s kind of a weird time to want to practice music. Considering the nighttime announcement already went off, not to mention everything that happened today…”

Suddenly, a thought sparked in Leon’s mind.

“Wait…could it be that, she wants to practice music right now because of what’s going on?!” he questioned aloud, abruptly standing up. “Yeah…yeah, that’s gotta be it! She must be having a hard time coping with all this crap too!”

A smile broke out on Leon’s face as he came to this conclusion. Of course that’s what it had to be! She needed someone there to help her and she probably chose him because they had connected before over the music training thing!

He didn’t have to think about why she didn’t ask Makoto, whom she’d spent most of her time with, to help her instead. She and Leon had the common ground of music and undoubtedly she wanted someone she could trust with that sort of understanding. Nothing against Makoto but the kid seemed to be musically…un-inclined.

Picking up his jacket and throwing his arms through the sleeves, he adjusted his clothes a bit before practically racing out into the hallway.

Slightly humming to himself as he walked down the hallway, Leon found himself feeling lighter and more carefree than he had for quite a while. The contents of his own DVD were disappearing from his mind as he began to anticipate how much fun he was going to have learning music from Sayaka…alone…in her room…that was soundproof…where no one could hear them…

Abruptly, his feet stopped moving as a new and more fearsome thought came to his mind.

“Wait a sec, getting me alone like this…could it be that…Sayaka actually has something else in mind? Could…could she really be planning to…to…to go all the way with me?!”

Leon’s face reddened slightly at the thought but he quickly letting out a cheeky laugh.

“Yeah, right! There’s no way a good girl like Sayaka would want to do that!” he said aloud, a bit saddened but not wanting to set himself up for disappointment. “And it’s not like she’d try to kill me or anything. She’s way too good of a person to fall for Monokuma’s schemes.”

Even though he had laughed it off, somewhere in the back of Leon’s mind, he still considered the possibility that Sayaka may have wanted him there for…something more. As such, as he passed by the laundry room on his way to where he thought Sayaka’s room was, he smirked to himself and decided to take a minor detour.
“Where the hell is he?!” Sayaka hissed from her hiding spot around the corner.

Just around the bend, she had a clear view of the door and was just waiting for that ignorant idiot to come through. The kitchen knife clutched in her hands shook as her body unconsciously trembled. Her breathing quickened with each passing moment, as she worried that her target may not actually come.

“I should have been more specific in my note!” she cursed herself, slightly rapping the back of her head against the wall. “I just told him to come here without a reason! He may get suspicious of it and wait to ask me about it tomorrow! If that happens, everyone will find out that…that I…planned to…kill him…”

As the words left her lips, Sayaka felt her arms fall to her sides, barely able to continue clutching the knife.

She’d been in such a rush to get this done but after forcing herself to write the note and pushing it under Leon’s door, she knew there was no going back. She told herself that over and over but in the end, when she thought about jumping out as he passed her and stabbing him in the back…she felt a horrific chill run up and down her spine.

However, she shook her head and gritted her teeth, unable to get the image of her fallen band mates out of her mind.

“I…I don’t have a choice!” she reasoned, lifting the knife up and gazing at her own reflection. “I…I have to get out of here! I don’t want to do this…but…but…”

This was her only chance to do this and Leon was the only one stupidly naïve enough to come to her room. That idiot was probably taking his time because he thought she was going to sleep with him or something! He was another stupid boy who only looked at her as someone he could use! It was okay to kill someone like him if it meant that she could help her friends…right?!

After all, Leon was constantly flirting with her, asking her when they could start his musician training, pleasantly greeting her each morning when he saw her…always smiling brightly and acting like an idiot…making her laugh and forgetting this horrible—

“Stop it!”

She smacked herself across the face with her free hand, first once, then twice. After slapping her reddened cheeks a third time, she huffed in frustration before gripping the knife with both hands.

“…There’s no turning back! I have to do this! I have to do this…I have to do this…I have to…”

Leon hummed to himself as he turned off the faucet in the laundry room. Running a hand through his dyed-red hair, he made sure that each strand was up and looking awesome. He checked his goatee to be sure there weren’t any strays sticking out and even made sure that his collar was popped up like usual.

“Oh yeah, that’s how ya do it,” he said, winking to himself in the mirror. “Now, whatever happens, I’m totally prepared for it!”

Reaching for a towel to wipe off his face, the baseball star’s hand landed on something round and smooth. Startled, he sharply retracted his hand before shooting his gaze over to see a small glass ball
sitting on a pillow next to the sink. Yasuhiro…or just Hiro now, as he wanted to be called, must have left it there.

Leon let out a quick sigh of relief, only now realizing how nervous he was. He began to chuckle to himself as he finally grabbed a towel and cleaned off his face, leaning his head back smiling.

“Haha. Guess I didn’t notice how tense I—”.

His words stopped as his eyes saw the clock hanging above his head. Only now did he remember what the note had said. Five Minutes. He was supposed to meet with Sayaka in only five minutes! And he’d spent at least ten minutes sprucing up in the laundry room!

“Oh crap!”

Breaking out into a run, Leon sped out of the laundry room and made a mad dash toward other side of the dorms.

“Please don’t be pissed, please don’t be pissed, please don’t be pissed,” he chanted to himself as he rounded the corner and came to the spot where he was sure Sayaka’s room was located.

He’d only see it once, when he’d dropped off Makoto on their first day but he knew that her room was right next to his. Looking up at the nameplates, he was surprised when he saw that Sayaka’s room was actually before Makoto’s. He could have sworn that it was the other way around but then again, he hadn’t been paying too much attention to the nameplates at the time.

In any case, he was still very late and didn’t think much of it. And because he was in such a rush, he completely forgot about knocking and instead grabbed the handle to the door and pushed it open.

“I have to do this…I have to do this…I have to do—”.

Sayaka’s mantra was interrupted by the sounds of the door opening. A light gasp escaped her as she gripped the knife with both hands and glanced around the corner.

Leon was there, albeit very late, closing the door before turning around and nervously calling out, “Uh, hey! Sorry I’m late! I got caught up in—”.

Sayaka didn’t bother to let him finish, clutching the knife tightly in both hands before screaming at the top of her lungs and rushing around the corner. Her anxiety had gotten the better of her and she completely forgot about her plan to lure him into the main area and stab him from behind. She wanted this to be over and knew that if she didn’t strike now, she would lose the will to kill.

Shrieking like a frantic banshee, the pop idol charged toward her target, the point of her blade angled toward his chest.

Leon’s eyes widened with horror as he saw her approach and with his athletic reflexes, he leapt aside just as she would have pierced his chest. He barely kept his footing as he spun around to get a clear look at his attacker. Fear penetrated his soul as he identified who it was.

Meanwhile, Sayaka stumbled slightly from her failed attack but managed to come to a halt just in
front of the door. Snapping her head back toward him, Leon felt himself go numb as he looked upon her face.

Her once vibrant blue irises were now dull and filled with bloodlust. Her once brilliant smile was replaced with a gruesome snarl that bore her clenched teeth. And stray strands of her long hair hung all about her face, intensifying her maddening visage.

“S-S-Sayaka?! What the hell—?!"

He didn’t have time to finish as she screamed at him once more, charging him again with her knife. This time, he practically leapt away as she swung the knife at him, the sharp edge grazing his jacket. Luckily, the attack only scraped the material a little and he was otherwise unscathed.

He shot his gaze over to Sayaka. After failing to stab him, she tripped over her own feet due to missing her target. She stumbled and fought to keep her footing spinning around and slamming her back directly into the far wall, which was the only thing that prevented her from falling. She kept both hands on her knife as she panted heavily, her gaze downcast.

For a time, neither of them moved or said a word, the reality of the situation crashing down on both of them. Time was frozen as both of their hopes and dreams seemed to shatter.

In this brief moment of silence, Leon took a brave step toward her and shouted, “Wh-What are you doing?! You…You didn’t really—.”

“I’m sorry…”

Leon’s breath caught in his throat as Sayaka’s usually cheerful voice weakly called out to him.

And for some reason, he found himself unable to turn away and run. Every instinct told him to flee while he could, get out of there and try to wake the others if he could. Or at least get back to his own room. However, something in her voice stopped him, as if she was begging…begging for him to help her.

He was mesmerized as she slowly lifted her gaze, eyes glistening with fresh tears as she narrowed her gaze and lifted her knife. Snapping out of his reverie, he instantly began to back away from her again, his fears returning.

“I’m sorry, Leon! But I have to get out of here!”

As she screamed to him, Leon continued to back away until his back hit the counter behind him. It was then that he felt his back hit something odd. Snapping his eyes around, he saw a golden decorative sword sitting on a stand behind him. He barely had time to register it before he saw Sayaka’s movement out of the corner of his eye.

Steadying her grip and preparing to charge, she blinked away the fresh tears and shouted:

“FORGIVE ME!!!!”

With speed unlike anything he’d seen, Sayaka mercilessly rushed toward him.

As Sayaka charged in, ready to finish her task, she closed her eyes and thrust her blade forward.

She would do it this time. She would drive her knife through his chest and it would all be over. She
would be allowed to leave. She would get out of here and see her friends again. She’d prove that those images were wrong and soon this would all be a long forgotten nightmare.

She was sure of it…until her knife stopped and the sound of wood clacking against metal reached her ears.

Her blue irises shot open and widened in horror as she saw that Leon had blocked the attack. At first she was shocked, unable to understand how he’d stopped her. However, she gasped in shock as she recognized the object the baseball star had used to parry her with.

It was the decorative sword that she had insisted that Makoto keep for self-defense!

In truth, she had indeed suggested that he keep it to protect himself, and more importantly her, should it come down to it. She had all but forgotten about it during her rushed preparations to kill her fellow student. And because of that mistake, she could feel her advantage beginning to slip from her grasp.

However, instead of backing down, she knew that she had to keep attacking in the hopes of finishing off Leon before he had a real chance to fight back!

Quickly retracting her knife, she swung at him again but this time from below. To her surprise, the baseball star noticed her movement and twisted the sheathed blade down and parried her attack again. Undeterred, she pulled the blade back and swung it at him again. But once more, Leon was able to knock away her attack.

Growing even more frustrated, Sayaka tried again and again to get through Leon’s defenses but found herself blocked at every turn. She panted and knew she was getting weaker with each failed attack. However, if she didn’t get him here, she knew he would be able to overpower her.

She had to finish this now, before he had a chance to turn the tables on her!

“Dammit!!! If you don’t die, I can’t get out!!! Just die!!!!” she screamed at him, tightening her grip on the knife and lifting the blade high, she prepared to throw all of her strength into one last attack.

However, before she even had a chance to swing, a strong hand grasped both of her wrists, stopping her in an instant. Her eyes shot open to see Leon, with only one hand on the decorative sword, hold her in place with his other hand. Gasping in terror, she was certain that he was about to tear the knife from her hand and bury it into her own chest.

Much to her surprise, she heard him shouting at her instead.

“You really believed what the bear said, didn’t you?!” Leon tightened his grip on her wrists. “Do you really think that Monokuma will keep his word?! That he’ll just let you walk out of here?!”

His words penetrated her ears and invaded her mind, rattling around and cutting her deeply. She knew it was more than a long shot; a gamble that may not pay off…it could even lead to her death. Even so…even so she…she…

“What OTHER CHOICE DO I HAVE?!” she shouted in his face, fresh tears streaming down her cheeks.

“You do have a choice! Trust me, I understand what you’re feeling—”

Sayaka’s features flared at hearing that, her face twisting in anger as she snarled, “HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND?! YOU LIGHT-HEARTED IDIOT!!!”
As she screamed, she managed to tear herself free from Leon’s grasp, tumbling backward toward the bed and hitting her back on the bedpost. Her arms frantically grabbed onto the wooden post to steady herself. Just as she began to regain her balance, she heard the sound of the decorative sword being unsheathed.

Her eyes shot over to see Leon, holding the golden sword in both hands, staring at her with a fearsome determination in his eyes, the likes of which she’d never seen from him before.

All at once, Sayaka felt unimaginable terror take hold of her. Her complexion whitened as all color drained from her face. Her advantage was gone. And now, she had to pay the price for her actions.

“He’s…he’s going to kill me…!!”

“Dammit! Now what the hell do I do?!” Leon questioned himself as Sayaka flung back and barely caught herself on the bedpost.

Nothing he said made any difference! He just wanted to try and talk with her but as long as she had that knife, he didn’t think he’d be able to calm her down—

“That’s it!”

Without thinking, he grabbed the golden sheath of the blade and tore it off, letting the scabbard clatter to the floor. The sound cued Sayaka into his movements and she shot her gaze over to him. The moment their eyes met, he saw an understandable terror building up on her eyes. It was obvious that she was now more scared of him than he was of her. After all, he had a longer and better weapon, even if it was dull and edgeless. Plus, he was a professional athlete who was physically stronger than her. Her fears were more than founded, he was unfortunately forced to admit.

However, regardless of what she may be thinking, Leon knew that he had no intention of actually hurting her.

“I’m the only one who can help her now! I’ve got to get that knife away from her so we can just talk!”

Grasping the hilt of the decorative blade with both hands, he narrowed his gaze at her and prepared for her next attack.

As she gazed at his determined visage, Sayaka let out a terrified scream before jumping to her feet and pointing the knife as threateningly as she could manage with her now shaky hands. Her lips trembled and her body shook as she fought to stay standing, adrenaline probably being the only thing keeping her upright right now.

Leon desperately wished she would just drop the knife and surrender but her horrified visage made him realize how foolish that notion was. However, if she stayed away from him long enough for him to try and explain himself, then maybe they could—

“I won’t let you kill me!!!” Sayaka abruptly screamed and charge at him once more.

This time, however, Leon was fully prepared and knew what he had to do.

Unlike before, Sayaka was holding the knife just with her right hand. And if he timed his strike well enough, he’d be able to knock the blade far enough away from her grasp. Then, he could overpower
her and subdue her physically, and hope that he could calm her down afterwards.

It was a crude plan but the only one he could come up with on such short notice. All he had to worry about was knocking the knife from her grasp. Which he didn’t see as a problem at all. As Leon lined up the angle for his swing, he felt a sure of confidence overtake him.

“I mean, if I can hit a side-winding fastball going 100 km an hour, then surely I can hit the knife from her—”.

Just as he swung the golden blade toward the knife, Sayaka saw his movement and decided to try and evade instead of attack. Unfortunately, Leon was already following through with his swing and it was too late. Then, to both party’s surprise, rather than the sound of metal colliding with metal, a sickening crack was heard as Leon saw the decorative sword make brutal contact with Sayaka’s wrist, the knife falling from her grasp and clacking onto the floor.

He barely had time to react before a pain-filled wail reached his ears.

“ARRRRRRRRRRRAHHHHHHHH”

Leon completely froze. He saw Sayaka rear her head back and grasp her probably broken wrist. She breathed heavily and stared, horrified at her injury, wheezing and fighting to endure the pain.

Across from her, the baseball star felt himself lose his grip on the decorative sword, the golden weapon clattering to the floor loudly. He hadn’t meant to do that! He only wanted to disarm her, not break a wrist!

However, even if it wasn’t what he intended, she was unarmed now and with that injury, she would probably be easier to subdue. Although he wanted to avoid hurting her even more, he knew it was now or never. Holding up his hands to show he was unarmed, he slowly began walking toward her.

“S-Sayaka! I…I didn’t…I didn’t mean…” he struggled to say, trying to find a way to convince her of his good intentions. However, his hesitation only seemed to further frighten the injured Sayaka and she quickly backed away from him.

“STAY AWAY!!” she frantically shouted, her eyes frantically scanning the room.

Finally, her eyes seemed to lock onto something near her and Leon realized all too late that it was the knife she’d dropped. Sayaka saw that he had noticed her discovery and immediately dashed for the blade.

Not wanting a repeat of what had happened earlier, the baseball star also sped toward the knife. However, just before his fingers would have grasped the hilt, Sayaka’s foot smashed into his side, causing him to gasp for breath. This gave her just enough time to grab the knife with her uninjured hand and speed away from him.

At first, Leon thought she might be trying to get behind and stab him, so he whirled around and leapt to the side. Coincidentally, he landed next to the decorative sword and furiously grabbed it before spinning around to face the re-armed pop idol.

However, much to his surprise, he found Sayaka using her shoulder to push open the bathroom door.

“No! Sayaka, wait!”

However, she paid him no heed as the door flew open and she disappeared within, the kitchen knife clutched in her left hand.
The door slammed behind her, creating a barrier between her and her supposed killer. Luckily, even though it was a boy’s bathroom that didn’t have a lock, because the frame didn’t fit right, it jammed and appeared to be locked. A fact that Sayaka had counted on when she fled there.

Her back pressed against the cold tiled surface of the bathroom wall, her left arm clutching the knife while her aching right arm hung lifeless at her side. She tried to move her broken wrist but a surge of pain shot through her, so she decided to let it remain motionless. However, the dull ache that came from that arm continued to assault her regardless.

Her legs began to lose strength and Sayaka felt herself slowly sink to the floor. All the while, tears of sorrow and regret spilled from her eyes.

“This is it. This is the end for me. Even if Leon does go away, he’ll tell the others what I did. Makoto might believe me if I told him that it was Leon that attacked me, but if Leon shows them the note I wrote…”

She winced as another jolt of pain from her wrist wracked her body. At the same time, she could hear Leon shout at her just outside the door. She couldn’t tell what he was saying but he sounded furious, which he had every right to be. He continued banging on the door, obviously desperate to get in and finish what she had started.

“I can’t believe… I actually tried to kill him… me… And now… he’s going to kill me instead… I’m scared… I don’t want to die…”

Against her will, she began sobbing uncontrollably, tears rolling down her cheeks and soaking the collar of her uniform. All of the happy memories of her time with her band mates now came back, taunting her as she realized that everything she had fought to protect was going to die with her.

“I’ll never know the warmth of being on stage ever again… I’ll never find out if my friends are okay… I failed… I failed everyone… I’m going to die here… alone… and it’s my own fault!”

Choking back her tears, Sayaka lifted the knife up and viewed her reflection in it one last time. Her disheveled, tear stained and reddened face only further tortured her and she couldn’t bear to look at it any longer. Angling the tip of the blade at her throat, she took deep breaths as she prepared to end her misery herself.

“I can’t take it anymore. I’d rather end it all myself than be murdered,” she tried to assure herself, speaking aloud in an attempt to steady her nerves. “It’ll be over soon…”

Holding the knife firmly against her throat, she began to press the tip into her slender neck.

“Sayaka! Open the door! Dammit, Sayaka!!!”

Leon rattled the handle of the door but found it wouldn’t budge. He shouldn’t have been surprised, this was a girl’s room and their bathrooms could lock. But that only made it all the more infuriating!

“Dammit!!!” he grunted as he slammed his shoulder into the door, trying to force it open. However, no matter how many times he rammed it, the lock seemed to hold firmly.
For a moment, Leon stopped to consider what he should do. Now that his life wasn’t in danger, he felt like he could think more clearly and decided to weigh his options.

He could try and talk to Sayaka through the door, though he doubted she would listen. Even worse was the fact that she had taken the knife with her. If she had run into the bathroom without it, he wouldn’t have been so worried, but leaving her with a weapon was too dangerous a threat for him to ignore.

He could try and get the others but what happened if Sayaka decided to come out and attack him while he did so? Then there was also the option of just returning to his room and waiting for the morning announcement and showing everyone the letter Sayaka had wrote. However, what if Sayaka went to someone like Makoto before morning? She would spin things in her favor and probably say that he wrote the note and was trying to frame her after failing to kill her!

“Arrgh, dammit! Why did things have to turn out like this?!” he complained as he pressed his head against the bathroom door. Just as he was about to consider giving up and heading back to his room, he heard a despairing voice beyond the door.

“…can’t take…anymore…end it all myself…murdered…over soon…”

An audible gasp escaped Leon as he heard Sayaka’s agonizing words. She wouldn’t…would she? Could she really be planning to do it?! No! That’s not what he wanted at all! He was trying to save her, not drive her into a corner so she could kill herself!

Snapping his head up, Leon once more resumed his furious assault on the door, pounding his fist into the wood.

“No…no! Don’t do it! Open the damn door, Sayaka!” he pleaded, desperately trying to stop her from outside. “You can’t! No! Stop!!”

More desperate than ever to break down the door, Leon looked to the wall where he had set down the decorative sword. Without any hesitation, he grabbed the golden blade once more and reared it back. With all his strength, he slammed the blunt metal into the door, leaving a huge gash in it.

However, despite the newly formed mark, the door remained rooted in place. Anger coursed through Leon as he lifted the blade again, slashing at the stubborn door once more. The attack earned another gaping indent in the wood but still the frame held the door in place. Taking a few steps back for momentum, Leon rushed toward the door, swinging the blade down with as much force as he could muster.

Unfortunately, even that valiant effort only put another gash in the wooden surface, the door itself still as unmoving as ever.

“God-Dammit!!” he cursed as he threw the now bent blade aside before continuing to pound on the door. “There has to be a way I can—”.

Before he finished speaking, his eyes caught a glimpse of the doorknob and he gasped as he knelt down before the knob. There were small screws in the plate that held the knob in place. So, even if the knob itself broke, the door would remain locked. But if he removed the screws, he should be able to shimmy the lock open!

All he needed now was—

“My toolkit!” he exclaimed before practically leaping to his feet. “Sayaka! Just hold on a little longer!”
And with that, he dashed around the corner and out into the hallway.

Just as the tip of her knife touched the flesh of her neck, Leon resumed his frantic shouting. Startled by the increased banging on the door, Sayaka pulled the blade away from her throat but not before the edge of the knife nicked the underside of her chin.

Gasping at the painful sensation, Sayaka winced and closed one eye, trying to regain her resolve. Outside, the assault on the door was growing more frantic and she knew that any moment, the door would give way and she’d be in the hands of her would-be killer. She needed to finish this…quickly.

“I won’t…let him…” she told herself, putting the blade back in place, ready to stab into her neck. “I…I won’t…let him…”

Her hand trembled as the blade got closer and closer to her flesh, and no matter how hard she tried, she could not steady her grasp. Then, when the blade was only inches away from her throat, she felt something inside her break. The hand holding the knife retracted and fell back to her side and her body was rocked with sobs and fresh tears.

“I…I can’t! I don’t want to die! Not like this…Not like this…”

It was at this time that all of noise outside the door ceased, making her head snap up in attention. For a moment, she thought he would resume but after what seemed like an eternity, it seemed that Leon had finally given up on breaking down the door.

“Is…is he…gone?” she pondered, a glimmer of hope shining through.

Despite her tears and the pain of her injuries, Sayaka decided to pull herself up to her feet. Using the wall as support, she was able to stand upright and push off the wall, standing on her own. Slowly and cautiously, she approached the door, listening for any signs that someone might be on the other side.

When she heard nothing, Sayaka allowed herself a brief moment to sigh and take a deep breath.

“I’m alive…” she said almost triumphantly, a fragile smile forming on her lips. “I’m still alive…I’m going to—”

Just then, she heard a strange sound coming from the door. Leaning in only slightly, she heard what sounded like metal being turned or unhinged. At the same time, she saw that the handle of the door had begun to jiggle slightly. Her face blanched as the rumbling of the handle increased until it was shaking violently.

Shaking her head violently, Sayaka backed away from the door and said, “No…no…I don’t want to —”

Without warning the door handle abruptly came loose and the door swung open. Standing there, with screwdriver in hand, was the one person Sayaka wished to never see again.

“No…I don’t want to die!!! I want to live!!!” she screamed as Leon stepped into the bathroom.

Tossing the working tool aside as he entered, Leon held up his hands, as if to surrender.

“Wait a second! I’m not going to do anything! I just want you to listen to what I have to say for a bit,
okay?!” he said to her, coming closer and closer.

However, Sayaka knew it had to be a trick. He was here to kill her, just like she had tried to kill him! What other reason would he have for going so far as to break open her door just to get to her?!

Although completely terrified, Sayaka held up her knife and angled the tip at him again. Without waiting for him to speak, she rushed at him in a desperate attempt to defend herself. However, before she even got close to him, he sidestepped and grasped her knife wielding hand.

“NOOO! GET AWAY!” she frantically screamed trying to free herself of his grasp.

She managed to pull the blade back closer to her chest but Leon’s hand stubbornly held onto it the entire time. If she could use her other hand, she would have slapped at him but at the moment, she couldn’t even lift a finger on that hand. Continuing to struggle against his superior strength, Sayaka did all she could to break free, but to no avail.

“DON’T KILL ME! NOO!!!!” she shrieked, feeling him use his other hand to try and pry the blade from her grasp. In response, her fingers tightened around the handle and she refused to let him have it.

It was then that she heard him grunt and say, “Dammit! I’m not going to kill you! So will you just calm down and—”.

Suddenly, she felt him tear the knife from her grasp and when he did, a sharp pain ran down her body. She froze for a moment, unable to think or even feel. Then, slowly, her gaze wandered down to her abdomen and her eyes widened in horror.

Just below her breasts, a slender gash could be seen tracing down to just above her waist. Her white uniform top slowly began to darken as the blood began oozing out. It wasn’t until then that a seizure of pain, more intense than anything she’d ever felt before, encased her entire body and she felt her strength quickly fail her.

Stumbling backwards, she slapped into the back wall and slowly began to slide down. Her legs came out from under her and she plopped onto the floor, propped up against the now bloodstained wall.

In this moment of agony, all she could do was stare up at Leon as he gazed down upon her, absolute terror and fear in his eyes. And it was then that she understood…this was, indeed, her punishment.

The bloodstained knife in Leon’s hands clattered to the floor. His crystal blue eyes widened as he realized exactly what his hasty action had done. The gash on her abdomen didn’t appear to be deep but it was bleeding intensely, staining both the walls and floor as it oozed out of her stomach.

“No…no!”

Without thinking, he pressed his hands against the elongated wound, trying to stop the bleeding by keeping pressure on it. However, the wound extended too far for his hands to cover and he could see that Sayaka was getting weaker and weaker by the moment.

“Shit! Shit! What the hell do I do?! I need to stop the bleeding but I don’t—”.

Frantically looking around, the baseball star noticed a pure white towel hanging on the door to the shower. Thinking quickly, he leapt up and snagged it off the door. Immediately, he began ripping it
into long, slender strips to use as bandages.

“Thank God for Kanon teaching me how to do this!” he briefly thought as he began wrapping the towel strips around the gaping wound.

He pulled each one tight and only when he was sure the bleeding was receding would he move on to the next bandage. The wound was too long for a single strip so he resolved to use all of them. When he finished tying the last of the smaller stripes, he quickly grabbed another towel and wrapped the entirety of it around the smaller make-shift bandages. Tying it tightly, he was now confident that with the larger towel encasing the smaller ones, the pressure would help stop the bleeding.

“I just have to stop the bleeding! If I can do that, surely Sayaka will—”.

Before he could finish the thought, an agonized grunt alerted him to a change in Sayaka’s condition. Shooting his gaze up, he saw that her eyes were only barely open and she was groaning as if trying to say something. Finishing tying off the last of the makeshift bandages, Leon immediately pulled himself up to her level and looked into her eyes.

There was no life left in her, all of it seemed to be drained as her life blood had spilled onto the floor. Leon had no idea if she was really conscious or not but he knew he had to do something to keep her awake! Gently placing his hands on her cold cheeks, he wiped away her tears with bloody fingers as he said to her:

“Come on, Sayaka! You can’t die here! You still have to teach me music…and…and…you have to…do a lot of other stuff too! So please…don’t die, Sayaka!!!”

Sayaka felt her consciousness flicker as she lay there on floor, her back pressed against that back wall. Every so often, she’d feel an intense jolt of pain just below her chest and even with her darkened vision she could make out that it was Leon kneeling down in front of her.

For a while, she wasn’t sure what he was doing but after he knelt down, she felt a sharp pain in her abdomen every few seconds and she could have sworn she saw his hands reaching around her.

Was he stabbing her even more? That’s what it felt like as she fought to stay awake, a battle she was quickly losing. Letting her head rest against the wall behind her, she was surprised that her thoughts were not focused on herself, but rather others.

She thought of her band mates and prayed that they were alright, still believing the video Monokuma showed her was a lie. She thought of her classmates still trapped in this hell, and earnestly wished that they would find a way to escape.

But most of all, she thought of Makoto and how devastated he would be when he discovered her in the morning…dead in his shower.

“M-M-Makoto…”

Guilt consumed her as she realized that she may have sealed his fate. Her plan to frame him would be carried out but not by her. And she knew that the others would blame him for her death…which he didn’t deserve.

Makoto…
All he did was trust her and she not only violated that trust, she took advantage of it. And that’s what hurt the most. The pain of her death was nothing compared to the deep hollow pressure she felt in her very soul at realizing how much she was going to hurt him.

“I…I have…to…”

She had to make things right. And there was very little time to do that. With the last of her strength, she pressed her left index finger into the pool of blood oozing out of her abdomen. The act brought untold pain to her but she endured it as best she could, only giving a single grunt as she retracted her hand.

Doing her best to concentrate, she pressed that bloody index finger against the wall behind her. And even though she knew she had one chance to do this, she somehow knew exactly how and where to write one final message.

11037 – L-E-O-N

Just as she finished the last stroke of her message, the last of her energy gave out and her hand fell to her side, completely lifeless.

“There…I…did…what…I could…”

Her vision began to blur and the world around her began to fade out. However just before she thought that she would fade from this world forever, Leon’s face suddenly appeared in front of her. Tears spilled from his crystal eyes as he placed his hand on her cheeks and began speaking to her.

“…on, Sayaka!…You can’t…here!…still have to…me music…So please…don’t die, Sayaka!!!”

He held her so tenderly and spoke to her in a mixture of desperation and concern. It was unlike anything Sayaka had ever seen from him before but somehow, she wasn’t surprised. And it was only in that moment that she realized that she had been wrong.

Leon had been telling the truth all along, he had been trying to help her. He had been trying to get the knife away from her out of concern, not to use against her. And he didn’t hate her for trying to kill him, or at least she hoped he didn’t.

She had been too blinded by fear and despair to see his good intentions and it had cost her everything.

All at once, she felt even more guilty for having dragged him into this…not only for attempting to kill him but for having written his name in her own blood. She had condemned him for something that was entirely her fault. She had no idea what would become of him or Makoto but she knew that, no matter what, they deserved to hear her one last time.

“I’m…so…sorry…”

As that unsaid apology rang through her mind, the darkness consumed her.

Leon felt his body go cold as Sayaka’s eyes slowly slid closed, her expression completely lifeless.

“…No…no…no, no, no, no, NOOOO!!”

His voice echoed in the small washroom and his mind frantically tried to deny what had happened.
“She…she can’t be dead! This can’t be real!” Leon pleaded, not entirely sure what to do. “She’s just unconscious! That’s all! I’ll check her pulse and…”

Grabbing hold of her wrist, he began feeling around for the vein that would resonate with her heartbeat. He’d also learned how to do this from his cousin, Kanon, but never imagined having to use it here. Unfortunately, to his utter horror, he felt nothing. Not even a hint of life seemed present in the lifeless Sayaka’s body.

His bloodstained hands slipped from her wrist and he raised them up to his eyes. The grimy pink tint on his fingers made him feel sick to his stomach and he fought off the urge to vomit. As he held in the contents of his dinner, he slowly began backing away from his classmate’s body, unable to even look at her any longer.

Getting out into the main room, Leon slumped against the wall next to the bathroom and stared up at the ceiling.

“How…did this happen?” he whispered to himself, trying to will away what had occurred. “This is all a bad dream…right, Sayaka?”

However, when he glanced back inside the bathroom, he felt himself blanch and threw his hand up to cover his mouth. He knew he had to hold it in, it would be bad if he lost it all over the carpeted floor. It was then that he noticed something he otherwise wouldn’t have.

He spotted a very distinctive strand of red hair on the floor.

“Shit! It must have happened during the fight!” he surmised.

Without even thinking, he looked over and saw the lint roller by the bed, picked it up and began cleaning up all of the hair in the room, both his and Sayaka’s. It was mainly just to make sure he got all of his but he didn’t want to take any chances. As he finished cleaning up the very last spot in the room, he tossed the lint roller aside and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Only then, after once again seeing the blood on his sleeve, did he realize what he had done.

“Oh shit! I’ve been covering up the crime scene! Why the hell did…I…”

Suddenly, he froze as his mind began to catch up with his intentions. He knew there was no turning back now. Sayaka was dead and even if it was an accident, it was by his hand. There was no way the others would believe him. Even if he told them exactly what happened, there was no way to guarantee they’d believe him.

Showing them the note would only prove that he was attacked first, not that he hadn’t intended to kill her. And besides that, even though he never wished for it, this was a coincidental opportunity for him. Killing in self-defense was understandable and even if he was found out later, he did have the excuse of it all being an accident.

Plus, if the bear was telling them all the truth, he qualified to get out of this hell hole! He could go and see what happened to his old team, find out what happened to his cousin, Kanon!

“This means…I get to graduate, right?” he said solemnly to himself.

He realized how hypocritical he was being compared to how he had been acting only a few minutes ago, but back then, he hadn’t accidentally murdered anyone before! He didn’t want to be punished for something that wasn’t his fault and he certainly didn’t want anyone to find out what he’d done.
It was bad enough it had happened, knowing the truth and having to live with the horrific fact that he’d killed Sayaka…it would stay with him for the rest of his days.

Even so, there was nothing left he could do now. Nothing would bring Sayaka back now. A part of him wanted to turn himself in but his own fears kept him from really considering that. After seeing how ruthless Monokuma was, he could only imagine what his punishment would be if he actually admitted to murder.

That thought alone sent chills down his spine and as he lifted his arm to wipe away more sweat, again being reminded of his crime by the blood on his sleeve. However, unlike before, he was suddenly overcome with the desire to rid himself of the garment.

Pulling off the bloodstained jacket, Leon prepared to head out of the room and find a way to dispose of his stained clothing. However, just before he was about to leave, he found his feet taking him to the entrance to the bathroom.

Glancing inside, he took in the sight of Sayaka’s body one last time. Despite himself, he felt hot tears well up in his eyes and he abruptly bowed in her direction.

“…I’m sorry…I know there isn’t any forgiveness for what I’ve done but…just know that I never wanted this to happen…”

Lifting his head, he forced himself to look directly at her before finishing.

“Goodbye…Sayaka.”

Turning around sharply, Leon quickly began walking away. He didn’t stop as he reached the door, almost knocking it open as he ventured out into the hall and off toward the laundry room. What he never would have know was, only a few moments after he left, a noise came from the bathroom.

On the floor of the shower, Sayaka abruptly stirred, if only slightly, and a light groan escaped her throat. For an instant, her eyes fluttered and strained, as if trying to open again. But a moment later, her stirring ceased and she once again became motionless.

No one, not even the mastermind behind the camera, saw her occasional stirring for the rest of the evening.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was difficult to write. I wanted to convey both sides of the incident without making either of them seem like a “villain”. They were just two very unfortunate kids that were backed into a corner, nothing more.

Beyond that, what did you all think of this chapter? There was a small deviation from
the main story-line in this chapter. Can you spot it? If so, let me know what you think it is!

Either way, leave a comment or review if you’re enjoying the story! I hope you’re all looking forward to the next chapter and have a great day, my beautiful readers!
Ch 1 Act 6

Chapter Summary

The class trial is made known to the students, and Mukuro is forced to realize her place in this game.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“…morning everyone...now 7AM...nighttime is officially...greet...beautiful day!”

Mukuro’s eyes fluttered open as the morning announcement invaded her ears, ruining her rest. Even so, she continued to rest her eyes for a few moments after the announcement, not ready to face the day just yet. She laid her head down on her desk, her arms folded into a makeshift pillow, still exhausted from her work the night before.

However, reason soon outweighed desire and she groaned as she knew it was time to awaken.

Pushing herself up, the soldier wiped away the sleep from her eyes and lightly slapped her face. As she sat upright in front of her desk she felt a small bit of something fall off her arms. Lifting up her arms for inspection, she found that she had fallen asleep on some of the unused screws and they had embedded into her skin a bit.

Brushing off a few more screws that remained stuck to her underarms, her gaze slowly shifted down to the center of her desk. There, polished, sharpened and pristine, was the combat knife she’d spent most of the night restoring.

A twisted combination of pride and disgust welled up inside Mukuro as she observed it.

Carefully, she reached out and picked it up, her reflection shimmering in the flat of the blade as she gazed at the deadly weapon. And, despite the guilt that she fought to keep away, she couldn’t deny the euphoria rising within her as she held that sleek and deadly weapon in her grasp. However, she immediately shook her head and forced herself to set the blade back down.

“I shouldn’t be enjoying this,” Mukuro said to herself as she pushed herself away from her desk and stood up. “This isn’t like the battlefield. There’s no sport in hunting civilians…”

Still, the thrill of the hunt was stronger than she had realized, to make her forget her past atrocities and revel in that maddening bliss, even if it only lasted a moment.

“Junko must get that same feeling from Despair…I really am no better than her, am I?”

Her own words mockingly echoed in her mind as she approached her wardrobe.

Opening it up, she quickly grabbed a knife holster before unbuttoning her blouse. Setting the expensive garment aside for a moment, Mukuro slung the holster around her shoulder and settled it just below her breast-line. Replacing the designer blouse and adjusting it to hide the holster, she returned to her desk to retrieve the knife.
Just as she was about to reach out for the knife, she curiously lifted her eyes to check the time. To her shock, it was already ten past 7AM.

“Shit!”

She swore as she realized just how late she was, not realizing it had taken so much time to do such a simple task. Sleep depravity was obviously to blame but that didn’t resolve her situation.

Quickly grabbing her combat knife from the desk, she effortlessly slid it into the holster beneath her blouse, completely obscuring it from view. And because the holster was positioned low, it didn’t protrude outward or give any sign that she was armed. The perfect hidden weapon.

Not having time to congratulate herself for doing such fine work, Mukuro desperately sped toward the door. As her hand grasped the handle and begun to turn it, one hand shot up to her head. Sky blue eyes widened as she felt only her natural black hair atop her head. Gritting her teeth in frustration, she spun around and looked over to the far corner of her room.

Lying in a heap, frazzled and messy, was the pink wig that completed her outfit.

Knowing that this wig was now completely useless, the soldier sped toward her dresser that sat next to her wardrobe. Pulling open one of the larger drawers, an arrangement of several pink wigs came into view. All of them were already styled with a cute red bow and kitty cat clip.

“If Junko is anything, she is prepared!” Mukuro audibly thanked as she pulled out one of the spare wigs.

Speeding over to the mirror on her desk, she placed the pink patch of hair upon her head and adjusted it, clipping it to her own hair as quickly as humanly possible. Once she was certain the wig was secure and perfectly placed, Mukuro tore from desk and ran out her door, heading for the cafeteria.

Standing outside the cafeteria, staring blankly ahead, Leon felt as if his whole body was rooted in place. He knew he was late but that didn’t inspire him to take a single step. Guilt completely overtook him as he balled his fists and lowered his head.

“How the hell am I supposed to face all of them…?” he whispered to himself.

He hadn’t slept at all the previous night. After disposing of his bloody shirt via improvised use of the incinerator, he had returned to his room and laid down on his bed. There, he stared upwards at the ceiling for hours, unable to close his eyes no matter how exhausted he was.

For each time his eyes shut, the horrific vision of Sayaka’s terrified face flashed before his eyes, followed by the image of the bloody mess he had left her in. Her words echoed in his mind, clawing at his sanity.

“No! I don’t want to die!!!”

“Please, don’t kill me!!!”

“I want to live!!!”

Leon gritted his teeth as he tried, and failed, to forget those words and the terrified voice of the Pop
Idol. They would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life and even if he survived this horrific situation, he knew he would never be the same again. The blood on his hands may have washed away but to him, it was still there and would forever remain there.

He would never be allowed to forget his crime, he couldn’t and wouldn’t let himself do that. At the very least, he could do that for Sayaka. But that didn’t mean he would admit to his crime either.

He had already decided on what he needed to do now. He would act as if he had no idea what had happened and when it was time for the killer to be released from this prison, only then would he admit to his shameful act.

In truth, he was incredibly fearful of what would happen when that time came. A large part of him wanted to just own up to it and just tell his classmates right now. But something told him that wasn’t an option. Even if he wasn’t punished by Monokuma for coming clean, he knew that his classmates would undoubtedly do the job for the demented bear.

It seemed that the only option he had was to stay quiet and pray that no one found out he was involved in Sayaka’s murder.

But that brought up new questions. Just how would Monokuma go about letting the killer leave? For that matter when he said that the killer would be forced out of the school…did he even mean that the killer would be allowed to leave alive?!

As that horrifying though occurred to him, a slap on his shoulder startled him and he abruptly shouted for a moment before whirling around. To his surprise, he found Hiro smiling awkwardly and rubbing his head.

“Whoa! Sorry about that, man. Didn’t mean to startle you,” the clairvoyant explained, obviously startled himself. “You okay? You were just standing there, staring down at the floor like a zombie.”

Only now realizing how suspicious his actions could seem to others, Leon plastered a grin on his face and chuckled.

“Y-Yeah! I was up waaaay too late last night. Guess I’m still out of it this morning.”

Leon mentally cursed as that excuse escaped him. No one was dumb enough to think that just because he was tired that he’d be zoned out in front of the cafeteria, sweating profusely and obviously nervous about something—

“Oh, I see. One of those nights, huh? I have those sometimes too.”

It took all the strength Leon had not to give a huge sigh of relief as his idiot classmate accepted his lie. Instead, Hiro decided to use it as an excuse of his own to keep talking.

“I remember the time that I was out late with some, uh, customers, and we decided to—”

Suddenly, from behind them, an annoyed scoff startled both of them.

“Do you mind? You’re blocking the doorway.”

The boys turned their head to see none other than Junko Enoshima standing behind them, her arms folded over her chest and tapping her foot impatiently.

Leon was about to apologize, on instinct, when he suddenly noticed something was off about her today. Her hair was slightly frazzled and kinda seemed…folded in places. Not to mention that she
was breathing heavily and seemed to be recovering her composure. And though he couldn’t quite place it, something was just…different about her face. He just couldn’t tell what.

Before he could inspect her further, Hiro nervously replied, “Oh, sorry about that! We were just saying how nice it is today—”.

“Don’t give me that crap. We’re gonna be late if you don’t get moving!” Junko abruptly cut him off, taking a determined step forward. “And I’m hungry so either get in or get out of the way.”

Hiro tensed up at her stern disposition and immediately turned to head into the cafeteria without another word.

Leon, however, was kind of shocked by her sudden change in attitude. She had always been frank and kind of bitchy but he’d never seen her so stern or abrasive before.

“I guess she’s just not a morning person,” he surmised as he, too, turned and headed into the cafeteria.

Junko followed directly behind them and when they finally entered the dining hall, it was already quarter past the meeting time. It seemed as though they were the last to arrive. Even Hifumi, who had been the last to arrive for the past few days, was there before them.

And the instant the three of them wandered into the dining hall, they fell under the scrutinous gaze and boisterous voice of Taka.

“Junko! Leon! Hiro! All of you are over fifteen minutes late! What do you have to say for yourselves?!” the Ultimate Moral Compass shouted, pointing furiously at them.

Without any hesitation, Junko abruptly smiled and said, “Sorry about that. My make-up would not agree with me this morning!”

Again, Leon was kind of startled by her sudden shift in persona. It was almost a complete 180 from her previous disposition a moment ago. But he ignored it as everyone seemed to accept her words.

Beside her, Hiro laughed awkwardly and answered, “I wasn’t late! I just got lost on the way here! I blame the Bermuda Triangle!”

This left only Leon, whom would have rather stayed silent and just gone to his seat. But now, as everyone was staring at him, expecting an answer, he had no choice but to respond.

“Sorry I’m late guys. I slept right through my alarm.”

Leon blatantly lied to his classmates as he slowly drifted into the cafeteria, another forced grin hiding his shame and terror. And even though Taka scolded them for a bit longer, no one questioned any of them on their tardiness. It seemed that getting caught up with Hiro and Junko had been a blessing in disguise.

Absolutely no one seemed the wiser. None of them could tell that Leon had changed overnight. Hell, he hardly believed it himself…but he knew it was true.

He was a killer now…a murder. But if he played the game accordingly, he just might get out of here alive.

“It’s all I can do now. It’s not like I wanted this to happen…”
This was all he could focus on as the rest of the students began chatting around him.

Taking her usual seat by the end of the table, Mukuro let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. Apart from almost being the last one to arrive, she managed to keep her guise up without raising any suspicion. It had been fortunate that those two idiots happen to be hanging around outside the dining hall. It masked her actions, and tardiness, perfectly.

After all, if she was going to have a chance at killing…her target, she would need to be careful and not do anything that could seem even the slightest bit suspicious. Drawing attention to herself in any way could put the more intelligent students on alert, which would make her task that much more—

“Junko, forgive my rudeness but…you appear quite different than on the cover of your magazines. It was not what I was expecting.”

The instant Sakura Ogami’s words reached her ears, a flutter of panic rose up in the disguised Mukuro. Only now did she realize that, in her haste, she had forgotten to reapply foundation to her face, leaving most of her freckles clear for everyone to see! And if that was the case, did that also mean that her hand was—!

As cautiously as she could manage, Mukuro lifted her hand up to be sure that the symbol of her mercenary career was still hidden from view. For if it wasn’t, her cover would be completely blown!

Fortunately enough, it seemed that the Fenrir tattoo on her hand was still completely covered with foundation. A relieved sigh escaped her as she used that previous hand movement to disguise her mistake.

She let out a cheeky laugh before placing her right hand on her cheek to show emphasis while giving a cutesy expression.

“That’s because I get all fixed up for the magazine articles!” she proudly pronounced, smiling lavishly as she continued. “They use photo editing and all that junk to spice things up a little!”

“Is that so!?” Sakura replied in shock, her surprise spreading to many of the surrounding students who happened to hear them.

Confident that her lie was a success, the disguised Mukuro waved her hand dismissively and continued, “Oh come on, guys! Don’t look so surprised! It’s pretty common in the fashion world to do that kind of stuff.”

Everyone whom was paying attention gave a slight gasp of surprise, some more quietly than others. No one had expected to hear such a thing from the famous model and it clearly showed.

Even Makoto looked to her with shock, obviously not expecting an Ultimate Fashionista to have such a dirty secret. However, none of them seemed to question it at all. Not even Kyoko whom she had been certain would at least voice her suspicion. But it seemed that the memory wiped detective didn’t plan to say anything, which in a way, was more frightening than if she had spoken up.

Not only that, Mukuro’s eyes slowly drifted up to the camera watching them, but only for a moment before looking away. Even if it hadn’t been intentional, she had just completely disrespected her younger sister with that lie.

“Junko won’t be happy about this…”
Being the Ultimate Fashionista, as well as Ultimate Despair, Junko prided herself on her looks, and even though she was never vain about them, she knew **exactly** how beautiful and stunning she was. Even without make-up, the despair loving girl had a glamorous glow to her that Mukuro had, albeit unknowingly, always been jealous of.

Luckily, before she could ponder the ramifications of her words any longer, Taka stood up and decided it was time to start the morning breakfast meeting.

“Alright, is everyone here?” he called out, making everyone look around to confirm it.

“…No, actually. Byakuya and Sayaka haven’t arrived yet,” Hina chirped, not spotting either of the mentioned students.

“I haven’t what now?” the cold and stern voice of Byakuya called out, turning everyone’s head toward the door.

He strode in as usual, his confident and smug attitude already showing through. Without offering anything else, he took a seat far removed from the others and waited patiently for the meeting to begin. However, he barely got the chance to rest before he was bombarded with an important question.

“Yo, you didn’t see Sayaka on the way here, did ya?” Mondo bluntly asked, only half concerned.

A mocking scoff came from Byakuya as he settled into his seat but surprisingly, he answered, “No. I didn’t see anyone on my way here. Why? Has something happened?”

Mukuro didn’t appreciate his tone, almost as if he wanted something to have happened. And although she wasn’t entirely surprised by his abrasive and somewhat cruel attitude, it still unsettled her that the Affluent Progeny derived pleasure from such horrifying circumstances.

Nevertheless, warning bells didn’t really go off in her mind until Hina once again chimed in.

“Sayaka isn’t here yet,” the swimmer said curiously. “I wonder if she’s sick?”

“It is most unlike her to be absent,” Sakura agreed, her demeanor changing in response to the tense air that began to settle in around them. “And she isn’t the type to be late for such things.”

A deep, heavy silence overtook the area and for a few moments, no one dared to either speak or move. Not even the arrogant Byakuya or the indifferent Celeste were immune to moment of dread that spread over all of the students.

The only one that seemed able to think properly…was the imposter who hid among them.

Perhaps predicting the coming disaster, from beneath her guise, Mukuro suddenly turned her attention over to Makoto. Her sky blue irises widened as she saw that his face was twisted in abject horror, his eyes dilating and his body trembling. He looked as if he was trying to convince himself that Sayaka’s absence meant nothing but he was losing that battle with himself.

“I…I’m going to go check on her!!” Makoto practically shouted as he shot up from his seat and dashed out of the cafeteria, obviously giving in to his fearful curiosity.

It was in that moment that Mukuro realized that the game had officially begun. And what was worse, she had absolutely nothing to do with it. And, unfortunately for all of them, her fears were confirmed as the horrified shriek of Makoto echoed all the way to the dining hall.
“EHYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

The instant that ear shattering scream rang out, Kyoko knew that someone had given into temptation. And for reasons unknown to even herself, felt something inside harden as she mentally prepared herself for whatever was to come.

Unsurprisingly, Taka was the first one to react, tearing away from the head of the long table everyone was seated at. As he reached the door, he spun around to face his fellow classmates with a stern but concerned visage.

“Everyone! Stay here where it’s safe! I’ll check it out and report back!” he instructed before abruptly turning and dashing down the hallway.

For a moment, it seemed as if the remaining students might actually listen to him. However, that notion was shattered as Byakuya leapt up from his seat and sped out the door, not sparing a word for anyone.

“W-Wait! S-Shouldn’t we do what Taka—?!” Chihiro tried to insist before all hell broke loose.

Without waiting for anyone’s approval, Kyoko also rushed toward the door, ignoring all protests and the sounds of footsteps that followed after her. But she didn’t make it even halfway down the hall before a strange sound played over the intercom.

*Ding–Dong–Ding–Dong*

Kyoko came to a sharp halt as that chime played throughout the school. Her eyes shot up to the monitor that was hanging in the top corner of the hallway, already knowing what would happen next. Her suspicions were confirmed when the screen clicked on, buzzing to life as the image of Monokuma appeared.

Holding a glass of wine, as usual, the bear’s half-grin seemed to widen menacingly as it spoke.

“A body has been discovered!”

Kyoko gritted her teeth and seethed silently as her worst fears began to materialize right in front of her. Her gloved hands balled into fists and if she had been near a wall, she might have been tempted to slam her knuckles into it. Fortunately, she was too far away from the nearest wall and so she merely redirected her vision back toward the screen as the bear’s voice continued.

“Every living student is to report to the gymnasium immediately! Tardiness will be met with extreme prejudice!”

And with that, the monitors flickered to black, leaving everyone who heard it, aside from Kyoko, in a state of shock. Almost on instinct, Kyoko’s mind began processing the situation.

A dead body…that meant that someone really had fallen to the temptation. And the victim was more than obvious. The only thing that remained for them to discover was who had been the one to give in to their twisted desire and snuffed out such a young life. Even more terrifying was that, if Monokuma kept his word and stayed out of their way, the killer had to be…one of the students that were currently rushing toward her in a mad frenzy.

She heard their footsteps, some louder and more desperate than others, speeding toward her and the scene of the crime. And again, as if on instinct, she spun around placed herself between them and the
open door leading to what she assumed was a horrific scene.

“Hey, dammit! What the hell are you doing?!” Mondo shouted at her, closing the gap between them and growling in her face. “Get out of the way!”

“No.”

Kyoko’s firm voice and stern gaze didn’t falter, even in the face of Mondo’s threatening posture. Obviously surprised that his demand wasn’t heeded, confusion spread over the biker’s face for a moment as he took in her fierce visage as she blocked his path. But just as quickly as his confusion came, it was gone, and he regained his composure and glared down, towering over her.

“Just what the hell are you trying to pull?” he replied menacingly, gritting his teeth and beginning to crack his knuckles.

It was a habit she’d noticed Mondo did only when he wanted to punch something but knew he shouldn’t. And fortunately for her, she also knew why he was restraining himself.

From what she knew of the bike gang leader, Mondo would never...ever stoop to hitting a woman; he’d sooner kill himself than send a punch her way. Knowing that, and seeing that he was the one leading the charge of the other students, she figured that opposing him would be the best way to get them all to stop and think.

Behind the furious biker, the rest of the students looked on with different expressions.

Chihiro and Hina stood close to Sakura, who stood out in front as a way to somehow shield them from this disaster. Junko blanched while standing beside a horrified Hiro, whom seemed to continually deny that any of this was true. Hifumi howled in terror, his hands clasped to his face as he shrieked. Behind them, Toko grasped her head in fearful frustration and Celeste watched the scene with what could be considered intrigue, except that she couldn’t stop beads of nervous sweat rolling down her forehead.

And far behind all of them, Leon stood frozen in place, as if something within him had broken and he could do nothing but watch the madness unfold. A common reaction, Kyoko noted, but it felt odd he was distancing himself from everyone. He seemed the type to rely on others when in times of crisis but she wasn’t sure why she came to that conclusion.

In either case, Kyoko knew that if she didn’t take charge now, the situation would worsen.

“For now, we need to do as our captor says and report to the gym,” she said sternly, her gaze hardening as she could see them all wanting to protest. And of all of them, the only one able to shake off her glare and speak, was Mondo.

“Like hell we’re gonna do that! I’m not going anywhere until I see what happened with my own eyes!”

Kyoko knit her brows at his statement. In the state he, and probably the rest of them, were in, they would only disrupt the scene and perhaps unintentionally destroy vital evidence that could lead to the killer. That was something she couldn’t allow...for reasons that escaped even herself.

“We all heard the announcement. We have to gather in the gym as soon as possible or—” she tried to reason but found herself cut off.

“Who the hell cares about that right now?!” Junko abruptly shouted, pushing through the crowd to stand next to Mondo. “We don’t know if what that freaky bear said was even true! We need to see if
Sayaka is really—!

“D-Don’t s-say it!”

Everyone was shocked to hear Chihiro abruptly shriek, her hands covering her ears as she began trembling. And she wasn’t the only one. Most of them were struggling to keep it together, desperate that the announcement hadn’t been real or that they didn’t hear it properly. But none of them could deny the truth, no matter how painful it was.

It was a sobering moment for everyone. To realize that one of their friends…truly was dead.

Taking advantage of the sudden silence, Kyoko cleared her throat to get everyone’s attention. “Listen everyone. Like it or not, we’re all captives in this place. And if we don’t do as our captor says…well, we’ve already seen the kind of punishment that awaits us.”

As one, everyone turned to gaze at Mondo, remembering their first day and what happened when he defied the rules. Mondo himself could still slightly recall the smell of gunpowder and smoke as the explosion had almost singed his clothing. No one wanted to test their luck after that, not even in this desperate situation.

Just as Kyoko feared that she may have to lead them to the gym herself, an unlikely ally spoke up. “I’m afraid that I have to agree with Kyoko. We should head for the gym with all haste.”

Everyone turned to see Celeste, her posture perfect as she folded her hands under her chin, smiling at all of them. When no one openly rejected her, she decided to continue.

“This is all part of adapting to our environment. And as she said, we know the consequences of defying our captor.”

She tilted her head slightly, letting her smile widen. The way she smiled like that was kind of unsettling but the logic behind her words was undeniable. Slowly, everyone began to accept their classmate’s notions, despite wanting to protest. Seeing her classmates understand her reasoning, Celeste let out a soft chuckle.

“Are there no objections?” She paused for a moment but no one dared to speak. After a few more seconds of silence, she smiled at them again, triumphantly. “Alright then, shall we get going?” she said almost cheerfully before turning on a heel but stopping before she took a step. “Oh, but we will need someone to go and fetch Byakuya and Kiyotaka. Just in case they don’t heed the—”

“I’ll do it,” Kyoko unsurprisingly volunteered, already turning to head toward the open door to the crime scene. “I promise we won’t be long. Goodbye.”

She didn’t give any of them time to protest before she walked away from them, confident that Celeste would lead them away. And even though she was more than wary of the Ultimate Gambler’s silver tongue, for now it was working in her favor and she welcomed the assistance, at least for now.

“I’m going to need to keep a closer eye on that one,” Kyoko mentally noted as she crossed the threshold into the room.

Sakura walked out in front of the students heading for the gym, acting as a shield of sorts. She wanted to make sure that everyone would be safe, and having her leading them would put some of
their minds at ease. However, there was another purpose that she couldn’t reveal to the others.

A look of genuine relief marred her features instead of stern determination.

“Because someone else committed a murder, I have been spared that burden. At least for now…”

The sick, twisted alleviation from that horrible duty also made her want to smash her fist into the wall. She didn’t want to be grateful that someone else had killed one of her classmates, and she most certainly didn’t want to be relieved that the one who died hadn’t been Hina. Even so, she couldn’t deny that those very things were what she was feeling. And it filled her with despair as she realized that no matter what, even if she didn’t go through with killing another student or spying on them for the mastermind; this horrific guilt would never leave her mind.

“No…it’s not that the guilt can’t be forgotten. It’s that I don’t want it to be forgotten.”

This was her punishment for turning on her classmates to save her dojo. Even if she hadn’t actually done anything for the mastermind yet, she knew that after whatever ordeal they would be forced to endure was complete, Monokuma would come calling. His relentless attempts to break her will were maddening and—

“Sakura?” the sudden voice of Hina snapped the fighter out of her thoughts and she turned to see her friend walking directly beside her. “Are you okay? You look kinda pale. Well, we all do but…”

As Hina hung her head, trying to force away her own feelings of despair, Sakura felt herself become even more angered. Her internal struggle was leading to her only true friend becoming more and more worried, about herself and the situation. This could not be allowed.

Slowly, Sakura gently placed her hand atop Hina’s head and said, “I’m fine. I was just preparing myself for whatever comes our way. After all, we will need to be strong in order to survive this.”

As Hina lifted her gaze up, a light smile appeared on her lips.

“Yeah…you’re right!” she audibly agreed, as if drawing strength from her friend’s words. “We just need to stay positive and work together! We can’t let that stupid bear win! Am I right, Sakura?”

Hearing her friend’s words of encouragement should have brought a renewed hope to muscle-bound fighter. However, it only proved to further throw her into despair.

Seeing Hina actively doing her best not to let the hopelessness of the situation bring her down, Sakura felt even more ashamed that she had, reluctantly, given in already. Becoming the Mastermind’s pawn had taken away all semblance of dignity and left her nothing more than a shell of her formerly proud self.

However, as she stared at Hina’s determined features, a single thought invaded her mind.

“Even if I am branded a traitor or find myself in harm’s ways because of my choices. My mission will always be to protect my family and friends…no matter the cost.”

Despite how painful it was, Sakura managed to give a warm smile to her friend as she replied, “Indeed. Let’s do all that we can, together.”

“Right!” Hina cheerfully concurred, looking forward and smiling brightly.

Seeing that beautiful and hopeful smile, Sakura came to a decision that she knew would go against everything she believed. However, if it meant that her friends would survive and live on…then she
would be more than willing to do it.

“I will never allow Hina…or any of my friends to suffer for my mistakes.”

The instant Kyoko entered the room; a strange and unsettling feeling of calm overtook her. As if her emotions were shutting themselves off without her permission.

“An automatic reaction,” she surmised, unable to fight the feeling. “Why am I having such a reaction to this? What in my past caused me to act this way when in this kind of situation?”

She wanted to ponder the notion further but she was here for a purpose and she knew that Monokuma wouldn’t permit them taking too long. So, pushing away the unsettling calm that surrounded her, she ventured further into the scene.

Her lavender eyes scanned the entirety of the room, aside from the bathroom that was just around the corner. The slashes on floor and walls, the ruffled bed sheets hanging off the bed frame and the empty sword stand overturned…somehow all registered to her in an instant. Again forcing away the lingering questions of what had happened and why, she quickly proceeded around the corner and stopped at what she saw.

Her classmate Makoto was lying on his back, eyes rolled back and mouth hanging open. Undoubtedly he was unconscious and so, Kyoko chose to leave him be for the moment and turned her attention toward the bathroom. The door was swung open and inside, she could see her other two classmates staring down at something.

Her lavender eyes slowly lowered until she saw the visage of Sayaka, blood staining the walls and her clothes, lying completely lifeless against the back bathroom wall.

Kneeling down in front of her, careful not to get any blood on himself, Byakuya pressed his fingers against her neck, searching for a pulse. He must have given up on finding it there, or perhaps he just wanted to be certain, but he slowly picked up her limp left hand and pressed his fingers to her wrist instead.

Standing beside him, pale and shocked, was Taka. The Moral Compass’ complexion worsened with each passing moment and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from his classmate’s corpse. And for some reason, Kyoko knew that the expression warping his face was one of guilt, but not the kind one has when they are truly at fault.

Taka was blaming himself, a feature uncommon in those who see their own crime. It was for this reason that, despite her mind telling her not to ignore the possibility, she knew without a doubt that he wasn’t the murderer. After all, the Moral Compass had never been able to keep hold of his emotions and honesty was ingrained in him. He would have reacted differently if he was the culprit.

Observing the scene, Kyoko knew they had little time before Monokuma came to collect them. And she didn’t want to find out what the bear meant about tardiness being met with ‘extreme prejudice’. Because of that, she decided it was time to make herself known.

“Well?”

As she expected, Taka audibly gasped at her arrival and spun around in surprise.

“K-Kyoko!” he sputtered, unsure of what else to say. She wasn’t surprised by this, considering his
already frazzled nerves and paling complexion.

On the other hand, Byakuya didn’t even flinch as she made herself known. Or if he was surprised, he never showcased it, rising to his feet and staring down at Sayaka’s lifeless body. Without even turning around, he cleared his throat before replying.

“…She’s dead.”

There was no arrogance in his voice, or underlining hostility of any kind. It was simple, matter of fact and direct. There wasn’t even a hint of thrill that she would have expected to hear from the Affluent Progeny. In fact, he seemed to be…at a loss? For what, she couldn’t even fathom.

For a few more moments, all three of them stood there in silence, even Byakuya. Kyoko wasn’t sure if he was being respectful or if he was distancing himself from the situation.

Likewise, in the back of her mind, even the realistic and rational Kyoko had held a sliver of hope that the Pop Sensation was still alive, foolish though the notion was. But now that hope had been replaced…with a deep and deforming despair.

Honestly, looking down at the bloody corpse of her former classmate, Kyoko felt a bit sick to her stomach. However, it was not because of the scene. It was because she wasn’t feeling anything at all at the moment. Not even the stench of blood or the gruesome sight of the crime scene made her register anything. She had truly become a hardened shell, at least for the moment.

“…Why?...Why am I...so calm right now?” she couldn’t help but ponder, curiosity the only feeling breaking through her iron-clad defenses.

And although she desperately wanted to explore this feeling more and search the room to discover what had truly happened, she couldn’t forget that she was here for a very specific purpose.

Folding her arms over her chest and frowning, she stared at the two men before saying, “You heard the announcement, didn’t you? We need to gather in the—”.

“What’s the point in that?! Sayaka’s dead!!” Kyoko was shocked that it was Taka who disrupted her, his head hung and his eyes squeezed shut. Guilt and frustration warped his features as he gripped his own clothes to keep from lashing out.

“She…she’s gone…forever! And I couldn’t stop it! No matter how hard I tried!” he abruptly continued, shooting his gaze toward her dead body, moisture building in his eyes.

“I did everything I could! I encouraged everyone to work together! I came up with plans to help keep everyone safe! I even offered my personal advice to anyone that needed me! So why…why did this happen?!?”

Falling to his knees, he began to openly weep. His tears splattered to the floor, mixing in with patches of blood that stained the room. Whipping his head up, through blurred vision, he bowed to his deceased classmate.

“I’m...I’m so...so sorry...Sayaka! I...failed you!!”

Watching him take all of the blame unto himself and fall even deeper into despair, Kyoko fully recognized the kind of pressure the Moral Compass had placed upon himself.

It was obvious from the beginning that he was trying to be an example for all of them and lead them
down the right path. More than that, he must have truly believed that, even if someone desired to commit murder, as long as he kept strict watch and prepared for it, he could prevent it. He had tried to defend them the only way he knew how, with strict discipline and well-meaning rules.

However, he failed to factor in the human element; that none of them were predictable and any of them could find ways around his precautions. And it seemed that the realization that he was utterly powerless in this situation was going to consume him…but only if she didn’t intervene.

Gently, she placed a gloved hand on his shoulder, startling him enough to make him turn back to look at her with blood-shot eyes. He was close to breaking but now, more than ever, Kyoko knew they needed him.

“I know it’s hard but we need to focus on what we can do now,” Kyoko spoke clearly but softly, trying to comfort him as best she could. “We all failed to save her, not just you. If we all had been more vigilant, this may have been avoided.”

She shot an accusatory glare at Byakuya for a moment but if he noticed, he didn’t acknowledge it.

Turning her attention back to Taka, she continued, “For now, we have to keep focused. We need to find out what really happened here and make sure we discover who is responsible.”

Hearing the logic in her voice, the tears stopped flowing from Taka’s eyes and he seemed to be processing her words. It was slow at first but his composure and fervor were quickly returning. A little more and Kyoko knew he would be fine.

“We need you, Taka. Now more than ever before, we need the Ultimate Moral Compass to be our guide. We need to be united and take care of each other…not just for ourselves, but to prevent anything like this from happening again.”

Her lavender eyes stared into his hazy reds, her strength and determination filling and revitalizing him. He blinked once and all of a sudden, his fear and despair seemed to vanish from his entire being.

“R-Right. You’re absolutely right!”

Furiously wiping away the remainder of his tears, Taka leapt to his feet, brushed himself off and adjusted his uniform. As soon as it was straightened and proper, he gave a respectful bow to Kyoko.

“Thank you! You have opened my eyes to my own foolishness! I swear…I will not falter ever again!”

Seeing his revitalization, Kyoko felt a mixture of pride and shame. She had observed him long enough to know exactly what he needed to hear and she had said it without any hesitation. And while it hadn’t been a lie, per se, she felt an ounce of guilt knowing that she had effectively manipulated him into recovery.

However, it was true that they needed him there, as they needed to be united to be able to solve the mystery of who put them in this horrific situation and why. She wouldn’t admit that he had a bad habit of upsetting everyone with his constant nagging and rules, but that was because she honestly felt that someone as straightforward as him was needed to keep order.

“I can’t make myself a target. And having Taka be the center of everyone’s frustration would certainly help with that,” she told herself, steeling her resolve and not letting her conflicting emotions overrule her judgment.
Despite that, she also recognized that it was because of her suppressed emotions that she considered such a risky and deadly plan. Her logic was also sound, which added to her determination and conviction to see the plan through. At the same time, she knew the danger was high, for herself and anyone else she involved.

“However, if I’m careful and utilize everyone resourcefully, then I can prevent any more needless killings…”

Just then, as quickly has he bowed, Taka rose and gave his classmate a stern but appreciative look. In response, Kyoko nodded firmly before saying, “We need to head to the gym, where everyone is waiting for us. But first…”

She turned her attention around behind her where the unconscious Makoto still lay. Following her gaze, Taka’s eyes widened as he obviously just remembered that the boy was still there.

“Very well!” the Moral Compass shouted proudly. “As penance for my distasteful display, I shall be the one to carry Makoto! You can count on me!”

Without another word, he marched over to the unconscious boy and hoisted him up onto his shoulders, showing that Taka was not only intelligent but rather strong as well. He didn’t even complain as he carefully balanced Makoto on his back and turned to face his fellow students.

“Like Kyoko said, we need to get moving!” he proclaimed before turning toward the door leading to the hallway. “To the gym! So we can find the culprit behind this madness!”

Adjusting his grip to be sure Makoto didn’t slip off, Taka quickly headed for the door, leaving Kyoko and Byakuya in the bathroom. Giving a brief sigh of relief, Kyoko moved to follow. However, she didn’t get two steps away before an authoritative voice stopped her.

“I must say, I’m impressed. I never expected such tactics from you.”

Kyoko’s gaze snapped over to see Byakuya half smirking. However, it lasted for only a moment before his gaze hardened and he glared over at her. In his eyes was a mixture of respect and caution.

He obviously realized how tactful she was and knew that her words for Taka were mainly for her own benefit. And, unfortunately for Kyoko, this also meant that his opinion of her had changed. Even if he would never admit it, she was now an adversary in his eyes, a threat to him. And if she understood anything about Byakuya Togami, it was that he would not tolerate any threat, no matter how insignificant.

Frustration built up inside as she realized she had made herself stand out and, eventually, she knew she would have to pay for her carelessness. However, both of them knew it was not the time for such things and so, without paying his words any mind, she began walking out of the bathroom.

“We need to hurry. Before Monokuma decides that we’re tardy,” she said bluntly, exiting the room and leaving Byakuya alone with Sayaka’s body.

However, he only lingered there long enough to scoff at her dismissal before he, too, departed the room.

…dark…so dark…pitch black darkness…
…a scream…piercing through the blackness…reaching deep down…so familiar…the voice
embedded in the scream…

…Makoto…

From deep within the darkness that consumed her consciousness, Sayaka began to stir. The voice of
her friend, the one she’d betrayed, cut through the emptiness that surrounded her and forced her
consciousness up to the surface…but only barely.

Then…something touched her.

She wasn’t sure who or what it was but she could feel something poking at her neck, then her wrist.
She could hear voices as well. She couldn’t make out who or what they were but they ranged from
calm and collected to frantic and desperate. And as those voices echoed around her, she summoned
every last ounce of strength possible and tried to open her eyes.

However, her eyelids hardly even moved at all, no matter how hard she struggled. Despite that, she
kept fighting to open them with everything she had left, unable to let herself give in.

“I…I’m still…”

Sayaka didn’t want to return to that darkness, the emptiness that was consuming her soul. She
wanted to see the light, even if it was one last time. She wanted to see her friend Makoto…for she
was sure it was his voice that had roused her.

It was then that, just as she felt her strength would give out, her eyes cracked open and blurred
images barely came into focus.

Despite how hazy her vision was, she could make out three figures before her. One of them quickly
departed, however, leaving only the other two standing near her. However, she didn’t think they
were facing her, as they didn’t seem to notice her eyes narrowly opening to see them.

And even though she had utterly no strength left in her body, she still tried to force herself to call out.

“…Makoto…Leon…Anyone…Help…”

However, her voice never came and she was left to watch as the other two figures lingered for a
moment before heading to depart. Unparalleled fear gripped Sayaka as she desperately tried to lift her
hand to reach out to them, begging for them not to leave her…alone…in the darkness…that
emptiness…

A single tear rolled down her cheek as the figures disappeared from her view. And when they were
gone, Sayaka felt the last of her will to live disappear with them. Her tired eyes once again closed
and she felt herself slipping back into that horrid darkness.

…and deeper…deeper…she fell…deeper than before…immersing…almost…entirely…

“…As far as class trial rules go, that’s all there is to it! Any questions?”

All of the students gathered in the gym broke out into a cold sweat as Monokuma finished explaining
the class trial system. Nothing but questions flooded everyone’s minds but the answers were clearer
than they ever wanted. The rules of the game were now laid bare for all of the students to understand. This was a game shrouded in despair.

If you want to escape, you must kill. If you want to live, you must condemn another to death.

No matter what, at least one more person was going to die today. Either it was the killer among them, or the rest of their class would follow after Sayaka. This was the true form of the killing game they were all forced to play.

And, unfortunately for Leon, he finally had the answers to the burning questions that had plagued him since his despicable act last night.

“No FUCKING way!! I knew it won’t be that easy but seriously!! An investigation AND a fucking trial?! If I had known that, I would have just left Sayaka to kill…herself…”

That dark thought consumed the Baseball Star’s mind as he felt cold sweat slip down his neck and back. A part of him wanted to believe that it wasn’t true, that having this horrifying bit of knowledge wouldn’t have affected his judgment last night. He desperately wanted to believe that he would still have tried to save Sayaka…but it was a lie.

He gritted his teeth and lowered his head in shame, everyone around him confusing it for anger toward their situation.

“Deep down…I’m just a coward…and I’m still running! But what other choice do I have! I don’t want to die either!!”

It was then that a fiercely angry voice disrupted his thoughts and he, along with everyone else, stared in shock as one of the students brazenly opposed the bear.

“Hey! Hold on just a second!” Junko abruptly shouted at Monokuma from the center of the room. “You’re freaking insane! You know that?!”

Makoto, as well as everyone else, turned to her in shock and almost utter disbelief. The Fashionista was the only one who didn’t seem to be reeling from the news the bear presented and she was already going on the offensive.

It was almost as if she predicted that something like this would happen…but how could that be?

“Class trial?! Why the hell do I have to do that?!” Junko suddenly continued, snapping Makoto back to reality. “I want nothing to do what that crap!”

As she shouted across the room at the demented bear, Monokuma simply turned his head to the side, as if confused by her words.

“Why not?” he plainly replied, as if it were unexpected for her to say such a thing.

A fearsome scowl overtook Junko’s features and she brazenly took a step toward the bear, seething, “What do you mean, ‘why not’?! Why do I have to waste my time figuring out who murdered someone?! It’s totally unfair!!”

As the fashion model shouted her protests, Makoto’s brows furrowed as he noticed something felt…off about this conversation. As if Monokuma knew exactly what she was going to say and do,
countering her with absolutely no surprise in his voice.

“What?! Are you saying you won’t participate in the trial?!” the bear shouted back, not nearly as surprised as he should have been. And then, Monokuma seemed to fill with glee as he finished, “Only punishment awaits such blasphemy!”


“I dunno…Maybe I’ll throw you in a dark hole or something?” the bear off-handedly remarked.

“Shut the hell up!” the model furiously screamed back, “Say whatever you want! I won’t be a part of this!”

The instant those words left her mouth, Makoto saw that there was something most definitely off about Junko. He hadn’t noticed it before, due to his mania over finding…Sayaka, but now he finally took note of something he’d definitely seen from her before.

Junko was completely flustered, her face reddening and clashing with her usually paled complexion. Not only that, she was being much much more abrasive than before. Even that time when he’d stopped her in the laundry room, she hadn’t been as frantic or as desperate as she seemed right now.

Not only that, as she continued to clash with the bear, she was steadily moving forward, away from the rest of the students. Each time Monokuma jeered or countered her, she was lured further and further toward him, until finally, she came to a halt directly in front of the podium on which the bear stood atop.

“Wait…is Monokuma trying to separate her from us?” Makoto suddenly began to piece together. “Why would he…?”

Before he could finish that thought, Makoto caught a glimpse of a fearsome sight. Up on the podium, he saw that Monokuma had a murderous glint in his sickening red eye…and it was growing more intense by the moment! Like he was begging for an excuse to punish someone!

“Don’t be so selfish!” Monokuma chided the model again, snickering as he did so.

As if a floodgate had broken in Junko’s mind, the Fashionista abruptly pointed one of her painted nails at the bear before shouting, “You’re the one being selfish! Kill whoever you want, it’s got nothing to do with me!”

As those words rang in his ears, Makoto’s breath hitched in his throat as he felt a wave of terror overtake him. With the way she was acting now, Makoto knew it was only a matter of time before she made a mistake like the one Mondo had…but with much more dire consequences this time!

This situation was getting out of control and what was worse, absolutely none of his fellow students appeared to have any desire to stop this madness!

All of them were merely watching intently, probably because they wanted to see what would happen when someone opposed the headmaster directly. However, none of them made a single move to help Junko if something did happen. Whether it was because of fear or curiosity varied between each student but one thing was certain…no one was going to interfere.

Anger suddenly filled Makoto as this revelation became clear. Part of it was at himself, for being one of the fearful students who couldn’t find a way to help. But what could he really do anyway? There was no way he could talk Junko down when she was like this. Besides if he just stayed quiet…
“…maybe I’ll be able to survive…” he briefly thought.

Just then, the image of Sayaka’s bloody body flashed in his mind and a wave of guilt suddenly overtook him.

“How…how is that any different from what happened with Sayaka?!”

Despite knowing it wasn’t his fault, Makoto placed all blame for Sayaka’s death on himself. He kept telling himself that if he had insisted that they stay in the same room or if he’d checked in on her during the night, then maybe…just maybe…she would still be with them.

He knew it was pointless to question such things after the fact but at this moment, he felt that, once again, he was at a crossroads. Junko’s behavior was dangerously similar to the way Sayaka had been acting last night, perhaps even more so since she was facing down their tormentor head on!

“And if…no one does anything now…will what happened to Sayaka…happen to Junko?!?”

Without even realizing it himself, Makoto’s feet began to carry him forward. And strangely, no one seemed to notice him. Not the students who watched with bated breaths. Nor Junko or Monokuma who were too focused on their arguments.

Absolutely no one saw the Ultimate Lucky Student approach from the side.

Everything was going according to plan and Mukuro was more than pleased about that.

The failsafe that she and her sister had discussed was going better than she had thought. It was never completely laid out how Mukuro would get into position to be spirited away when a trap door beneath her would be activated, so she decided that venting her anger would be the best course of action.

And actually, not all of it was false. She was very frustrated with how the game had been proceeding lately and was more than ready to get the hell out.

She and Junko had practiced some of the lines they were using but ultimately, it had been up to Mukuro to get into position. And thankfully she almost was. Only another step and she would be directly over the hidden door under her feet.

Glancing at Monokuma, she knew that her sister would give her at least one more excuse to step forward and from there, she would finally be out of the game.

“…At least for now,” she grimly reminded herself.

Even knowing that she had more than her work cut out for her, she was eager to be ‘killed off’, so to speak. Her new task would be to cause havoc behind the scenes. What Junko meant by that, she wasn’t quite sure yet but she knew that her sister probably had everything planned. After all, her sister had never lied to her and she wasn’t in the habit of going back on her word.

And best of all, the first murder had completely enticed Junko, or at least enough for her to forget about the ultimatum she’d placed on her older sister.

“With this, Makoto will be safe…for a while at least.”

Mukuro couldn’t deny the relief she had felt when the body discovery announcement had been
made, no matter how twisted that was. Because someone had stepped up and committed the first murder, there was no longer a need for her to have to target Makoto, considering the failsafe would need to be activated, as per Junko’s orders.

And even though Mukuro hadn’t discussed going through with the failsafe with Junko prior to this moment, she knew that her sister would want to stick to the plan and pull her from the game.

After all, if her classmates made the wrong choice, she didn’t want to get executed along with them.

“That’s why we created the failsafe in the first place…” she reasoned, convinced that Junko would be piping up any moment now.

And, as if on cue, Monokuma leapt onto the very top of the podium and proclaimed, “There is Evil standing before me…but I won’t give in!”

The automaton hopped off the podium and landed gracefully onto the floor a few feet away from the disguised Mukuro, bearing its teeth and claws only half menacingly.

“If you want to get out of here…you’ll have to go through me first!!!!”

Mukuro almost broke character and smirked as Monokuma waddled toward her, swinging its arms in circles and trying to appear menacing. And, conveniently enough, he came to a stop just in front of where Mukuro needed to be for her to ‘get caught’ in the trap door.

“Clever girl…” Mukuro thought to herself as she knew what needed to be done.

Lifting her boot, she slammed her foot down on top of Monokuma, taking that final step to be in place for the trap door.

The bear grunted in a mixture of what seemed to be shock and genuine surprise but that was probably for effect more than anything. Plus, the stomp was improvised and probably did take her sister by surprise, so it made it all the more believable for the rest of the students. And besides, it was something Mukuro knew the real Junko would do, so she didn’t question it.

And if she was being honest, Mukuro had put more than a little aggression into that stomp too. She would have words with Junko about coercing her into trying to kill Makoto, considering it was never planned or even mentioned at any point.

It was then that a tantalizing idea popped into Mukuro’s head, and this would be her only chance to realize it.

Staring down at the flattened Monokuma, a snide smirk overtook the soldier’s lips as she said, “Are you enjoying yourself now?!”

The double-entendre of her words were even more satisfying than she thought they would be! Her fellow students would have no idea the true meaning of her statement and it was enjoyable to poke fun at her sister’s fetish at the same time! Sure, she’d probably get scolded by Junko later but she’d live through that—

Or so she thought…until a voice so serious it chilled her to the bone reached her ears.

“Are you?”

Mukuro froze in sheer terror as the menacing voice of Monokuma invaded her mind, spiraling down deep into the very recesses of her soul.
Her feet almost lost their footing as she stared down at the automaton. The tone of that voice was more than enough for Mukuro to realize she had made a horrifying mistake. She could practically feel the rage being projected by her sister through the bear.

And without realizing it, she began to tremble as the bear growled a bit and continued, “Violence against Headmaster Monokuma is prohibited. You violated a school regulation…”

“Oh God…No…Junko’s wouldn’t really…”

Mukuro felt herself shudder.

The implication itself was enough to terrify the soldier but it was the tone in which the bear spoke that petrified her even more. There was malice there, certainly, but underneath it all, Mukuro could have sworn that she heard a hint of…sadness, in the bear’s voice as it spoke. Almost as if Junko had just come to a decision that actually made her feel regret. And considering that her little sister never regretted any decision she’d ever made before…this was beyond horrifying.

But then, as quickly as she thought she heard it, that inkling of sadness vanished completely as Monokuma waved its arms frantically and shouted:

“I invoke the magic summon spell! Come to me, Godly Spear Gungnir!!”

If he hadn’t have been standing beside Junko, he never would have seen it coming.

Makoto had continued to approach the unsuspecting arguers and had held in a gasp as he’d watched Junko slam her boot into the fearsome headmaster. After that, he barely registered what the two of them were saying because a chill ran down his spine and he found himself hearing a strange sound from the floor.

Looking down, he saw that small, square shaped holes had appeared all around Junko, surrounded her on all sides. They were very inconspicuous as well and Makoto realized that, if he had been only a few feet back, as he’d been only a moment ago, he never would have been able to see them.

Just as Junko never would have either.

And because of that, on instinct, he once again threw himself into danger to save his classmate.

“Watch out!!!”

Suddenly, something wrapped around her left arm and a fierce tug pulled her back. Extending out of her right hand to try and regain her balance, Mukuro didn’t have time to speak or even react as she finally noticed the slots in the floor that had opened up all around where she had just been standing. A burst of movement flashed before her and with it came a horrifying sensation.

…Pain…

It was a feeling that Mukuro had all but forgotten and now felt more than foreign to her. Nevertheless the agonizing sensation tore through her right hand as something long and slender plopped through it. Shock overtook the Ultimate Soldier’s senses and she slowly turned her dilating eyes to her grief
stricken appendage.

Horror gripped her soul as she saw a long spear jutting up from one of the open slots in the floor, the tip of it piercing the back of her hand and protruding out the other side. As her blood spilled out of her hand and slid down the shaft of the spear, Mukuro felt something inside her twist and snap.

“ARRRGGGGGAHHHH!!!!”

Her voice tore through the room and pieced through the ears of everyone present. The sounds of her screams echoed all through the gym, only pausing long enough for her to suck in more air to continue the pain-fill shrill.

Again, before she even had time to react, the spear abruptly retracted itself, tearing out of her palm with a sickening cleaving sound. Bits of bloody flesh and muscle splattered to the floor as the open wound bled profusely.

Gritting her teeth so hard she felt they might crack, Mukuro reacted quickly and pressed her good hand against the gaping bloody hole in her other palm.

“Pressure! Keep pressure on wounds!” her mind frantically ordered, unable to do anything but panic at the sight of her own blood.

Because of that, she couldn’t concentrate enough to realize that she was only making the bleeding worse because she didn’t have anything to wrap around the wound. The pain was steadily increasing and just as she felt herself give in to her panic, a firm hand grasped her arm.

She turned to scream at whomever it was but froze as she saw that it was Makoto. His face showed his panic but behind it, a fierce determination resonated within his eyes.

“We need some kind of bandage!!” he shouted, desperation clear in his voice.

“Use this!”

A frilly handkerchief was tossed to them from the side and Mukuro had only caught a glimpse of Chihiro retracting her arm. Grabbing it without hesitation, Makoto pulled away the hand pressing down on the wound and began wrapping the cloth around gaping hole in her hand.

However, it was too small to properly wrap around her hand. Thinking quickly, Makoto instead pressed the handkerchief against the hole in her palm while using his other hand to try and cover the hole on the back of her hand. Again, the pain of the needed pressure made Mukuro shrill.

“Arhhhhhh! Ahhhhh!”

As her screams filled the area once more, Mukuro’s teary eyes shot toward the now standing Monokuma, a single thought tearing at her mind.

“Why…Junko…WHY?!?”

Even with the pressure Makoto was putting on the wound, it just continued to bleed more and more profusely.

And unfortunately, without something to stop the bleeding on both sides of her hand, the wound only worsened and even someone with no medical knowledge like Makoto knew he was doing more
harm than good. And at this rate, Junko was going to lose more than just her hand!

“I can’t stop the bleeding!” he reluctantly admitted aloud, practically begging for someone to help him.

“Let me see it!”

Makoto was surprised when Hina suddenly materialized at his side, glaring at the sloppy job he was doing of containing the injury.

Overwhelmed with surprise, Makoto lost his grip on the wound and was lightly pushed aside as Hina took his place. One glance at it and she frowned, paling slightly at seeing so much blood loss. However, she shook her head, probably swallowing bile as well, before turning and glancing to everyone.

“We need more bandages to stop the bleeding! Anything will work, so long as it’s big enough—”

Before she even finished, sound of ripping gained everyone’s attention. They all turned to see Sakura, her massive hands tearing off large portions of her own shirt, making numerous strips of makeshift bandages.

“Hina, take these!” Sakura insisted, handing the oversized strips to her friend.

A bright smile overtook Hina’s face for a moment as she grabbed the bandages from her friend before turning back to attend to Junko’s wound. As she furiously wrapped the strips around the gaping, bloody hole, Makoto’s eyes drifted around the room.

Most of the students, including Taka, Leon, Chihiro, Hiro and Hifumi, were paralyzed with shock. Mondo angrily stood nearby, obviously wanting to help but not having a clue as to how he could. Toko was clutching her head and staring down at the floor, muttering incoherently. Celeste and Byakuya remained at a distance, observing the situation carefully. All the while, Kyoko glared at Monokuma, as if she could barely hold herself back as she observed the scene.

And behind all of them, Monokuma stood grinning at them all.

Far away in the control room, the real Junko Enoshima breathed heavily as she looked at the screen.

“Shit! She survived! How the hell did that happen?!” she screamed, angrily throwing a large plush Monokuma doll furiously against the wall.

As soon as she did, stopped herself and took a deep breath. Then another…and another…and another…until she was sure that the adrenaline had worked its way out of her system. Taking one last deep inhale to collect herself, the mastermind returned to the Monokuma control panel and took her seat.

“It’s fine…I can work with this…it’ll be more fun this way anyway…”

After all, the despair of having to swallow the disappointment of failing to kill her sister was more than enough of a reward. Besides, her sister being alive could still be despairingly useful.
“Wow! Now that sure was surprising!” Monokuma suddenly proclaimed, forcing everyone to turn its way. “I never imagined she’d live through that! But I guess everyone gets lucky now and again!”

Rearing its head back and cackling, the bear let the anger of the students seethe for a bit longer before it continued.

“Normally, I’d need to finish the job and complete the punishment.”

Hearing this, Makoto could only watch as Junko’s head shot up and slowly, despite the pain, she turned to stare helplessly at Monokuma. Makoto gritted his teeth in anger as pain-stricken tears spilled from the Fashionista’s sky-blue eyes as fear began to overtake her. On instinct, he moved to stand between her and the bear but Monokuma resumed before he even stood up.

“However, I really want to avoid a corpse popping up unintentionally…at least if I can help it.”

Everyone gave a collective sigh of relief at hearing that, especially Junko, though she still held more a fair share amount of terror in her eyes.

“However!” Monokuma abruptly continued, startling everyone. “I hope that now you see just how serious I am about those regulations. Defy me and you get shot full of holes! Exploded! Buried alive! Disintegrated…et cetera. So, if you don’t want that to happen to you, you’d better follow the rules…or end up like Junko here!!”

As Monokuma shouted those final words, it was evident that things had not gone as he’d planned. Even so, their captor had demonstrated that they were more than willing to kill anyone who protested or went against the rules. So, even though they had failed to kill someone, the message had been delivered perfectly.

It was at this time Makoto noticed that Kyoko, unlike the other students, was steadily approaching Monokuma, a displeased glare on her face.

“…Why did you try and kill her? Didn’t you say that you were going to imprison her or something?” Kyoko bluntly questioned, not backing down even in the face of the bear’s angry stare.

An instant later, Monokuma scoffed and turned away before replying, “…I changed my mind—”

“No,” Kyoko abruptly cut in, her glare intensifying. “You’ve been wanting to kill this entire time.”

To this, Monokuma gave a playful expression and answered, “Kill this entire time? Don’t be stupid…you can’t kill time! Trust me, I tried…”

Perhaps the automaton became fed up with its own jokes or simply wanted to leave, but for some reason, its persona changed to be very serious as it brushed off Kyoko’s words.

And, if no one else, Makoto was getting more and more frustrated by the moment. For he could hear Junko’s whimpers as Hina continued to try and stop the bleeding, the blood easily soaking through all the makeshift bandages.

“Anyway, none of that matters now!” Monokuma proclaimed placing it’s paws on its hips. “I have something that will help you in your investigation and your search for the blackened—!”

Being reminded of the fact that they still needed to solve Sayaka’s murder made something inside of Makoto snap. Without warning, he shot to his feet and shouted, “How the hell are we supposed to think about that when our friend is bleeding to death?!?!”
A heavy silence followed his outburst, no one expecting to hear such brave words from him.

However, it was almost immediately broken as Monokuma jeered, “Tsk, she’ll be fine! Trust me, it’s a flesh wound. An injury like that won’t be enough to kill—”.

“No! That’s wrong!”

Again, everyone was stunned into silence as Makoto abruptly shouted from across the room. Even Monokuma was deafly quiet as the Lucky Student pointed at the wound in Junko’s hand.

“Wounds like that can get easily infected and if we don’t treat it soon, she could die from it! It may not be today but if left long enough, it’ll only get worse! We have to take care of it now!”

Beneath her guise, Mukuro contended with the pain as best she could but it was a losing battle.

Even the lightest twitch of her hand sent massive jolts of agony to her brain and she fought to keep her breathing under control. She wasn’t even sure how she’d managed to stay conscious, considering she was hardly breathing.

She could hear the others arguing with Monokuma, but after hearing that the bear didn’t plan to finish the job, she had begun to phase out most of whatever else it was saying. However, that was mainly because her fragile mind was barely hanging on and focusing on her wound kept her from thinking about why…Junko…

Another surge of pain rippled through her hand and Mukuro gritted her teeth as she finally registered that someone was screaming. Turning her head, through blurry, tearful eyes she saw Makoto directly challenging Monokuma.

She missed most of what he was saying but the one thing she could make out was that Makoto was gesturing to her. Was he actually…defending her…?

He seemed so fierce and powerful, even Monokuma didn’t dare refute him. Which meant that…even Junko wasn’t going against him …how was he able to silence her?!?

“We’re not doing anything else before we get her some medical treatment!” the Ultimate Lucky Student shouted, glaring at Monokuma so intensely that the bear seemed stunned into silence.

At the same time, Makoto took a moment to glance to Junko, checking if she was alright. And for a brief moment, the Fashionista turned her head upward, watery sky-blue eyes filled with agony staring up at him.

“Hey, you little bastard!” Monokuma suddenly fired back, making the boy snap his head back toward the demented bear. “The investigation and class trial have to come first! That’s the rules and you know what happens to—!”

“Then at least give us some proper medical supplies to treat her with,” Sakura cut the bear off this time, her muscular arms folded sternly over her chest.

Monokuma growled and was about to retort but lost the chance to as Makoto challenged it again.
“Some of us can go and treat Junko, while the rest of us get started on the investigation. That should work out fine shouldn’t it?”

His fierce proclamation was met with another pause, no one wanting or willing to disrupt it. Or at least it seemed that way, until another voice quickly joined his own.

“Yeah! Makoto’s right!” Hina abruptly concurred, still holding onto Junko’s bleeding hand, the bandages quickly proving not to be enough to hold in the blood. “She needs real medical treatment! Like stat!”

“And besides,” Kyoko’s calm voice startled everyone, making them turn to her in shock, “If one of us isn’t able to participate in the class trial, won’t that technically be a violation of the school regulations? And since you refused to allow her treatment, the fault would lie solely with you.”

Even though Makoto didn’t have time to say it, he was incredibly grateful that the mysterious girl had come to their defense. She was so calm in the face of all this and he couldn’t help but feel at ease as she presented her argument. And considering she’d remained so silent up until now, he was pleased that she’d decided to speak up when she did.

Slightly fuming from being cut off in the middle of explaining, Monokuma turned red before retorting, “Alright already! If you’re that hyped up about it…I guess I can open up the Nurse’s Office for you. There are real bandages, gauze and even painkillers in there to fix her up with. Will that shut you up and get you back on track?!?”

“It will suffice for now,” Sakura admitted, her spite clear in her deep voice.

“Allrighty then,” Monokuma replied, glaring rather menacingly at Sakura for a moment before turning to the others. “For those of you investigating, I have included a gift for you in your e-handbooks…The Monokuma File! Look over it and get busy! I’m out!!”

Without warning, a large trap door opened up just beneath Monokuma and the bear fell through, maniacal laughter echoing as the door shut itself.

“Now then, who shall go and investigate while we take her to get treated?” Sakura asked, folding her arms and glancing around the room.

Before anyone could speak, Mondo pushed his way toward the injured Fashionista, flung his coat over her shoulders and wrapped his arms around her to pick her up. If Junko was surprised, she barely showed it, the pain from her palm making her wince as he lifted her, distracting her from what she probably would have found an embarrassing situation in any other setting.

“I’ll take her to the nurse’s office,” he finally explained, holding Junko bridal style to help her be more comfortable. “I’m no good at this investigating shit, so I figure this is the best I can do.”

“Very well then! I shall lead the others to the crime scene while you assist our classmate!” Taka finally broke out of his stupor and rallied, returning to his usual strict and moral self.

“While we’re on the subject,” Celeste politely intervened, finally making her presence known, “I don’t believe that we should leave the scene of the crime unattended. In case the killer tries to return and destroy evidence.”

There was a heavy silence for a moment and even if it was only for a second, it looked as if Makoto wanted to refute her. However, not even he was naïve enough to question that logic and instead remained silent.
“I’ll do it.”

None of them were surprised to hear Sakura volunteer for the position. Her massive form would be enough to intimidate even the most deceptive of culprits and even more so, her honorable nature made her the most likely candidate.

Even so, it wasn’t enough for everyone.

“We can’t have you on watch by yourself,” Byakuya insisted, pushing his glasses up with his middle finger. “If you’re the killer, you’ll undoubtedly tamper with evidence.”

“What?! How dare you think that Sakura would—?!” Hina began to shout before Sakura laid a hand on her shoulder.

“It is alright. He makes a sound point,” the Martial Artist reluctantly concurred, “We should have at least two guarding the scene.”

Although Hina was still fuming and wanted to chastise Byakuya, she didn’t want to argue with her friend and instead said, “Alright then! I’ll guard the scene with you!”

“I’m afraid that this time, I, cannot agree with that.”

Everyone turned to see Celeste politely folding her hands under her chin and smiling sweetly.

“And why is that?” Sakura questioned, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

Giving a light chuckle, as if mocking them, Celeste explained, “The two of you seem so close and if it turns out that one of you are the killer, the other might try and cover it up. We can’t have that, now can we?”

The tension in the air grew thicker and thicker as the class already began to divide itself. It wouldn’t be long before distrust and fear took hold of everyone completely. And there was at least one student that recognized that and decided to intervene.

“Why not have Mondo guard the scene with Sakura instead?” Kyoko abruptly offered, snapping everyone’s head over to her but then quickly over to the biker.

Flinching under their gazes, Mondo flushed as he countered, “H-Hey dammit! I’ve got to take Junko to the nurse’s office!”

“That’s fine,” Kyoko assured him, “And when you’re done, you can join Sakura in guarding the scene of the crime. That should suffice, shouldn’t it?”

Her question was fired directly at Celeste, whom nodded her head and smiled, “This is fine with me.”

No more objections were raised and it seemed that Kyoko had managed to settle the animosity that was slowly building, even if she had to make demands to do so.

And Mondo wasn’t the only one to realize that Kyoko wasn’t asking for his cooperation, she was practically ordering him. And everyone knew how Mondo felt about being told what to do. The only thing that stunted his fury at her command was the fact that he was holding a bleeding girl in his arms.

“Fine then,” he angrily huffed as he turned toward the door, but not before he snuck a quick glance
at Hina. “Besides, a girl shouldn’t have to guard the crime scene. That’s a man’s job.”

No one commented on the fact that Sakura, also a girl, was the other one guarding the scene but considering he was going along with it, correcting him now would do more harm than good.

Besides, Hina didn’t seem to mind his comment as she fervently replied, “If that’s the case…I’ll go with Junko to the nurse’s office and help get her patched up.”

“I’m going too!”

No one was surprised to hear Makoto speak up, practically materializing beside Mondo and Hina as they carried Junko out the door.

As soon as the doors closed, Taka turned to his fellow classmates and was about to shout for all of them to get going when he noticed someone was missing.

“Has anyone seen Hiro?! Where has he gone off to?” the Moral Compass asked, prompting everyone to look around for him.

“Yeah…he’s over there,” Leon informed everyone, pointing to the corner.

All of them turned to see Hiro crouching in the corner, clutching his head tightly with snot and tears gushing down his face.

“…So…so this is…ALL REAL!!!!” he frantically shouted before throwing his arms up to the sky. “NOOOOO!!!!!! LET ME OUTTA HERE!!!!!!”

“Y-Y-Your just n-now accepting it?!” Toko almost shouted, completely flabbergasted.

In the midst of Hiro panicking, Celeste opened up her e-handbook and glanced over the Monokuma File. A slight grin spread over her lips as she read through its entirety.

“Hmm, so the crime took place in Makoto’s room…” she said loud enough for everyone to hear.

“…”How...how could this...have happened to me?...”

Mukuro sat on one of the few beds in the nurse’s office, Mondo’s coat still firmly wrapped around her shoulders and her injured hand extended out while her classmates bandaged her. As soon as he had set her down, Mondo had quickly departed, saying he needed to get guarding the scene and he would leave the rest to Hina and Makoto. He’d been kind enough to wish Mukuro well but she had barely heard it, too shocked to register much of what was going on right now.

She stared blankly at the floor, her fragile mind unable to comprehend how it had come to this.

“…And there! That should do it!” Hina proclaimed as she finished tying the last of the bandages firmly around her hand.

Barely lifting her head, Mukuro gazed at her bandaged injury in disgust. Not only did it ache terribly from being cleaned and scrubbed with anti-septic, the only bandages they had been able to find in the whole of the office were ‘Monokuma Bandages’, the half and half bear’s evil face stitched into every few inches of the cloth.

The very image of that bear sent chills down her spine, accompanied by a deep despair she knew her
sister had to be reveling in. The soldier felt herself tremble as she reminded herself to keep breathing, shaken though her breaths were.

“Junko…”

Slowly tearing her vision away from her hand, the disguised girl looked up to see Makoto looking down at her with a mixture of concern and pity.

“No need anything? Like a glass of water or something?”

Staring up at him, she could see his sympathy overflowing but it only caused a sharp pain to sting her chest. The boy who she had been ready to kill just a few hours ago was now the one to save her life. Karma was being more than a bitch to her, as the hurt of her decision came back in full swing.

Behind him, Hina put away the wipes and bandages but also gave her a piteous look. She had immediately set to dressing the deep wound once they had arrived and did it with such determination that Mukuro felt ashamed that she had never really acknowledged the swimmer girl before this point. Even though they had ‘hung out’ a few times, she’d only seen Hina as a target…never a friend.

“…I don’t want their pity… I don’t…deserve it…”

For a moment, when it didn’t look as if she would respond, both Makoto and Hina inched closer but were startled when she did finally speak.

“…Alone… I want to be… alone…”

To this, both of her classmates gave a quizzical look but neither of them left. Instead, she heard Makoto say, “But… we can’t just leave you here all by yourself.”

“That’s right! What if Monokuma decides to go back on his word and kill you?!” Hina concurred, not realizing that her words were doing more harm than good.

Mukuro flinched at the mention of Monokuma but managed to hold herself together long enough to reply, “You have to go and… investigate. It’s the rules… and you can’t… break… them…”

She trailed off as her vision floated over to her injured hand. She hoped that her message got across to them, needing both of them to leave for personal and private reasons.

“…Alright. If that’s what you want,” Makoto finally gave in, surprising Hina for a second. “But as soon as we can, we’ll be back to check on you. Okay?”

Without lifting her head, Mukuro gave a stout nod, “Okay… thanks.”

Very slowly, her two classmates headed for the door and she listened as they slid it open. However, just before she heard the door close, she lifted her head to see them go. When she did, she caught one last glimpse of Makoto, his worried expression burned into her memory as he exited the room.

Watching as the door was slowly slid shut, her expression shifted into one of agony and rage.

“Rrrgh…” she grunted as she gripped the wrist of her injured hand. Very carefully, she flexed and retracted each finger on her hand, and each time, a sharp jolt of pain surged through her entire arm.

“…Extensive… nerve… damage…” she whispered to herself, unable to completely ball her hand into a fist. Tilting her hand over to see the other side, as she stared at the back of her bandaged hand, a new thought occurred to her.
It wasn’t until those words left her lips that she realized that her tattoo, the symbol of her time as a mercenary, was now gone forever. Her source of strength and pride had been impaled, literally, and ripped from her without mercy or hesitation. And with it, Mukuro felt a part of her soul had been cleaved away.

Suddenly, a familiar but hateful voice shook the room.

“Look on the bright side! You won’t have to worry about covering up that ugly tattoo anymore!”

Junko’s voice resounded through the room and Mukuro’s head shot up, a fearsome glare overtaking all of her features. Standing before her, closing the door quietly as to not draw the attention of any nearby students, the demented Monokuma grinned at her.

All fear was forgotten the moment she heard her sister’s voice through the automaton and Mukuro leapt to her feet, the coat lent by her biker classmate falling to the floor. Anger coursed through the soldier’s veins and she pointed at the bear with her uninjured hand.

“Is that all you have to say?! You lied to me! You tried to kill me, Junko!!”

Despite her loud volume, her sister didn’t reprimand her. And if she wasn’t upset that Mukuro had spoken her name aloud, then it meant that Junko was certain they weren’t being overheard. Which was both a blessing and curse for the injured soldier, because it also meant that Junko was uninhibited as well. Even so, the soldier was too worked up not to protest.

“I followed through with your failsafe! I did everything you wanted me to do! Why did you betray me?! Was it because I back-talked in front of everyone?! Didn’t I play the part like I was supposed to?! Wasn’t I supposed to—?!”

Through the bear, a loud sigh interrupted Mukuro’s tirade.

“I’m disappointed in you, Mukuro. You failed to see what was right in front of you this whole time.”

All of Mukuro’s protests stopped the instant those words reached her ears but she managed to choke out, “Wh-What are you talking about?”

Before going any further, Monokuma slowly walked over to a nearby stool and hopped up onto it. Standing tall and mighty, the bear folded its arms and gave a very furious expression.

“You want to know why I tried to kill you? It’s because you broke the rules, you stupid bitch!!”

Pure rage exploded from Junko’s voice as she shouted at her sister and the instant she heard it, Mukuro’s entire body trembled. This was the second time she’d ever seen her sister display such anger, the first being just after she regained her memories and committed her first murder. And since history tends to repeat itself, it was certain that disaster was soon to follow.

Mukuro slowly backed up until her back hit the wall but with nowhere to go, she soon found her sister had taken a deep breath to continue:

“I told you, over and over and over and over again! Don’t break the fucking rules or I’ll have to enforce them! And what did you do…you attacked Monokuma in front of everyone!! How the hell did you think I was gonna respond to that?! If I didn’t punish you, then everyone would have known something was up!”
Mukuro’s entire body shook as Junko’s voice continued to assault her, the remote controlled bear waving its arms emphatically all the while.

“You say that I lied to you?! That I betrayed you?! No! You brought this on yourself for being such a fuck up! You can barely act the part of being me, despite how long I practiced with you! And then you pull this!”

Despite the overwhelming fear and terror that kept her pressed against the wall, Mukuro finally found her voice and tried to say, “B-But! You moved Monokuma in the way! I couldn’t get to the spot! I didn’t want to but you made me—!”

“Then you should have stepped to the side, let him get through, and then went to your spot…like I told you to do!”

“B-But…you never…I…didn’t think that…”

“Enough! I don’t want to hear it!” Junko snapped, the bear holding out one paw to gesture silence. Mukuro immediately complied, not wanting to anger her sister any further.

For a moment, there was a heavy silence between them, only the sounds of their breathing echoed as the pair stared each other down. Deep inside, Mukuro felt something within her beginning to crack, like a premonition of despair welling up inside her soul, threatening to consume her.

And then, the sound of very deep, cleansing breaths came from Monokuma, and Mukuro hoped that her sister had finally settled down. That hope was dashed, however, when her sister’s voice came back, softer and yet even more menacing than before.

“It seems that I’m going to have to complete your punishment after all. And I’ve prepared a very special one.”

Her entire body freezing, Mukuro’s breath hitched in her throat as her fate became clear to her. Sky-blue eyes widened and she clutched her injured hand close to her chest, pressing herself even harder against the wall. At the same time, her voice began to crack.

“N-No…please…Junko…I didn’t…I don’t…”

Without warning, Monokuma leapt off the stool and landed directly in front of Mukuro, staring up at her with a neutral expression, stunning the soldier into silence again.

“My very special punishment for Mukuro Ikusaba, the Ultimate Soldier, is……to play the game like everyone else…as Junko Enoshima, of course.”

Mukuro’s eyes widened and a gasp escaped her lips as she heard her fate. Unconsciously, she began to lightly shake her head as Junko continued, “From here on, you’ll get no more special privileges. You are allowed to play the game however you see fit, as long as you don’t ever reveal who you really are. If you do, even unintentionally, I will consider it a rule-breaker and punish you accordingly.”

Mukuro’s lips quivered and she tried to form words but her voice failed her, her mouth hanging open as she tried, in vain, to question her sister.

In response, Junko gave another sigh before saying, “I’ll excuse you from the first trial as a parting gift. So, even if those idiots don’t figure out that the baseball hater killed the pop idol, you’ll survive. But this is the last favor I’m doing for you.”
Turning Monokuma away from the startled soldier, the bear glanced over its shoulder and finished, “Good luck in the game.”

Without giving Mukuro any time to accept this horrific knowledge, Monokuma began walking away from the trembling soldier and headed directly for the door.

Snapping out of her petrified state, Mukuro fell forward onto her knees and begged, “Y-You can’t… you can’t be serious! Junko! Junko, you can’t—!”

“Stop calling me that.”

Mukuro’s eyes shot up as her sister reprimanded her, Monokuma whirling around to stare at her disgraceful appearance. Her sister scoffed at the wig on her head, frazzled and unkempt, stared with contempt at the spots of blood on her blouse, and practically sneered at the hints of moisture that threatened to spill from her sister’s eyes.

With a huff, she continued, “You’re Junko Enoshima now. And you will be for the rest of your… short as that life will probably be.”

Again, Mukuro shook her head and pleaded, “No…please don’t do this. Death…give me death instead of abandoning—!”

“As far as I’m concerned,” Junko cut her off and had the bear turn away again, “Mukuro Ikusaba is dead…”

“No!...No!...Sister! Sister, please!”

Ignoring Mukuro’s incessant begging, Monokuma strode up to the door and opened it, stepped out into the hallway.

With each step, the soldier felt herself slipping more and more into despair, giving her sister exactly what she wanted but slowly killing herself at the same time. And as the bear crossed over to the other side of the door, Mukuro struggled to hold onto the last bit of sanity she could as she reached out her arm for her sister…desperately pleading this was another of her sister’s sick and twisted tests.

However, her reality was shattered as Monokuma turned around a final time, grasped the side of the sliding door, and allowed for Junko to deliver one final message:

“…Don’t ever call me that again…”

It was those words, not the slamming of the door, that broke Mukuro’s spirit. As the squishy sounds of Monokuma’s footsteps echoed down the hallway, she collapsed into the fetal position, gasping for breath as her lungs seemed to refuse to allow her to breath, wrapping her arms around herself tightly.

Moments later, deep, heart-wrenching sobs echoed throughout the nurse’s office as true despair was visited upon her.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
And here it is! The huge deviation that I promised you! And more deviations are to come in the next few chapters! This was an extra long chapter and a big thanks to my beta, Dixxy Mouri, for putting up with my typos and bad humor.

By the way, my beta and I decided something about Taka. If you reread the scene with Kyoko inspiring him…if you notice, what she’s really saying is: “Taka, you’re the hard-ass we need right now…but not the one they deserve”. Just had to get that in somehow…

Anyway, let me know what you think of how the story’s progressing. I’m eager to hear your ideas or theories about future chapters! Have a great day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

As the investigation comes to a close, and the class trial begins...who will be there to hear Sayaka’s final plea for help?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Kyoko? What are you doing?”

Even though she clearly heard his question, Kyoko ignored Makoto’s query completely, keeping her attention focused on the numerous scratch marks on the floor of Makoto’s room. She ran her gloved fingers through the fibers of the carpet and just when she though she noticed something important, her classmate spoke up again.

“Did you lose a contact lens or something?”

A soft grunt escaped her, but she made sure to keep it inaudible. Her concentration broken by his inane questioning, Kyoko fought to keep her emotionless façade intact amid the frustration that boiled up within.

“How naïve can this boy be?! Can’t he see that I’m in the middle of a very sensitive investigation?!”

Instead of scolding him for his idiocy, she merely let out a soft breath before she replied, “What does it look like I’m doing?”

She foolishly hoped that he would get the message and either begin his own investigation or leave her be to continue but instead, she realized that she should have merely kept her mouth shut.

“I…I don’t know?”

This time, she couldn’t help the audible groan that escaped her, no matter how she tried. Despite his brave actions in the gym earlier, it seemed that Makoto was just as inept and useless as she had feared he would be. Then again, it had been the same with her other classmates.

Once everyone had gathered after delivering Junko to the nurse’s office, Celeste ‘conveniently’ pointed out that, since the room actually belonged to Makoto, the chance of him being the killer was high. From there, almost everyone blindly assumed this to be true and weren’t even bothering to assist in the investigation.

Even Byakuya, who seemed far wiser than he let on, was doing minimal investigating. And no doubt, like the others, he had come to the conclusion that Makoto had to be the killer…despite the fact that it was all far too obvious and blatantly done with the intent of framing the Lucky Student. Sure the possibility had existed that he was the culprit but the evidence proving his innocence was practically abundant. And no one took the time to even think of another possibility!

The ineptitude of her classmates tied a knot in her stomach and she felt as though she was truly alone in this case.
“If this keeps up, I’ll have no choice but to take the lead and resolve this case myself. I wanted to avoid making myself a target for the more ambitious students but if I don’t solve this, then I’m certain that no one else will. And I won’t let myself die because my classmates can’t use simple… logic…”

Again a wave of nostalgia washed over her as she questioned how this all came to her so naturally. Was this logic so simple? It came to her easily enough but perhaps that’s all it was. And if that was the case, did it mean that her classmates weren’t as inept as they were simply untrained? But that would mean that she had been trained to in the art of criminal investigation, which could lead to—

Kyoko abruptly squeezed her eyes shut and forced her thoughts to grind to a halt. Now wasn’t the time for such ideas.

If she let herself get distracted now, she might overlook something important and be unable to save everyone from a horrific fate. With that in mind, she resumed her inspection of the slash marks on the floor, not to mention the absence of a vital clue that would determine whom had been in the room.

“There’s absolutely no hair in this room. How can that be? Stray strands always fall, even if we’re unaware of it. It’s often the greatest clue that points to the culprit in these cases—wait, how do I know—”.

Again, she forced herself away from the nostalgia that plagued her, doing her best to keep focused and not let her mind slip into concentrating on her past. This case was life or death and even if it was awakening her buried memories, she had to remain vigilant.

“Right now, the murder has to take precedence. Stay focused…”

Standing up, she realized that Makoto must have given up on speaking with her because he had disappeared from behind her and was currently looming outside the bathroom door. Not that she blamed him for that, seeing a friend dead would make anyone hesitate. Which is why Kyoko was able to investigate Sayaka’s body with no issues, she hadn’t considered the Pop Idol a friend and therefore was able to push away those unsettling emotions.

Even so, she’d been respectful and only spent the required amount of time examining the body. And now, she decided to extend that same courtesy to Makoto as he swallowed his bile and quietly entered the bathroom.

When he was out of sight, she decided to check one final spot before concluding her investigation of the crime scene and moving on to the trash room, where she was certain some evidence had been disposed of.

Leaving that thought alone for now, she ventured over and sat down at Makoto’s desk near his bed. Almost instantly, she noticed the pad of paper was set far off to the side and the pencil that usually was supposed to be in a small holster was sitting atop the pad. The cleanly appearance made Kyoko believe that the desk had probably been untouched by the fight that must have taken place.

But then, why was the pad and pencil far removed from—!!

Almost subconsciously, Kyoko’s hands reached out, grasping the pencil tightly and pulling the pad over to her. With quick furious swipes, she shaded in the top page of the pad and her eyes widened as a message began to form. She read it quickly as she continued to shade, only stopping when she read the name signed at the bottom of the page:

Sayaka Maizono
“So then...it wasn’t Sayaka who was attacked but instead instigated the assault. Unfortunately, she was smart enough not to include the name of her intended victim. If only she’d written their name...”

Folding the note and surreptitiously placing it into her coat pocket, Kyoko was about to go over her evidence when her brain finally caught up with her actions. She stood up from her seat and stared down, almost in wonder, at her handiwork.

“The shading...how did I know to do that? It seems almost like the kind of trick a detective would use on a murder mystery. Did that mean I received similar training? It would certainly explain my knowledge of criminal investigations. Could that mean that my title was the Ultimate—?”

Abruptly, her gloved hand shot up and lightly slapped the side of her cheek.

Letting the stinging sensation course through her, she scolded herself for letting her mind wonder back to that issue. Even if she had been on the cusp of remembering something, she knew that she also was close to piecing together this crime. And no matter how desperately she wanted to remember her past, she knew that now was not to the time to focus on it.

“There will be plenty of time to discover my past later. First and foremost, I have to survive long enough to uncover the answers.”

Pushing away those lingering distracting thoughts, Kyoko instead focused on recounting the evidence she’d discovered.

“...Evidence of a struggle. The decorative sword with its gold plating rubbed off. The sword sheath scratches. The broken doorknob. The bloody knife on the floor of the bathroom. The bandages wrapped around the body. Her right wrist was broken. Blood on her left index fingertip. The dying message – 11037...”

As she silently passed by Mondo and Sakura on her way out of the room, Kyoko’s mind kept coming back to those numbers.

“...11037...11037...11037...11037...11037...”

She calmly opened the door and stepped out into the hall. She barely heard her fellow students, Leon and Hifumi, speaking as her feet carried her away from the crime scene and toward the trash room. All the while, her mind continued to process...

“...11037...11037...11037...11037...N037...!”

Her lavender eyes widened as the sounds of the world suddenly came back to her, beginning with the tiniest of gasps as her mind cruelly pieced together the plot of this case. Glancing over her shoulder, she finally noticed one of her classmates nervously scratching his head, sweat trickling down his neck, occasionally stealing a glance toward the crime scene as he ran a hand through his fiery crimson hair.

“...LEON...”

“...Please go through the red door on the first floor of the school!”

Leon heard the announcement just as everyone else did. And, knowing that there was no defying the
demented bear, he slowly carried himself to the large red double doors. Along the way, he snuck one final glance back at the door leading to what he had thought was Sayaka’s room.

In the end, he didn’t even go inside to pretend to investigate. He feared that if he crossed that threshold again, he might break down and give in to the little voice that told him he should turn himself in. It had been there, agonizing him ever since he’d been told his fellow students would be executed if he wasn’t found out. Even so…

“I…I don’t want to die…I’m…I’m not ready! I have to…I have to become a rock star and—”.

The moment he thought of that, images of Sayaka smiling happily and promising to teach him flashed before his eyes…the horrific vision of her bloody corpse replacing those happy memories an instant later.

His dreams…died with Sayaka. He knew it was true…but right now, that lie was the only thing holding him together.

Pushing open the red doors, Leon found that he was one of the first to arrive, with Celeste and Byakuya already there. He carefully walked past them and leaned against the far wall, folding his arms and watching as everyone else strode in. Makoto was the last of them and he was instantly met with harsh glares.

A heavy pressure weighed down Leon’s chest as his fellow students labeled the Lucky Student as the killer. And even though Makoto insisted it wasn’t true, no one seemed to believe him.

“That’s good.” Leon thought as he watched Toko blatantly accuse his classmate of his own crime, “No one has any idea it was me. And all I have to do is…make sure…that no one finds…”

He couldn’t finish his own thought as he saw a hint of moisture build up in the corner of Makoto’s eyes before they were furiously wiped away. The accused boy was fighting off the pain of not only losing his close friend but the agony of being blamed for her death. Leon pretended to turn away from his classmate in disgust but in reality, the disgust was for himself.

But what choice did he have? He didn’t want to die…like Sayaka.

Just as his guilt was about to consume him, Monokuma suddenly appeared near the elevator door and shouted, “Alrighty! Everyone seems to be here! So then, we can finally get the underway—!”

“Hold on a moment.”

Everyone froze as Kyoko’s stern voice called out; making many of them turn to her. Even Leon found himself surreptitiously glancing her way as she pushed herself to the head of the crowd to stand before Monokuma.

“What about Junko Enoshima?” she asked, choosing not to elaborate.

Monokuma tilted it’s head sideways and answered, “What about Junko Enoshima?”

“I mean, why is she being excluded from this trial?” the lavender haired girl questioned.

Correcting it’s posture, the bear lowered its head before replying, “Given her injury and the fact that all of you made such a fuss over it,” he shot a quick glare to Makoto before continuing, “I’ve decided to exclude her from this trial. After all, it’s my job as Headmaster to look out for my students!”

Monokuma’s head shot up as it gave a cheeky laugh, holding it’s sides for emphasis.
A slight sigh escaped Kyoko before she continued, “If one of us is missing, how can we be expected to solve this case?”

Her query ceased the bear’s laughter instantly, a feat that shocked most of the students.

“That’s quite true,” Celeste chimed in, taking a step forward. “What if Junko is somehow connected to this case? Or perhaps she knows something we do not? Wouldn’t that be an unfair advantage for the killer?”

“Agreed,” Byakuya concurred, unfolding his arms and glancing toward the door, “Someone go and fetch her.”

“I-I’ll go!” Toko abruptly, and surprisingly, volunteered. However, she didn’t even have time to take a step before a furious growl echoed through the room.

“Dammit! I’m tired of waiting and I won’t accept any more delays!” Monokuma suddenly shouted, gaining everyone’s attention. “Fine then! I wouldn’t normally do this but my hands are tied!”

Inexplicably from behind itself, Monokuma pulled out a large megaphone, took a moment to adjust it, and then placed it at the center of what could be considered its mouth.

“Listen up, you punks! Junko Enoshima had absolutely NOTHING to do with this case! She wasn’t involved in the murder nor does she have any connection to it at all! That’s why she’s being excluded! Get over it and get in the damn elevator!!!”

Suddenly, the metal doors to the elevator slid open and before anyone could protest, Monokuma had slipped away and was nowhere to be found. A heavy silence overtook the group for a moment, as none of them were quite sure what to believe.

However, order suddenly returned as an annoyed scoff broke the silence.

“At least that clears up one thing,” Byakuya said as he adjusted his glasses. “We now know that Junko is not the killer.”

“W-We already knew t-t-that!” Toko insisted, pointing an accusing finger at Makoto. “H-He’s obviously the killer! So w-what’s it matter if that s-slutty model isn’t h-here.”

“Y-Yeah, it doesn’t really change anything…” Leon found himself saying, knowing that his words were mainly meant for himself.

“Indeed,” Celeste agreed turning toward the elevator.

“W-Wait, you guys—!” Makoto tried to defend himself but it was too late.

Everyone began piling into the elevator that would take them to their fate, none of them listening to the pleas of the unfortunate boy they’d labeled the murderer. Leon lingered for a moment, a sympathetic expression coveting his face. However, he quickly hardened his features and took his place in the elevator.

All the while, he never noticed Kyoko, whom was standing only a few feet away from him, staring at him with a cold gaze.

It was unsettling, knowing exactly who was responsible but not being able to act on it. Kyoko had
kept her gaze primarily focused on Leon and it was obvious he was hiding something. Or at least to her it was. For the most part, the rest of her classmates seemed obsessively keen on pinning the crime on Makoto, which made the situation all the more unbearable.

“W-Wait! You guys—!” she heard Makoto try to defend himself, only for his pleas to fall upon deaf ears.

Kyoko felt a great deal of pity for him. After all, he lost the person who he trusted most and had to endure being accused of being her killer. And what made it even more tragic…was that she knew that Sayaka had been deceiving him. For how long, she couldn’t say. But that didn’t change the fact that he’d lost his only ally in this horrific place.

Perhaps it was that pity that made her walk over to him and place a hand on his shoulder. Startled, he slowly turned, his eyes widening as he recognized her.

“Are you scared?” she asked him before she could stop herself.

He flinched but tried to put on a brave face as he answered, “N-No, scared isn’t quite right…”

Staring at his apprehensive face, Kyoko could tell he was being honest. However, she could also see the anxiousness in his eyes, the need to find out who was responsible. She only hoped he would be strong enough to face the truth once it was revealed.

In light of that, she took her hand off his shoulder and turned to face him completely. “Makoto…it’s up to you to uncover the mysteries of this case for yourself. If you don’t, you’ll never come to grips with the truth.”

Without another word, she turned and marched toward the elevator. A part of her felt guilty for putting that kind of pressure on him, but she knew it was the right thing to do. If he didn’t confront this matter himself, then he didn’t deserve to know the truth. A harsh notion, but one that she firmly believed.

Stepping onto the elevator, she wasn’t surprised when he followed almost immediately after her, his eyes hardened with determination. The doors to the elevator closed and after only a few seconds it began descending. As they sank into the earth, Kyoko folded her arms and hands gripping her leather jacket tightly, pondering if this would be the last time any of them would be above ground.

The clicking of Mukuro’s laced boots echoed down the hall as the soldier absentmindedly let her feet carry her to an unknown location. She almost hadn’t noticed that she was up and walking around. All she could remember was collapsing to the floor of the nurse’s office and weeping uncontrollably, she wasn’t sure how or why she was in the hall or even where she was going.

Her face was reddened, eyes strained and dilated; she almost appeared to be a walking corpse as she stumbled down the hallway.

“I may as well be dead,” she told herself, feeling her despair reach its peak as she recalled her sister’s words.

“As far as I’m concerned, Mukuro Ikusaba is dead!”

Abruptly, she halted and leaned against a nearby wall for support. She tried her best to fight them, but the tears came all the same. A flood of hot moisture spilled down her cheeks and dripped to the
“What am I supposed to do?” she despaired as she wept. “I’m a soldier... I follow orders... without orders to follow... I... I don’t...”

Pushing off the wall in a desperate attempt to deal with her frustration, she continued sobbing as her feet forced her onward, passing through the entryway to the dorms. Steadily advancing, Mukuro gazed at her bandaged wound, gritting her teeth and hanging her head.

“What reason is there for me to exist now? I have no home to go back to... no place left in this world... all I had... was Junko... and she... and she...”

As she walked, her uninjured hand slowly slipped into her blouse and she grasped the handle of her combat knife. However, she stopped herself from drawing it as she lifted her head to see exactly where she had stopped.

It was a door that held the image and name of Sayaka Maizono.

Deep, shallow breaths were sucked into Mukuro’s lungs as she stared at that door, still grasping her knife. She wasn’t sure how long she stood there gaping, unsure if it was even possible for her to enter. Her legs trembled and she felt as if her strength was being drained just by being there.

However, after her breathing finally began to calm itself, she loosed her grip on her combat knife and instead reached for the door knob.

“Alright then, first up is the case summary! Class trial... Begin!!”

After Monokuma made this announcement, the bear reclined back in its huge judge’s chair and grinned as the students looked between each other. A thick silence fell upon the group as no one seemed sure of exactly how to proceed.

Standing in her place between the biker and the martial artist, Kyoko carefully examined each and every one of her classmates.

Byakuya and Celeste were overly calm, which didn’t surprise her. Chihiro and Toko were fidgety, but holding up well. Mondo was doing his best to comprehend things. Hina and Sakura were looking around cautiously, uncomfortable with not being seated next to each other. Hiro was surprisingly in control after his outburst earlier. Taka had his eyes closed and was concentrating. Hifumi was half-way between confused and invested. And Makoto was desperately trying to find ways to prove his own innocence.

Finally, she glanced over to Leon and felt herself let out a soft sigh. She had everything she needed to convict him, from evidence of his involvement to the way he would undoubtedly over-react at being accused. He was making it painfully obvious he was hiding something from all of them and she could use that to drive him into a corner.

However, a part of her still didn’t want to take the lead in such things. She’d be painting a target on herself for future cases, if there were any, but she also didn’t trust any of her classmates enough to allow them to solve this mystery on their own.

“So, uh, where do we actually start with this?” Hina bravely asked, the first to speak up after the silence.
Taking precedence, Taka cleared his throat and shouted, “I assert that the one who was murdered… was Sayaka Maizono!!”

A collective groan escaped everyone and only Hiro found himself saying, “Yeah, we know that already…”

“She was found in Makoto’s room,” Byakuya said, trying to steer everyone back on course.

“And what was the murder weapon?” Sakura questioned aloud.

“Obviously it was the knife that we found on the floor of the bathroom! It was covered in Sayaka’s blood!” Taka explained to everyone, knowing that not everyone had actually gone into the room to see for themselves.

Everyone began to ponder about this when suddenly, Leon let out an audible sigh.

“Okay, so we know the murder weapon was a knife, but where does that get us?” He paused as no one seemed to really have an answer. Taking the initiative again, he sent a glare toward his classmate and said, “I mean, we all know Makoto killed her, right??”

Kyoko’s gloved hands gripped her sleeves at Leon’s abrupt and direct accusation. Even disregarding the evidence she had, for him to make such an accusation at this early stage was beyond foolish. Unfortunately for her, the ensuing confusion and argument that occurred were more than frustrating.

Toko followed up on Leon’s claim and again placed all blame on Makoto, who tried to defend himself but found that neither the bookworm or the ball player were interested in his words. At the same time, even though she was certain that either Byakuya or Celeste were intelligent enough to see there could be more to this, neither of them spoke up.

A fact that perturbed Kyoko to no end.

“So, either they truly don’t have as much sense as I thought, or they’re simply doing as I am and trying to keep from making themselves a target.”

In any case, she knew that regardless of their intelligence or intentions, something needed to be done before the more influential students were completely misled. After all, she couldn’t expect Makoto to defend himself…

“Let’s draw our conclusions after we’ve presented our arguments. Otherwise, what’s the point of the trial?”
registering the chaotic state of the sleeping area. But now that she was here, standing over the body of a person she had once considered a classmate, she felt a strange sensation building within her.

It took a moment but Mukuro soon realized that it wasn’t sadness or pain that she felt…but sympathy.

“You and I…we aren’t so different are we?” she said softly as she stared at Sayaka’s pale face. “We’ve both been abandoned…left to die for our sins. Only…mine are much graver than yours.”

Memories of her past flooded her mind, images of the lives she’d destroyed while in Fenrir, visions of her crimes against her classmates long before trapping them here. And finally, her deception that she was now forced to carry out, having to play the role of her sister, the person who abandoned her, until she was either killed or found a way to survive the game.

Not that it mattered anyway.

It was only a matter of time now. She knew Junko would never allow a liability like her to win. Even if she was the last person alive at the end of the game, she was certain that Junko would have her executed anyway. After all, it would bring even more despair for the viewers watching the broadcast if the person who survived until the end was found out to be one of the instigators and killed for it.

Not to mention that Junko wouldn’t allow a failure like her the satisfaction of survival.

“There…was no chance…from the beginning,” she muttered to herself still staring down at Sayaka. “Neither of us had a chance at surviving this…only…I didn’t know it until now…”

Fresh tears began to form in her eyes as she squeezed them shut and clenched her fists.

“I don’t deserved any kind of forgiveness for what we’ve done to you…but at the very least, I have to say that I’m sorry! You didn’t deserve to die like—”

“Uhgh…ughu…uh…”

“…that’s definitely something I wouldn’t do. Since I knew exactly how to open the bathroom door, right?” Makoto finished defending himself, having laid out another point that proved his innocence.

“That is…a definite possibility,” Byakuya reluctantly admitted, forcing anyone else who was suspicious of the Lucky Student to concede as well.

Across the room, Kyoko hid a smile as she snuck a glance at Makoto. She may have given him a little push, but that was all he needed to jump in and defend himself from the onslaught of accusations he’d received.

In fact, she had to admit that, despite her initial observation of him, he was far more intelligent than she had originally believed. His own investigation mirrored hers almost perfectly and she only had to step in occasionally, to clear up any doubt whenever one of their classmates tried to counter him.

“Perhaps I was wrong about him,” she mused to herself as everyone was stunned into silence at the realization that Makoto was, indeed, not the killer. “But still, that doesn’t mean that he’ll be able to solve everything.”

With that in mind, she turned her attention back to her fellow classmates…and to Leon in particular.
“Shit! Now what the hell do I do?! I can’t blame Makoto anymore! I’ll look too suspicious!”

Leon began to panic as everyone decided against the Lucky Student being the killer. He carefully wiped the sweat from his brow, doing his best not to seem flustered. Lucky for him, he wasn’t the only one frustrated by this turn of events.

“Okay, then who the hell did it?!” Mondo abruptly shouted, trying to make sense of this new information.

“I’m sorry but I give up! Quit without saving!” Hifumi uselessly replied, making everyone groan.

“Wait…they still have no idea who actually did it, so…I should be in clear…” Leon thought as he breathed a quick sigh of relief.

That is, until Taka had to go and open his mouth, “Well then, why don’t we just vote right now?! Majority rules!”

Before anyone else could refute him, Leon found himself dumbstruck before saying, “Majority rules? Are you sure that’s such a good idea…?”

His words made everyone around him nod in agreement, but Leon himself felt a wave of utter stupidity wash over him.

“Why the hell did I say that?! No one suspects me right now! I should have pushed for the vote!!”

“He’s right! Our necks are on the line here! Someone do something, for serious!” he heard Hiro comment, convincing others that Taka’s stupid suggestion shouldn’t be considered.

And while he did his best to appear calm, on the inside, Leon felt his composure beginning to waver as everyone resolved themselves to continue debating. His mind raced as he tried to think of any other way to keep from being discovered. Fortunately for him, his classmates were no closer to solving the mystery.

“Uh, I have a question.” Hina suddenly chimed in, turning all attention toward her. “How did the killer get into Sayaka’s room in the first place?”

A swell of relief flooded Leon for a moment, knowing that no one would be able to figure that one out. After all, he’d burned the note Sayaka wrote to him when he’d left it in the pocket of the bloody shirt he’d incinerated.

“There’s no way they’ll be able to piece that part together…”

Sayaka felt the last thin thread of her life fading into the nothingness. Only blackness could be sensed…all around her…her soul…beginning to fade…into oblivion…her last chance…to live…gone…forev—

Just then, a voice rang in her ears. It was muddled and broken, but she could tell it was close!

“…aren’t so different are we?...both been abandoned…left to die… don’t deserved any kind of forgiveness… I’m sorry!”
As the darkness around her threatened to finally consume her whole, Sayaka heard that voice calling out to her. It was soft and sweeter than Makoto’s but it was definitely there…waiting beyond the deep blackness that overwhelmed her, pulling her back to consciousness. A last ray of light had appeared before her, beckoning her back to life.

“…I…I want…to…live…!”

Knowing that this was indeed her very last chance to reach out, Sayaka used every last ounce of her strength to respond. And this time, she found her voice…

“Uhgh…ughu…uh…”

Mukuro completely froze as those soft groans escaped from the seemingly lifeless body of Sayaka. Her breath hitched in her throat and the soldier thought for a moment that she had to be imagining things…

“Urgh…ah…”

Again! Again there was noise coming from Sayaka’s cold lips! Instantly falling to her knees beside the mostly-dead girl, Mukuro placed two fingers on the idol’s throat and remained still as she found the vein she was searching for.

…

…Thump-thump………………………………………………………………….Thump-thump…

…

A shaky breath was sucked into Mukuro’s lungs as she heard the incredibly weak heartbeat of Sayaka Maizono!

“She…she’s…she’s…SHE’S ALIVE! SAYAKA IS ALIVE!!”

Mukuro could hardly believe it. Sayaka was weak and fading, certainly, but she was still alive after bleeding out for so long. How was that even possible? It had been several hours since the wound was inflicted. There was no way someone could survive for that long after losing several pints of blood. Unless…

The soldier’s eyes drifted down to see the bloodied strips of towel wrapped around Sayaka’s midsection. And although it certainly was a sloppy job, the towel had been effective in stopping the bleeding at least. The amount of blood loss may have been extensive but if she was able to make noises, then there was still a chance!

“If I hurry, then I can still—!” Mukuro almost shouted to herself before strangely falling silent.

Looking down at the helpless girl, whose life was fading even at that very moment, dangerous thoughts coursed through Mukuro’s mind.
“If Sayaka is alive, then Junko’s plans are ruined…at least for the time being. She’ll be more furious than ever and take it out on…well, all of us! But if Sayaka doesn’t survive…”

Unconsciously, Mukuro found her good hand slipping inside her blouse and grasping the handle of her combat knife.

“And if I’m the one to do it…will Junko…love me again?”

She could see it now. Junko welcoming her back with open arms, congratulating her for keeping the game going and not letting one little slip up ruin her plan. She’d be acknowledged by her sister and even praised for being useful. Just thinking about it made Mukuro…made her feel…feel as if…as if her heart were being cut out…

A single tear slid down Mukuro’s cheek as she gently whispered, “It’ll…never happen…Junko…she would…never…”

She knew that Junko would never praise her. In fact, she’d probably brand her sister a blackened and execute her for finishing off Sayaka. It was stupid of her to even think that just because she kept Junko’s plans from being ruined that she would be forgiven. That was not how Junko worked.

Taking her hand off the knife, Mukuro now found herself with another dilemma.

“I really don’t owe Sayaka anything. And even if I managed to save her, it would only incur my sister’s wrath. Perhaps I’m better off just letting Sayaka…slip away—”

In the midst of her thoughts, she abruptly shook her head and slapped her cheek.

She had just been thinking about how unfair it was that both of them had been abandoned. And now, she was considering letting Sayaka feel the same hurt and anguish she’d been battling ever since Junko had cut her loose!

Furious at herself, she clenched her fists but felt a sharp pain from her right hand. Wincing, she lifted her hand up and almost gasped as she looked at the bandage.

Even if the wrappings were printed with Monokuma’s image, she could still feel the tenderness of Makoto’s hands as he’d gently wrapped her bandages, careful not to pull too tight and injure her further. This, of course, conjured Makoto’s face in her mind…and she felt more ashamed than ever for what she’d considered doing to Sayaka.

“Makoto…he never abandoned us. Even now, he’s fighting…trying to keep as many of us alive as he can.”

Her voice was low, barely a whisper but she clutched her bandaged appendage close to her chest.

Her heart had nearly broken when she’d seen Makoto’s pain-stricken face when he had been forced to accept Sayaka’s apparent death. And she could never forget the bravery he’d shown when he pulled her away from the spear trap, extending her now shortened life. He threw himself into harm’s way for his friends, something she had never done before.

And, if for no other reason than to repay her debt to him, Mukuro came to a decision.

“At the very least, I owe Makoto for prolonging my life. And if I can save Sayaka…And save him from this pain…then I’ll endure any punishment my sister can conjure!”

Taking in a deep breath, Mukuro steeled her resolve and bent down low, scooping up the
unconscious Sayaka in her arms. Adjusting her weight and making sure that the pop idol wasn’t still bleeding, she quickly but carefully made her way out of the bathroom, into the living area and outside into the hallway.

Not wasting a single moment, Mukuro sped off toward the nurse’s office with Sayaka in tow.

“How the hell did this happen?!” Leon frantically thought as his classmates deduced that whomever Sayaka invited over, and tried to kill, was the culprit.

He’d been confident that without the note, there wouldn’t be any way to tell that Sayaka invited him over! But then, Kyoko had to pull some NCIS bullshit and *magically* replicate the note he’d received! On top of that, Makoto flawlessly pieced together what must have happened during the fight between him and Sayaka, making it even harder to defend himself if he was found out!!

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, to calm his frazzled nerves, Leon reassured himself there was nothing to fear.

“I’ll be fine. I mean, that’s it, right? There isn’t anything else.”

As if on cue, everyone began having the same reaction. No one seemed to be able to think of anything that might lead to the discovery of the culprit. Not to mention that some of them, mainly Makoto, were still reeling from the fact that they’d uncovered Sayaka’s true involvement.

Even Kyoko seemed stumped at this point, as she turned to her classmates and said, “If we can’t uncover who murdered Sayaka, then it’s over for all of us…”

A hollow silence filled the room as the threat of death loomed over them all…well, except for Leon that is.

Lucky for him that there was no evidence left for them to present, given that he’d destroyed it all. Sure, they may have found out about the hair being removed but there was no way they’d be able to figure out how he’d burned his shirt. Which meant that, there was nothing left for them to—

“Wait! That’s it!! If I insist on how hopeless this is and urge us to just piece together what we have, then none of them will have any suspicion for me at all! And since they can’t trace it back to me… I’m in the clear!”

Folding his arms, Leon faked frustration as he said, “It’s easy to say, ‘Just decide who did it,’ but it’s not that simple. I mean, there are absolutely no clues left, right—?”

That’s it. He was in the clear now. There was absolutely nothing left for anyone, even Kyoko, to—

“No, that’s wrong…”

Leon’s body froze as Makoto’s accusatory words broke through the silence. The baseball star slowly turned to see the lucky student, renewed fervor burning in his hazel eyes, staring forward with more conviction than ever.

“We’re all forgetting about one thing,” Makoto said before anyone could refute him, “…Sayaka’s dying message.”

Unable to stop himself, Leon let out a light gasp as his mind began to retreat back into panic.
Sayaka felt herself being carried, to where, she couldn’t even guess. The idol felt her head resting on something soft, her arms folded over her chest as whoever was carrying her had their hands under her back and legs, hold the injured girl close to their chest. And despite the warmth she felt from her savior, there was agony as well.

Pain…immense pain ripped through her body…such agony had never been experienced by her before…not even when she’d been sliced open…however…it brought an overwhelming sense of calm with it…it was like nothing she’d ever expected…

She was no longer being consumed by the darkness around her, her mind freed from the nothingness that had been seeping in. She would endure any suffering if it meant that horrifying darkness was kept at bay. For even as crippling as that pain was, it was preferable to slipping away into the void.

And even though she was too weak for her to open her eyes, she knew that…somehow…she had come back to the land of the living. It was then that she heard that voice again; that soft yet stern voice that had beckoned her back from the dark.

Only this time, it was clear as day:

“You know…I used to hate you. Both on and off the stage, people loved you. They loved you as a performer and as a person. I…I was jealous of that.”

Unable to respond in the least, Sayaka continued to listen intently, taking in each and every word the voice spoke to her.

“And even though I could see through your fake smile, see that you must have had difficulties too…I still resented the fact that you were loved, truly and absolutely. By everyone…by him.”

Strangely, the voice was very apologetic. As if the person speaking had committed a grave sin against her.

“But I was wrong. I hated you for something that you worked hard for, something that you didn’t take for granted and actively tried to keep. Now I realize that I was jealous of your strength more than anything else.”

Sayaka couldn’t fathom why her savior was saying such things. After all, she wasn’t strong at all. She had tried to frame Makoto, tried to kill the naively innocent Leon, and her actions would no doubt inspire others to try and murder their way out as well.

“I’m weak…and pathetic. I don’t…deserve…”

Before her thoughts darkened any further, that soft voice broke through and enveloped her again.

“And because of that, I never gave a thought to how much you…how much everyone here must be suffering. I only thought of myself and in the end…”

The voice fell silent for a moment and Sayaka feared that she may never hear it again when it abruptly came back.

“In the end, that’s why I have to save you. Even if it’s only this one time, I have to do something…anything it takes to make this right. I swear…if we both survive this, I’m going to apologize to you properly…so you can’t die until then!”
As those words seeped into Sayaka’s semi-conscious mind, she was suddenly overwhelmed with emotions. Someone actually cared for her, even though she was an attempted murderer, even though she had done many horrible things to others in her past. At the very least, the person who this voice belonged to…wanted her to live.

And for the first time since she’d been thrust into this horrific situation, she felt sincere gratitude as her will to live was completely restored.

“…Thank…you…”

Mukuro had no idea if Sayaka could hear her, or even why she was saying these things. But as she moved closer and closer to her destination, she felt that she needed to say something. Her words were pure and honest, even though she wasn’t sure what brought them on. All she knew was that they needed to be said.

Sayaka needed to hear them, just in case she wasn’t able to save her. The soldier knew that this was her only chance to convey those words that had been suppressed for so long.

Sayaka’s head lay against her bosom, providing the much needed comfort this fading girl required. Blood from the idol’s abdomen wound stained her blouse and skirt but Mukuro didn’t care in the least. After all, it wasn’t the first time she’d been drenched in blood…but it was the first time she’d done so to save a life.

And even though she had doubts as to if she could revive her severely injured classmate, she knew that this was her purpose now. It was the first time she’d given herself a mission and with a clear goal in mind, she found herself able to push away all the distracting thoughts of the trial and Junko, focusing solely on keeping Sayaka alive.

Looking down at Sayaka’s pale face, Mukuro barely noticed the tiniest of tears trickling down the idol’s cheek.

It may have been from the pain of being moved. That’s what the logical part of her mind told her. But instead, Mukuro chose to believe that, on some level, her words had reached Sayaka’s soul…and she knew that she was going to be saved.

Feeling the adrenaline beginning to pump through her veins, Mukuro lifted her head up as she turned the corner, the nurse’s office finally coming into view.

Readjusting her injured classmate, Mukuro hardened her features in determination and said, “Hold on, Sayaka! We’re almost there!”

“Sure, I think we can all agree that Sayaka wrote the message, but still…what the heck do those numbers mean? 11037?”

Hina’s question was the same as everyone else’s in the group. Well, almost everyone’s.

Kyoko stood in her place, a hand on her chin, watching as her classmates tried to decipher the numbers. Naturally, Chihiro was asked about them but the programmer didn’t have a clue as to what the sequence of numbers could correspond to. Because of that, all speculation went out the window.
and none of her classmates could fathom what it could mean.

At the same time, Kyoko found herself eerily quiet. Once again, she feared making herself into a target and wanted to keep her discoveries to herself, hoping someone else would be able to reach the same conclusion as herself.

In fact, she had half expected Makoto to figure it out by now, considering he was doing so well at unmasking all of the crucial elements to this case. However, to her disappointment, she found that he was becoming just as stumped as everyone else. But unlike everyone else, she could see that he was still actively trying to solve the mystery of the number.

She could see it in his eyes, those hazel irises that continued to question everything and seek out the truth, no matter the cost. And it was because she respected that relentless tenacity that she finally decided to give him a little push.

“…Let’s look at the numbers assuming they’re not numbers.”

The instant those words left her mouth, she saw Makoto’s eyes light up as he finally realized there was another way to interpret them. However, he wasn’t the only one. Hifumi also jumped in and pointed out that the first two letters, 11, looked off. From there, Chihiro noticed a tiny connecting line between the two numbers.

And thus, the letter “N” became visible for all to see.

However, the high everyone got from this discovery was immediately halted when Sakura spoke up, “But even if it really is an ‘N’…N037 doesn’t make any more sense than before…”

With that, Kyoko knew that her classmates were close to uncovering the truth for themselves but unfortunately, they were still falling short. The answer was literally right in front of them but none of them could see it. Makoto’s eyes dampened a bit as even he couldn’t see the meaning of this new discover.

Not even the killer could clearly see it yet. But then again, she knew why.

He’d never gone back into the bathroom to see Sayaka’s body, so he missed the message entirely. Naturally, he was utterly shocked at all of this and as such, Leon had remained utterly silent throughout this entire affair. It was the clearest giveaway Kyoko had ever seen.

She had pieced it together before she’d even gotten into the elevator. She knew Leon was the culprit from the start but for some reason…she’d kept herself from coming right out and explaining it all at the beginning. And sadly, it wasn’t just about not wanting to become a target for other students.

It was something deeper than self preservation. It was a notion that she didn’t want to admit needed to be done but knew that it was going to have to happen for herself and her classmates to survive…

“The moment I say this…I will become Leon’s killer.”

Even though the rational part of her mind kept insisting that notion was foolish, she couldn’t fight that feeling. More than anything else, that notion was the reason she’d kept quiet all this time. She didn’t want to face the responsibility…the guilt that because of her investigation…a classmate was going to be condemned to death.

And while it may be true that he committed a heinous and unforgivable crime, that didn’t mean it was right of her to sentence him to such a horrifying fate. To her, taking another’s life was not something that should be forgiven…which is why she hesitated to take Leon’s at this very moment.
She would never forgive herself for being the instrument of his demise.

Looking across the way, she could see that Leon was already in the throes of panic and despair. Whether because he regretted his actions or was just terrified of being discovered, she couldn’t say.

In any case, it didn’t change the fact that if she didn’t do something here and now…she and everyone except Leon would perish. She was working so hard to keep everyone alive but she was outwitted at every turn.

Then again, it was the nature of this game. Monokuma wanted all of them to feel the darkest of despair and what better way than making them turn on the ideals that they hold so dear?

Kyoko cursed whomever was controlling that bear with every fiber of her being as she was forced to concede and give Monokuma exactly what he wanted. Burying her conflicting emotions deep down beneath her cold exterior, Kyoko felt a little bit of herself dying as she finally opened her mouth and said:

“…Rotate the image 180 degrees…”

Leon wasn’t sure exactly what it was, but something about the way Kyoko had spoken sent a chill down his spine. Compelled to do as she asked, the baseball player flipped his electro ID over and blanched as he saw what was written there.

L-E-O-N

His feet suddenly felt ice cold and his eyes dilated as he realized his fate was sealed.

Before he had a chance to say anything, Makoto audibly gasped and shouted, “Oh my God! I see it now! If you invert the numbers they become the letters L, E, O, N! Or more accurately…Leon!!”

As one, all of the students surrounding him turned and stared, some with accusatory glares and others with shocked questioning glances. Under their harsh gazes, the baseball star felt that hollow pressure in his chest return as his wrongdoings were made apparent to all present.

“No…No way…NO FUCKING WAY!!”

“Okay…There!”

Mukuro finally finished setting up the IV stand with a fresh pack of blood. It was fortunate that there were blood packs in the fridge, considering she hadn’t checked if there were any. She’d half expected Junko to remove all of the packets, in case something like this happened but it seemed that her sister either didn’t believe it would happen or she thought the students might use the blood for…other purposes.

Not only that, she had been worried that she wouldn’t know what type of blood Sayaka was. However, she remembered the electro ID had all of their information saved on it and thankfully, everyone’s blood type was listed in their profile.

Mukuro almost couldn’t believe her luck in all of this and wondered if possibly Makoto’s influence
was rubbing off on her. But she didn’t have time to think about that now!

Turning around she saw Sayaka lying in the bed she’d set her on. Her pink wig was tied back using a hair mask, to make sure it didn’t get in the way. She considered taking the wig off all together but figured that, on the off chance Sayaka happened to wake up, it was crucial that it be in place.

Making sure the sterile gloves on her hand were secure, she reached a hand out but stopped just before she grasped her classmate’s right wrist. Seeing it swollen and more than likely broken, she decided to use the idol’s left wrist instead and began searching for a vein. It took a moment but she soon found the vein in questioned and took a deep breath.

“Sayaka…This is gonna hurt but just bear with it!”

Holding the IV needle tightly in her hand Mukuro furrowed her brows and pierced the needle directly into the vein. Sayaka very lightly grunted and slightly twitched but otherwise remained motionless.

Taping the IV tube to her hand, Mukuro looked back at the blood packet. A relived smile broke out on her face as she saw the blood begin to drip into the IV, flowing down the tube and directly into Sayaka’s body.

“Well…that wasn’t so hard,” Mukuro said as she wiped the sweat from her brow. “Now, here comes the tricky part.”

Mukuro knew she needed to redress Sayaka’s stomach wound, or else it would get infected and all of her efforts would be for nothing. However, since she had never actually sustained an injury in battle before, she didn’t really know the proper way to clean and dress a wound. Sure, she’d gotten a few scrapes and bruises before but never anything that required medical attention. As such, her experience here was practically nonexistent.

“Then again, I’ve only watched others do a blood transfusion and I managed that well enough,” she encouraged herself, “And if I just remember what my comrades taught me in case I get injured…”

Picking up a pair of medical scissors, the soldier carefully began to cut away the cloth of both Sayaka’s shirt and the towel strips on her abdomen. Once she was certain she could remove it all, she began to slowly pull the material off Sayaka’s body. As she lifted the bloodied cloth away and tossed it aside, Mukuro breath hitched for a moment as she saw the injury.

From just below Sayaka’s right breast to just above her waistline, a long jagged slice of flesh was visible. However, Mukuro was able to breathe a sigh of relief, noticing that the wound itself was not as deep or fatal as it appeared. But unfortunately, since the towel strips had been stuck to her body for so long, removing them actually caused the wound to begin bleeding once more.

However, Mukuro was prepared for this and immediately applied a large gauze to the open wound. The medical patch soon began to become soaked all the way through with the pink hue of blood. Expecting this, the soldier quickly applied another gauze to the area before grabbing medical tape from the table beside her.

As quickly and effectively as she could, Mukuro began taping down the sides of the gauze, blood from the open wound staining her gloves.

“This should…help keep…pressure on it…” she reasoned as she finished taping, putting the tape back down and reaching for a towel.

Wiping her gloved hands on it to remove as much blood residue as she could, she then reached over
for the last and most crucial item needed for the dressing. Her hand wrapped around the roll of bandages and she pulled a long strip of them out to prepare to use. She almost cringed as she saw the image of Monokuma on the bandages but beggars can’t be choosers in this situation.

Leaning over Sayaka, Mukuro began wrapping the bandages tightly around the idol’s abdomen. It was initially difficult to get her hands underneath her body to fully wrap the bandage but after a few wrappings, she found a rhythm and pattern that allowed her to slip one hand under, grab the roll and pull it all the way out the other side without causing much trouble.

Sayaka grunted and writhed a bit as each bandage was tightened but the sounds were more of a relief to hear than a detractor. Considering she was thought to be dead, any noise that Sayaka made right now was an improvement!

A few times while wrapping the bandages, a sharp jolt of pain shot through Mukuro’s injured hand but each time she forced it away and continued. It was fortunate that she still had as much dexterity with her fingers as she did, considering how fresh the hole in her palm was. Even so, regardless of how stiff she thought her fingers were, she was finally able to finish wrapping the bandages tightly around Sayaka’s midsection.

Pulling them tightly, earning another groan from Sayaka, the soldier tied the bandages firmly and took a step back. The IV was flowing steadily and the white cloth around the idol’s abdomen showed no sign of continued bleeding. And, maybe it was her imagination, but it seemed as though Sayaka’s breathing was returning to normal as well, seeing the light rise and fall of her chest.

Confident that her job was complete Mukuro pulled the sheets over Sayaka’s body to keep her warm, leaving only the arm with the IV lying atop the sheets.

The instant that task was done, the soldier felt her strength begin to waver and she stumbled over to the nearby wall. Easing herself down to sit on the floor and placing her back against the wall, she stared upwards at the ceiling. Her exhausted breaths were the only sound she could hear at the moment as she felt her consciousness slipping into tired rest.

Closing her eyes, she whispered, “With this…Junko’s plan is ruined. Now that Sayaka is alive…there isn’t a…blackened for the…first trial…and there won’t…be a need to…execute—”.

Suddenly her eyes shot open and an audible gasp escaped her lips as realization came crashing down.

“Oh shit! The trial!!!”

“…Isn’t that right, LEON?!”

Makoto’s stern and absolute conviction tore through Leon’s mind like a hurricane, destroying any and all hope that he may be spared. He’d been found out, plain and simple. He’d never seen the dying message and didn’t think anyone would figure out he used the incinerator from behind the gate. And never in a million years did he think that Makoto of all people would be the one to convict him.

And now…he was going to die…just like Sayaka…

“No…This can’t be happening…How did it come to this?...It’s all so stupid…stupid…stupid, stupid, stupid!!”
Greetings, my beautiful readers. Sorry I didn’t post last time. I was traveling and didn’t have time to get this chapter edited. So, I put up a fun little one-shot “The Ultimate Hope” in its place. Feel free to go and check it out if you haven’t yet.

Anyway, quite a riveting chapter, wouldn’t you agree? But now that Sayaka is out of harm’s way, what will become of Leon? How will he escape his grizzly fate? You’ll just have to tune in to the next chapter to find out!

Thanks for reading and have a wonderful day, my beautiful readers!
Ch. 1 Act 8

Chapter Summary

Down in the depths of the school, Leon is forced to face the consequences of his actions. Meanwhile, Mukuro rushes to courtroom but finds a stalled elevator in her path. How will Mukuro be able to reach him in time?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mukuro tore out of the nurse’s office like a bat out of hell, almost slamming into the adjacent wall as she sped toward the red doors leading to the courtroom.

The hairnet that had kept her wig from getting dirty had been discarded, as were the blood-stained gloves she’d used while treating Sayaka. She had to be certain that once she was seen by the others again, no one would know she wasn’t Junko. After all, she didn’t want to get executed for giving away her secret, especially not after finding the resolve to save her classmates.

However, that was the smallest of her concerns as the eerie red doors finally came into view.

“I can’t let it happen! It won’t matter that I saved Sayaka if her attempted murderer still gets executed! It’ll change the rules! And if the rules change—!!”

She shook her head as her mind considered the consequences before she managed to force them away. Regaining her focus, she kicked open the red double doors and proceeded inside.

“Show us your toolkit, Leon.” Makoto reasoned, his gaze firm. “If I’m right about this, your toolkit will show some evidence of being used.”

“Stupid, stupid, stu—Wha?”

Leon’s mind finally clicked back on after his meaningless barrage of misplaced insults.

“And if you say you used it for something else, you’ll need to explain exactly where, when and why,” Byakuya immediately followed up, driving him further into a corner.

“I…I…uh…” the baseball player stammered, his mind unable to keep up with how fast he’d been outmaneuvered.

“And let me say this right now,” Kyoko spoke up, making him turn to her in utter terror. “Telling us, ‘I lost it’, is not a valid excuse.”

As her words echoed in his ears, Leon felt as though his strength was sapped away, lowering his head and muttering, “Stu…pid…Stu……pid?”
And with that, the first class trial came to a close as the student’s minds were set upon whom to punish.

“Make extra sure you vote for someone. You wouldn’t want to be punished for something as silly as that, would you?” Monokuma cheekily instructed everyone as they cast their votes.

Kyoko clenched her jaw and seethed, sending an accusatory glare toward the bear atop the throne. The Mastermind was forcing everyone to bear the responsibility of taking their fellow student’s life, even if most of them didn’t see it that way or even realize it. The bear was clawing its way into their minds with this tactic, doing as was promised in creating despair.

Nevertheless, the amnesiac girl knew there was no choice in the matter and pulled the lever as well, a small part of her writhing as she had once again given in to save her own life.

“For me…Leon.”

In all honestly, the baseball player knew it was over the moment Makoto had accused him, but he just couldn’t accept it…he couldn’t accept his own death without even trying to fight back!

But that didn’t matter anymore and a cold chill ran down his spine as he lifted his head to see the other’s already voting. Barely managing to overhear Monokuma’s threat about not voting, the broken young man looked to the lever in front of him. Without a second through, his hand reached out and he voted…for the person that had put him in this situation.

“This…isn’t my fault. It’s Sayaka’s!” He practically seethed as he pulled the lever. “That’s right! She’s the one who attacked me! If anything, I’m the victim! Why should I have to die because of her?!”

It was a last act of defiance against a fate he couldn’t fight. So, with a weary gaze, he lifted his head to watch the slot-machine that held everyone’s faces spin…before the reels landed purposefully on his image.

“Come on, dammit!”

Mukuro’s furious pounding on the elevator button continued to receive no response, despite numerous attempts to force it to work. She gritted her teeth as she realized that Junko probably locked down the elevator to ensure that none of the students, blackened or spotless, could use it as a form of escape.

“I don’t have time for this!”

Without hesitation, Mukuro’s hand slipped into her blouse and she withdrew her combat knife from its holster. Moving to the center of the two metal elevator doors, she angled her blade and thrust it forward. Her aim was perfect, as usual, and she managed to get the tip of the blade between the tiny crack between the doors.
Placing her other hand on the back of the one holding the knife, she slowly pushed the blade forward while jiggling it further between the doors. Slowly but surely, the entirety of her knife was able to slip between the metal. With a swift yet powerful jerk, Mukuro managed to barely pry the two doors apart.

Seizing that opportunity, her fingers instantly found their way to both sides of the metal doors. At first, she could barely get the metal to budge, even though she was using all of her strength to try and pull them apart. When she could only just get her palm through the crack between the metal was she able to use her weight and slowly pull the doors apart.

“Come…on…just…a…little…more!!” she groaned as she almost pulled the doors apart wide enough for her to fit through.

With a final grunt and fierce tug, she widened the passage between the metal doors so that her entire body could easily get to the other side. Fortunately for her, the metal doors were not using any kind of spring system to hold them shut, and she was able to momentarily catch her breath, knowing that they weren’t going to close on her.

Sliding her knife back into its holster under her blouse, she felt her injured hand ache from the pressure she’d just applied getting those damn doors open. But she knew it was nothing compared to what awaited her next. Poking her head through the gap she’d made, she looked at the thick elevator cord that was her only means of descending below.

Slowly, her eyes drifted down to her bandaged appendage and she groaned as she saw blood already beginning to seep through the wrappings.

“I’m running out of time…” she had to remind herself, knowing that more than just her life hung in the balance.

Sayaka, Leon and Herself.

Their fates were now tied together, whether they knew it or not. And somehow, Mukuro knew that if her sister succeeded and, now wrongfully, executed the baseball player, it would spell the end for her and the pop idol as well. Junko would find a way to have them eliminated…to protect her precious rules.

With that reaffirmation, Mukuro lifted her gaze up and her sky blue irises focused intently on the elevator cord. She felt sharp pain in her hand as she knew there was only one option open to her.

She briefly considered dashing back to the nurse’s office to find something to wrap her hands in, to make it easier to slide down the cord. However, there was no time left and there was no turning back.

Taking a deep breath to compose herself, Mukuro narrowed her gaze before speeding forward, leaping into the elevator shaft and grasping the thick cord.

“That’s right! The blackened in this case, the one who killed Sayaka…was none other than Leon Kuwata!!”

Hearing his own name and the crime he’d committed spoken together made Leon lift his head, tearing his eyes away from the reels that showed him as the guilty party. Everyone was staring at him; some with anger, others with contempt, and a select few showed sympathy.
Among the sympathetic ones was none other than Makoto, who despite being the driving force behind his sentencing, seemed almost as shocked as he was.

“Leon…is it really true?” the lucky student asked hesitantly, showing that even he didn’t wish to believe the baseball player had committed such an atrocity.

There was great pain in Makoto’s eyes, both for having lost a friend and for having sentenced another to death. And it was that horrified and agonizing look that stopped any words of dissuasion that Leon may have had for him. There was nothing he could say to defend himself at this point…so he hung his head and kept quiet.

Taking his silence as a form of admittance, an uproar of confusion and anger enveloped the room.

“I don’t believe it…” Hina quietly said, the truth suppressing even her optimism.

“You son of a bitch!!” Mondo abruptly cut in, grabbing his pedestal as he leaned forward to shout, “What the hell is wrong with you?! Killing a girl like that?!”

The sudden accusation seeped into Leon’s mind and one last time, he felt the will to defy his fate.

Snapping his head up, he returned Mondo’s fierce gaze and fired back, “I-I didn’t have a choice! She came at me with the knife first! I never meant to kill her!”

His comments were met with suspicious gazes and even a scoff from both Byakuya and Celeste. Seeing and hearing their outright disbelief, something inside Leon snapped and he furiously pointed at everyone.

“None of you are any different!! One wrong move and it would have been one of you standing here! Not me!! It was complete chance that I wound up like this!!”

As he finished screaming, all resentment and fury seemed to pour out of him until he was left with nothing but a sickening realization. He was still making excuses…for taking Sayaka’s future from her. Even now, when he’d already been caught, he just couldn’t believe that it all was real…

“I was just…unlucky…that’s all.”

Those were his final words of protest as he once again hung his head and fell to his knees. Unwanted tears formed in the corners of his eyes, dripping to the floor as his sins were laid bare and the weight of his choices began to crush his spirit.

If he could take it all back…go back to last night and do anything different…it didn’t matter anymore. There was absolutely nothing he could say or do that would ever make up for his crime. Even so…

“Alrighty then! I’d say it’s time for some good old-fashioned punishment!!”

Monokuma’s ominous words snapped Leon back to reality and he almost leapt up to his feet in panic.

“P-Punishment?! Y-You mean…execution?!” he stammered, not yet ready to face his own demise. “W-Wait a second!!”

A maliciously gleeful grin broke out on Monokuma’s face as it calmly answered, “There will be no waiting—”
“But I didn’t have a choice! It was an accident! I never meant to kill her! I was trying to get the knife away from her but—”.

“Do you really believe we are that naïve?” Celeste abruptly cut in, earning a perplexed stare from Leon. “When you forced your way into the bathroom, did you or did you not use your very own toolkit?”

“W-Well, yeah but that was because I thought Sayaka was going to—”

“You went out of your way to go back to your own room, get your toolkit, return to the scene and force the door open...just to get to her. Am I wrong?”

“N-No, but that’s not the reason I—”

“You had a number of chances to stop what you were doing...but you chose not to.”

The gambler’s words were laced with venom, despite how calm and collected her tone was. At first Leon almost couldn’t believe she was being so hostile, considering she didn’t seem all that flustered by the trial in the first place. But he soon realized that Celeste was not only skeptical...she was outright accusing him of premeditative murder!

Before he could try and defend himself, she beat him to it again by finishing, “Is it not because you had an unclouded intent to commit murder in order to escape from this place?”

“No! That’s not…”

Leon was losing his will to protest, mainly because he knew how horrific his position seemed. He wanted to tell them he tried to save her...tell them how he was only trying to get the knife away from her so she couldn’t hurt herself. But no matter what he said, there was no way anyone would—

“Stop it!”

Leon’s eyes widened as he heard someone defend him. But even more than that, he was surprised at who it was. Turning his head, he stared directly at Makoto as the lucky student continued.

“I’ve had enough of this...just stop it Celeste.”

Utter confusion warped Leon’s features as he watched Makoto of all people coming to his defense. It was beyond Leon’s comprehension as to why he would do such a thing. He’d fought so hard to prove the ballplayer was the killer but now...he seemed to almost regret that decision.

“Oh? Are you sure?” Celeste answered in shock, as surprised as anyone by Makoto’s actions. “He killed your precious Sayaka after all. Are you saying you forgive him for that?”

At this, Makoto slightly lowered his gaze and Leon knew what was coming next. There was absolutely no way that the lucky student could forgive such a horrific thing. Hell, the baseball star couldn’t even forgive himself! How could he possibly expect Makoto to—?

“He’s not solely to blame for this...and I can’t blame Sayaka for it either. Instead, I know exactly who is responsible...”

With no hesitation, Makoto pointed an accusatory finger at Monokuma, who reeled back as if in shock at being blamed.

“You’re to blame for all this! Not Leon or Sayaka! You did this to them...to all of us! It’s all your
Everyone, especially Leon, couldn’t believe the words that came from Makoto’s lips. Mainly because, he was absolutely right! All of this was happening because the bear had put them into this situation. If the Mastermind hadn’t forced them to play this killing game, none of them would be turning on each other or trying to kill one another.

Hearing that somehow made a feeling of relief momentary flow through Leon’s mind.

“Makoto…he doesn’t blame me? He should…he really should…but he doesn’t. How the hell can he do that?”

In the midst of Leon’s thoughts, another person stepped up to surprise everyone.

“I agree, especially because it seems that we’ve all forgotten something very important about this case,” Kyoko suddenly spoke up after remaining silent for so long, surprising everyone into silence. She turned to Leon and asked, “You said it was an accident. Would you care to elaborate?”

“Huh?” was all that Leon could manage; barely comprehending that someone was letting him speak.

“Well, it was an accident! When I…defended myself against her and she ran into the bathroom, Sayaka took the knife with her. The reason I forced my way into the bathroom was because I heard her mumbling about killing herself!”

Instead of his words causing shock, everyone looked to him with suspicion instead, making him feel even more foolish for having said anything.

“You can’t honestly expect us to believe that, now can you?” Byakuya mockingly insisted, “Trying to garner sympathy after the vote’s been cast is pointless. You should simply accept your fate.”

“Indeed,” Sakura surprisingly agreed with him. “You should have enough pride not to make up excuses by this point.”

Leon could hardly believe they were being so skeptical. What point was there in him lying now? The die was cast and he had nothing to left to lose! Why were they being so unforgiving?!

“But it’s the truth! All I was trying to do was get the knife away from her! But she held onto it too tight and when I pried it from her hand…I…I accidentally cut her,” he insisted, holding back the pain that memory alone caused him.

“Yeah right, dude. Don’t make this harder to understand than it already is,” Mondo condemned him, turning away as if not paying attention. “You should own up to your mistakes, like a real man.”

“Y-Yeah! Next y-you’ll be s-saying that it was you t-that tried to bandage S-Sayaka!” Toko joined in, following the crowd as usual.

Anger abundantly rose in Leon as those words were thrown at him and he furiously shouted back, “But that was what I did! I used the towel to try and stop the bleeding! I even checked her pulse when she stopped breathing!!”

“S-See! Making m-more excuses!” the writing prodigy accused, glaring harshly at the disbeliefed ballplayer. “Y-You should j-just die already!”

Gritting his teeth, Leon hung his head again. He knew how hopeless it was to even try and explain himself. It seemed far too perfect to be coincidence and at this rate, he was going to be forever branded as a malicious murderer!
It was then that, once more, Kyoko decided to intervene.

“I don’t think these are excuses at all. In fact, I’m more inclined to believe them to be the truth.”

Hearing that made everyone turn to her in an instant. Most of them were shocked into silence but Makoto wasn’t one of them.

“Why do you say that?” he genuinely questioned, very eager to hear this.

“I don’t think that Sayaka would have been able to wrap those bandages around herself,” she said plainly, giving no room for doubt. “For starters, she wouldn’t have the strength to cut tiny strips out of that towel; she’d have lost too much blood by that point. And given the fact that they were all tied behind her back, it seems even less likely she would have been able to do so, given that she was pressed against the back wall—”.

“But it’s still possible that she could have done it herself,” Byakuya interrupted, glaring at her menacingly; “She could have easily done it before succumbing to her wounds.”

At this, Kyoko unexpectedly gave a short and mocking laugh before countering, “Perhaps, but tell me, how would she be able to do all that…with a broken wrist?”

Realization came crashing down on everyone as a heavy silence engulfed the courtroom. All the while, Leon couldn’t help the perplexed stare he was giving Kyoko as she too fell silent.

“W-What’s going on? Why is she…defending me?” he questioned, unsure of why anyone would even bother to come to his aid after learning of his crime. “I mean, there’s no way she’d be feeling guilty…right?”

As that thought occurred to him, Leon slowly began to look around at his fellow classmates.

A dissatisfied grunt escaped Byakuya as he was forced to remain silent. Chihiro almost broke out into tears as she heard this revelation, burying her face in her hands. Mondo continued to look away in shame. Celeste, although a bit miffed, seemed to have an almost apologetic look in her eyes. Taka was doing his best to seem unaffected but the tears in the corners of his eyes said otherwise. Hifumi hung his head low, doing his best to keep out of this situation. Sakura and Hina were ashamed of themselves and stared at the ground. Hiro, whom had been mostly quiet, nervously looked away, also trying to seem unaffected by this news.

Finally, Toko let a mortified expression overtake her face as she softly said, “So…he r-really didn’t mean to kill her after all! And y-yet…we…”

As if a floodgate had been opened, Leon finally understood the reason for his classmates’ actions and why they had been so unforgiving.

They had all voted for him, chose their own lives instead of his own, and whether they admitted to it or not, it was hurting them. They knew they sentenced their classmate to die for something that wasn’t truly his fault, and their harsh attitudes had been a way to alleviate themselves of that burden. But to no avail it seemed.

“Is it true, Leon?” Makoto abruptly asked, breaking the silence at last. “Did you really try to…save Sayaka?”

Looking over to him, Leon never imagined it would be so hard just to say, “Y-Yeah…it’s true.”

He half expected Makoto to get that look of shame himself, the same as everyone else. Instead, he
was treated to a relieved sigh from his classmate.

“…Thank you…for trying.”

Those words penetrated deep into Leon’s mind and for a moment, he felt his legs go weak. Fresh tears spilled from his eyes as he knew that at the very least…Makoto no longer blamed him for what happened.

A heavy silence filled the room for quite some time following those words, as no one had anything left to say.

When no one said anything, Leon finally felt as if he’d won something. It was an incredibly small victory but at this point, he was willing to take it! This proved that he wasn’t a homicidal killer and that there should be leniency shown because he tried to save—

“Yeah, yeah, whatever! That doesn’t change the fact that Leon is the blackened and he killed Sayaka! Let’s hurry up and send him to his punishment!”

Monokuma’s high voice cut through any shred of hope that Leon may have had, panic and fear once again gripping him.

“But…but it was an accident! You can’t execute me for something that wasn’t my fault!” Leon shouted, his desperation showing through.

However, Monokuma paid him absolutely no mind as it continued, “It’s the moment everyone’s been waiting for! The punishment for disturbing the communal life!”

Eyes widening in utter terror, the baseball star abruptly looked over to all of his classmates as he shouted, “I’m begging you! Please, don’t do this!”

He stared desperately at Makoto, silently begging for help. Unfortunately, the lucky student seemed as lost as he did, knowing that the vote was concluded and that the rules had to be enforced.

Even so, it seemed that Makoto wasn’t willing to give in just yet as his head shot up and he protested, “How can you punish him if he didn’t mean to commit murder?!”

“Because that’s the rules! The circumstances don’t matter! If you kill someone, you become a blackened!” Monokuma effortlessly refuted, as if he was quoting a holy scripture. “Besides, if your ‘friend’ Sayaka hadn’t been so hesitant, he’d be dead anyway! And you’d have been framed for it! So why do you care—?”

“Shut up! Just shut up you—”

Almost on instinct, Makoto tore away from his seat and made a mad dash around the courtroom toward the cheeky bear. However, before he even got halfway there, a gloved hand shot out in front of him and held onto him firmly, jerking him to a halt. It took the lucky student a moment to realize he’d been stopped before he furiously glared at whomever held him.

To his surprise, Kyoko was the one keeping him in place, her grip like iron and her eyes as stern and cold as steel. The sight of her stunted all his momentum and he found himself staring at her with a pleading expression, as if begging to be released so he could at least try and help his classmate.

However, Kyoko shook her head wordlessly, her actions speaking louder than any words she could have mustered. Forced to accept that he was utterly powerless, Makoto’s head slowly dipped until it hung down in shame.
At first, Leon was infuriated, not understanding why she wasn’t letting him at least try to help. However, he knew the answer all too well. There was no saving him, not now. There was nothing anyone could do to stop it what was coming.

And because of that, the last remnants of hope seemed to slip from Leon’s grasp as he once again begged, “C-Come on! You can’t do this! I’m a victim too!”

As if infuriated by his pleas, Monokuma shot him an accusatory glare and replied, “No more begging! No more excuses! You must pay the penalty for breaking the rules! Society demands it!!”

“No…no…no, no, no, no, no!!”

“Let’s give it everything we’ve got! It’s punishment tiiiime!!!”

“Nooooooooooo!!!”

No amount of screaming could stop Monokuma as its paw gripped the tiny gavel and slammed it down hard on a red button that inexplicably rose up in front of him. On a tiny screen below the button, an 8-bit image of Leon was suddenly dragged away by an 8-bit version of Monokuma.

As Leon watched the 8-bit bear drag his image off the screen, something cold and metallic suddenly clasped around his neck.

Mukuro gritted her teeth and suppressed an agonizing scream as she slid down the elevator cord down toward the bottom. It had been further down that she had expected and the bindings on her injured hand were coming undone. Small pink splotches of blood stained the cord as she held on for her life, unsure of when she would reach the bottom.

“Dammit! I can’t slow down!” she told herself, knowing that it was possible but would be detrimental to her mission.

If she slowed, she might not make it in time, but if she continued at her current pace, she may lose all feeling in her right hand…permanently!

Just as she feared her hand was going to lose its grip, she saw a hint of light below her. Her gaze shot down and a relieved sigh left her as she saw the top of the elevator come into view. However, seeing it brought up a new dilemma she hadn’t accounted for.

If she dropped down into the elevator and her classmates saw her, she would have to explain how she was able to slide down the cord for such a long way. It would reveal that there was something suspicious about her, to say the least, and it may even reveal her identity. If that happened, she knew that Junko would have her executed for ‘ruining’ the game.

However, that issue came and left her mind almost instantly. She had to save Sayaka’s attempted murderer, even if it cost her own life. She owed that to everyone, and it would be a fitting punishment for her betrayal. But such thoughts had to wait for later as she came closer and closer to the top of the elevator.
Because she was sliding down so fast, she hit the top hard and lost her balance. Toppling to her side onto the cold metal, her injured right hand slapped against the surface with a sickening smack.

“RRRGH!” she grunted, pulling her now exposed hand to her chest.

Slowly retracting it to view the damage, she held in a gasp as she saw the gaping hole in her palm. Blood poured out of it and she knew there was nothing left to bandage it with down her.

Or so she thought!

Having been in too much of a hurry, she’d failed to remember the long silk tie that was a part of her outfit, only seeing it now because it was sprawled out in front of her. With no hesitation, she ripped the long silk cloth from her neck and quickly wrapped it around the now furiously bleeding wound.

Using her teeth to tie it, she worried that it might not be enough to really stop the bleeding. But that was secondary to her at the moment, as she forced herself to recall the reason she’d descended.

Willing away the pain as best she could, she looked for the hatch that led into the elevator. Upon finding it, she used her good hand to push herself up and crawled over to the latch. With a swift tug, she pulled open the hatch and jumped down into the elevator. Skillfully landing into a crouched position, her gaze shot up to stare forward, expecting her classmates to be glaring at her.

To her surprise, a completely empty courtroom was all she saw. It would have been a relief, if it didn’t signify a more horrific realization.

“That can only mean that…!!”

Her eyes scanning the room frantically, she saw an open set of double doors behind the podiums. A small sign just above it was light with bright red, the words burning into her irises:

IN USE

Before she even knew what was happening, Mukuro broke out into a run. Passing the double doors in an instant, she saw another set of door at the very far end of the hallway, speeding toward them with the speed of a cheetah. All the while, she clutched her bloody appendage to her chest and repeated in her head:

“Please don’t be too late! Please don’t be too late! Please don’t be too late! Please don’t be too late!!”

Leon grunted and struggled against the metal straps that held his body pressed against the pole behind him. Suspended off the ground by the straps, he could only stare in horror as a pitching machine suddenly shot out of the floor less than thirty feet from him. It wasn’t until he heard the ominous sound of baseballs being loaded that his panic reached its peak.

“No…No…Oh God, PLEASE NO!!!”

He squirmed and pulled against the straps but it soon became clear that there was no escape. He was going to be pelted with baseballs to death!

Beyond a chain-link fence far behind the pitching device, he saw all of his classmates staring at him in absolute horror. However, none of them dared to look away, for reasons he didn’t even want to
think about. But that wasn’t the most despair-inducing part of the execution. No, that came in the form of the demented bear appearing inside the fence.

Happily hopping around next to the pitching machine, Monokuma, clad in a baseball helmet and wielding a thick metal bat, mockingly laughed. Pointing the end of the bat directly toward the captive Leon, the bear uttered a single sentence:

“Batter up!!”

The instant those words left the bear’s mouth, a plunking sound echoed as the first ball shot out of the machine. With a sickening smack, it smashed directly into Leon’s unguarded abdomen.

“KHAGH!!”

Leon’s lungs desperately tried to suck in air but the combination of pain and shock kept him from doing so. Instead, all he could do was helpless gape as he saw the next ball be fired out of the pitching machine, this time striking him square in the chest. A merciless cracking sound reached his ears only seconds before the pain hit him, as he could feel his ribs twisting as they were at the very least bruised from that hit.

“KRRRAHH!!”

Again, Leon sputtered as he tried to breath, finding himself unable to think or even register the amount of pain he was in. The only thing his mind seemed capable of was forcing his eyes open as he stared at the ball shooting machine that would be his death. And it seemed that the machine was only beginning to be put to use, as he saw the barrel of the pitching device begin to rise up, becoming level with his face.

If he’d have been able, he would have gasped as he realized that his life was about to end. However, the pain was too intense and his mind wasn’t able to process that information. Instead, he merely stared forward, petrified fear warping his features.

“Enough practice swings!” he heard Monokuma chide as the bear raised the bat. “Time for the game to really begin—!”

Just then, from far behind his classmates, a flood of light spilled into the room as the door he’d been dragged through suddenly burst open. Even from so far away, Leon could clearly see what appeared to be a pink-haired angel appear before him. At the same time, a frantic but determined voice screamed:

“STOP THE EXECUTION!!!!”

Mukuro had no air and she almost felt her lungs collapse as she shouted her demands.

Unsurprisingly, every single person present spun around to stare at her, more than perplexed by her presence. However, none was more confused than that of Monokuma, as the bear lowered his bat and allowed the pitching machine to momentarily cease as it turned around to face her.

With what energy she had left, Mukuro glared at the automaton, her gaze practically daring the bear to question her actions. And question the bear did!

“Junko! What do you think you’re doing? Not only were you very late to the trial, you stupidly
demand that we stop the execution of the blackened!”

With a snap of his fingerless paws, Monokuma reactivated the pitching machine. Fortunately, it seemed it would take a few more seconds before it was ready to fire again. This was Mukuro’s last chance to save…Leon! Even though she knew it had to be him, a part of her was still shocked to see the baseball star strapped to the field pole. But that surprise was put on hold as she regained her composure and readied herself to speak.

As if anticipating her, Monokuma groaned and pointed the bat her before continuing, “The rules say we have to punish the blackened that killed Sayaka! It’s the rules! I hope that you have a very…very good reason for—!”

Not letting the bear finish his statement, Mukuro took as deep a breath as her body allowed and screamed:

“Sayaka…isn’t dead!!!”

If everyone was surprised before, they got a system shock from hearing that.

Of course, Makoto’s eyes lit up as those words reached him, hope quickly building up within him. Beside him, Kyoko held a mixed visage of shock and perplexion, since she had been certain that the idol had departed from this life. Not far away, Byakuya also felt surprise but for a different reason; he’d checked for a pulse but found none…how could Sayaka have fooled him of all people?!

Hina looked to Sakura with an equally conflicted glance, as if not sure if she could believe it, earning a confused gaze from the martial artist in return. Celeste hid her emotions through an awkward smile, one that showed a hint of shame but also a bit of relief as well. Hifumi looked around to the others, unsure of what he could believe or if he was even awake and not in some strange kind of fictional story! Hiro now felt more justified than ever in his prediction; after all, he’d said that no one was going to die…and so far, he’d been right!

Mondo, thoroughly confused by this point, decided to just be relieved that his classmate might not be dead. Beside him, Chihiro let out a meek sob as joyful tears streamed down her face. Not far away, Taka also felt himself give in to confusion but tried his best to hide it, unsuccessful as he was. Toko also felt more than perplexed by this turn of events, though she couldn’t deny that it was nice to hear that her classmate wasn’t actually dead…just like the protagonist of her romance story coming back during the epilogue…

But none of them could possibly understand the utter confliction of joy, sadness and guilt that swallowed up Leon’s mind as those wonderful yet unbelievable words reached his ears as well. However, the tears that suddenly streamed down his face were the clearest sign that he too wanted to believe that the impossible really had happened.

For what felt like an eternity, no one spoke even a single word…well, everyone that is, except for Monokuma.

“Rrrrrh! Don’t think you can stop the execution with a pathetic lie like that!” the bear challenged, more than confident in its position. “I’ll have you know that I’m monitoring all of the cameras in the school and I can assure you that—”.

“Check the nurse’s office then,” the disguised Mukuro fired back, her glare intensifying as she stared into the bear’s robotic eyes, as if staring directly at her sister. “You’ll be in for a surprise…”
High above all of them, sitting at the Monokuma control panel, the real Junko hesitantly flinched. She knew it had to be a ploy, something her sister had concocted to try and get back at her for being abandoned. There was no other explanation for it…it just couldn’t be true.

“I mean, there’s no way Sayaka could have…” she began to say but lost her nerve.

Instead, almost on reflex, she stood from her seat, moved around to the side and slowly walked to the door behind her. Pushing it open, she found herself in the monitor room once more, her feet carrying her to the screen that displayed the nurse’s office. As the room came into view, Junko’s eyes widened only slightly at what she saw.

Sayaka was indeed in the nurse’s office, IV next to her bed, her chest rising and falling in what appeared to be peaceful slumber.

Rather than explode with rage or stammer with shock, as most people would do, Junko merely stared at the screen in perplexion for a while longer. Her face was utterly stoic, not a hint of emotion playing on her features in the slightest. As if there was nothing for her to really feel at this moment in time.

And with that utterly emotionless visage, she slowly turned and began walking toward the far wall. On the floor next to said wall, the stuffed Monokuma doll she had flung earlier that day stared up at her as it lay motionless on the floor. Standing over it for a moment and gazing down upon it, she slowly bent over and picked up the bear with one hand.

Holding it up at eye level, she stared into the stuffed bear’s eyes for almost a full minute.

Suddenly, she clenched her free hand into a fist and abruptly punched the stuffed toy directly in the face. She paused for a moment, retracting her hand and staring stoically at the bear…before driving her fist into it again. It was slow at first, one punch followed another and another, growing faster and faster with each passing moment.

Before she knew it, Junko was mercilessly beating the fluffy Monokuma toy, her fist moving so fast she was sure it rivaled even Sakura’s legendary speed. It almost seemed like the pounding would go on forever when abruptly, her attacks halted and she clenched her fist tightly for one last punch.

With a flick of her wrist, she tossed the stuffed bear into the air before slamming her fist into it one last time, smashing the poor toy into the wall directly in front of her, her fist embedded in its face.

Taking deep breaths she hadn’t realized she needed, Junko retracted her hand and let the beaten toy tumble to the floor. Giving it no mind at all, she turned on a heel and proceeded back to the Monokuma control room, her pace surprisingly even and her visage notably calm. Closing the door behind her, she slowly walked over the chair in front of the panel and retook her seat.

Staring through the eyes of Monokuma once more, she couldn’t stop the despairingly euphoric grin that had crept over her lips.

“Well played…‘Junko’!”

“You’ll be in for a surprise…” Junko said with the tiniest of smirks, her pink hair frazzled and her outfit ruffled and bloodstained.

Byakuya couldn’t help but frown as he heard Junko’s mocking tone. She seemed far too confident.
for someone that had been whimpering fearfully for her life only a few hours ago. Even if she was clearly exhausted and looked absolutely ragged, she seemed more determined than he’d ever seen before.

“Almost as though she’s an entirely different person…” he mused, still reeling from the news that his classmate was still alive. The classmate he was certain he’d found dead this morning.

And he wasn’t the only one who was disbelieving. His calculating eyes scanned everyone’s faces and just as he suspected, both Celeste and Kyoko held suspicion in their gazes. However, unlike him he noted, both of them seemed to be more readily accepting of this. It disgusted him that individuals of great intelligence so easily bought into the notion that the pop idol could still be alive. Then again, they hadn’t been the one who failed to find a pulse on the bloody body of Sayaka.

That honor belonged solely to him…much to his shame and discontent.

Pushing that aside for the moment, he glanced over to Monokuma and found the bear strangely still, as if no life existed for the stationary automaton. The Mastermind must have been verifying if Junko spoke the truth and all he had to do was wait until the bear resumed its functions to have his answer. Even if he couldn’t really trust the Mastermind’s words, in this case, he felt that whoever it was wouldn’t be capable of lying their way out of it.

That would violate the rules they had defended so fervently. Not to mention that it would take all of the fun out of the game if the Mastermind decided to forgo their own rules and continued the execution regardless. That notion, more than anything else, kept the affluent progeny’s attention.

“Even with this development, the game is becoming quite interesting. And having more players will certainly make it more challenging…” Byakuya mused as he waited for further developments.

“S-S-Sayaka…she’s alive?” Makoto’s mind barely fathomed as he struggled to regain composure.

Even if she had betrayed him and planned to frame him for murder, there was no stopping the relief that washed over him as he drank in Junko’s words. His only friend here, his assistant that had been there for him during these first horrifying days…she wasn’t dead…she wasn’t a cold corpse rotting away in his bathroom.

Almost unbelievably, the lucky student slowly approached Junko. It was only now that he noticed her frazzled state and bleeding appendage…wait, bleeding appendage!!

Before he had a chance to even react, it appeared that the last of Junko’s strength gave out and she crumbled to her knees, grunting audibly and gripping her wounded hand tightly.

“Junko!”

Makoto sped to her side in an instant, grabbing onto her shoulders to keep her from toppling over. The instant he did, he noticed that the bandages on her hand had been torn away and her silk tie had taken their place, and not doing a satisfactory job as a replacement.

“What happened to you?! Why is your arm—?!”

“Never mind that!” she urged him, shocking him into silence as she lifted her head to look at him and everyone else. “We can’t let Leon be executed! He’s not a blackened because Sayaka’s alive!”
“Yes, you’ve said that already. But that’s what we don’t understand,” the condescending tone of Celeste cut in, earning glares that were promptly ignored. “How is it that Sayaka is still alive? I thought we confirmed that she was deceased.”

Her slight accusatory comment was followed by a quick glance at Byakuya whom merely folded his shoulders and scoffed, “She was dead. She had no pulse and her skin was ice cold.”

“T-That’s right! She was!” Taka concurred, trying to regain some form of control over the situation. “And there was blood all over the walls and floor around her. It’s only logical that we thought—”.

“Are you saying I’m lying?” Junko abruptly interrupted, silencing the uncertain Taka and forcing all attention back to her.

“N-No! We’re not saying that!” Makoto insisted, trying to calm everyone.

“Yes, we are…” Celeste immediately refuted, fixing her gaze on the injured Fashionista. “We’ll need to go and see for ourselves if she’s actually—”.

“…It’s true…”

Everyone froze as the high pitch voice of Monokuma silenced them all. They turned to see the automaton slowly walking, not waddling but actually walking, toward them, a neutral expression on its face. And if his words weren’t surprising enough, it was the calm and almost depressed tone of voice that shocked them all.

“W-What d-did you—?” Toko tried to question before a raised paw quieted her.

“I said, and I quote, ‘It’s true’…” Monokuma repeated, emphasizing the previous words to hammer it in. “It appears that Sayaka is indeed…alive and kicking…dammit.”

A gasp escaped almost everyone as their tormentor confirmed what they all, secretly or not, hoped had been. Only Kyoko and Junko seemed able to keep their emotions in check but for very different reasons. And even then it didn’t last long, as Makoto noticed the Fashionista lower her head and breath a heavy sigh of relief.

“H-Hey! Is it true?!!”

A desperate voice from across the way suddenly shouted to them, making each and every student turn toward the execution area.

Leon’s mind was racing as the pain from his now seemingly cancelled execution encouraged him to demand answers. He couldn’t make out much of what anyone was saying but he’d certainly heard those first words that Junko had shouted upon arrival. Ever since, he’d forced away his own agony as he tried desperately to listen in on their conversation.

However, he’d been too far away and they all spoke so softly that he could just barely hear them.

Finally, when he’d lost all semblance of patience, he gritted his teeth and shouted, “H-Hey! Is it true?!!” which caused almost everyone to spin around and face him, “S-Sayaka!! Is she really…!!”

As if on cue, Monokuma groaned loudly and, once more, inexplicably pulled out a megaphone form behind his back.
“We’re having an important discussion! Please refrain from any further interrupts! Also, I will not be repeating myself just because you weren’t listening carefully enough!”

Despite his current position, Leon felt his rage begin to boil over and all fear of his imminent execution was momentarily halted as he defied the demented bear.

“D-Don’t fuck with me you damned bear!!” Leon almost pleaded as he stared at the group from his spot in the center of the room. “Just...Just tell me what happened to—!”

“She’s alive! Sayaka is alive!”

Those heavenly words were carried by the same pink-haired angel that had stopped his unlawful execution. And even though Junko appeared exhausted and apparently re-injured, she still managed to flash him a hopeful smile from across the room.

As if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Leon felt lighter than he had ever been before. And for the first time since last night, he was able to conjure the image of Sayaka’s smiling face as he closed his eyes and smiled.

“She’s...Sayaka...She’s really alive...! I’m...I’m not...I’m not a killer! I’m...we both...are...alive...!”

Hot tears streamed down the baseball player’s face as he openly wept in front of everyone. He didn’t care how he appeared or if anyone mocked him. Nothing in this world could dampen his spirits as he looked upward and continued to cry, letting the moisture from his eyes cleanse his conscience of any remaining guilt.

“I’m bored now...” the bear suddenly commented, no longer enjoying torturing Leon. “…Execution cancelled. Now, you punks can go...do whatever you punks do. I’ve got some...things to take care of.”

Monokuma snuck a very accusatory glance at Mukuro before turning its back to her completely.

With a snap of its paws, the pitching machine suddenly disappeared into a hole in the floor leaving Leon alone in the middle of the makeshift ball field. The gate to the execution area slid open and while the baseball player was still strapped to the pole, at the very least, it seemed his demise was no longer imminent.

None of the students had time to speak before the bear disappeared down the same hole that the pitching machine had sank into, the slots in the floor closing the instant the bear was out of sight.

And although Mukuro knew that her sister would not take this intervention lying down, for right now, all seemed well.

“We should go and check on Sayaka,” the calm voice of Kyoko startled everyone back to reality. “We need to see for ourselves how well she’s fairing.”

A murmur of agreement began to rise up between the students before Makoto decided to take charge.

“Right! And we need to get Junko help too,” he said with a nod, extending his hand down to Mukuro. “Can you stand? Does Mondo need to carry you again?”
The soldier suppressed what may have been either a laugh or a sigh, she wasn’t sure at this point.

“At least he’s being considerate,” she mused before shaking her head and replying, “I’ll be fine. Let’s get back up to the nurse’s office and see how Sayaka’s doing. I’m getting worried.”

“As am I,” Celeste joined in, her usual cryptic smile plastered on her face, “I’m very interested to see how she was able to survive such a wound.”

“Yeah! Let’s get out of his creepy place!” Hina abruptly cut in, her enthusiasm completely restored after hearing this joyous news.

“Alright everyone! Let’s get back to the elevator and head up to see how Sayaka is doing!!” Taka shouted to everyone, resuming his usual demeanor as the hard-ass that they deserved but didn’t really want right now.

“Yeah, for serious…” Hiro agreed, already beginning to head for the door. Taking his movement as a sign that it was okay for them all to depart, the student slowly began moving toward the double door at the far end of the room.

Just as some of them were about to exit the execution chamber, a panicked voice frantically screamed:

“H-Hey wait!! You guys can’t just leave me here!! What if Monokuma comes back!!”

A bit startled, everyone turned to see Leon, still unable to free himself from the pole, wriggling around to try and free himself, but to no avail. Even if he’d been cleared of his crimes, it was more than obvious that his fear of just being in this place was beginning to overwhelm him.

Mukuro felt a hint of remorse growing inside her, knowing that this event had scarred not only her, but him and Sayaka as well. And, like it or not, she knew it was only a matter of time before it grew, especially considering what she’d need to face later.

“Junko…”

Shaking her head to regain her composure, she looked to her classmates and said, “Well? Isn’t anyone gonna help him?”

At first, no one made a move, some out of anxiety but others out of suspicion and contempt. Not that Mukuro blamed any of them…not after going through what she assumed had been a cruel and unforgiving class trial.

Finally, after a lengthy silence, with a tiny smirk on her face, Kyoko turned to everyone and said, “I suppose we’d better get him down. We’ll need to keep an eye on him, at least until we see Sayaka.”

“Agreed. He’s too dangerous to be left alone,” Byakuya concurred, although not for the same reasons that Kyoko had wanted. “Would someone please get the fool down before his incessant screaming attracts the bear?”

Mondo scratched his head and said, “I guess I’ll do it. I’m supposed to be the guard anyway…” He turned around and began heading for the trapped baseball player but not before calling out, “Stop screaming, dude! I’m coming!”

“I will assist you,” Sakura unsurprisingly offered, moving away from Hina and following after him.

With that matter settled, Mukuro tried to rise up to her feet, only to wince in pain as she failed to do
so. And then, despite her earlier insistence, Makoto leaned down to her and said, “Here, I'll help.”

Taking her hand with his own, he placed it over his shoulder and stood up slowly, helping her to stand up. Her face flushed and she was about to push him away when Makoto glanced over and gave her one of his warm smiles. Utterly powerless against that image, the soldier averted her gaze and said nothing as they turned and hobbled toward the exit.

Unbeknownst to both of them, the analytical and calculating amethyst eyes of Kyoko lingered carefully on them before she followed after them.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

And with that, Leon has been saved! But how will this turn of events shape the rest of the story? What kind of repercussions will Mukuro face for turning against her sister? You’ll have to wait for the next episode to find out!

We getting close to the end of Chapter 1 and I appreciate all the reviews and comments everyone’s been leaving! Also, I’ll be posting a different one-shot that I made a while ago along with this one. It’s entitled, “Junko’s ‘Execution’”. I wrote it before I wrote Never Say Never and it served as my entry into DR fanfiction.

As always, thank you all so much for reading! Leave a comment or review to tell me what you think of the story, or how you think I can improve it! And be sure to keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Mukuro is forced to realize that there will be consequences for siding with her fellow students, as the first not-so-bloody Chapter of our story comes to a close.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I…I can’t believe it.”

Makoto fell to his knees as he saw Sayaka sleeping peacefully in the nurse’s office. Her skin was noticeably less pale but still hadn’t regained its usual color. Her chest rose and fell lightly and it was obvious that she must still be very weak. Even so, just seeing her there, instead of on the bloody floor of his bathroom, made the lucky student’s eyes well up with unshed tears.

Everyone crowded into the small nurse’s office, aside from Mondo and Sakura who were still unaccounted for due to having difficulty getting Leon down. Apparently those metal straps were so strong that even the Ultimate Martial Artist was having trouble with them, and none of them knew exactly when those three would return.

But that wasn’t prevalent in any of their minds right now, instead only able to focus on the fact that their once thought to be deceased classmate had miraculously been resurrected.

“This…this is real, right?” Hina said quietly as she felt moisture build up in her sockets as well. “Sayaka’s gonna be okay? She’s really gonna be okay?”

She turned to Kyoko, who seemed to be the only one willing to inspect the sleeping girl. Wordlessly, the intuitive girl lifted the sheet covering Sayaka, giving everyone a clear view of the fresh bandages around her abdomen. Nodding affirmatively to herself, she laid the covers back down before pressing two fingers to her neck. Only then did the slightest trace of a smile grace her lips.

“…Her pulse is noticeably weak. But beyond that, she seems to be fine.”

Kyoko’s words were met with a relieved sigh from most of the students, particularly Hina, Makoto and Chihiro, who were teary-eyed. Taka wiped a bit of sweat from his brow but just smiled, pleased that everything had worked out. And, even though she kept her poker face, Celeste also let out a breath no one realized she’d been holding. Hiro gave a relieved laugh and muttered something about being right all along, to which everyone sent a sharp glare. Hifumi quoted that such a thing wasn’t abnormal in this kind of story but he seemed to more be convincing himself than the others. Even Toko, as panicky and fidgety as she was, could be seen smiling as she peeked out from behind one of the divider curtains.

Meanwhile, Byakuya simply shrugged and folded his arms, though he did seem somewhat less annoyed than before. Even so, it didn’t seem to stunt his inquisitive nature as his gaze shifted to glare at Junko.

The Fashionista sat on the adjacent bed, the wound in her palm cleaned and dressed with fresh
bandages. Everyone had been so caught up with Sayaka’s miraculous survival that few of them paid notice to her after they’d arrived. Even Makoto, whom had been assisting her in getting to the nurse’s office, found himself torn away from her as he stared at his once thought to be deceased friend.

Junko had replaced and rewrapped all of her own bandages, and all in the short amount of time since they’d arrived in the office, and no one seemed to notice…at least not until Byakuya had decided to take interest.

“Something is wrong…” he thought to himself as he took in her relaxed visage. “She could barely stand before, practically limping through the hallways. Yet now she seems calm and competent enough to give herself medical treatment…and there’s also that other matter.”

Before he could probe the issue more, someone else spoke up.

“Wow! This is amazing!” Hina commented, lifting up the sheet covering Sayaka just enough to look at the handiwork of bandaging. “There’s no bleeding or anything! It almost looks like it was done by a pro! You’re amazing, Junko!”

At the mention of her name, the Fashionista lifted her head from her bandages as everyone turned around to face her.

“I-It’s no big deal—”.

“That’s not true!” Makoto instantly countered, probably riding out the last bits of his trial high. “Without you, Sayaka wouldn’t be here right now! It’s incredible that you were able to do this all by yourself!”

“…Indeed, it is.”

Byakuya’s harsh tone broke through the joyous celebration that the other students were reveling in, his words already sparking inquiry among the more intelligent students.

The elevator slowly climbed up the shaft, the humming of the engine the only noise to be heard. After getting Leon down from the pole, he was ushered toward the elevator at his own insistence, desperately wanting to see Sayaka and confirm the truth for himself. Mondo stood next to him, supporting the baseball player by having the latter’s arm slung over his shoulder. Behind both of them, Sakura solemnly stood, arms folded and eyes closed in deep thought.

The silence between them was almost deafening and it wasn’t long before Mondo felt himself getting fed up with it.

“Damn. That took forever,” Mondo commented as he shifted his weight to better support the injured Leon. “Whoever built that thing really didn’t want you getting down from it!”

The instant those words left his mouth, he shut his trap, realizing what he’d unintentionally implied. He’d honestly meant it as a joke but his lack of tact only served to make the silence that much heavier. He thought about apologizing for his stupidity but then he heard Sakura loudly clear her throat.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw her glaring down at him, shaking her head. It wasn’t the first time he’d been wordlessly scolded and the biker really wanted to protest that he hadn’t been trying to be offensive. But as he opened his mouth, the elevator suddenly came to a halt, the metal doors
sliding open and leading them back into the school area.

“We should hurry to the nurse’s office,” Sakura said as she walked ahead of the boys, pushed on the large red double doors and held them open. “Everyone is waiting for us.”

Eager to get the weight off his shoulders, in more ways than one, Mondo nodded and replied, “Right. Come on, dude. Let’s go make sure you’re not a killer.”

Sakura wanted to face palm but settled for rolling her eyes at the biker’s insensitive remark, to which Mondo himself didn’t seem to register as offensive in the least. However, neither of them could know that Leon wasn’t listening in the slightest.

All of his thoughts consumed by a single, powerful notion that he begged was true:

“Please let her be alive…”

Almost as one, the entire class shifted their feet and turned their gazes toward Mukuro.

“Why are they all staring?” she pondered as almost all of them seemed to have the same question in mind for her. She barely had time to raise an eyebrow before Byakuya stepped forward.

“It’s rather impressive, I must admit. Those bindings are efficient and professional, and the application of the IV and blood packets seems almost flawless,” the affluent progeny falsely praised, drawing stern gazes from the others.

As if picking up on his observations, Celeste also chimed in, “Not to mention the speed at which you must have had to work in order to get down to the trial before the sentencing. If I may ask, how did you get down there so quickly anyway?”

Mukuro scowled at their deliberate and direct questions, unafraid to show that she wasn’t pleased with her actions being questioned.

“I rode the elevator. How else would I get down there?” she answered matter-of-factly, giving the gambler a quick huff of disappointment. If Celeste was disheartened by the answer, she didn’t show a hint of it as she nodded in acceptance.

“I see…” was all she said but her eyes remained unconvinced.

“Hmm… I suppose I can believe that, for now.” Byakuya cut back into the conversation, also seeming a bit miffed at Celeste’s interruption. “As I was saying, it’s staggering that you were able to rescue Sayaka from death. So tell me, how exactly were you able to detect that Sayaka was still alive —?”

“She didn’t!” Hifumi abruptly shouted, striking a pose and pushing up his glasses as everyone turned their attention to him. “For you see, Miss Maizono must truly have been dead! That’s how we were all fooled! But then, Miss Énoshima thought of a way to save her! By gathering the seven mystic balls, she was able to summon the wish granting dra—!!”

“W-Would you be quiet, you p-perverted bag of l-lard?!”

Everyone was shocked to hear, and see, Toko as she shot out from behind the curtain, pointing accusatorily at the fanfic creator.
“N-No one in-interrupts Mast—I mean, Mister Togami!! You s-should just s-shut your fat face!” she continued to scream, her gaze briefly glancing over to Byakuya ever few seconds.

Almost as if he didn’t register her words as an insult, Hifumi let a disturbing grin overtake him as he replied, “Oh, doff mine ears deceive me or did I just hear you call Mister Togami your Mast—”.

“Would you two simpletons be quiet?” Byakuya sternly protested, glaring fiercely and forcing both of them into silence. Both Toko and Hifumi cowered away slightly as the affluent progeny turned his back to them and instead focused his inquisitive gaze upon Mukuro.

“I won’t beat around the bush this time,” he harshly continued, adjusting his glasses as he spoke, “Explain to me how you were able to discover Sayaka was alive and more importantly…how do you, the Ultimate Fashionista, know how to bandage wounds and rig up a blood transfusion?”

A thick and heavy silence overtook the room as everyone was made aware of Byakuya’s intentions. Even those who were unsure of what he’d previously meant now understood the reasons for his questioning. The gears were turning in all of their minds and it was only now that some of them realized that things just weren’t adding up.

Mukuro kept her gaze even as everyone looked to her for answers. Her chest felt tight as she knew there was no talking her way out of this one…at least not by telling the truth anyway.

“I knew this had to be coming but I never imagined it’d be so soon after we got back. I’d hoped to have time to come up with something but…”

As she felt the weight of their demanding gazes grow heavy upon her, Mukuro was about to open her mouth when, once again, a certain someone decided to intervene.

“D-Does it really matter?” the voice of Makoto sounded from the back, everyone turning to see him now standing by Sayaka’s bedside. “I mean, she saved Sayaka and—”.

“Don’t be so naïve.”

Makoto visibly flinched as Byakuya cut him off, only sparing the shortest of glances for his optimistic classmate.

“Even you have to understand that it’s suspicious. She gets excused from the trial, miraculously revives Sayaka and then arrives just in time to stop the execution. It all seems far too convenient for my liking.”

“Well, yeah, a little but—!” Makoto tried to refute before a gloved hand appeared on his shoulder. He turned to see Kyoko once again holding him back. But this time, however, she offered an explanation.

“She needs to tell us exactly what happened. Otherwise, how can we trust her going forward?” Kyoko said plainly but softly, obviously trying to calm him.

For a moment, it looked as if Makoto was going to protest but just like before, it died in his throat. He was still visibly uncomfortable with what was happening but at the very least, he seemed to understand the necessity for it.

“Alright then. Junko, would you please tell us what happened after we left to go to the trial?” he said carefully, wanting to make sure he wasn’t being demanding or anything.

Mukuro felt a mixture of joy and sadness at seeing this. Pleased that he continued to defend her but
disheartened by the fact that he suffered for it. This was yet another reason why she had to make sure she kept up her guise and didn’t stand out too much, it would lead to Makoto putting himself in danger for her, just as he’d done several times up until now.

With that renewed vigor, she let out an audible scoff to gather attention before she began to explain:

“After Makoto and Hina left, I didn’t really know what I should be doing. Honestly, I was in a lot of pain and didn’t know what to think. That’s when Monokuma showed up—”.

“The bear came to see you?” Byakuya interrupted with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, I kinda freaked out at first but all it said was that I didn’t have to come to the trial. I didn’t get the chance to ask why…and I kinda didn’t want to. I was glad I didn’t have to go but then I really felt lost.”

She kept her voice soft but her tone firm, not wanting anyone to suspect why she really felt lost at the time. It seemed to work because no one interrupted her again, instead letting her continue.

“I didn’t feel like just sitting around so I went to walk around for a bit. When I did, I thought about a lot of stuff, like nearly getting impaled and…dying. And before I knew it, I ended up at Makoto’s room. I thought that I should at least pay my respects to Sayaka…all things considered.”

She stole a quick glance at the sleeping idol and didn’t fight the light smile that came over her.

“That’s when I heard her groaning and I checked for a pulse. It was really weak but I—”.

“You managed to find a pulse?” Byakuya intruded again, furrowing his brows in disbelief. “I find that highly unlikely, especially considering that I personally checked for her pulse and couldn’t get even a hint of it.”

Mukuro frowned at his egotistic and pious comment but knew that arguing with him would only make her more suspicious. So, she decided to play to her strengths and just shrugged and said, “I must have gotten lucky. I can’t really say how or why I was able to when you weren’t.”

She knew it was underhanded to insinuate such a thing but it was the only excuse she could come up with on such short notice.

At first, she didn’t know if he bought it but she quickly realized it didn’t really matter, because whether or not he did, he simply scoffed and decided to say, “I suppose that’s not the important matter. Tell me how you were able to get Sayaka all the way here to the nurse’s office.”

Holding in a scoff of her own, mainly because the bastard was trying to gain control of the conversation, the soldier decided that skipping ahead wouldn’t hurt, especially since there would be less for her to explain. Even though she knew the most difficult part of the story was just ahead.

“It wasn’t easy…I can tell you that much. I didn’t have anything to carry her with so I was forced to pick her up and carry her all the way there—”.

“Oh, that must have been dreadfully difficult,” Celeste chimed in, inserting herself into the conversation. “I can’t even imagine how much that must have hurt your wounded hand. Was it still bleeding at the time?”

Rubbing her palm affectionately, Mukuro turned her gaze to the gambler and answered, “Yeah, it hurt like a bitch and I thought I was gonna black out from the pain. But considering that Sayaka was dying right in front of me, I did my best to put that aside and get her here.”
For a few seconds, everyone was quiet. Not only by the implications of what had transpired but also the course language ‘Junko’ had just spouted at them. Mukuro knew it was something her sister would actually say and figured now was a good time to let them see that ‘Junko’ wasn’t quite as delicate or fragile as they thought.

By doing this, she hoped that she could act more like herself instead of always putting on airs. She expected at least one person to question her but instead, she got an entirely different inquiry.

“You’re wound was still bleeding? Even with those bandages?” To everyone’s surprise, Kyoko finally vocalized herself, a hand inquisitively resting on her chin. However, a moment later she let her hand drop and nodded to herself. “I see. Then it all makes sense now…”

“What exactly do you mean by that, Kyoko?” Taka questioned, also trying to be more involved in this matter. “What does her wound bleeding have to do with what happened?”

Kyoko’s amethyst eyes slowly turned toward the door, making everyone follow her gaze to it. With utter confidence, she said, “If you look out in the hall, on the floor leading from here to the dorms, you’ll see it.”

Faster than anyone else, Taka rushed over and slid the door open, glancing out into the hallway before giving an audible gasp. “B-Blood! There’s blood on the floor! It looks like it’s coming from the direction of the dorms!”

“Exactly,” Kyoko explained, not letting anyone interrupt her. “We can confer from that trail of blood that Junko must have carried Sayaka here. Whether the blood was from both of them or only Junko is irrelevant. And by judging the amount of it staining the floor, it must have been rather painful for both of them.”

Mukuro could scarcely believe what she was hearing. Kyoko had actually noticed something she’d failed to see and was using it to help cover up the truth, even if the amnesiac detective wasn’t aware that’s what she was doing. It surprised the soldier even more because, for the entire time she’d known the Ultimate Detective, they’d never really spoken.

Even back when they were all students at the academy, the two of them never really saw eye to eye. Aside from the occasional nod while passing in the hall, they basically said nothing to each other since they’d first met. There just hadn’t been a reason to, so they didn’t.

Her sister Junko had spoken to Kyoko a number of times but it was mainly because the despair loving girl wanted to get more info about Headmaster Jin out of her. Junko respected her talents but otherwise wrote her off, so Mukuro had done so as well. That’s why, even knowing how intelligent and talented Kyoko was, the soldier felt it was almost ironic that the detective was going out of her way to defend her.

Especially considering what she and Junko had done to her father—

“Alright then, I’ll consider it conceivable that you were able to carry Sayaka to the nurse’s office,” an impatient Byakuya’s words cut off her train of thought. “But that doesn’t explain how you were able to bandage her and perform a blood transfusion. After all, it’s not something someone of your standing would normally know how to do.”

Luckily for Mukuro, Byakuya’s insistence brought her back to reality and she decided to put her feelings about Kyoko’s assistance on hold for now. She’d have time to deal with that after clearing herself of suspicion.
Mukuro’s eyes shifted over to Byakuya, furrowing her brows as she began again, “And how much about my standing do you really know, rich boy?”

Again, some of the students were caught off guard by her abrasive comment, none more than Byakuya, whose glare was growing more and more menacing by the moment. However, she didn’t give him, or any of them really, the luxury of time to question her before she took a deep breath just to sigh very audibly.

“It’s not exactly something I like to bring up but...I actually used to live on the streets when I was younger. This was before I was discovered by a talent scout while—”.

“Whoa, wait, wait, wait!” Hina abruptly shouted, “You’re saying that you used to be homeless! No way!”

To this Mukuro simply raised an eyebrow at her and replied, “Oh come on, out of everything that I’ve said, that’s the thing that you can’t believe?”

Her tone made the swimmer girl reel back for a second before regaining her vigor, “Well, yeah! I can see you carrying an injured person and stuff but being homeless?! How could someone who ended up at the Ultimate Fashionista have ever been homeless?!”

Even knowing that there would be skepticism while bringing that up, Mukuro felt that Hina somehow took it to a level that was somehow offensive, even if the swimmer hadn’t been trying to.

Or at least she thought that, until Hifumi also chimed in, “Miss Asahina is right though! Your character and story arc don’t match that kind of background at all!”

“And plus...you seem way too spoiled to have ever been homeless.” Hiro, surprisingly, concurred before hanging his head. “Trust me…I would know…”

With all of her strength, Mukuro resisted the urge to slap her uninjured palm to her face. Instead, she just groaned and said, “This is why I don’t like bringing it up. Even my manager went through hell to make sure no one knew about it. Anyway, that’s not important right now, so can I please just get back to explaining how I know how to apply first aid?”

Her frustrated tone seemed to get the message across, which she was very happy for, and it took a moment for someone to respond.

“Yes, by all means, please continue.”

Mukuro was a bit surprised that Celeste had been the one to insist she continue, considering Byakuya had been pushing her up until this point. However, she chose to ignore that and did as instructed.

“So, one time I got caught up in a bit of a turf war between me and this other guy—don’t get me started on that!” she instantly countered before any of them could ask about it. “Anyway, that’s not important right now, so can I please just get back to explaining how I know how to apply first aid?”

“I’m surprised the police actually did such a thing. Normally they would just leave you to die…” Celeste commented, more than a bit skeptical.

Shooting her a glare, Mukuro continued, “There were a lot of people around. They probably felt pressured to do something about the teenage girl bleeding all over the sidewalk.”

“Regardless of how, you ended up in the hospital?” Kyoko asked carefully, obviously trying to push
Thankful for unintentionally helping again, the soldier let her features soften as she said, “Yeah. When I woke up, I was hooked up to an IV and was getting a blood transfusion. My wounds had been treated and I told that my bills had been covered by some grant the hospital received or whatever. And that’s that…”

A brief silence followed her words as everyone put two and two together almost instantly.

“So, wait…” Makoto slowly began, still trying to fully understand. “You’re saying that you learned how to do a blood transfusion and wrap bandages—?”

“From having it done to myself, yeah.”

She knew it was a bald-faced lie but honestly, it was the best she could come up with on the spot. And surprisingly, it wasn’t completely untrue. She really had lived on the streets for a few years before joining Fenrir. She’d gotten into a nasty turf battle with a group of guys, but unlike her story, the ambulance was called for them and not her. Also, it was true that she’d learned to give a transfusion and wrap bandages just by watching them being performed, it just hadn’t been on her personally.

A disbelieving scoff resounded and everyone turned to see Byakuya scowling fiercely at her.

“You can’t honestly expect us to believe all that, can you?” he openly mocked, narrowing his eyes at her. “Even if it were all true, that doesn’t mean that we can really trust you.”

Even if she knew exactly why Byakuya continued not to trust her, it still made her chest feel heavy. There was absolutely no way for anyone to know the real truth…the fact that she was just like them now, a player in the killing game. She’d thrown her lot in with them and even though it was mainly to save herself from guilt, she’d saved two lives today. That had to count for something, right?

Because of that, despite the danger it could bring her, she wanted them to know she was on their side!

She was about to protest when Makoto stepped toward Byakuya and angrily asked, “How can you say that?! She risked her life to help—”

“SAYAKA!!”

Everyone heard the shouting and spun around. The door to the nurse’s office was wide open and standing in the doorway, held up by Mondo’s shoulder, was Leon.

He was obviously in a great deal of pain, holding his abdomen where the baseball had struck him. His breathing was labored and it appeared that he was having trouble just standing up. Even so, the entire time, he never took his eyes off the sleeping idol that lay in the hospital bed across the room.

“It’s…it’s really true!” he stammered, abruptly pushing himself away from Mondo before losing his balance and toppling to the floor.

As he made brutal contact with the linoleum, the biker who’d been supporting him clicked his teeth. “You damn idiot! What the hell are you thinking?! Can you even stand up by yourself?!”
“S-Shut up!” Leon shouted back at him, forcing himself up onto his knees. With great effort, he lifted himself to his feet and began hobbling toward Sayaka’s bedside.

As everyone watched him struggle to get over to her, Mondo huffed and was about to go over and help him when a large, muscular hand grasped his shoulder. He didn’t have to turn around to know who it was.

“Don’t bother,” Sakura told him, staring onward as Leon continued toward his goal. “This is something he needs to do for himself.”

“Sakura! You’re back!” Hina called out, waving to her friend.

The martial artist nodded affirmatively to her before signaling the swimmer to look over at Leon. When she did, Hina was almost in shock that the baseball player had somehow made it all the way over to the side of Sayaka’s bed. From there, he did something that was both expected and unexpected.

Leon Kuwata fell to his knees, ignoring any kind of pain that he was feeling, and slowly reached out to touch Sayaka’s hand. Grasping her fingers, he felt that they were not as cold as they’d been so many hours ago. As if a brace had been released inside him, his eyes welled up with tears before they began gushing down his cheeks.

“T-This isn’t…a joke…right?! She’s…she’s really…!”

As he choked out those words, someone put a hand on his shoulder. A bit shocked, Leon looked up to see none other than Makoto smiling down at him, tears streaming down his face as well.

“Yeah! Sayaka’s alive!!” the lucky student assured him.

“So, I’m…I’m not a killer!” Leon stammered, almost unable to believe it himself. “I…I didn’t kill Sayaka!!”

Unable to say any more, Makoto just nodded firmly to him before he looked over to Sayaka with renewed hope in his eyes. And that was when something miraculous truly occurred.

“Uhg…Uhh…Ahhh…”

Warmth surrounded her, encasing her and protecting her from the darkness that had tried to swallow her. Slowly, she felt her consciousness begin to float back to alertness, as if rising from a deep sea.

A soft groan left Sayaka’s lips as her eyes fluttered weakly. She still had very little strength and her body felt as though it was made of lead. Even so, she wanted to wake up, she wanted to open her eyes and see the world once more.

And when she did, she found the two people she longed to see more than anyone else right before her eyes.

Leon and Makoto both gasped loudly as Sayaka’s blue eyes slowly peered open. It was a sight that both of them had once thought they’d never see again and it brought a surge of joyful emotion along
with it.

“S-Sayaka!!” they both shouted, making the barely conscious idol wince at their excessive loudness.

“Take it easy, you two!” Hina scolded them from not too far away. “She just woke up and already you two are yelling at her!”

“Hina, perhaps you should keep your voice down as well?” Sakura offered, trying to be polite.

Realizing her mistake, Hina’s hand flew up and covered her mouth before she quietly replied, “… right…sorry…”

Her apology went almost unheard by the two boys leaning next to the injured Sayaka, as they were far too preoccupied with her remarkable recovery.

“Do you need anything? Water? Food? Another pillow?” Makoto asked gently, willing to do anything she needed at that time. He had no way of knowing that his incessant questioning wasn’t helping at all, despite his good intentions.

However, he quickly silenced himself as he looked down to see Leon staring at her. The baseball star’s face was wracked with guilt and self-loathing, making him unable to utter a single word, though he obviously had a lot of explaining to do. And just when it seemed that he was going to push himself away from her bedside, he felt Sayaka abruptly reciprocate the firm grasp he had been holding onto her hand with.

Her fingers squeezed his own tightly and Leon suddenly felt himself unable to disengage from where he sat. Before he could even think of a response to that, they finally heard her speak.

“…Le-on…Ma-ko-to…” she forced out, her voice dry and hoarse from so many hours of dehydration and inactivity. It seemed to even cause her pain just to speak their names.

Almost instantly, Leon found his voice again as he gently squeezed her hand back and said, “Hey, hey, don’t try to talk right now! You’ll only—!”

He was silenced as Sayaka gripped his fingers at tightly as she was able to, stunning him into silence. At first, Leon looked to Makoto for guidance, unsure of what to do now but found the lucky student staring down at Sayaka with widening eyes. And when the baseball star turned back to see what was the matter, he felt something within him came to a halt.

Sayaka was staring at both of them with a pure expression of sadness. Her eyes held more guilt than Leon’s ever had as tears began to trickle down her cheeks. And then, despite the obvious pain she had to be forcing herself to endure, she opened her mouth and spoke to them with the most sorrowful of tones.

“…I…I’m…so…sorry….”

In that instant, everyone present knew there was absolutely nothing more to be said.

Sayaka’s words filled the room and for the first time in what felt like forever, the class was made whole once again. The class had felt so divided lately, with some unwilling to trust others and few willing to even work together during the crisis. However, regardless of how they felt about their situation, none of them could deny that at that moment…hope lingered within all of them.

After all, they were all there, and they were all alive.
“Okay, enough of this hopeful crap…” a certain despair loving girl murmured as she glared at the monitors in the security room.

Junko’s high was already beginning to dissipate. She figured that the despair of having *almost* executed her former classmate would last her longer than an hour but then again, she had gone through the five stages of grief already. She shouldn’t have expected much, considering that all of her classmates were still alive and she’d essentially lost Mukuro…though not in the way she’d figured.

“It looks like ‘Junko’ and I are going to have to have a chat…but that can wait. I suppose I should get them all ready for the next stage,” she said softly to herself as she slowly rose to her feet, clicking her heels on the floor as she headed for the Monokuma control room.

After she’d gone, all that was left was a pile of envelopes sitting just in front of where she’d been, a name inscribed on each one.

“Try to get some sleep,” Makoto insisted, still very worried about the increasingly exhausted Sayaka. “We’ll be right here if you need us.”

“Yeah! We’re not going anywhere!” Leon immediately added, seeing that the idol was having great difficulty just keeping her eyes open.

Unable to respond, due to her lack of energy, Sayaka settled for a brief nod before letting her heavy eyes-lids close. Almost instantly, she seemed to fall back into peaceful slumber, her grip on Leon’s hand loosening as her own rhythmic breathing lulled her into a state of bliss.

As soon as they were certain that she was asleep, Makoto and Leon regretfully stood up, with the baseball player practically have to tear his hand away from the sleeping idol’s fingers. Turning around together, they noticed that everyone was staring at them.

Nervously scratching his head, his face slightly flushed, Leon decided to ask, “So…what do we do now?”

It was a simple and yet complicated question and for a second, there didn’t seem to be a clear answer. That is, until Kyoko cleared her throat to get everyone’s attention.

“The first thing we need to do is decide how to take care of Sayaka,” she said calmly, a hand resting on her chin.

“Hey! What do you mean, *take care* of her?!” Mondo angrily countered, cracking his knuckles as he believed her words to be more ominous than they truly were.

Signing at the biker’s inability to decipher her words, she instead clarified, “All I meant was that we should decide who will stay with Sayaka while she recovers.”

“Oh…right. Sorry ’bout that,” the biker apologized as he lowered his fists. “I guess I’m still a bit on edge…after everything that happened.”

“We all are,” Makoto said consolingly, looking at everyone as he spoke. “A lot happened today and we’re all pretty tired, but I think that Kyoko’s right. We need to do something for Sayaka.”
“I concur,” Celeste decided to chime in, taking a step toward them. “In this state, Sayaka is completely defenseless. Anyone could simply put a pillow over her head and smother—”.

“D-Don’t say that!” a distressed Chihiro protested, fearful tears already welling up in her eyes. “We need to think positive! We can’t let ourselves—”.

“I was merely stating a fact,” the gambler cut her off, stunning the petite programmer into silence. “As it stands, Sayaka is very vulnerable. We need someone to look after her while she recovers. I propose that we implement the same tactic we used for guarding the crime scene.”

“You mean having two people stand watch to avoid any suspicion?” Byakuya questioned with a raised brow.

In response, Celeste folded her hand under her chin and smiled as she replied, “Exactly. It is the best way to be certain that no one does anything foolish. Can we all agree to this?”

Glancing around the room, Makoto found that everyone, himself included, seemed to agree with that recourse, so he said, “Alright then, we just need to decide—”.

*Ding Dong Bing Bong*

The abrupt sound of the school bell startled all of them, their minds forced to realize that they were still being held captive and it was time for another announcement. Lifting their gazes almost reflexively, each of them glared up at the monitor as the image of their tormentor, Monokuma, came into view.

“Ahem! This is a school announcement. It is now 10PM. As such, it is officially night-time. Soon the doors to the dining hall will be…”

A hint of relief came over everyone as they realized it was just another one of those automated messages that signaled the time of day. That is, until the bear gave a slightly cheeky laugh that normally wasn’t heard.

“Upupup…By the way, it’s obvious that you’re trying to make each other feel better via mutual wound licking…that’s disgusting! At least use disinfectant! Eyahahahahahaha!”

At once, the atmosphere of the room shifted into frustration, some of them going to outright anger. However, prisoners that they were, they were forced into silence as the bear continued to address them.

“But I digress. I feel the need to remind everyone that, despite someone being gravely injured, you all must obey the rules. Specifically, rule number 3.”

Some of the students, such a Hiro and Hina, reached for their e-handbooks but didn’t have time to check them before a stern voice spoke up.

“They’re referring to the rule that sleeping is only permitted in our dorm rooms,” Kyoko explained, ceasing any need to look up the rule.

None of her classmates were very surprised that she’d have the rules memorized and none of them questioned if it was true or not, as Kyoko had proven herself to be stern and yet honest when the situation was grave. Even so, that didn’t stop the horrific realization that came over all of them.

“Wait, then that means that Sayaka can’t stay here either!” Hina voiced for all of them, adding to the animosity they all held for the demented bear and its rules.
And while all of them felt anger coursing through their veins, none of them were quite as infuriated as Leon.

“Hey, you bastard! How the hell is she supposed to get better if she can’t stay here?!” the baseball player furiously shouted up at the monitor, his previous fears of the bear seeming to vanish as he defended the sleeping idol.

Even knowing that it was reckless to challenge Monokuma, considering the punishment they knew could await them, Leon held his ground and didn’t back down from this unfair rule. And whether they said it or not, everyone was feeling the same, unwilling to place their classmate into harm’s way for an unjust rule.

“Yeah! That’s bullshit!” Mondo abruptly agreed, stepping up and waving his fist at the screen.

“Agreed!” Taka surprisingly concurred, “While the rules must be followed absolutely, certainly there are exceptions! Especially for flawed rules such as this one! Mainly because it didn’t take injury into account!”

“W-What if her condition changes unexpectedly! She should be allowed to stay here until she gets better!” Chihiro piped up, standing between Mondo and Taka before she even knew what was happening.

Like a wall, they stood behind Leon, ready to support him in his resistance to Monokuma’s rules.

They were a strange trio but as they stood together, united by their will to help their classmate, they seemed stronger than ever before. And then, almost as one, the rest of the students lifted their gazes up to glare at the monitor in defiance, being united in agreement for the first time since they’d all arrived.

Even Byakuya, in his condescending way, seemed to support this decision, staring menacingly at the screen as if he actually had the power to overrule the decision.

Silence followed their defiant actions and no one was sure if Monokuma was actually able to hear them, since he’d never responded to threats made at the monitors. And for a moment, no one thought the bear would answer, until its malevolent cackling abruptly returned.

“Upupupupu! The look on your faces is priceless! Wish I had some popcorn to enjoy the show! Oh, wait! I do!”

From behind its back, Monokuma pulled out a huge tub of popcorn. Picking up some of it with its paw, the bear smashed some of the buttery popped kernels at its face, the remnants of the popcorn clattering to the floor.

In any other situation, it may have been comical, but right now, it was one of the most insulting things any of the students had ever seen.

“Damn you!!” Leon screamed and almost seemed that he might lunge at the screen. Before he could even take a step, a stern hand grasped his arm. Stopping instantly, the baseball player snapped his head around to see Sakura holding him back with only one hand.

“As Sakura’s words invaded his ears, Leon was brought back to the events of the previous night, where his good-intentioned but rash behavior had nearly gotten Sayaka killed. It was a sobering memory and just thinking about it helped to force him back to a calmer state of mind.
“Y-Yeah…you’re right.”

Hearing that, Sakura smiled and nodded to him, before lifting her ferocious gaze up to the monitor as well. With her watching his back, Leon felt renewed vigor as they all waited for Monokuma to continue. And they didn’t have to wait long before the bear chuckled slightly, tossed away the remaining popcorn and waved its paw.

“Of course, I’m not that heartless! So, as a special exception to the rule, I will allow Sayaka Maizono to ‘rest’ here until she is able to walk. At which point, she will be forcibly removed.”

Even if it was only a small bit of good news, the classmates all felt a hint of relief, which only lasted until the bear continued.

“As for the rest of you though…there will be no sleeping in the nurse’s office! Violating this rule will result in a punishment involving many pointy objects and possibly a rabid dog!”

Whether they wanted to or not, all of them were reminded of Junko’s foot stomping defiance, with the Fashionista herself tightly gripping her injured hand as those words were spoken. Not giving them much time to process this, the bear chimed in again.

“Okay then, sweet dreams everyone! Good night! Don’t let the bed bugs—oh, that’s right! I almost forgot to mention. Makoto, your room is off limits for tonight for deep cleaning! Punishment awaits anyone who tries to enter while cleaning is in process! Have fun with that!!”

“Wait, what?!”

The Ultimate Lucky Student didn’t have time to protest before the monitor abruptly cut to black, leaving him confused and everyone else wondering what the bear meant. However, one student let a grin slide over her lips as she thought of a wonderful idea.

“Well then, I suppose since Makoto can’t enter his room tonight, he will have be one of the two standing guard, correct?” Celeste proposed to everyone, her smirk widening as the lucky student spun around and gaped at her.

“H-Hey! How are we supposed to watch her when we can’t—?”

“The rule says we can’t sleep anywhere but the dorms. It never said anything about staying awake and watching her,” Kyoko unexpectedly joined in, not coming to Makoto’s defense as much as he’d have liked.

“But that’s not—!” he tried to say before being interrupted.

“Are you saying you don’t want to be one of the people protecting your precious Sayaka?” the gambler asked with false shock in her voice.

“N-No! I don’t mind—!”

Smiling daintily, Celeste chuckled and cut him off, “Then it’s settled, is it not? Makoto shall be one of the two to watch over Sayaka.”

“But how do we even know Monokuma’s telling the truth?!” the lucky student insisted.

To his utter disappointment, it was again Kyoko who spoke up, “Monokuma said that cleaning was in progress, most likely meaning your room is being cleansed of being a crime scene. It would make sense then, considering everything that happened there.”
As much as Makoto wanted to refute that, it made far too much sense to disagree with. And it seemed there was no way to really check, considering Monokuma would punish anyone foolish enough to try and confirm it. It seemed that he was completely out of options.

Feeling defeated and outwitted, Makoto let out a deep sigh before replying, “…I guess I’m first then. But what about the other?”

From the back of the room, Junko called out, “Since I’m the one who bandaged her, I wouldn’t mind —”.

“No, not you.”

Although everyone should have been accustomed to it by now, everyone froze as Byakuya once again chose to vent his influence. However, unlike before, Junko didn’t shy away from his comment, sending a fearsome glare his way.

“And why’s that?” she demanded, asking the question everyone else wanted to have the answer to.

“Hmph, isn’t it obvious? You can’t be trusted,” Byakuya informed her, matching her glare with one of his own before turning to face the others. “Let me ask you all this; if Sayaka were to end up murdered again… who would be the least likely among us we’d suspect?”

It was a heavy question that none of them were expecting and it stunned most of them into shock. However, it didn’t seem to affect Hiro that much as he bluntly answered, “Probably Junko or Leon at this point.”

“…Exactly,” the affluent progeny concurred, a little shocked it had been Hiro who answered. Nevertheless, he continued, “As of this moment, Leon and Junko appear to be the most remorseful and therefore cannot be trusted. Or have you forgotten how Sayaka nearly fooled all of us into thinking she was the victim?”

“Hey! Don’t bring her into this!” Leon fervently shouted, barely managing to hold himself back. “She’s got nothing to—!”

“But she does,” Byakuya cut him off, folding his arms and slowly walking closer to the baseball star. “How do we know that this isn’t an elaborate trap set up by you or Junko in order to find a way to win the game? For all we know, your tears may have been fake—”.

“Shut the hell up, you god-damn bastard!” Leon shouted before closing the gap between them and grabbing Byakuya by the collar.

But then, something completely unexpected happened. Even if it was only for a moment, Byakuya seemed to lose his composure and, using only one hand, he effortlessly knocked away Leon’s hands and shoved him backward.

“Don’t you dare call me that again, murderer…” the affluent progeny said, raising his voice as he filled with utter rage.

Just hearing that accusation come from Byakuya’s mouth was enough to send Leon into a frenzy and he was just about to lunge for the bastard again when a white blur suddenly flashed between the two of them.

“ENOUGH!”

To everyone’s surprise, Taka had thrown himself into the fray and was holding out both hands to
stop the both of them. Not only that, his tone of voice was even stricter and more disciplinary than any of the students had heard before. And if that wasn’t enough, his eyes were almost on fire as he glared between the two of them.

First, Taka turned to the affluent progeny and said, “We all see your point, Byakuya. But that does not give you the right to decide who we can and cannot trust!” Next, he turned his gaze toward the baseball star and said, “And Leon, while I don’t blame you for being angry at such an insult, violence will solve nothing! You should know that better than I do!”

Giving them no time to refute him, the Ultimate Moral Compass continued, “Now is not the time to be fighting! Especially when we have two injured classmates here!”

To this, both Byakuya and Leon fell into utter silence, averting their gaze away from everyone, the baseball star hanging his head, while the affluent progeny folded his arms and stared upward.

When it became clear that neither of them were going to speak, Taka decided to continue, “We’re all still reeling from what happened today. I say that we, very calmly, decide who will stay with Makoto to watch over Sayaka, then go back to our rooms and rest for the night. How does that sound?”

For a few moments, no one really felt able to speak. This wasn’t the first time that Taka had spoken up to maintain order among his classmates but this was the first time that he’d been completely successful. Perhaps the trial had awakened some kind of ferocious instinct that led him to be fiercer than before, or perhaps he was just tired as well. In either case, his words were sound and no one could or wanted to refute them.

Instead, he got a volunteer.

“I’ll stay and watch over Sayaka with Makoto,” the calm voice of Kyoko broke the silence, her stern gaze fixed upon Taka. “We can discuss switching off who will guard Sayaka in the morning, after you’ve all gotten some rest. For tonight, the two of us shall suffice.”

“Are you certain? I would be happy to stay as well,” a concerned Sakura offered.

“No, we may need you to take over for Makoto and I in the morning,” Kyoko politely declined, “Not to mention that you already guarded the crime scene, it would be unfair to have you or Mondo on guard duty all night as well. Besides, I have some knowledge of first aid and can perform well under pressure, in case her condition changes.”

“That’s true…” Mondo concurred; obviously pleased he didn’t have to stay there all night either.

“And she did handle herself pretty well during the trial,” Taka agreed, not seeing any reason not to go with her suggestion.

Hearing this, Byakuya let out a scoff but was unable to say anything before he was cut off by Kyoko.

“I believe that should lay our objections to rest, even if it is for only a single night,” she said with a slight smirk, enjoying the fact that he wasn’t in control at the moment.

Trying his best to appear unaffected, the affluent progeny scoffed and replied, “Do whatever you please. But don’t come running to me when you get knifed in the back.”

Without waiting for anyone to excuse him, Byakuya made his way to the door and quickly departed, unable to stand the idiocy of his classmates any longer.
“Alright then,” Taka said to all the remaining students, “Makoto and Kyoko will watch over Sayaka for the night and we shall all reconvene in the cafeteria for breakfast, as per usual! Dismissed!”

Makoto watched as his classmates slowly began to depart, emptying the room as they all yawned and rubbed their tired eyes. Turning his back to find a stool or something to sit on, the lucky student was surprised when someone called out to him.

“Hey, Makoto.”

Glancing over his shoulder, he found none other than Junko staring at him. She was clutching her injured hand and held a surprisingly nervous look on her face. Makoto couldn’t imagine why she seemed so nervous, so he turned to face her and politely replied, “Yeah, what’s up?”

“I…uh…never really thanked you for saving my life. So…thanks…”

Much to his shock, she abruptly bowed deeply to him, leaving him kind of speechless for a moment. It wasn’t until she straightened up that he found himself nervously scratching his head and replying, “W-Well…uh, I mean, you’d do that same for me, right?”

As if a knife had been jammed into her heart, Junko flinched at his words and averted her gaze.

“Y-Yeah…maybe.”

She didn’t sound too sure of herself and it kinda confused Makoto but he didn’t have time to think about it before she said, “Anyway, take care of Sayaka…and if you need my help with anything, feel free to come get me.”

Smiling brightly as he heard those words, Makoto nodded firmly and said, “I will. Thanks, Junko…for everything.”

To his shock and awe, Makoto was dumbstruck as his words brought a genuine smile to Junko’s lips. It wasn’t her usual grin or smirk but a completely natural smile that held a great deal of gratitude in it. It was the first time he’d ever seen such a wonderful sight from the Fashionista and it brought him hope that they could all survive this horrific event.

But just as quickly as it came, the smile disappeared as Junko turned around and headed out the door, leaving him alone in the room with Kyoko to watch over the sleeping Sayaka.

“Dammit, why couldn’t I have just said, ‘yes’,” Mukuro scolded herself as she walked toward her room, face still flushed after her conversation with Makoto.

Unfortunately, she already knew the answer to her question, and it was the reason she’d been unable to lie to him. Even after making up that huge story about how she knew about treating the injured, she just couldn’t bring herself to lie to him. Not when he smiled at her…that smile that made her feel…like she belonged.

“But I don’t…I don’t belong with them,” she had to remind herself, furrowing her brow as she walked. “I betrayed him…betrayed all of them. I even considered killing Makoto, just to please my sister. And now, I don’t belong with her either. I mean, even if I had gone through with it, who’s to say that Junko wouldn’t have just disposed of me anyway? After all, I’m sure she’d love to feel the despair of killing a family member…she’s never done that before…”
As she neared her room, she realized that she was still clutching her freshly bandaged hand. Coming to a halt just before her door, she stared at her hand and flexed it, wincing only slightly at the pain. Her movements were still stiff and it would take time to fully recover—at least physically.

Almost immediately after her palm had been impaled, she knew that the wound would forever haunt her. Not only as the first true injury she’d ever sustained but also as a permanent reminder that, just as she had betrayed her classmates, Junko had subsequently betrayed her. The hole in her hand would forever serve to show how little she really meant to this world—or at least, she’d thought so at the time.

Almost before she realized it, that injury began to take on an entirely new meaning. It was proof that she was a survivor, showed that Makoto valued her enough to save her life, and it was a reminder that she was still alive…and she could still do something for him. Even if she wasn’t sure exactly what she should be doing, at the very least, one thing was clear:

“Whatever it takes…I will repay him!” she quietly swore, again feeling the need to assign herself a purpose to exist.

Feeling slightly reenergized, she unlocked her room and proceeded inside, flipping on the light-switch as she entered. However, the instant she was inside, something felt wrong. Nothing particularly seemed out of place…and that’s what felt off. She remembered leaving in a huge rush that morning; her room should have been a mess from that hurry.

Instead, everything looked far too clean—as if someone had been in there to—!

Mukuro’s eyes widened and she found herself speeding over to her wardrobe. Grabbing the handles, she flung the door open and gasped at what she saw…or rather, didn’t see.

“My weapons…”

Every single firearm, knife and explosive had been completely removed from the inside of the wardrobe, instead replaced with a number of different designer clothes! Gritting her teeth, she dashed into her sleeping area and lifted her mattress, only to find that the spare clips and extra bullets she’d hidden there were also missing! Practically slamming the mattress down, she grabbed onto her pillow and shook it, infuriated that the miniature palm sized handgun she’d always slept with was gone as well!

Instinctively, the soldier’s hand slipped into her blouse and she grasped the combat knife she’d hidden beneath her clothes. A slight feeling of comfort coursed through her as she grasped the handle of the blade, knowing that she wasn’t completely unarmed. However, that’s when a definitive cackle reached her ears and she knew exactly what had transpired.

Glaring over her shoulder, Mukuro spotted the gleefully grinning Monokuma standing right beside her door. It continued to chuckle to itself, maintaining its cutesy bear voice all the while.

“Firearms are not permitted inside the school! And having all those dangerous knives around is detrimental to your health! It’s a good thing I found them and got rid of them for you…so that you didn’t get punished for it.”

The soldier gritted her teeth and growled in embarrassment. The bear had probably been there the entire time, she’d just been too distracted by the loss of her weaponry to notice! Slowly unsheathing the combat knife and pulling it from her blouse, Mukuro turned to face what she’d feared had been coming.
“I figured you’d come for me…sooner or later,” she said solemnly, taking an offensive stance, angling the blade directly at the automaton. She thought about making the first move but before she had time to devise a strategy, the voice of Monokuma resumed…shifting into the familiar tone of her sister.

“Actually, I’m just here to ask you a simple question,” Junko’s voice took over, phasing out the usual voice the bear used. Clearing her throat, the despair-loving girl plainly asked, “So…what the hell, Mukuro?”

At first, the soldier was a bit startled by the question but instantly knew exactly what her sister was asking of her. She was asking why she’d interfered, shifting the game and giving the advantage over to the students, at least for now. It was a loaded question, but one that Mukuro was more than prepared to answer.

Realizing that her sister more than likely wasn’t there to do her harm, she relaxed her stance only slightly as she smirked, “You told me I could play the game however I wanted, as long as I didn’t reveal my true identity. Well…this is how I play the game.”

Monokuma tilted its head to the side as Junko answered through it, “But that’s the ‘what the hell’ part. You’re not really playing the game because you’re not killing anyone. The one thing you’re best at and you decide to do the exact opposite. It just doesn’t add up, Mukuro—”.

“That’s twice now…”

“Hm?” Junko replied, become the one to be confused.

Mukuro’s eyes narrowed as she answered, “Twice now…you’ve called me Mukuro. But weren’t you the one who said that Mukuro Ikusaba was dead? How strange of you to make such a mistake…”

Her words hung heavy in the air as silence engulfed them. Junko was rarely every wrong about anything, it was a blessing and a curse she’d once said. But even rarer was it for someone, especially Mukuro, to correct her when it happened upon occasion. It was usually followed by either a witty remark, or a furious explosion of anger.

Mukuro wondered which she’d receive for her defiance and was shocked when, in response to her comment, the joyous laughter of Junko erupted from the bear, echoing in the small room. The soldier almost relaxed her guard as she heard what truly seemed to be genuine laughs coming from the automaton that relayed her sister’s voice.

“Hahahaha!” the despair-loving girl howled, barely able to speak through her tirade, “W-When did you learn to talk back?! Oh, I love it!!”

As Junko’s cackling voice continued to resound in the room, Mukuro was growing more and more impatient. She hadn’t expected her sister to visit her again, not after cutting ties with her. And while losing her weapons was unfortunate, she could survive the game without them. In truth, she should have expected this. There was no way that the ‘Mastermind’ would allow for such an unfair advantage, especially when the soldier already held the upper hand over her classmates just by having her memories of them intact.

Even so, she was completely dumbfounded by how happy her sister was about her comment. Almost as if she’d been waiting for this moment for quite a long time…

Suddenly, Junko’s laughter ceased and her voice regained its usual cruel tone, “You know, I really
should confiscate that knife you’re holding, too…it is prohibited, after all.”

Just hearing those words made Mukuro visibly flinch and, on instinct, she took an aggressive combat stance. Her eyes burned with fury but there was also desperation there, and her sister knew why all too well.

“Oh? Where’d all that vigor suddenly go? You weren’t worried about back-talking a second ago. Why’ve you gone all quiet on me now?” Junko chided, with the soldier practically able to hear her sister grinning behind the mic. “I wonder, is it because it’s the last weapon you’ve got…or perhaps, it’s the only item you have left to remind you of the good-old days back in Fenrir?”

“Shut up…” Mukuro seethed, somehow finding the courage to defy her sister again.

“Hmph, it makes sense really,” Junko continued unabated, positively elated by her sister’s reaction. “I mean, with your ugly tattoo gone, you’ve got nothing left to link you back to the days when you were actually happy…am I right?”

“I said, shut up!!” Mukuro screamed, grasping her knife with both hands in preparation to attack.

However, before she took a step, she heard her sister let out a victorious laugh, spreading the bear’s arms wide, as if inviting her to attack.

“Come on then…do it!” Junko enticed her further, her voice shaking from what could only be described as despairingly horrific euphoria.

Gritting her teeth so hard she thought they’d crack, Mukuro held her ground and managed to keep her anger under control…if only just barely. It was obvious that Junko wanted her to lash out and attack; it would give the despair-loving girl a valid excuse to execute her. But even knowing that, it didn’t help subdue the rage the soldier felt boiling up.

As she felt herself losing control, her eyes darted over to her bandaged appendage. In a desperate bid to calm herself, she focused her thoughts on the image of Makoto coming to her rescue and bandaging her once it was over. She remembered the warmth of his hands, and how gentle he’d been when he’d taken care of her. And how, if she lost her temper now, she’d never get the chance to repay him…and she wouldn’t be around to help keep him safe!

That thought alone brought a sense of calm amidst the hateful comments her sister had thrown at her. Unclenching her jaw and taking slow but deep breaths, she gradually began to bring her anger under control. Carefully, Mukuro relaxed her stance and let her hands drop to her side, but still clutching her knife as a form of comfort.

Taking in even more deep, cleansing breaths, the soldier glared at Monokuma and said, “I won’t let you win this time. Of that, I can assure you.”

Only the tiniest bit shocked that her plan to infuriate Mukuro hadn’t worked, the despair-loving girl cocked Monokuma’s head to the side as she took in her sister’s determined visage.

“Oh? Is that so?” Junko mockingly replied, squeezing in a bit of a snicker. “Let’s say you do manage to win. What then? You don’t have a place to return to—”.

“I’m aware of that,” the soldier cut her off, slowly lifting up her knife and angling it toward the bear once more. “But who said that I’d be playing for myself?”

Hearing this, the automaton that Junko spoke through suddenly expressed an image of frustration, it’s face turning read as it glared toward the soldier.
“Oh, come on! You don’t really think you can—?!?” Junko tried to say before she was cut off once more.

“I won’t let the game go the way you want it to anymore! My goal isn’t to survive this game,” Mukuro defiantly explained, not letting her sister interrupt her anymore. “As you said, I know what awaits me outside these walls. I know that I’m beyond saving…this school will be my grave. However, I plan to do everything in my power to kill you…and free my classmates from this hell we’ve put them in!”

It was now Mukuro’s time to smirk as she made her position clear. She wasn’t playing the game to save herself, nor was it truly as a form of redemption. She was a cornered animal that was lashing out at the one who’d put them in that position…no, more like a mother determined to protect her young. The right metaphor didn’t really come to her at the moment but she couldn’t care less.

For the first time in her life, she’d stood up to Junko. And even though she could feel her legs trembling as she decided to rebel against her sister, in her heart, she knew that she’d finally done something right for a change…and it was by her own choice!

She more than half expected her sister to begin laughing at her again, mocking her for making such a suicidal choice. However, to her surprise, her sister was completely silent…as if she hadn’t even considered Mukuro would ever say such things to her.

Just as the soldier thought that Junko may have fallen asleep, or was simply ignoring her, Monokuma abruptly returned back to its normal visage, standing there solemnly and just staring at her.

“Impressive,” Junko suddenly spoke through the bear, her voice even and stoic. “I guess I can let you keep that knife then. You’ll certainly need it if you plan to kill me.”

Somehow, it was jarring to hear Junko mention her own death so casually. She’d always insisted that she was beyond killing, that her death would need to be filled to the brim with despair before she even considered letting herself leave this world. And it was at that moment that Mukuro had a last minute revelation.

“Junko, you…you didn’t come here to kill me…did you?” she questioned, surprised that she even realized it herself.

Instead of answering, Monokuma slowly shifted its feet and turned around. Without uttering a word, the bear waddled over to the door and began reaching for the knob. Seeing this, Mukuro couldn’t stop herself as she took a step forward, calling out to her sister.

“Wait! What did you come here for, Junko?!” the soldier asked, almost desperately, completely unable to comprehend why her sister had come in the first place.

Just before Monokuma opened the door, it glanced over its shoulder and Junko’s voice softly spoke through it.

“This is the last time we’re going to talk like this…Goodbye.”

The gentle, almost regretful tone of her sister’s voice startled Mukuro and she found herself frozen in shock, staring down at the automaton as it slowly turned its head and opened the door. She wanted to call out, to question her sister on what she meant by saying farewell…but she already knew.

Her choice had been accepted…her sister was actually accepting her decision to play the game as she saw fit. And because of that, both sisters knew that only one of them would survive the game.
As Monokuma slipped out into the hallway and closed the door behind it, Mukuro lowered her head and felt a single tear slide down her cheek.

“…Goodbye…Junko…”

Reaching a hand up, she quickly wiped away the moisture from her eyes and hardened her features. Moving over to her dresser, she took off her wig and replaced it on the wig form. Swiping her uninjured hand through her sweaty black locks, she sat down and gazed at her reflection. A smile crept over her face as she realized that the person staring back at her wasn’t the same one she’d seen in the mirror that morning.

There was a fire in her eyes and as ironic as she knew it was, she felt hope beginning to well up within her. And even more surprising…she liked it.

…

…

…

Chapter 1: END

*Two more students have lost the will to kill:*

- Leon Kuwata-

- Sayaka Maizono-

12 students ‘remain’

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To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! It’s been a long haul but chapter 1 is completed!!

I certainly hope that you’ve enjoyed the first chapter of my story. Rest assured, I’ll be continuing onward into the second chapter soon, with new surprises to await everyone due to the survival of Sayaka, Leon and Mukuro. What lies ahead for everyone as their fates constantly change? You’ll have to tune in next chapter to find out!

That being said, I will be taking a short break to get a few more chapters ahead. Not a long break (so don’t panic), about double the average time between chapters will suffice. I’m getting busy with my life very soon and I need a bit of time to properly craft the story. However, I may post a few DR one-shots in the meantime, if I get them finished sooner.

Regardless, I’m glad to see that so many of you are enjoying the story and are very invested in what’s going to happen next. As always, if you’d like to leave a comment or
review to help better the story, or just to ask questions, please do so.

Take care and keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

As the students live return to "normal" after the first trial, some of them let their feelings get the best of them. Makoto wonders about Sayaka's true intentions, and Leon contemplates his actions. Meanwhile, Mukuro faces an unexpected dilemma.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The nurse's office was quiet as Makoto and Kyoko neared the end of their long night. Peacefully sleeping in her bed, Sayaka hardly stirred in the slightest, her color almost completely restored and her breathing seemingly back to normal. The lucky student couldn't stop himself from smiling as he continued to look after her, tiredness barely nipping at him even after keeping watch all night.

The hours passed by rather quickly and, considering all that happened, Makoto was very thankful for it. And even though he should have been utterly exhausted, the resolve to make sure nothing happened to Sayaka seemed to keep him active. Which was great because Kyoko didn't seem to be particularly chatty, opting to stand by the door and keep watch in silence.

Not that he didn’t appreciate her presence, of course.

It was just that, he kinda hoped to talk with her while they stood guard. There were some things he wanted to ask her about, like how she was able to deduce so much of what happened during the trial. She'd practically solved the entire case herself! He wondered why she didn't just come right out and tell them everything she knew at the beginning of the trial. Then again, if she had, Leon would have been executed before Junko could show up to save him, so it worked out in the end but…

Shaking his head, he decided that it didn’t really matter anyway. Everyone was alive and since it was nearly 7AM, the others would be waking up very soon. Then, they could discuss what they should do about…Sayaka…

All of a sudden, his smile upturned into a frown and he lowered his head. He’d been so preoccupied with everything that had happened; surviving the trial, hearing of Sayaka’s revival, ensuring Leon didn’t get executed…it didn’t give him any time to really think about what happened.

But now, in the silence of the nurse's office, his mind finally came back to a single question he needed to know the answer to:

“Did Sayaka really try to frame me?”

Of course he didn’t want to believe it…even now—no, especially now that Sayaka was still alive. But the evidence was too concrete to refute, Kyoko and the trial had seen to that. And while he knew it was better to know the truth, a large part of him wished he’d never known.

It was hard to accept that someone he’d vowed to protect, the person he’d trusted the most, had been using him the entire time. Even with her wearily voiced apology, it didn’t stunt the pain of knowing that she’d planned to use him to escape. And the most heart-wrenching thing was…Makoto wasn’t
sure that if she had succeeded in killing Leon, he would have spoken up and exposed her.

Squeezing his eyes shut, in a vain attempt to block those thoughts, the lucky student found himself falling deeper and deeper in anguish.

“She probably knew that…and that’s why she chose me in the first—”.

“—Makoto.”

At once, the lucky student’s eyes shot open and his head snapped up to see Kyoko standing over him. Her face was as stoic as usual but strangely, Makoto noticed a hint of emotion in her otherwise expressionless eyes.

“Y-Yeah?” he said nervously, unsure of how to really talk to her, especially since this was the first time they’d spoken since the others had left.

“You shouldn’t rest your eyes just yet,” she said, a hint of concern in her voice. “We’ve only got a few more minutes before the morning announcement. Once we meet with everyone, and get someone else to guard Sayaka, you can sleep for the rest of the day if you want. But for now, just concentrate on staying awake. Alright?”

“Oh!” he replied, more than a bit shocked, “Yeah, you’re right. I’m fine. I was just…thinking about something.”

At first, Makoto was kind of surprised by her concern. Sure, he knew she wasn’t heartless or anything but she’d noticed that he’d closed his eyes and in only a few seconds, she was already encouraging him to stay awake. She was a lot more observant than he guessed. But then again, considering what happened during the trial, he really shouldn’t have been.

Because of that, he shouldn’t have been surprised when she suddenly crossed her arms and said, “You’re thinking about how Sayaka may have betrayed you, aren’t you?”

That comment completely caught him off-guard and for a moment, Makoto blankly stared up at her, his jaw hanging open as he struggled to find words.

“H-How did you…?” he began to say but quickly silenced himself, shaking his head and sighing. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised…after the way you handled the trial.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” she corrected him, brushing off his compliment almost instinctively. “You did remarkably well yourself, once you had all the evidence. But that’s beside the point.”

Kyoko turned her gaze and fixated on him, making him shrink. She didn’t even have to ask the question again, the way she stared at him demanded an answer.

“You’re right,” he solemnly admitted, knowing that denying it would only complicate things.

“Honestly, I avoided thinking about it until now, but…”

As he trailed off, he heard the clicking of Kyoko’s boots and he lifted his head to see her walk to over to Sayaka’s bedside. For a moment, she merely stood there, watching the pop idol’s rhythmic breathing without saying a word. Just as Makoto opened his mouth to say something, she cut him off.

“Makoto, do you remember what I told you, as we went into the trial?”

The question stopped him for a second as he had to think back to what exactly she’d told him.
“You mean about having to discover the truth for myself?” he asked softly, unsure if it was the right answer.

“That’s correct,” was all she replied.

However, even if she didn’t say it aloud, he knew exactly what she was implicating. Lowering his gaze, he continued, “You wanted me to realize that Sayaka had betrayed me by myself, didn’t you?”

As he asked that, he lifted his gaze up and was stunned to see the tiniest hint of a smile spreading over Kyoko’s lips as she answered, “And you did. Honestly…you’re a lot smarter than I initially gave you credit for.”

A part of him wanted to be upset by her comment, because it meant that she previously didn’t think he was very intelligent…but he hardly blamed her.

Gripping his pants tightly to hold in his self-loathing, he seethed, “No…I’m not. The idea that Sayaka would betray me…the thought never crossed my mind. I feel like such an idiot…becoming such an easy target like that. She played me…right from the very beginning—!”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Makoto almost froze as she contradicted him, making his head snap up to stare at her in bewilderment. Finally turning his way, Kyoko met his gaze head on as she continued:

“Sayaka did mean to double-cross you. That much we know to be true. But in regards to her manipulating you from the start, I don’t think that was the case.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

His tone was more stand-offish than he’d wanted but it seemed that Kyoko didn’t mind as she said, “Up until the very end, I think she was indecisive about, well, everything really. More than likely, she doubted that she could really kill someone, doubted she could really deceive you…and doubted that she was going to survive.”

The heavy implication in her words sparked a swirl of emotion inside Makoto but before he could act on them, she continued.

“And that’s why, as she lay there, believing she was going to die…she was thinking of you.”

Makoto froze as he heard her say that and on instinct, he replied, “She was…thinking of me?”

With a firm nod, Kyoko elaborated, “Her message to us…her dying message…it was meant to protect you.”

“W-What?” he stammered, unsure if he’d heard her right. “T-That’s crazy! Why would you think that?”

Slowly, he watched as Kyoko’s features began to soften as she answered, “If she didn’t care what happened to you, she never would have left that message.”

“But…didn’t she do that just to get back at Leon for trying to kill her?” he pointed out, still unable to believe that Sayaka would do such a thing for him.

“That’s certainly one possibility,” Kyoko admitted, nodding her head a single time. “But I don’t think that’s the case…considering her heartfelt apology.”
More than anything else Kyoko had said, those words sank deep into the recesses of Makoto’s mind as he replied, “You can’t just say something like that…we don’t know what she was thinking…especially with everything that’s been going on.”

To this, Kyoko shrugged her shoulders and said, “That’s true. But fortunately for all of us, we’ll have the luxury of being able to ask her about it once she wakes up.”

For a few moments, silence grew heavy between them. Makoto didn’t know how to respond to that, nor did she really want to. However, he knew that there was still one more burning question he just had to ask before he could feel satisfied.

“…Why are you telling me all of this?” he asked plainly, making certain that his confusion was evident.

Instead of replying right away, Kyoko paused but only for a moment before answering, “Because…you’re the kind of person who can overcome this. Because you were able to move past the horrible things that Sayaka and Leon tried to do…and you keep moving forward. And without someone like that, the others will never be able to break free of this desperate situation.”

The utter confidence in her voice, the faith she was displaying for him…it left Makoto utterly speechless. If it had been anyone else, he may have been unnerved by how he was being treated…but for some reason, when it was her, it didn’t really bother him.

In fact, in a strange sort of way, he trusted Kyoko more than anyone else at the moment.

Makoto wasn’t quite sure why…maybe it was because of how she acted during the trial; stopping him from attacking Monokuma, an act that probably saved his life. As well as guiding him through the more difficult parts of the trial, especially when he felt lost and afraid. Not only that, she defended Leon even after he was revealed as the culprit, because she somehow knew he wasn’t the monster everyone made him out to be.

More than anyone else…Kyoko genuinely seemed concerned for the well-being of her classmates. He admired her for that. Mainly because, it wasn’t exactly what you’d expect from the normally stoic young woman. In a strange way, her resolve and dedication gave him hope that all of them would be able to survive the horrible nightmare they’d fallen into.

Even so, he did feel that he had to correct her on one part.

“You were wrong about one thing,” he told her, earning a raised eyebrow before he continued, “I’m not ‘moving past’ what Leon and Sayaka tried to do…I’ve accepted their actions for what they were and I understand them better because of it. I know their true feelings now…and I’ll carry those feelings with me…for the rest of my life if I have to.”

As his words echoed in the small room, even he thought he sounded really cheesy saying a thing like that. But he had to admit, everything he’d said, it somehow felt…right. He briefly wondered if that was true and got his answer in the strangest way he could imagine.

Staring down at him, with the tiniest of smiles stretched out on her lips, Kyoko said to him, “Well then, I have high expectation for you.”

It was then that the annoying sound of a bell reached their ears.

*Ding–Dong–Bing–Bong*

“Ahem, this is a school announcement. It is now 7AM…”
As the obnoxious voice of Monokuma continued its morning ritual, Kyoko’s faint smile faded and she turned to face the door.

“We’d better go. The morning meeting will be starting soon,” she said, her hardened exterior returning faster than Makoto had wanted.

Stealing a glance at Sayaka, the lucky student protested, “But we can’t leave Sayaka alone like that. What if someone—”.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think anyone’s going to try anything,” Kyoko said reassuringly, looking over her shoulder back at him. “I’ve been watching the hall outside the office all night. At no point did anyone get past me. And even if they did, if someone didn’t show up for the morning meeting, or at the very least, arrived later than us, they would immediately fall under suspicion.”

Again, Makoto was left speechless as Kyoko effortlessly resolved his fears and put his mind at ease. She was almost like a manga heroine, always knowing what to do and never giving up hope. And each time she helped him, Makoto felt himself becoming more and more interested in getting to know her.

“Y-You’re amazing…” he gently whispered to himself.

However, he must not have been quiet enough because Kyoko turned around with a raised eyebrow and asked, “Did you say something?”

From seemingly nowhere, Makoto flushed and he nervously scratched his head while averting his gaze. “N-Nothing…let’s go then. We shouldn’t keep the other’s waiting.”

Although it was obvious that she wasn’t completely convinced, Kyoko seemed to let the matter drop, nodding firmly and answering, “Indeed.”

Turning around, she headed toward the door, Makoto nipping at her heels.

For the first time, not a single student was late for the morning meeting. As the morning announcement rang through the empty halls, they all sat, gathered together in the cafeteria, in silence.

Once more the students had begun to group themselves. Mondo leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. Taka, as per usual, was standing instead of sitting at the head of the table. Chihiro sat between them, which was a strange thing for her to do, being surrounded by two men like that. Celeste seated herself just across from her, her hands folded daintily into her lap. Hifumi took up the space next to her, staring down at the table looking exhausted, probably because he didn’t get much sleep. In contrast, Hiro was nothing but smiles that morning, muttering about his predictions or something. Hina and Sakura sat next to each other, chatting about healthy activities.

And then there was Junko, who sat beside them in utter silence, her usual smug attitude seemingly dented by her near-death experience the previous day. Also, while it seemed that she had put in the effort to put on make-up today, she obviously wasn’t trying as hard as before, probably because she’d realized that there was no real need for it. The only reason she stuck out at all was because she’d changed out of her blood-stained clothes and into a white designer blouse that had a black ribbon in the center, accompanied by a dark blue skirt that hung down to her knees, her usual black boots adorning her feet.

And, while most of the student sat at the long table in the center of the room, Byakuya and Toko
decided to remove themselves from the others, with the former sitting at an adjacent table and the latter standing near said table.

However, Leon sat off to the side, alone at a table far removed from the long center table. He didn’t have the heart to sit with his fellow students, not after what he’d tried to do. And the feeling seemed mutual, considering that his classmates had barely glanced at him since yesterday.

“I can’t blame them. I’d probably do the same thing…” he thought to himself as he waited for the meeting to begin.

It was about five after 7AM now and the only three not present were, of course, Makoto and Kyoko, who were looking after Sayaka, who was still recovering.

“Everyone! Quiet down and listen!” Taka proclaimed, speaking mostly to the students seated around the long table. “I’m glad to see everyone was early for the meeting today, it boasts of your fortitude and dedication. And I hope that you all got a good night’s rest, because we’re going to need it today.”

“Yeah, about that,” Mondo spoke up, putting his feet up on the table and leaning back. “What the hell are we supposed to do now? I mean, I know we need to talk about who’s gonna guard Sayaka but…”

“We also need to discuss what, if anything, needs to be done about both her and Leon,” the slightly accusatory voice of Celeste pointed out, not even bothering to turn toward the baseball star as she spoke.

“What do you mean?” Chihiro questioned her.

An annoyed scoff came from Byakuya before he answered, “Isn’t it obvious? We need to decide how we intend to deal with the two of them. Or do you want two potential murderers walking among us unchecked?”

“Y-Yeah! They tried to k-k-kill before! Who knows if they’ll t-try it a-again?!” Toko swooped in and backed up the affluent progeny.

Leon’s hands balled into fists and he knew that he should have taken offense to that but given his circumstances, he couldn’t find the words to refute her. And even though he had expected this to be the case, it was even worse when he was confronted with it directly.

“Before any of that,” Taka interrupted the conversation, gathering everyone’s attention. “We need to send someone to fetch Kyoko and Makoto. It’s not right to discuss this without them. Do we have any volunteers?”

At the mention of them, Byakuya visibly scowled and turned his head away from the others. He was obviously still bothered by how they usurped his authority yesterday but he remained silent on the matter. Not that anyone expected him to volunteer anyway.

“I can do it!” Hina abruptly announced, standing up and getting ready to leave.

“That won’t be necessary.”

Everyone turned to see Kyoko and Makoto entering through the double doors. And while Kyoko didn’t show any signs of exhaustion from their long night of guard duty, Makoto had heavy bags under his eyes and looked half-dead.
“Good morning, you two!” Taka earnestly shouted to them. “Now, while you technically could be called late, your act as guards for Sayaka should be made note of! So, as a sign of good-will, I will graciously overlook your tardiness due to your good nature in volunteering yourselves! Haha!”

The overly pleased smile that Taka plastered over his face actually hurt to watch. But no one had the heart to tell him that his ‘good-will’ was migraine inducing, so they let him have his moment. Well, perhaps Byakuya did but he was far too busy being stuck-up to say anything.

As such, everyone waited as Makoto and Kyoko took their seats at the long table.

“Hey so, before we get to talking, I have a question.” Everyone was kind of surprised to hear Hiro speak up but no one stopped him as he asked, “Sayaka’s all alone in the nurse’s office, right? Is that really okay? I mean, what if something happens to her?”

Again, the students were a bit shocked that, of all people, Hiro was asking a very important question.

“That’s true…” Hifumi concurred, an eerie smile creeping over his face. “What if Monokuma were to return and decide that Sayaka is actually an animatronic outside of its exo-suit and has to be gruesomely stuffed inside a spare Monokuma robot, crushing her skull as it’s forced into—”.

“I don’t think we have to worry about that.”

Surprisingly, Junko was the one who spoke up and ceased Hifumi’s ramblings, much to everyone’s relief. Folding her hands across her chest, she continued, “Monokuma always follows the rules…if he was going to go against them, then he would have finished me off after I survived yesterday. And he wouldn’t have allowed Leon to live after it was revealed that he wasn’t a blackened student.”

“But he let the both you live, instead of killing you yourself. That’s because he wants us to be responsible for any killings. As for his reasoning, I can’t say right now.” Kyoko chimed in, supporting Junko’s theory. “Because of that, we can be assured that, at least for the time being, leaving Sayaka alone will be fine.”

For some reason, it felt odd that Junko and Kyoko were working together to reassure everyone. Leon couldn’t really say why it felt awkward, apart from them having very differing personalities, but still it was odd to see them collaborating. But in either case, it seemed to settle everyone’s fears.

“Alrighty, now that that’s been settled…what were we talking about?” Hiro said nervously, obviously not wanting to facilitate the conversation himself.

“We were discussing what needs to be done about Sayaka and Leon,” Celeste said as they got settled in.

To this, Makoto raised a weary eyebrow and said, “What do you mean, ‘what needs to be done’? Don’t you think they’ve suffered enough? I mean, they nearly died, after all—”.

“And you think that redeems them?” Byakuya interrupted, glaring daggers at his naïve classmate. “Just because they failed to ‘graduate’ once doesn’t mean they won’t try it again.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s right for us to treat them like criminals,” Makoto countered, unafraid to oppose the Togami Heir. As he spoke, the lucky student began looking around the table and paused for a moment. “Wait a second…where’s Leon?”

Hearing his name being called, an awkward groan escaped Leon as he raised his hand and said, “Uh…over here.”
As Makoto looked over to him, he seemed genuinely shocked that he was as far removed from the table as he was. “…Not that I’m questioning where you want to sit but, why are you all the way over there?”

Leon almost wanted to face-palm but held himself together. “I just…wanted some space, that’s all.”

Leon watched as his words reached Makoto, the lucky student’s features hardening a bit, completely understanding why and yet not really being comfortable with it. And again, the baseball star’s strange mixture of guilt and relief as he was once more reassured that the one person who should hate him the most was the only person who really seemed to be on his side.

“Don’t get away from the discussion,” Byakuya cut in, making everyone face him directly. “Once Sayaka wakes up, we need to decide how we plan to punish her for—”.

“What?! Punish her!” Leon practically screamed, “I’m the one who tried to—!”

“Are you forgetting that she was the one who initiated everything? Because of her, our first attempted murder, as well as our first class trial, came to be. Like it or not, she started the game. And now, we have to play it,” the Affluent Progeny countered, not even needing to raise his voice.

“Wha-?! That’s…!” the baseball player stammered, unsuccessfully fighting to defend his classmate.

There was a heavy silence as everyone, especially Leon, found themselves unable to refute him. No one could deny that a feeling of dread had set in after the first case and it wasn’t going to fade any time soon. It wasn’t until a timid voice spoke up that the horrible silence finally abated.

“G-Game? How could you call this a game?”

Everyone turned to see a teary-eyed Chihiro struggling to meet Byakuya’s accusatory gaze.

“Because that’s what this is. A game. A game of life or death,” he answered matter-of-factly, hardly dissuaded by his petite classmate’s objection.

“B-But if we work together—” the programmer tried to counter but was ushered into silence as Byakuya turned to face her head on.

“We were already ‘working together’ and we all saw how that turned out. Worthless notions like friendship or camaraderie have no place here. Anyone could betray us at this point. Look what happened to Makoto, he foolishly trusted Sayaka and because of his naïveté we were the ones who nearly lost our lives.”

Shrinking back a bit, Chihiro choked down a gulp as she said, “B-But, no one actually died.”

“That’s right!” Hina suddenly chimed in, obviously unimpressed with Byakuya’s attitude, “If anything, now is when we need to cheer up! If we all stay united against the Mastermind, then I’m sure we can find a way out of—!”

“Haven’t you been listening to a word I’ve said?” the cruel tone of the affluent progeny practically sliced through her statement, drawing all attention back to him. “‘Working together?’ ‘Fighting a common enemy?’ That kind of fantasy only happens in manga or other worthless fiction. It won’t be that easy to oppose the Mastermind.”

“Um, why do you say that?” a curious Hifumi inquired, seemingly unsure of who he should be siding with. In response to his question, the amused chuckle of Celeste caught everyone’s attention.
“The mastermind’s influence is far greater than we first thought. Taking over Hope’s Peak, which was supposed to be an impossibility, and modifying it to suit their needs. Creating Monokuma, a highly advanced piece of technology. Not to mention providing for all of our needs, supplying food, water and…other comforts. Everything planned out to the most excruciating detail…there are very few people or even groups that would be capable of such a monumental feat.”

She paused for a moment, letting her words sink in before finishing, “This is not the work of an everyday psychopath. Defying them, as we’ve seen, can be more than fatal.”

Even though they all tried not to, the bulk of the students couldn’t help but glance over to Junko, if only for a moment. The bandaged hand that rested on the table in front of her served as a reminder of their helplessness. And the Fashionista herself slightly hung her head at the mention of it.

However, much to everyone’s surprise, Junko lifted her head and said, “There’s something you’re missing though.”

“Hm? What would that be?” Celeste replied, half-surprised and half-intrigued.

“We’ve seen what the Mastermind is capable of, but we also know that they won’t betray the rules that they’ve established, even though it would be more beneficial to them. As long as we don’t break any rules, then there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I see. So you’re finally starting to adapt to this way of life?” the gambler pondered, a sickly sweet smile spreading over her pale lips.

Reeling back a bit, Junko answered, “That’s not exactly what I meant.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Celeste half-heartedly replied, “And here I’d thought you’d begun to realize how foolish your previous actions were. It seems that history is doomed to repeat itself for you.”

Junko’s sky-blue eyes narrowed as the insult hit her ears, glaring fiercely back at her offender. “What I was trying to say was; as long as we don’t do anything stupid, like provoking our fellow classmates, we should be able to find a way to escape.”

Celeste didn’t miss the insinuation Junko made toward her but instead of retorting, she merely twirled a strand of her hair and pretended to ignore the Fashionista’s presence. Seeing how her comment had affected the gambler, Junko folded her arms and huffed before falling silent as well.

“So then, what’s going to happen now?” the deep voice of Sakura asked, not letting the silence dig into them.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Byakuya spoke up again, his condescending tone becoming more familiar by the moment. “Anyone who wants to escape…will have to follow the rules and play the game accordingly.”

With another huff, Junko turned her attention over to him and said, “Why do I get the feeling that your idea of ‘escaping’ is vastly different from the one I was talking about?”

“You were the one who suggested that we follow the rules, isn’t that right?” he chided with a confident smile that bordered on arrogance. “In this case, the only option is to deceive those around you and win the game...as dictated by those rules.”

Byakuya’s smile grew into a condescending smirk as he regained the authority he believed he was destined to have. Junko grit her teeth and quietly seethed, infuriated that her own words were used against her. Just as she was building up an argument against him, another voice, this one soft and
frail, rang out to oppose him.

“N-No…!”

Everything seemed to halt as Chihiro made her proclamation, her eyes squeezed shut with unshed tears brimming in the corners of her eyelids. She looked like a frightened rabbit that had decided to face a predator head on. And it was this look that caused Byakuya’s smirk to come crashing down, sinking into an annoyed frown.

“’No’…what?” he demanded, a bit thrown off by the turn of events.

As moisture slipped down her cheeks, Chihiro opened her eyes and stared at everyone as they looked to her.

“I-I…I don’t want to live…if it means that I have to kill someone else to do it,” she said as plainly as she could, choking back sobs. “I…I don’t want to have to kill anyone again!”

The entire room seemed to flinch at her words, not expecting to hear something so horrific from their delicate classmate. Most were just shocked to hear such a thing from her, while others regarded her with instant suspicion.

However, out of all of them, it was Hiro who found the words to ask, “Again…? What, uh, what do you mean by that?”

Furiously wiping away the oncoming tears, Chihiro lifted her gaze up and her blood-shot eyes focused solely on one student in particular…Leon.

“We…we all voted to kill Leon! If not for Junko, he would have died…and it would have been our fault! It would have been no different than us having killed him ourselves!”

Openly sobbing into her hands, Chihiro leaned forward and laid her head down on the table. With her previous statement now becoming clear, the full weight of her burden was made known. Her disheveled appearance and self-loathing attitude began to affect the other students around her.

And none of them felt more at fault than Leon himself. He couldn’t even look at her, clenching his fists and desperately wanting to disappear from the room. He couldn’t even offer a comforting word for her, because he knew it would never be enough. He caused this and he had to accept the consequences of his actions.

While averting his gaze from the weeping girl, he noticed that Byakuya was glaring menacingly at him, as if to put all blame on him. This made the baseball star want to get up and ram his fist into Byakuya’s smug face but he held himself back.

Just as he thought it would be better to try and excuse himself, a familiar voice spoke up.

“Chihiro…listen,” Makoto abruptly spoke up, his voice breaking through her sobs. “You’re not to blame. None of us are. Not you, not Leon, and not Sayaka.”

Barely able to lift her head up, the programmer somehow managed to pull her gaze up to meet her classmates gaze. Even though he was showing obvious signs of exhaustion, Makoto held a determined visage that, even if only for a moment, gave Chihiro a hint of relief.

“The one responsible for all this is the Mastermind,” he continued, not letting his condition get the better of him. “If they hadn’t of put us here, and made us desperate, none of this would have happened. Isn’t that right, Leon?”
At the mention of his name, the baseball star froze as everyone shifted their collective gaze over to him. A feeling of panic rose up in him, remembering when this had happened during his trial, and the subsequent punishment that had followed. Words caught in his throat, whether they were of encouragement for Chihiro or anger at Makoto for putting him back in this position, he really couldn’t tell.

“Uh…um…well…” he choked out his gaze flicking around to everyone that stared at him. It wasn’t until his eyes fell on the disheartened face of Chihiro that he finally stopped.

Tears stained her cheeks and her puffy eyes stared into his, as if begging him for forgiveness. As he drank in that sight, something inside of him seemed to well up. He wasn’t quite sure what it was, but it was quickly dissipating the fear and anxiety that had been keeping him silent this entire time. Seeing Chihiro in such pain just upset him, for reasons that should have been obvious but at the moment, he just couldn’t explain.

“Y-Yeah! Makoto’s right!” Leon abruptly proclaimed, startling everyone as he stood up from his seat. “You guys didn’t do anything wrong! Especially you, Chihiro! I would have done the same thing if I had been in your position! And in the end, none of us wanted this to happen!”

His heartfelt words seemed to penetrate the despair that had been quickly taking over Chihiro, her tears ceasing to flow and her breathing coming back under control. Seeing her begin to calm down, Leon felt his passion starting to wind down as he continued, “So…you know, don’t beat yourself up over this…”

For a moment, Leon thought that he may have just made things worse, as Chihiro didn’t say a single word and just stared at him with a vacant expression. He wasn’t sure what else he could do, and just as he was about to turn away and sit back down, he heard a soft sniffling come from the programmer. Snapping his eyes back to her, he was certain she was about start crying again but instead, she just stared back him, a strangely serious expression on her reddened face.

“S-So…you don’t hate me…hate us…for what we almost did to you?”

Her voice was shaky and full of fear, as if his answer would determine whether she lived or died. It honestly hurt Leon to hear her ask that but given everything that had happened, he understood why she needed to hear it straight from him. It was very…Chihiro, Leon briefly thought just before he answered.

“Hell no…” he abruptly said, before realizing he sounded a bit too aggressive. “I mean, I’m still alive so…it all works out, right?”

The last thing Leon expected his words to bring were more tears from Chihiro but that’s exactly what he got. As if a dam had burst, moisture poured out of the programmer’s eyes and the baseball star was certain that he’d seriously screwed up again. But then, he heard the tiniest of laughs coming from the weeping girl and he realized her tears were no longer sorrowful.

Chihiro furiously wiped away her tears and, mustering up the biggest smile that she could, she said, “T-Thanks…”

Against his will, Leon felt his face flush and he laughed nervously, pushing away any thoughts of embarrassment. “Y-You’re, uh, welcome…” he muttered, not knowing what else to do.

Either way, both of them felt much better. Then again, it wasn’t just them. It seemed that almost everyone was less on edge than they’d been a few moments ago. And even if no one else realized it, Leon knew it was all thanks to Makoto. The lucky student was smiling as he saw the two of them
Leon really didn’t know what it was but Makoto just had this...thing that he could do. And whatever it was, they certainly needed it right now. However, little did the baseball star know that there was one student that had had enough of their happy-go-lucky attitudes.

“Hmph, ‘it all works out’, huh? What a foolish way to look at things.” Again, the arrogant tone of Byakuya interrupted them but he didn’t give them time to react before continuing, “Or are you all forgetting that we still have to decide what to do with the two attempted murderers?”

“We haven’t forgotten, but I do think it’s unfair to decide such a thing right now.” Much to everyone’s surprise, Kyoko finally chose to speak up, effortlessly meeting Byakuya’s stern gaze. With a firm glare of her own, she turned her attention over to the affluent progeny and said, “It’s only fair to wait until we hear what Sayaka has to say. After all, we never got to hear her side of the story.”

“I would like to hear what she has to say as well,” Celeste surprisingly chimed in, a dainty smile on her face. “Understanding Sayaka’s reasoning might prove useful in adapting to living here, wouldn’t you agree?”

“And what’s the point of that?” Byakuya instantly protested, “It won’t change the fact that she betrayed us.”

With a smirk of her own, Kyoko countered, “…True, but that doesn’t mean that we have the right to punish her without at least hearing her story. If we did that, we would be no better than Monokuma —”.

“Did I hear someone call for the Ultra Spectacular Headmaster?”

Before any of them realized it, Monokuma materialized near the entrance to the kitchen. Paws placed on its hips, the bear stood in a heroic position as the students sharply turned to glare. At once, everyone was on guard.

Mondo and Sakura sprang up from their chairs and rushing in front of everyone else, prepared for whatever the bear might try. Taka stood just behind them, prepared to negotiate with the bear if need be. Makoto also stood up, but got dizzy and almost fell back into his seat, exhaustion finally beginning to overwhelm him. Byakuya, Celeste and Kyoko all stared angrily at the automaton, small beads of sweat beginning to form on their foreheads. Toko quickly ducked behind the closest table, muttering about keeping calm.

Chihiro flinched and hid behind the wall that the braver students had formed. Hina also got up from her seat and instantly went to stand just behind Sakura, ready to support her friend however she could. Hiro and Hifumi stayed exactly where they were opting to remain as still as possible, in the hopes of not being noticed. Behind all of them, Junko glared menacingly at the bear, her fists clenched so tight her knuckles turned white.

Far in the back, Leon began to tremble almost uncontrollably. Just seeing Monokuma brought untold fear to him, knowing that his death had almost come at the bear’s hands. He tried to will his body to stop shaking but it was no use. He tried to fight the memory of the bear wielding the baseball bat as the bone-shattering baseballs had crashed into his abdomen, but he was unsuccessful. His hand instinctively clutched the spot where he’d been injured, for protection, and it was all he could do just to remain standing right now.

“No one called for you, you piece of shit bear! So get outta here!” Mondo shouted, cracking his
knuckles menacing.

Hearing this, Monokuma lowered its head in mock sadness as it said, “What? Am I not cool enough to be invited to your little tea party?” Suddenly, the bear’s head shot up and it howled with laughter, “Eyohohohoho! Not that I care! I’m more of a coffee drinking bear anyway!”

As Monokuma continued to jeer at them, Sakura took an aggressive step forward and said, “Do you have some business with us? If not, then leave us in peace.”

Strangely enough, even Sakura seemed just a tiny bit shaken by the bear’s sudden appearance. But no one seemed to notice it, or perhaps it was simply understandable considering all they’d witnessed. In either case, Monokuma didn’t seem too bothered by her words and continued on.

“How rude!” the bear shouted at them, its face flaring up and its claws extending out. “I took time out of my beary busy schedule to come out here and get you all instead of using the intercom and this is the thanks I get? At the very least I expected a bit more respect for coming here personally.”

“If you have a message for us, then out with it. You’re wasting my time,” Byakuya said curtly, his frustration from before leaking into this conversation as well.

“Fine, fine, fine,” Monokuma said carefully before clearing its throat. “Ahem! Attention! Attention! Please gather in the gym at your earliest convenience…meaning right now! That is all.”

As the bear finished, a sense of confusion washed over everyone. Without another word, Monokuma turned to leave but was quickly stopped as a stoic voice called out.

“Hold on a moment,” Kyoko inquired, causing the bear to halt. “If you have a message for us, why not just tell us here? Why make us go to the gym?”

“Oh, now you wanna chat, huh?” Monokuma said, followed by a heavy sigh. “Well, I suppose I could tell you now buuuuuut…” He paused for but a moment before whirling around and shouting, “Since you all seemed so eager to get rid of me I figured I’d make you work for this new info! That’s what you get for being so standoff-ish when your headmaster graces you with his presence.”

“New info? Just what do you—?” Makoto tried to say before the bear snapped at him.

“I already told you…go to the gym if you want the info! Kids these days…can’t even follow simple instructions…this is why unemployment is up…”

Taken aback by Monokuma’s abrasive attitude, no one moved as the bear stormed off into the kitchen, presumably disappearing into some dark hole somewhere. Left standing in their now, awkward positions, the students semi-relaxed as they realized the bear was truly gone, if only for the moment.

“We had best do as he said,” Celeste interrupted the silence, “Besides, I’m rather curious as to what this ‘new info’ could be.”

“It could be a clue to help us find a way out of here!” Hina hopefully proclaimed, trying to cheer everyone up.

“I doubt that,” Junko disagreed, trying, and failing, not to sound negative. “It’s not like we really have a choice anyway.”

“True, but if Monokuma called us all personally, it probably has something to do with our school life,” Kyoko asserted, one hand resting on her chin. “We should put all other discussions on hold
“Agreed!” Taka shouted, trying to take charge again. “We can debate what to do with Sayaka and Leon afterward if we must. But for now, let’s all head to the gym! Single file, please.”

Knowing that there wasn’t too much else they could do about it, they all prepared to depart.

A stern expression came over Byakuya’s face, as he must have realized that now was not the time to continue their earlier debate, especially since they knew how dangerous it was to defy Monokuma’s will. Besides, it probably didn’t really matter to him what they decided to do, his mind was already made up.

As everyone began to file out of the room, hardly anyone realized that Leon remained rooted in place, unable to move. He was still trembling with fear, despite how hard his fists were clenched. He couldn’t move, he was too terrified of what might happen. What if he reversed his decision and decided to execute him? Or worse yet, what if he decided to punish Sayaka instead?!

When he thought of that, Leon didn’t know if he had the strength to take even a single step forward. His head hung down so low he though his body was going to being to droop down to the floor. That’s when a soft voice invaded his ears.

“Hey, Leon?” The baseball star suddenly snapped his head up to see Chihiro standing in front of him, a concerned expression clouding her features. “I know it can’t be easy for you but…try not to worry…okay?” She paused for a moment before giving a nervous smile and saying, “I mean, you said it yourself, you’re still alive right now so…everything will be okay!”

For a moment, Leon stood there, frozen as Chihiro did her best to cheer him up. Her words sank in and little by little, he felt his strength returning. Before he knew it, he discovered that he wasn’t shaking anymore but that wasn’t the strangest part. Oddly enough, this all felt so nostalgic for him, as if this wasn’t the first time she’d cheered him up like this. But there’s no way that could be possible. After all, they’d only met a few days ago and this was the first time they’d really ever spoken to each other.

Pushing away those thoughts, Leon instead focused on his petite classmate and said, “Y-Yeah… thanks.”

It was obvious that he was still pretty freaked out, but at the very least, he felt that he could at least head to the gym with everyone else. Chihiro must have noticed this because she went to his side, patted him on the back, and ushered him forward as she said, “Alright then, we need to catch up to everyone.”

“Right, let’s get going.” Leon agreed, walking beside her as they made their way out of the cafeteria.

Unbeknownst to either of them, standing in the darkness of the kitchen, Monokuma glared at them with a furious expression.

“No way…the degradation of the procedure couldn’t happen that fast…can it?” the real Junko Enoshima pondered as she watched Leon and Chihiro through the bear’s eyes. “If this keeps up… how long will it be before…?” she trailed off finishing her sentence in her head but not aloud.

Abruptly standing up, she gave a quick stretch before yawning audibly.
“Eh, who cares?” Glancing over to a pile of folded papers, each bearing a student’s name on them, she chuckled to herself. “After I get finished with them…the whole world’s gonna see the true face of despair!”

“Okay! Lift your arms up and down! One, two, three, four!!”

Mukuro fought the urge to roll her eyes with all her might, giving in just as the bear decided to stretch up then reach down and touch its toes. Even more annoying was the fact that, out of all of the students present, the one who was supposed to be their “leader” was actively going along with the physical training.

“One! Two! Three! Four!!” Taka practically shouted as he swept his arms from side to side and bent over to reach his toes.

An exasperated sigh followed Mukuro’s fated eye roll as the soldier was forced to endure her sister’s attempt at increasing tension through means of peaceful activity.

It was rather ingenious really. Everyone had such a negative and fearful opinion of Monokuma that it didn’t matter what he did, they would be cautious and wary of him. Even just calling them there to exercise was viewed with the utmost scrutiny, when in fact, that’s all the bear truly wanted from them. At this point, the ruthlessness of Monokuma was too well-known for any of them to see the animatronic in any other kind of light. Hell, even if the bear offered them the escape switch at this point, more than half of the students wouldn’t trust the gesture, even if the gift was genuine.

It was a clever tactic, one that Mukuro had seen on various combat campaigns. Doing something horrifying immediately followed by a kind gesture, it sowed the seeds of confusion amongst enemies and made them more susceptible to deceit. In this case, it was used to put everyone on edge even more than they already were, to push someone closer to actually committing murder.

And if Mukuro hadn’t seen the effectiveness of the tactic first-hand, she wouldn’t have been so fearful. However, knowing that every move her sister made was to provoke them all into making a fatal mistake, the soldier couldn’t fight the uneasy feeling she got as the bear’s exercise regiment finally came to a halt.

“Ahhhhh! Doesn’t that feel great?!” Monokuma panted, sweat somehow leaking from its fur. “Being stuck inside like this means you really need to take care of your health!”

“Y-You’re the one k-keeping us inside,” Toko muttered barely above a whisper.

“Details! Details! That’s not important right now! You need to relax a bit more, embrace life—!”

“Wasn’t there a purpose you’ve called us all here for? Or did you intend to exercise some of us to death?” Byakuya openly mocked, sending a swift glance over to Hifumi, who hadn’t even attempt the routine.

A part of Mukuro almost reeled in disgust at the affluent progeny’s hurtful insults. He had always been aggressive when he was working toward a goal but never like this. And while he certainly could be a heartless bastard, he never took it as far back when they were in school together. It seemed that being forced into a life or death situation had activated his self-preservation instincts.

It was the exact opposite of Makoto…speaking of which, he seemed rather quiet.
Stealing a glance over his way, Mukuro saw him glaring fiercely at Monokuma…or what a physically exhausted person’s could consider a glare. His eyes were reddened and his eyelids sagged. Legs wobbling and fingers digging into his palms to try and stay awake, even a child could tell that he wasn’t going to last much longer.

“Urgh, fine! Listen up, kids!” Monokuma shouted, stealing Mukuro’s attention away from the fading boy. “I called you all here today to let you know that, because you completed a class trial, a whole new world has just opened up for you! Even if the trial didn’t quite go as planned…”

As the obvious disappointment in Monokuma’s voice echoed in the gymnasium, a look of shock spread across each student’s face, but none of them were more shaken than Mukuro.

“W-Wait a second! Junko can’t mean…she’s opening up the second floor!”

Staring, almost completely wide-eyed at the bear, the soldier honestly questioned if what she heard could be true. However, Monokuma, or Junko rather, had never lied to any of them since the killing game had begun. And while Mukuro knew there was cause for Junko to lie to them, no one else could possible know that the Mastermind was taking a huge risk.

The only real question was ‘Why’? Why did Junko decide to do this now? Could it be that her boredom was getting worse and she wanted stimulation? Or perhaps she wanted to give the students more opportunities for murder? It would make sense but it was a pretty risky venture, because there could be clues to what had happened to them on the upper floors.

“Then again…the rules are absolute to Junko. And she did say that after each class trial, the next floor would be opened up. She never specified that an execution needed to take place, just a trail. Does that mean that…Junko isn’t so much taking a risk as she is following the rules?”

It made sense but there was a single flaw in that logic. Until this very moment, Monokuma hadn’t mentioned the rule about opening up a new floor to any of them. The only reason Mukuro knew was because of her previous involvement. There was actually no need to follow through with a rule that hadn’t even been given yet.

Unless…

“Junko…you’re playing the game too. You’re doing it in your own way but you’re still playing the game, the same as us. Which means…you only get to leave if you murder someone and don’t get caught—!”

Mukuro’s breath hitched in her throat and her face paled. A fearsome truth was revisited upon her as she lost the will to breathe.

“Is that…is that why she decided to…betray me?!”

The horrible truth was even more despair inducing then she had ever imagined. From the very beginning, she was never meant to leave this place, Junko hadn’t told her the entire plan on purpose. The Despair loving twin had put them both in the game, probably planning to murder her own sister all the while. And since Mukuro would never intentionally bring harm to her sister…she may have even let Junko kill her in order for her sister to survive the game.

And if Makoto hadn’t stepped in and saved her, Junko would have become a blackened without anyone being the wiser. As the numbness of this revelation began to wind down, Mukuro clenched her fists and glared menacingly at the bear.

“Was that it? Was this what you wanted all along Junko?!”
As if to mock her, Monokuma briefly glanced in her direction and even if it was only for an instant, she could have sworn that the bear’s toothy grin widened. Just before the soldier felt she was going to be overtaken by anger, a new thought invaded her mind.

“Wait…but if that’s the case, then Junko failed and…she isn’t a blackened. Which means…!”

Mukuro’s gaze abruptly shot out to take in the view of the rest of her classmates. “She still needs to murder one of us…”

It was all becoming clear now. More floors meant more opportunities, not just for the students, but for Junko as well. It leveled the playing field, in a way.

Of course, all of this was going off the assumption that Junko was truly playing the game and wasn’t like Mukuro could just ask her about it, not anymore. After all, it was possible that Junko may stay out of the game entirely…but chances of that were slim, especially with Junko obviously increasing boredom.

Opening up the second floor presented a number of advantages for both parties, and at the same time, it gave Mukuro the advantage as well. There was something on the second floor that could be the key to saving all of them.

“The hidden archive in the boy’s bathroom…”

“Have fun exploring your new surroundings!!” Monokuma danced elatedly as it sank behind the podium on the gym stage, completely disappearing from sight and presumably going back into its hole.

Just as quickly as the bear appeared, he departed, saying no more about what he meant by ‘A whole new world’.

Leon wasn’t at all displeased to see the demented bear go. Standing far in the back, putting as much distance between himself and the bear as possible, the baseball star was practically rooted to the floor, sweat trickling down his neck. He’d been so terrified that Monokuma might reverse his sentencing that he barely heard the automaton’s words.

However, the other students were already discussing what the bear’s words could mean.

“A whole new world”? What the hell does that mean?” Mondo questioned everyone, trying to make sense of it.

“Could it possibly mean—?” Celeste began before she was abruptly cut off.

“An exit!!” Hina shouted, earning the smallest of huff from Celeste in the process.

“That seems…unlikely.”

“Well we won’t know until we look!” Mondo furiously objected, almost making the gambler flinch. However, she merely scoffed and twirled her hair with her fingers.

“At any rate, it would seem that we should organize another search of the school,” Sakura suggested, trying to ease everyone’s tension.

“Right! Everyone split up and investigate the school! We’ll meet back in the cafeteria once we’re—”
“H-Hey! Hold on!”

Leon found himself calling out before he even knew what was happening and he instantly wished he hadn’t. The accusatory glares of the class trial were revisited upon him as everyone turned to listen to him. With their gazed all fixated upon him, the baseball star’s throat seemed to swell shut and his voice refused to cooperate.

“What? What do you want?” the harsh voice of Byakuya dug into him, causing him to pant for air.

“W-Well…uh…” he stammered, almost not able to remember why he’d interrupted Taka in the first place. “We…we still haven’t decided who’s gonna watch over Sayaka.”

His voice wasn’t as strong as it usually was, and at first, he wasn’t even sure if anyone had heard him. However, a slow murmur from the other students caught his attention.

“That’s right. We never did decided what to do about that,” Hina remembered, scratching her head nervously. At the same time, an annoyed scoff came from Byakuya as he looked away from Leon.

“Hmph. Honestly, I don’t think we need to have someone watch her at all.” Although they shouldn’t have been, most of the students were surprised by Byakuya’s snide comment. The affluent progeny smirked as he continued, “In fact, if someone did decide to kill her, it would make the game that much more interesting.”

All of a sudden, all the apprehension that Leon felt dissipated as he saw red.

“Interesting! You call leaving someone defenseless to die interesting!” Leon’s screams echoed in the room and he clenched his fists tightly. Just before he was about to do something reckless again, a new voice joined the fray.

“How dare you!” Everyone spun around to see Makoto, barely standing, pointing angry at Byakuya. “Even if she did try to kill one of us, she’s still our friend! She made a mistake and you just keep on punishing her for it!”

Completely ignoring Leon for the moment, the affluent progeny turned his full attention over to Makoto.

“And what’s wrong with that?” he jeered, making Makoto flinch. “Criminals should be punished for their crimes. Just because she was a classmate doesn’t excuse her.”

“But she apologized! She…she apologized!!” Makoto sputtered before almost doubling over, panting for breath.

“Makoto!” the voice of Junko rang out, the Fashionista speeding to his side, followed quickly by Hina. Labored breaths came from the semi-conscious boy as he fought off what was probably a wave of dizziness.

“Idiot. He shouldn’t try to argue when he can barely stand,” Byakuya scoffed and turned around, unknowingly coming face to face with Kyoko Kirigiri.

If the affluent progeny was surprised, he didn’t show it, staring down at her without so much as blinking. For a moment they just stood there, fiercely glaring at each other menacingly. But then, almost without him realizing it, Kyoko gave a disappointed huff and slipped past him, as if she didn’t acknowledge him as threat. And although it shouldn’t have bothered him, it was clear by the furrowing of his brows that Byakuya felt more than insulted by the silent gesture.
“Don’t worry, he’s just exhausted from being up all night. He needs rest.” Kyoko told everyone, slowly approaching the circle that had formed around their collapsed friend. “Will someone help carry him to his room?”

When the question was posed, Leon instantly felt like volunteering. He owed Makoto, not just for backing him up now, but for defending him over and over whenever Byakuya insulted him or Sayaka. However, he didn’t get the chance to offer.

“I’ll do it.” Mondo abruptly, and surprisingly, spoke up. He walked over to his exhausted classmate and said, “And after I get him back to his room… I’ll go and watch over Sayaka.”

“As will I,” the deep tones of Sakura concurred, folding her arms and nodding sternly.

“A pointless endeavor—,” Byakuya was barely able to utter before a steely voice cut him off.

“You call ensuring the life of a fellow student pointless?” Kyoko said calmly, not even bothering to turn and look at him. Another annoyed scoff sounded from Byakuya’s throat before he shifted his feet and headed for the door.

“If you all want to waste your time protecting a murderer, then go ahead. I, on the other hand, have more important matters to deal with.”

No one made a move to stop him as he left, allowing him to exit the gym without any further delays. A dense quiet hung over them for a few moments after he’d departed. Tension was rather high and they all knew what it could lead to…

“H-He’s not e-exactly wrong…” Toko said abruptly, fidgeting with her hands as she spoke. “S-Sayaka chose to b-betray us. We don’t kn-know if it won’t happen again.”

Almost as one, the remaining students sent angered looks at the writing prodigy. Not because she’d spoken up, but because they all knew it to be true. Time seemed to grind to a halt as everyone unwillingly let the Affluent Progeny’s words invade their minds. In truth, Byakuya was being the most logical of all of them and that’s what made it so difficult to refute him. Even so, his attitude was doing far more harm than good, both for himself and the rest of them.

“For now, let’s just concentrate on searching the school. We can deal with the other issues after we do that.” Kyoko’s stern voice washed over everyone, seeming to lessen the tension just enough for time to resume for all of them.

Slinging Makoto’s arm over his shoulder, Mondo lifted the semi-conscious boy up enough for his feet to be dragging along the ground. “C’mon, man. Let’s get you to back to your room. You gotta be tired after watching a murderer all night.”

Makoto barely was able to lift his head and the displeased look on his face was expected, but he didn’t have the energy to refute, simply allowing the biker to slug him along and toward the doors.

Leon watched as they exited the room, briefly reminded of their first day here, when he’d helped Sayaka carry the unconscious Makoto to his assigned room. He recalled Sayaka’s kind offer to help him become a better singer, remembered how vibrant her smile was and how her presence filled him with energy. He’d been smitten with her amazing talent and wonderful personality…

But that image was now shattered, not only by what he’d done but because of the realization that, probably right from the start, he and Makoto had been played by her. Well, honestly, Leon wasn’t sure if it had all been a lie or if it had just ended up that way. In either case, her actions didn’t warrant a death sentence and what he’d almost done was far worse than what she’d attempted.
It was almost unbelievable…that he had almost taken her from the world completely.

“Hard to believe it was only a few days ago that we talked about changing my title…” he quietly thought, his head lowering and his hands balling into fists. “How could everything have gotten so fucked up in only a few days!?”

Before he had time to self-loath any more, an authoritative voice shouted to all of them.

“Alright then!” Taka once again stepped up, trying to make sense of this chaos. “Once we finish investigating, we’ll meet in the cafeteria! Dismissed!”

With little else he could do, Leon followed everyone out of the gym to begin their investigation.

“Well, this is fan-fucking-tastic…” Mukuro sat alone in one of the stalls of the second floor girl’s bathroom, seething. “What was I thinking?! ‘Oh, I’d better go check the bathroom’. Like that was going to get one of the guys to check out the boy’s restroom.”

Upon arriving up on the second floor, Mukuro thought that, if she decided to investigate the girl’s room, then one of the boys would undoubtedly do the same. Unfortunately, as she headed into the restroom, out of the corner of her eyes, she saw all of them walking away without even glancing back.

She even thought she heard one of the guys say, “She must have been holding it or something.”

Apparently, she had vastly overestimated the intelligence of her male classmates. Then again, a part of her had to be reminded that, even if they were in a live-or-die situation, not many of her classmates could pick up on subtle hints…or even obvious ones.

“Then again… I have no idea why I thought this would work,” she muttered, leaning to the side and resting her head against the wall. “This is gonna be harder than I thought.”

Everyone had split up into groups to investigate the new developments in the school.

Taka decided to stay on the first floor to investigate if anything on that floor may have changed, with Mondo and Sakura keeping watch over Sayaka. Hina, Celeste and Leon headed off toward the direction of the pool, with this being confirmed when Mukuro heard Hina’s elated shouts all the way in her stall. Kyoko, Hifumi, Toko and Chihiro were traveling as a group and had headed off toward the library. They were probably there now. Hiro was probably wandering around aimlessly, ducking into a classroom or something.

Byakuya had probably ascended to the second floor after he left the gym, and probably had found the library by now. He spent so much time there even when they were in school together, so she wouldn’t doubt that’s where he’d be.

The second floor didn’t have much there, compared to the other floors, because the pool and library took up so much space that there wasn’t much room for anything other than a few small classrooms. At this rate, the investigation would be over rather quickly…and Mukuro may lose her chance to help one of the boys “discover” the hidden room in the boy’s restroom.

“Uhg… Why the hell can’t they just go in there and look around?! I know they have no reason to but there isn’t much I can do! It’s not like I can go in there! Junko’s gonna be watching me like a hawk. The only way I’m getting in there is if a boy… takes… me…”
As her words trailed off, she pushed away from the wall she’d rested against, an uncomfortable look on her face.

“If I can trust what Junko once told me, the only time a boy takes a girl into a restroom...is for sex! Anything can happen during sex! I can suggest going to the far back, and when I decided to get a little rough...we’ll accidentally find the hidden room! That’s it!” she exclaimed, pleased that she finally had some kind of plan.

However, it took all of two seconds for her mind to register exactly what she just planned, and when it did, she almost blanched.

“...I don’t know anything about sex!” she horrifically realized, slapping her palm against her forehead.

Mukuro was a tactical genius when it came to combat and self-preservation, but because of this, she had never been physical with anyone. She’d never kissed or initiated sexual activities with someone. Hell, she’d never even hugged her sister before! Then again, Junko was never a huggy kind of sibling. Yeah, Mukuro was a soldier and was quick on her feet when she needed to be but this was a whole other kind of “close quarters combat”!

Not to mention that, despite being in a mercenary squad with a number of physically appealing men, she had absolutely no interest in pursuing sexual activities. In fact, she was the only member of Fenrir who didn’t prefer to cool down from a life-threatening mission by “relieving tension” with another squad mate. Many of the other female members did but she preferred to exercise or clean her equipment instead. She never imagined that refusing to learn sexual techniques would be what stopped her from being able to complete this mission!

“And there’s a lot at risk, too.” Mukuro hung her head and sighed heavily. “Even if I’m able to do this properly, because I have to pretend to be Junko...I can’t be as aggressive as I would like. Which means, I may not be able to forcibly ‘discover’ the hidden room! And if that happens...and I really do go all the way...with one of the boys...”

That thought alone was terrifying, not because she thought her male classmates were unappealing, but because it could be dangerous in this kind of scenario. She’d need protection but there was no time to go and search the nurse’s office for it...which was currently occupied. Plus, knowing her sister, the only rubbers that she would have stocked were the eerie Monokuma condoms with the Monokuma headed tips that had a 90% fail rate! Which Junko had been so proud were released before The World’s Most Despair Inducing Event had taken place.

Mukuro considered that she could do it raw but then the idea of getting pregnant was a major factor and she was not going to let that happen!

“Junko always said that pregnancy was a whole different kind of despair that even she wasn’t ready for...”

However, if Mukuro didn’t at least attempt to seduce any of the boys, they may never be able to find the hidden room in the boy’s restroom. This mission was turning into a nightmare that she wasn’t sure she could handle! This is why she preferred to be a soldier who followed orders rather than one who came up plans!

Shaking her head furiously, she paused and slapped her cheeks with both hands.

“I can’t just give up before even trying! This is the best chance I have and I can’t let myself worry about this kind of thing right now! However...” she grew quiet as the most difficult part of this plan
had yet to be decided. “If I *have* to do this…w-who should it be with?”

Mukuro suppressed a shudder as all of her choices flashed through her mind, weakening her resolve slightly as she was forced to go through them one by one.

“Byakuya will never trust me…and…just no. Even if he was the Byakuya from before, there’s no way.” She crossed him off her mental list and continued, “Mondo wouldn’t be a horribly bad choice…except that if I prove I’m stronger than him he’ll know something’s wrong and that could lead to issues…” Scratching him off as well, she moved on. “Then there’s Taka…but there’s no way Mr. Honor Student’s gonna go for that! Even if he did…he’d have to take off those god-awful boots before I get anywhere near him—oh, god now I’m sounding like Junko!”

A twisted feeling of disgust wormed it’s way through Mukuro but she managed to fight it off. With three candidates down, the soldier plugged along with her remaining choices.

“There’s always Chihiro—wait, they still don’t know she’s physically a boy. Dammit, she was one of the better choices!” she seethed as she was forced to move on. “And then there’s Hiro……….” A bit of bile leapt up in her throat as she decided to keep pondering. “Hifumi would be far too interested in the 2D to actually go through with it…though if I cosplayed…no, I don’t have the time for that!”

Her options were seriously winding down now. And so, with only two possibilities left, she finally came to the choice she wanted to make but knew she couldn’t.

“Makoto…I’d be willing…more than willing actually but, he never would be. Besides, he’s asleep and I’m not waking him up for my stupid plan!” she unfortunately surmised, leaving her with only a single option remaining.

“With what happened with Sayaka, I doubt that Leon would be willing to go into a room alone with me. Then again, I did save him from execution…perhaps a little bribery for coming to his rescue is in order…”

As her words echoed in the small bathroom, Mukuro had no idea of the miniature microphone that was hanging from the ceiling.

Far above her, shut up tight in the camera monitor room, Junko was practically giddy as she listened to her sister’s “plan”. Stuffing her face with popcorn and sipping a large soda, the Ultimate Despair girl couldn’t stop herself from roaring as Mukuro continued to prattle on.

“S-She has no idea…I’m putting this audio in the broadcast!!! AHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!”

The second floor was far more spacious than the first but that was to be expected of a higher floor, especially considering there were two larger rooms making up half the floor.

Leon wandered through the hallway past the pool area, having poked his head in to see Hina practically begging Celeste to join her for a swim. He left before they really noticed him. As much as it disheartened him, he knew keeping his distance from everyone was best for now. Traversing down the open corridor next to the library, he pondered what he should do next.
Hearing voices from within the library, he decided to steer clear for the time being, especially since he was pretty sure he heard Byakuya’s condescending tone coming from within. Moving to the end of the hallway, he opened up the doors to both of the classrooms but found all the windows sealed, just like on the first floor. With nothing left to investigate, he returned to the large corridor outside the library, pacing back and forth for what seemed like hours.

Growing tired of pacing, he glanced over at the metal plates on the wall, moved over and knocked on them a couple times. Just for good measure, he placed his fingers on the edge of the metal sheet and pulled, but it didn’t budge in the slightest.

“There’s no way we’re getting through that…” His sullen voice echoed down the hall, sounding defeated for several reasons.

A multitude of chairs were lined against the wall and, tired from all his “exploration”, the ballplayer sank down into one of them, resting his head against one of the window blocking plates. Staring up at the ceiling, Leon could help but feel more alone than he’d ever been before.

“That’s to be expected though…considering what I tried to do,” he whispered to himself, letting one hand rest over his face, fingers rubbing at his tired eyes.

“Hey, Leon?”

A familiar voice called to him, bringing him back to attentiveness. Leaning forward, he turned toward the voice to see none other than his savior, Junko, heading straight for him.

“Oh…hey Junko,” he answered almost on reflex, “What’s up?”

The Fashionista held a weary look on her face as she marched over to him. For a second it seemed that she had something to say to him but as she got closer, that notion appeared to vanish as she looked him over. The once over she was giving him sent waves of embarrassment through him, so he averted his gaze to keep from showing his flustered appearance. Besides, he could only imagine how pathetic he looked at that moment.

“What are you doing out here by yourself?” Junko suddenly asked, her soft tone almost startling the ballplayer. He lifted his gaze up to see her nervously smirking down at him. “Finished ‘exploring’ already?”

Her tone was light and if they hadn’t been in such a horrific situation, Leon almost would have thought she was kinda flirting with him. However, despite telling himself it probably wasn’t the case, the baseball star felt that she was only talking to him out of pity, which agitated him even more. His sullen look shifted to frustration as he jerked his gaze away and said, “Yeah, something like that. So, what do you want?”

The sound of a shifting chair reached his ears and on instinct he turned back to see Junko pull up a chair right next to him. Plopping down in the seat, she crossed her legs and stared up at the ceiling. Neither of them said anything for a good fifteen seconds before the Fashionista let out an exasperated sigh.

“You know; if you’ve got something to say, just spit it out.”

Leon noiselessly gasped as those words reached his ears. Not only because of the bluntness but because her tone had shifted dramatically. It was just like the time he and Hiro had been holding her up outside the cafeteria. She sounded…stronger? He wasn’t quite sure how to really describe it. It was almost as if she was letting out some kind of inner personality, one that she was rarely able to
“Bottling things up will only make it harder on you, ya know?” the Fashionista continued despite his shock, her voice still radiating strength and power. It was so overbearing that Leon almost felt unable to respond.

“What’s the point?” he finally muttered, hanging his head to avoid looking at her. “It’s not like anything I say really matters at this point—”.

“Don’t be so naïve,” her sharp tone cut him off, forcing his gaze to shoot back up to her. “Just because you made a mistake doesn’t mean you don’t have the right to talk about it. Believe me… there are a lot, and I mean a lot, of things I want to say to a bunch of people…but I can’t now. Even if it doesn’t make sense or you think I won’t understand, just say it anyway.”

For a long time, there was a thick silence between them. It was so quiet that they both heard the light ringing of silence in the air. Gripping the edge of his chair, Leon was about to blow her off and walk away when she caught him by surprise.

“Trust me, talking about it will make things easier for you. And if I’m the only one who’s willing to listen, then I guess now’s the best time to do it. So, like it or not, I’m not going anywhere until you get it all out. Got it?”

Glancing over to him, she let a reassuring smirk overtake her features, proving that she meant it. As if her words themselves were penetrating him, Leon felt his pent up aggressions and regrets beginning to burst through, and before he knew it, he just began speaking.

“I…I just don’t know what to do anymore! I’ve done something that no one should forgive me for! And at the same time… I do want to be forgiven for it!” he seethed but kept his voice low, so as not to draw the attention of any nearby students. “But I know that there isn’t anything I can do about it! I feel so hopelessly powerless! I don’t know what I should be doing!”

He paused for a moment to catch his breath, and when he did, moisture began to accumulate in the corners of his eyes.

“And the worst part is…a part of me agrees with that bastard Byakuya. Even now…I can’t see myself as anything less than a murderer. I tried to cover up my crime and, even though I had no idea it could get everyone else killed, when I did find out, all I cared about was my own survival. And I… and I…”

Squeezing his eyes shut, tears slipped down his cheeks only to be furiously wiped away by his sleeve. Taking a few deep breaths, he managed to compose himself enough to continue.

“I…I just…don’t know what to do anymore…” he finished, not knowing what else to say.

His heavy breathings echoed in the long corridor and it was fortunate that no one had decided to come their way. Not only was this probably the most embarrassing moment of his life, but he’d broken down in front of Junko of all people, the girl that had saved his life. Still wiping away tears from his reddened face, he slowly shifted his gaze over to see the Fashionista again staring up at the ceiling, a stoic look on her face.

“Get it all out?” she abruptly asked, still not turning toward him.

“H-Huh?” he sputtered for a moment before clearing his throat and thinking about it. “I-I guess…”

“Good,” Junko said sharply before folding her arms and glaring at him. “Now let me tell you why
Visibly taken aback by her blunt comment, Leon almost fell out of his chair as Junko swiveled over to face him directly, staring him square in the eyes.

“But first, let me ask you a question. Who was it that saved Sayaka?”

The question startled him more than her previous statement and he struggled to answer, “W-Wha-? Well, you obviously—”. 

“Wrong again.” 

Her tone was only the slightest bit condescending but it was enough to snap the weary Leon out of his pity party, his fists clenched as he glared furiously at her. “And what the hell do you mean by that, huh?! I wasn’t the one who carried her to the nurse’s office or did the transfusion thing—!”

“But you were the one who tended to her and bandaged her right after she was cut!” Junko spoke over him, practically jumping to her feet and glaring down at him. “If you hadn’t of reacted so quickly, she would have bled out long before I got to her. The reason she’s alive is because of you. Not me…You.”

Leon’s eyes widened as Junko forced her opinions on him. He wanted to argue with her, wanted to tell her that even though what she was saying was true, he just couldn’t bring himself to believe it. Frozen in place after hearing that, he was unable to stop Junko from continuing.

“No matter what you think, no matter how hard it is for you to believe…You are not a murderer.” He flinched as she emphasized that but didn’t stop her. “Murderers don’t try to save their victims, and they don’t feel regret for what they did or feel responsible to those around them for it.”

“B-But! I tried to cover it all up! I was only thinking of myself!” Leon tried to counter but only received a scoff from the Fashionista.

“And you think that none of us would have done the same in your position? We’re human, we do that when we’re scared,” she said before a light smile graced her lips. “Besides, by my count, you’ve saved more people than you’ve killed.”

“But…But…!!”

Before he knew what was happening, Junko’s hands landed on either side of his shoulders. As her nail dug in slightly, Leon found himself staring up at her, unable to look away.

“Honestly, we’ve all been pretty lucky. If just one thing had gone wrong for any of us…we’d all be dead now. You, me…and Sayaka.”

She paused for a moment, as if trying to block out the horrific memory that came with such a statement. However, it appeared that she was able to push it away as she turned back to him and said, “Even so, we’re all still alive. And we need to focus on what we can do now. And not just you, me and Sayaka. Everyone’s in the same boat here. We’re all just trying to do our best to make it through all this bullshit.”

Although unaccustomed to hearing such vulgar language from her, something about the way she said it didn’t bother Leon. In fact, it felt almost natural for her to speak this way, though he couldn’t understand why. Instead of worry about it, he chose to stay quiet and continue listening as she spoke.

“I know it’s not easy…but you have to get it through your head that none of this is your fault. We’re
not here because we want to be. You didn’t hurt Sayaka because you wanted to. And you didn’t betray us out of spite or anything like that.”

Junko’s voice was as stern and strong as it had been before but this time, there was a hint of concern in it as well. Each word, each syllable she spoke, they resonated with him as he was unable to turn away.

“We need to work together to survive whatever the mastermind has planned. Learn from what happened to you and Sayaka to make sure it doesn’t happen to anyone else. It’s the only way we’re gonna make it out of this alive. Understand?”

An eternity seemed to pass as Leon’s crystal blue eyes stared up at the Fashionista, his mind barely able to comprehend everything she was telling him. His body felt lighter than it ever had before as she forced him to realize the depths of his own self-deprecation. Her words were so…hopeful. Never in his wildest dreams would he ever have thought that Junko Enoshima of all people would be the one to help bring him back from the edge of despair.

“Then again, she was the one who saved me…Oh!”

An unexpected laugh came bubbling up from his throat and he chuckled nervously as finally he let a weak smile spread across his features.

“You know, I’ve been a bit of an asshole to you. I’ve had plenty of chances but I guess I’ve been putting it off,” he said with another light chuckle. Now it was Junko’s turn to be taken back, raising an eyebrow as he continued, “I never thanked you for being coming to my rescue yesterday. If not for you, I wouldn’t even be here right now. So, yeah…Thanks!”

A puzzled look overtook Junko’s face but it only lasted a moment before she let out a laugh of her own.

“See, was that so hard?” she chided with a smirk. Releasing his shoulders and giving him a light slap on the back, she plopped back down in her chair next to him, grinning all the while.

Staring at her unmatched smile, Leon felt all of tensions slowly slipping away. It was only now that he realized just how little he’d really known about Junko, or any of his classmates for that matter. It was also the first time he recognized forming a bond with any of them. Sure, he’d spoken to Makoto about his dream of quitting baseball but this was different.

He felt a connection to Junko, like he could actually believe in her and trust what she was saying. Not just because she’d saved him, but because it seemed like, out of all of his classmates, she was the first one to completely forgive him for what he’d tried to do. And he didn’t know how, but someday, he would return the favor.

“Seriously though…I owe you for saving my life. You’re a great friend, Junko.”

The instant those words came out of his mouth, Junko tensed. It was as if she just remembered something incredibly important just now. And less than a second later, the way she looked at him changed.

“Really?” she said, almost too sweetly. “Well, I know a way that I can be an even better friend to you…”

Her smirk returned but this time it seemed wider than before…Leon wasn’t quite sure but there was something a bit mischievous behind it. However, he reminded himself that, despite just discovering that she could be serious when she needed to be, the Fashionista did have a bit of a sarcastic streak.
Rubbing the back of his head nervously, he chuckled as he replied, “You saved me from being pounded with baseballs to death. What **better** of a friend could you be?”

The tiniest of groans came from Junko, so slight that Leon wasn’t even sure he’d really heard it.

“Well, you know, I could do more kind of friendly like stuff for you…if you want,” she offered, uncrossing her legs and turning toward him with an expecting glance.

“Hmm, I don’t know,” he pondered aloud, trying not to sound ungrateful. “I mean, sure it’d be cool to hang out more but I’m into video games and punk-rock and stuff. Not exactly the kind of thing you’d be into.”

Now Leon was sure he’d inadvertently upset her because Junko took in a deep breath before letting it out slowly, more than likely offended by something that he’d done. Even if he had no idea what it was, it didn’t really matter. Instead, he decided that whatever she said next, he’d agree with, just to be safe.

As luck would have it, Junko carefully lifted one of her manicured hands up to her blouse and unbuttoned the very top button, giving a better view of the lacy bra underneath. However, because this wasn’t entirely abnormal for her, Leon hardly noticed it.

“Ah, is it just me or is it really hot up here on the second floor?” she asked him, fanning herself while sneaking glances at him.

Even though he didn’t think it was very hot at all, in fact it was a bit cold, Leon decided to stick to his plan and immediately complied, “Oh, yeah! It’s like sweltering hot! Must be because of the pool and it’s humidity…and stuff…”

The sound of a slap reached his ears and Leon looked over to see Junko palm had slapped against her forehead, a deep groan sounding from her throat. The baseball star slowly leaned away, unsure of what he’d done to upset her so much.

“**Seriously, what did I do?**” he questioned mentally, not wanting to ruin the newfound friendship with her. “**I’ve never been good with girls…unless they’re screaming fans but I didn’t have to actually talk to most of them.**”

Just as he was about to suggest looking around some more, Junko sprang up to her feet and turned completely toward him. Her hands rested on her hips and she leaned down to look him in the eye.

“Leon, I know this is sudden but will you take me to the guy’s—”

“Everyone! Please come quickly!!”

“…Sorry but the way it is now, it can’t even power on.”

Chihiro sat at one of the desks in the library, a blank screened laptop resting before her. Peering over her shoulder, Kyoko pressed a hand to her lips and sighed.

“I’d have hoped to find some useful information but it seems we’re out of luck,” she expressed aloud before nodding appreciatively to the programmer. “Anyway, thanks for trying.”

“Not a problem…” Chihiro answered softly, her eyes still focused on the dead laptop.
The sounds of Kyoko’s footstep alerted the programmer that she was now alone with the computer, her mind already running scenarios about how and why it wasn’t functioning…and what could be done to restore it.

“I do have the toolkit in my room,” she considered, her hands running over the dusty keys of the board. “And if the battery is still good, then maybe—”.

“Everyone! Please come quickly!!”

As a deep voice echoed throughout the upper floor, the petite programmer’s heart practically leapt into her throat as she shot up from her seat, a feeling of terror consuming her thoughts. Looking around she found that the other students, led by Byakuya, who had made the library his dominion, were already heading out the door and into the hallway, from which the frantic shout had originated.

Not wanting to be left behind, Chihiro sped around the side of the desk but came to a grinding halt. Slowly, she turned her head around to gaze at the lifeless laptop…

The Fashionista froze as a deep but feminine voice shouted down the hallway. As one, both she and Leon turned to see none other than Sakura racing down the hallway. If Taka had been there, he’d have been writing her up for running but now wasn’t the time to worry about that!

“Sakura! What’s wrong?!” Junko immediately questioned, stopping the martial artist in her tracks. Sakura turned to them, only now noticing they were there.

“Ah, Junko! Leon! We need to gather everyone together as soon as possible! It’s Sayaka—!”

Untold fear had already gripped Leon at the sight of Sakura’s flustered and rushed appearance, knowing she would never abandon her post unless it was truly an emergency. And the instant the Pop Idol’s name left her lips, Leon leapt up from his chair and shouted, “What is it?! What about Sayaka?! Did something happen to her??”

Sakura must have seen the sheer panic on the ballplayer’s face and it made her hesitate for an instant before she answered, “Sayaka…she’s—”.

“What’s going on out here?!” an unmistakably authoritative voice called out. The three students turned to see the door to the library abruptly open and none were surprised to see it was Byakuya that had called out to them. Lingering just behind him were Kyoko, Hifumi, Toko and finally Chihiro.

“Is there a fire or something?” Hiro’s lazy tone came from the other side of the hallway, an open classroom door showing where he’d been.

“What is all the fuss about?” the calm voice of Celeste now intruded onto the scene. Coming from the pool hallway, she walked toward the group with Hina rushing past her to greet her friend.

“Sakura! What’s going on?!” the swimmer asked, a hint of fear in her voice.

“That’s exactly what I’d like to know,” Byakuya demanded again, “Why are all of you out here and why is Sakura—?”

“EVERYBODY JUST SHUT UP!!!”
All at once, everyone was quiet as Leon practically screamed at all of them. Even Byakuya was shocked into silence as the Ultimate Baseball Star whirled around and shouted at Sakura again.

“What’s happened to Sayaka??! Tell me!!”

His strained voice held more fear than any of them had ever heard from him before. Not even his tearful pleas during the trial sounded as despairing as his tone did now. And in that moment, no one, not even the condescending Byakuya, could refute the idea that Leon was genuinely worried for Sayaka.

Realizing that she had caused a panic, Sakura immediately composed herself and answered, “Do not fear…she is alright.”

Letting out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, Leon couldn’t stop the overly joyous smile from spreading over his face. He was too overjoyed to even ask why Sakura had come running to them with such haste. Luckily, someone else was ready for it.

“If you don’t mind, I’m still quite lost as to what’s happening,” Celeste said plainly, glancing over to Sakura with a curious expression. “Has something happened that we are unaware of?”

“Hm,” Sakura confirmed with a firm nod. “Just a moment ago, Sayaka regained consciousness.”

A wave of shock washed over all of the students for a moment but they all quickly recovered. However, one of them was already off and running the moment he heard the news.

“Sayaka!”

Leon tore down the hallway without any regard for anyone else, practically leaping down the stairs the instant he got to them. Byakuya groaned and was about to complain when someone else left the group as well.

“L-Leon! Wait up!” a stammering Chihiro called out, following after him. Again, no one made a move to stop her and simply watched as she headed down the hall toward the stairs.

“H-Hey! Don’t leave us here like that! Come on, Sakura!” Hina shouted after Chihiro, gripping the martial artists arm and pulling her along as they headed off as well.

“Hey! Wait for me, guys! I wanna go too!” Hiro called after them, obviously not wanting to be left out.

“It’s like herding chickens…” Byakuya quipped, rubbing his eyes under his glasses.

“Indeed…” Celeste agreed, letting out a sigh of her own. “We haven’t even finished investigating the second floor yet.”

“Given the circumstances, we should put the investigation on hold,” Kyoko calmly advised, ignoring the stare the gambler was giving her. “For now, we’d better go and see Sayaka.”

Without another word, Kyoko’s heeled boots clicked along the ground as she departed.

“…I, unfortunately, must agree with her. Besides, I have some things I wish to speak with Sayaka about anyway,” Celeste conceded, slowly making her way toward the stairs.

“As do I…” Byakuya added, narrowing his gaze as he also departed.

At this time, no one noticed that Junko was still standing by her chair next to the metal plated
“Fuck…” Mukuro seethed as she realized she was the only one still there. “I guess I ran out of time. Dammit, I almost had him! I never thought that Sayaka would wake up so soon! I mean, I’m glad she’s awake and all that but if she had just stayed asleep for a few more minutes…”

As the reality of her failure loomed over head, the soldier couldn’t stop the frustration from boiling over inside her.

“Dammit! Why couldn’t Leon have just gotten the hint?! I did everything I could think of to get him to realize I wanted sex! I left subtle and not so subtle hints, I spoke sweetly to him, I even uncrossed my legs right in front of him and everything!”

Her crimson nails dug into her palms as she seethed, trying not to let out her fury.

“And what’s worse, because he didn’t get the hint, I failed my mission! This is the first mission I’ve ever failed! My perfect record is now stained with defeat!!”

Without warning, she slammed her fist into the metal plate next to her, leaving a hardly noticeable indent in the metal. Letting her hand fall from the plate and hanging limp at her side, Mukuro realized how foolish her idea really way.

“I need a better plan…” she said quietly, sounding a little defeated. “But that can wait for later. I need to go and see Sayaka before the others realize I’m not there.”

Taking deep breaths to keep herself calm, she only now began walking toward the stairs, her boots practically slamming down with each step. Just before she reached them, she stopped just in front of the boy’s restroom. She was more than tempted to go inside and just make up something later about why she was in there but she knew it was pointless.

“I’d look too suspicious…and if I accidentally reveal myself,” she muttered quietly, her voice lower than a whisper. “Besides, I can’t be gone too long or else they’ll get suspicious anyway. Guess I’ll have to give on it…for now.”

Regrettably resigning herself to failing the mission, Mukuro trudged down the stairs, unaware of the camera that had been watching her every move.

Meanwhile, back in the control room on the upper floor, the real Junko silently watched as her sister descended the stairs. Slurping down the very last of her soda, Junko let out an exasperated sigh as she watched her sister’s pitiful attitude upon her inability to seduce Leon.

Another deep sigh escaped her as she said, “Mukuro, Mukuro, Mukuro…don’t you know anything? The most powerful weapon at her disposal is built-into her and she doesn’t even know how to use it!”

Putting her feet up on the table, she stretched her arms up before putting them behind her head and continuing, “I know that I told her before but…women have the almighty vagina. Therefore, we make the rules. If she had just said, ‘Hey Leon, let’s have sex’, she’d probably already be in the boy’s restroom fucking like rabbits…”
Tossing away her empty soda can, the Despair loving girl giggled to herself as she watched everyone gather in the nurse’s office. A twisted smile spread over Junko’s lips as she prepared for the ensuing despair.

“Oh well, at least this little reunion should be good…”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Sorry for the wait but I hope this extra long chapter makes up for it! Been busy with real life stuff, so I needed a bit of a break. But I’m back now, so it’s all good!

So, what do you think will happen with Sayaka’s awakening? Will the others condemn her or will they be able to forgive her? And how will Leon react to finally being able to confront her? You’ll have to tune in next time to find out!

And just to let you know, there were quite a few in-jokes for future events in this chapter. So, if some of it doesn’t make sense, now you know why. Also, I have to credit my beta for Junko’s line of the “almighty vagina”, which inspired that last scene.

As always, please leave a review if you’ve got questions or insight on the story, or if you just want to say how much you’re enjoying it. Either way, let me know what your all think and have a great day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

The students gather in the Nurse's Office as Sayaka awakens. Tensions rise as they students cannot agree on how to deal with Leon and Sayaka's betrayal. That is, until Byakuya offers a suggestion...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Almost unsurprisingly, as the students approached the nurse’s office, they found Leon standing just outside the doors, staring at them with a look of what might seem like panic. He’d come there in such a hurry that he hadn’t really thought about what he’d do when he arrived. It was almost as if some invisible force kept him rooted to the ground, preventing him from opening the door and crossing that threshold.

Chihiro and Hina, who had followed after him, felt a twinge of guilt just looking at him, unable to bring themselves to disturb him. However, their gesture of kindness was shattered when Byakuya ruthlessly brushed past them and advanced toward the office door, coming to a halt directly beside the petrified Leon.

“Move. You’re blocking the way.”

The affluent progeny’s stern order made the ballplayer flinch but he didn’t move, just turned his head slowly to stare at Byakuya. Before he managed to find the courage to retort, Kyoko appeared to the side of him.

“If you’d rather stay out here, that’s fine. No one will force you to go in,” her expression seemed to harden a bit as she continued; “However, if you keep running from this, you’ll never be able to face it.”

Gritting his teeth, Leon couldn’t help but seethe, “I-I know that…but I just…”

In that moment of hesitation, Byakuya shouldered his way past the ballplayer, and grasped the door handle. “Stay out here and writhe in your misery then. It seems to be all you’re capable of anyway.”

Leon opened his mouth to shout at him but no words came forth. His breath caught in his throat as he realized that, as loathsome as it was, Byakuya was correct. He’d done nothing but sulk and drag others down with him since he’d survived the trial. Even now, when he should have been elated that Sayaka was awake, all he felt was the crushing guilt that he feared would never leave.

As he stood there, unable to move, Byakuya pulled open the door and went inside, many of his fellow students following his lead. Chihiro and Hina were the very last to enter, both of them lingering their gazes on him as they went in, leaving Leon alone in the hallway. Well, not exactly alone, as one last student came down the stairway and saw him.

“Eh? Leon? What’s wrong?”

The ballplayer lifted his gaze to see Junko, whom must have fallen behind, only now making her
way over to him. She seemed a bit flustered but then again, she’d probably been trying to catch up to
them and it seemed a bit tough with those heeled knee-high boots.

Even before he had the chance to explain himself, Junko raised a hand to stop him. “What did I tell
you about that sulking crap?”

“…Yeah, I know,” he answered hesitantly, feeling embarrassed to be scolded by her again.

With a light sigh, Junko stepped closer and slapped him on the back. “Good. Now, let’s go see
Sayaka so we can tell her about how she owes you her life because you saved her and junk.
Alright?”

“Wait, what—?!” Leon stammered but had no time to react before Junko shoved him into the nurse’s
office.

No one was quite sure what to expect when they threw open the doors to the nurse’s office.
However, as they all piled into the small medical room, they realized that it really didn’t matter all
that much.

Sayaka was sitting up in her bed, a pillow against her back as she leaned against the metal head-
board of the bed. Interestingly, she had Mondo’s coat draped over her shoulders, the end of it
hanging off the side of the bed. However, it quickly became clear that the reason for it was that she
wasn’t wearing anything underneath said coat, her clothes having been discarded when she’d been
bandaged the day before.

“…Uh…Hi, everybody…”

Sayaka’s voice was soft but strong, a little bit hoarse from inactivity but at the very least, she sounded
much better than yesterday. Even so, her usual sweetness was missing, replaced with an obvious
sense of dread. Then again, with everyone staring at her, some of them accusatorily, her fears were
well founded.

“Hey, uh, what’s with the coat?” an insensitive Hiro blurted out. Seeing him staring, Sayaka tugged
the edges of the coat inward, flinching almost in disgust as she tried to ensure her chest was fully
covered.

Leaning against the wall next to the bed, a tank-top clad Mondo raised his eyebrows and was the first
to glare at him but he couldn’t hide the somewhat embarrassed look on his face as well. “What?! She
didn’t have any clothes and for some stupid reason, there aren’t any of those uncomfortable hospital
robes in here!”

“Oh, I see!” Hiro said with a short laugh, “I guess things are awkward enough, without her being
naked on top of that!”

Oblivious to the aggravation he was causing, the clairvoyant was about to get reprimanded by Hina
when suddenly, someone began pushing through the crowd. Or rather, Junko was pushing Leon
through the crowd. The baseball star was squirming and trying to grab onto anything and anyone to
stop the forced advance but each time his arms were smacked away by the Fashionista.

With one last powerful shove, Leon was spun around and pushed out in front of everyone. Barely
able to maintain his footing, the ballplayer froze as he realized he’d come to halt just in front of
Sayaka’s bed. His gaze inadvertently fell upon the injured pop idol and Sayaka, in turn, flinched as
he appeared before her.

“L-Leon…”

The words were almost choked out of Sayaka, a lump forming in her throat at just the sight of him. Little did she know that, just like her, Leon had broken out into a cold sweat, but was unable to turn away from her.

“H-Hey…Sayaka…”

For a long while they remained motionless, unable to turn away but incapable of speaking either. Both of them had so many things to say but neither of them knew how to say them. And even if they did, there was no way to deny that something sacred had been broken between them. Thankfully for both of them, a new distract suddenly burst onto the scene.

“Sayaka! You’re awake!”

Leon whirled around and Sayaka blanched as Makoto abruptly made his way through the crowd at the door. He was out of breath, hair and clothes were disheveled, eyes reddened with heavy sacks under each eyelid. The exhaustion was still taking a toll on him. Even so, he still wore one of the brightest smiles either of them had ever seen.

“Are you in any pain? Are you sure it’s okay to be sitting up like that? Do your bandages need to be changed? Are you hungry? Do you need another pillow—?”

In the middle of his rapid-fire question, a feminine hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him back a bit.

“Down Makoto,” Junko said almost jokingly, pushing past him and moving toward Sayaka. “If it’s okay, I’d like to check your bandages and see if anything needs to be done. Okay?”

“Huh? Why would…” Sayaka trailed off, pure confusion warping the idol’s face.

For a stretch of time, the pop idol just stared at Junko, as if she was unable to understand how or even why the Fashionista would want to do something as gritty as that. The look on her face brought a realization to Junko, who slightly frowned.

“Oh, that’s right…you still don’t know what happened yesterday…” Junko said aloud, so that everyone would be aware of it.

A feeling of gloom fell over the area, as the events of the previous day hung heavy in all their minds. Particularly, Leon and Makoto flinched and averted their gazes from each other, still not quite able to speak about what had transpired. Only Byakuya, Celeste and Kyoko, seemed to keep their emotions in check, appearing unaffected as much as possible.

All the while, sitting in her bed with a perplexed look, Sayaka felt a sense of oncoming dread and she was barely able to ask, “What…what happened…?”

As if a knife had cut through them, everyone froze and kept their mouths shut, afraid of what telling her might mean. And as the silence dug in, Sayaka knew that she had done something far worse than just attempt to murder and frame someone. Before she found the strength to ask them again, a stoic voice broke the silence.

“Before we tell you that, I think we should do as Junko suggested and have you checked for any further injuries. While that’s going on, we can fill you in on exactly what transpired yesterday,”
Kyoko reasoned, her logic easing the tension slightly.

“That’s fine,” everyone was surprised to hear such a thing come from Byakuya. The affluent progeny unfolded his arms and turned his back. “It wouldn’t do to have her be unaware of her crimes before deciding her fate.”

Sayaka noticeable tensed at his words but said nothing, which earned Byakuya a glare and a choked back snarl from Leon. However, even if Byakuya was aware of that fierce look, he ignored it as he didn’t even turn around to acknowledge the ballplayer’s presence.

“We should probably get her some actual clothes too,” Hina abruptly piped up, “I can go and get something from her room if you want.”

“Good idea,” Junko concurred, before smirking slightly at Sayaka. “Can’t have you going around naked all the time. It’d ruin your image as an idol.”

The instant those words left her lips, it became clear that the Fashionista regretted them because she watched as Sayaka’s breath hitched. The idol then lowered her gaze and squeezed her eyes shut, as if blocking out a most painful memory. Luckily, before the situation had a chance to worsen, another voice spoke up.

“Obviously, the boys will need to leave the room for the time being,” Celeste insisted, folding her hands daintily as she smiled at them. “The girls will stay and take care of Sayaka.”

At the mention of the girls staying, Chihiro tensed but it was so slight that no one seemed to notice.

“Wait, what? Why do only the guys have to leave?” Mondo pressed, pushing off the wall for the first time since everyone arrived.

Smiling overly sweetly at him, the gambler answered, “Oh, did you want to stay and watch as we inspected her naked body for any more injuries? I never imagined you to be so immoral.”

Crimson flashed over Mondo’s cheeks for a brief instant as he replied, “T-That’s not—! I didn’t mean—! Dammit, never mind!”

“Alright then!” Taka regained authority with his boisterous voice, “Ladies, you know what you need to do! Men, in the meantime, we shall continue exploring the school. There’s no reason we should put such an important task on hold! Except for Makoto, he can go back to sleep.”

It was only now that everyone turned to see that, despite how hard he tried, Makoto was dangerously close to nodding off while sitting in a chair near Sayaka’s bed.

“Hey, hold on! You can’t just decide what the rest of us should do, dumbass!” Mondo suddenly retorted, “Nobody tells me what to do! Least of all a rule obsessed hall monitor like you!”

For an instant a look of genuine shock crossed Taka’s face as he was refuted, as if it were the first time someone had ever gone against his directions. However, he recovered quickly and replied, “It only makes sense that we continue investigating. We may find something useful. I understand it was your task as a guard but standing around all day will not help us here. Everyone has to do their part.”

“I was doing my part, you uppity prick!” Mondo instantly roared, slamming one fist into his palm. “You were the one doing diddly squat, looking around the first floor, which we already explored!”

Furrowing his brows, Taka defended himself, “There may be something here to discover! After all, some of the doors were sealed before but now it seems—!”
“Would you two please take your little spat outside?!” the agitated voice of Junko shouted from across the room. “If you’re gonna go and continue investigating than just go! We’ve got work to do here, right girls?”

Before Mondo or Taka could even think about retorting, a massive shadow loomed over both of them. As one, they turned to see none other than Sakura glaring down at them.

“Indeed. After all, all of this noise certainly won’t help anyone.”

Tensing slightly, the two boys turned to see Sayaka nervously staring at them. At the same time, Makoto, who had been startled by the shouting, was looking around in a daze, as if he was unsure of how he’d ended up back here. At the very least, their shouting had kept him awake, and by that regard, safe from punishment of breaking the “no sleeping outside their rooms rule”.

Not only that, it seemed that Chihiro was cowering in fear, shaking slightly as she stared at them. She was hunched over and gripping her sides, as if holding something in place. Feeling embarrassed by their actions, Taka and Mondo simply frowned at each other for a moment before the biker huffed and headed for the door.

“…Whatever. Let’s just get this over with,” he seethed, exiting the room while graciously leaving his coat behind.

With a light huff of his own, Byakuya said, “Don’t take too long. I’ll be waiting outside, so be sure to let me know whenever you’re finished.”

Although that statement earned him a few angry glares, he promptly ignored them and departed before allowing for any objections.

“I-I’ll g-go and help in-investigate…” Toko squeaked, immediately following Byakuya out of the room.

“Right, then. Come on then, men. We need to get going,” Taka quietly concurred, beginning to usher the other boys out of the room.

“…Uh, if no one minds…I think I’d like to help investigate too.” The timid voice of Chihiro echoed, making everyone turn to her with a raised eyebrow.

“Are you certain? You can stay here and rest if you’d like,” Celeste offered, already seated and preparing to lounge while the other girls did the majority of the work.

Shaking her head slightly, Chihiro tensed bit more before answering, “N-No thanks. I think that I’d like to do what I can to help…if that’s alright?”

It was strange for her to ask permission like that but then again, her apologetic nature made it seem almost normal for her to do so. Most of the girls just shrugged, not minding either way.

“I’m sure the boys will appreciate your help,” Sakura encouraged her, giving her a warm smile. “Do not worry, we will care for Sayaka.”

Having been given permission, Chihiro smiled back and nodded, “Alright then, I’ll be back later everyone.”

Without waiting for anyone else, the petite programmer slipped past everyone and out the door, heading down the hallway toward the dorms. An instant later, Hina also headed out, presumably to get some clothes for Sayaka, but stopped to stare at the remaining boys for a moment.
“You all should get going too,” the swimmer insisted before darting down the hallway.

Feeling rather unwelcome there, Taka, Hifumi, and Hiro all prepared to leave. However, before they even got to the door, Hifumi abruptly stopped and turned around.

“Umm, aren’t we forgetting someone?” he awkwardly mentioned, glancing back at Makoto, who was straining his eyes trying to remain awake.

“We could just let him stay here,” Hiro suggested light-heartedly. “You could put him in a bed and close the curtains. It’ll be fine.”

“B-But! It’s unwholesome for a boy to—!” Taka protested before being cut off.

“It’s also against the rules,” Kyoko’s harsh tone concurred, sending a quick glare at Hiro before walking over to Makoto. “Come on, I’ll help you get back to your room.”

Although everyone was a bit suspicious of Kyoko’s kind offer, no one seemed to mind all that much. Perhaps it was because they felt that, of all the boys, Makoto was the only one that they could feel comfortable around because of his hopeful and honest nature. They wouldn’t have minded even letting him stay but that was out of the question. In the end, they didn’t have a choice. There was no telling when Monokuma would appear and enforce the “sleep is only allowed in your room rule”.

“N-No…I can…” Makoto tried to insist as he stood up but nearly fell back in his seat, barely able to stay conscious.

A swift hand grasped his arm, steadying him before pulling that arm over a shoulder.

“Don’t be stubborn. It won’t end well for you,” Kyoko said as she used her shoulder to keep him upright. “You’re going back to sleep. Now.”

“Shouldn’t you get some rest too, Kyoko? You also spent the entire night watching over Sayaka,” a concerned Sakura questioned.

Hearing this, Sayaka immediately snapped her head up and said, “W-What? You were…watching over me?”

Her voice was soft and confused, unable to believe that the cold and stoic Kyoko would do such a thing. Her answer came directly from the lavender haired girl, who glanced at her over her own shoulder.

“It wasn’t only me…Makoto was the one who took care of you all through the night. You should thank him.”

Sayaka’s eyes widened at this news, moisture welling up in the corners of her eyes. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything, shame clouded her and all she could do was hang her head and let a few tears fall into her hands. It was lucky that Makoto was barely conscious because he would have refused to go if he saw that.

However, with his fading consciousness, Kyoko knew that they had little time and she needed to depart. Getting a firm grip, she prepared to carry him out.

Out the corner of her eye, Kyoko saw Junko giving them a heated look but it only lasted a second before the Fashionista turned and headed to Sayaka’s bedside. And although she knew it was probably just something harmless, Kyoko couldn’t help but feel a growing suspicion for Junko’s actions. However, this was neither the time nor the place.
“I’ll be back soon,” she said quickly following the boys as they headed out. However, one of the boys remained rooted in place.

Leon, who had gone unnoticed for quite a bit of time, continued to awkwardly stand in the center of the room, glancing at Sayaka. It was obvious that he had words stuck on the tip of his tongue that desperately needed to be said but knew that it just wasn’t the time for it. This created a hesitation that made him wish he’d just spoken up sooner.

Just when it seemed like he was on the cusp of speaking, an irritating voice called out, “Leon! Hurry before you are late for our investigation!”

Panic rose up in Leon as Taka shouted to him from the doorway, drawing the attention of all of the girls left in the room. Celeste gave a light huff but otherwise said nothing, while Sakura merely looked on almost apologetically. Finally, Sayaka briefly lifted her head to look at him, tears still brimming and eyes that held more sadness than he could bear at the moment.

This only made his earlier hesitation spike back up and when he tried to say something, only a squeak of sound came out. Just as he was about to slink away, possibly to bury himself under a mountain of self-doubt, a familiar voice startled him.

“I’ll come find you as soon as we’re all done,” Junko said, looking directly at him, her sky blue eyes firm but gentle. “Then we’ll sort this whole thing out, got it?”

Leon stood there a moment, letting her words sink in. For reasons he just couldn’t understand, knowing that she was placing faith in him was somehow able to calm his frazzled nerves. Or at least, it was enough to snap him out of his dazed state and bring him back to reality.

“Y-Yeah…take care of Sayaka…” he managed to utter, forcing himself to turn away and head for the door. Looking over his shoulder ever few steps, he eventually exited the room, shutting the door behind him.

Junko smiled briefly before a mocking chuckle reached her ears.

“I didn’t know the two of you had become so close. It must be because of your daring rescue, yesterday,” Celeste chided, stifling her laughter in the process.

The Fashionista glared daggers at her and Sayaka, who was wiping away her tears, raised a confused eyebrow.

“‘Daring rescue’? What are you talking about?” she asked them, looking around at everyone.

“It’s nothing…” Junko answered swiftly, pulling up a chair and sitting next to Sayaka. “Let’s get those bandages changed. After that, we’ll talk about—”.

“No…tell me what happened!” Sayaka demanded, glaring at all of them one by one. “No one ever answered…my question! What happened yesterday after I was…attacked?!"

There was a decided silence and it seemed that, even now, none of the girls were really comfortable with explaining the horrific chain of events that Sayaka had inadvertently caused. Perhaps if Kyoko had been there, she would have explained but without her presence, it seemed the task would fall to one of them instead. Just as the silence began to deepen, a deep voiced sigh echoed.

“Allow me to explain…” Sakura said, quietly taking a seat by Sayaka’s bed as Junko removed Mondo’s coat and began changing her bandages.
Chihiro practically rushed into her dorm room, closing the door behind her with a firm slam. Her breathing was heavy from having run almost the entire way, showing just how weak her petite body was. Bolting the door shut, just in case, she reached underneath her shirt and grasped something.

Carefully, she pulled out the laptop from the library that she had hidden away beneath her clothes, staring at the Hope’s Peak Academy logo on the back of it.

“Why did I feel the need to hide it?” she wondered aloud, brushing off a bit of dust as she headed for her desk. “No one would have objected to my taking it…I think.”

Even though she told herself that, a part of her was scared to have anyone see her with it. Mainly because they would have asked the all important question, ‘What are you going to do with it?’. It would have been a simple answer, ‘I’m going to fix it’ but then that would lead to, ‘How? You don’t have a toolkit’.

…but she did.

Setting the out of power laptop on her desk, Chihiro reached a shaky hand down to the bottom drawer of the desk. With a swift tug, she pulled open the drawer to reveal a completely sealed toolkit staring up at her, as if mocking her. It was an eternal symbol of the secret she was hiding from everyone, and she couldn’t take the chance of anyone finding out. Not even Makoto, whom she felt would be the most understanding, could be allowed to know her dark secret.

Even though she was born as a man, Chihiro always felt that she was, in fact, a girl. It wasn’t immediate, mind you, but after pondering everything for several years, she came to the conclusion that, despite having a male body, she was always meant to be female.

However, because she didn’t have the courage to admit it to anyone, she was forever shamed by the fact that she would never been seen that way. Even now, when she looked at her e-handbook, it listed her as male. She had appealed to the school board before she arrived to have her listed as female but she never heard back from them before arriving at the school. And now, being caught up in this killing game, she knew it wasn’t the time to worry about that.

Despite that, having such evidence as a toolkit and a bathroom that didn’t lock were cruel reminders that even if she did come out and tell everyone, no one would accept her for who she was. In fact, they’d probably be suspicious of her for not telling them sooner, which would lead to them not trusting her. Leaving her all alone here in this horrifying situation…

However…!

“I have to do what I can to help! And even though it’s risky…” Chihiro told herself as she lifted the toolkit from the drawer, “I know that I can be of use to everyone!”

Tearing open the brand-new kit, Chihiro grabbed the screwdriver, sat in front of the powered down laptop and instantly went to work on repairing it.

“…And so, it was decided that we would wait for your awakening before discussing the matter further,” Sakura concluded, just as Junko finished dressing the injured pop idol’s wounds.

Sayaka’s already pale complexion whitened as Sakura finished explaining all that had transpired.
class trial, the horrific consequences of actually deceiving her classmates, the punishment for the killer if they are caught...it all seemed too terrifying to be real, like it was taken from the mind of a psychotic serial killer or something.

But it was real. Monokuma’s presence and malicious nature was more than enough to convince Sayaka that everything her classmate had told her was true. And the fact that she had, unknowingly, forced that predicament upon her classmates chilled her to the bone.

Then again, at the time of her attempted murder, her mind had been anything but clear. She’d been frantic in her quest to escape and even though she tried to convince herself otherwise, she wasn’t really sure if having knowledge of the class trial would have swayed her decision. She hoped that it would have but that was immaterial at this point.

“This is all my fault...I nearly killed everyone...just to try and escape...and Leon—”.

A tightening of bandages around her midsection sent a jolt of pain through her body, making the pop idol wince as Junko finished dressing her wound. Not only that, she had carefully wrapped up Sayaka’s sprained wrist and had her arm in a sling.

Alright, that should do it.” Junko flashed her a quick smile and pulled away, “Just don’t move around too much. The wound wasn’t too deep and it already seems to be healing. You’re lucky it was only a light cut.”

Her tone was light and seemingly joking but the seriousness and worry couldn’t be masked. And more than that, something about the Fashionista’s voice was so soothing and familiar, as if she’d heard it somewhere before today—

Before she could wonder about it further, the door to the nurse’s office slid open and a loud voice erupted.

“Hey! I brought some clothes from your room Sayaka!” Hina joyously conveyed to the entire room, carrying two sets of identical clothing. Both of the outfits had shirts were white with blue trimmed collars and a matching miniskirt...identical to the uniform she’d been wearing up until this point.

“Sorry it isn’t much, but there just weren’t many different kinds of clothes in your closet.”

Even though they were her own clothes, Sayaka couldn’t help but feel a bit unnerved at seeing her uniform again. Then again, it wasn’t really her fault. Ever since she’d been shut up in this school, she’d only had her uniform to wear, three sets of it to be precise. She knew she brought more clothes with her but for some reason, only her three uniforms were in her closet. In fact, aside from Junko, no one ever seemed to change their clothes on a daily basis.

The pop idol hadn’t really noticed until now, even Makoto kept wearing the same hooded jacket every single day. It was probably Monokuma’s doing, taking away their clothes to limit what they could wear was probably a tactic to get them to kill...somehow. She wasn’t really sure but at the moment it didn’t really matter. At least she had clothes to wear...even if they reminded her of nearly being killed.

“T-Thanks,” she answered, her voice shaky, as if she wasn’t sure it was right to say such a thing after what she’d done. To her shock, Hina practically beamed as she set the clothes down on the bed.

“Not a problem! We weren’t going to make you roam around naked. Besides, that’s what friends are for, right Sakura?”

For a moment, the martial artist almost hesitated, stealing a quick glance over to Sayaka. If the pop
idol hadn’t been looking at her, she might have missed it but rather than any kind of resentment, Sayaka could see the forgiveness within Sakura’s eyes. However, for reasons that she couldn’t quite place, the pop idol also felt a hint of…guilt in her gaze as well.

Despite being a bit confused by that, Sayaka remained silent as Sakura smiled warmly before answering, “…Indeed, you are right Hina.”

A lump formed in Sayaka’s throat as those words echoed in her ears. Even if it were so few of them, it seemed that these girls, at least, were willing to forgive her for her crimes. She wanted to thank them but it just didn’t feel right. After all, she hadn’t forgiven herself yet for the horrible thing she’d done to all of them.

“They shouldn’t forgive me so easily…I know that I wouldn’t…”

A stirring beside her almost startled her but she settled down when she saw that it was only Junko, leaning over to pick up her uniform.

“I’ll help you get dressed,” she said plainly, not really asking at all.

“No, it’s fine. I can—”, Sayaka tried to protest but found the Fashionista not heeding her request.

Almost without warning, her uniform top was thrust over her head, startling her. Before she knew it, her head poked through the hole at the top and her arms slowly slid down through the sleeves, with Junko’s hands almost meticulously straightening out the clothing. When she was finished smoothing out the top, the Fashionista lifted the skirt up and frowned.

“I know it’s fashionable but I don’t think that this is the best for your condition right now.” Junko rubbed her chin in thought before snapping her fingers and smirking. “I’ve got something that would go great with this top and it’ll be super comfortable too. Give me a sec and I’ll run and grab it.”

As Junko stood up to leave, Sayaka’s uninjured hand shot out and grasped her sleeve. “Don’t worry about it. This…is fine…”

Slowly, the Fashionista turned her head around and, much to Sayaka’s surprise, glared down at the pop idol. There wasn’t any real anger in Junko’s eyes but there certainly was a great deal of frustration building up, evident by the scowl that formed on her face.

“Why the hell not?”

“Huh?” Sayaka choked out, shocked by Junko’s piercing glare and fierce attitude. “Well…I mean… I don’t really deserve to—”.

“You don’t deserve what?” The Fashionista fired back, narrowing her eyes. “To wear a comfortable outfit after recovering from a life-threatening injury? We should make you wear clothes that will hurt you while you’re trying to get better? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

Without much thought or hesitation, Sayaka lowered her gaze, let go of Junko’s sleeve and whispered, “…Maybe—?”

“Well too bad,” Junko immediately refuted, looking away as the pop idol’s gaze shot up to her. “You’re going to get a nice, comfortable and, dare I say, fashionable outfit to wear while you recover. And you’re gonna like it.”

“But…but I don’t really need—”
Junko’s heavy sigh interrupted Sayaka’s protests. Whirling around and placing her hands on her hips, the Fashionista said, “When the Ultimate Fashionista offers to hand pick your clothes, the proper response is; ‘Oh, how wonderful! Thank you for brightening up my otherwise dreary wardrobe with your extensive knowledge!’.”

“That’s not the point!” Sayaka protested, matching the Fashionista’s glare as she finally got fed up with her opinion being ignored.

“Then what is the point?” Junko shot back, unwilling to retreat in the slightest.

“I don’t care what I wear! I just want to—”

“You should care! Wearing uncomfortable clothes can affect your recovery! Why do you think they make patients wear those ugly hospital gowns?! Because it helps! I want to get you something like that but more appropriate to wear around the school!”

Despite her best efforts, Sayaka felt her face flush in embarrassment as Junko enthusiastically expressed her opinion. She wanted to refuse the offer and just wear anything at this point but knew that if she kept on pushing, it would only complicate matters further.

Realizing there was no way to win this argument, she finally relented and said, “Fine…go get whatever you want…”

A triumphant smirk spread over Junko’s lips as she said, “There now. Was that really so hard?”

“Yes!” Sayaka furiously thought but kept it to herself.

“Alright then, I’ll be back in just a sec!” Junko happily decreed before turning on a heel and heading for the door, closing it behind her as she left. When she was gone, Sayaka let out a relieved sigh but said nothing, pleased the ordeal was over with…or so she thought.

“In that case,” the soft tone of Celeste caught everyone’s attention, “I will go and fetch the others.”

Sayaka, as well as Hina and Sakura, instantly turned to stare at Celeste. The gambler had been sitting in one of the chairs, watching in silence as they had done all the work, pleasantly smiling all the while. It was almost as if she had been impatiently waiting for them to finish taking care of Sayaka. But now it seemed that she was done with waiting, as she had already stood up and planned to do exactly as she’d said she would.

Sayaka’s stern attitude dissipated almost instantly, shakily replying, “W-What? Why do you need to do that?!”

Folding her hands daintily under her chin, the gambler replied, “You seem well enough to argue about fashion. Surely then, you feel ready to discuss what happened with the others, do you not?”

The pop idol visibly flinched, knowing there was no way she could refute that. Her injury had only been severe because of the loss of blood, but after the transfusion, she was feeling incredibly well considering she’d almost died. However, that didn’t mean her emotional state had completely stabilized, and she knew she wasn’t ready to face everyone.

Even more unnerving was the fact that, even though she was smiling that same as usual, Celeste appeared to be far too eager about gathering everyone. Almost as if she was enjoying watching Sayaka squirm, which made the pop idol seethe despite her guilt.

“We should at least wait until Junko returns with clothing,” Sakura unexpectedly spoke up, her
massive arms folded, staring at Celeste with only one eye open. “Surely gathering the others can wait until after she’s completely changed clothes.”

An amused huff sounded from Celeste as she let her hands fall to her sides, “I certainly agree. I just thought that I would go and inform everyone that we would be able to meet in a few minutes. We’ve waited all day for this after all. And besides, we need to discuss our discoveries from investigating the school, do we not?”

“Well…yeah, I guess so,” Hina reluctantly concurred, hanging her head slightly and sneaking a sympathetic glance at Sayaka.

“Then it’s settled,” Celeste concluded, leaving no room for argument as she headed for the door. Just before opening it though, she spared a moment to glance back at Sayaka and said, “I will go and gather everyone but I will be sure to knock before we enter, in case you are changing.”

With a snide smirk spread over her lips, Celeste opened the door and departed. All the while, Sayaka narrowed her eyes and glared furiously at her, lips pursed and teeth tightly gritted.

“Alright then, let’s begin the meeting!” Taka announced to everyone who had gathered in the small nurse’s office. “Let’s start with what we found while investigating the school!”

All of the students, apart from Makoto, were crowded into the office but managed to find ways to be comfortable.

Mondo leaned against the nearby wall, the same as before. Taka stood in the center of the room, trying to be the center of the room. Hina, and Chihiro were sitting near Sayaka’s bed with Sakura standing next to them. Byakuya leaned against the door itself, as if to block it in case anyone tried to flee. Toko sat in a chair close to him, glancing his way every few seconds. Celeste twirled her hair and stood off the side, waiting impatiently for the meeting to being. Hiro and Hifumi kept to themselves, standing cautiously near the door but not as close as Byakuya.

Junko was by Sayaka’s bedside, glaring at everyone like an overprotective mother every time someone tried to stare at Sayaka. Leon nervously sat on an adjacent bed, just far enough away from where the pop idol was resting, his head hung but his eyes occasionally glancing her way. Kyoko stood with her arms folded, leaning against the far back wall, her face stoic and unreadable.

Finally, Sayaka was sitting up in her bed, fully clothed but obviously nervous.

It hadn’t taken long for Junko to return, with no less than three different pairs of designer pants, all of which were more comfortable than Sayaka could have ever imagined. She had trouble getting out of bed and her legs weren’t strong enough for her to support herself, so she ended up having to lean her legs over the side of the bed while Junko and Sakura helped get the pants on.

Almost as soon as they were finished, Celeste had knocked on the door and led everyone else in. Makoto was the only one not present. On Kyoko’s insistence, she recommended that he be allowed to rest, as he was clearly exhausted. And although most of the students understood that, some of them didn’t agree with him being left out.

However, despite how ugly it made her feel, Sayaka felt a bit relieved that he wasn’t there. The guilt of trying to frame him overwhelmed her judgment and she wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to face him again.
“Before we get to that,” Byakuya spoke up, not letting anyone discuss their findings from their investigations, “I think we need to first address the elephant in the room.”

All eyes turned to Sayaka, who seemed to shrink in size under all of their gazes. However, one student had his eyes set on someone completely different.

“Hey, man, that’s really rude!” Hiro abruptly said, making Byakuya and several other’s glare at him. “I mean, yeah, he’s big guy but comparing Hifumi to an elephant is just wrong!”

For few seconds, an awkward silence filled the room as everyone felt the intelligence level drop significantly. Breathing a heavy sigh and folding his arms sternly, Byakuya answered, “I was referring to Sayaka and her betrayal…”

“……Oh! Okay, that makes more sense!” Hiro said with a laugh that tempted everyone to throw him out.

“Indeed, it does!” Hifumi surprisingly agreed, much to the somewhat shock of his fellow classmates. Taking a brazen step forward while adjusting his glasses, he put his hands on his hips and shouted, “Though I must admit that if I had transformation power, I would rather change into a beautiful naked woma—!”

“That’s enough of that! Things are tense enough without your weird commentary!” Hina instantly cut in, silencing the fanfic creator faster than anyone could have expected.

“Oh… I see…” Hifumi seemed to sulk for a moment before retreating back, letting himself fade back into the crowd.

“With that out of the way,” Celeste intervened to get the conversation back on track, “I think it’s about time we discussed what needs to be done with Leon and Sayaka.”

At the mention of their names, the baseball star and pop idol tensed, fear welling up inside both of them. They both knew that this had been coming and although they had prolonged it as much as possible, it seemed that nothing would be able to deny their fate any longer.

“Agreed,” Byakuya unsurprisingly supported, his condescending tone bearing down on both of them. “We have been lenient thus far but I feel that now is the time to take action.”

“And what exactly do you think we should do with them?” Junko harshly questioned, knitting her brows as she glared daggers at him.

As if expecting her hostility, the affluent progeny smirked and replied, “I propose… a vote.”

His suggestion startled everyone, not only because of its fairness but also because of what it implied. They would all be forced to make another decision that they would share the responsibility of, just like the class trial. And just as it had been in the trial, the mere suggestion of the vote had Leon trembling.

The horrific memory of everyone voting to kill him flooded his mind and the baseball star fought a wave of nausea that caused bile to leap up his throat. Fighting off that sickening feeling, Leon wasn’t sure what to even think about such an idea. Luckily for him, it seemed that there were others who weren’t please with the notion either.

“A vote? Vote for what?” the confused voice of Mondo asked, unsure of what the hell Byakuya was trying to get at.
With the confidence one would expect from the Ultimate Affluent Progeny, Byakuya adjusted his glasses before answering, “We need to decide whether or not we allow Sayaka and Leon to remain a part of group, or if we need to imprison them to keep them from doing further harm. Thus the need for the vote, a majority vote to be precise.”

“This isn’t a fucking class trial, you bastard! Why the hell do we need to vote on anything?!” the biker insisted, fully understanding the notion now.

“I must agree with Mondo,” Sakura calmly stated, “Surely there is a better way for us to resolve this?”

Shifting his gaze over to her, Byakuya hardened his features and said, “If you have a better way of fairly deciding what should be done with them, then I would like to hear it.”

A momentary silence engulfed them before Hina spoke up, “Well, we can’t really have a fair vote anyway. Makoto isn’t here, and I don’t know if we should go and wake—”

“A mocking scoff escaped Byakuya’s lips as he interrupted, “We don’t need Makoto to be here.”

“No! That is unacceptable!” Taka jumped in, pointing at Byakuya furiously. “We can’t have a fair vote if one of us is absent! It’s bad enough we have to have this meeting without everyone being accounted for, and I for one will not allow a vote where we are missing an individual.”

“I second that,” Kyoko finally spoke up, “Personally, the idea of voting doesn’t bother me. However, it is certainly something that we all need to be present for if it is to happen.”

Around the room, most of the students began to whisper murmurs of agreement. Perhaps it was because they wanted to avoid creating another class trial scenario or maybe they just didn’t want to have the responsibility of the vote on their consciences. In either case, it seemed that Byakuya’s notion was going to be shot down…at least until he let out a condescending chuckle which drew everyone’s attention.

“Have none of you realized it yet?” he openly questioned, but didn’t give anyone time to answer. “The reason I said we don’t need Makoto isn’t because I don’t think he should have a vote or because of the urgency of the matter. It’s because we already have his answer.”

Byakuya’s implication hung in the air for only a moment before everyone began to realize exactly what he meant.

“Think about it. If Makoto were here, do any of you honestly think he would vote to lock away either of them?”

“So, what you’re saying is that, because we know which way he would vote—?” Kyoko began but was quickly cut off.

“Exactly. We don’t need him to be here, we can simply tally his vote as already being cast,” the affluent progeny concluded, smirking to himself as he finally seemed to outwit the lavender haired girl.

At the same time, Kyoko narrowed her eyes at him, visibly showing the tiniest bit of frustration for the first time since they’d been trapped here. With no logical way to refute his claim, she fell silent as the rest of her classmates began to ponder the situation carefully.

“Hmm, it is true that Mr. Naegi would undoubtedly vote to let them be part of the group again, but still…” Hifumi speculated, unsure of what to make of this new development.
“It just doesn’t seem right to vote without his presence,” Sakura admitted, not knowing if her confession would change anything.

“I think we should postpone any kind of voting until Makoto is here with us,” Junko chimed in, the reason behind her agreement more than obvious. However, it didn’t seem to stunt the momentum that the affluent progeny had built up with this notion.

“We have already put this off for long enough,” Byakuya insisted, his sharp eyes glaring at both Sayaka and Leon. “The time has come to make a decision and we can’t let one person, whom we know will vote to let them stay, get in the way of that decision.”

His authoritative voice echoed in the small room and, unfortunately, no one seemed able to refute him this time. Not even Leon and Sayaka, who had nervously listened as their classmates decided what should be done with them, could disagree with his logic. They certainly disagreed with how and why he was doing it, but both of them knew they had brought it on themselves.

This was, in one way or another, a form of punishment they both had to endure.

“Pardon me, but I would like say something.” Celeste called out during the small break in conversation, drawing everyone’s attention. “Personally, I don’t mind voting on whether they stay or not but I do think we should vote for them individually.”

A murmur of confusion spread through the students at her suggestion but only Kyoko found the will to ask, “And why is that?”

Smiling overly sweetly, Celeste glanced over to Sayaka as she began, “While it is true that both of them betrayed us, there is a great difference between them. Their crimes, while similar, are vastly different and need to be taken into account.”

Sayaka felt a chill run down her spine and she averted her gaze to keep from letting her shame overwhelm her. Seeing this, Celeste smirked before shifting her gaze over, locking her calculating eyes onto Leon.

“Of the two of them, I believe that Leon committed a graver sin and he deserves to be held accountable for it.”

The instant those words were spoken, Sayaka’s eyes widened and her head snapped back to see Celeste twirling a lock of her hair as she mercilessly continued.

“I believe I said this before, during the trial, but…Leon had ample time to abandon his attempts to force open the bathroom and get to Sayaka.”

“B-But! Leon only did that because he was worried about Sayaka!” Chihiro instantly jumped to his defense, surprising many of the students with how vocal she could be. At the same time, Leon looked over and let a bit of relief fill him, happy that the programmer had come to his defense.

“Even if his claims are true and he only did it out of concern for her, that notion does not absolve him of the crime,” the gambler continued unabated, not letting the remark slow her down. “If he had simply left, perhaps Sayaka would never have been ‘accidentally’ injured in the first place.”

Hearing that clear implication, and only now realizing it could be true, Leon felt that hint of relief vanish as he squeezed his eyes shut and hung his head, resigned to his fate.

With no one objecting to her statements, Celeste continued on, “And we cannot forget that he consciously chose to cover up his crime after it had been committed. If he is truly as remorseful as he
claims to be, then he should have admitted to the crime when—”.

THWAP!!

“Ahhhhhgh!”

Everything stopped as a slapping sound immediately followed by a terrified scream came from the other side of the room. All of the students shot their gazes over to see Hiro, his arms wrapped around himself in pointless defense, staring at a pillow that was lying on the ground in front of him.

“W-W-Who’s throwing pillows at me?!?” the frightened clairvoyant shouted, frantically looking around the room.

“Sorry, that was me.”

The entire room was shocked to hear Sayaka, whom they now saw was pillow-less, admit to the deed with absolutely no hesitation. For a good ten seconds, no one said a word, with everyone just staring at her with wonder and confusion.

“U-Umm, why did you throw a pillow at me?” Hiro carefully asked, seeming to be frightened of her at that moment.

Bowing her head slightly for a moment before sitting upright again, Sayaka waved her uninjured left arm for emphasis as she said, “I really am sorry but my aim was off because I’m using my weak arm. I wasn’t aiming for you, Hiro...I was actually aiming for Celeste.”

If the students hadn’t been shocked before, they were now. Not only because of what had happened, but because her aim had been way off. Hiro was on the opposite side of the room that Celeste was. It was a miracle she hit anyone with such poor aim. In fact, the entire group seemed to shift to looking between Sayaka, then to Celeste, over to Hiro, down to the pillow, then back to Sayaka to restart the process, all the while trying to figure out how it had happened. It seemed like hours went by as each and every student went through the process at least once.

Amidst this strange viewing ritual, Sayaka extended her good hand out again and said, “Can I have my pillow back please?”

“Uh, why?” Hiro absent-mindedly asked, the obvious answer not coming to him right away.

However, his question was actually well-founded when Sayaka replied, “So I can try again.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Hiro was just about to lean down and retrieve the pillow for her when the confused voice of Celeste rang out, making his hesitate.

“More to the point,” the gambler inquired intently, “Why were you trying to hit me with that pillow?”

Sayaka paused for a moment before sending the most vicious glare any of them had ever seen directly toward the gambler as she replied, “To get you to shut the hell up!”

Everyone seemed to flinch at the ferocity the pop idol displayed. It wasn’t just her tone, everything that had made her seem sweet or innocent seemed to have vanished right before their eyes. It was almost as if she was out for blood and wouldn’t stop until she was satisfied. None of them had ever seen the usually sparkling Sayaka in such a terrifying light.

Well, almost all of them anyway.
Leon knew this ferocity all too well; he’d been assaulted with it just the other night…when Sayaka had tried to kill him. The frantic hysteria in her eyes, the fury in her voice, the horrifying panic that consumed her reason…her very being had changed into that of a cornered beast. Even just recalling that terrible memory made the baseball star shudder uncontrollably, unable to suppress the fear that rose up in him as a result.

But then…something seemed different about Sayaka’s imposing nature this time. He couldn’t quite place it exactly, but instead of her being fanatic and aggressive, she seemed more on the defensive, as if she was trying to protect something.

And Leon wasn’t the only one to notice this. From across the room, Kyoko kept her stoic eyes locked on the pop idol as the scene unfolded. Nearby, Junko seemed like she was almost repressing a smile as she looked on. And finally, Byakuya watched with great interest, as if he’d been waiting for this for quite a while now.

However, Sayaka paid no mind to any of the suspicious or startled glances she received. Her blue eyes narrowed dangerously at Celeste and she seethed, “You have no right to put all the blame on Leon. If I hadn’t tricked him into meeting with me and tried to frame Makoto for it, then none of this would have happened!”

As she vented her pent up frustrations, Celeste, who had been taken aback this entire time, finally seemed to regain her wits. As if on instinct, the gambler leisurely crossed her arms and averted her gaze as she replied, “Perhaps, but that is irrelevant. Because despite your claims, the fact is that Leon consciously tried to cover up his crime—”.

“And I suppose you would have just laid down and died!” Sayaka interrupted, her tone forcing Celeste to return her gaze back to the pop idol. “Face it! None of you would have done any different if I had targeted you instead—!”

“She raises a good point.”

The room fell awkwardly silent as Byakuya spoke up in between Sayaka’s shouting. All attention focused on him, which he probably appreciated, and it didn’t take long for him to huff and cross his arms, an overly confident smile plastered on his face.

“I can say with 100% certainty that any of us would have done the same. And it’s for that reason that I proposed the vote in the first place. Voting for them separately is pointless, as both of them have betrayed our trust, albeit in different ways,” he paused for but a moment to glance around at everyone. Celeste in particular, he noticed, was glaring at him angrily, obviously displeased with his intervention.

However, he barely registered her animosity as he continued, “If we are to punish them, then it must be both or neither of them, as either one of them presents a considerable threat—”.

“No…”

An annoyed grunt escaped Byakuya at being interrupted and he scowled as he saw Sayaka glaring at him furiously. All of her rage seemed to have been shifted over from Celeste to him. She almost looked as if she was going to pull a knife on him, much to everyone’s terror. However, the affluent progeny seemed less than intimidated by her attitude.

“‘No’, what?” he inquired, matching her gaze with a fearsome glare.

Involuntarily, Sayaka momentarily winced under his gaze, obviously not prepared for anyone to
match her ferocity. However, she recovered almost instantly, hardening her features and holding her head up high as she retorted, “Everything that happened is my fault…even if Leon tried to cover it up, it never would have happened if I hadn’t called him to my room. Leave him out of it.”

For a moment, Byakuya was left stunned as she glared at him. Even though her hair was slightly disheveled and her complexion was still noticeably pale, there was no denying the determination that radiated from the pop idol. She was unwilling to back down, and it seemed that she was intent on taking responsibility for everything that had happened.

Leon’s eyes bulged and he immediately shouted, “W-Wait a second! Sayaka, what are you—?”

“I’m afraid we can’t do that,” Byakuya cut him off, ignoring his protests and speaking directly to Sayaka. “Like it or not, both of you are at fault here. So both of you need to—”.

“Will you just shut up, you bastard?!” Everyone was taken aback as Sayaka’s anger seemed to peak, her index finger pointing accusatorily at the affluent progeny. “What gives you the right to judge us!? And what does it matter anyway! If you need to punish someone, then punish me! I’ll gladly—!”

“Hmmmmm, did someone mention…punishment?!” a menacingly high-pitched voice inquired

Sayaka ceased speaking the instant those words reached her ears, her blood practically freezing in her veins. And she wasn’t the only one, Leon also felt himself lose mobility in his muscles as that fearsome voice penetrated his eardrums. As one, the two of them slowly turned and fixed their terrified gazes on the object of their torment.

Standing by the door, with a strange box in its hands, Monokuma grinned maliciously and chuckled. “I’d be beary happy to oblige…”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Sorry for the delay in posting this chapter but I’m afraid I had a very minor medical emergency last week. Everything’s fine but it delayed the posting, so sorry about that.

Anyway, what’s going to happen now?! How will the voting go, do you think? Will Leon and Sayaka be ostracized from the group? Or, will they be allowed to keep company with everyone? And what’s that box Monokuma’s got? Stay tuned until next time to find out!

As always, your reviews, observations, and ideas are welcome. If you have any questions, concerns, fears, tears, traumas, or phobias about the story, feel free to voice them. Also, my beta (Dixxy Mouri) has been working hard on her own story “Haunted”, so if you have time, give it a read and leave her an encouraging message!

Thank you all for reading and I hope your enjoying the story! Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Monokuma attempts to intervene with the students' judgment of the betrayers, and Leon and Sayaka are faced with a difficult situation. Later, Makoto finally speaks to Sayaka about what Kyoko mentioned...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Are you doing okay? Need a break?”

“No…let’s just get there fast.”

Shuffling down the hallway toward the dormitory with a slender arm slung over his shoulder, Leon hoisted up a slow moving Sayaka as she did her best to walk on her own. Her broken wrist was still in its sling and this meant if she fell, she wouldn’t be able to catch herself, hence Leon’s presence.

“…You sure you don’t need to rest?”

“I can rest when I get to my room…can we please hurry up?”

All in all though, she was doing well for someone that had lost so much blood the previous day, but it was painfully obvious she had little strength. She needed someone to counter balance her and hold her upright as she walked and it just had to be the person that had inflicted her wounds in the first place.

“Yeah, this ain’t awkward at all…” Leon mused as they moved along at a snail’s pace.

In truth, Sayaka was in no condition to be traveling so soon after her bandages had been replaced but it couldn’t be helped. Monokuma had made his demands quite clear…

One Hour Earlier:

As usual, Monokuma’s presence stunned the students into silence. The bear never came around without a purpose and like it or not, their survival depended on listening to every depraved thing their “Headmaster” had to say. Even so, some of the students seemed to be growing accustomed to the bear’s constant intrusions.

“You’re not welcome here,” the stern voice of Byakuya shook the room, startling everyone. “Get out; we’re having an important discussion.”

“Eh…really?” Monokuma said with a head tilt. “It looked like a bunch of meaningless prattle from a group of grade school-children, considering that it took over an hour to finally get to the good part.”

“What do you mean, ‘the good part’?” Hiro absent-mindedly asked, earning a few frustrated glares,
particularly from Byakuya and Junko.

“Oh come now! Did you really think that you all could talk about punishments without having the Master of Masochistic Mayhem meander into the mix?!” While everyone rolled their eyes at Monokuma’s self-appointed title, the bear set the box at its side down in plain view for everyone. “Besides, I have this wonderful little show for you all to see!”

“Whatever it is, we don’t want to see it,” Junko spoke up, folding her arms and glaring menacingly at the bear. Its gaze downcast, Monokuma didn’t bother to lift its head as a maniacal chuckle echoed, sending chills down each student’s spine.

“Upupupupu...is that so? Are you sure you all feel the same way? You’re all completely fine with the fact that two of your classmates, who willingly betrayed you, are getting off scot free?” Snapping its head up, the bear’s half-grin seemed to widen as it continued, “That’s great! Such forgiveness is exactly what our communal life here is all about!”

A frightful silence engulfed the room, as no one had expected Monokuma to say anything remotely cheerful. It was a shock but also felt more terrifying than if the bear had threatened them. There had to be something more to this…

“Oh, but I should remind you of something,” Monokuma abruptly spoke again, continuing to be the central focus. “I am your delightfully vigilant headmaster, and as such, I feel that it is my duty to keep you all safe and sound while you’re in my school. And if there are any, shall we say, concerns that you might have about another student…I may be persuaded to discipline them.”

“What exactly are you getting at?” Byakuya asked, as if intrigued by the bear’s offer.

Spinning around joyfully, Monokuma halted mid turn and pointed both of its claws at the small box that had been set down in front of them.

“To answer that, I must refer all of you to the visual aid I brought with me!”

Without further ado, the bear tore off the lid to the box and turned it on its side so everyone could get a better view. Much to everyone’s surprise, the inside was quite detailed and seemed to resemble a concert stage, like the ones seen in pop videos. And standing in the center of that stage, trapped in a stereotypical idol pose, was a small doll with long blue hair.

It took the students all of two seconds to recognize what, or rather who, the doll was supposed to be. “Is...is that...me?” Sayaka practically whimpered as she saw her tiny replica on the box’s ‘stage’.

“Indeed it is!” Monokuma confirmed as it grabbed the doll and proceeded to make it ‘dance’ all about the ‘stage’. Leon gritted his teeth, trying to repress how disgusting it was to watch the half and half bear toy with not only the doll, but Sayaka’s feelings as well.

“Once there was a lovely girl named Sayaka Maizono, who only wished for the heavenly warmth of the stage,” Monokuma monologued as it continued to play with the doll. “In fact, she loved it sooooo much that she was willing to do unspeakable things to keep it! But such naughty girls need to realize that no matter how hard they try—”

Without warning Monokuma released the doll from its grasp, letting it stand upright in the center of the stage. Then, inexplicably from behind its back, the bear produced a small lever and skillfully plugged it into the side of the box. Turning the lever slowly, the familiar melody of “Pop Goes the Weasel” began to echo from inside the box.
Suddenly, just before the last note of the song, a bear-trap that had been cleverly hidden away beneath the box snapped shut. As the teeth of the trap snapped, they dug into the small body of the Sayaka doll, severing the head from the doll’s shoulders with a splat. An ominous gush of pink gunk shot out from the headless doll, spraying the floor all around the box.

And, as if guided by fate, the bloody, severed head of the doll flew straight toward Sayaka, smacking into her chest and making her jump and shrill at in terror.

“—you can never escape your punishment!”

As Sayaka’s terrified scream filled the room, Mukuro had to grab onto a nearby bed-frame to keep herself from reacting. She could have easily caught the flying doll head before it got anywhere near Sayaka but, of course, that would have ruined her guise. Her soldier’s instincts instantly put her on guard the moment she saw the box, and she knew that, even if it wasn’t something deadly, if Junko decided to use it, there was an express purpose.

The doll’s beheading combined with Sayaka’s fearful cry had put them all on edge. Glancing around she noticed that all of her classmates were startled; even Kyoko held the faintest bit of shock on her face as the scene unfolded. But that didn’t answer the question of why Junko had done it in the first place.

Perhaps the purpose had simply been to frighten all of them, Sayaka in particular, but there was something about the box trap that only Mukuro would know of. The way the Sayaka doll had been…destroyed, it was identical to what Junko had planned for the real Sayaka’s execution. A giant bear-trap on a stage she couldn’t escape, lulling her into a false sense of security that she might survive before brutally ending her life, it was tailor-made to play on the idol’s fears.

Was Junko upset that she may have lost the chance to perform the pop idol’s actual execution? No, there was still a chance Sayaka might fall to the temptation of murder once more…no matter how unlikely that was.

“But then…why go through the trouble of building a small execution replica?”

As Mukuro pondered that notion her eyes shifted over to see Monokuma, going unnoticed during the confusion, staring at her with a devilish grin. It was then that, clear as day, the animatronic bear finished it’s sentence from earlier.

“—you can never escape your punishment!”

Mukuro’s eyes widened as she realized the purpose of this little display. Everyone had been too distracted to notice that Monokuma’s final words were directed at her, something that Junko certainly must have planned. And while she was certain that the beheading had been a means of tormenting Sayaka, as well as agitating the rest of her class; more specifically it had been Junko’s way of sending her sister a very specific message.

“If I make a single mistake, if any of my classmates discover who I really am…I’ll have to face punishment as well.”
As Sayaka’s shrilled voice pierced everyone’s ears, Leon found himself speeding to her bedside. Grasping the bloody doll head in his hand, he quickly tossed it away from her. The instant it was gone from her sight, the pop idol finally finished screaming, falling eerily silent as her body trembled from the sudden activity. Her breathing became ragged and she struggled for air, her abdomen wound obviously plaguing her.

Once things started to settle, all hell began to break loose.

“What the hell was that about?!” Mondo suddenly shouted at Monokuma. “Trying to scare us like that is pretty low, man!”

“Indeed!” Taka joined in, pointing furiously at the bear. “Such a diorama is not acceptable! It didn’t have nearly enough detail to be considered A+ material, and to top it off, it was too deadly to be presented properly!”

“That’s not even remotely the issue here…” Junko muttered with a heavy sigh.

“Anyway,” Kyoko’s calm voice entered the fray, “What exactly was your purpose for coming here? And why was the ‘visual display’ needed?”

“I already told you, that was nothing more than a little visual aid. It was mainly for my own amusement since someone interrupted the execution yesterday,” Monokuma answered, shrugging off her comment while sending a slight glare toward Junko, who leaned against the wall, flipping the bear off.

Folding her arms, Kyoko continued, “Then would you mind telling us the reason for the visual aid? You never answered that.”

For a moment, it seemed that Monokuma growled a bit as Kyoko made her demand. However, the sound faded almost in instant later as the bear said, “Basically, if you all think that Sayaka can’t be trusted…I can arrange for a ‘repeat performance’. Only this time, we’d have it be the real deal.”

“Uh, wait…you’re saying that—”, Hiro tried to say before he was abruptly cut off.

“If we desire it, you can have any one of us executed? Is that what you’re implying?” Sakura said, unnerved by such an idea.

Taken aback by the sudden suggestion, a look of shock overtook Monokuma’s features and it waved its arms frantically in a ‘no’ formation.

“Oh me, oh my! Goodness, no! That would disrupt the rules that govern our little community!” the bear explained, slowly letting its arms fall to its side. “But if she just so happened to break any of the rules for whatever reason and one of you were to inform me of it…then I’d certainly have to punish her accordingly. And don’t worry; in this case, snitches won’t get stitches!”

A heavy silence dug into everyone as a familiar unease set into everyone. What the bear was suggesting was beyond unfair. If any of them reported Sayaka for even a minor rule breaker…she could be executed on the spot, with seemingly no repercussions imposed on whoever reported it.

Sayaka in particular began darting her eyes around the room gauging everyone. It was the first day all over again, with her being terrified of just about everyone. And this time, Makoto wouldn’t be here for her to rely on…a consequence she’d brought upon herself.

“So, if you see her breaking any rules, feel free to let me know so that I can carry out the justice our society demands of us!”
Monokuma cackled as everyone hung their heads, realizing how fragile their lives really were as long as the bear had control over the school. However, in the middle of its laughing fit, the bear was interrupted by a furious shout.

“You little bastard!!” Leon seethed as he glared at Monokuma, the bear only just finishing its chuckling. “You think this is funny, don’t you! Messing with her just after she’d finally woken up! Who the hell do you think you are?!”

Without missing a beat, Monokuma placed its hands on its hips and replied, “I…am…Monokuma! Headmaster of this school! I figured you would have that down by now…I’ve said it like forty-seven times already—”.

“Get out…” a small voice interrupted, startling the bear and ballplayer. Both of them turned to see Sayaka glaring daggers at Monokuma, holding her pillow in her good hand. Tears rolled down her face as she angrily shouted, “I said, get out, you little monster! I’ve had enough of you! Leave me alone!!”

Seeing exactly where this was leading, Junko’s eyes widened and she shouted, “No! Stop!”

But it was too late…

In a fit of anger, she flung her arm outward, hurling the pillow toward the bear. Unlike before, her aim was spot on and it flew directly at its target. Monokuma’s grin widened as the pillow grew closer and closer. And everyone knew that, the instant it reached the bear, her fate would be sealed, and there would be no escaping it this time.

*THWAP*

…

…

…

“No freakin’ way…” Leon whispered, unable to move.

He and everyone gasped as they saw the pillow, only a few inches from Monokuma’s smug face, held firmly in the grasp of someone’s hands. Even more surprising was that the one holding the pillow, the one who’d blocked it and kept it from striking the bear...was none other than Byakuya Togami.

“Although normally it’s beneath me to side with such peasants, in this instance, I must agree with them. We have no need of your services. Not now or ever,” Byakuya said sternly but without raising his voice. “We can decide the fate of our classmates on our own. You’re just in the way here. Be gone.”

Everyone paused as Byakuya’s demands reverberated around the room, strangely coming to his classmate’s defense. However, no one was more surprised than Monokuma, its face burning a bright red as its temper began to boil over.

“W-What’s it to you, anyway?! Weren’t you the one who thought that they needed to be punished —?!”

“I don’t recall saying that at all,” Byakuya cruelly interrupted, slowly turning to face the bear directly. “All I said was that we needed to decide what should be done with them. I never proposed
any kind of punishment or execution. That was Sayaka. She, and she alone, was the one who felt the need to be punished."

A deep furious growl slowly began to rise out of Monokuma as the Affluent Progeny’s calculating eyes narrowed in on the mistake the bear had flippantly made.

With an air of superiority about him, Byakuya continued, “I, on the other hand, think that isolation is the proper recourse here. For you see, I refuse to give you the satisfaction of executing one of us without due process.”

If Monokuma had had a vein in its head, it would have popped at the pure rage that exuded from the bear as it shouted in fury.

“AHHRGH!! Fine! Just do whatever the hell you want with ‘em!” Monokuma screamed, waddle-stomping toward the door furiously. However, just before it left, the bear whirled around and said, “I hope you die penniless in a snowstorm.”

And without further ado, the bear flung open the infirmary door and disappeared into the hall, slamming the door with a furious clacking. The instant the bear was gone, an awkward silence covered the area for a moment before an ecstasy filled moan startled everyone.

“A-Amazing!!” Toko chocked out, her face beet red with sweat dripping down from her forehead. “M-Master Byakuya d-drove off the fiendish bear w-with his aura alone!”

“That’s not remotely close to what happened,” Hiro semi-protested but kept his voice low all the same.

“I’m more surprised by the fact that you decided to defend such ‘lowly commoners’,” Kyoko said, a suspicious glare on her face.

A light scoff escaped Byakuya’s lips as he answered, “Don’t misunderstand me. I simply didn’t want the bear interfering in my business. I won’t tolerate such uncouth behavior from anyone, let alone a pathetic remote controlled toy with a superiority complex.”

“Even so, that was quite a shock to see,” Celeste decided to interrupt, a crafty smile on her delicate face. “If you hadn’t of caught the pillow, Sayaka would surely have been executed. Did you perhaps —?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” Byakuya cut her off, sending her a chilling glare her way. “I only intervened because the bear has no place here. We still need to decide what needs to be done with these two betrayers.”

Without another word, Byakuya tossed the pillow back toward Sayaka, making her panic as she realized there wasn’t enough time for her to catch it. However, before it got close to her face, Leon snagged it out of the air. Before she could react, he was already holding it out for her to take from him.

Slowly reaching a hand out, she grasped the pillow and pulled it into her chest.

“T-Thanks—”.

“Okay, is no one going to address what just happened?” Junko abruptly asked, frowning at all of them.

“You mean how Mr. Togami became imbued with super human speed and—”, Hifumi tried to say
before the Fashionista sent him what he interpreted as a death glare. “Eeeep!”

Shifting her gaze to glance at everyone again, Junko furrowed her brows and said, “I’m talking about the fact that no one seems to be upset about Sayaka nearly getting herself executed!”

There was a subtle pause as everyone realized that they had been too focused on Byakuya’s daring (and unexpected) rescue to really think about the situation. And unfortunately, the only one of them who had enough confidence to retort, shouldn’t have.

“Well, is it really that big a deal,” Hiro replied nonchalantly, waving one hand dismissively. “It’s not like anything happened—”.

*Smack*

“Arhhh!”

Everyone in the room heard the resounding slap as Junko’s palm brutally smacked into Hiro’s cheek. And for a moment, everyone just stood there as Junko, her body trembling from anger, glared at him furiously.

“One of us nearly got executed for a pillow fight! Does that sound like nothing to you?!”

“Uh, um, uh, uhhh…” Hiro tried to reply but the pain in his cheek combined with the absolute fear the Fashionista put into him compelled him to be silent. Luckily for him, Junko directed her attention over to the now terrified pop idol.

“And you, Sayaka! What the hell were you thinking?!” she continued on her tirade, practically stomping over to Sayaka’s bedside with all haste. Her teeth were grit and it was obvious she was struggling to keep her fury in check. The pop idol shrunk under her furious gaze, feeling more ashamed than ever over her stupid mistake.

“You’re already on thin ice and you pull a bullshit stunt like that?! What would you have done if… Byakuya hadn’t caught the pillow?! Or do you think that you deserve to die for not actually killing anyone?!”

The entire room seemed to shake as Junko uncharacteristically scolded her classmate.

“Well?! What do you have to say for yourself—?!”

“I don’t know!!” Sayaka instantly replied, hanging her head, her body trembling. “I don’t know what I should do anymore! I don’t want to die! But I have to get out of here and find my friends!! M-My friends…my friends could be dead and I…and I…”

Her words cut deep into everyone, each of them recalling their own DVD and the motive that had come with them. The frustration and desperation those little discs had caused were more powerful than any of them previously thought. Even Junko, whose fury seemed to have subsided, hung her head for a moment as most of the students realized how close they had come to buckling under the pressure.

They had all been just one step away from being in either Sayaka or Leon’s position, and if she hadn’t acted as quickly as she had, one of them could have fallen to that same temptation. It was a somber fact that not even Kyoko or the great Byakuya could refute.

Amidst the silence, Sayaka closed her eyes began to sob as she continued, “I…I don’t want…to hurt anyone…but…my friends…I…I don’t…”
To her sudden surprise, a pair of arms wrapped around her and her head was laid gently against a soft surface. Sayaka’s eyes snapped open to see Junko gently caressing her head, running a careful hand through the pop idol’s hair.

“It’s okay…just let it out…”

Confusion warped Sayaka’s features but it quickly dissipated as she gave in to her own grief, latching her good arm around the Fashionista and openly weeping. Her tears stained Junko’s designer blouse but the fashion model said nothing about it as she let Sayaka’s head rest against her bosom.

Mukuro didn’t know what possessed her to do such a thing for Sayaka. Perhaps memories of her time carrying the pop idol to the infirmary had something to do with it, or it could be some kind of maternal instinct that she’d never been aware of before. Either way, she didn’t say a word as she let the pop idol cry her heart out.

However, she did manage to shift her gaze over to Leon, who looked on the verge of tears himself. She kind of wanted him to join her and help to soothe Sayaka’s grievances but she wasn’t so naïve as to think it would be that easy.

It was the first time in all her life that she’d ever used physical contact to comfort someone…hell it was probably the first time she’d ever really tried to comfort anyone ever. Neither she nor her sister had ever needed that kind of consolation. Junko was always too busy reveling in the despair and Mukuro, being a soldier, never let the horror of her life affect her.

However, as she held onto Sayaka and gently stroked her hair, memories of the moment Junko had abandoned her rushed into her mind. And as she tightly hugged Sayaka to her chest, the Ultimate Soldier couldn’t help but feel the tiniest hint of jealousy.

“There was no one to hold me while I was in despair…” she briefly thought before gently shaking her head to expel all of her negative thoughts as she continued to soothe her classmate’s woes.

As Sayaka continued to weep, everyone in the room felt their anger for her begin to fade…aside from Byakuya, of course. In the midst of her weeping, he cleared his throat loudly, gathering everyone, including the grieving Sayaka’s, attention.

“Sorry to interrupt your little pity party but we still need to decide what needs to be done with these two,” he stoutly informed everyone, ignoring the furious glares he received, particularly from Leon and Junko. However, he scoffed at their gazes and continued, “Don’t look at me like that. You all knew this was coming, we decided to vote and I believe we’ve put it off long enough.”

A depressing silence dug into everyone as they realized they couldn’t put it off any longer.

Hina looked to Sakura for support but all the martial artist could do was shake her head solemnly. Even though he normally would have been ecstatic to lead the charge in the voting, Taka felt sickened by the nature of the vote and couldn’t bring himself to ask for it. Chihiro looked at everyone nervously not wanting to have to vote at all. Mondo, conflicted about how he should vote, hung his head and averted his gaze.
Toko, still in the thralls of excitement over Byakuya’s brave dealings with Monokuma, was ready to cast her vote right now if her white knight would take note of her. Celeste also seemed ready to vote; her decision had probably been made the moment Sayaka tried to throw a pillow at her. Hifumi opted to remain silent in the whole affair, knowing how he wanted to vote but otherwise unsure of how he could contribute to the situation. And Hiro didn’t really understand the need for the vote but knew which way he should vote regardless.

Sayaka still clutched onto Junko, afraid of what the verdict will be, and Leon remained rooted in place, unable to escape whatever fate his classmates chose for him. At the very least, it seemed that this vote wasn’t as life threatening as it had been the first time…that is, if Byakuya had been telling Monokuma the truth.

“Before we do that, I have a question.”

Startled, everyone turned to see Kyoko, who was still leaning against the far wall, staring directly at Byakuya.

“Go ahead,” the Affluent Progeny insisted, already anticipating her query.

“Did you mean it?” she asked carefully.

“Mean what?” he replied with skepticism.

“Everything you said to Monokuma, about isolating them instead of killing them. Or were you simply bluffing to force his hand?” she asked directly, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

There was another slight pause before Byakuya scoffed and folded his arms, glaring at her accusatorily. “Don’t make me laugh. My name is Byakuya Togami, my word is my oath. If I didn’t mean it, then I would never have said it.”

“And if we happen to vote the other way, you’ll abide by it?” Kyoko continued her questioning, her stoic features not budging an inch.

Byakuya’s eye slightly twitched at the implication she was making but other than that, he remained completely motionless as he replied, “As I said, a Togami never goes back on his word. Whatever the outcome, I will abide by it.”

Byakuya found it odd that she was pushing this so much but he didn’t have time to process it before she spoke again.

“Then I’d like to make an alteration to the vote,” she said purposefully before continuing, so no one could interrupt her. “If we decide to allow them to rejoin us, then someone will need to attend to Sayaka’s needs, at least until she fully recovers.”

“W-Wait a second—!” Sayaka tried to interject, finally releasing Junko from her grasp.

“Hmm, I can agree to that.” Everyone was shocked when Byakuya suddenly complied. However, the devious smirk on his face instantly put everyone back on edge. “However, I’d like to request that Leon be the one to look after Sayaka—”.

“What?” the pop idol practically shrieked, staring wide-eyed at the Affluent Progeny. “Why would Leon need to be the one to—?”

With a sideways glance, Byakuya cut her off as he explained, “If the two of you are together, and one of you ends up murdered, then we’ll have a suspect.”
“Also, it will serve as a form of punishment for both of you,” Celeste added with a sickly sweet smile. “That is what you wanted, isn’t Sayaka? To be punished for you crimes?”

Sayaka began to see red and was about to protest again when she was cut off by someone unexpected.

“I’m cool with that,” Leon complied quickly, shocking the pop idol into silence.

Before she could muster up the words to respond, Junko stepped away from her bed, turned to face him directly and asked, “You sure about this?”

It may not have seemed like much, but everyone knew it was a loaded question. However, unlike what everyone expected, the ballplayer didn’t hesitate.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he answered solemnly, his eyes hardened with determination.

Sayaka felt her mouth go dry as he accepted the role. She wasn’t ready to be within a few feet of him, let alone be alone with him! And if he was the one who had to serve her meals and probably help her eat, since her dominate hand was out of commission, it would be beyond awkward. She couldn’t escape the guilt of what she’d done, she’d have to be reminded of it every time she saw him.

Then again, just as Celeste said, it was a fitting punishment for what she’d done. But then, was it fair to force Leon to suffer with her…?

Before she could really consider that notion, Taka finally regained the will to speak.

“S-So, I guess we should get down to the voting now,” he said carefully, trying to regain his former enthusiasm.

“Yes, I’d like to get it over with as soon as we could. Alright?” Hiro almost pleaded, obviously not enjoying how long this had dragged out.

“But, uh, how exactly do we do the voting thing? And how do we make sure no one sees what we voted for?” Hina chimed in, fidgeting nervously.

“Indeed, confidentiality should be taken into consideration,” Sakura added, reassuring Hina if only slightly.

“I see no reason to hide any of our votes,” Byakuya cruelly answered, glancing around the room and speaking to everyone. “If you all feel strongly about your vote, then there should be no reason to hide it.”

“I…I suppose he has a point,” Hifumi reluctantly concurred, obviously not pleased with the idea either.

“So then, you’re asking us to vote but how would you like us to proceed with that?” Celeste questioned Byakuya, trying to get everyone back on track. “Will we be raising our hands or writing down our votes on paper?”

“A simple tally by raised hands should suffice,” Byakuya answered, narrowing his gaze at both Sayaka and Leon. “And of course, neither of you shall be voting.”

“R-Right…”

“Whatever…”
The two of them answered simultaneously, averting their gazes from everyone in the process.

With everyone ready, Byakuya stood in the center of the room and said, “Alright then, let’s begin. Everyone in favor of isolating Leon and Sayaka until further notice?”

Byakuya, Celeste, Hifumi, Hiro, Toko and surprisingly Mondo, all raised their hands. There was a bit of shock at seeing the bike gang leader’s decision but there was no time to dwell on it.

Taking the lead from there, Junko stepped forward and proclaimed, “All in favor of allowing Leon and Sayaka to rejoin our group?”

Kyoko, Hina, Sakura, Taka, Chihiro and Junko herself raised their hands. For a moment, everyone took a second to tally the votes but were disappointed with the results.

“Aw crap!!” Mondo said aloud, making everyone groan. “So what the hell do we do now? It’s an even split!”

“He’s right! We never established punishment games in the event of a tie!” Hifumi frantically pointed out, much to everyone’s chagrin.

“Actually, it’s not an even split.”

Everyone froze as Kyoko spoke up, her words earning raised brows and confused glances.

“That can’t be right!” Taka abruptly countered, holding up a piece of paper he must have had in his pocket. On the paper, he had tallied each person’s vote into two separate columns. “According to my chart, there are exactly twelve of us and six votes for each side. Therefore, we are at an impasse. We will simply have to keep voting until someone changes their—”

“…Actually, as reluctant as I am to admit it, Kyoko is correct.” Byakuya’s smooth voice interrupted Taka’s ramblings, not giving his classmate the chance to finish.

“But…how can that be?” Hina joined in, now very confused. “There are only twelve of us, if you don’t count Sayaka or Leon.”

A smirk appeared on Byakuya’s lips, chuckling as he answered, “A simple case of addition keeps you from seeing the answer. How sad…”

“What?! Are you calling me stupid or something?!” the swimmer shouted, glaring at him angrily as she was held back by Sakura.

“Please get to the point,” the Ultimate Martial Artist insisted, her voice deadly serious. “Now isn’t the time for games.”

With a hint of frustration in his voice, the Togami Heir continued, “There is one more person whose vote was not accounted for. The only one of us who isn’t present.”

It took the confused students all of two seconds to understand who he was referring to, but only Sayaka found the courage to say it aloud.

“…Makoto.”

“Exactly.” Byakuya further explained, “Since we know that he would vote for them to rejoin us, that brings the vote up seven to six, in favor of them rejoining.”

Even as he said that, Sayaka felt as though she hadn’t really won. In fact, a small part of her wished
to be isolated, to be kept away from everyone and avoid facing her crimes head on. And Byakuya must have been keenly aware of that, because less than a moment later, he smirked fiendishly toward her and Leon. He didn’t have to say anything, it was all in his expression. He was enjoying knowing how difficult it was going to be having to be around each other so often.

And to top it all off, he promised to abide by the outcome of the vote, so he obviously had no intention of helping them. Not that they expected him to do any such thing anyway.

As the reality of their new situation set in on them, Junko turned and smiled at both of them before saying, “Look at it this way, you’ll have plenty of time to work out your issues now. Why don’t you help Sayaka to her room, Leon? I’m sure she wants to rest after all that’s happened.”

“Y-Yeah, sure…”

For the first time in what felt like ages, Leon turned toward Sayaka and she made the fatal mistake of glancing over to him as well. The instant their eyes met, she felt the same fear and apprehension that had overtaken her the previous night. This was her punishment.

She had brought this on herself and this time, there was nothing she could do about it.

“At least everything worked out. For now anyway,” Leon thought as he and Sayaka made it past the cafeteria and into the red-tinted dorm hall.

As they approached the dorm room, Leon instinctively began to turn toward the door labeled: Sayaka. However, the injured pop idol visibly winced as he shifted his weight against her. Shocked at her sudden display of pain, the ballplayer ceased all movement, holding her up as cautiously as he could.

“W-Whoa! What’s wrong?” he carefully asked, trying his best not to sound surprised.

With a slight glare, Sayaka shifted her gaze to him and said, “You moved too quickly in a different direction. Why the hell do we need to go right for, anyway?”

“Well…because this is your room,” Leon explained nodding his head toward the door. Taking one look at the door, an exhausted sigh escaped Sayaka’s lips and she furrowed her brows in frustration.

“Leon…That’s Makoto’s room…I’m the next door down.”

The ballplayer felt like face-palming but his hands were too full. Instead a hint of red stained his cheeks as he embarrassedly said, “Oh…yeah.” Without another word, he continued to hobble down the hallway with Sayaka in tow, reaching her actual dorm in only a few moments.

Turning the handle and pulling open the door, Leon shuffled the both of them inside. The instant he was in the room, he paused. It was so incredibly…plain. There were no posters, no make-up kits, no dresser to apply said make-up at, hell there was no pop idol type stuff in there at all! Aside from the sheets of her bed being pink, there was absolutely no indication that this was a girl’s room at all…well aside from the pleasantly female aroma that filled his nostrils.

For some reason, it was oddly comforting to him…although he couldn’t quite tell why. It should have been more alluring than anything but, truth be told; it was more familiar than he thought possible. But he didn’t let that thought stray too far before he continued looking around her room.
It was like everything had been removed or something, which was exactly the opposite of his room. When he’d returned to his own room, he’d found his baseball equipment, a good deal of his rock posters and even his own electric guitar set was ready and waiting for him. It was all stuff he’d shipped to the school before his arrival so he hadn’t been that surprised to see it, but it wasn’t until now that he realized how strange it was.

Why did his room have so much of his stuff but Sayaka seemed to have nothing? She must have sent her belongings to the school before she arrived, the same as he did, so why did she—?

“Hey…would you let me sit down?” Sayaka’s voice snapped him back to reality as he realized that he must have been standing there for quite some time.

“Y-Yeah,” he said quickly, shaking off the strange feeling that thought had given him.

Moving over to the bed, Sayaka practically pushed herself away from him when she was close enough, plopping down on the bed. Not two seconds after she’d separated from him, she said, “Thanks, you can go.”

Leon felt his eye twitch at her attitude. Sure, she’d said the words but there was practically no gratitude in her voice as she’d thanked him. And the way she insisted that he be gone also hurt just a bit. However, it wasn’t as if he didn’t understand. He’d probably be acting the same if the person who’d almost killed him had to take care of him.

“Even so, she doesn’t have to be so pushy about it…” he thought to himself as he took a few steps back. “It’s not like it’s easy to carry a person down three hallways, especially since I haven’t really eaten today—!”

Leon’s eyes widened slightly as he realized that, not only had he neglected to eat, Sayaka hadn’t even had the chance to eat since she’d awoken. And with everything that had happened, she must be starving.

“So, uh, are you hungry or—?”

“No, I’m not.”

A deep frown formed on Leon’s face as she blatantly refused. “Seriously? You haven’t eaten for like two days.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not hungry,” she sternly replied, not even looking at him as she slid over to lie down in the center of the bed. “So just go already.”

Leon really didn’t want to get mad at her, he wanted to calmly explain why she needed to eat and convince her to let him get her something. However, he utterly failed at that notion.

“Look, I know you’re not happy with this but you gotta eat something,” he said sternly, getting more and more frustrated. “You gotta eat to get your strength back and stuff right? Even if you’re not hungry, you have to eat something—.”

He was surprised when Sayaka snapped her head over to glare at him, her eyes narrowed angrily. The ballplayer involuntarily flinched at the sight, it reminded him far too much of the fury she’d had the night before last, although there certainly was a lack of bloodlust in her eyes this time.

“What’s it going to take to get you to leave me alone?” Sayaka seethed, blatantly spelling out her desire to him.
However, Leon didn’t back down and returned her angry glare as he replied, “Let me bring you some food and I’ll leave you alone for the rest of the night. Deal?”

For a second, they stared at each other in frustration, neither of them willing to back down. This was exactly what both of them worried was going to happen and it seemed that their situation was going to continue on until one of them finally gave him.

Surprisingly, it was Sayaka that broke down first, heaving a great sigh as she averted her gaze and said, “…Fine. Just be quick about it.” And with that, she rolled over to completely turn her back to him.

Again, her tone infuriated him but at the very least, she was going to get some food. It was a minor victory but at least Leon felt as if he’d accomplished something.

“All right, what do you want?” he asked, prepared for whatever she might request.

“I don’t care as long as it’s edible.”

Okay, so he wasn’t quite as ready as he’d expected. There was a crap ton of food in the cafeteria and deciding what she should eat would not be an easy task. However, Leon told himself that he should just be happy she was willing to eat and turned to head for the door.

“All right, I’ll be back inna bit. Don’t go anywhere…”

The words had fallen out of his mouth before he’d even realized it. A twinge of guilt prodded at his heart as he realized that, even if she wanted to, she was in no condition to go anywhere. And even if she could, there was nowhere to go, not with them trapped in this deathtrap of a school. Forcing that thought from his mind, the ballplayer decided to focus his thoughts on what food he should get for her, exiting the room without another word.

As the door closed, Sayaka briefly turned back to glance at the doorway, a hint of moisture glinting in the corner of her eyes.

“What the hell am I supposed to do now?” Mondo wondered aloud as he sat with his feet propped up on one of the cafeteria tables.

After they’d finished deciding what to do about Sayaka and Leon, everyone had pretty much gone their separate ways. Mondo had been feeling hungry so he’d come here to get a snack and found himself not knowing what to do next. He wasn’t tired and it was still pretty early, so he had no reason to go back to his room. He’d been there for almost fifteen minutes and still, he just couldn’t decide what he needed to do.

“I ain’t never been good at thinking about this kinda crap. Why can’t I just beat the crap outta the mastermind and force ‘em to—?”

In the middle of his rambling, the doors to the cafeteria opened and Mondo lazily turned his gaze to see who it was. However, upon seeing the red-haired baseball player entering the room, the biker quickly tensed and averted his gaze.

“Shit…what the hell is he doing here?” Mondo pondered for a brief moment before groaning as he remembered he was in the food court, where anyone could get food.
Honestly, the real issue was that Mondo just wasn’t ready to face the ballplayer quite yet. After all, he’d openly voted to lock up both Leon and Sayaka. At the time, it seemed like the best option to make sure nothing bad happened, but after seeing people like Chihiro and Kyoko voting to let them stay, he felt a bit ashamed.

He felt like he could trust people like Chihiro and Kyoko, the first because of her honest nature and the latter because she was really freaking smart during the trial. If he had known they were gonna vote to let them stay, he may have changed his vote. Then again, he was still kind of worried about what Sayaka or Leon might try to do…he thought?

“Uhg, I really am no good at this thinking crap!” he berated himself as he remained rooted to his seat.

He hadn’t even noticed that Leon had already gone to the kitchen and was already returning with a plate of food. Mondo had no intention of saying anything; he still wasn’t quite sure what to feel about Leon…or Sayaka for that matter. Sure, he’d kinda forgiven them since no one had actually died but it was still pretty complicated and he just didn’t know how to deal with it.

However, as the ballplayer passed by him this time, the biker absentmindedly blurted, “So, that for you or did Miss Pop Idol get the munchies?”

Mondo was trying to be casual and just talk to Leon like he would have before everything that went down but even he realized how insensitive his comment had been. He watched as Leon flinched but didn’t stop moving.

“It’s for Sayaka…” was all Leon replied, pushing open the cafeteria door and exiting without really acknowledging the biker.

Almost instantly after Leon had gone, Mondo felt his blood boil. Pulling his feet off the table, Mondo furiously grabbed an innocent chair with one hand, lifted it up high and slammed it into the floor with a furious shout. As the sound of the now smashed chair echoed in the cafeteria, the biker clenched his fists tightly.

“It’s not like I wanted to vote for you!” the biker seethed, his anger overshadowing his reason.

Mondo felt his shame begin to overtake him. He needed to let his anger out somehow and if he had to smash every single chair in the room, then that’s what was gonna happen! However, before he could grab another defenseless chair, the doors to the cafeteria burst open.

“What is going on in here?!” the voice of Taka erupted, making the biker snap his head to glare at the Ultimate Moral Compass as he entered the room. “I should have known it was you, Mondo! Can’t you cease your delinquent activities until we’ve found a way to escape?!”

Just seeing the rule obsessed dipshit made the fury Mondo struggled to contain overflow and he narrowed his gaze at his classmate as he said, “Dude…I am in no fucking mood for your bullshit…”

*Tick*…*Tick*…*Tick*…*Tick*…

The hour hand of the wall clock was barely past ‘8’, while the minute hand was already nearing the ‘6’. So much time had passed and it seemed like no one had noticed it. The clock on the wall continued to count the time as it passed, oblivious to the grief stricken Pop Idol sitting upright in her bed.
Sayaka stared downward almost lifelessly, not knowing or really caring what she should be doing now. She hugged her knees to her chest; ignoring the ache this caused her wounds. She’d taken her broken wrist out of the sling, setting the sling itself beside her on the bed, and let her injured arm rest atop her knees, a visible reminder of her crime.

Beside her bed, on a small serving table that must have come from the storage room, was a platter of fresh food that Leon had brought for her. He’d said very little, their confrontation from earlier obviously still affecting him, and had only stayed for a moment before departing. That was almost an hour ago and still she hadn’t touched her meal.

Feeling a bit ashamed by the awful comments she shouted at him earlier, she couldn’t stop herself from glancing over at the tray to see what he’d brought her. A turkey sandwich with lettuce, accompanied by an apple and a bottle of water. All foods she could eat with one hand. Leon had gone the extra mile and even unscrewed the lid of the water bottle for easier access. Unshed tears moistened the corners of her eyes and she quickly wiped them away, averting her gaze from the platter.

“Why…why is he…being so…nice to me?” she slowly spoke, choking back a sob. “I tried to…I tried to…”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she buried her face in her knees, refusing to let any tears fall from her eyes. Her stomach wound ached and her broken wrist was numb but she barely paid it any mind, letting a different kind of darkness begin to consume her.

Suddenly, a knock came from her door.

Her head shot up and she stared wide-eyed toward the small hallway that led to her door. She waited a moment, unsure if she had really heard the noise or not, but only a few seconds later, someone rapped on the door again. In truth, Sayaka didn’t want to acknowledge it was happening, opting to bury her head in her knees again. But just as before, the knocking came and disrupted her thoughts.

A small part of her mind considered that this might be a trap, like the one she’d set for Leon. But even if that was the case, she didn’t feel that she had the right to resist. Of course, she didn’t want to die but she also didn’t want to keep on living with such crushing guilt any longer.

Perhaps that’s why, even though she knew she was going against her better judgment, she made the decision to answer the door.

Picking up her arm sling, she slung her arm through it as she inched closer to the edge of her bed. Slowly stretching her legs over the side of her bed, she carefully lifted herself up, standing on her own for the first time since the incident. Her legs were weak and wobbly but somehow, she found the strength to take the smallest of steps toward the door. They were baby-steps and she was barely able to lift each foot off the ground as she progressed, but little by little, she made her way toward the door.

The knocking continued, albeit not as frequently as before, but enough for her to know that whoever was summoning her was still there.

“I-It’s probably Leon…” Sayaka surmised as she neared the door, “He just doesn’t know how to take a hint…”

Her comment was meant to ease her frazzled nerves, which had been growing more frantic with each step closer to the door. However, she couldn’t deny the fear that welled up, thinking that it may be someone here to do her harm. But it was too late to turn back now, she was already at the door,
twisting the handle and slowly pulling it open.

Opening the heavy door just a crack, she peered outside and said, “Y-Yes…”

“Um…Sayaka?” a nervous but familiar voice called out.

Sayaka’s blood froze and her eyes widened as Makoto came into view just beyond her door. Her hand slipped from the door handle, inadvertently opening it wider, allowing both parties to get a good look at each other.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke or even moved, aside from the tiniest bit of trembling that began to overtake Sayaka. A new kind of fear was overwhelming her as she was now face to face with one of the people she’d manipulated. At that moment, the terror of facing death seemed insignificant compared to the horror of having to live with her crimes.

“Can I…come in?” Makoto finally asked, speaking quietly.

Despite her mind practically shouting not to allow him in, Sayaka found herself replying, “S-Sure…”

Backing away from the door, Makoto took slow steps as he entered the room and shut the door behind him. Without waiting for him to say anything, Sayaka turned and slowly began making her way back toward her bed. Her movements were slow and she knew that if she asked he would have helped her, but she couldn’t bring herself to do that.

“I’ve done enough to him already…”

As she expected of him, Makoto was very patient and waited as she slowly reached her bed and sat down. It was then that Sayaka lifted her gaze and finally took a good long look at him.

To her torture, Makoto still appeared quite tired, even after sleeping for so long. His clothes were ruffled and his hair was a mess. He probably hadn’t even showered before coming over to see her, which showed just how concerned he must be for her.

“Did he really…stay up all night and watch over me…after all I’ve done to him?” Sayaka wondered as she took in his disheveled appearance.

As she looked him over, her eyes lifted up to see him anxiously glancing her way and she immediately averted her gaze, dropping it down to stare at the carpet.

“So, uh, you seem to be getting around alright,” Makoto abruptly commented, nervously scratching his head. Out of the corner of her eye, Sayaka saw him glancing around the room until he spotted the platter of food. “Oh, so Leon brought you something to eat? I heard that he was gonna be the one bringing you food until you felt better. I…uh, I know that probably isn’t easy for either of you so…if you want, I can—”.

“What do you want, Makoto?” Sayaka suddenly found herself saying, her tone harsher than she’d wanted.

However, she couldn’t stand to hear him talking about any of this anymore. He was still the same as always, so kind and considerate, willing to do anything to help her. His honest and pure nature should have been comforting…but she couldn’t see it that way anymore. Not after she’d manipulated his compassionate nature to try and commit murder. She just wanted to hear what he had to say and send him away, his very presence making her uneasy.

She realized that her words must of taken him aback because for a moment, Makoto opted to stay
silent. However, it didn’t seem to take him long to recover before he spoke up again.

“There’s…something I need to ask you, Sayaka.”

His stern tone startled the pop idol and against her better judgment, she lifted her head up. She barely managed to hold in her shock as she saw the serious expression on his face. Not once since they’d been trapped here had he made such a face, and in that moment, she suddenly understood how the tender-hearted Makoto had been able to be a driving force in the class trial. Sakura had told her that he had been the most adamant about solving the case and pursued it relentlessly, even after discovering her betrayal half-way through.

Despite being unnerved by his determined visage, she kept her shock to herself as she replied, “Go ahead.”

“I need to know…” he began slowly, as if working up the courage himself. “From the very beginning, since we all got trapped in here…were you just using me the entire time?”

Sayaka thought she was prepared for anything he could say, that nothing he could possibly ask of her would break her, but she was wrong. Even if externally, she showed absolutely not sign of change, on the inside she felt her conscience being twisted and pulled asunder.

She wanted to tell him the truth, tell him that she had honestly befriended him because she felt comfortable around him, because she’d admired him long before she’d become an idol. But she just couldn’t do it; the words just didn’t come, trapped inside by the guilt that was tearing her soul apart.

And then it hit her, she realized what she needed to do to protect him. She knew that this was her one and only chance to do the right thing…no matter how horrible it would seem.

Without hesitation, she furrowed her brows and answered, “Of course. I thought you figured that out already.”

A look of genuine shock and hurt spread over Makoto’s face as he heard her, his determined and stern visage from before completely vanishing. And as it did, Sayaka felt her heart breaking as she watched him avert his gaze. She knew she was hurting him and that he, above everyone else, didn’t deserve that. But she also knew it had to be done.

“Well, yeah, I guess I did…” Makoto stammered, as if trying to convince himself before abruptly shooting his gaze back to her. “But Kyo—ehh, someone else thought that…maybe the reason you wrote Leon’s name on the wall was to…protect me?”

Sayaka felt her insides twist as he hit the nail on the head but knew she couldn’t acknowledge it. So instead, she grunted angrily and replied, “Don’t be so naïve, Makoto. I obviously did it just to get back at Leon. I wanted everyone to know who had…attacked me. It was just a coincidence that it helped you too.”

“B-But—!”

Makoto seemed on the verge of arguing with her, as if he truly didn’t want her words to be true. And Sayaka knew that if she was going to convince him, she was going to have to do the unforgivable…

“Get it through your thick head, loser!” she abruptly shouted, gritting her teeth and glaring at him. “Did you really think that someone like me would willingly associate with someone as pathetic as you?”
“That can’t be true! We’re friends! You…you apologized for what you did to me and Leon!” Makoto fired back, doing his best to deny what he was hearing.

His words dug into her and Sayaka clenched the fist of her good hand to keep from breaking down and admitting the truth. However, somehow, she found the resolve to continue the charade.

“I do regret what I’ve done…but that doesn’t change anything.” Slowly, she lifted her head and practically sneered, “I don’t want anything to do with you anymore. We’re not friends. We never were and we never will be. You were just a means to an end. So, will you just get out of here and leave me alone!”

As her words echoed in the small room, she was never more appreciative of the dorms being soundproof. What she’d said was completely unforgiveable and she didn’t want anyone else to hear. Forcing Makoto to listen to it was horrific enough…

Continuing to glare fiercely at him, Sayaka was forced to watch as all of the color drained from Makoto’s face. She could practically see the hurt she’d caused him as he hung his head, tears glistening in his eyes. Even so, she kept her angered visage intact, knowing that if she broke now, everything she’d done would be for nothing.

Finally, after nearly an entire minute of silence, Makoto finally spoke, “I see…I’ll leave you be then.”

His voice was beyond dejected and as he turned around his features saddened as he tried to keep the hurt inside. With slow steps, he began moving toward the door, never looking back.

All the while, Sayaka kept reminding herself that she had done the right thing.

“I can’t hurt him anymore…He needs to stay away from me or else I may hurt him again…That’s why…That’s why…I can’t…I can’t…”

She was managing to hold on, her angry features not flinching in the least as Makoto departed. However, just he reached the door and opened it; he did something she never would have expected.

Wiping away what must have been tears with his sleeve, Makoto slowly glanced over his shoulder. His eyes were closed but he had the warmest smile she’d ever seen from him plastered over his face, as if forgiving her for everything.

“I hope you get better soon…”

That was all he said before he turned away and exited her room, slowly closing the door behind him. But those words had more of an impact than Makoto would ever realize.

The instant she heard those words, Sayaka’s façade came crashing down. Tears spilled from her eyes, rolling down her cheeks and she reached out her good hand, as if to try and stop him from leaving. However, he was already gone…the damage she’d done was irreversible. She’d been trying to protect him but had only hurt him so much more…and even then he didn’t give up on her! He still cared for her despite all that she’d said, despite insinuating that their friendship was a farce! He valued their friendship, cherished it more than she could ever have known!

He still believed in her after all she’d done…and she’d cruelly turned her back on him.

A heavy silence engulfed the room for a few moments but it was quickly shattered as Sayaka burst into tears. She collapsed on her bed and buried her face in her pillow, weeping uncontrollably and not caring that her despair was being recorded by the camera above her.
Sayaka had absolutely no idea that, in his haste to get out of her room, Makoto hadn’t completely shut the door, leaving it open just enough for sound to be heard. However, he’d already made his way over and into his own room before he could have heard anything. And in addition to that, he also hadn’t noticed a certain red-haired baseball star leaning against a nearby wall.

And whether he intended to or not, Leon found himself listening intently as Sayaka’s weeping filled the otherwise empty hallway.

However, he felt that he had absolutely no right to even go near her right now. No matter how much he wanted to comfort her and tell her that none of this was her fault, he knew that he would never be able to do that. He’d destroyed any possibility of that happening the moment he’d accidentally stabbed her.

Unable to force himself to listen to her sobs, he slowly approached her door and gently closed it, hoping that she didn’t notice. Once the door was closed, keeping her cries from resounding through the halls, Leon found himself sighing deeply as his stomach grumbled.

“I never did get anything for myself,” he remembered, slowly shifting his weight to walk down the hall, toward the cafeteria.

As he neared the food court doors, he was too distracted by his own hunger and conflicting emotions to notice the voices of his two classmates arguing loudly.

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**To Be Continued…**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Greetings, my beautiful readers! So, it wasn’t the most action packed chapter but some good development happened here. And so, what do you think is going to happen now? Will Leon be swept up into the confusion? Will Sayaka be able to overcome her despair? You’ll have to stay tuned to the next chapter to find out!

Also, in the next chapter, we get a deviation from the original story. I won’t say what but there will be a few instances such as these in future chapters, as more and more students survive and therefore will be present for events that they never would have dreamed of experiencing.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! Leave a comment or review to tell me what you’re thinking about the story or if you have questions or just general praise for anything you like. Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chihiro continues to work on fixing the laptop. Meanwhile, Leon is invited to judge a test of manliest...before being forced to join in the festivities.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“Okay, so you need me to what now?” Leon questioned, unsure of how or why he’d ended up unable to leave the cafeteria.

“We need you to preside over our battle, as a witness!” Taka proclaimed, aiming his finger at Leon as if he was the only one capable of such a task.

An audible scoff from Mondo drew their attention, the biker folding his arms as he said, “Don’t worry, it’ll be over quick. There’s no way I’m losing to a pansy-ass like him.”

“How dare you!” Taka immediately countered, “At least I have the dignity to respect you as an opponent, regardless of how unruly and disrespectful you are!”

Narrowing his gaze, Mondo seethed through gritted teeth, “You think you can look down on me, you piece of shit?!”

Leon groaned and hung his head as the two continued to bicker. He’d only gone to the cafeteria to get a bit of food before bed, he hadn’t expected to find the biker and the moral compass arguing about which of them was the better man. And apparently, they couldn’t settle their differences unless someone else was present to verify who the victor was.

“So that’s the situation! Your cooperation would be most appreciated!” Taka shouted, again pointing at Leon.

“Uhg…I just wanted a sandwich, dammit…” the ballplayer mumbled as the two of them turned to him. “Fine…whatever. So, are you gonna throw down here or should we go to the gym or something?”

At that, the two combatants fell silent and Leon realized that neither of them had thought this through. Not that he really expected them to but at the very least he’d figured they had some idea of where and how they were going to settle their differences. However, much to his surprise, Mondo suddenly grinned and pounded his fist into his palm.

“I got it! There’s a bathhouse across the hall, right? With a sauna?”

“Aha! So a simple test of endurance, is it?” Taka immediately understood, ready to depart at a moment’s notice. “We’re going to see who can stay in there the longest, am I right?!”

“Goddamn straight!!” Mondo instantly confirmed, pounding his fists together.

“Alright then, let’s be off!” Taka announced, striding toward the door.
Walking right next to him, Mondo excitedly replied, “Yeah, let’s do this!”

As Leon watched them heading off toward the bathhouse, an audible sigh escaped him. “How the hell can they go from arguing to agreeing in less than ten seconds?”

It was strange indeed. Despite their fierce bickering, they decided on the endurance contest without hardly saying a word to each other. What’s more, they seemed almost…happy to be competing against each other. Then again, they were both guys and guys had to prove who had the bigger dick to justify themselves.

Even so, Leon couldn’t shake this strange feeling of déjà vu that overtook him. Well, it wasn’t really déjà vu, but this whole thing definitely felt nostalgic for some reason. As if he’d seen something like this happen before—

“Hey! Hurry the hell up! We don’t got all night!” the voice of Mondo called from the hall, startling him and making him lose his train of thought

“Alright, alright, I’m coming!” he shouted back, putting his hands in his pockets and heading for the sauna, regretting not picking up an apple or something before they noticed he was falling behind.

As the three of them pushed aside the curtains and entered the bathhouse, none of them noticed the towering figure that watched them from the shadows.

Junko tapped her foot as she waited, a beyond bored expression obscuring her beautiful features.

“Where the hell is she?” she grumbled as she sat in the Monokuma control room. In front of her, the camera in Monokuma’s red eye watched the staircase connecting the first and second floor. “Seriously…I know that I wrote for her to meet Monokuma on the second floor just after the nighttime announcement. What’s the deal?”

She was about to abandon her post and move back to the surveillance room to check the cameras when, almost immediately after her complaint, she saw the hulking figure of Sakura ascending the staircase up to the second floor.

“About time…” Junko muttered as she readjusted her seat and took control of the half and half bear.

“Tardy! Late! Unpunctual! Overdue! Not here on time!” Monokuma screeched, waving its arms furiously as Sakura reached the top of the stairway. The Ultimate Martial Artist’s face was as still as stone, without even a hint of expression visible.

“I apologize. It will not happen again,” she replied stoically, not making any such excuses. However, that only seemed to further infuriate the already fuming Monokuma because the bear grunted and turned its back to her.

“Since this is your first offense, I’m willing to let it slide…” Monokuma retorted, turning only its head back to glare at her. “But be sure this doesn’t become a habit. I’d hate to have to renege on our arrangement because you couldn’t get your ass in gear.”

“I understand…” Sakura acknowledged, still not showing a hint of emotion. On the inside, however,
the tiniest feeling of relief washed over her as the bear didn’t seem keen on insisting about why she had been tardy.

The truth was that she had seen three of her classmates: Leon, Mondo, and Taka, heading for the bathhouse just before the Nighttime Announcement was set to play. And despite wanting to believe that no foul-play could be involved, she couldn’t stop herself from shadowing them. However, upon overhearing of the contest the men had forced upon themselves, she allowed herself to be at ease, if only slightly.

She would have preferred to stay and keep watch over the preceding, just in case the situation turned grim. However, she knew that their captor demanded her presence and when the Nighttime Announcement sounded, she realized that she had almost forgotten about meeting with the Mastermind. As such, she tore herself away from the spectacle.

Her only reassurance came at the sight of Leon being the one to preside over the event. Having witnessed his transformation after discovering that Sayaka had not been slain by his hand, Sakura felt that she could put her faith in him. After all, she had trusted him enough to vote to allow him to return to the group. And even if there was a gnawing feeling of uncertainty because of the whole affair, she had forced it aside as she begrudgingly went to report to Monokuma.

“My betrayal…is far more wretched than Leon’s ever was…”

She had feared that Monokuma would have seen her on the cameras and questioned why she’d decided to leave them be but, for reasons she couldn’t make sense of, it seemed that the Mastermind hadn’t seen her shadowing them. Or, possibly it could be that the mastermind had seen her but didn’t think much of the event. In either case, she was pleased that the bear had neglected to bring up the matter. And although it was clear that Monokuma was displeased with her simple responses, the bear also seemed aware that time was of the essence.

“Follow me,” it said before waddling down the hallway.

“Where are we going?” Sakura dared to ask, maintaining her composure despite how disgusted she felt with herself.

“You’ll see…” the bear gleefully answered as they made their way toward the staircase leading up to the third floor.

“You sure you guys wanna do this right now? It’s already Nighttime...” Leon tried to reason with them, despite knowing how pointless it was.

“So? What’s your fucking point? It doesn’t matter what time we do this!” Mondo menacingly replied, glaring at the ballplayer for his insinuation. “It’s not like you were doing anything else anyway.”

“Yeah because feeding myself is pointless compared to your dick measuring contest!” Leon thought silently, doing his best to keep from losing his cool. Which wasn’t easy now that he had to contend with the extreme heat of the bathhouse.

“All you gotta do is just shut up and judge us, nothing else!” Mondo tried to reassure him, failing miserably.

“Oh don’t worry; I’m definitely judging you…” Leon seethed.
With an appreciative grin and a thumbs up, Mondo happily replied, “That’s the spirit!”

At this, Leon found his palm slapping into his face, rubbing his temples to try and keep sane. Just then, a hand landed on his shoulder and the ballplayer looked over to see Taka giving him a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry. This won’t take long.” The Ultimate Moral Compass almost seemed to smirk as he glared at Mondo. “He’ll be done in a matter of minutes. People like him are, without exception, all talk!”

Clearly overhearing that overconfident comment, Mondo slowly turned and fixated his vengeful gaze on Taka. “If that’s how you’re gonna be, let’s make this interesting!” the biker abruptly shouted, cracking his knuckles simultaneously.

“Please don’t…” Leon pleaded, only to be outright ignored by both of them.

“We’re gonna do this…with all of our clothes on!!” Mondo shouted so loud that, if the student’s rooms hadn’t been soundproof, it would have awoken everyone.

Shocked by both his volume and his overwhelming stupidity, Leon’s jaw dropped as he tried to comprehend how someone like Mondo could be the leader of any kind of group, much less a biker gang.

“How does his gang survive being led by such a freaking idiot?!”

As if having the exact same thought, Taka stammered as he said, “T-That’s ridiculous! Suicidal even! You can’t wear your clothes in—!”

“Oh, pussin’ out before we even get started! I shoulda known you wouldn’t be able to handle it!” Mondo bellowed boisterously as Taka gritted his teeth, his face reddening with anger.

“Don’t…don’t underestimate me!!”

Faster than either Leon or Mondo could have predicted, Taka flung his shirt off, kicked away his pants and already had his towel wrapped around his waist. Standing there, in his half-naked glory, the Ultimate Moral Compass clenched both hands into fists as he shouted, “You’re going to regret not taking me seriously!”

Unenthused by Taka’s sudden manly display, Mondo angrily replied, “Shut up and let’s do this thing!!”

With a manly, and possibly crazy, shout from the two of them, the combatants dashed toward the sauna at blinding speed, leaving Leon standing there awkwardly.

“Okay, so…what the hell am I supposed to do now?”

The gentle hum of the laptop fan could very well have been a symphony to Chihiro’s ears as she smiled to herself and she wiped a hint of sweat from her forehead.

“Huh…that was a lot easier than I thought,” she said, astounded by how smoothing things seemed to be going.

It had taken the better part of the evening but she finally had a way of powering the dusty laptop
she’d recovered from the library. Using the cord from her desk lamp, she had managed to convert it into a source of power for the laptop’s battery. She had to practically jury rig it, but with the tools in her toolkit, it proved to be a much easier task than she’d expected.

“Good thing Dad always watched that ‘Mac Gaiver’ show or whatever it was called,” she mused to herself, thinking that she probably wouldn’t have considered using the lamp cord if not for the creative thinking that had rubbed off on her because of her father’s love for that show.

Her dad liked watching a number of American innovational shows and he considered Mr. Gaiver to be one of the most creative minds to ever come out of America. She remembered her father telling her that, even if there didn’t seem like there was a way to build something, there was always a way! The determination her father displayed is what ultimately inspired Chihiro to become the computing expert she was today.

Unfortunately, the memory of her father only dampened her mood, her mind wandering back to her DVD. The bright flames engulfing her home…her father rushing into the inferno…

“No…I can’t think about that right now!”

Pushing aside all distracting thoughts, she opened up the laptop, a fragile smiled forming as it began to boot up.

“My cock’s bigger than your cock…my cock’s twice the size as your cock…” Leon sang to himself as he leaned against the wall adjacent to the sauna. “Seriously, how much longer is this thing going to take…?”

It had been quite some time since Mondo and Taka had gone in and, apart from the occasional gripe, neither of them seemed to be close to giving up yet. Every so often, Leon would walk over and peek through the window in the door; just to be sure the two of them were still conscious. A part of him hoped they’d both pass out and he could just drag them back to their rooms.

He would need to get up early and get to the cafeteria before anyone else and staying up half the night because of the dick measuring contest would make that harder. Yeah, he could survive not eating for tonight and just getting something tomorrow but he also had to be sure and check on Sayaka in the morning…even if she didn’t appreciate having him around.

“That’s an emotional mine field all on its own…” Leon muttered as a heavy sigh escaped him. Glancing up at the wall clock, and discovering that two whole hours had passed since the dude-bro contest had commenced, the weary baseball player knew he might end up being here all night.

Taking a risk, he pushed off the wall and walked over to the sauna door. “C’mon guys! It’s already past midnight. Can’t you just call it a tie—?”

“SHUT UP!!!” they shouted in unison from within, startling him.

“In a…true competition…there’s no such thing as…as a tie!” he heard Taka protest, sounding quite winded by the experience.

“Look at you…trying to talk…big…dumbass…” he overheard Mondo grumbling, which sparked more testosterone filled arguing from both of them.

Leon face palmed as he realized he’d inadvertently reignited their passions for the contest.
“Whatever! Do what you want…I’m outta here,” he whined, unsure if they even heard him over their cocky banter.

Throwing his arms up in a gesture of giving up, he suddenly flinched as a dull ache in his abdomen tore through him. Tenderly placing a hand over the spot where he’d been struck by the baseball, Leon winced, the pain bringing him back to his senses. Each time this happened, whenever he felt the stinging sensation from yellowish-blue bruises on his stomach, he couldn’t stop the images from the previous day from flooding his mind.

Tied to a metal pole, unable to protect himself as the baseballs smashed into him, the looks of pity and terror on his classmates’ faces as they watched what would have been his execution…it felt so far away and yet somehow closer than he’d ever imagined possible. And with that horrifying imagery, a single thought repeated over and over in his mind:

“It was an accident…I never meant for it to happen…”

Lifting his gaze up and staring at the sauna door, Leon couldn’t shake the feeling that another ‘accident’ might occur if he abandoned his classmates now. He also considered what might happen if both of them were too stubborn to leave and both of them ended up frying in there overnight. It was selfish, he knew it was, but a part of him feared that, if they died of heat exhaustion due to him not being there to pull them out…would Monokuma see that as murder?

“I mean, even though it was an accident…I was still the one blamed and punished for Sayaka’s ‘death’.”

He knew that this was a very different situation compared to what had happened between him and Sayaka, but the fear of Monokuma’s silver tongue and penchant for punishments was keeping him from leaving his two classmates to die from stupidity.

Just then, as if fate decided to prove him right, he heard the tired voice of Taka mumble something from within the sauna. It was barely above a whisper and he didn’t catch all of it, but what he did hear was:

“…plenty…to go…eat…hot boiling soup…”

Taken aback by the sudden change in the moral compass’ attitude, Leon stepped closer to the door, only to be assaulted with another barely inaudible phrase, this time from Mondo.

“…hot spring…monkey…gates…of hell…”

Leon’s eyes widened as shock coursed through him. Both of them seemed to be muttering incoherent phrases to each other and since they were speaking so quietly, it was hard to know if he was even hearing them correctly. However, what they were saying didn’t really matter anymore.

“Dammit, their stupid brains must be boiling! But if I tell them to get out, it’ll just make them want to stay longer because they’re stupid!”

Groaning and resting his head against the door, Leon knew he was running out of time. Even so, he hesitated. If he rushed in there and tried to force them to leave, would things somehow end up the way they had with Sayaka? He didn’t want to believe it, but then again, he’d thought something similar when he’d busted in the bathroom door.

Only this time, if he waited too long, both of them would die regardless…which actually left him with little choice in the matter.
“Fuck it…”

“Step into my office,” Monokuma said as it held the door for Sakura. The martial artist did as instructed and was greeted by a surprising sight.

A well-furnished REC room; complete with a pool table, dart board and fully stocked magazine rack stood before her. And that wasn’t the biggest shock. No, that came in the form of a tray of tea and cookies sitting on the coffee table in the center of the room.

“*Bringing me up to the third floor, showing me a room none of the others know exists, and providing tea and snacks for both of us…the Mastermind certainly is a bold one.*”

Although these discoveries might seem rather ordinary for most, Sakura could discern a great deal about the Mastermind from this small gesture.

Firstly; by taking her up to a higher floor, it also meant they had privacy, since Monokuma had relocked the metal gate on the stairway after they had passed through. She had expected to report to Monokuma in the gym or somewhere on the first or second floor. Being led up to the third showed that the Mastermind wasn’t concerned with her knowing what might be on this floor.

Secondly; if they had a tea set, then they had to have the resources to clean and maintain them. Sakura had thought that the reason the cafeteria was closed each evening was to allow the Mastermind the ability to obtain food for themselves. And if that was the case, then it would be easy to get the tea at this time of night.

Third and finally; Sakura painfully surmised that the Mastermind didn’t consider her much of a threat if they were willing to show her all these things. Regardless of her status as the bear’s mole, both of them knew it was an uneasy alliance to say the least, and that, given the chance, Sakura would use anything and everything to turn the tables on the Mastermind. It showed that the Mastermind was completely confident that nothing they showed her would be of any use in discovering their identity.

“What are you waiting for, a written invitation?” Monokuma abruptly shouted, snapping her back to reality as she noticed that the bear had already taken its place opposite her.

As the demented bear somehow picked up the teapot and poured them both a cup of lukewarm tea, Sakura took her seat, staring ahead stoically. Once both cups were filled to the brim, Monokuma leaned back in its chair, saucer and cup in paw.

“So…no one’s dead yet,” the bear politely said, grasping the tea cup with one claw. “So, uh…how the fuck did that happen?”

Opting not to trust the tea or cookies provided, Sakura remained motionless as she answered, “I believe you already heard of Junko’s miraculous rescue—”.

A loud crash ceased her words as she watched Monokuma slam its cup down so hard it shattered.

“Don’t take that kind of tone with me, missy!” the bear seethed, obviously still very sore about that subject. However, it only took a quick inhale for Monokuma to return to its Zen state of calmness, inexplicably pulling a replacement teacup from behind its back. “I wasn’t referring to *that*. What I meant was; why haven’t you made a move yet?”

Sakura could feel a pit forming in her stomach at those words but knew she had to answer them. “I
didn’t realize I was supposed to. After all, you merely instructed me to observe for the time being—”.

“But I distinctly remember instructing you to ‘be a pal and kill someone with 24 hours’, did I not?”

the bear interjected, taking a sip of tea. “It seems you forgot about that little request, now didn’t you?”

No matter how hard she tried, this time, Sakura could not stop herself from flinching. As Monokuma had said, she’d completely forgotten about that arrangement after the ordeal she and her classmate had endured yesterday. But now it seemed that Monokuma wanted to cash in on their agreement. The martial artist had naïvely believed that just because Sayaka and Leon had been spared, so too had she.

“How could I be so blind?! Why did I think that my classmates’ survival would change anything?!"

Her massive hands balled into fists and her entire body shook with suppressed anger. She was suddenly overcome with the desire to rip that demented bear in two, and if she was executed for it, then it would be her penance. However, before she could be given the chance to act upon that rash whim, the bear gently set its teacup down and sighed.

“Anyway, for now, you can just forget about crushing anyone’s head between your thighs or whatever you muscle-ly people do to murder someone.”

All of Sakura’s anger abruptly faded as the bear’s words reverberated in her ears. “Are you certain?” she couldn’t stop from asking, only afterward realizing she sounded entirely too eager.

“Oooh, such a tempting reply…but sadly I am certain.” Monokuma picked up a cookie and shoved the baked good into its mouth, chomping down almost violently. “It’s for the best, at least right now. I guess I expected too much from you. Plus, I can’t have you spoiling the next motive by killing someone before they see what I’ve got in store.”

Quickly catching the bear’s meaning, Sakura immediately asked, “And what exactly do you have planned?”

Sakura watched as Monokuma’s menacing grin widened as the bear answered, “Oh, let’s not talk about me. Let’s talk about you! After all, you promised to tell me all about your little sleepover with Aoi Asahina…or is it just Hina now? You all gave yourselves the stupidest nicknames, I swear.”

Cursing the fact that she had fallen into another of the Mastermind’s traps, and knowing there was no way out of it, Sakura begrudgingly swallowed her pride, and conflicting emotions, as she began to tell Monokuma everything she’d learned thus far.
and did his best to pretend the extreme heat wasn’t bothering him either.

Regardless of their manly façades, however, both of them could feel the stinging sensation of sweat leaking into their eyes, and the painful tingling the steam forced upon their bodies. Even so, their pride demanded that they endure this harsh contest, no matter the cost.

Perhaps due to that, Mondo smirked to himself before glancing at Taka out of the corner of his eye to say, “I woulda thought someone like you would know your limits…it’s like you think you actually got guts or something—”

Before he could finish, Taka shot to his feet and marched over to the coals on the other side of the sauna. Grasping the small water pail and dunking it into the water, he seethed, “Don’t say such foolish things!”

With a flick of his wrist, he splattered the water onto the coals, fresh steam billowing up instantaneously.

“It’s far too cold in here!” he was barely able to shout before the temperature spiked, washing over both him and Mondo in a brutal torrent of heat. Both of them abruptly gasped, not realizing the air had just become more difficult to breath, their lungs burning as they inhaled more steam than oxygen.

However, neither of them could admit defeat and, as confidently as he could manage, Taka marched back to his seat beside Mondo and sat, staring forward as if nothing was wrong. Just as he felt a new layer of sweat pour from his pores, the Moral Compass heard a mocking chuckling from beside him.

“Ain’t you the thoughtful one? I was just thinkin’ it was getting too cold—” the biker tried to say but found himself cut off.

“Why don’t you drop the tough guy act and just admit your defeat?” Taka brazenly countered, not even bothering to look at his opponent. “Or does your good-for-nothing personality stop you from seeing how outclassed you are?”

“What the hell did you just say?!” Mondo unsurprisingly exploded, staring dangerously at Taka. “You got a death wish or something?!”

Feeling more confident now that the biker was getting rattled, Taka scoffed, stood from his seat and pointed accusatorily at his classmate.

“You dress sloppy and you’re in a bike gang that can only use violence to solve its problems! It should be me asking if you’re the one who has any real guts! People like you who make excuses from the start are nothing short of losers! I find that inexcusable!"

Taka was certain that he was in for another bout of relentless arguing from his opponent, and was prepared to back up his own accusations. Wiping the sweat from his brow, the Moral Compass turned and glared at Mondo, ready and willing to prove how tough he was.

That’s when something strange happened.

Instead of arguing or even refuting him, Mondo simply stared forward, completely still. Taken back by his sudden lack of passion, Taka wasn’t quite sure what he should be doing. Just as he considered continuing to lecture his classmate, he heard a heavy sigh.

“I’m not in a biker gang. I’m the leader of a biker gang. And I got my own responsibilities and goals as leader.” Mondo spoke clearly but angrily, emphasizing his position as concretely as possible. “It’s my responsibility to lead everyone in the Crazy Diamonds. It has been ever since my brother…died.”
If the air hadn’t been so thick with steam, Taka would have gasped at hearing that. Instead, he simply returned to his seat and remained quiet as the biker continued.

“I never had a good home life…even so, my brother did his best for both of us. He’s the reason the gang came together…and I wanted to be just like him.”

“I see…your brother…” was all Taka could manage to say, nothing more than a simple acknowledgement. His words earned a pitiful chuckle from Mondo, who leaned his head back and slapped his hand to his face.

“And Chuck…he probably thinks I’m a loser for actin’ like this…” the biker said quietly but audible enough for Taka to become confused.

“Uh…Chuck?”

Without warning, Mondo’s head snapped over and he shouted, “He’s a Maltese! And he’s really smart! He used to bring me the paper every day and I’d give him a walk for it!”

For the first time since they’d met, Taka felt a tiny smile form on his lips, accompanied by a light chuckle. “I never expected someone like you to love animals…”

“Fuck you, asshole…” the biker retorted, angrily averting his gaze, embarrassed that he’d shouted so abruptly.

Realizing that his comment sounded far too sarcastic, Taka cleared his throat and reiterated, “He sounds really clever…your dog, I mean.”

Hearing that, Mondo tensed and lowered his gaze down to glare at the floor.

“Yeah, he was,” he answered solemnly, never lifting his gaze. “But…Chuck’s not here anymore either…”

All desire to argue suddenly evaporated as Taka silently listened to his classmate. And somewhere deep inside, a part of him felt guilty for forcing Mondo to bring up such difficult memories. That realization came crashing down on Taka as if he’d been hit by a freight train and he habitually replied, “Oh…sorry—”

His words were cut short when Mondo abruptly shot up from his seat, shouting up at the ceiling “My gang…Crazy Diamonds…they’re all I got left! The survival of the gang is all on me!” Turning his gaze down to glare at Taka, the biker narrowed his eyes and finished, “I’m not an honor student who has all the brains! I gotta work hard at everything I do, unlike a genius like you—!”

“Don’t you dare say that to me! Don’t confuse me for someone like that! I’m not a genius at all!!”

Now it was Mondo’s turn to be stunned into silence, perplexed as Taka raised his voice even higher than his own. Even so, the biker couldn’t stop his curiosity and it didn’t take long for him to ask, “But…if you aren’t a genius…why are you so smart?”

With a heavy sigh, Taka rubbed his temples and explained, “Just because someone gets perfect grades does not mean they’re a genius…”

As expected, Mondo’s reply came in the form of a raised eyebrow and a simple sentence, “…I don’t get what you mean.”

Trying to take a cleansing breath despite the intense heat, Taka resolved to educate his classmate,
despite the extreme situation they were in.

“You’ve heard about Former Prime Minister Toranosuke Ishimaru, haven’t you?”

Mondo took a second to think before replying, “Uh…ain’t he the guy who embezzled money or something?”

“…He’s my grandfather.”

The biker’s gaze snapped up and he stared wide-eyed at Taka, watching as the Moral Compass silently lowered his head. Unable to comprehend how he should react to finding this out, Mondo decided it was best just to keep quiet for the moment. But he didn’t have to wait long before Taka quietly began murmuring.

“My Grandfather…he was considered a genius. He never had to work hard for his accomplishment, they all came naturally to him,” Taka paused for a brief moment before “And because of that, he failed to see how others around him despised him. They suspected corruption and eventually, everything he built fell to ruin. Along with the failure of his business, he fell into great debt…which still affects my family to this day.”

Only now lifting his head, Taka angrily stared forward, as if confronting an invisible demon.

“Do you understand? An intelligent but lazy person who doesn’t know how to put effort into their work will always fail! I am not one of those people!” Rising to his feet once more, he clenched his fists and continued, "I’m certain that, with hard work and a clear conscience, I can change this country—!"

Abruptly, a hand slapped down on his shoulder, startling him into silence. Turning to follow the hand back to its owner, Taka was shocked to see a tearful Mondo staring directly into his eyes.

“You…you’ve had a lot of hardships too, haven’t ya?!!” the biker bellowed, hot tears streaming down his cheeks.

Shocked, Taka felt moisture building up in his own eyes as he was barely able to utter, “…Y-You’re crying…for my sake?!”

As the two manly men felt that they had finally come to some form of understanding, a loud and sudden slam snapped both of them back to reality. Their heads snapped over to look at the now opened sauna door, and both were shocked as a red haired figure, clothed only in a towel, brazenly stepped into the steam filled room.

“…I’m glad we had this chat! And I think we’ve made great progress with you this evening! I’ll see you again for another therapy session very soon!” Monokuma chided Sakura as it opened the shutter leading back to the second floor.

Sakura was pleased that her conversation with the bear had come to a close. She’d divulged absolutely everything she could remember about her classmates to the demented bear. Everything from personal habits to possible weakness, Sakura even had to tell Monokuma exactly how her sleepover with Hina had gone, in excruciating detail.

All the while, Monokuma acted as a psychiatrist, occasionally asking the martial artist ‘And how does that make you feel?’ It made Sakura’s blood boil and it seemed that the bear enjoyed watching
her squirm from all the verbal abuse. Not to mention the guilt that threatened to overtake her for betraying her friends.

“At least it’s over…for now.”

She knew that Monokuma would call upon her again soon and the martial artist questioned how long she’d be able to live with her guilt before she did something foolish…like confessing the truth to her classmates. Forcing such thoughts away for the time being, she marched through the open stairway and heard the heavy clatter of the shutter being forced down.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the bear had kept itself on the opposite side and began waddling its way back upstairs before abruptly stopping.

“Oh, and I did forget to mention something…” Monokuma called out, not letting her leave just yet. “Do me a favor and keep an extra special eye focused on Junko Enoshima. She’s been acting a bit out of character and it’s got me a bit worried.”

Although Sakura could completely understand why the bear would want her to keep an eye on the person who thwarted the first execution, something about the way the bear said her classmate’s name sent a chill down her spine. She wanted to ask the reason for such suspicion but opted to simply nod and be done with the bear for now.

“That’s a good little mole,” Monokuma said, as if congratulating a puppy on bringing them the newspaper. “Alrighty then! See you later!!”

Without another word, the bear bounded up the stairs and around the corner out of sight. Sakura couldn’t help but feel relieved but distraught at the same time.

“…Junko Enoshima. What could she be hiding?”

“Alright, enough of this shit!” Leon Kuwata shouted at his sweaty classmates, letting the sauna door close behind him before taking another step toward them. “You two are gonna get the hell out of here or I’m gonna drag…the…both…of………Mondo, are you crying??!?”

Suddenly aware of the situation, Mondo shook his head and furiously wiped away the moisture from his face.

“H-Hell no! It’s just sweat, asshole!” he defended, regaining his manly façade. “What the hell are you doing in here anyway? You ruined our moment!”

“Well have your moment outside! It’s time to get out!” Leon fired back, pointing furiously at the door.

It was at this time that Leon sadly remembered that Mondo, in addition to having a short temper, did not like being ordered around. He’d wanted to be stern with them and try to convince them both that their dick measuring contest could be settled tomorrow, but unfortunately, it seemed that he’d done the exact opposite.

“You son of a bitch…You think you can come in here and order us around like you own the place??” Mondo seethed, turning to face the water pail before dunking it and splashing more water onto the coals. “We’re not even close to finishing this yet!!”
Feeling the intensity of the heat for himself, Leon tried to play it cool, pun intended, and folded his arms before saying, “Do you guys know how long you’ve been in here?”

Puzzled by the sudden question, Mondo looked around aimlessly as he tried to come up with an answer. “Uh…about 20 minutes or so?”

“Try three hours!” Leon shouted, instantly regretting raising his voice.

“Really, you sure the heat’s not getting to you or something?” Taka questioned, completely oblivious to his classmate’s concern. In response, Leon face palmed with both hands and groaned.

“No! That’s not the issue right now anyway!” the baseball star insisted, wiping away the newly formed sweat.

Even though he was acting like it wasn’t affecting him, in truth, the extreme heat was quickly wearing down his already exhausted body. Not to mention that, without his shirt to cover it, the bruises on his abdomen were almost completely exposed. Not that Mondo or Taka seemed to notice, though.

Not wanting to stay in the sauna any longer than need be, the baseball player motioned for the door and reasoned, “If you guys stay in here any longer, you’re gonna put your lives at risk!”

At the mention of that, it seemed that reason had begun to return to Taka, because he lowered his gaze a bit before turning to Mondo and saying, “He does have a point. Perhaps we should—”.

“Don’t go soft on me, man!” the biker interrupted, slapping a hand on his shoulder. “We resolved ourselves to finish this, and that’s what we gotta do! As men, we can’t back down from a challenge! Only a lazy person would give up after coming so far!”

A light gasp escaped Taka as he registered Mondo’s words. Staring at the biker’s determined visage, the Moral Compass suddenly felt his passion returning and he hardened his features in resolve.

“Yes…yes, you’re right! Absolutely right! It would be lazy of us to give up now! And neither of us are the lazy type!” Taka affirmed, placing his hand on Mondo’s shoulder as well.

Smiling confidently, Mondo let out a roar of laughter and said, “That’s the spirit! Let’s give it everything we got!”

As one, the two of them erupted into harmoniously overconfident laughter, leaving Leon both stunned and feeling rather confused. How had his plan backfired so much after he’d only been in the sauna for one minute!

“Oh, come on, guys! You can’t be serious! What if you both pass out because of your dick measuring contest?!?” Leon protested, finally giving voice to what their competition truly was.

“Don’t worry,” Taka tried to reassure him, smiling as confidently as the biker. “We’ll be sure to leave before that happens—”.

“And if you don’t?! What happens then?!” the ballplayer insisted.

Groaning loudly, Mondo waved his arm dismissively before turning his back to Leon as he said, “If you want to leave, then leave. We don’t need you here anymore, anyway. Go back to your room or something.”

For reason’s sake, Leon couldn’t quite place, the biker’s dismissive attitude sparked something deep within
him and he felt the flames of anger rising up and consuming his reason entirely.

“Listen up, you stupid morons! I’m not gonna be held responsible for the two of you getting heat stroke. So stop being so stupid and get the fuck out of the sauna!”

A long pause accompanied that statement and for a moment, Leon thought he may have finally gotten through to them. However, the instant Mondo turned around and glared at him, he realized he had made a fatal error in judgment.

“And just what the hell is that suppose to mean, huh?” the biker seethed, taking a few steps toward Leon. “And why the hell would you be responsible if it did happen?”

His blood still boiling, Leon couldn’t stop himself from answering, “I don’t know, maybe because of the fact that I was held responsible for what happened to Sayaka, even though it wasn’t my fault!!!”

Taken back by his sudden outburst, Mondo let a look of confusion warp his features. “W-What the hell is that suppose to mean? What does that have to do with any of this?”

“Because it’s the same bullshit that almost got me executed before!” Leon practically screamed, heaving heavy breaths due to the heat. “Who do you think will get punished if no one drags your stupid asses out of the sauna, huh? Me! That’s who! And I am not going through that again!”

As he finished his tirade, Leon noticed that he was not only short of breath, but that his legs were slightly wobbly. Having not eaten for most of the day, combined with the intense heat of the sauna, his strength was fading fast and he needed to get the morons out ASAP. However, instead of his classmates understanding his plight, an enraged Mondo suddenly grabbed him by the shoulders.

“Is that the only reason you came in here, huh?! Because you’re worried about yourself! Is that it?!”

Flinching due to the biker’s firm grasp, Leon bravely smacked his arms away and retorted, “No! T-That’s not…that wasn’t the only—”.

“Shut the hell up! I don’t wanna hear any more excuses! A pussy like you doesn’t deserve to preside over our battle! Get the fuck outta here before I have to throw you out!” the biker threatened.

Before Leon could retort, Mondo shoved him away and turned his back to him. Feeling desperate, and wanting to at least try and explain himself, the ballplayer reached out and grabbed the sleeve of Mondo’s jacket.

“Just listen! I’m not trying to—”.

“I thought I told you to GET THE FUCK OUTTA HERE!!”

Before Leon knew what was happening, Mondo’s elbow flew back and struck him square in the abdomen. Even worse, he hit the ballplayer in the center of the largest bruise on his torso.

“Khhggh!!”

Leon’s entire body convulsed as the pain from the hit consumed him. He sputtered and desperately tried to pull air into his lungs, but the combination of pain, the force of the strike, and the limited air of the sauna made that impossible. His body lost what little strength it had and he crumpled to the floor.

A moment later, he was surprised to hear the voice of Mondo abruptly calling out.
“Oh shit! Leon! Leon!”

The baseball player felt them grabbing onto him and shaking him, sending another jolt of pain through his already grief stricken body.

“Come on, man! Don’t do this to me! Get the fuck up, you stupid son of a bitch!”

That was the last thing Leon heard before the darkness consumed him.

“Okay, just a little bit more…there!”

Chihiro finished typing in the last of the core programming code she’d spent all night working on. Her tired eyes were half-open and bloodshot but still she forced herself to read over the code she’d just finished calculating.

“Everything should be…in order…” she said quietly, a yawn escaping her as she slowly moved her hand over to the ‘enter’ key. “And now…the final…test…”

Clicking her finger down on the button, the now fully charged laptop’s screen abruptly went black. A look of shock overtook Chihiro’s features and her tired mind desperately tried to understand how or why her program had failed.

“Perhaps its…the power out…put…or maybe…the code…has…error…need…to…”

Before she was aware of it, she’d rested her head into her arms and slowly drifted off into peaceful slumber, her brain still trying to confirm why her program hadn’t responded as instructed. However, less than a moment after she lost consciousness, the laptop screen abruptly flashed and a green backdrop appeared.

And then, slowly appearing in the center, the face of a certain Ultimate Programmer suddenly appeared.

“……………Nice to finally meet you, Master.”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! This chapter was long awaited by my wonderful beta, who has been fangirl squealing about this ever since I first showed it to her. So, I hope that all you fangirls enjoyed it as well.

Anyway, what’s gonna happen now?! Is Leon gonna be okay? Will he make it out of the sauna alive? Will he ever get his sandwich? You’ll have to read on to find out next time!
Please leave a comment or review to give me your impression of this chapter and the story in general. Any kind of comment is better than none at all, so please leave your thoughts or ideas. As always, have a wonderful day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Leon discovers that he now has Bros, whether he wants to or not. Then, Toko confides her secret to Byakuya. Meanwhile, a certain student misses the morning meeting, inciting an understandable panic from the others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warmth…that was all Leon could feel as his consciousness slowly returned. His body almost felt like it was floating, and all around him there was a soothing heat that didn’t threaten to burn him alive. His vision swam as his eyes opened and all he could see was a heavenly haze. It seemed to stretch out forever into the distance, into a void of white on the horizon. A feeling of calmness unlike anything he’d ever experienced before swelled inside him, and the ballplayer felt all his earthly fears and desires dissipate into that void.

“Oh shit…I’m must have bitten the big one…So this is heaven, huh? Kinda surprised I made it here but I’m not complaining.”

Just as he was about to rest his eyes and give in to this magnificent state of bliss, a huge pompadour slid into his vision, his eyes widening as he recognized who it belonged to.

“Yo dude! You alive?!”

As the face of Mondo Owada came crashing into his line of sight, the beautiful white horizon instantly became recognized as the bathhouse ceiling and the heavenly haze was registered as steam from the baths.

“Oh fuck! This isn’t heaven! This is hell! It’s conjured the most pants-shitting place for me to spend my eternity of torment! Complete with a sweaty Mondo to torture—wait, hold on a sec…”

As his thoughts ran rampant, a hand abruptly pushed Mondo aside, making room for Taka to lean over Leon’s body.

“Leon! Are you alright? Quickly, what is the square root of nine to the seventh power?”

A long moment of silence followed and all Leon could do was stare upward as his fears were slowly being confirmed.

“Taka’s asking me math questions…now I know I’m in hell. Hell is pulling out all the stops—okay, hold on, how the fuck would Taka end up down here?”

It was only now that Leon’s memory began to catch up with his mind, recalling the events in the sauna. Well, at least up until the point when he’d been gut punched in his wounded area by Mondo.

A flood of relief hit Leon and he let out a relieved sigh and said, “Okay, so it’s just a metaphorical hell, not the real one. Whew! Dodged a bullet there.”
Taka and Mondo exchanged a confused look but he couldn’t care less. His body felt incredibly heavy and he wanted nothing more than to just remain on the floor. However, that wasn’t meant to be.

“Dude, if you’re awake, then you should get off the floor. It’s kinda hard to tell if I really killed you or not.”

Instantly, Leon felt a twinge of anger and he decided to act upon it. “Oh, because that’s all that matters. Whose only worried about themselves now?”

Mondo visibly flinched at that accusation, stunned for a moment as he processed what Leon had said. And it didn’t take long for his eyes to narrow and his hands to ball into fists.

“What did you say?! You got a death wish, you son of a bitch!”

Somehow feeling confident enough to get it off his chest, Leon continued to lay flat on the floor as he glared up at Mondo.

“Hmph, it’s different when it’s your ass on the line, isn’t it?! Well how the hell do you think I felt when you all abandoned me?!” He paused and sent a small glare Taka’s way before continuing. “I see how you all look at me. Like I’m some deranged murderer that could snap at any moment!”

Taka opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out, knowing that, on some level, even he had done that at one point. At the same time, Mondo began to lose his ferocity, but still didn’t know what else to feel besides anger.

“It…it ain’t like that! I don’t see you that way anymore—!” he tried to explain.

“Yeah, anymore! Doesn’t change the fact that you don’t trust me and want me locked up for a mistake that makes me want to beat the shit out of myself!” Leon interrupted, not accepting Mondo’s excuse. “But as long as it’s not you then it’s fine, isn’t it?! Face it! If it had been you tied up with that pitching machine pointed at you, you’d be as desperate and pathetic as I was!”

Each word cut deeper and deeper into Mondo, and whether or not he agreed with Leon, it didn’t stop how furious those accusations made him. Gritting his teeth and practically seeing red, the biker let out a furious shout and reared his fist back, prepared to clock the ballplayer in the face.

“You sonofa bitch!! You don’t know anything about me!!”

Angrily scoffing, Leon’s gaze practically dared him to let his fist fly. “I know that you can’t solve any of your problems without hitting them! Keep that up and you’ll end up just like me!”

“Be quiet!! Both of you!!”

A flash shot in front of Mondo, a hand grasping his wrist to keep his arm from moving. The biker’s gaze shot down and both he and Leon were startled to see that Taka had placed himself between them. Mondo was especially surprised that the Moral Compass actually had enough strength to hold him back, the iron grip on his wrist keeping his fist in place.

A brief silence engulfed them all before Taka slowly released his grip on Mondo. Immediately afterward, he took a deep breath and said, “Now isn’t the time for violence.”

As if a switch had been flipped, Leon and Mondo felt a chill as they realized how reckless they both had been acting. As they both considered the absurdity of their actions, the Ultimate Moral Compass tightened the towel around his waist and cleared his throat before glancing at Mondo.
“Mondo, I understand why you’re upset. You feel guilty over what we both did…voting for Leon during the trial. And it’s hard to deal with…trust me, I understand that all too well…” He paused and momentarily averted his gaze before snapping back up, a fire burning in his eyes. “But Leon is right! We did abandon him! Even if we don’t want to admit it, we still did. And he has every right to be angry!”

The biker stood there, fists still clenched, holding in a retort. It was obvious that he knew Taka was right but he still couldn’t admit it. So, he opted to remain silent instead. During that time, Taka turned and kneeled down to speak with Leon.

“I know that it’s too late but…I owe you an apology!” He abruptly bowed his head. “During the trial, I lost my composure and blamed you for what happened to Sayaka! And for that, I am truly sorry!”

Shocked at the sudden apology, Leon was at a loss for a few moments. “Uh…it’s, uh, it’s cool, dude —”.

“It most certainly is not cool…dude!” Taka repealed, snapping his head up. “And even though I tried to make up for my actions by voting to allow you to stay a part of the group, I feel that I still deserve punishment! If you’d like, you can punch me! Right in the face!”

“What, why?! Why would I do that?!” the ballplayer asked, completely perplexed.

“To punish me for not being able to help you! Now, go ahead! I’m prepared!”

Before he could protest more, a ferocious shout startled him. “Me too!! I deserve it too!” Mondo abruptly shouted, kneeling next to Taka. “Clock me right in the nose if you want! Do it!!”

Leon’s jaw dropped at the stupidity of their suggestion, his face warped with confusion. And even as appealing as that was, he didn’t really feel that it would help. Plus, he was exhausted and didn’t think he’d be able to proper punch them anyway.

“Dude, I don’t want to punch either of you in the face!” he informed them, trying to find a way out of their suggestion.

Taka and Mondo exchanged a confused look before the biker looked back at Leon and asked, “Do you want to punch us somewhere else?”

“No! Dammit, you can’t solve all your problems by punching them!” Leon protested as he face-palmed.

“You sure about that?” Mondo asked, not completely registering the notion. “I mean, if you punch me, we should be even, right?”

A heavy sigh escaped Leon and his gaze fell to the floor. “Mondo, if you keep acting like that, you might accidently hurt someone…just like I did.”

For a brief moment, all of them fell silent. The reality of what had happened to all of them, especially Leon, was far too fresh for them not to worry. And, almost against his will, Mondo lifted his hand to his face and balled it into a fist before letting it fall melancholically to his side.

“Yeah…I know. It’s the second time someone’s had to tell me that…” he said quietly, recalling Kyoko’s warning to him on their first day in this hell-hole.

“Well then, what do you want?” Taka asked, trying to bring them out of the funk they’d found
themselves in.

“I don’t know, man…” Again, Leon felt nothing but confusion at being put on the spot and he threw up his arms. It was then that, a single thought invaded his mind. “I…uh…I guess I kinda want to know why Mondo voted to have me locked up?”

Now he felt like the stupid one. Sure, he wanted to know the answer to that question but he didn’t want to ask it in a way that made him look so ridiculous.

“Well…uh…”

Leon’s eyes widened and he looked up to see Mondo nervously scratching his head, as if searching for the best way to answer. Fortunately, it didn’t take long for the biker to sigh and answer.

“Well, you know, when you do bad shit you get locked up, right? I mean, that’s what happened to me when I flipped off that cop and ended up in juvie!”

“…You got put in juvie for flipping off a cop?” Leon couldn’t help but question.

“Well, it was more about stealing his bike, but yeah!”

“Mondo! Why would you do such a thing?!” Taka protested, his hall monitor senses tingling.

“What? Police bikes are supposed to be a lot fuckin’ faster than a normal bike. I wanted to test and see if it was true! It was a…what’s it called…like a pursuit of knowing things!”

“The Pursuit of Knowledge does not constitute theft!”

In the middle of their argument, both Taka and Mondo were shocked to hear a roar of laughter from Leon, as he continued to lie prone on the bathhouse floor.

“Dude! That’s fucking awesome!” he shouted between laughter spurts. “That’s the most badass thing you’ve ever said, man!”

Slowly, Mondo let the laughter infect him and he chuckled as he replied, “You wanna talk about badass? Just look at this bastard, right here!” He gestured toward a surprised Taka. “Jumping between us and holdin’ me back like it’s no big deal! Seriously, dude, that takes balls! Like brass balls, man!”

Taken aback by the sudden, and somewhat vulgar compliment, it took Taka a moment to realize he was being praised. As soon as he did, however, he huffed confidently and replied, “Well of course I have them! They were forged in the line of duty as Hall Monitor, long before I became the Ultimate Moral Compass! In fact, I’ve been stopping hallway fights since I was in preschool!”

A mischievous grin spread over Mondo’s lips as he retorted, “Ya know, that sounds like a challenge! What do you two say to a little contest to determine the most manly of men?”

Immediately, Leon ceased his laughter and his eyes widened in horror. “Please god, no…”

“What kind of contest do you purpose?” Taka instantly inquired, his competitive spirit returning, much to Leon’s continued torment.

Pounding his fist into his palm, Mondo continued to smirk as he answered, “We’re gonna have a ‘Guys Night!’ Stayin’ up all night and doin’ manly crap like hangin’ sheet rock or something!”

At this point, Leon had had enough. He was happy that they had, somewhat reconciled about what
had happened but it was all getting to be too much for him, at least for tonight.

“Dude…I just wanna go back to my room and—”.

“Awesome! We’ll have our contest in your room then!” Mondo immediately misread.

“What?! No!!”

“Hell yeah!” Mondo fervently said, not listening to Leon’s protests in the slightest. Standing up and offering a hand to Taka, he continued, “This time, we’ll see who’s the manliest among all three of us! Ain’t that right, Bro?!”

The moment the word ‘Bro’ reached his ears, Taka felt something he never imagined he’d feel… friendship. True and pure friendship. Someone genuinely wanted to be his friend and was asking him to hang out, without wanting to copy his notes or ask about school regulations. A hint of moisture built up in his eyes but he blinked it away as slapped his hand into Mondo’s allowing the taller student to pull him up.

“Right…Bro! Let’s get Leon up and have ourselves a…’Guy’s Night’!”

“That’s what I wanted to hear!” Mondo replied, pleased to have made a new friend. “But don’t expect me to go easy on ya!”

“Ha! As if you stand a chance against me. But I suppose I will be gracious, even in victory!” Taka fired back, realizing how much he enjoyed friendly banter.

As much as he wanted to protest, Leon found himself simply sighing at the “manly” friendship that had just blossomed between two of the most idiotic students in the whole bunch.

“Ah, what the hell? Alright, let’s get this over with,” Leon called out to them, making them turn and remember that he was still there.

“Are you sure you’re alright? You never answered my mathematical question,” Taka insisted, his unique type of worry drawing a sigh out of the ballplayer.

“Dude, I sleep through math every day. I didn’t even know numbers could be powered up.”

“Well, once you study the proper equations, nothing will—”.

“Bro, this ain’t the time for quizzes. Let’s just get the hell outta here. We’re not gonna find out who’s the manliest among us in here!” Mondo thankfully interjected, hoisting Leon up and putting his arm over his own shoulder to help carry the ballplayer.

“Ah, you’re right, Bro! Let’s head for Leon’s room! We can continue our mathematical pursuits there! That will surely be the best way to determine who among us is the manliest of men! You two are probably unprepared for such a contest but worry not! I will be gracious enough to provide the learning materials for our ‘Guys Night’ festivities! I will meet you there after I retrieve the books from my room!”

“Huh? Wait, what?! No! I meant like tellin’ stories about our conquests of chicks an’ stuff—!” the biker tried to protest but had already Taka spun around and hurried into changing room, leaving Leon and Mondo with a look of genuine horror on their faces.

“What have you done?!” Leon gasped, his gaze slowly shifting over to glare at Mondo.
“…Don’t worry, I’ve got an idea about how to fix this,” the biker reassured him, slowly moving them toward the changing room. “We’re gonna head for the storeroom and see if they have any beer.…”

“It’s a school, man! There’s no way there’ll be any beer here!”

“…Fuck.”

“I regret telling you not to solve all your problems by punching them…” Leon muttered under his breath as the long night seemed to only be just beginning.

*Ding—Dong—Ding—Dong*

“Gooooood Morning, everyone! It is now 7AM and nighttime is officially…”

As the morning announcement rang through the halls, Sayaka’s door slid open and the pop idol poked her head out slightly. Glancing down the hall without seeing anyone, she quietly pushed her door open and stepped out, sliding her door closed silently. Using the wall for balance, she headed directly for the cafeteria.

“It’s still early. I should be able to get there first,” she whispered to herself as she inched her way along.

Her strength was coming back, albeit slowly, and after crying herself to sleep last night, she’d slept until just before 6AM. Getting out of bed had been difficult, particularly with her right arm still in the sling, but somehow she’d managed to get up and was already half-way to her destination.

“I’ll just grab an apple or something. That should be enough to get Leon off my back…at least until this evening.”

She’d come to the conclusion that, if she showed she could provide for herself, then she could convince Leon not to deliver her food anymore. It was humiliating enough to have to be taken care of, but it was almost unbearable that her ‘victim’ had to be the one to do it. She knew that neither of them wanted this but considering their situation, there was nothing they could do…or at least she’d thought that until coming up with this brilliant plan.

“I can make it…it’s not that far…” she reassured herself, finding herself already short of breath.

As she reached the open area just before the cafeteria, she was forced to push herself off the wall and travel the short distance to the double doors of her destination. However, the second she was forced to stand on her own, without any support, her legs buckled. Her good hand slapped into the floor to try and break her fall, however, she lacked the strength to hold herself up and her hand slipped almost instantly.

Panic surged through her as she fell and she twisted her body so that she wouldn’t land on her broken wrist. Instead, she let her face smack into the hard linoleum, an audible grunt following. Tears stung her eyes as her whole body suddenly ached, particularly the bandaged gash on her stomach. Taking in a few pained breathes through grit teeth, she repositioned her good arm and tried to push herself up. But, once again, she lost all strength and her hand slipped, making her face-plant a second time.

She winced as another jolt of pain racked her body, her breathing still ragged and desperate. Her
entire body felt like it was being pressed into the floor, and even moving her fingers seemed like a monumental task.

“Maybe…this…wasn’t such…a…good…” she panted, realizing how disastrous of a situation she’d put herself in. She was trapped, unable to move forward but also unable to go back. “Dammit…why…did…this…happen…I…never…wanted…”

Her vision blurred and she felt completely and utterly helpless. Mentally and physically, she was beyond exhausted. She had never felt so lost in all of her life. Until now, she had always known what path to follow, her destiny clear to her. But now, it was all gone. Her hope…her dreams…her old life was nothing more than a shadow that continued to taunt her. She could never go back to being the Ultimate Pop Idol…not after what she’d done. And that thought scared her more than she had ever realized.

“What’s…the…point…in…surviv—?”

“Sayaka! What happened?!”

The pop idol’s eyes widened as a familiar voice startled her. Painstakingly glancing over her shoulder, she found a pair of slender arms gently wrapping themselves around her shoulders, cautiously pulling her up to a seated position. Before she knew what was happening, Sayaka found herself coming face to face with her savior.

“Am I in the right place at the right time or wrong place all the time…dammit.”

Mukuro mentally cursed as she was once again forced to put her identity at risk by helping one of her classmates. But there wasn’t really any other choice. Sayaka was obviously in pain and worse, she was vulnerable to attack. If she hadn’t decided to start getting up early and making rounds throughout the school, in case her sister decided to change things or just for this sort of occasion, who knows what could have befallen her classmate.

After getting the idol up and comfortably resting against the wall, Mukuro’s eyes drifted down to Sayaka’s midsection. “Lift your shirt,” she demanded, already reaching for the edges.

“H-Huh…” Sayaka barely mumbled before the soldier pulled up the material.

“H-Huh…?” Sayaka barely mumbled before the soldier pulled up the material.

Mukuro let out along held sigh as she saw that, miraculously, Sayaka’s wound hadn’t reopened. The bandages were twisted and a little stained from being worn all night, but there was no evidence of fresh blood anywhere.

“We’ll have to change these,” she informed her classmate, pulling her shirt back down. “You’re damn lucky the wound didn’t reopen.”

“…Y-Yeah…”

A deep scowl marred Mukuro’s features as Sayaka averted her gaze, most likely in shame. And while the soldier had a vague idea of why the pop idol was out here on her own, it didn’t stunt her frustration.

“So, you want to tell me what the hell were you thinking?!” she questioned, trying to seem as bitchy as her usual persona had to be. “You can barely stand, let alone walk on your own! What are you doing out here and where the hell is Leon?”
“…Who cares…”

Mukuro’s eyes narrowed at the challenging tone Sayaka was using, making her change her tone as well. “Excuse me?” she seethed, not even trying to hide her frustrations anymore.

“I said…” snapping her head up, Sayaka glared at the soldier. “…who cares?! Why does it matter where Leon is?! Why does it matter where I am?! What does any of it matter?!”

A hint of confusion sparked in Mukuro’s eyes as she questioned, “Any of what matter?”

Sucking in short ragged breathes, the pop idol snarled, “This. Being in this horrible place and being forced to kill each other to survive! What’s the point in trying to deny the inevitable?!”

“The inevitable?” the soldier pushed her further, knowing exactly where she was taking this but also knowing that it needed to be said.

Finally losing her composure, tears burst from Sayaka’s eyes as she shouted, “We’re all going to die here! The mastermind will never let us go! And even if we do somehow make it out…there’s nothing left for me out there!” Her head hung, droplets of moisture falling and soaking her shirt. “I have nothing! What…what I am suppose to do…?! What am I supposed to do now—?!”

Without hesitation, Mukuro lifted her hand and slapped Sayaka across the face. A short and abrupt shriek erupted from the pop idol’s mouth as the shock of the hit registered. Not giving her time to recover, the soldier placed both hands on Sayaka’s cheeks and pulled her face back to stare directly into her tearful eyes.

“Listen up! You think you’re the only one that’s scared? Terrified that we may be killed any day now?” She saw that Sayaka’s lips were trembling, like she was trying to answer, so the soldier immediately continued, “Well you’re not! We all are! I’m struggling to keep it together just as much as you are! Or have you forgotten that I have a fucking hole in my hand!”

She pulled her hands from Sayaka’s cheek and untied the bandage on her right palm before thrusting it in the idol’s face. The wound had finally begun to heal but was still bloody and ugly. The sight of it, made Sayaka flinch and pull away, her breathing speeding up in the process. Seeing that her display was having the desired effect, Mukuro quickly rewrapped her wounded appendage.

As she did, she quietly spoke, “My modeling career is over. No one’s going to even look at me with this disgusting scar. The business is that cruel.” She knew her logic wasn’t entirely accurate but with Sayaka’s frazzled state, she was certain her classmate would believe her. “Even so, I’m…we are both still alive. And…isn’t that the most important thing?”

As she finished reapplying her bandage, she glanced up to see Sayaka, somewhat coming out of her stupor, lower her gaze.

“It’s different for you…” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “You didn’t try to kill anyone —”.

“I got damn close though…”

Sayaka’s eyes widened and her head shot up, shock overtaking her features. “W-What…?”

A depressing chuckling sounded from Mukuro’s lips as she answered, “I was close to the breaking point myself…in fact, I even began planning out what I was going to do. That is…until we found you in Makoto’s bathroom…”
The soldier watched as Sayaka shuddered, the memory of that time obviously plaguing her. Not wanting to focus on that, Mukuro continued, “When I heard that you’d apparently been…killed, I was horrified. Not because you were thought to be dead but…because I realized that I had been planning to do something similar. And when that bear explained what happens to anyone who commits murder…I lost all hope…and I attacked him. And we both know how that turned out…”

For a few moment’s they both sat there, unable to say a single word. The repercussions of their actions haunted them, and even though Mukuro wasn’t being entirely honest, the disgust she had toward herself was certainly real.

“But then…Makoto saved me,” she finally decided to say, interrupting the silence. “I don’t know how or why but he did. He gave me a reason to keep surviving…and that’s the reason I was able to save you.”

She paused for a moment, letting those words encourage her before narrowing her gaze at Sayaka. “So don’t say that we don’t have a chance to survive! If you and I can be saved from certain death, then why can’t we find a way to beat that bastard bear and get the hell out of here?!”

The instant those words were spoken, Sayaka’s breath hitched and it was obvious that she was caught in a surge of emotion and confusion. And though Mukuro could tell that she didn’t necessarily want to hear these things, she also knew that Sayaka desperately needed someone to say those exact words to her. Even so, the utter confusion in the pop idol’s eyes wasn’t dissipating in the least.

“B-But…what can I do?” she asked, desperately seeking the answer. “I have no idea what I should be doing now!”

“Ha…join the club,” Mukuro replied, much to her classmate’s surprise. “Do you think any of us know what we should be doing now? We’ve got no clue what we should be doing! You, me, Leon, Makoto…all of us are completely in the dark on what we should be doing.”

Hearing that, Sayaka’s head hung and the soldier realized that might not have been the best motivator. However, she quickly recovered by saying, “That’s why we have to do whatever we can! Even if we don’t know what that is yet, we just have to wait and see what we can do!”

At this, Sayaka looked up at her and, for the first time throughout this entire conversation, there was the tiniest hint of hope in her eyes. Finally feeling that they were on the right track, Mukuro gave her a confident smile and continued, “But the most important thing is that we do it together. If we stick together and help each other out, then we can beat the Mastermind and find a way out!”

“T-Together…?” Sayaka whispered, as if the word was foreign to her.

“Yeah! Whether that means exploring the school to find a way out or helping a classmate off the floor,” Mukuro said with a wink. “And speaking of helping each other out, I’m freaking starving! What’s say we get you up and go get some breakfast, huh?”

Mukuro had almost completely gone back to her “Junko” persona by this point, which actually helped her as much as it did Sayaka. Normally, she would never be so hopeful and chipper but because she’d practiced being her sister’s double for so long, it was much easier. Not to mention that, whether she admitted to it or not, some of Makoto’s personality was certainly rubbing off on her.

Looking to Sayaka for confirmation, she smiled a bit more when Sayaka slowly nodded.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’,” Mukuro said, as she moved to Sayaka’s side, slung the idol’s good arm
over her shoulder and helped her stand. Sayaka’s legs were wobbly but with someone to lean on, she was able to carefully begin to take steps.

Just as they were about to get to the double doors of the cafeteria, a gentle whisper reached her ears.

“Thank you…Junko.”

Involuntarily, Mukuro flinched at those words. It was painful for her to be called by her sister’s name. Knowing the evils that her sister had done…as well as being a part of most of them, it felt wrong for her to be thanked. Not to mention that being called by her sister’s name was a great source of shame in and of itself.

However, she forced those feeling aside and replied, “No prob. Now let’s go get some—”.

A loud bang, followed by a startled shout suddenly echoed from just beyond the cafeteria door, interrupting Mukuro and instantly putting her into defensive mode. She considered retreating and getting the others but knew it would be difficult with having to support Sayaka. Then again, she couldn’t just break down the door either…

“Th-That voice?! Was that Leon?!” Sayaka abruptly inquired, a hint of fear in her voice. “It came from the cafeteria! He could be in trouble!”

Fear crept into Mukuro’s mind as she registered Sayaka’s words. If she didn’t react quickly…they could have another murder on their hands. Even if it meant risking revealing who she really was, in the end, there was no other choice.

“Sayaka, hold onto me!”

The pop idol did as instructed without hesitation. All apprehension left Mukuro and she lifted her leg, smashing it into the double doors.

The doors to the cafeteria burst open and in strode Junko, with Sayaka practically attached to her hip.

“Alright! Just what the hell’s…going…on?” Junko’s words faded as she caught sight of who was present.

Across the room, Mondo and Taka were staring at the girls in shock, their arms locked in what appeared to be an arm-wrestling match. Sitting nearby, looking utterly exhausted and rubbing his own arm, was Leon.

For a moment, none of them said anything, the awkwardness of the situation sinking into all of them. However, no awkward silence was enough to keep Mondo silent for very long.

“It’s arm-wrestling…what’s it look like?! Come on, Bro! Let’s finish this!”

“Right!” Taka fervently replied.

Instantly, the two went back to their match, grunting and groaning as they each tried to dominate the other. Still standing in the doorway, Junko’s jaw had dropped and she could only stare at the men continued to fight for dominance. However, didn’t have to wait long before—

“Gotcha!!” Mondo shouted as he slammed Taka’s fist into the table. Pulling their arms back, the biker smirked and said, “Damn that was close! You almost had me, Bro!!”
“Next time I won’t be beaten so easily, Bro! Remember that!” Taka instantly replied, smirking just as hard at his new friend.

Both of them let out boisterous laugh before slapping each other on the shoulder. Meanwhile, Junko and Sayaka were beyond confused but only the Fashionista seemed able to voice it.

“Hey! What the hell is going on here?! And why the hell are you in here so early?!” she demanded, making the two men turn toward her with raised eyebrows.

“We were having a contest to see who was the manliest among us!” Taka answered, still patting Mondo on the shoulder. “As for why we are here, that should be obvious! We came here just before the morning announcement was sounded in preparation for the morning meeting! While we waited, Bro suggested that we have a test of strength—”.

“Okay, yeah, I get all that! But what the hell was that banging and shouting before?!” Junko interrupted, helping Sayaka over to a table during his explanation.

“Oh, that was just Leon,” Mondo explained, laughing all the while.

“Oh…” Junko replied quickly, a look of sympathy in her eyes as she gave Leon a quick glance. “Well, I guess…that explains it then…” she finished before helping Sayaka to a nearby seat and sitting next to her, a deep sigh immediately following.

“Yeah, he lost big time and cried like a girl when I slammed his arm into the table!” the biker continued, slapping the baseball star on the back.

“Can I go back to my room now?!” an absolutely exhausted Leon shouted, his voice slightly muffled by the fact that his face was practically embedded in the table. Lifting his head from the table, he caught a glance at Sayaka and his eyes widen in terror. “Oh God…she’s come for me!”

Seeing the baseball star’s fearful reaction, Junko narrowed her gaze at the two other boys and asked, “What did you do to him?”

Mondo and Taka looked between each other for a moment before shrugging their shoulders in confusion before the biker replied, “Nothing. We didn’t do nothing.”

Reaching a hand out toward Sayaka, the baseball player begged, “Please…be my mercy angel…”

Hearing this, Junko folded her arms and glared at the other boys again. “This is not ‘nothing’! He’s clearly losing it! Now, what did you two do to him?!”

Sighing at being scolded by a girl, Mondo answered, “Like I said, we didn’t do anything! We were just doing manly stuff!”

Raising an eyebrow, the Fashionista skeptically asked, “What kind of ‘manly stuff’?”

Simultaneously, Taka and Mondo answered:

“Pythagorean Theorem.”

“Hanging sheet rock.”

Her jaw dropping, Junko was forced to come to the only conclusion that made sense, “You guys made him study Pythagorean Theorem while forcing him to hang sheet rock?!”

“What? No, we were just kidding! We just stayed up all night hanging out and stuff!” Mondo
defended, kinda embarrassed to be associated with anything school related.

“Yes, we bonded over our manly tendencies!” Taka tried to reassure her, to no avail.

However, that answer didn’t have the desired effect either, as Junko rose from her seat, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “You guys forced him to stay up all night?! Are you crazy?! He can’t handle that!”

“Sure he can! I mean, he seems to be doing alright so far…” Taka defended, before being cut off by a shouting Junko.

“He just asked Sayaka to be his mercy angel! What part of that is ‘alright’ to you?!”

For the first time since their manly competition had begun, Mondo and Taka began to realize that they may, in fact, have done something bad to their newfound bro. Glancing over, they saw Leon’s disheveled appearance and grimaced.

Taking the opportunity, Junko continued, “Most people sleep at night! Why did you think it was a good idea to force him to stay up with you?!”

Briefly looking to over to his new bro, Mondo shrugged his shoulders and answered, “He plays baseball and stuff, right? We figured he’d be used to being up all night—”.

“Are you freaking kidding me?!” A frantic Fashionista shouted, face-palming at the same time. “He’s an athlete! They have to rest and recover so they can play again the next day! I know that bikers are out all night and honor students study until dawn but athletes and normal people need sleep!”

The full spectrum of what they’d done to their new bro came crashing down on them and both Taka and Mondo held a guilty visage…for about ten seconds. Stepping forward, Taka decided it was best that he resolve the situation.

“Alright, so we may have gone overboard but I assure you, we never meant to inconvenience him,” the moral compass assured her, wanting to settle her down.

“Does that mean I can go back to my room now?” Leon practically begged, not sure what was worse at the moment, Sayaka’s presence or the manly Bros.

“Leon, you may rest after the morning meeting! Bro and I are also tired but you don’t hear us complaining, now do you?” Taka tried to encourage him, failing miserably.

A light whimpering came from the baseball player but otherwise, he said nothing as they all awaited the arrival of their classmates. At the same time, Junko apparently gave up as well, letting her head rest on the table as she groaned audibly. All the while, no one noticed that Sayaka was staring directly at Leon, guilt and worry clouding her eyes.

Mondo and Taka continued to be obnoxious and friendly with each other even as the rest of their classmates arrived.

First to arrive were Hina and Sakura, who were both relieved and terrified to see how close the Bro’s had become overnight. When Byakuya arrived, he gave them an annoyed glance but said nothing as he took a seat near the back of the room. Toko followed immediately after Byakuya, almost as if she’d been tailing him. Hifumi and Hiro arrive at the same time, with each of them offering very
different and insane reasons for those two having become friends. After that, Celeste made her way inside, giving her usual smile until she spotted the two bros…which changed into a look of confusion for half a second before she seemed to write them off and took a seat. Kyoko was the next to arrive but all she did was quietly take a seat, as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Finally, Makoto rushed into the cafeteria, a bit sweaty from running all that way. The instant he saw how buddy-buddy the two previously irreconcilable classmates were being, his eyes widened and he couldn’t stop himself from asking: “What happen while I was unconscious yesterday?!?”

“It’s a very very long story…” the tired voice of Leon answered him, prompting Makoto to be startled by his disheveled appearance.

“Leon! What happened to you?!” Makoto asked, obviously concerned.

“Yeah, you look like you were up all night!” Hina chimed in, having waited for the right opportunity to inquire.

“He was! And it was awesome!” Mondo announced to everyone!

“Yes, he is our ‘Bro’, now!” Taka declared before turning to the semi-conscious ballplayer. “Isn’t that right, Leon!”

“Hate you…hate you both so much…” the ballplayer quietly replied. “I just want to get the morning meeting over with so I can go to sleep!”

“I’m sorry Leon, but we can’t start the meeting yet!” Taka announced, looking at his watch before frowning. “Chihiro isn’t here yet…and it’s already half-past 7.”

“That’s weird,” Hifumi commented, looking around the room. “Miss Fujisaki is normally one of the earliest to arrive. What could be keeping her?”

In that moment, a familiar sense of dread overcame all of them. Even Leon found himself sobering up as the situation dawned on him. After all, it was the same terror they had all felt the morning that Sayaka had failed to appear for the morning meeting. Only this time, she was there to experience the fear and horror for herself.

And that’s what prompted her to say, “S-She’s probably just…running late…”

Unfortunately, her shaky voice didn’t inspire any such confidence and immediately after speaking, Junko stood up and headed for the door.

“I’ll go and—“.

“Wait a moment…” the Fashionista was surprised to hear Kyoko was the one to stop her but obeyed her commanded nonetheless. “I’ll go with you. The rest of you should stay here until we get back. If she really is just late, there’s no need to cause a panic.”

“R-Right…” Makoto answered for everyone. “We’ll wait here for you.”

With a nod, Kyoko joined Junko by the door before the two of them ran off down the hallway.

The rest of the students sat in complete silence, as if afraid that saying anything would somehow make the situation worse. Even Makoto, who seemed like he really wanted to cheer everyone up, remain silent while the pair were gone.
Just as the silence was becoming deafening, Celeste cleared her throat and said, “Well, I am absolutely parched. Hifumi, go and make us some tea while we wait.”

“Huh, what?” the fanfic creator said in shock, unknowingly mirroring many of his fellow students.

Before he had a chance to actually complain, Celeste folded her hands together and finished, “Milk Tea, if you please.”

“Wh-Why me?” Hifumi finally questioned.

“Your figure reminds me of the owner of a café I once frequented,” was her answer, and it didn’t really seem like a proper response, given the situation. Nevertheless, she showed no signs of relenting as she smiled ‘pleasantly’ and quipped, “Quickly please, my throat is drying out.”

Everyone was quite shocked that she’d made such a request during such a dreadful time but what was more surprising was that Hifumi replied, “Oh…okay.”

His lack of resistance startled most of them but no one said anything as he departed for the kitchen. Seeing this as a way to possible break the tension, Makoto carefully stood up.

“Why don’t we all get something to eat while we wait?” he offered kindly, trying to ease the situation.

However, before anyone could take him up on the offer, Junko and Kyoko came in the door. And judging by the expressions on their faces, the news wasn’t favorable.

“Was she there?” Makoto asked regardless, still trying to be hopeful.

“No, she didn’t appear to be,” Kyoko answered, folding her arms.

“A-Are you sure? Maybe she’s just sleeping?” Hina joined in, also trying not to assume the worst.

To this Junko sighed and raised her arms in defeat. “I doubt it, not with my ringing her doorbell non-stop for the last few minutes.”

“And there was no evidence of her room being broken into,” Kyoko added, her demeanor calm as usual.

“Then she may have just gone to the bathhouse or something…” Hiro suggested. “Yeah, if her door was locked, I’m sure she’d probably there!”

“But if that were the case, why would she go so early in the morning? And without informing any of us?” Sakura spoke up, offering her opinion.

“Not to mention that she is normally one of the first of us to arrive for the morning meeting,” Celeste concurred before sending a surreptitious glance at the kitchen door.

“If you put it like that…then—!” Taka was about to proclaim something but was rudely interrupted.

“In other words…the game is afoot once again.” Everyone turned and glared as Byakuya said those words, a confident grin on his face. Taking note of everyone’s gaze only seemed to intensify his attitude as he continued, “If you all can’t realize the situation we’re in, then I have no need for you.”

“You don’t have to say it like that, you prick!” Mondo abruptly shouted, waving his fist at the affluent progeny.
“For now, why don’t we split into groups of two or three and search both floors?” Kyoko suggested, trying to ease the hostility between her classmates.

“I can agree with that,” Byakuya chimed in. “That way, we can be assured that the killer won’t be able to disrupt the crime scene.”

Everyone was growing more and more frustrated with Byakuya’s accusations but just before it seemed that Mondo was going to burst into a rage and deck him, a calm voice spoke up.

“That’s fine. But we should hurry,” Kyoko insisted, looking around at everyone. “Let’s decide who to pair up with.”

“Pardon me, but I believe we should have someone remain here, just in case Chihiro happens to return. I volunteer myself and Hifumi for this task,” Celeste offered, smiling daintily all the while. “Besides, I have yet to receive my morning tea and I feel that I will be rather useless until that time.”

A collective groan sounded but no one seemed to refute the idea. At least until Leon stood up and shouted, “Hey! What about Sayaka?! You can’t expect her to roam around the school with the way she is!”

At once, everyone looked at Sayaka, who seemed to still be rather shaken up by all the proceeding, hanging her head with her bangs obscuring her eyes.

“Oh, my apologies,” Celeste replied quickly. “I never meant to alienate her. If she wishes to remain here with us, then I am fine with that. I doubt she’s in any condition to traverse the school anyway —”.

“Let me help…” Everyone was startled when Sayaka suddenly interrupted. “I can help look for Chihiro…so please…let me help.”

Lifting her gaze, Sayaka saw that most of her classmates were apprehensive at least, and suspicious at worst. Nevertheless, she decided to prove to them she could handle it by pushing herself up onto her feet, using the table for balance.

As she stood though, Makoto took a careful step forward and said, “A-Are you sure?! I mean, you don’t have to. You can rest if—”.

“No…I’m going to help,” she said, sending him the harshest glare that any of them had ever seen.

Rather than protest like he usually would have, Makoto felt his confidence slipping, mainly because of the argument they’d had last night. That’s why he was incredibly relieved when Junko suddenly marched over to Sayaka and took her gently by the arm.

“Tell ya what, you and I have to change our bandages anyway, so why don’t we head for the nurse’s office? We can look for Chihiro along the way, sound good?” the Fashionista proposed, holding up her bandaged appendage for emphasis.

“…Alright,” Sayaka finally relented, letting Junko help her toward the door.

As the two of them departed, Taka finally regained his position at the one in charge by shouting, “Very well then! Let’s split up into even groups and search the school for Chihiro!”
“This whole thing is grating on my nerves…why should I care if the little programmer is missing? If someone else finds her before I do, then it works out the same…”

Celeste sat at her table, alone in the cafeteria, still waiting for Hifumi to deliver her tea. The rest of her fellow students had already left and were probably searching everywhere for the Ultimate Programmer.

After Junko had left with Sayaka, it was decided that Hina and Sakura would investigate the pool on the second floor. Byakuya insisted on going to check the library and Toko eagerly shouted she’d accompany him, much to the affluent progeny’s disgust. Kyoko decided to search the gym, with Makoto tagging along to help if need be. Leon and Hiro were elected to search the empty classrooms on both floor and finally, Taka volunteered himself and Mondo to search the first floor dorm area and bathhouse.

Ten minutes had already passed and the body discovery announcement hadn’t played, so Celeste assumed that no one had found Chihiro yet. And so, as she sat at her place with nothing better to do, she quickly became bored.

“What is taking that fatso so long to get my tea ready? It’s not like its rocket science or anything. Although a nerd like him might be better at rocket science than tea making—”.

“Thank you for waiting!!” the voice of Hifumi snapped her back to reality, along with the fragrant aroma of the tea.

“Hmhmhm. Finally…” was all she graced him with as he approached.

As he set her tea down in front of her, Hifumi noticed that everyone was gone and asked, “What happened to everyone else?”

“They elected to search for Chihiro themselves,” she told him, turning the tea cup carefully in her hand before letting her fingers delicately grasp the handle before lifting it up.

Just before the cup would reach her lips, the fat nerd had to open his mouth and ask, “Uh…shouldn’t we help with the search?”

Stopping just short of achieving her goal, Celeste barely managed to contain her frustration as she answered, “It is fine. I’m sure if they need us, they will call. Now if you please be silent. I have yet to judge your tea…”

“Oh! G-Go right ahead!” Hifumi insisted, finally quieting down.

Finally assured that she could sample the tea, Celeste held her temper as she replied, “We are to remain here in case Chihiro returns or we hear from the others.”

Resuming the lifting of the cup, she could feel the heat of the tea and was about to take a sip when the nerd decided to interrupt her pleasure once again. “A-Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Again stopping before achieving her goal, Celeste barely managed to contain her frustration as she answered, “It is fine. I’m sure if they need us, they will call. Now if you please be silent. I have yet to judge your tea…”

“Oh! G-Go right ahead!” Hifumi insisted, finally quieting down.

Finally assured that she could sample the tea, Celeste cautiously placed the tea cup to her lips and sipped the blend. Instantly, she felt her rage spike.

“What the hell kind of shit is he making me drink?! I wouldn’t call this backwash ‘Milk Tea’ if my life depended on it!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, she threw the tea cup against the wall as hard as she could, a small smile appearing on her lips as it was smashed into tiny pieces. However, the smashing seemed to
startle Hifumi, who jumped and shrieked in terror.

“What the—?!” he tried to complain but was instantly cut off.

“I HATE this kind of tea…” Celeste spoke harshly, turning her back to the destroyed cup. “Imagine, if you will, that we are at a coffee shop. Any everyday normal café and I ordered the Milk Tea. Would that imply that I simply wanted milk with my tea?”

“Uh…I suppose?” the fanfic creator tried to speculate. Unfortunately, for him, that was not the answer she had wanted to hear.

Continuing to hold herself back, she politely continued, “Well, that is not for me! I am among those who prefer the milk to be part of the brewing process! The fragrance is just so overwhelmingly sweet that way…”

She lost herself in a brief memory of sitting in a lovely little café with the fat shop owner personally serving her some of the finest Milk Tea she had ever tasted. That memory was now tainted by the fact that this other fat tea maker could not even be trusted to imitate the process correctly.

“I wasn’t expecting 5 Stars but at the very least I expected 4 Stars from him! My cat could make a finer tea than this uncultured pig!” she thought to herself as she took a deep breath.

“I cannot acknowledge any ‘Milk Tea’ that does not add the milk from the outset. Make it again.”

Celeste made the mistake of thinking that she had made herself rather clear but it seemed that her companion had yet to understand her, as he simply replied, “I went to the trouble of making you tea…and you wanted me to go a step further?”

“Indeed,” she barely got out, only just keeping her temper in check.

“But…shouldn’t we be more concerned about Miss Fujisaki—?”

Something inside of Celeste snapped, and all at once, she found herself reverted back to a place she hadn’t visited in many a year…the land of Taeko Yasuhiro’s rage.

“Will you shut up about that?! Just hurry up and bring me what I asked for, swine!”

As her rage boiled over and she furiously shouted her demands, Hifumi seemed to shrink to the size of a pebble, letting out a horrid shriek of terror.

“EIIIIHHHH! You’re little piggy will bring it out right away!!!” he continued to scream in fear as he dashed back into the kitchen to, hopefully, prepare the tea to her specification.

Once he was gone, Celeste finally began to take deep cleansing breaths as she suppressed her original persona. And it wasn’t easy. She’d never lost her temper so furiously with anyone before. Sure, she was under a lot of stress with this killing game, not to mention that fact that, more than anyone else, she wanted to find a way to escape. A part of her considered bashing Hifumi with the tea kettle just to try and escape…

“No…that would be stupid. I’d be found out in no time. I need to be patient for now…not let my emotions get the best of me…no matter how much that pathetic piece of fat screwed up! Well…at least he did exactly as I said…when I commanded it of him…hmmm…”

As that thought echoed in her mind, she completely reset her persona and smiled pleasantly to herself. Perhaps this little arrangement with Hifumi could be put to use after all…
“Hmhmhm… I do so love coercion.”

Byakuya pushed open the door to the archive room within the library, a hint of dust rustling into the air. He surveyed the room for a brief moment but ultimately sighed as once again, he found no trace of a crime scene. With everyone splitting up, and the amount of time that had passed since they’d begun their search, the body discovery announcement had been eerily silent, as if lurking all around them, ready to blare in their ears as tragedy struck.

Honestly, a part of him was actually pleased they hadn’t found Chihiro’s body yet…it meant that the killer was thorough, which meant the oncoming investigation and trial would be even more stimulating.

“This game isn’t as boring as I first believed it would be…” he whispered to himself with a smirk as he began pulling the door to the archive shut. Just before he closed it, however, he noticed one of the books he’d purposefully left sitting out. A police file, to be exact, documenting his favorite unsolved murder case.

“Genocide Jack…it would be both an honor and a terror to meet you…” he audibly mused before movement behind him drew his attention. To his disgust, he found the odorous shape of Toko Fukawa ducking unsuccessfully behind a shelf. A great sigh escaped him as he called out, “Why must you insist on following after me? I have no want or even need of you. Now leave.”

He saw Toko stiffen before she peered out from behind her ‘hiding’ place. “H-How did you k-k-know I was h-here?” she asked, almost hopefully.

Scoffing as if his nose had suddenly clogged, the Togami Heir waved a hand in front of his nose and replied, “I can smell you from across the room.”

“W-What?!” the startled writing prodigy stammered, her eyes glued to his whether he wanted them to or not. And then, inexplicably, Toko wrapped her arms around herself, saliva slightly dripping from her edges of her mouth. “O-Oh… I suppose t-that makes… sense…”

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**ATTENTION: Toko’s Fantasy**

Toko: (Shocked but awed) “How did you know I was here?”

Byakuya: (Seductive glance) “Your aroma is so strong, there was no way I wouldn’t be able to sense your presence.”

Toko: (Moaning slightly) “O-Oh!! Of course, you would be able to do something so… amazing!! That makes… (louder moaning)… sense!!”

**EXITING: Toko’s Fantasy**

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Standing there, watching this putrid woman holding herself and moaning did nothing to inspire confidence in Byakuya’s eyes. And so, he did as he always had done; put the filth in their place.

“You’re filthy scent aggravates me. Never approach me again. I’m leaving…”
He quickly moved past her, holding his breath to keep her rancid odor from invading his nostrils.

“H-Hey!” she abruptly shouted, making him glance over his shoulder just long enough to glare at her
“…D-Did you…mean it?” Toko abruptly asked, far too serious for how she’d been acting before.

Perplexed but also somewhat interested, Byakuya came to a halt just before the door and countered,
“Mean ‘what’ exactly? Get to the point.”

His harsh tone made Toko flinch, but she seemed to be enjoying it rather than being intimidated. And apparently, it urged her to continue, “W-What you said a-a-about meeting…Genocide Jack…did y-y-you mean it?”

For a moment, the Togami Heir was actually surprised, not only because she was questioning him but because she’d actually been able to hear him whispering to himself when she’d been on the far side of the room. If she hadn’t been so absolutely repulsive to him, he may have felt inclined to feign being impressed by her. However, as he wasn’t truly impressed, he decided that answering her would be the simplest way to get her to leave him be.

“I am Byakuya Togami, and every word that I chose to speak is the absolute truth. Why should that matter to you?”

Byakuya quickly learned that those words were the worst he could have ever uttered as Toko’s eyes suddenly sparkled and she practically leapt forward, grasping onto his palm with both hands.

“B-Because I’m Genocide Jack…s-sort of!!”

…

…

Time stood still as Byakuya slowly ingested what was happening to him:

First, he did not like being touched, ever. Least of all by a sweaty, smelly, utterly disgusting woman who he wouldn’t voluntarily waste his time on, even if it meant escaping this hell hole of a school. Second, there was no possible way that a girl this introverted, unsociable, and offensive to all five senses could possibly be the uncatchable serial killer he’d spent long hours into the night researching.

Jerking his hand from her greasy palms, he shoved her away with all his strength, sending Toko toppling to the floor with an…elated yelp? Briefly shaking his head, he wiped his hand on his pants as he growled, “Don’t touch me, you pathetic waste of space!”

Only now did he notice that, because of the sudden frustration and excursion, his voice sounded slightly frazzled, which could easily send the wrong message. Clearing his throat immediately afterward, he made a mental note to sanitize his hand as he turned his back to her and continued, “Your lies are as filthy and disgusting as you are. Even a serial killer like Genocide Jack has more value than you! Don’t even dare to try and imitate such a person!”

From the floor, Toko stared up at him, her eyes sparkling once more as she insists, “B-But it’s the t-t-truth! I have a split p-p-personality!!”

A scoff escaped Byakuya and he didn’t even turn to acknowledge her as he sarcastically replied, “I’m sure you do…”

“B-But I can prove it!!”
Toko: (Grasping her lover’s warm hand) “I’m…Genocide Jack!!”

(Byakuya’s face reddens. He shoves her away. She falls to the floor.)

Byakuya: “Don’t touch me… I’m not prepared yet!” (He turns away in embarrassment) Your lies won’t fool me! How could someone like you be the famed serial killer?! Don’t even dare to speak such things about yourself!”

(Toko understands her lover’s apprehension. She finds courage to speak the words of her heart.)

Toko: (Pleading for understanding) “But…it’s the truth! My split personality makes me do it!”

Byakuya: “While I’m sure you’d never lie to me, I cannot believe you…”

(Toko rises to her feet. Courage swells in her bosom. She decides to trust him.)

Toko: “I will prove it to you…with love!”

**EXITING: Toko’s Fantasy**

“Hmph,” Byakuya scoffed as he slowly turned to face her. “How far will you allow this little farce to go before you realize that I—?”

Before Byakuya could finish speaking, he saw Toko lifting up her skirt. The initial shock of her lewd action wasn’t what ultimately fazed him. It was the fact that, strapped to each of her thighs just below her waist, he spotted a very distinct set of scissors:

“Genocide Jack’s… ‘Genoscissors’, ” Byakuya whispered, using the nickname the police had given to the death dealing tool.

The pattern and design of the scissor was one that he had seen many times in the police file he’d perused over the last few months before coming to this school. They were the most unique cutting tool he’d ever laid eyes on, and there was no mistaking them. Not to mention that she had so many… not just one or two, but at least five or six were attached to each leg! Enough to crucify a man twice over—

“D-Don’t worry! I-I would never l-let her hurt you!” Toko blurted out, dropping the material of her skirt and hiding the killing tool once more. “I’d never h-hurt… my Master…”

It was only then that Byakuya realized the look of absolute horror that had overtaken his features. He could hardly believe it and even though the facts were scarce, there was enough to cause him concern. Not only that, if he considered that what she told him was true… then all the pieces fell into place.

“This explains why the authorities were never able to catch him… err… her. No one would ever have suspected a student of Hope’s Peak to be a serial killer. Even though they deduced that it could be a student, who would believe that an introverted, lewd woman like her could be…”

He clenched his fists as he felt embarrassment of his own. He’d solved a number of previously unsolvable cases before, although only for his own amusement and even then he never made his
discoveries public. He had planned on being the one to finally uncover who this renegade serial killer with a pretty boy fetish could be. After all, some would consider him a prime target for—!

His breath suddenly hitched as his brain processed the situation he was currently in:

Alone…in a dark room…with a serial killer…that considered him to be her ‘type’…trapped in a school where murder was the only way out…

“Oh God…”

For the first time in a great number of years, he actually felt fear creeping into his mind. Death…it was standing before him, in the guise of a disgusting and vile woman. And in any other situation, he most certainly would have been impressed with that guise, except that it now threatened him…and he couldn’t have that.

And even though she’d claimed that she wasn’t there to hurt him, there was no way to be sure. Plus there was evidence to support her targeting him. She’d been stalking him through the halls for quite some time now, whispering his name in the shadows before disappearing whenever he turned around.

If she hadn’t foolishly revealed her true identity…she may have been successful.

However, now that he was aware of her…arrangement, even if he hadn’t seen her other side himself, he knew to be cautious around her. He would not become another footnote in the pages of that police file!

“I am Byakuya Togami, the man destined to lead the world into a brighter future! And I cannot and will not allow a person as low-born and putrid as her the honor of ending my life prematurely!”

Straightening out his features and putting on his usual air of superiority, he narrowed his gaze at the startled but flustered Toko. As if his gaze was burning through her, the writing prodigy’s breath hitched in her throat and she fell silent as he issued his command.

“You are not to mention this conversation to anyone…ever. If you do, then I will end you.”

Toko’s face burns crimson as she slowly nods. “I-I…understand. My Master…!”

Unable to stomach her any longer, Byakuya quickly turned and departed from the library, leaving a flustered Toko alone with her thoughts…

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**ATTENTION: Toko’s Fantasy**

Toko: “Please don’t worry, I would never allow myself to hurt you!” (Blushing furiously) “I could never harm…my Master…”

(Wonder crosses her lover’s face. Confusion mixed with understanding. Passion as well.)

Byakuya: (Lustfully whispering) “Oh God…Toko.”

(He takes a step toward her. His hands cup her face. Toko flushes. She is overwhelmed by heat.)

Byakuya: (Breathing heavily) “I will…carry…your secret…to my grave! (He lets out an embarrassed moan) So please…do not speak of this…with anyone! Ever again! For I fear…it will be…the end of us!”
Toko feels her lover’s genuine feelings. Her heart races. She nods slowly and euphorically.

Toko: (Moaning wildly) “Yes! Anything for you…my Master!!”

(An explosion of ‘white’ covers all that can be seen)

**EXITING: Toko’s Fantasy**

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As Byakuya slammed the door of the library behind him, he practically sped down the hallway as he made for the stairway leading toward the first floor. He knew it would difficult, but he had to force himself to appear as though nothing was wrong. He couldn’t afford to show his enemies any weakness…especially not now.

The killing game had been nothing but a distraction for him until this point, a form of mild amusement that he would eventually win, as he did with all challenges put before him. But now, it was different. The game had taken on new form, if only slightly. Now it was going to become a tool for him…a tool that might be the only way for him to survive long enough to win this game.

“I swear, on the Togami name…that I will never fall victim to that disgusting woman!”

With that resolve in mind, all he needed to do was find a way for the ‘game’ to dispose of the looming threat now known as Toko Fukawa.

“Are you sure? We could just stick to the first floor, you know?” Mukuro said as she helped Sayaka up the last few steps leading to the second floor.

“Only a few…of us… came up here…right?” the exhausted idol said, still not used to heavy excursion. Reaching the top, she took a few deep breaths before finishing, “We already searched the nurse’s office, student store, and the lobby. Besides…I haven’t gotten to see the pool or the library yet…”

A soft sigh escaped the disguised Mukuro as she looked over her classmate. Sayaka was obviously pushing herself, probably because of their conversation earlier. And while it was good for her to do whatever she could, the soldier also worried about her health. Even though her wound was healing nicely, it still wasn’t ready for sudden movements, which would be required if she tripped while on the stairs.

“She really shouldn’t be up here…but then again…”

Mukuro knew this was a glorious opportunity that she just couldn’t pass up. Glancing over her shoulder, the soldier stared at the boy’s bathroom door just in front of them.

Having taken advantage of Sayaka’s suggestion to help search upstairs in order to secretly uncover the hidden room, Mukuro felt that this time, everything would work out. Her objective from yesterday would finally be accomplished, removing the stain on her previously spotless mission record. Not to mention that with this, they’d finally have a fighting chance against Junko!

“Sorry for using you like this, Sayaka. But you’ll thank me later.”

Smiling brightly at the pop idol, Mukuro put her best ‘Junko’ personality forward as she replied,
“Hey, not a problem! We can start by searching the bathrooms. I bet no one even checked them—!”

“Don’t bother, there’s nothing there.”

Both of the girls gasped as the boy’s bathroom door opened and out stepped Kyoko Kirigiri. In that instant, Mukuro felt all of her hope she’d managed to hold in begin to crumble.

“Kyoko? What are you doing here?” Sayaka asked, very puzzled to see her coming out of the boy’s room.

“Yeah!” the disguised Mukuro concurred, although for entirely different reasons. “I thought you and Makoto were searching the gym?”

The soldier did her best to keep her voice even, because she knew that Kyoko would see through any hint of suspicious activity and she could not afford that…especially right now!

Kyoko raised an eyebrow as she tucked a lock of her long lavender hair behind her ear. “We finished our investigation in the gym quicker than we thought. So Makoto suggested we help search the upper floor, he’s checking the classrooms down the hall right now.”

“Oh…I see,” Sayaka said, the mention of Makoto still slightly unnerving her. “Well, we came to do the same…where shall we start?”

“Anywhere should be fine,” Kyoko said coldly before turning away from them, presumably preparing to rejoin Makoto.

Despite herself, Mukuro felt like screaming. This was their one chance to get a leg up on the Mastermind and—wait! Maybe this was okay! Surely Kyoko of all people would be able to find the secret room, even if she didn’t know it was there! There was still a chance—still hope!!

“So, you didn’t find anything? Nothing at all?” Mukuro abruptly called out, stopping Kyoko before she left. The soldier knew she probably sounded a bit desperate, but she hoped it would be seen as concern for Chihiro’s disappearance. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as the detective turned to face them, her face completely stoic.

“No, nothing at all.”

Those words shattered the little bit of hope that Mukuro had been building up for so long. As the clicking of Kyoko’s boots echoed in down the hallway as she departed, the soldier realized that their opportunity to one-up her sister was walking away with Kyoko.

“It’s over…now I may never be able to help them find that room…dammit!” she mentally cursed, the shame of defeat weighing heavily on her.

The silence that invaded her ears was suddenly broken by the nervous voice of Sayaka. “So, uh, do you think we could check out the pool? It’s the closest room to us, right?”

Her classmate’s request brought the distraught soldier back to reality and she understood that, even though she’d failed this time, there might be an opportunity later. Besides, there was no time to be moping anyway, not with Chihiro still missing.

“Right…let’s hope we don’t get to see a dead man’s float or anything!” she joked to cover her apprehension.

“Junko! That’s terrible!” Sayaka reprimanded but still let her help lead her toward the pool area.
Stealing one last glance at the boy’s bathroom door, she proceeded to help Sayaka down the long hallway leading to the pool. 

Little did she know that, from just around the corner, Kyoko’s lavender eyes watched them carefully as they departed. And the instant they were gone, she made her way back toward the boy’s bathroom, closing the door silently.

“Aafter all that, we still haven’t been able to find her?!” Taka shouted to everyone as they sat at the cafeteria tables.

After each group returned, they all confirmed that none of them had found any trace of Chihiro or anything that appeared out of the ordinary. And although some of the group was more fidgety than before, namely Junko and, unbelievably, Byakuya, the overall sense of dread hadn’t dissipated in the least.

“This is beyond unacceptable! We need to search again!” Taka insisted, already heading toward the door.

“You want us to look everywhere? Again? For serious?” Hiro complained, making no move to get up from his seat.

“I don’t normally like to agree with Hiro but…he’s kinda right,” Leon insisted, exhaustion clearly overtaking him. “I mean…where the hell else could she be?”

A heavy silence engulfed everyone as their imaginations filled in the gaps with horrific images.

“Did anyone check the incinerator?”

A shocking realization overtook everyone as Byakuya spoke, a smirk on his face as he pushed up his glasses. Already the students began look to each other, connecting the dots of his accusation.

“What are you getting at?” Makoto dared to ask, despite knowing exactly what the affluent progeny was insinuating.

“All I’m saying is that the murderer is being quite thorough. And, to that effect, I wondered if the incinerator itself had been searched,” the Togami Heir commented, glancing over to Hifumi, who still had possession of the trash key.

Scratching his head nervously, Hifumi replied, “Eh, well, I actually wasn’t able to leave here in order to search, you see?”

“And why not?” Byakuya pushed, obviously already suspecting him. “Do you have something to hide from us?”

“Actually, he was busy preparing my tea,” Celeste informed them, sipping from her cup. “It took him several tries to get it half-way descent.”

Holding in a scoff, Byakuya folded his arms and said, “Then I suggest we take our investigation there. If we’re lucky, we may be able to corner the killer before he disposes of the body—”.

“Killer?! Body?! Did someone else get murdered?!” a frantic voice suddenly shouted.

“Yeah!” Mondo announced without thinking, turning around at the same time. “We still can’t find—
Everyone froze as none other than Chihiro Fujisaki stood in the doorway, rubbing the sleep from her red and panicked eyes.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! An extra long chapter to get you through the winter break! But what will happen now?! Where was Chihiro? What is Celeste planning? How is Sayaka going to cope with this newfound friendship with “Junko”? Keep on reading to find out!

To everyone that celebrates Thanksgiving, I hope it’s a happy one! I have to work on Thanksgiving this year so please enjoy it for me! Also, this time around, my beta was particularly pleased with Mondo stealing cop bike…not that I wasn’t but I figured I’m mention it.

Please leave a comment or review if you’re enjoying the story. Tell me what you think of it and be sure to ask questions if you have them! Beyond that, enjoy the winter break (if you get one) and keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Chihiro feels embarrassed about making everyone worry. Then, Monokuma decides to reveal the second motive. Later, Chihiro tells Alter Ego about their situation. Meanwhile, Mondo discovers something wrong with his e-handbook.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chihiro couldn’t help but flush as all of her classmates stared at her; some with concern and relief, but others with anger and distain. Byakuya in particular looked as though he was about to march over and rip her head from her shoulders. She’d never seen him so furious before, what possibly reason could he have to…

“Oh god…he knows!” Chihiro panicked, her face blanching as she resisted the urge to flee. “He knows that I took the laptop and probably thinks I’m a murderer! He probably told everyone and now they all think I’m planning something horrible!”

Even though there was absolutely no reason for such a bold assumption, the incredibly tired mind of Chihiro concluded that her theft of the laptop could be the only thing to upset the Affluent Progeny so. However, until she was accused of anything she decided it was best to try and appeal to their sense of reason. After all, she had been working on her Alter Ego project to try and help them after all!

Shaking a bit, she steadied herself as she asked, “Uh…w-what’s wrong—?”

Before she could utter anything more, all of her classmates suddenly charged her. Startled, she yelped and lost her balance, having to grab onto the door handle to keep upright as they surrounded her.

“Oh God, they all know and they’re going to kill me for taking the laptop!!” she panicked and shivered as they all closed in on her.

Closing her eyes, she waited for something to happen and was surprised when everyone started patting her, as if checking for injuries.

“You’re not hurt anywhere, are you?” a concerned Hina asked, looking her over.

“That’s everyone present and accounted for! Good work everyone!” Taka congratulated them all, relief flooding his voice.

When Chihiro saw all of her classmates breathing easier now that she was present, she began to think that, just maybe, they didn’t know about her laptop theft.

“Just where the hell were you?! We thought you’d been murdered!” Mondo shouted, getting right in her face.

“Okay, maybe they do know!” she reasoned, trying to calm herself as her body trembled.
Suddenly, Mondo was pulled back and away from her by none other than Junko, who glared at him and said, “Don’t go screaming at her like that! She’s obviously confused enough as it is!”

Jerking free, the biker hesitantly straightened his jacket and replied, “W-Well, what the hell was I suppose to say? She’s been missing all morning!”

“Yeah, but screaming at her isn’t going to help, now is it?!” the Fashionista refuted, glaring harshly as the biker folded his arms and turned away with a huff.

Hifumi slowly raised his hand and interrupted, “Perhaps we could get back to the matter at hand… like where Miss Fujisaki has been all this time?”

Junko physically flinched as she must have realized that she’d completely forgotten to ask. With a slightly flushed face, she turned to Chihiro and said, “Seriously, you kinda scared us. I rang your doorbell consistently for like a solid minute. Were you…uh…indisposed?”

Although it was kind of sloppy, Chihiro could tell that Junko was at least trying to be sensitive about where she might have been. Although, it didn’t really help the situation any regardless.

“…uh…well…” Chihiro whispered, embarrassment overtaking her. “I couldn’t really sleep last night…and I didn’t really get to sleep until…early this morning. So, uh, I guess I overslept…?”

A momentary silence engulfed them and no one was quite sure what to say. Chihiro felt bad for not telling the whole truth but the tension in the air convinced her that it was best to keep the real reason for her sleepless night to herself. Just as she was about to apologize, someone unexpected spoke up.

“For serious? You were just sleeping?” Hiro abruptly shattered the quiet, an idiotic smile stretching on his face. “Well, I guess that makes sense! We all have our days!”

His irritatingly jolly laughter was enough to make even Makoto shake his head. However, everyone seemed to calm down a bit and accept what she had told them. Even Byakuya appeared to believe her, since he had neglected to voice his opinion, though he still seemed to be rather perturbed. At the same time, Chihiro felt very uncomfortable due to causing everyone so much trouble, but also relieved as well.

“At least they don’t suspect that I stole the laptop…”

Despite feeling that she wasn’t under suspicion any more, she still felt it was best to clarify the situation, so she decided to ask, “So, uh, would anyone mind telling me what happened this morning? I mean…did something happen?”

Her question triggered a wave of embarrassment that washed over all her classmates, as they realized exactly what they had been doing all morning. And it seemed that none of them were ready to even talk about it…at least until Kyoko spoke up.

“Allow me to explain,” she said as calmly as ever, making her way over to Chihiro to fill her in.

Kyoko’s explanation was short and swift, leaving Chihiro even more embarrassed. She desperately wanted to tell her friends the reason for her sleeping in but just couldn’t…not yet.

-Earlier That Morning-
A strangely familiar voice stirred Chihiro from her peaceful slumber. Groaning softly as she lifted her head off her desk…wait, desk? Why did she? Oh, right. She’d fallen asleep while trying to figure out the bug in her programming.

Yawning and rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she lifted her head and was surprised to find a mirror in front of her. It was weird though, judging by her reflection, she didn’t look as though she’d pulled one of her usual all-nighters. And even stranger was that her reflection was…smiling? She hadn’t even realized she was smiling, such an unusual way to wake up—

“Greetings, Master! Good morning!”

A bit of drool trailed down Chihiro’s chin as her jaw dropped and her eyes widened. Had her reflection just…talked to her?! Was she still asleep and dreaming? Or was this another of Monokuma’s tricks perhaps?

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Master. Did you sleep well?” the mirror with her face asked.

Squeezing her eyes shut and rubbing them furiously, Chihiro blinked a few times to clear her vision and when it did, she gasped. That was no mirror, it was the laptop screen! And that meant the image of her own head floating before her could only be—!

“A-Alter Ego?!”

A pause occurred as the laptop made a mechanical sound, as if processing something.

“…Is that the name you’ve designated for me, Master? If so, I shall save it in my memory banks. Would you like me to save that—woah!”

Chihiro couldn’t stop herself from abruptly lifting the laptop up into her arms and spinning around with it, giggling joyfully all the while.

“Yes! It worked! I never thought I’d get it in just one night but it worked! Yeah!” the programmer shouted, so happy that her creation had come to life.

“Master…spinning like this…is not…” the AI program tried to say but was drowned out by its Master’s cheering.

Everything was looking better now. Chihiro had done something that may be able to help them all escape the school, since her creation could analyze the files on that laptop for sensitive information. Not only that, she’d programmed her creation to learn and adapt, even when left alone, meaning that she didn’t need to watch over it all the time to ensure it would complete its function.

Also, it seemed that the pre-install microphone built into the laptop was functioning adequately enough. She’d been concerned, considering that the laptop was an older model and the microphone wiring was a bit loose and worn out, but it seemed that her creation could hear her just fine!

And, although it was a bit narcissistic, she just couldn’t get over the fact that her own image was the default for the program. Hearing her own voice was a bit strange but it felt the most comfortable. Plus, she could tell it about all her other friends and eventually, it might be able to imitate them too!

Chihiro was so enthralled with what she’d accomplished that she almost didn’t notice something important. As she spun around, her eyes caught a glimpse of the wall clock and she instantly stopped, her face blanching. It was hours past their usual meeting time and no doubt everyone was
worried…or suspicious.

Realizing time was short, Chihiro instantly set the laptop back down before looking directly at her creation. “Okay, sorry but I need to go! We’ll talk about everything later so for now, just stay here and look over the files on this laptop. Can you do that for me?”

The mechanical processing noise sounded momentarily before the AI program smiled back and answered, “Of course, Master! Leave it to me!”

“Perfect! I’ll be back soon!” Chihiro shouted with a mixture of pride and haste, as she straightened her hair and uniform before racing for the door. Just before she reached the handle though, her own voice called out to stop her.

“W-Wait a moment, Master!”

Grinding to a halt, Chihiro turned her head around to see her creation staring directly at her. It was surprising enough that the AI had called out for her to stop but what was even more surprising was the fact that it had an almost…nervous look on its pixilated face.

“I’m sorry but I really need to go,” Chihiro insisted, only now realizing she was negotiating with an AI program, which was a odd but welcome notion. “We’ll talk later—”.

“B-But…!” the AI program insisted, as if trying to find the courage to speak. “Master, you never approved of my name! I don’t know what I am to be called…”

Shock overtook Chihiro as she registered what her AI was asking. Not only that, it was clear that it was imitating part of her personality as well, which was and yet wasn’t surprising. She’d used her own personal data as the base for the program, so it would certainly know how to imitate her but…it seemed more genuine than she could have predicted. Her program was learning at a rate that far exceeded anything she’d ever imagined.

She wanted to stay and examine it more, learn more from what she’d accomplished in so short a time but she just couldn’t. Instead, she smiled back at her creation and said, “Alter Ego…your name is Alter Ego.”

Upon confirming its name, Alter Ego practically beamed as it replied, “Thank you, Master! I’ll get to work on those files right away!”

A swell of pride immediately filled Chihiro as she watched the laptop go to work. Perhaps this is what it felt like for a parent to be proud of a child they had raised. It was an odd sensation, but it was the only way she could think to describe the feeling.

“She’s growing up right in front of me…” Chihiro whispered to herself with a light giggle.

Nevertheless, she didn’t have the luxury of time and decided to depart.

“Hopefully they won’t be too angry with me…” she pondered as she locked her door from the outside and headed for the cafeteria.

Upon hearing all that had transpired before she’d arrived, Chihiro wiped away the hint of forming tears and bowed deeply to her classmates.
“I’m sorry! I never meant to do that to all of you!” Chihiro practically shouted, ashamed that her oversleeping had caused such a panic. It felt like all she could do was apologize, since she was still worried about how they’d react to Alter Ego.

She might not have been, if it wasn’t for the vicious glare that Byakuya kept sending her. The way he was acting made her nervous to bring up her creation, since he would undoubtedly demand to see Alter Ego and possibly demand use of ‘her’. And she couldn’t allow that to happen. She had to protect her creation….until the time to show ‘her’ to the others was right.

She was about to apologize again when a manicured hand landed on her shoulder. Looking up, she saw that Junko was standing over her.

“Don’t worry about it,” the Fashionista insisted, giving her a big smile. “It could have happened to any of us. So don’t blame yourself.”

“B-But!” she tried to protest but was stopped when Makoto interjected.

“Really Chihiro, it’s okay,” the lucky student assured her. “As long as you’re okay, then it’s not that big of a deal.”

“I’m afraid I can’t agree with that,” the harsh voice of Byakuya caught them all off guard, Chihiro especially. With a menacing frown, the Affluent Progeny walked directly up to her and sneered, “In the future, if your plan on disappearing, could you at least have the courtesy to actually be dead? That way, we don’t have to waste the entire morning searching for nothing.”

The entire room froze as Byakuya’s cruel words invaded their ears. Chihiro in particular felt all the color drain from her face. As she stared up at the Affluent Progeny, almost unable to comprehend how despicable his action were, someone called out to her.

“Ch-Chihiro! You’re…”

The programmer turned to see Hina, who had appeared by her side, gesturing toward her face. It wasn’t until that moment that Chihiro realized that moisture was pouring down her cheeks. Not only that, she suddenly became aware that, despite not intending to, her reddened eyes continued to secrete a waterfall of tears.

This realization made her knees buckle and her hands shot to her face, desperately trying to wipe away the oncoming tears she knew wouldn’t cease any time soon. Uncontrollable, heaving sobs racked her body and she felt her insides twist as confusion wrapped itself around her frazzled mind, unable to comprehend why Byakuya had been so cold to her.

Just before she felt she would be swallowed by that horrific feeling, a strong masculine voice shouted.

“You son of a BITCH!!! How DARE you make a girl cry like that?!” Mondo shouted, making Chihiro’s head snap up.

“Hmph,” Byakuya huffed as he folded his arms, barely even acknowledging the biker. “It’s no concern of mine if she can’t handle the truth. Or are you saying that wasting the entire morning searching for that pitiful excuse for a weakling was an appropriate way to spend my precious time?”

Everyone could see that Byakuya was clearly baiting Mondo, and when they saw the vein in his head pop, they knew it was too late.

“YOU PIECE OF SHIT!!”
The biker charged but didn’t get more than few feet before two pairs of hands grabbed him. From the front, Taka had leapt before him and grappled his arms in an attempt to slow him down. From behind, Leon tried to get under Mondo’s arms and hold him back. If it had just been one of them, the biker probably could have shaken them off, but together, they barely managed to hold him back.

“Bro! You need to calm yourself!” Taka insisted, desperately trying to pacify his new friend.

“Seriously, man! Get a hold of yourself!” Leon shouted, obviously still exhausted but trying to do his best to keep his friend from going nuclear.

“GET OFF ME!! I’LL KILL HIM! I’LL FUCKING KILL HIM!!” Mondo protested as he was unable to break free. At the same time, Byakuya smirked at the sight and unfortunately, the biker caught a glimpse of it. “WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU SMILING ABOUT, YOU PRICK?!”

Despite the opportunity, it seemed that Byakuya was entertained enough by remaining silent, as he merely watched as Taka and Leon continued to struggle with holding Mondo back. Just when it seemed that the Affluent Progeny had won, something unexpected happened.

SLAP!!!

The resounding noise startled everyone, as did the audible groan that followed. Everyone’s eyes shot over to see Byakuya, his head jerked to the side and glasses clattering on to the floor. Even more surprising was the person that stood in front of him.

Sayaka Maizono retracted her hand and glared menacingly up at him. Her legs were shaky and she was breathing heavily, due to her current state of health, but nevertheless, she furiously confronted the Affluent Progeny.

“Y-You! How dare y-y-you strike M-M-Mister Byakuya like that?!” Toko abruptly shouted but no one seemed to pay attention to her.

Sayaka in particular didn’t even seem to notice she’d spoken, focusing entirely on glaring menacingly at the Ultimate Affluent Progeny. And after what seemed like ages, she finally spoke.

“You should be ashamed of yourself…” she seethed, refusing to turn away from him, her blue eyes radiating with anger and determination.

The entire class held their breath as Byakuya turned back to face her. To their shock, he held no surprise or even anger on his face. He simply stared down at her with his usual condescending gaze. They glared at each other for nearly an entire minute before the Togami Heir abruptly turned and bent over to pick up his, amazingly, undamaged glasses.

Reapplying them to his face, he finally scoffed, walked a few steps away from her and said, “I don’t have any need to feel ashamed.”

He sent a glare back at Sayaka, who huffed and went back to her seat, looking utterly exhausted.

A confident smirk retook Byakuya’s features as he continued, “After all, it’s not as if any of us are friends. On the contrary, we are enemies in competition with each other—”

“That’s not true!” Makoto immediately interjected, causing Byakuya to glare at him. “We may not all get along but…if we work together, then I’m sure that we can—”

“You’re such a fool…” Byakuya interrupted, his tone turning more menacing than any of them had heard before. “Pretending to be friends with everyone? How long do you think that’s going to help
“You survive here?”

“Fuck you!” Mondo shouted, still being held back.

Byakuya’s smirk reappeared and he glanced at the biker as he replied, “If you can’t see the wisdom I offer, then it’s too late for you. Well, actually, it was already too late for you to begin with.”

Again, Mondo’s rage began to consume him and Taka and Leon had to double their efforts to keep him from rampaging.

“Bro! Calm down!” Taka implored, barely able to hold his grip.

“I AM CALM!!”

“No, dude! You’re seriously not!!” Leon insisted, unsure of how long he could hold the biker back. It was at that moment that a pain-fill voice erupted and startled everyone.

“Please…! Everyone just stop fighting!!” the sorrowful voice of Chihiro echoed in the room, gaining everyone’s attention. As one, all of the students turned to her and saw her furiously wiping away her tears as she tried to speak. “T-This is…all my fault! I didn’t…mean to…I’m so…weak…”

The sounds of Chihiro’s sobs pierced everyone’s ears, but one person in particular felt ashamed just hearing it. Mondo felt all the fight he’d been giving Leon and Taka fade and he seemed to sober up completely. Completely forgetting his rage toward Byakuya, he shrugged his friends off, walked up to Chihiro and said, “H-Hey! It’s not a big deal! Besides, it’s not your fault that you’re weak! That’s just how girls are!”

Unbeknownst to him, every single female in that room sent him a glare. Junko in particular stared menacingly at him but he was entirely too focused on ‘helping’ Chihiro to really take note of them.

“So stop crying already! I can’t stand it when girls cry…’specially because of me,” he continued, doing his best to comfort her. However, despite the fact that he’d tried to sound as nice as possible but he didn’t factor in that his tone was still very angry. Because of this, and his insensitive comments about women in general, and despite his good intentions, Chihiro just seemed to weep harder.

“Mondo! Don’t yell at her like that! And be a bit more sensitive about it too!” Hina shouted, going to Chihiro’s side and rubbing her back.

“I…I…I thought I was!” Mondo retorted, feeling more ashamed than ever, which only made him even more desperate to stop the programmer’s crying. Just then, he remembered something and a bright smile suddenly overtook his face. “I got it! I’ll make you a promise…as a man!”

Hearing that, Chihiro was finally able to momentarily cease her weeping and look up at him. “P-Promise…as a man?”

Seeing he may have finally done the right thing, Mondo smiled wider and gave her a thumbs up.

“I…I thought I was!” Mondo retorted, feeling more ashamed than ever, which only made him even more desperate to stop the programmer’s crying. Just then, he remembered something and a bright smile suddenly overtook his face. “I got it! I’ll make you a promise…as a man!”

Hearing that, Chihiro was finally able to momentarily cease her weeping and look up at him. “P-Promise…as a man?”

Seeing he may have finally done the right thing, Mondo smiled wider and gave her a thumbs up.

“That’s right! And a man never breaks his promises! I may have mentioned it before but, my brother always drilled into me that, no matter what, a real man always keeps his promises! That’s what he…”

Staring up at him, Chihiro barely managed to say, “L-Left you…”

Hanging his head, Mondo quietly answered, “Yeah…he’s dead.”
A heavy silence struck the group and for a few moments, no one spoke a word as they absorbed this new information. Even Byakuya kept his mouth shut as the biker willed away his personal demons and finally lifted his head.

“A-Anyway, that means you can trust me when I make a promise! So, yeah…you don’t have to cry anymore…okay?”

It took a second, but after a few more moments, Chihiro finally replied, “O-Okay…” Wiping away the remnants of her tears, the programmer was able to lift her head up and smile. “…Thank you, Mondo.”

Whether he wanted to or not, crimson stained Mondo’s cheeks as he took in that adorable smile. Clearing his throat and turning his head away, he quietly answered, “…S-Sure…no problem.”

Hearing that, almost everyone in the group let out a sigh of relief. Even Mondo, in his embarrassment, felt a bit better about the situation.

A few moments later, Chihiro pulled herself up to her feet and said, “But…I still don’t like that I’m the reason you all were fighting.” Her confession made everyone’s mood drop a bit, knowing that their situation hadn’t actually improved in the slightest. However, that didn’t stop Chihiro from continuing, “I…I need to get stronger. I’m so weak that…anybody can make me cry…”

Hearing that, Mondo felt his shame slightly resurface as he finally took note of the menacing glares that all of the other girls had been giving him. At the same time, with a heavy sigh, Junko began walking over to where Chihiro was.

“Hey, don’t stress out over it too much, okay? It’s not your fault Chihiro,” the Fashionista said, circling around to the other side of Chihiro and wrapping an arm around her shoulder. “And not standing up to a prick like Byakuya does not make you weak,” she insisted, sending one last glare toward a confused Mondo.

“What was that?” the Togami heir seethed, narrowing his gaze at the Fashionista as he registered her insult.

“If you hadn’t provoked her, then we could have avoided this argument,” Kyoko chimed in, supporting Junko’s assessment. “That fact is undeniable.”

Shooting his gaze over to her, Byakuya was just about to retort when someone else join in.

“Even I must agree,” Celeste cut in, smiling daintily at the infuriated Byakuya. “What you said may not exactly be incorrect, but it went a tad bit far. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Even though he appeared to be calm on the outside, it was obvious that all of their comments were getting under the Togami heir’s skin. He certainly wasn’t pleased that he conversation had turned on him and made him out to be the villain here. Folding his arms, his fingers tightened around the material of his suit, as if holding in his anger. And just when it seemed he had found the right quip to retort, a new voice echoed in the cafeteria.

“…Personally, I think he’s got the right idea!” a horrifyingly familiar voice shouted.

The entire room tensed as they turned to see their captor, Monokuma, sitting at a nearby table watching the festivities. However, the bear’s appearance startled all of them.

A large red puff wig sat atop the half and half bear’s head, huge amounts of eye-shadow decorated its eyes, enhancing the terrifying red robotic camera/eye. Glitter was slathered across the bear’s face
and its lips were adorned with massive amounts of bright red lipstick. Completing the outfit was a rainbow colored dress that hung down to just below where the bear would have had knees.

Monokuma had become the very epitome of a terrifying drag queen. And it drew disgusted looks from everyone…except for one. Chihiro couldn’t stop herself from trembling as she took in the demented bear’s new appearance. Even worse, she felt as though the bear was staring directly at her.

“Why…why is he…?” she mentally questioned, her mind already giving way to doubt and fear.

Before she could try to understand the bear’s action, Monokuma turned to everyone and announced, “You shouldn’t pick on Mister Togami so much,” the bear said with an offensively fake feminine tone. “He’s got a right to his opinion! Just like I have a right to denying all of yours! Upupupupupu!”

Everyone cringed at how creepy the bear was presenting itself and it didn’t take long for one of them to protest.

“W-What the hell with that get-up?” Hina blurted out, obviously shocked.

A look of false confusion spread over the bear’s features as it looked down to examine itself. “Oh, you mean this old thing? Why, I don’t know what you could mean. Is it my dress? Is it too…revealing…?”

That last word was directed entirely toward Chihiro, this time was sure of it. She broke out into a cold sweat and cautiously looked around. It didn’t seem that any of her classmates could tell the bear was targeting her, or at least, she hope they couldn’t. But even more frightening was the implication Monokuma had made…

“…They know…must have always known…but why now…?” the programmer tried to figure out, only to startled by a loud shout.

“Uhg! That’s so creepy!” Hina continued, still visibly startled by Monokuma’s appearance. “Why the hell would you dress like that?! It’s disgusting!”

…disgusting…
…disgusting…
…disgusting…

That word rang in Chihiro’s ears and for a moment, time seemed to stand still as her word began to crumble. Her hands unconsciously drifted down to her nether region, as if trying to hide something disgraceful. Fresh tears poured out of her eyes and whether she wanted to or not, she began openly sobbing once more.

At that moment, a hand rested on her shoulder and before she could look up to see who it was, Chihiro found herself pushed behind Mondo as he stepped in front of her. Only then did the biker remove his hand from her shoulder, fury seething in his eyes.

“What the hell is wrong with you, ya freaky ass bear?! Your weird get-up’s making Chihiro cry!” Mondo shouted, pointing furiously at the bear. “Now, take that shit off before I have to beat some sense into you!”

Although Chihiro should have felt grateful for Mondo’s willingness to protect her, she couldn’t deny that his words hurt her too. Looking around, she saw all of her classmates glaring at Monokuma with nothing short of disgust and displeasure on their faces. The way they looked at Monokuma right
now…would they all look at her the same way if she revealed her biological sex to them? Would they all turn on her for lying to them? For making use of the laptop without telling them?

She honestly couldn’t even fathom what might happen if they all found out…and it wasn’t like she was strong enough to endure their disgusted gazes if that did happen. After all, she wasn’t even strong enough to tell them about the AI program she’d spent all night developing…all for the sake of helping them all escape. Not that it would do them any good right now…

“I’m…so weak. I can’t even…stand up for myself…” Chihiro realized as Mondo continued to shield her from Monokuma’s offensive appearance.

“Oh well, whatever. At least I got to feel pretty for a little while,” Monokuma abruptly said, hopping off its chair and heading for the door. “I just want to personally invite all of you to the gymnasium. I’ve got a special surprise for you all.”

“What kind of surprise?” Junko instantly asked, angrily narrowing her gaze at the bear.

“Upupupu…you’ll just have to come and see for yourselves! On the double!” the bear shouted before waddling out the door and into the hallway, presumably heading for the gym.

Silence greeted them all for a moment before a stoic voice broke through.

“We’d best get going before Monokuma loses its temper,” Kyoko suggested, already heading for the door without another word.

“Y-Yeah, you’re right!” Makoto agreed, following suit.

As if sanctioned, everyone began heading for the door, knowing that whatever awaited them was going to be unpleasant. They only one of them that struggled was, of course, Sayaka, who had trouble standing on her own. However, Junko quickly went over and offered her shoulder, helping the idol up and out the door.

Meanwhile, Chihiro remained rooted in place, her legs still shaky. Just as she felt her strength was going to give out, that hand plopped down on her shoulder again. Startled, she looked up to see Mondo staring down at her, somewhat confused.

“Yo, uh, you alright?” he said, trying to be concerned. “Need me to carry you or something?”

Although it would have felt chivalrous at almost any other time, right now, Mondo’s gestures were like a knife being slowly turned in Chihiro’s gut. Every kind gesture was appreciated, but also made the programmer feel even more powerless and weak. However, she couldn’t let that show…not right now anyway.

“Y-Yeah…I’m fine,” Chihiro outright lied but knew it was the only thing she could do. Lying seemed to be the only thing she could do right now…

Just before they were about to leave, a loud bang caught their attention as they turned to see Leon stumble into a table, grasping it for support.

“What’s wrong with him?” Mondo questioned, completely oblivious to how utterly exhausted the ballplayer must have been at that moment. Either way, the biker ran over and grabbed on to his friend and said, “This isn’t the time to be sleeping! We gotta head for the gym!”

“Kill me now…” the exhausted Leon whispered as Mondo helped get him to his feet and marched him toward the gym.
Chihiro trailed behind them, her thoughts as heavy as the bags under Leon’s tired eyes.

Strangely enough, by the time everyone arrived at the gym, Monokuma was nowhere to be found. They had expected the half and half bear to be awaiting their arrival, or at least to reveal himself when they’d all gathered. It was certainly unsettling for them, but it concerned Mukuro most of all.

“Why the hell would Junko call us only to make us wait? She’s never been keen on waiting or postponing her plans. That must mean…she’s up to something,” the disguised soldier pondered as she surveyed her surroundings.

Taka was complaining about Monokuma’s tardiness to Mondo, who was only half listening as he was trying to keep Leon from passing out by repeatedly smacking him on the back of the head whenever the ballplayer closed his eyes. Chihiro stood close to them, but not right next to them, as if keeping her distance on purpose. Hina and Sakura stood together, as always, relying on each other’s support during this difficult time. Celeste stood off to the side, waiting patiently, with Hifumi only a few feet from her. Sayaka sat on the bleachers where Mukuro had left her, too tired to continue standing. Hiro paced near the back room, silently muttering a prayer of some kind, or at least that’s what Mukuro suspected his murmuring to be.

Byakuya was being his usual self, scowling as he stood far removed from the group. Occasionally though, he would send a glare behind him, a silent warning for Toko, who stared at his back from a distance. Mukuro though it odd for the Togami heir to pay any such attention to his stalker of a classmate but perhaps her persistence was finally beginning to wear down his patience.

Meanwhile, Makoto took his place in the center of the room, clearly looking around in case anything suspicious may happen. And, interestingly enough, instead of keeping her distance as per usual, Kyoko stood amongst her classmates, and only a few feet away from Makoto at that! Mukuro wondered about her sudden change in attitude but didn’t have time before the festivities began.

“Thank you all for waiting!!”

Everyone’s attention instantly turned toward the podium at the front of the gym and none of them even flinched as Monokuma shot out from underneath, his appearance returned to normal.

Mukuro could only guess but she was fairly certain that the drag queen get-up had only been there to disturb Chihiro personally, freaking out the rest of them was just an added bonus. But, did that mean that Junko was specifically targeting her? Why would she do that? It’s not as though the programmer was any kind of threat…demeaning as that might seem.

Still, was there something Chihiro had done to upset her sister?

Glancing over her shoulder, making sure not to make eye contact, Mukuro observed that the programmer was acting even more skittish than usual. But then again, that could have been because of the cross-dressing bear’s insinuations. At that moment, Chihiro momentarily turned her gaze toward the soldier, who immediately shifted her head to appear that she was yawning.

“Now isn’t the time to be focusing on that,” Mukuro reminded herself, finally turning her sky-blue eyes to face Monokuma. In truth, she had barely noticed that the bear had been giving a speech about…their deepest secrets?!

Her head snapped back to stare at the bear, eyes bulging as she saw it holding no less than fifteen small envelopes. As if gauging the soldier’s reaction, Monokuma trembled with anticipation as it
drank in her and her classmates’ expressions.

“You see, I’ve been growing bored of this ho-hum, no death, peaceful, hopeful, utterly infuriating slog that your school live has been up ‘til now,” the bear explained, fanning itself with their secrets. “My life just isn’t complete without a Blackened to spread civil unrest and general discomfort.”

At the mention of the Blackened, both Sayaka and Leon flinched. It didn’t help that Monokuma blatantly glared at both of them as it accentuated the word. The ballplayer, though completely exhausted, suddenly found himself alert and active, his breath hitching. Meanwhile, the pop idol pressed her back firmly against the bleachers behind her, wishing she could disappear into the darkness underneath her seat.

Only when Monokuma turned his gaze away from them did they get a momentary bit of peace, which was quickly shattered.

“That’s why I prepared these little beauties for each of you!” Monokuma shouted, holding out the envelopes as if they were playing cards. “Your deepest secrets and most embarrassing memories! Right before your very eyes! Perhaps with this, you’ll finally find the will to kill!”

A sense of dread overtook the room but this time, it wasn’t silence that occurred, it was anger.

“I don’t know what you have planned, but no one’s going to be killing anyone!” Taka shouted in protest, pointing a determined finger at the bear. “I swear that we won’t kill each other, no matter what you have in store for us!”

“Yeah! We beat your first motive! What makes you think this one’ll be any different?!” Hina insisted, her temper flaring.

“That’s right! We’ll never give in to you!” Makoto shouted, supporting both of them. “We’ve all survived this long without losing to you, and we won’t be beaten now! We won’t ever lose Hope!”

His passionate words sent out a flicker of hope that began to build up within the students as he spoke out. As if revitalized by those words, the sense of dread began to dissipate and the other students slowly hardened their features as they joined their classmates to determinedly glare at Monokuma… all except one of them.

Mukuro could only feel apprehension seeping into her soul, her face blanching as Makoto finished his little speech. Her gaze focused on the half and half bear, the soldier felt a bit of her strength leave her legs as Monokuma’s red eye camera twitched.

“Makoto…you shouldn’t have done that…” she mentally grimaced, knowing the chaos that could be unleashed because of that single word…the word her sister despised more than any other.

…Hope…

Makoto had unknowingly pushed her sister’s “Hope” button…a feat that usually resulted in a slow and painful death. And from the looks of the bear’s features, her sister was about to drop a bomb on them.

“…Upupupu…Eyahahahahahahahahahaha!!”

Everyone froze as Monokuma erupted into hysterical laughter; even Makoto’s enthusiasm was stunted at the menacing tone that echoed all around them. And it was as mocking as it was frightening.
“You really think you beat the first motive! That’s rich!” the bear shouted between fits of hysteria. “If that’s true, why did we have the first class trial? Or have you forgotten how all of you were manipulated by one of your own?!”

With a collective flinch, everyone’s attention shifted over to Sayaka, who hung her head and squeezed her eyes shut. A few students, such as Byakuya and Celeste, stole a glance at Leon as well, who gritted his teeth and clenched his fists in self loathing. Makoto tried to counter the bear’s words but found himself unable to speak, the bitter truth destroying his resolve.

With a triumphant cackle, Monokuma pointed the envelopes at the students and seethed, “Face it! You didn’t beat the first motive! It beat you!!”

Hearing those words from the hated bear cemented their defeat, as none of them, even Makoto, dared to speak out against those allegations. Mukuro, most of all, felt herself beginning to lost heart. It was a difficult pill to swallow, but one that they, reluctantly, couldn’t deny. Even though she’d managed to save her classmates from certain death, Monokuma…or Junko rather, and her motive had won the first round. The Mastermind had proven that any of them could snap at any moment, and this morning’s argument between everyone served as evidence for that point.

“With that said…” Monokuma said before clearing its throat. “Let me give you all another bit of motivation!”

With a flick of its wrist, the bear tossed the handful of envelopes at their feet. Without a second’s hesitation, everyone scrambled to find the one that bore their name. With little effort, Mukuro managed to retrieve the envelope that bore the name ‘Junko’.

That was when she noticed that Sayaka had remained seated, not making a single move to retrieve her envelope. Then again, it kind of made sense. No matter what her secret was, it couldn’t have been worse than manipulating Makoto and nearly getting everyone killed.

Conflict arose in Mukuro’s mind, unsure of what was the right course of action. If Sayaka didn’t want to see her own secret, then it was her business, but at the same time, it could be a dangerous tool of manipulation if someone such as Byakuya got a hold of it. At the same time, there was no guarantee that anyone would bother, considering the state Sayaka was in. Even so, Mukuro thought that she at least deserved her privacy and turned around to scan the floor. Upon seeing the only envelope not to be retrieved, the soldier quickly scooped it up, and made sure it bore the idol’s name before slowly walking over to where Sayaka was sitting.

However, Sayaka didn’t react at all to her presence…almost as if she truly didn’t care if the other’s discovered her secret. It actually hurt to see the idol this tortured and broken but in their current situation, that was to be expected. Regardless, Mukuro didn’t want her suffering anymore than she already was, and gently set Sayaka’s envelope next to her, patting it for emphasis.

“…So that no one else can look at it,” she said quietly before moving away, glancing over her shoulder.

Slowly, Sayaka reached out and picked up the envelope, neglecting to open it and merely clutching it close to her chest, much to Mukuro’s relief. In the back of her mind, Mukuro greatly feared for Sayaka’s mental health. Being reminded of her own crime seemed to have partially undone all the good the soldier had been trying to do for her lately. This meant that, unfortunately, the soldier would have to keep a close eye on the idol for the next few days, just in case.

Her conscience appeased for the moment, Mukuro turned her attention back to her own envelope, not even pondering what cryptic message it contained. After all, she was living her secret in front of
all of her classmates already, so there was little to speculate. Her fellow students on the other hand, were a very different story.

Junko had told her about some of the other motives she’d planned but never went into detail on any of them. So, while she was aware of the “Secrets Revealed” motive, she didn’t actually know the contents of all of her classmate’s envelopes. And while some were obvious, such as Toko’s Genocide Jack personality and Celeste’s true name, others were a complete mystery.

“Hmm, I wonder what Makoto’s could be? I mean, what could he have possibly done that would be so horrible?” she pondered, stealing a glance at the lucky student as he gasped upon reading his own secret. His face flushed but otherwise he showed no change from his usual persona. The sight triggered the tiniest of chuckles from Mukuro.

Feeling a might bit relieved, Mukuro slowly opened her own envelope, pulled it the paper and unfolded it. She knew she’d need to react to the message despite knowing its contents, and had prepared herself to react accordingly. However, the words that greeted her were not what she’d expected at all.

“Junko” has a huge crush on Makoto Naegi

An audible and unexpected gasp sounded from Mukuro as she read the single line of her message a second and then third time.

“What…what the hell is this?!” Mukuro mentally screeched, her brain unable to comprehend the information.

The message was so unnerving because it was so straightforward. It tackled the deepest secret that Mukuro actually had, not the one she had been keeping from her classmates. It was the only secret that Junko alone knew, one that had been revealed in a moment of weakness that Mukuro regretted to this very day. Sure, Junko may have precipitated that weakened moment but it was still her fault for revealing it!

The only bit of relief, if it could be called that, was that her sister had been lenient enough not to put her own name on the page. The “Junko” in question was no doubt a substitute for her real identity, just in case the others saw it. However, the way those quotation marks were placed would make the more astute of her classmates suspicious…particularly Kyoko or even Byakuya.

Mukuro made a mental note to burn that message as soon as possible…and prayed that Monokuma wouldn’t forbid the destroying of the messages. Then again, her sister wouldn’t need to go that far. After all, if she remembered correctly, the true horror of the “Secrets Revealed” motive that their embarrassing memories and secrets would be announced to everyone within 24 hours.

Even so, to have everyone…especially Makoto, know about her crush would be the height of embarrassment! Not only that, in a small way, it would put her position at risk because, as terrifying as it was to admit, it was even harder to explain. Really, what was everyone going to think when they find out that “Junko Enoshima” – the Ultimate Fashionista, had a crush on the skimpy, talentless, kind…compassionate…hopeful…Makoto...

Mukuro felt her face burn crimson and she slapped herself on the cheek.

“Now is not the time to be thinking about stuff like that!”

Fortunately, everyone else was as preoccupied with their own secret as she was, so none of them noticed how panicked her features had become. Remembering her place, Mukuro stuffed the
envelope into her blouse, the shock of its contents still evident on her face, as would be normal if she was the real deal.

Despite not wanting to expose herself, Mukuro couldn’t stop herself from shifting her gaze over to Monokuma, grimacing as she saw the bear staring right at her, obviously pleased with her reaction. It was at that moment that Mukuro understood that this secret was actually meant to reveal anything that would unmask her. No, it was just an example of the personal grudge that her sister undoubtedly held for her. And that’s what infuriated the soldier even more.

However, she kept her anger in check, knowing that it might give her away. Instead, she made a personal vow.

“I don’t care how long it takes…I will make you pay for this, Junko!”

**Tokø’s split personality is Genocide Jack**

The Ultimate Writing Prodigy squirmed as she read her message. Her breath was shaky and shallow, and she had nothing to draw strength from…except for one.

Turning her head, she glanced over at her Master, Byakuya Togami, as he slowly began to open his own letter. However, just before he pulled it out, he lifted his head and abruptly shifted his fierce gaze toward her. She gasped as their eyes met and for a moment, all was right in Toko’s world. And although he remained silent, she could tell what his gaze meant…

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**ATTENTION: Toko’s Fantasy**

Toko: “Will he…keep his promise?”

(She chances a gaze at her Master. She gasps. His white hot gaze pierces her soul.)

Toko: (Loud moans) “Master Byakuya…”

(Byakuya maintains his façade, not showing his true feelings. He nods. Her secret safe with him)

Byakuya: (Mouths) “I will protect you…always.”

(His feelings reach her. Toko floods…with relief.)

Toko: (Gasping and moaning louder) “Oh…my…Master!!”

(An explosion of white covers all that can be seen…)

**EXITING: Toko’s Fantasy**

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Toko’s arms wrap around herself and she shudders, lost in momentary throes of passion.

“My secret…is safe…with Master…”
Celeste struggled to keep her rage from consuming her. Her hands gripped the paper so tightly that if she made even the slightest movement, she’d tear it to shred. But then again, considering the gravity of her secret, she could barely stop herself from flying into rampage. For all that her message contained was two single words:

**Taeko Yasuhiro**

It contained nothing else…just the name that she despised more than anything on this planet. The name she’d spent years forcing others to forget. The name she’d buried so deep that she had though it impossible to discover. The name that was, for her, the very definition of her disgust. The name that she would no longer be legal bound to once she was old enough to change it. The name that her filthy, pathetic, loser parents had given her!

Taking deep cleansing breaths, she managed to fold her message back up and neatly replace it back in the sleeve of her envelope, already plotting it’s destruction. Sparing a glance up at Monokuma, who didn’t seem to interested in her, she let a momentary glare of rage surface as she made a vow.

“No one must know…no one must EVER know! I will kill anyone who knows the truth! Whoever you are, Mastermind…you as so fucking dead!"

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**Kyoko Kirigiri has lost her Memories**

“As I though…Monokuma is aware of my condition. Whether or not they are responsible for it is still unclear however…” the amnesiac girl thought to herself as she read her notice.

At least it confirmed her suspicion about the bear and how much it knew of her. She had surmised this long ago but it was reassuring to finally have some proof. Then again, that also didn’t answer any of her lingering questions.

Why did only she have memory loss? Was she somehow a threat with memories? Did they hold the key to escaping this place?

A piercing ache stung her head as she tried to force the memories to resurface. However, the pain grew too great and she was forced to grunt and take a breath. She knew it wouldn’t be easy to regain her lost memories, but the situation was growing more grim by the moment. She had hoped to find information on that laptop that Chihiro had examined but it seemed that she would have to rely on her wits after all.

Her only form of relief came from an unexpected source. Her lavender eyes shifted over to her companion, the only classmate she truly felt she could rely on, Makoto Naegi.

After the first trial, they’d spoken a number of times and each time, she felt more and more assured that he could be counted on if need be. Not that it was easy for her to admit that. She much rather preferred to be on her own, but given the situation, his unexpected talents were useful to her. Perhaps with his assistance…she might be able to solve the mystery of the school and why they were there.

Without even realizing it, she had found herself staring at him, only to be brought back to reality when he felt her eyes on him, making him turn toward her. However, she averted her gaze long before he could have caught her staring and simply shrugged as he went back to his message.
“He’s growing more and more astute,” Kyoko observed, rather impressed at the same time. A tiny smile spread over her lips as she snuck one last glance at him. “I really am counting on you…Makoto.”

Sayaka didn’t have to open her envelope to know what it contained…it was a secret that she had sworn to take with her to the grave but it felt so pointless now. After what she’d almost done to everyone, it wouldn’t be that surprising. After all, the idol agency was a dark and horrifying place…normal people would hate all idols if they knew the things they had to do to stay on top.

Even so, Sayaka still didn’t want her secret to get out. She thought she was fine with it at first, opting not even to bother getting up to retrieve it. However, after Junko selflessly brought it over to her, completely unopened, she realized that there were some people she still wanted to keep her secret safe from. Namely Junko…and Makoto.

Those two still had pleasant things to say about her, regardless of her actions, but would they remain that way if they knew the horribly atrocity she’d committed in the past?

“No…they’d abandon me too. As they should…” she felt certain, leaving no room in her mind for doubt.

That’s why she clutched that envelope so close…it was a final, vain attempt to protect herself. But something told her that wouldn’t last long…especially when Monokuma began speaking again.

An eruption of question echoed in the gymnasium, drawing out all rational thought

“How did you…?!” Hina shouted, completely shocked.

“How did you find out about this?!” Taka protested, his face turning blue at the very sight of his message.

“No way! I thought I covered that up!” a tired Leon insisted, rubbing his tired eyes over and over as he had trouble reading his message.

Even the great Byakuya Togami couldn’t hold his tongue after seeing his message. “This…this is…” he seethed, glaring at the paper so fiercely one might think it would burst into flame.

All at once the cacophony of startled and angry voices grew louder and louder, which appeared to be like music to Monokuma’s ears. The bear reveled in that joyous sound for a few moments longer before deciding to move forward with the plot.

“You all have 24 hours!” Monokuma abruptly shouted, silencing everyone and gaining their attention. “If someone doesn’t become a blackened by then…all of your deepest, darkest, most embarrassing secrets will be made public, via the internet!! And trust me, some of these are pretty freaky! The perfect motivator for the next stage of the game! Eyahahaha!”

A wave of nausea hit each and every one of them as that threat was made clear. Their deepest regrets and secrets…made public using the fastest tool to spread information. It was a truly frightening motive. Nevertheless, some of them didn’t despair…
“It’s definitely something I’d rather not have people find out,” Makoto interrupted the laughter, earning a glare from the bear. Hardening his features, the lucky student pointed a determined finger at their captor and shouted, “But still…we’d never kill over something like that!!”

“Wha-What!!” Monokuma choked out in utter disbelief.

A round of awkward silence followed that proclamation and just as it seemed that no one would agree with him, Taka abruptly concurred, “He’s absolutely right! Your plan is doomed to fail this time! There is no way any of us would commit murder over so small a thing! Isn’t that right, Bro?!”

The overconfident Taka turned toward his newfound brother and stopped cold as he saw Mondo, gripping his message tightly in one hand, his teeth clenched. Apart from being visibly upset by whatever was in his message, it was clear that he hadn’t really even been paying attention to the conversation.

“B-Bro?! Are you alright?!” the moral compass called out, startling the biker.

“W-What the hell?! What do you want?!” Mondo protested, confused by why he was being shouted at.

“I-I…uh,” A startled Taka took a moment to regained his wits and vigor. “I was saying that Monokuma’s motive is sure to fail! No secret we have could possibly warrant murder. To prove it… I’ll tell everyone my secret right now! Then we’ll all go around and—”.

“Stop!” Mondo roared, stunning everyone into silence. However, none of them were more shocked than Taka, who could only stare at his Bro in utter confusion.

“B-But…if we don’t do this, then—”, the moral compass tired to reason only to be cut off.

“I’m…I’m sorry, Bro. But…I just can’t. Not even if my Bro asks me to. Not right now…”

All at once, Taka lost the little bit of enthusiasm he’d had. His words of protest against Monokuma died in his throat as he saw how much the motive had affected his Bro. He lost all words and all he could do was lower his gaze, unsure of what to say. At the same time, Mondo had no idea what was going on or who to punch to make it better. It was then that Monokuma let out a mocking laugh, and the biker realized he who it was he should be punching…but couldn’t.

“See! I told you so!” Monokuma suddenly shouted, earning a glare from everyone. “Not everyone is capable of having their true selves revealed to the world, making it a perfect motive! Just because you are tough enough to handle it, doesn’t mean everyone else is! So don’t try to speak for everyone, glass half-full boy!”

The bear cackled, rearing its head back, the disheartening sound sending chills down everyone’s spine, none more so than Taka. He hung his head in utter defeat, shame encroaching in with each reverberation of Monokuma’s hysteria. Just as his personal disgust was about to peak, the bear abruptly ceased its laughter.

“All right then, I’ll see you in 24 hours…or maybe I won’t!! Upupupupupupupu!!”

With that last irksome chuckle, Monokuma leapt backward off the podium it stood upon, swan diving into whatever hole it had prepared for its escape.

“A secret so bad that you’d kill to keep it hidden…no one has a secret like that…right?”

Makoto stood in the center of the room, pondering this notion as everyone fell silent. Sure, his secret
was something he could live with the others knowing, but he had absolutely no idea about his fellow students. And while he couldn’t deny Monokuma’s allocations about someone wanting to protect their secret so intensely they’d kill for it, he still wanted to have faith.

Even though the demented half and half bear was correct that the first motive had beaten them, in a way, they had beaten it. After all, if they’d completely fallen victim to it, three of his friends wouldn’t be there right now. That tiny bit of reassurance was enough for the faintest glimmer of hope to flicker in his heart…

“Hey, so—”, he began but was cut off by an unexpected source.

“That’s a load of crap!!” Everyone jumped as Junko shouted at the top of her lungs. Placing both hands on her waist and puffing out her chest, she continued, “Sure, we’ve all got something we’re not proud of, but that’s doesn’t mean we’ll kill anyone! Personally, and I can’t believe I’m saying this, I agree with Taka! We outta just get it all out now and get it over with, better that than waiting for that two-toned freak of a bear to announce our secrets to—!”

“D-D-Don’t…say s-something so stupid!!”

The entire room shook as the timid but provocative voice of Toko interrupted the Fashionista. Even Junko herself seemed a bit startled by the writing prodigy’s sudden outburst. However, now that all of the attention was focused on her, Toko abruptly seemed to shirk before rudely finishing.

“B-Besides…I don’t w-w-wanna talk a-about it anyway…” she murmured at first, before sneaking a not so secretive glance at Byakuya. “I don’t c-care what anyone says! I-I’m not gonna talk about m-m-mine!”

Although this outburst obviously stunted Junko’s enthusiasm, she still seemed ready to argue the point. However, as she opened her mouth to protest, another voice raised an objection.

“And neither will I.” Celeste, unsurprisingly, concurred with the writing prodigy. “Not because it is unpleasant. But because it is impossible.”

Her enigmatic words brought a deal of confusion for most of them. However, it seemed that her mysterious way of explaining her issue peaked at least one student’s interest.

“Inconceivable! It’s human nature to want to hear if it is impossible or not!” Hifumi instantly protested, a strange sort of smile on his face. “C’mon! It’s better to say than keep it inside!”

A creepy vibe was shared by nearly all of the students at Hifumi’s sudden insistence. He’d hardly ever spoken to Celeste before today. And disregarding the fact that he’d been tricked into making her tea, he showed virtually no interest in anything 3D. He’d said so himself! So why now was he so interested in the Goth Lolita’s secret?

Before anyone had the chance to voice that shared opinion, Celeste huffed and answered him, “Absolutely not.”

Her firm tone and stern attitude made her position resolutely clear. However, like an anime convention participant offered free pizza, Hifumi pursued his goal with reckless abandon. Slowly walking toward Celeste, twiddling his fingers all the while, the Ultimate Fanfic Creator breathed heavily as he continued on his quest.

“It’s okay, just a little bit of information will suffice! You know you want to…” Hifumi insisted, inching closer and closer to her with each word that escaped his lips.
“As I said—”, Celeste tried to counter but found herself rudely and uncomfortably cut off as he got within a few feet of her.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon!” the fanfic creator encouraged; now standing directly beside her, his fingers wiggling with anticipation. “What devilish secrets lie beneath that cold exter—?”

Almost everyone could hear a vein in Celeste’s head snap as she spun toward him and shouted, “I said, I don’t want to talk about it! You human bag of lard!”

Lifting her foot, she promptly kicked him square in the stomach. As her red heeled shoe connected, Hifumi doubled over onto his knees, gasping for breath. With a final huff, Celeste took two huge steps away from Hifumi, who writhed in agony on the floor, no one coming to his aid.

Folding her hands under her chin and smiling as graciously as she could, Celeste concluded, “I’d prefer to keep my business private. If you don’t mind.”

Almost unsurprisingly, no one asked if Hifumi was alright, preferring not to get involved in the slightest. Not only that, not a single person questioned Celeste’s reaction, not even Makoto, who should have found her sudden personality change disturbing. And before any of the more inquisitive students could reach that conclusion, another objection sounded.

“I agree with them. I have no need to discuss my private affairs with the likes of any of you,” Byakuya finally voiced. Everyone knew it would be coming sooner or later, his distaste for all of them making his decision evident before he even voiced it.

“Um…sorry but…I don’t really want to discuss it right now, either.”

Everyone turned in shock to see Chihiro, moisture building up in the corners of her eyes, her head downcast as she gave her opinion. However, almost immediately her head shot up and she looked right at Junko with tearful eyes.

“B-But I also don’t want to leave things this way! After I…try my best to become stronger…maybe we can…talk about it later?” she said hopefully, praying that no one laughed at her.

More than anyone else, Chihiro’s objection to the decision seemed to be what swayed Junko in the end, because after taking in the programmer’s apprehensive comment, the Fashionista lowered her gaze and sighed deeply.

“…Alright, I get it. If none of you want to…then I guess there’s nothing we can do about it,” Junko replied, sounding completely defeated, hanging her head as she finished.

The very sight of it bothered Makoto, because she’d been working so hard to unite everyone after what had happened to her. Sure, she was still hard to understand and get alone with sometimes, but she proved that her heart was in the right place. She’d become someone they all could count on, and the lucky student didn’t like the fact that she seemed to be giving up.

That’s why, when she lost the argument, Makoto found himself walking over and tapping her on the shoulder. As she looked to him, noiselessly gasped and averted her gaze, probably because she wasn’t expecting anyone to come talk to her or something like that. Smiling brightly, Makoto decided to say what he’d come to say anyway.

“It’ll be alright. We’ll just all have to be extra careful until tomorrow,” he reassured her, trying to be as supportive as she had been for them. “I’m sure we’ll all be strong enough to make it through this. We just have to have hope and faith in our friends, right?”
Even though he’d wanted to say that to everyone, it was too late now. Most of them were already
preparing to leave and he wasn’t sure if anyone but Junko had heard him. Regardless, he still felt it
needed to be said, even if only one student heard him.

“God, you say some cheesy crap, don’t you?” Her condescending tone startled him, as he wasn’t
expecting such hostility. Just as he felt he should just leave her be, she turned back toward him and
said, “But…I guess you’re right. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

A light smile decorated her lips and Makoto responded in kind. “Yeah! We’re all gonna be fine!” he
insisted, not letting Monokuma’s words bring him down.

“We should still prepare for an unfortunate outcome though,” a calm and stoic voice suddenly said
from behind them. Abruptly turning, they saw that Kyoko had remained behind, listening to their
entire conversation. “But if we remain vigilant, then perhaps we can avoid further incidents.”

Junko frowned at Kyoko’s sudden appearance but Makoto could only smile and nod enthusiastically.
“Right! Let’s all do our best! Alright?” he encouraged, looked between both of them.

Junko and Kyoko took a moment to stare at each other, as if each of them were examining the other.
At the end of it though, they both sighed and merely nodded, not saying a single word to each other.

“It must be because they don’t talk to each other much,” Makoto surmised, still pleased that they had
come together. “But I’m sure we can do it. We’ll beat Monokuma at his own game! All of us…
together!”

One by one, all of the students disbursed, many of them needing time for them to wrestle with their
own demons. As it was only about an hour past noon, there was a lot of time left in the day to ponder
their situation. The only one left after it was all over was Sayaka, who gently slipped her message in
her pocket. However, the moment she did, her eyes widened…

“Master…I think you have a malfunction. You’re leaking fluid from your face…”

Alter Ego’s misguided words of concern didn’t stunt the onslaught of tears that poured from
Chihiro’s eyes. The programmer had fled back to her room as fast as she could, knowing she
couldn’t stop the flood of moisture that burst forth as soon as she locked her door. Her motive was
left upright on her bed, the message further tormenting her:

Chihiro Fujisaki is…A BOY!!!

Resting her head on her desk, she’d almost completely forgotten that Alter Ego was there until it had
spoken up. Lifting her face up, even more tears welled up as she glanced at her creation. After all,
this was another secret that she’d been keeping from everyone. However, somewhere deep inside
her, she felt that she shouldn’t be crying in front of Alter Ego.

“What kind of example am I setting for her?” she questioned herself, forcing herself to sit up and
furiously wipe away the tears. “I need to be strong…for her.”

Putting on the best smile she could manage, Chihiro said, “Everything’s…alright, Alter Ego. I’m
just…having a few problems. B-But everything’s okay! I’m…going to be okay…”

She felt horrible for lying to her creation but she had to at least try to be strong, despite wanting to
break into a million pieces at that very moment. And, unfortunately for her, she’d done too good of a
job programming her creation.

“But Master…I know that humans don’t usually leak fluid unless they are deeply infected with a virus. Do you need protection software to remove it?”

Again, Alter Ego’s concerned words only provoked more unrest in her creator, and Chihiro made a mental note to explain about human physiology to the AI program later. Regardless, knowing that even her creation could see how troubled and weakened she was, only made the programmer fall deeper into depression.

“I…I’m sorry, Alter Ego. It’s just…I feel so weak right now,” Chihiro said, choking back sobs as best she could. Standing up and turning away from her creation, so that it would see her crying, she continued, “I don’t…know what to do…and at this rate…I won’t make it…out of here…alive. Maybe if I was strong…like Mondo…then, maybe I could be—”.

“Please pardon me, Master, but…who is this Mondo you speak so fondly of?”

Alter Ego’s simple question caused Chihiro’s gaze to shoot over to the laptop, surprise evident on her reddened face. Was the AI program…actively questioning something to learn more about the situation? Could it be that…Alter Ego was actually curious about this person her Master spoke about? Or perhaps, was it simply trying to fulfill its function and acquire as much information as possible to further its development? Did Alter Ego actually care for its Master’s well-being or was it simply acting according to programming?

In any event, it brought a much needed sense of clarity to Chihiro, who immediately wiped her eyes and returned to her seat at the desk.

“H-He’s…Mondo is…someone I look up to…and respect,” she said, beaming.

“Oh, do you have romantic feelings for him, Master?” Alter Ego innocently asked, causing Chihiro’s jaw to drop, unsure of how her creation learned of such a thing having only been ‘alive’ for a single day. Nevertheless, the AI program continued on, “Because copulation with him is impossible because you’re both of the male sex—”.

“No! No! Eww! No! I’m not attracted to him! Or men in general!” Chihiro shouted, waving her arms frantically. “I just meant that he’s really cool! Like a big brother or something!”

The mechanical processing noise sounded from Alter Ego once more and the AI program corrected itself, “I see. Master’s preferences have been updated. I apologize for upsetting you with my conclusions.”

Taking a deep breath, having resolved the misunderstanding, Chihiro took a brief moment to consider what to say next. “Would, uh, would you like to hear more…about Mondo?” she asked apprehensively, as if talking to a real person.

Immediately, Alter Ego’s pixilated face lit up and it shouted, “Yes! Please! I’d love to hear about someone who you respect so dearly, Master!”

Alter Ego’s excitement was practically infectious and all at once, it stopped the flow of tears that had been plaguing Chihiro. Taking one last moment to wipe away the moisture from her entire face, the Ultimate Programmer situated herself comfortably in her seat and prepared for a very long conversation.

“Hmm…where do I start?” the programmer said with a light giggle, making her creation smile as well.
For the next few hours, Chihiro explained everything there was to know about Mondo to the fascinated AI program.

“Everything seems to be fine here,” Taka spoke aloud to himself, as he closed one of the classroom doors on the second floor. He hadn’t known what to do with himself after the motive was announced, and so he fell back on his old instincts to calm his nerves.

That was scouring the halls for rule breakers.

As Taka continued to ‘patrol’ the second floor, he couldn’t keep from pondering his own motive, with great distain.

“What will my classmates think of me when my secret is revealed? How can they respect someone with such a foul and disgusting secret? I know that I would lose respect for someone who let a simple thing like—”

Before he could complete that thought, a loud and aggravated shout reached his ears, echoing down the hall that led to the pool.

“I know that rage-filled shout!” Taka realized aloud, speeding toward the pool area. Pushing open the double doors leading to the pool locker rooms, he was correct in assuming that it was Mondo kicking the door furiously.

“Bro! What’s wrong?!”

Spinning around with his fists clenched, ready for a fight, Mondo’s anger suddenly faded when he saw it was Taka calling out to him. Obviously embarrassed, the biker let out a deep sigh before face-palming and rubbing his tired eyes.

“Shit man, ya scared the crap outta me,” he admitted, taking a deep breath.

“I could say the same! You were shouting so loudly I heard you down the hall!” the Moral Compass concurred, relaxing somewhat now that it seemed there wasn’t an emergency. “I thought something may have happened…”

Both of them paused, knowing that, for entirely different reasons, they had overreacted. With everything that had happened today, it wasn’t unexpected. Everyone was on edge; even Taka felt his normally calm and decisive manner was waning. But that was all the more reason he needed to keep a level head and do what he could to assist his classmate…and friend.

“So, what were you shouting about?” Taka asked, trying to help his obviously frazzled friend.

“Oh, right…” the biker replied, remembering why he’d flown into a rage. Reaching into his pocket, he produced his e-handbook. “I wanted to come up here and work-out for a while…try to get my mind off that damn motive. But for some reason, my handbook won’t open the damn door for me!”

Staring at the essential tool for school life, Taka raised an eyebrow and asked, “May I see it for a second?”

Without a word, Mondo tossed it over to him. Catching it, the moral compass decided not to lecture his friend about simply passing items over instead of throwing them, due to how upset the biker was right now. He’d be sure to remind him later.
Pressing the power button on the device, Taka was surprised when it didn’t immediately roar to life. Instead it remained dark and useless, instantly helping the Moral Compass to understand why it hadn’t allowed Mondo entry.

“It appears to be broken,” Taka told Mondo, who had moved to look over his shoulder and see what could be done. “But how could that have happened? Monokuma told us these were practically unbreakable—”.

“Oh shit…”

Taka’s gaze shot over to his friend and saw a surprised and yet embarrassed scrunching to Mondo’s face. Slowly, the biker turned his gaze to Taka and continued:

“The sauna…”

Instantly, Taka understood. He recalled their battle of wills in the sauna yesterday and that his friend Mondo had elected to keep all of his clothes on, more than likely leaving his e-handbook in his pocket as well. The extreme temperature would be enough to destroy any electronic, no matter how impressively constructed it was.

“Oh, I see.”

Taka could muster no other words than that. He knew the implications of not having this device, and unfortunately, the only course of action to replace one was to ask Monokuma for a replacement. And there was no way any of the students would ask for favors from the demented bear.

“God-dammit,” Mondo cursed quietly, his fists clenched and his eyes downcast. “Now I can’t ever work-out! This day has gone from ‘fucked’ to ‘fuck everything!’ Son of a bitch!”

Seeing his friend in so much agony tore Taka apart inside. His first friend, someone he had bonded with over their shared interest in proving their strength, was now unable to enjoy even the simplest of pleasures he could find in this place. This would not do!

“Don’t worry, Bro! I got this!”

Without waiting for Mondo to ask what he meant, Taka marched over to the door leading to the boy’s pool locker room. Holding up his own e-handbook, he unlocked the door and held it open.

“For now, whenever you need to get in here, just let me know and I’ll let you use my handbook!” he proudly declared, smiling triumphantly at his friend.

For an entire second, Mondo seemed entirely surprised, but it quickly faded as he laughed joyfully. “Seriously? That’s awesome, Bro! I owe you one!”

Mondo stood up and headed toward now open locker room, and the exercise machines within. Once he was inside, Taka asked, “Perhaps you’d like some company? It has been a while since I worked up a good sweat myself.”

The instant he said that, he saw Mondo flinch. He knew that wasn’t a good sign and it was confirmed when the biker quietly answered, “No offense, Bro…but I think I need some time to myself right now. Nothing personal…”

As much as it hurt for his offer to be rejected, Taka also understood where his friend was coming from. And he, more than anyone else, knew that alone time was a valuable thing for a young man to have. After all, studying and mental training didn’t happen when in a large group, a lesson he’d
learned long ago, and thus always prepared for classes in private. This was just Mondo’s strange version of alone time and he wanted to respect that.

“I understand. Perhaps tomorrow then?” he offered, perhaps a little too hopeful. However, he was pleased when Mondo turned and held out his fist toward him.

“Sure, man. It’s a promise.”

With a confident smile, Taka nodded and fist bumped his friend. “Indeed, a promise between men!”

With their business complete, they both nodded at each other before the Moral Compass turned and exited the room, heading back to his own room. He never saw the look of self-loathing that spread over Mondo’s face as the door closed.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Well, things are certainly shaping up now! Everyone’s got their motives and rest assured that, even though all of them weren’t revealed, they will be in good time, I assure you! But what’s going to happen now that Taka knows that Mondo’s e-handbook is broken? How will the rest of this chapter play out? You’ll have to read on next time to see!

By the way, as for the motives you saw, what did you think? Most of them were obvious, with Toko and Celeste’s being so canon, but once the rest of them are out, I hope you find them interesting. Until then, if you want to take a guess at what each unrevealed motive is, feel free! My beta and I would love to hear your ideas! Also, my beta and I are particularly proud of the secret we’ve given Taka, and that is all I will say about that!

As always, please leave a review or comment to let me know what you’re thinking about the story, or if you have any questions. Until next time, have a great day, my beautiful readers!
Ch 2 Act 7

Chapter Summary

Chihiro hides Alter Ego in the bathhouse changing room. After speaking with Mondo and arranging a meeting with him, she heads to the storage room to procure a tracksuit and duffle bag. Meanwhile, a confrontation between Leon and Sayaka in the cafeteria unearths the secrets they have kept hidden away.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So…we only have 24 hours until Monokuma reveals all our secrets to everyone,” Chihiro finished explaining to Alter Ego, who stared at its Master in fascination.

“Actually, Master, if this occurred just before you returned, then you have exactly 18 hours, 19 minutes and 44 seconds before that deadline is up.”

The AI program smiled, hoping its Master would be pleased with having the exact amount of time made known to them. However, it only solicited a tearful look from Chihiro as she realized that she had spent the last six hours explaining everything that had happened to all of them up until this point.

Upon seeing its Master’s less than pleased reaction, Alter Ego immediately gasped and said, “I’m sorry, Master… I seem to have upset you. I was simply trying to be useful…”

Hearing those words made Chihiro shake her head and wipe away the unshed tears. “No, it’s not your fault. None of this is your fault… it’s not any of our faults.” She fell strangely silent, her head drooping and her gaze lowering for the first time in hours. “If I was stronger, I could handle this situation better but…”

“Master, I’m afraid I can’t comprehend what you’re saying,” Alter Ego replied, a small mechanical processing noise showing its inability to understand. “Why do you believe you are weak? You were able to create me in only a few hours, is that not a strength?”

An ironic chuckle escaped Chihiro, never imagining that her creation would be the one to console her. “Yeah, it kind of is but… it’s not the kind of strength that I want. I want the strength to survive… to be able to help my friends and be there for them when they need me.” She choked on her words, doubt and futility creeping into her mind. “At this rate… I don’t know if I’ll even live long enough to see the outside world again. I’m so weak… I can’t do anything—”.

“Master! I have an idea on how to make you stronger!” Chihiro’s head shot up as Alter Ego continued to insist, “You have mentioned that your friends, Leon and Sayaka, were able to stay alive because your other friend, Junko, saved them, correct? Why don’t you ask Junko to save you too?”

This time, Chihiro couldn’t help the tiniest bit of laughter that bubbled up in her throat and she smiled as replied, “That’s not exactly how it works, Alter Ego. Remind me to educate you about how friendship works.”

The mechanical processing sound echoed and Alter Ego nodded. “Reminder set, Master. I shall
remind you tomorrow, if that is sufficient?"

“Okay, that should be fine…”

A yawn escaped her and the programmer turned to check the time. As Alter Ego had indicated, she’d spent most of the day explaining her and the others’ situation to her creation. It was almost nighttime hours and most of the other students were probably returning to their rooms right about now. And it meant that Chihiro now had a chance to go and do what she’d planned.

She’d grown interested in the exercise equipment she’d seen in the locker rooms, mainly because she was unhappy with her petite frame. She didn’t exactly want to become like Sakura, but she felt that, in order to become a stronger person, she needed to grow physically stronger as well.

In truth, she would have preferred to go earlier but there was always a chance of someone walking in on her during the workout, which under normal circumstances wouldn’t have been so horrible. However, because her biological sex only allowed her into the Men’s locker room, if anyone saw her, her secret would be revealed. And she would never live it down. Even though all of her fellow students would know her secret by the end of tomorrow, she still felt too embarrassed to tell them without at least trying to get stronger. She knew she was grasping at straws here, but in the end, it was the only thing she could think of to try and improve herself confidence.

“If I’m going to head for the locker room, I’d better hurry up,” she said to herself, forgetting that Alter Ego was in the room.

But she was quickly reminded when the AI program spoke, “Why are you going to the locker room, Master?”

Chihiro sighed as she remembered that she’d programmed her creation to question the tiniest of things in order to help it better learn and associate with its surroundings. With a bit of an embarrassed look, she twiddled her fingers and answered, “I’m…going to work out for a while. To try and get stronger…”

The instant those words left her mouth, Alter Ego’s mechanical processing noise flared up louder than she’d ever thought possible, as if the AI program had just had a sudden revelation.

As if on cue, Alter Ego shouted, “Master, I have a way to solve your strength deficiency problem!” Startled by her creation’s sudden forwardness, Chihiro was stunned into silence as the AI program continued, “If you wish to grow stronger, someone strong should teach you how to be stronger! The same way that you have taught me so very much, one of your friends could now teach you!”

Although she was impressed that Alter Ego had gone to those lengths to try and suggest a way to help, she knew it wouldn’t be that simple.

“Well, it’s not a bad idea but…I just can’t think of anyone that would be able to help me with—”. “What about Mondo, Master? You told me he was rather strong, didn’t you?” the AI program interrupted, catching Chihiro off guard.

“Oh, yes, but Mondo is…a different kind of strong that I’m not sure I can—”, Chihiro blurted, a hint of red tinged her cheeks as she tried to get her creation to understand.

“But Master, you told me exactly 47 times that Mondo was the kind of strong person you wanted to be.”

“W-What?! I never designed you to keep track of information like that!”
“You designed me catalog and store all manner of information…judging by how passionate you were on the subject, it seemed important enough to catalog at the time.”

Chihiro was just about to retort when all of a sudden, Alter Ego’s suggestion fully registered in her mind. Mondo was indeed strong. And while it seemed mostly physical, it had to be mental as well. After all, he led a renowned biker gang, which had to take mental fortitude of some kind. Even if that wasn’t the case, at the very least, he probably wouldn’t laugh at her when he found out her secret.

“He did make me a promise as a man…though I’m not quite sure what it was he was promising…” she admitted to herself, beginning to consider the idea. “And if he’s the one I reveal my secret to… I’m sure he’ll keep it.”

Biker gangs, especially their leaders, were typically men of their words. And with Mondo’s added assurance of his manly promise, he might be the only person that Chihiro actually could reveal her secret to. Not only that, Alter Ego hadn’t exactly been wrong.

Chihiro did admire Mondo for his strength of will and his powerful physique. And while it was a different kind of strength that the programmer really wanted, in the end, doing anything to battle her own weakness of heart would be beneficial. Besides, he’d shown he could be trusted…she could trust him to understand…she hoped.

“Alright then…I’ll go and see if Mondo is still up…but first,” she glanced up at the camera in her room, the chilling words Monokuma had said to her earlier that day suddenly plaguing her mind.

“Not everyone is capable of having their true selves revealed to the world…”

Those words plagued her but not as much as the glare the bear had been sending her that day. The way Monokuma had been acting, it seemed that the Mastermind certainly knew about her taking the laptop. Hopefully the Mastermind was still unaware of exactly what the AI program was capable of, but considering the level of technology that comprised Monokuma, she guessed that the Mastermind was probably a genius in the electronic field. Either that, or they were acquainted with someone who had that level of expertise.

In either case, leaving Alter Ego in her room didn’t seem safe anymore. There was no telling when the Mastermind might come in and take her precious creation…a thought that terrified Chihiro even more than the killing game. Even if it had only been for a day, the programmer had developed protective feelings for the AI program, so much so that she feared leaving the laptop anywhere that the Mastermind could see it.

She felt compelled to hide the laptop away from the Mastermind’s influence but…was there even a place like that in this school? A place outside of the Mastermind’s field of vision, even if only slightly —?

“Wait…that’s it! The bathhouse!”

Chihiro had almost completely forgotten about the bathhouse, which housed no camera. It was probably due to the humidity of the area, too much heat without a proper way to cool itself would definitely make a camera short out. This meant that the bathhouse was most likely the only place where the Mastermind was truly blind. And if that was the case, if she left Alter Ego there, it would be safe until she came back for it later! However, a new thought burrowed into her mind.

“But if I leave her in there, then the humidity might start to affect her as well…”

She hadn’t considered that, and while a laptop was an entirely different kind of machine than a
camera, it was still very possible the humidity would affect the AI program. Unless it was shielded from the heat somehow...would the lockers in the changing room work? There was no camera there either and the lockers were meant to help keep the humidity out. At the very least, she could hide her precious creation there until she came back from her meeting with Mondo.

It wasn’t a perfect plan but it was better than leaving her little girl all alone in her room...just waiting for Monokuma to come by and steal her away! The thought sent chills down Chihiro’s spine and she suddenly hardened her features.

“No one’s touching my little girl...I won’t allow it!”

Realizing that the bathhouse was her only real option, Chihiro stood up from her seat and smiled gently down at the AI program. “Alright, Alter Ego. We’re going on a field trip,” she said, not voicing where they were going, just in case the Mastermind was listening in.

“Hurray! My first time leaving this room. I wonder what the outside world looks like…” Alter Ego pondered, making a face full of fascination.

Chihiro smiled, pleased that her creation seemed to be enjoying itself. With gentle hands, she tenderly picked up the laptop, protectively pulling it toward her chest. However, as she turned away from the desk, her foot caught the leg of the chair and she stumbled, her grip on the laptop loosening. The face of Alter Ego on the screen seemed to understand that something was wrong and just before Chihiro lost her grip, she saw signs of panic on the AI’s face. Before she knew what was happening, the laptop flew from her delicate fingers and smashed face up into the floor with a sickening crack.

All color drained from Chihiro’s face as she shrieked, “ALTER EGO!!” Rushing to the laptop’s side and turning it over, she continued to frantically shout, “Are you alright?! I’m so sorry! Please tell me you’re all right! It was an accident! I never meant to hurt you like that!”

Fortunately, there didn’t seem to be any damages, not even a single crack in the screen. And there, in the center, smiling warmly to show that all was okay, was Alter Ego’s face. Breathing a sigh of relief, Chihiro put a hand on her chest to be still her beating heart as she said, “Oh, thank heavens you’re okay! I was really worried about—”.

“Master, is something the matter? You’re not making any sounds…”

Chihiro’s eyes bulged and her gaze shot back to her creation, panic overtaking her. “W-What?! No...no! Alter Ego! Alter Ego, can you hear me?!”

Her answer was the lack of a reaction from the AI program, who continued to smile absent-mindedly, completely unaware of the panic its Master was in. Instantly, Chihiro surmised what had occurred. Pulling the laptop close to her face, she examined the built-in microphone just below the screen. To her horror, there was the tiniest of cracks in it.

Self-loathing unlike anything she’d ever felt overtook Chihiro as she lowered her head and gritted her teeth.

“...Damn it...damn it!!”

Her own words barely kind of surprised her. This was probably the first time she’d actually cursed in her entire life. She hadn’t meant to, but those were the only words that came out of her as she realized the full extent of what she’d done. Her precious creation...her Alter Ego...was now deafened.

“This place...this place takes everything away from me!” she shouted, sending a glare at the camera
in the corner.

In truth, she was more angry at herself than anything. She had the knowledge but not the utensils to fix such a thing, but that didn’t stop her from blaming herself. If she was at home, she could easily replace the microphone but in this place, that was a near impossible feat. Unless there was a workshop or something on a higher floor, she didn’t have the proper tools or components to fix a microphone. And without it, her little girl would forever be subject to a world without beautiful sounds.

“I hurt her…” Chihiro sobbed, tears falling to the floor. “She’ll…never hear…my voice…ever again —”

“M-Master! Are you alright?! I cannot hear you but I can see you’re crying! Is it because the external microphone was damaged?!”

Chihiro’s eyes widened as she realized that Alter Ego could still see and talk to her, even if she couldn’t hear anything. Furiously wiping away her tears and trying to hide her anguish, the programmer decided to set down the laptop and see if there was anything she could do for it at this time.

In the process of setting the laptop down, her hand pressed against several keys. At the same time, Alter Ego gave a surprised yelp. Chihiro immediately retracted her hand, a startled yelp erupting from her at the same time.

Suddenly, a puzzled look crossed Alter Ego’s face as it processed something. A moment later, a text box appeared with a garbled mess of letters on it. Looking at the text box, the AI program asked, “…jfnsdbvf…I don’t understand that message Master? Is it a type of programming?”

Chihiro only had to glance at the screen to fully understand what had happened.

She’d been so panicked that she’d completely forgotten about the encoding method utilizing typing instead of speaking. The typing encoding was meant to be the primary form of communication but since the voice function had been successful, she’d completely forgotten about it.

“Any information typed into the computer…will instantly be read by Alter Ego!” she surmised aloud, a hint of joy returning as she took to the keyboard.

Are you alright? I’m so sorry I dropped you!

Chihiro stared at Alter Ego as it took half a second to process the new message. With a huge smile, it replied, “Yes, I’m fine, Master! I’m sorry to have caused you so much trouble…”

A pang of guilt bit at Chihiro’s heart as her little girl tried to take the blame for upsetting her. Not willing to allow the AI to think it was responsible, she typed out another message.

This was NOT your fault! I dropped you by accident so it’s my fault!

Taking only a moment to process that message, Alter Ego smiled and replied, “But Master, if it was an accident, then it was no one’s fault. Is that not why they are called ‘accidents’ and not ‘on purposes’?”

A light gasp came from Chihiro as she heard that, blinking several times in confusion.

“Did…did Alter Ego…just make a joke?”
Her suspicions were confirmed when Alter Ego took in her confused visage and replied, “I’m sorry, Master. Was my attempt at humor not good? It seemed appropriate to make such a joke to make you feel better…I will need to study more on humor. I shall make note of this…”

As the mechanical sound of Alter Ego’s processing invaded Chihiro’s ears, she found herself in complete shock. Alter Ego was learning and adapting at an unimaginable rate. In fact, it seemed that the automated learning program was running even smoother than she had ever predicted. And the only explanation for that was the processor in the laptop itself. Chihiro knew it was advanced, more than any she’d worked with before, but that was even more surprising. She and her father collected and programmed highly advanced computers every day, and yet, a simple laptop found in Hope’s Peak was more advanced.

“Is this how all technology at Hope’s Peak is?” Chihiro pondered, amazed at how amazing this technology was. “Considering this laptop was left out in the open, I figured it wasn’t very powerful, but I was mistaken. It runs better than my customized PC back home. The hardware itself is old but it seemed to be customized model itself. What is something like this doing here?”

And that wasn’t the only thing gnawing at her mind. The technology that comprised Monokuma had also been troubling her since she’d arrived. Yes, it was highly advanced but in actuality, it was similar to a project she’d been planning to work on when she found time. She’d even thought that, with help from others at Hope’s Peak, she could create an automaton similar in function to Monokuma. It would have been a type of maid or servant that could take care of simple tasks like trash collecting or cleaning.

Looking at Monokuma, she couldn’t help but think that some of her designs might have been used in its construction. But that was impossible, considering she’d neglected to share these ideas with anyone, not even her father. Was it possible that someone else had the exact same idea for a remote controlled robot? Or was there something else going on—?

“Excuse me, Master? But were you not in a hurry?”

Alter Ego’s words snapped Chihiro back to reality. Shaking her head, she decided that tonight wasn’t the night to worry about these issues. She’d have plenty of time to find the answers out later.

Wanting a firmer grasp on time, she glanced up at the clock and cringed. It was definitely getting late and if she was going to speak with Mondo before the nighttime announcement happened, she’d need to go now. However, her gaze shifted and lingered on the pleasant face of Alter Ego, fear seeping into her mind.

“Sh-Should…should I just leave her here after all? I don’t want anything else to happen to her today…”

As if in response to her worried thoughts, Alter Ego spoke up, “I am prepared for the field trip, Master! I’m very excited!”

Even though the AI program’s excited words reassured her that everything would be fine, a little voice in the back of Chihiro’s mind told her that she was taking a huge risk. After all, if the others found Alter Ego before she could tell them about it, then it would undoubtedly cause more friction between everyone, regardless of the fact that it was there to help them.

Because of that, and although she felt a bit guilty about it, she couldn’t stop herself from typing:

Are you sure you want to go? I don’t know what might happen.
Upon processing the message, Alter Ego’s happy persona immediately sank, a worried and almost fearful look replacing it. Almost instantly, the AI program asked, “Do you not want to take me out anymore, Master? Have I done something to displease you?”

The AI program’s fearful tone sent waves of guilt and frustration through Chihiro. The disappointment on her little girl’s face was heart wrenching and she finally understood her Dad’s fear about letting her go to Hope’s Peak. Sure, he’d been excited, like any other father, but she had thought he’d worried a bit too much…and it turned out he was right.

However, at the same time, her Dad also supported her interest in programming and wanted the best for her, so he’d allowed it without many complaints. And so, Chihiro felt compelled to do the same for Alter Ego. Besides, there was no guarantee that leaving the laptop here would be any safer. In fact, it felt like more of a risk, and beyond that…

“What kind of parent would I be if I didn’t even let her leave the room?!” she reasoned with herself, finding the courage to type out her next message.

No, everything’s fine! I just wanted to make sure you were okay!

An unexpected giggle sounded from Alter Ego, who replied, “Oh, I see. Not to worry, Master! I am quite resilient.”

Hearing that completely reassured Chihiro…or at least as much as it could given how scared she still was. Nevertheless, she knew that it was now or never and she so she typed:

Alright then! Time to go, but I’ll need to close the laptop to hide you better. Are you ready for that?

A firm nod from Alter Ego was followed by, “Indeed, Master! Let’s be off!”

Finally, a smile appeared on Chihiro’s lips as she slowly closed the laptop, and ‘ouff’ sounding as it closed, as if Alter Ego was being squished down or something. A light giggle escaped the programmer as she carefully picked up the laptop and slid it under her shirt, as she done when transporting it the first time. This time, however, she clutched it tightly to her chest, tenderly caressing it from outside the shirt.

Closing her eyes and giving the laptop a firm hug, she whispered, “…I swear…I’ll never let anyone hurt you, ever again.”

And with that, she headed for the door, prepared to do anything she needed to in order to keep her precious little girl safe.

The dim light of the library shadowed Byakuya’s face as he read over a very specific unsolved case file.

All of Genocide Jack’s victims have been male. Each victim was between the ages of 16 to 21 and were all found impaled and crucified with the serial killer’s unique, custom made scissors that investigators have nicknamed; “The Genoscissors”.

The Affluent Progeny suppressed a shudder as he recalled his encounter with Toko earlier that day, the image of the Genoscissors beneath her skirt flashing before his eyes. At first, he’d largely put it out of his mind, preferring to focus on Chihiro’s disappearance. However, the uncomfortable memory lingered between his thoughts, like a cancer that he couldn’t cut out. And no matter how
much he tried, he couldn’t help but feel…vulnerable for the first time in a great many years.

“That’s…absurd. Me…vulnerable…? How ludicrous!” he seethed, returning to his research.

*All of Genocide Jack’s victims have been male. Each victim was between the ages of 16 to 21 and were all found impaled and crucified with the serial killer’s unique, custom made scissors that investigators have nicknamed; “The Genoscissors”.*

What was there to be vulnerable about? With the amount of research he was doing into his murderous classmate’s routine, surely he’d find a weakness of hers to exploit. Her infatuation with him would only lead to his own demise, and therefore, he couldn’t count it among her weaknesses. If anything, it was a liability and the Togami name didn’t allow for any such liabilities.

“In this game, you must strike first if you wish to survive…and in my present condition…I am ill prepared to deal with *that woman* should her other self awaken…” he told himself, resuming his studies in order to discover a way to safeguard him from the serial killer.

*All of Genocide Jack’s victims have been male. Each victim was between the ages of 16 to 21 and were all found impaled and crucified with the serial killer’s unique, custom made scissors that investigators have nicknamed; “The Genoscissors”.*

Indeed, there was nothing to fear. As long as he kept his wits about him, there was no way he’d allow that miserable wretch to end his life. His destiny was awaiting him outside this hellish place. Even if the school provided him with a mild form of amusement, it would mean nothing if he did not live to bask in the glory of victory. He would survive—No…he would *win* this little game, no matter the cost!

“I am Byakuya Togami…the man who will lead this world to a greater future. I can’t…no, I won’t allow my future to be cut short by a foul smelling, pathetic plebian like her!” the Togami heir reassured himself, his hands tightly grasping the binding of the case file as he went back to reading.

*All of Genocide Jack’s victims have been male. Each victim was between the ages of 16 to 21 and were all found impaled and crucified with the serial killer’s unique, custom made scissors that investigators have nicknamed; “The Genoscissors”.*

Almost abruptly, he quietly gasped and gritted his teeth as his mind finally caught up with his action. He’d been reading the exact same paragraph from the case file over and over again. And with each reading, he felt himself falling deeper and deeper into frustration. And it didn’t help that his well-kept secret would be revealed in a matter of hours, not that his secret was terribly demeaning…unless you were a member of his family.

Any disgrace would reflect negatively on him and his own secret accomplished that flawlessly.

Setting the open file down on the table next to him, he reached into his pocket and he pulled out the paper containing his secret. Without a word he unfolded it, glaring intensely at the words written therein:

**Byakuya Togami Secretly Aids Members Cast Out Of His Family**

While others wouldn’t understand how this could be a deadly secret, Byakuya knew all too well the repercussions that would be visited upon him if his family knew this seemingly heartwarming revelation.

Any member of the Togami Family who was cast out was never to be acknowledged or even spoken of ever again. He would have faced that fate too, had he not been the shrewdest and most cunning
person the Togami Family had ever produced. It was a heavy price for his siblings, the humiliation of failing to secure the position as Heir to the Togami Legacy had been the beginning of their torment. His many brothers and sisters were abandoned by the very people they had once called their kin. And while some of them had managed to scrape out meager lives doing menial tasks, a few of them were penniless or homeless, unable to secure proper work due to the Togami Family’s influence. In fact, a select few of them would probably perish when winter came around, with no food or shelter to sustain their lives. Naturally, aiding them in any way shape or form was the highest disgrace amount current Togami Family member.

Even so, Byakuya regularly sent funds to them…all fourteen of them. They had absolutely no idea where the funds came from but they didn’t appear to question it, and even if they did, none of them would suspect the very man who cast them out to be providing for them.

It was not done out of kindness, mind you, just as a form of deterrence. If they ever tried to rise up against him, he’d simple cut their funding and leave them penniless once more. It was a failsafe, one meant to keep his enemies from overtaking him. He was always prepared for such betrayals.

And he knew that, just like his siblings, if he left Genocide Jack alone for too long, she’d eventually come for him.

He couldn’t allow that to happen…

“I can no more trust her words than I can trust the Mastermind’s intentions. Actually, I would probably have greater faith in the Mastermind than that filthy woman,” he mused, stuffing the paper back into his pocket.

Picking up the case file once more, he somehow found renewed vigor as he continued reading:

All of Genocide Jack’s victims have been male. Each victim was between the age of 16 to 21 and were all found impaled and crucified with the serial killer’s unique, custom made scissors that investigators have nicknamed; “The Genoscissors”.

The follow is a compilation of evidence attained during the various police investigations into the Genocide Jack homicides…

Hardening his features, Byakuya finally managed to push through that stubborn paragraph and was at last able to continue his research. And just as before, he would not let anything stand in the way of his own survival.

Alright, you stay in there and be quiet until I come back. Okay?

Chihiro typed out her message, glancing around to be sure no one saw which bathhouse locker she was leaving Alter Ego inside.

With a joyful smile, the AI replied, “Of course, Master! I will analyze the data contained on the laptop in the meantime!”

Nodding to her creation, her hands typed out one last message:

Be a good girl while I’m gone. I’ll see you soon!

“Mmhm, I will, Master!” the AI program promised, its smile radiated off the screen.

Seeing her little girl’s cheerful smile, Chihiro felt a swell of pride in her chest. Her creation was
already evolving past what she’d programmed and it wouldn’t be long before she would think and act like a real person. And if the others saw how useful and lifelike she was, surely they accept… her…

“I wonder if…they’ll be able to accept me…in the same way…” she mused, lowering her gaze for an instant.

However, she quickly pushed past her insecurities, shaking her head before returning Alter Ego’s gesture. With an affectionate nod, she closed the locker door, hiding her little girl from view.

Just as she was about to lock the locker door, she heard a loud groan, and it sounded very close by. Before she had a chance to move, the doors leading into the bathing area swung open and a tall figure emerged. Dressed in only a bath towel, the muscled form of Mondo Owada walked in, stretching and moaning from the relief of the bath.

“Ahhh, damn, that felt good! I kinda feel bad about not inviting Bro to—”, Mondo stopped midsentence when he noticed the tiny form of Chihiro across the room.

“Hi, Mondo,” she said cheerfully, smiling up at him.

Instantly, the biker’s face burned crimson and a surprised shout echoed as he pointed at her. “Ch-Chihiro! Wh-What the hell are you doing in here?!” furiously double checking that his towel was in place, even picking up a second one to be extra secure down there.

Chihiro had to suppress a laugh as she watched him panic. She completely understood why, of course. In his eyes, she was a pretty girl that was seeing him in all his half-naked biker glory. But to her, it wasn’t anything that special. After all, it wasn’t like he had anything she’d never seen before.

Plus, even though she identified as a girl, Chihiro wasn’t attracted to men. In fact, the reason she kept denying the other girls’ constant requests to hang out was because she found most of them pretty attractive. Hina in particular kept hugging her whenever asking her to spend time with her and Sakura, pressing her sweater puppies against her on many occasions.

“I guess that makes me a…biologically male lesbian?” she pondered, unable to find the right term.

Realizing this wasn’t the time to ponder her sexual attractions, she lightly shook her head before smiling at Mondo and answering, “Actually, I was looking for you. I need to ask you a favor.”

“A f-f-favor?!” the biker stammered, blood rushing to his cheeks. “Wh-What kind of…favor?!!”

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Chihiro gathered her courage and put on the most determined visage she could as she asked, “Mondo…uh…um…I…would you… would you please meet me outside the swimming pool locker rooms in an hour? I need to tell you something important.”

“W-WHAT?!!” he screamed, his face contorting in confusion.

Although she knew that her request could be misinterpreted in a few different ways, Chihiro was forced to admit that she still didn’t have the strength to come out and say what she needed to. It took all she had just to request his presence. She’d been trying to come out with her secret right there, but was suddenly fearful of how Mondo would take the information. Imagine being a healthy young man, dressed only in a towel, alone with a pretty girl in a bathhouse…who then tells you she has a penis, just like you.

Even though it made her feel uncomfortable to admit, Chihiro realized that, for a manly man like Mondo, it could be nightmare fuel. For a young man who has a crush on a pretty girl, it could be
viewed as a traumatic, emotionally scarring, life-changer that would negatively define the rest of that young man’s life. At least, their society would deem it as such…as disgusting as that made her feel.

And it was that ingrained societal fear that made Chihiro decide to wait...for now.

However, she also realized that her invitation would also seem very suspicious, asking him to meet her in an hour, just past the nighttime hours set by their captor. Considering their situation, many of her fellow classmates might think it was a ploy to lure someone to their demise. Except that, the way Mondo was visibly freaking out she guessed that his mind was far from the nightmarish situation they found themselves in.

The biker’s face was twisted in utter perplexion, his entire face a deep shade of red as his simple mind tried to comprehend exactly what she’d requested. Just when she thought maybe she’d chosen the absolute worst time to make this request, he slapped his forehead and grunted, probably trying to calm himself down.

Taking his hand away, his cheeks still pink, he stuttered, “Uh...an hour from now? What...uh...why can’t you just...ya know, tell me right now?”

Chihiro involuntarily flinched at his question, which only seemed to intensify whatever Mondo was concocting in his head. And while she knew that he may be assuming something unwholesome, she couldn’t fault him for being curious.

However, there was a deeper reason for needing to wait an hour. The programmer knew that, if she could convince Mondo to keep her secret and help her with her physical training, she would need the right outfit for it. In particular, she’d need a tracksuit from the newly opened storage room. Once she had that, she’d be ready to tell him everything...she hoped.

“I...uh...I need to...prepare myself before we meet up,” she finally answered, hoping that being vague would make her explanation easier to swallow. And at first, she thought her explanation had failed, because the moment she said that, Mondo once again contorted his facial features, a gasp escaping him as he stared at her with frantic eyes. However an instant later, he shuffled and turned his back to her, clearing his throat loudly and taking deep calming breaths.

“Duh...uh...O-Okay! Sure, whatever! Now...will ya just get outta here already! I need to change!” he shouted, seemingly unwilling to turn around.

Chihiro understood that he was probably embarrassed to change around her, considering he thought of her as biologically female. Of course he’d be uncomfortable with her standing there, staring at his half-naked glory while waiting for a response. So, out of respect for him, she bowed deeply and said, “Thanks so much! I’ll see you later then!”

And with that, she made a quick exit out of the changing room. The instant she was outside, she went around the corner and pressed her back to the wall. Her heart racing from the excitement of what had happened, she slowly began to process what needed to be done now.

“Okay...so I’m going to tell him when we meet up. I can’t chicken out of this. I’ve got to be...brave, and...uh...just tell him the truth...”

Despite her confidence, she couldn’t deny that her legs were shaking. She’d already lost the chance to tell him once because of her fear; would she be able to tell him properly during their meeting? And beyond that, a terrifying realization came to mind.

What if he didn’t accept her for who she was? What if...just like so many other guys, he made fun of
her for her life choices and…and…

Both of her hands slapped against her face, and she cringed as her cheeks stung. She wasn’t used to pain and even the slightest bump could bruise her but in this instance, she knew she needed the pain.

“Sure, it might hurt for a while…but if it means becoming a stronger person…then I’ll do what I have to!” Letting her own words echo in her mind, she pushed away from the wall and took a deep, confident breath. “Alright…let’s do this!”

She marched toward the storage room that was just across the hall as quickly as her legs could carry her. Once inside, she looked around for a bit before finding a duffle bag in the back, right next to a number of different colored track suits. Looking them over, and remising the fact that none of them were pink, she instead picked out a bright blue one, stuffing it inside the duffle bag.

“All right…I’m ready now—”

“Ready for what, may I ask?”

Gasping, Chihiro whirled around to see none other than Celestia Ludenberg leaning against the storage room doors. The Ultimate Gambler took a single look at the bag and the blue sleeve sticking out of it and smiled.

“Oh, planning a late workout session before nighttime?” she asked, seeming genuinely curious.

With a shy nod, Chihiro answered, “Uh…yeah, maybe…”

“I see. Well, I would advise you to hurry if you plan to do so tonight. It is less than an hour before the nighttime announcement. You wouldn’t want to break our arrangement, would you?” Celeste said almost cheerfully.

Chihiro felt a sting of guilt and embarrassment as she heard that, knowing that, if all went as she desired, she and Mondo would spend at least a few hours doing physical training. She wasn’t quite sure if Celeste could see through her or not, but she decided to play it safe regardless.

“I-I know. I’ll be sure to keep an eye on the time,” she insisted, stuffing the sleeve of the track suit inside the bag and out of view.

Knowing that time truly was of the essence, she decided not to waste any more of it. Without another word, she slowly headed toward the door, passing Celeste on the way. When she did, the gothic girl smiled wider at her but for some reason, it didn’t seem as particularly menacing as usual.

“Have fun and don’t be out too late now,” Celeste encouraged as she left, waving pleasantly as the programmer disappeared around the corner.

*Yawn*

Leon scratched his head, his eyes still heavy with sleep as he made his way to the cafeteria. His own secret didn’t weigh too much on his mind and he’d been able to rest for the remainder of the day. And did he need it! After being forced to stay up all night, then the search for Chihiro, then the announcement of the motive; by that point, he was ready to pass out three times over. Sleep had concerned him far more than his secret, considering that his embarrassing thing was something rather generic.

“Everybody has a porn stash…even chicks have that yaoi crap,” he said to himself, rubbing his tired
eyes and fully planning to only grab a sandwich or something before heading back to bed.

Before he even got to the open area between the cafeteria and the bathhouse, he saw someone exiting the cafeteria. He instantly recognized the long pink locks of Junko’s hair as she strode closer to him, seeming to be on her way back to her room. She looked to be deep in thought for a moment before lifting her gaze up and seeing him, a mischievous smirk spreading out over her lips.

“Yo, Leon! Perfect timing!” she called out to him, stopping to wait as he got closer.

A part of Leon cringed at her wording, mainly because the last time someone said that to him, he spent the entire night forced to stay up and do manly things. Shuddering slightly at the memory, he pushed it away, figuring that, if it was Junko asking, it couldn’t possibly be that bad. Besides, he kind of owed her his life, so he wasn’t in a position to deny her anyway, or at least he thought so.

“Oh, hey Junko. What’s up?” he said in turn, stopping in front of her.

Running a hand through her hair, her fingers getting caught now and again, Junko sighed and said, “Uhg, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I totally need a shower right now. And since it’s only a little while until water shuts off during nighttime, I need to do it now.”

“Okay…so what’s the problem?” an oblivious Leon questioned, not seeing any issues at present.

“Well, I kinda had to leave Sayaka in the cafeteria,” she began, provoking a foreboding feeling of dread from Leon as she continued. “She said she needed to look for something and that I could go but…I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave her alone, especially not right now.”

“U-Uh…okay,” the ballplayer tried to play it cool, almost knowing exactly what her next words would be.

With a grin so wide the Cheshire Cat would be envious, Junko slapped her hands together and asked, “So, would you do me a solid and go help her out? I mean, like, getting her back to her room and everything too. She still has trouble walking, ya know?”

“Wh-What?! Why does it have to be me?” Leon protested, staggering back as if hit by a wild pitch.

In response, Junko gave him a confused look and replied, “Uh, weren’t you the one who was supposed to be taking care of her anyway?”

Leon flinched as he finally recalled that important tidbit of information. He’d been so tired and out of it that he hadn’t even thought about that since yesterday. Damn, he certainly hadn’t expected her to throw that at him, but all things considered, it made sense. He was supposed to be the one helping her out anyway, Junko had just been nice since he’d been so exhausted, or at least that’s what he thought she’d been doing.

Defeated by her logic, the ballplayer lowered his head, sighed and muttered, “I just wanted my freaking sandwich…”

“Hm? What was that?” Junko genuinely asked, not hearing him clearly.

With another heavy sigh, Leon lifted his gaze up and said, “…Yeah, sure. I’ll go see if she needs anything…”

“Awesome!” an elated Junko shouted, patting him on the shoulder as she passed. “Take good care of her, Leon!”
The baseball star could practically hear her smirking as she shouted those last words to him, making him grunt and face-palm. It seemed that she was intently focused on getting the two of them to be comfortable around each other again. That was the only explanation that Leon’s fragile mind could conclude, considering how much Junko had done to try and mend the rift between them. Honestly, it didn’t feel out of character for the Fashionista to want such a thing but, Leon could help but feel that something was a bit…off with her.

He couldn’t even put it into words, but he felt that she was just…different than she should be acting. Yeah, she’d survived nearly being impaled and that was certain to have a drastic change in personality or how she viewed life but, this was different…separate even. Like he somehow knew that this wasn’t the way she’d typically approach this situation.

“But that’s crazy, right?” he said to himself with a chuckle as he headed for the cafeteria. “I mean, she’s still Junko. And that’s all that matters.”

Putting that strange feeling out of his mind, he stepped out into the large hall that led to the cafeteria. As he did, Leon spotted Mondo slowly slipping out of the bathhouse. Yet again, the baseball player felt something was kind of off about his classmate, although this time it was a lot clearer.

Mondo’s face was racked with a combination of nervousness and frustration, and he was sweating profusely, despite just having bathed, probably. He didn’t even seem to notice Leon as he passed by and, despite knowing it could lead him into another all-nighter of manly events, the ballplayer felt compelled to stop his classmate.

“Yo, Mondo! Where ya going?” he casually called out, only to be startled when Mondo abruptly spun around and glared at him.

“None of your God-damn business!” the biker shouted, rearing his arm back but stopping as soon as he saw who it was. “Oh, Leon. Sorry about that man…I, uh, wasn’t thinking straight.”

Leon, who had held up his arms to defend himself from what he’d assumed was going to be a punch to the face, stared at his friend in utter confusion. While it was true that Mondo often resorted to violence, it was never as sudden or immediate as this was. His eyes had been like that of a raging monster, ready to destroy all in his path. It was honestly terrifying, even now.

“Hey, my bad too. Didn’t mean to startle you like that. But, uh, seriously, what’s up? You seem… kinda freaked out,” Leon asked carefully, trying not to upset the biker.

However, while he didn’t fly into a rage, Mondo still seemed perturbed by the questioning and replied, “Why’s it any of your business?”

Despite obviously feeling threatened, Leon decided to push forward. “It’s not. I was just wondering what you’re doing out here so late? It’s almost nighttime—”.

“Well what the fuck are you doing out here so late?!” Mondo fired back, throwing what he perceived to be an insult back in the ballplayer’s face.

Hardening his features, Leon looked the biker straight in the eye and said, “Dude, chill the hell out. You’re getting freaked out for no reason—”.

“Fuck you! I’m not freaked out at all! I was just minding my own damn business when you had to start questioning me!” the biker defended, balling his hands into fists. All the while, Leon tried to keep from lashing out at his friend. He knew that it was the biker’s anger talking, but it was becoming unsettling. And it only worsened when Mondo cracked his knuckles and shouted, “You
got a problem with me, huh?! Wanna throw down or something?! Got something to say to me, huh?!”

Finally, after trying to keep his composure for so long, Leon lost it and grabbed the collar of Mondo’s jacket. “I just don’t want you flying off the handle and killing someone! I don’t want you or anyone else to end up like I did! So calm the fuck down!”

For probably the first time in all his life, Mondo was speechless as his friend shouted in his face. Each word seemed to echo in his mind and when Leon was finished, his hands fell to his sides and he stared at the baseball star with wide eyes. For a few seconds, he just stood there, his brain desperately trying to process what to do.

Then, out of nowhere, he spoke, “Yeah…yeah…you’re right.”

His words were slow and full of regret, and that’s what persuaded Leon to finally release his friend. Taking a step back as Mondo readjusted his coat, they both just stood there for a time, neither of them wanting to say anything to the other. Just as the silence began to eat at them, a light groan sounded from Mondo.

“Damn…I’m sorry, man. I didn’t mean to be such a dick. I’ve, uh, got a lot on my mind,” the biker confessed, his voice unusually shaky.

“Nah, it’s cool, man. We’ve both got a lot to think about,” Leon concurred, opting not to go into any further detail than that. Even with all the chaos of their misunderstanding, the secret motive was still out there, and Leon didn’t even want to imagine what demons Mondo might have in the back of his mind.

However, Leon finally felt that he’d managed to get through to his friend, helping him to realize he needed to be more careful with his temper. After all, he hadn’t been lying. He didn’t want anyone, least of all a friend, to make the same mistake he had. Confident that they’d resolved their differences, Leon suddenly thought of a way to help alleviate his own situation.

“Hey, so, I’m headed for the cafeteria to get a sandwich. Wanna come with?” he invited, praying his friend said yes. This way, he wouldn’t have to face Sayaka alone, which he feared more than getting pummeled by his biker friend.

However, he was shocked when Mondo shook his head and said, “Sorry man, not this time. I gotta—urp!”

He tried to stop himself but it was too late, the instant Leon heard the petite programmer’s name, a sly grin overtook his features.

“Oh, I see!” he said knowingly, elbowing Mondo suggestively. “Got a little late night rendezvous going on, huh? Never figured she’d be your type. Not that I have any idea what your type would be—”.

“Would ya shut up about that crap?!” Mondo shouted, his face burning red. “I-It’s not like that! She…she just asked to talk to me about something! That’s all!”

“Sure, sure,” Leon chided, chuckling at how embarrassed his friend was. “Look man, I know the ladies. I’ve had my fair share of fangirl confessions before and—”.

“Dude! I told you it’s not—! Uhg, whatever! I’m outta here!”

Without another word, Mondo turned his back to the ballplayer and headed out of the dorm area,
presumably toward the staircase at the end of the hall. As he left, Leon waved and shouted, “Good luck, man! I’m pulling for ya!”

He honestly hoped it would go well between those two. Even though it was kind of a strange pairing, it didn’t bother him. Chihiro was nice and adorable, and Mondo definitely needed something to keep him grounded while he was here. Perhaps a little romance was just the thing each of them needed. Hell, all of them could use a little normalcy at this point.

“God knows I do,” Leon whispered to himself, briefly letting his past sins enter his mind before he forced them away.

Feeling slightly better than before, Leon gathered some courage of his own and faced the cafeteria, clenching his fists to keep his hands from shaking. With a stout step forward, he pushed open the doors of the cafeteria.

“Dammit…where is it?!?” Sayaka fumbled around on the floor of the cafeteria, having a hard time staying upright with her good arm still in the sling. “I know I had it in my pocket this morning. Where the hell did it go?!?”

As she continued to rummage around underneath one of the cafeteria tables, she grunted as she bashed her head against the underside as she tried to stand up.

“Ow…” she uttered, rubbing her hand over the spot she’d hit. “Dammit, why did this have to happen so close to nighttime? I know I had it with me when Junko and I went to the nurse’s office but after that…”

As she pondered where it had gone, she suddenly heard the doors open. Staying hidden beneath the table she tried to see who it was but a table obstructed her view. A part of her wanted to stand up, but a larger part of her told her to stay hidden. What if one of her fellow students had given in to the motive, like she had last time? Finding her here, alone and vulnerable due to her injuries, caused a deep seeded fear to well up inside her. She’d be an easy target and with no other witnesses, whomever was there might indeed try to end her life—

“Hey, Sayaka! You in here?!”

“Leon—?!” she said aloud, all at once recognizing the voice. However, it also startled her enough to force her head upwards and she once again bashed her head against the underside of the table.

“Urgh!”

She groaned loud enough for him to discover where she was, evident by the fact that his footsteps were growing closer. A second later, she saw the white of his outfit at her side as she crawled out from beneath the table.

Offering her a hand, he said, “What were you doing under there?”

“Playing hide and seek. What do you think I was doing?” she sneered, her attitude worsening by the second.

Glaring at his hand for a moment, she instead chose to use a nearby chair to hoist herself up, completely denying his attempts to assist her. It took a little more time, considering she only had the one good arm, but she eventually was able to stand upright, leaning against the table for support.

Leon’s hand balled into a fist at this but he said nothing, instead patiently waiting for her to stand all
the way up before continuing, “I don’t know. That’s why I was asking.”

He said it plainly but Sayaka could feel hints of sarcasm in his voice. Deciding that playing coy would only worsen the situation, she sighed and replied, “I was looking for something. There, is that all you wanted?”

A hint of shock came over Leon at her snarky attitude but he forced it away as he answered, “Actually, Junko asked me to help you with…whatever it is you’re trying to do.”

At that, Sayaka finally flinched before biting her lower lip. “I’m fine…I don’t need your help.”

Now it was Leon’s turn to cringe. The way she’d said it was more than clear that she didn’t want anything to do with him, especially not now. A part of him contemplated leaving right then and there, but something told him to stay. Besides, he had promised he’d be the one to take care of Sayaka and leaving her alone now didn’t sit right with him.

So, with a heavy sigh, he scratched his head and said, “I’m sure you don’t but I’m not leaving you by yourself until we find whatever it is you’re looking for. So why don’t you tell me what it is?”

Gritting her teeth, Sayaka sent a fearsome glare his way and said, “It doesn’t involve you. So will you please just—”.

“Look, we’ve done this before. Like last night when you didn’t want me to bring you food, and yet you still ate it,” Leon countered, cutting her off.

Sayaka was about to retort when she suddenly realized he’d said something odd. And it only took a moment for her to question, “Wait…how do you know that I ate the food you brought me?”

At this, Leon fought to keep from giving himself away. He couldn’t admit that he’d been listening to her conversation with Makoto the other night. It would destroy any hope he had of helping her now. Plus, he didn’t want to be considered a stalker! Which he wasn’t, he’d just been concerned is all!

“It’s food, so of course you ate it! Anyway, that’s not the point! You know how stubborn I am, so just give it up and tell me what you’re looking for,” he demanded, leading the conversation away from his eavesdropping the previous night.

“No! It’s none of your business!” she fired back, slamming her good hand on the table.

“Yes, it is! I can’t get my freaking sandwich until I help you find what you’re looking for and get you back to your room!” he argued, not disguising his intentions in the least.

“Oh, so this is all about getting your precious sandwich, huh?!” she retorted, a frustrated look on her face. “You’re disgusting, you know that!”

“How is wanting a sandwich disgusting?!” he countered, not sure how they got on this topic. “Besides, that’s not even the point right now! Just tell me what you lost so I can find it for you—”.

“You’re not finding anything for me! Just leave me alone!” she demanded, getting fed up with all of this arguing.

“I will, as soon as you tell me what you lost so we can find it together and then I’ll leave you alone!” he offered, not backing down from their disagreement.

For a few moments, Sayaka chewed her bottom lip, debating on what she should do. She didn’t want to accept his help, not after all that had happened. And yet, he kept insisting. She knew the sandwich
part was probably a lie, he always seemed to appear when she needed him…even though the first
time she had needed him to die for her…

Shaking her head to get such dark thoughts out of her mind, she grunted and finally relented, “Fine! I
lost my e-handbook! I don’t know where it is and I can’t exactly go searching around the school for it! Are you happy now?!”

She lowered her gaze as she finished, panting for breath as her injured body screamed for her to stop.
Standing there with her head lowered, she collected her composure as she waited for him to reply. A
few seconds passed, then fifteen seconds, then thirty; finally as she neared an entire minute of
silence, she lifted her head and noiselessly gasped. Leon wasn’t in front of her anymore. Instead, he
was on his hands and knees looking under each table and chair.

“Wha…what are you doing?” she questioned, still rattled by her shouting.

“Playing hide and seek. What’s it look like I’m doing?” he answered semi-casually, his tone mocking
her earlier attitude. And although she felt that she should have been angry at him for it, she couldn’t
bring herself to say anything.

After all, if she wasn’t mistaken, he was currently searching for her missing e-handbook. She wanted
to tell him to stop but knew it wouldn’t do any good. He’d never listen to her, he never had, come to
think of it. Then again, it was all her fault anyway. That first time in the hallway with him, telling
him she’d teach him music, she should have just been honest and told him off. But she hadn’t…and
because of that, they were in the situation they are in now. They would have stayed away from each
other and she never would have…attacked him.

And yet, even after all of the horrible things she said…after the unforgivable atrocity she’d
committed against him, he was still kind to her and helped her when she needed him. She didn’t
derserve it, she knew that. But even so, he continued to search every nook and cranny for her missing
handbook. It infuriated her…because she wasn’t worth it. His kindness would be better wasted on
other people!

Just as she felt she was going to explode from all those feelings, she heard him groan as he stood up
and faced her.

“Sorry, but I couldn’t find it. Not in here at least. Anywhere else you may have dropped it—?”

“Why?” she abruptly cut him off, her shaky voice startling him. “Why are you…being so nice to
me?”

A look of genuine confusion warped Leon’s face as he absorbed her words, and yet he could find
none to answer her with. This only further perturbed her, as she couldn’t stand to be subjected to his
pity for even a moment longer. Turning to face him completely, she glared at him as fiercely as she’d
done that fateful night when she’d tried to kill him.

“You should hate me. You should want me dead for what I tried to do…but you don’t…and I don’t
know why!”

Her sudden confession washed over him and surprisingly, he hardened his features in response. She
expected him to retort or defend himself but he just kept silent, staring at her with what appeared to
be a mixture of guilt and confusion in his eyes. This irked her even more and she couldn’t stop
herself from continuing.

“I’ve done something unforgivable and yet you keep trying to help me! It would be so much easier if
you just left me alone to rot for what I’ve done! You don’t have any obligation to be kind to me, so why do you—?

“I got something I need to know too,” he suddenly interrupted, startling her into silence. His voice wasn’t accusatory or even that angry. More than anything, it seemed like he was struggling to understand something. It was because of that, that Sayaka found herself quieted down, unable to turn away from him.

Slowly, he took a deep breath and asked the one question he’d had since he’d first been attacked.

“I have to know… why me? You could have chosen anyone… anyone but you chose me! It could have been Makoto or even Hiro but instead you chose me! Why… why did you chose to kill me?”

At first, Sayaka didn’t react. In truth, she couldn’t. She hadn’t expect that kind of question at all, not in the least. Mainly because… she didn’t have the answer either.

“I…I… I don’t know…” she confessed, sinking into a nearby chair and pondering the idea for the first time since the attack. “I… honestly… don’t know… why I picked you…”

Meanwhile, Leon tried to hide his shock as best he could, but to no avail. It wasn’t as though he’d expected some huge reveal as to why he’d been the one she chose, but at the very least, he’d thought she actually had a reason for picking him. And for that reason, it kind of stung to hear that. He wanted there to be more to it than just, ‘you were there’ but in the end, he had to accept that it possibly could have been that way.

Despite being unsure herself, Sayaka at least seemed to now be considering it, evident when she began mumbling, “I guess… I don’t know… because we had the whole music lesson thing? No, that’s not it. I didn’t even think about that until after I chose you…”

As she tried to figure it out, Leon made his way across the room to her table. Without a word, he pulled out a seat beside her and listened as she continue to try and reason it out.

“I don’t really remember why… but I know that once I thought of you, I didn’t question it,” she told him, suddenly feeling more and more loathing for herself. As her mind registered exactly what she’d just said, she gave a depressing sigh and continued, “I’m… I’m a horrible person. I’m disgusting… trash… I shouldn’t be allowed to keep living after what I’ve done—”.

“Hey! Don’t say crap like that!” Leon abruptly cut her off, although he was unsure of why. “I mean, come on! I was the one who ended up nearly killing you! If anything… I’m more of a monster than you are—”.

A mocking scoff interrupted him, and he turned to see Sayaka cruelly glaring at him. “You don’t know anything about me… so don’t try to pull that kind of bullshit with me.”

Leon almost gasped at how vulgar her language was, but at the same time, he wasn’t actually surprised. He’d seen that she was capable of being far crueler than any of her fans could have ever imagined. Even so, he didn’t feel that everything she was saying was right.

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty sure that if you hadn’t of been freaked out by those videos Monokuma gave us, you never would have attacked anyone,” he insisted, a bit surprised she hadn’t cut him off. However, he was shocked to hear the tiniest mocking laugh erupt from her throat before she glared at him again.

“You don’t know that. And you don’t know me… you have no idea what I’ve done!” she ended up screaming at him, pounding her good hand on the table. And just as quickly as her rage came, it
subsided, but not completely. “Want to know what my secret is? I guarantee it’ll change your mind about me.”

Despite how menacing her tone was, Leon couldn’t help but hear how…sad she sounded. Like she was digging at an old wound that would never heal, a wound from long before she arrived at this school. Honestly, a part of him didn’t want to know what her secret was, but at the same time, he knew that he couldn’t exactly stop her from telling him.

In either case, Sayaka didn’t really give him an option, continuing before he had a chance to actually decide.

“You know about my idol group, right? Well, after we went and got our big break, we started to see how much competition we had. Including a nice girl from the same province as us. Her name was Kaname and she had high hopes for becoming a top idol. And you know what’s so horrible about that? She was actually as talented as my entire group, including myself, plus she was modest and good natured too! She even shared my dream of wanting to bring happiness to anyone who saw her! How ironic is that?!”

Sayaka paused for a moment, moisture beginning to form in the corners of her eyes.

“Well, in the idol world…girls like her are a major threat. So, when I heard she would be visiting my agency, I contacted a hardcore group of my fans. I told them to scare her…make sure she never wanted to sing or dance ever again…nothing too horrific…ya know…”

Her voice cracked and Leon desperately wanted to tell her to stop but he couldn’t, he knew she wouldn’t let him. And so, he was silent as she continued.

“Kaname…never showed up at the agency. She was found, beaten to a pulp in an alleyway not far from the studio. If that’s all it was, that wouldn’t have been so bad…but they…my own fans…they poured acid in her throat! She survived but…she’ll never be able to talk, let alone sing ever again!”

Tears burst from her eyes and her good hand slapped over her face as heavy sobs racked her body. For nearly an entire minute she wept into her hand, trying to find the strength to continue. All the while, Leon wanted to say or do something but…he didn’t feel that he had the right to. No matter how much he really wanted to comfort her, he knew that anything he did would only exacerbate the situation.

In the end, wiping away as many tears as she could, Sayaka continued, “I…I…ruined…her life! She…never even…knew me…and I destroyed her! And the…worst…part…I never…came forward! I wanted…to…I’ve…thought about…it…every day…since…but then…I’d lose…everything! So I…so I…so…I…”

As her sobbing continued, Leon clenched his fists…he had had enough!

“Oh yeah! You think that’s bad! I have a doozy of a story for you!” he shouted, startling her enough to cease her tears, if only temporarily. Clearing his throat, he leaned toward her and began his tale.

“So, a long time ago I had this huge stash of porn. And when I say huge, I mean like gargantuan! Like I could have had my own section in a library huge! I could have even categorized it if I’d have been motivated enough!”

He paused to take a breath and was pleased to see that Sayaka was so startled by his sudden admission that she’d stopped weeping altogether. In fact, she was staring at him as if he was some kind of bizarre creature, which wasn’t exactly what he wanted but he’d take anything over the crying
any day! Knowing he was on the right track, or at least hoping he was, Leon pressed onward.

“Anyway, so I kept getting freaked out that my parents might find it, ya know. So, of course, I had to hide it! Well, my room wasn’t exactly a hidden bunker, so I figured I’d hide it in the one place they’d never look! That’s right, under their very own noses…right under their own bed!”

At this proclamation, Sayaka visibly jumped, as if her frazzled mind couldn’t comprehend what he was trying to get at. Either that or she though he was a complete idiot. He’d take either option at the moment, as long as she stopped crying he’d cut off his own arm. Thankfully, all he needed to do was continue, which he did.

“So, everything goes well for a while, parents are none the wiser…until I sneak in after they’ve gone to bed to get my favorite for a…midnight jam session, if you know what I mean…” he says with a wink. To his splendor, it brought out the tiniest of giggles from Sayaka, so he proceeded onward.

“What I never predicted was…my parents were waiting for me! They turned on the light, with my hand in the pornographical cookie jar, and forced me to explain everything!”

He took another breath to continue but was shocked when Sayaka abruptly cut in.

“Wait, so…they knew you’d be coming? Your Mom didn’t think that they belonged to your Dad or something?” she said, completely enthralled by the story.

If there was proof that some kind of God existed, this was confirmation enough for Leon, for this girl truly knew what it was to have a sense of humor. With an embarrassed laugh and a scratching of his head, he replied, “Yeah…no. There’s no way my Dad would be into that kind of stuff—”.

At once, Leon completely shut up, realizing that he may have just destroyed all that he was working toward. And even worse was if Sayaka, the Ultimate Pop Idol, found out that the porn he’d been stashing, the porn that excited him more than any other…was manga idol porn!

At the very least, he’d take that part of his secret to the grave with him…or so he though!

“So, what kind of porn was it?” a curious Sayaka asked, now completely intrigued.

Caught off-guard, Leon waved his arms and sputtered, “Wh-What?! You can’t ask that! You’re a girl!”

It was then that Sayaka gave him what all girls would call, ‘The Look’, and he knew he’d fucked up. Huffing at him and flicking her hair, she answered, “Come on, it’s not like I’ve never looked at yaoi before—”.

“You read that crap!” a startled Leon spouted, unable to control himself. And then…it happened.

A sly grin so mischievous that Leon felt she might be coming on to him crossed Sayaka’s face and she said, “Yeah…got a whole stash of it, too. Only I didn’t get caught.”

Something inside Leon’s mind broke as that information was forever seared into his brain. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t move, couldn’t do anything other than watch as Sayaka laughed at his terrified expression. That is, until she said, “Okay…your turn.”

Snapping out of his fright, a confused look marred Leon’s features as he asked, “My turn…for what?”

“To tell me what kind of porn you had.”
Silence followed for a brief moment before Leon practically shrilled, “What?! Why do I have to tell you that?!”

“Because I told you what mine was. Fair is fair, am I right?” she insisted, still grinning at him. That’s when her smirk widened and she continued, “Don’t tell me it was…idol porn?”

All of the levies in Leon’s mind broke as his thoughts came flooding out his mouth.

“What?! How?! When?! How?! How?! What?!” he stammered on for a few more minutes before slapping himself to regain some form of cognitive thought. “How the hell could you possibly know that?!”

Once those words fell out of his mouth, he froze, realizing that he had completely revealed exactly what he’d sworn never to let her know. This was the end…game over, man. She was going to crucify him now, bleed him like a pig and leave him hanging out to dry. He knew that…but that’s why her answer completely stunned him.

“Oh…didn’t Makoto tell you?” she said, getting him to lift his head up to see her staring at him intensely. “I’m psychic.”

A loud gasp escaped Leon and he nearly toppled over in his seat, but barely managed to catch himself. “What?! B-B-But, your talent isn’t…oh God that makes so much sense!”

In the middle of his freak out, he heard the most pleasant sound his ears could have heard at that moment. Glancing over to her, he saw that Sayaka was smiling brightly, like she had when they’d first met, and giggling sweetly. He was so drawn in by that visage that he almost didn’t catch what she said next.

“Just kidding…I just have really good intuition.”

Although he felt tricked, and very confused, Leon also felt a swell of elation as she said that, particularly because she started laughing. It was infectious and before he knew it, he found himself laughing right alongside her. Their laughter echoed through the cafeteria, probably the first time anyone had genuinely laughed in there since the killing game began. And even better was the sense of peace it brought both of them.

They had needed this more than they could have ever realized, but until now, they had no idea how to obtain it. It was the first genuine sign that, despite all that had happened, they were alive and well. They even had the gall to let the tiniest amount of hope seep into their minds, planting that seed deep within their subconscious.

But like all things, it didn’t last forever. Their laughter died down and with it, Leon finally took a good look at Sayaka. She was obviously still physically exhausted from her injuries, and the sling that held her broken wrist particularly reminded him of his crimes. However, for the first time, he actually felt confident enough to address it, instead of turning away.

“Hey…Sayaka?” he said carefully, waiting for her to look toward him. Their eyes met and for some reason, it gave Leon the courage to say, “I’m…uh…sorry I broke your arm.”

Sayaka took a moment and briefly glanced down at her sling. However, her eyes didn’t linger there, instead shifting over to survey Leon. He seemed physically well, but then again, she couldn’t see the bruises that the other’s had told her must have formed on his abdomen. Regardless, she didn’t let that negative thought stop her from reciprocating his gesture.

“I’m sorry…that I tried to stab you,” she said quietly lifting her gaze to meet his.
For a few moments, they just sat there, staring into each other’s eyes with no other words needing to be said. Neither of them knew when, but before they realized it, they had begun smiling at each other. It was a soft and fragile smile but one that was shared only between them, one that no one else would ever see. And that made it precious—

“BRO!!! TAKA!!! WAKE UP, MAN!!!”

Both Leon and Sayaka were snapped out of their reverie as the ferocious voice of Mondo sounded from out in the hallway. The baseball player shot to his feet but stopped, unsure of what to do next. However, he was lucky his cohort did.

“We should go see what’s wrong!” Sayaka insisted, standing herself up and nearly falling in the process. Leon knew there wasn’t time to argue, so instead, he marched over to her and offered his shoulder.

“Okay, hang onto me!” Without hesitation, she grabbed onto him and he steadied her. “Alright, let’s go!”

As quickly as they were able, they followed after Mondo’s screaming as they headed for the cafeteria doors. Slowly making their way out into the hall, they glanced down the nearby hallway to see Mondo already speaking with Taka. They couldn’t quite hear exactly what they were saying but they heard the biker’s voice clear as day as he screamed:

“IT’S CHIRHIO!!! SHE GOT ATTACKED!!!”

Leon and Sayaka blanched as those words washed over them…for they knew it had begun all over again…

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! I want to give a special thanks to all of the guests that leave reviews or comments. I know I can’t always comment back, because of my busy schedule, but I enjoy each and every review/comment, so please keep them coming!

Anyway, what a long chapter, huh? Awww, Leon and Sayaka are getting along again! But Chihiro’s been attacked! Oh no! How could that have happened?! *Wink*Wink*Nudge*Nudge* You’ll have to tune into the next chapter to find out!

In case you haven’t noticed, from this point on, my chapters will tend to be a bit longer. I’ve realized that, to get through all I need to for each Story Chapter, I needed longer Acts. Don’t worry, this won’t interfere with updates. I’m still quite a few chapters ahead, so that if I fall behind for any reason, updates will remain consistent.

With that in mind, please leave a review or comment to tell me what you all like about the story or this chapter particularly. Thanks again, and keep on smiling my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Mondo goes to meet with Chihiro. Upon revealing her secret, Mondo is distraught by her display of courage...and acts upon it. All the while, Junko observes from the control room, reveling in the despair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The instant that Chihiro left the bathhouse locker room, Mondo felt like exploding. And yet, all he could do was stand there with a confused visage, overcome with feelings he’d never imagined he had. His face burned and he knew he had to be blushing despite how much he tried to will it away. And then, like levies breaking on a dam, it all came rushing out.

“W-WHAT THE HELL?!?!”

Spinning around, the biker slammed his fist into the wooden wall of the bathhouse, a small crack forming in the plank he struck. There he stood, breathing heavily with his knuckles pressed to the wood, his simple mind desperately trying to contemplate everything that was happening.

“How…how the hell did that happen?!” he questioned aloud, letting his fist drop to his side. “I…was just trying to forget about that damn motive…why the hell did…Chihiro…?”

The programmer’s request hung heavy in his mind and he just couldn’t fathom what she’d want to talk about! In fact, he didn’t really feel like talking to anyone right now anyway! The motive Monokuma had given him, reminding him of his sins, had plagued him the entire day. So much so that he’d gone out of his way to be alone. He’d even been avoiding Taka, and though it did bother him that he was alienating his newest friend, he wasn’t ready to come forward with his secret.

But then, Chihiro had to go and see him in only a towel and ask him to come to a secret meeting! He’d tried to say ‘no’, to tell the programmer that now was definitely not the time for him to be doing shit like that…but…but…

Again, he felt heat rush to his face as he imagined the petite programmer smiling up at him. It just wasn’t fair…who could say ‘no’ to that adorable face?! He’d tried to but the words just didn’t come out! And now, he only had an hour to prepare for…whatever Chihiro wanted from him!

Wait…what exactly did Chihiro want from him?

Finally lifting his head, Mondo couldn’t help but ponder the idea aloud. “Maybe…she needs me to break something for her? She is pretty scrawny…”

The instant those words left his mouth, he felt stupidity seep in. Why would Chihiro come to him if she wanted something destroyed? She could just ask Sakura, a woman who he admired if only for her ability to surpass his destructive tendencies. But then, if Chihiro didn’t need him to break something, what possible need would she have for him?

As Mondo tossed his towel aside and began dressing, an out of place thought crossed his mind. “…Is
A part of him wanted to be wary of his own optimism, but something told him that Chihiro wasn’t the type to try stuff like that. It had been different with Sayaka; because at least he considered her capable of attacking someone…like she had only a few days ago. But trying to put Chihiro in that same category was not only impossible, it was laughable.

A scoffing laugh escaped him as he imagined the petite programmer charging at him with a butter knife in hand. She’d poke at him and hit him with the flat side before he’d take it away and tell her to calm down…yeah, if it were possible for Chihiro to consider such a thing, he was sure that’s how it’d go down.

Then again, it was clearly something that wouldn’t happen, so…

“Guess she’s not looking for victim,” he surmised as he pulled his shirt over his head and fastened his belt buckle. “But if it’s not that then…there’s no way it could be that she…she…she’s got a confession to make!”

With that revelation, Mondo could only wonder what kind of confession she would need to make. Obviously, the first idea that formed concerned the motive Monokuma had given them. And with it, his own crimes flooded back into his mind, momentarily forgotten due to Chihiro’s interference. And no matter how much he tried, he was unable to stave off the images that flashed through his mind.

…”

“You ain’t just handin’ the gang over to me! Daiya, I challenge you for control of the gang!”

Mondo had shouted…with an amused huff, Daiya stood and said…

…”

Shaking his head and forcing away the memory, if only temporarily, Mondo furiously tugged his coat from the locker he’d stashed it in.

“Okay, so…Chihiro might want to talk about her…secret. But…what kind of secret could that tiny chick have?” Flinging his coat over his shoulders, arms sliding through the sleeves, he said aloud, “Whatever it is…it can’t be that horrible. Maybe she killed a spider or something and felt bad about it?”

It did seem like something that would plague Chihiro, considering her soft-hearted and gentle nature. Mondo had seen her talking to Makoto in the hall once and, unbelievably, he overheard that the programmer was actually letting a mosquito bite her! If he remembered correctly, she’d said she would have felt guilty for killing it, because it was only trying to survive. And if she couldn’t bring herself to kill such a tiny bug, there was no way that she’d ever give in to the motive and resort to murder.

“That means that…whatever her secret is…it can’t be that bad,” Mondo surmised as he pulled on his shoes. “Not like…mine…”

Again, almost against his will, the memories of his sins came back to haunt him.

…”

“I refuse to lose! Not now! Not ever!” Mondo shouted to himself over the roar of motorcycle engine… squeezing the throttle and making a dangerous pass around the outside of his brother’s…
bike…he didn’t even see the semi coming up over the hill...

Slapping his face and smashing his head against one of the locker doors, Mondo squeezed his eyes shut as he willed away the intense agony that memory brought. For a few moments, he just stood there, his forehead indented into the wooden locker doors and his pompadour bent upwards against the wood.

When he slowly opened his eyes, he saw that one of the locker doors was slightly ajar, and a strange noise was coming from it. It sounded like a tiny whirling of wind…like a computer fan or something. His curiosity piqued, the biker cautiously grabbed the small door and pulled it open, bending down to peek inside the small locker.

Resting inside, still running but its screen black, was a laptop.

“W-Wha…?” he said, almost unable to comprehend what he’d found. “Who the hell would leave a laptop in the—”

At once, an epiphany so huge that Mondo could only call it a stroke of genius struck him. That laptop had to belong to Chihiro! She must have been hiding it there when he’d come in! But…why would the programmer need to hide—?

“I got it!”

It all made sense now! Chihiro’s secret…was that she now had a working laptop and could probably play games and shit on it! If any of her classmates found out, they’d want to play it too but since it was the only thing computer wise she could play with, she wanted to keep it for herself! Not that Mondo could blame her. If Hifumi found out about it he might kill her just to get at it…and do…otaku…stuff…on it…

A bit of bile rose up in Mondo’s throat as he briefly speculated what Hifumi might try and use it for, but he quickly swallowed it back down. Deciding that it was better for the Ultimate Fanfic Creator to never find such a thing, Mondo quickly closed the locker door.

As he did, he failed to notice the screen abruptly turning on…a familiar image appearing in the center.

Taking a deep breath after closing the locker door, Mondo smirked as he realized, “So…that must be what she wants to tell me…I think…?”

It did make the most sense, at least to him. Considering that she’d gone to great lengths to hide the laptop in a place where no one would find it, that just had to be her secret motive. Besides, there was no other reason for wanting to meet him in secret…right? In fact, the only reason she may have invited to meet with him was because he walked in on her hiding it.

“That makes sense…” the biker said, trying to be sure that it actually did.

Then again, he hadn’t actually seen her hide it…at all actually. He’d been too focused on the fact that he’d been half naked in front of a cute chick to worry about crap like that! Plus, Chihiro was smart; she probably knew he didn’t know about it. Then, if she didn’t invite him to meet her because of the laptop, and since that was her secret, as far as Mondo could tell, then that meant… he was back to square one!

He still had absolutely no idea why the petite programmer wanted to meet him in private, and he was
running out of time! Glancing up at the clock on the wall, he discovered that, in his ramblings to
himself, he’d already wasted almost twenty minutes! He knew he wasn’t that good at figuring stuff
like this out, but he thought that twenty minutes would have been plenty of time to uncover why
Chihiro wanted to meet him! And yet, here he was, standing alone in the changing room, completely
dumbfounded.

Mondo’s brain pounded as he continued to ponder exactly why Chihiro wanted to meet with him.

“If it ain’t to confess her secret…what kind of confession could she…?” He stopped midsentence, his
whole body grinding to a halt as his mind processed this new revelation. “D-Don’t tell me…she’s
planning to confess her feelings for…someone?!?!”

Although he couldn’t say it aloud, it was obvious that he would be the target of her affection. No…
there was no way that…that…actually that made the most sense! It explained why she seemed so
happy to see him, and half naked no less, and invited him to meet her in private! She was probably
too nervous to tell him about her feelings when she saw him, lost her nerve and shit like that or
something.

But the question still remained…why him?

His bravado suddenly came back in full swing as he proudly declared, “Well…she probably has a
thing for biker guys!”

Yeah…yeah! That made the most sense! That had to be it—!

“Wait,” he abruptly interrupted his own thoughts, as he remembered something vital. “If that’s how it
is then…why did she say that she…she needed to…p-prepare…”

All of a sudden, Mondo suddenly felt hotter than he had in the sauna, and he pulled at his collar to
release the heat that was bubbling up from within him. And all of a sudden, Mondo couldn’t stop his
imagination from imagining what Chihiro had under her skirt—

“No! Stop that!” the biker abruptly shouted at himself, shaking his head several times. “You’re a
man! Real men don’t think those kind of thoughts! Those are for otaku nerds and…uh…fortune
tellers!”

Despite his claims, the overactive and adolescent mind of Mondo wandered back to pondering how
the petite programmer would look like under that ridiculously large dress she always wore. The
image of her smiling up at him…and him looking down to see her…completely…completely…

Clenching his fist, Mondo did what needed to be done…and punched himself across the face.
Grunting angrily, the biker didn’t relent as he let his fist find his face once more; smacking some
much needed sense into him. The realization of pain was enough to bring his mind back to reality.

Panting heavily with sweat pouring down his face, Mondo finally let his hand fall to his side. He
plopped down the bench beside him and leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. He stared at the
ceiling fan above him, letting himself be distracted by the rotation as his nerves calmed themselves.
And somehow, in the rotation of those plastic ceiling fan blades, Mondo was able to make sense of
all this.

“Ha-ha…this is crazy…” he said with a short laugh. “I’ve got no idea why Chihiro wants to see
me…for all I know, she could just want advice on being a biker or something…”

As unlikely as that was, thinking that notion is what finally allowed Mondo to settle down and
breath.
“Besides…me and her just…wouldn’t work. I mean, even if that’s what she wanted…and we…um…tried it… I think I’d break her…like in half! I don’t want that to happen!” Mondo reasoned with himself. “Yeah…yeah! It’s no big deal at all! I’ll just have to let her down easy…that’s all! Yeah, that’s all there is to it!”

Finally feeling ready to face Chihiro and whatever issue she wanted to discuss with him, Mondo stood up and strode toward the bathhouse doors. Along the way, he couldn’t stop from reassuring himself aloud, “Plus, if chicks want to get you, they gotta ride on your bike with you first! At least that’s what Big Bro always…said…”

Without even realizing it, Mondo came to a halt just in front of the exit to the bathhouse, his body stiffening uncontrollably. “That’s what…that’s what…Daiya…always…”

Inadvertently, Mondo had brought himself back to the same conflict he’d tried so hard to forget. And just like before, his memories flashed before his eyes:

…

A sudden jolt struck Mondo’s bike…sending him out of the way of the semi’s unrelenting advance…Mondo’s whole body trembled as he watched his brother’s body…rebound off the side of the eighteen wheeler…in his place…

…

Mondo’s fists clenched and he felt like punching himself again. However, unlike before, he kept himself restrained. He just wanted to forget, but all of these distractions eventually led him back to thinking about his past. Not to mention that he really didn’t have the time to…oh, shit the time—!

Snapping his gaze up at the clock, Mondo discovered that he had wasted another fifteen minutes with his little freak-out! He had wanted to arrive early and get this whole affair behind him as quickly as possible but he’d even managed to screw that up! Why did things always end up like this?! Why couldn’t everyone just leave him alone?! Why did his brother have to—?!

He cringed as his memories started to—

“No! Dammit…I don’t have time for this shit!” Mondo seethed through grit teeth, forcing away the memory before it could form. Pushing the curtain in front of the bathhouse aside, the biker strode into the open area across from the cafeteria, intending to get his meeting with Chihiro over with as quickly as possible.

Before he got very far, however, the familiar voice of Leon called out to him, “Yo, Mondo! Where ya going?”

Those few words made something within Mondo twist cruelly and he turned to face Leon with all the fury he’d been holding in for the past few hours…

---

“He’ll be here soon…” Chihiro whispered to herself as she waited outside the pool locker rooms, her e-handbook clutched in her right hand. Over her shoulder hung the duffle bag, with her blue tracksuit completely tucked away inside. She tapped her foot as she waited, growing more and more anxious as the time ticked away.

“It’s not even time yet…I’m super early anyway,” she reasoned, trying to calm her nerves. She’d
been waiting there since she’d gotten the duffle bag and tracksuit. That meant that, she’d gotten there almost forty minutes early and now had to wait in agonizing silence for Mondo to arrive. All the while, her mind slowly began to plan how she’d tell him the truth. But so far, nothing seemed right.

She thought about just coming out and saying she was biologically a boy but worried that she’d blurt it out the instant he arrived. Realizing that could potentially cause more problems than solve them, Chihiro also though about trying to tell it as a joke:

---

Knock, Knock

Who’s there?

Me…I’m physically a boy but my gender is female so please don’t hate me and please accept me for who I am and everything okay thanks bye!

---

…Okay, so maybe a joke wasn’t the best way to go about this. But she was seriously running out of options! She couldn’t just shout at him “I have a PENIS” or anything like that! That would be even worse, and probably the most embarrassing thing she could imagine! Not to mention that…he may not respond kindly to her revelation.

Her tiny hands gripped her belongings as she trembled, imagining what Mondo might say or do if he didn’t accept her…

---

You’re a dude?!

Why don’t you act more like man then?!

You wanna be a girl? The fuck would you want to be that weak for?!

You’re such a pussy, and you don’t even got one!

Man up, you prissy bitch!

---

Chihiro could hardly breath as she imagined his voice in her head…denouncing her for even bothering to reveal such a thing. If that did happen she knew she’d curl up into a ball and hide for the rest of her life…but she also knew that wouldn’t change anything. Insults like the ones she’d imagined had been hurled at her before…long ago when she was young. It was the reason she’d first decided to dress and act like a girl…because it suited her more. Plus, when everyone thought she was a girl, no one tried to pick on her anymore. People even started defending her! Despite not even knowing who she was!

And then, before she even realized it, she found herself identifying more and more as a girl.

Her like of dresses and cute stuffed animals didn’t seem so strange once she started thinking of herself as a female instead of a male. And while it wasn’t exactly uncommon for a boy to like cute things, her connection to the female gender felt much stronger than it ever had while she was perceived as a boy. Perhaps she was supposed to be born a girl, but ended up as a boy instead.
But that was neither here nor there…she needed to focus on what to do about telling Mondo the truth, she could decide what to do once she saw his initial reaction…

Even so, she still didn’t know the best way to tell him…though screaming it at him once he arrived still felt like the most favorable option, unfortunately. Then again, it was beginning to feel like that might be the only way to convey the truth to Mondo, considering he’d respond best to being straightforward rather than roundabout.

Just then, her right hand loosened and she almost dropped her e-handbook. Tightening her grip on the small electronic wonder, the programmer let her eyes glance down at it for a moment, briefly wondering what kind of technology was capable of building such a device—

“Wait…that’s it!”

She could just show Mondo the truth without having to say a single word! That way, he could take time to process what she was trying to tell him and, hopefully, he wouldn’t freak out and shout at her…for any reason. To that end, Chihiro knew that the instant Mondo arrived; she’d just need to show him her profile on her e-handbook and let him see for himself what her biological sex was.

However, the instant she decided that, her mind began to imagine what he might say…

---

What the hell am I supposed to be looking at?!

It says you’re a dude…WHAT THE HELL?!

Dude…that’s gross! Why are you dressing like a chick?!

You want me to make you stronger? Grow a pair first, then we’ll talk!

---

Before she even realized it, tears began forming in the corners of her eyes as the imaginary voice of Mondo invaded her mind. However, she instantly wiped away the tears and cast that negative voice out of her mind, despite how her legs trembled as she waited for the real Mondo to arrive.

If he even showed up, that is…

Glancing up at the clock on the wall, she noticed that it was time for their meeting to take place and she was still the only one there. A part of her wanted to be relieved if he didn’t show up but, a larger part of her would feel abandoned by someone that she, for reasons she couldn’t fathom, was confident would come to see her.

She wasn’t even quite sure where that confidence came from, it wasn’t like she’d really hung out with the biker since they’d been trapped in the school. Even so, more than anyone else, Chihiro felt that she could trust Mondo…trust him to come when she needed him…and trust him to accept her for who she was…

“…It’s going to be fine…Mondo…he’ll be here…and he’ll listen…and he won’t judge…he’ll…he’ll…”

“Damn, Leon…making me think about this crap again!” Mondo groaned as he rounded the last
corner of the staircase leading to the second floor. “Thanks to him, I’m not gonna make it on time!”

Why the hell did Leon have to be there anyway?! Sure, Mondo was grateful that he was there to talk him down when he really needed it, but did he have to make innuendos as the biker took off to meet Chihiro? Because of that, Mondo’s mind was racing as he still didn’t have a clear idea as to why the petite programmer wanted to meet him in secret.

Well…it used to be secret, before Mondo blurted out to Leon exactly who he was meeting. Then again, it wasn’t as though he had anything to hide. Yeah, it was kind of embarrassing to be meeting a pretty girl after hours but it wasn’t like anything was going to happen. Regardless of what Chihiro needed to tell him, he was sure it would all turn out fine…if only because Leon had helped him to get back into a good state of mind. He’d have to remember to thank the baseball star later…probably tomorrow but before their secrets got revealed…if it came to that.

After all, if someone gave in and murdered—

“Gah…no, don’t think like that,” Mondo told himself as he got to the top of the stairs. “Everything’s gonna be cool…everything’s gonna be cool…”

As he made his way down the hall and toward the pool, his mind was still bogged down by what Chihiro could possibly have to tell him. He’d come up with three possible ideas…

First was that Chihiro was luring him in to kill him—Impossible.

Second was that Chihiro was going to confess her…love to him—Mondo was prepared to let her down as easily as he could if that was the case.

Third, finally, and the one that Mondo personally thought was reasonable—Chihiro wanted to learn how to be a biker and chose the only biker present to help her.

…Okay, so the last one was a bit out there but no more than the thought of Chihiro trying to murder someone! Plus, every time Mondo envisioned the petite programmer decked out in a Crazy Diamond’s duster, riding atop a huge motorcycle with pitch black shades hiding her adorable eyes…Mondo couldn’t help but laugh. And he really needed that right now…more than he could have ever known.

Rounding the last corner and seeing the pool area door, Mondo felt his pace quicken. And as he neared the double doors leading to the pool area, he felt all the tension he’d previously lost since speaking to Leon return, which was ironically the baseball star’s fault for jumping to conclusions! Leon’s provocative words rang in his ears and he couldn’t help but feel nervous as he approached.

“Got a little late night rendezvous going on, huh? Never figured she’d be your type.”

“She’s not…my type,” Mondo reassured himself, despite how undeniably cute Chihiro was when she smiled at him. “She’s just adorable, that’s all. Just because I find a girl adorable doesn’t mean I got any kinda feelings for her.”

Even so, he couldn’t deny that having her ask him to meet like this wasn’t unsettling. However, he was already there and besides…he’d promised her, He’d given her his word as a man that he would be there for her, because that’s what a man does when he makes a promise to a girl! And right now, for reasons he couldn’t understand, Chihiro obviously needed him, so he’d be there for her!

With that resolution, he pushed open the doors to the pool area and strode inside, ready for anything that came his way! Nothing else mattered at the moment, and he was ready to face this challenge head on like a man—!
“You came! I’m so glad!”

All at once, Mondo completely froze as Chihiro smiled up at him, that adorable smile that could convince even the world’s most heartless man…Byakuya…to give her whatever she wanted. Mondo’s face burned red as he looked at her and he instantly averted his gaze, realizing the depths of the challenge before him.

“Oh God, I’m not ready to take on this challenge! I need to run! Get far away from here!”

Mondo screamed in his own head, feeling completely vulnerable for the first time in all his life. Slowly turning his head back to her, he saw Chihiro’s smile fade, as if something had taken the beautiful smile away from her. And when that happened, Mondo knew there was no turning back!

“No! Chihiro needs me! I don’t know what for but she needs me, now!”

Chihiro had settled with a happy greeting the instant Mondo came through the doors, instead of thrusting her e-handbook in his face, like she’d originally planned.

She at least wanted to try and tell him the truth herself, because just showing her biological sex in her profile would certainly cause friction between them. Sure, it was her trump card, just in case she couldn’t find the words but she knew that if she going to get stronger…she needed to put in the effort herself.

However, as she glanced up at him, Mondo surprisingly turned away from her, as if he couldn’t stand to look her way. Not only that, he seemed rather perturbed by something, and his face was kind of red…like he was already angry. And when he turned back to her, he seemed shocked…as if he disapproved of her already!

Her smile instantly vanished, as if it would never return, and her eyes slightly glistened with tears.

Was it because she’d called him out so close to nighttime? She hadn’t meant to inconvenience him but…she really did need his help. He was the only person she felt comfortable enough with entrusting her secret, and he could help her to grow physically stronger too. Even so, it was hard to even speak when he had such a scary visage pointed at her. However, she knew that this wasn’t the time to be afraid, even if she was terrified of him…and his possible reaction to her secret.

“T-Thanks for coming…” she said quietly, bowing her head. “I…uh…I really appreciate…you coming up here…and—”.

“What’s that?! I can’t hear ya!” Mondo abruptly cut her off, shouting as he stood over her.

Startled, Chihiro’s head shot up, meeting his intense gaze head on. As best she could, she elevated her voice as she tried to continue, “I-I’m sorry! I was…um… I was trying to…to tell you that…that…”

Her words were quickly dying in her throat as Mondo’s fierce gaze focused directly on her, judging her for everything she was saying and doing. Abruptly, she turned from him, tears stinging her eyes as she felt the pain of failure…

“I can’t…I can’t… even though I’m trying so hard…I can’t say anything! He just keeps
staring at me and I don’t know how to put it into words! I’m so weak…why am I so weak…?!"

It was then that she decided it was time to use her trump card. Gripping her e-handbook for support, she turned it on and began swiping her finger across screen, skimming through passing various pages, her hands shaking all the while. It took much longer than it usually would have, because her eyes were blurry from unshed tears but finally, she was able to get it to her profile page. Just as she was about to flip it around and show him the truth about herself, the biker’s voice shook the area.

“Just spit it out, would ya?!” an impatient Mondo said after enduring the silence for nearly an entire minute.

The sound of his shouts, startled the already terrified Chihiro, and she lost her grip on her e-handbook. It clattered to the floor, sliding close to the boy’s locker room door. Her eyes widened and she instantly sped off to grab her portable device. Sinking down to her knees, she carefully picked up her e-handbook and dusted it off, relieved that it was unharmed. Flipping it over, she saw her profile on display…and with it, the horrible male symbol that had decided her gender at birth.

Chihiro found herself quickly losing all of the resolve she’d spent so long building up. She couldn’t turn back and face Mondo now…not with how angry he appeared to be with her. And she couldn’t exactly get past him, since he was blocking the door; meaning she had no exit from this disaster of a confession.

“I…I’m so weak…I don’t know…what I should…” she cried inside her head, lifting her gaze up at the same time. Just then, she saw something on the wall. The card reader for the boy’s locker room was only a few feet away from her. And just like that, she knew what needed to be done.

Yes…there was still a way…a way to show him without even have to face him.

This was not going at all how Mondo had wanted it to!

When Chihiro had first started talking to him, her head bowed and her voice directed at the floor, he’d struggled to understand what she was saying. He didn’t want to be rude but it was annoying that he could only hear a word or two of what she was saying. Plus…her voice was so quiet, more so than usual…like she was crying or something.

Wait…was her head lowered because she was crying?! He couldn’t tell, he could see her face! And he couldn’t even see her properly either! Why couldn’t she just lift her face so he could see if she was okay? Couldn’t she speak any louder either?!

“What’s that?! I can’t hear ya!” Mondo abruptly shouted at her, instantly feeling guilty that he’d said that. However, it had the desired effect, as Chihiro lifted her head up…only for him to see tears glistening in the corner of her eyes!

“Shit! She was crying! Crap…did I do that? I didn’t mean to! Dammit…I should just be quiet and let her say whatever she needs to…” Mondo thought to himself as he patiently waited for her to continue.

When she did, he was glad that he could actually hear her…but she kept stuttering and apologizing, when she hadn’t done anything wrong! And then she fell completely silent, fiddling with the e-handbook in her hand…like she was too nervous to even talk to him!

“Oh God…she really did want to confess her feelings and shit!” Mondo surmised, seeing her trying
to get the words out, her hands trembling as she apparently couldn’t find the courage to even look up at him. She seemed intensely focused on her e-handbook but that was probably a coping thing for when she was upset…like how he would work on his bike when he used to get pissed about something, especially when there was nothing around he could destroy.

However, after an entire minute of waiting for her to say something, Mondo was losing his patience. He wanted to just wait for her but every second that ticked by made his mind wander further and further from his current situation, until finally…his mind drifted back to the motive…and his brother…until he just couldn’t control himself anymore.

“Just spit it out, would ya?!” the impatient Mondo called out, unable to keep calm.

Unfortunately, the biker was instantly aware of how much he’d screwed up as his voice startled the already terrified Chihiro, making her jump and causing her e-handbook to slip from her grasp and clatter to the floor. Mondo’s eyes widened as the programmer’s face whitened and she practically dashed toward the fallen device. Watching as she sank to her knees in front of it, carefully picking it up and seemingly caressing it, a great deal of shame fell upon Mondo as he realized he was only making matters worse. And to top it all off, he swore he could hear her sniffling as she was undoubtedly crying.

“Fuuuuck! Now what I am supposed to do?! I didn’t meant to make her cry…again!” Mondo slapped his hand to his head and rubbed his eyes, not knowing what to do. “Come on, think! What would…what would…what would Daiya do if…if he were…”

He couldn’t even finish that thought as memories of that fateful night were unintentionally revisited upon him…

…”This can’t be real”…that was all Mondo could think as he watched his brother’s bike smash into the pavement…Daiya himself slamming into the concrete with a sickening crunch…

…”Dammit…why do I have to be thinking about that right now?!” Mondo couldn’t help but ponder as he fell into further confusion. Even so, the biker decided it was best to put that out of his mind and focus on what he could do to fix his current situation.

Glancing back over to Chihiro, he found a strange sight. Sitting up while on the floor, she was staring directly at the boy’s locker room, which baffled him even more. In his frantic concern, he didn’t know how else to react other than shouting at her.

“H-Hey! Are you….uh…wait, what do you think you’re—?!”

Mondo tried to ask if she was alright but was stunned into silence as she stood up and faced the boy’s locker room. His mind went blank when Chihiro ran toward the door, her e-handbook outstretched toward the card reader by the door. Mondo’s mind went blank as he struggled to understand what she was trying to do.

He got his answer when she bravely pressed her e-handbook to the electronic reader on the wall next to the boy’s door. Mondo’s eyes widened and all color drained from his face, his gaze shooting up to the Gatling gun above her head, knowing that the instant the door read her as female, it would open fire on the petite programmer. An audible gasp escaped him and he knew he didn’t have time to reach her before she went through with her apparent suicide attempt.
All he could do was reach his hand out and shout, “Stop! That gun’ll turn you into Swiss-Chihiro!” As the card reader finished scanning her e-handbook, Mondo let loose a rabid scream from his throat…

“NOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

And then…there was silence. Time seemed to slow as Mondo waited for the hail of bullets that would tear little Chihiro to pieces in a matter of seconds. However, as that silence invaded his ears, a dull ringing echoing all around him…he was shocked when, instead of gunfire…the boy’s locker room door opened.

At once, a flood of relief hit him and for a moment, he allowed himself to breathe a joyful sigh. However, that relief was quickly shattered as his mind slowly caught up with everything that was happening…because something wasn’t right here…

...

...

It didn’t make any sense…

Chihiro was a girl…

She shouldn’t be able to open the boy’s locker room…

Unless she was actually a boy…

...

...

Something in Mondo’s brain cracked as it finally registered the truth.

“I did it…I finally showed him the truth!” Chihiro congratulated herself before turning around and freezing.

Before her, Mondo stood with wide eyes and a slack jaw, his arms hanging down by his side unceremoniously. He was staring directly at her, as if trying to comprehend exactly what she was. And while it made her feel uncomfortable, to say the least, she could understand why he was in a state of complete shock.

“…Surprised?” she carefully asked, to which she only got a strange kind of gargle sound from Mondo. “…I’ll take that as a ‘yes’…”

Abruptly, Mondo shook his head and slapped his face with both hands, startling Chihiro slightly as she waited for him to say something. After what seemed like an eternity, the biker grunted and seemed capable enough to speak with her.

“So…you’re actually…a dude?” he finally said, obviously trying to be respectful…or at least she hoped that’s what it was.

Instead of answering him right there, Chihiro urged him toward the open door to the boy’s locker room and said, “Uh, can we…please…talk about this…in private?”
“Y-Yeah…” an obviously still surprised Mondo answered, slowly following after her as she headed into the boy’s locker room.

Sipping from an emptying noodle cup, the real Junko flipped through a fashion magazine that she was featured in.

“Oh god…I look so amazing in this one! I’m glad I had the sense to get an extra copy of all my fashion debuts before I ended the world.” A malicious smile broke out on her lips as she continued, “After all, it wouldn’t have done to let the whole world forget that someone everyone thought was a slutty bimbo was the one who actually destroyed their precious lives. The despair from that one’s still going strong!”

As she giggled darkly to herself a buzzer suddenly sounded, accompanied by a flashing red light. Tossing away her magazine and empty noodle cup, Junko’s eyes shot over to the monitor that was blaring at her. On it, she saw Chihiro holding the door to the boy’s locker room open for Mondo.

However, rather than be immediately excited, a puzzled look came over Junko.

“Hold on…why is the alarm for a girl entering the boy’s locker room going off? Oh shit, that’s right! Chihiro was the one who originally programmed that sensor and she insisted on being allowed to use the girl’s locker room and listed herself as a girl in the system! I just changed her e-handbook settings, not the system’s. Well…I guess it all works out. Either way…what is this going to lead to?!?”

A now thoroughly enticed Junko snuggled up close to the monitor, watching as the pair entered the boy’s locker room.

The entire way, Chihiro could feel Mondo’s eyes on her, probably scanning her body for any giveaway that she was physically male. Unfortunately for him, she had years of practice in concealing her natural born sex. She was well versed in waxing and hair plucking, though considering her father didn’t have facial hair, she didn’t have much to worry about hair on that front.

Even so, to have Mondo eying her like this was beyond unsettling. She had hoped that he’d accept her, not ogle her for anything she was doing that could be considered masculine. Then again, he was certainly in shock. Anyone would be, considering how well she hid her physical sex from the entire world. She’d even managed to convince the Internet that she was female…a monumental feat in and of itself!

“I’m lucky I never did live blogs or anything…” she quietly said to herself, as she placed her duffle bag on one of the benches before turning back to Mondo.

Fortunately, it seemed that, at least in her eyes, he’d mostly recovered from the shock. She could have done without the frustrated glare that he was giving her, but at the very least, he wasn’t denouncing or poking fun at her…at least not yet.

“So…I suppose I should explain everything?” she offered, trying not to sound as nervous as she was.

“That would help…” a thoroughly conflicted Mondo replied, folding his arms but keeping his terrifying glare in place. Chihiro kind of flinched under his scrutinious gaze but decided it was best just to get it over with and see how Mondo would react.
“Well, while I was born as a boy…I actually feel more like a girl…but I guess that’s obvious…” she said with a forced laugh, to which the biker didn’t respond in the least, prompting her to continue. “It started when I was little. Other boys would make fun of me and call me girly…so I decided to act like a girl to get them to leave me alone. But then…I kinda liked being a girl so, I thought maybe I’d just stay as a girl…at least until this whole thing with Monokuma happened…”

At the mention of Monokuma and his motive, Mondo finally flinched, lowering his head and closing his eyes. At this point, Chihiro wasn’t sure if she had upset him or not but she knew that she needed to keep going.

“I’m sorry for not saying anything sooner…and I apologize if I’ve made you uncomfortable because of it…but even though I think of myself as a girl, it won’t matter to everyone else. Oh, and I-I’m still attracted to girls…even though I identify as one—”.

In midsentence, Mondo’s eyes snapped open and he shouted, “I don’t care about any of that!! I can’t make sense of all this with you blabbering on like this! Just shut up for a second, would ya??”

An audible gasp erupted from Chihiro and, almost against her will, she started tearing up. It was becoming a natural reaction but she felt completely justified for it this time. The dreaded moment was finally upon her, she was going to hear Mondo’s opinion about everything. And judging by his tone, he had some choice words to grill into her.

Doing her best to harden her heart, and failing miserably, Chihiro closed her eyes and waited for him to continue.

“Here it comes…”

In truth, Mondo hadn’t had any idea what to expect after Chihiro revealed that she…he…that they were born a boy! He was shocked sure…but mostly because there was still a part of his mind that could only see Chihiro as an adorable, pretty, petite little girl. And because of that, it was hard to really look at…her/him. Plus, it made all of his imagining of Chihiro naked earlier seem much…much creepier than he had ever intended! He kind of wanted to punch himself in the face again, this time for a very different reason!

Despite that though, the thing that he couldn’t stand, the thing that really upset him about all of this wasn’t the fact that she/he was a boy or that she/he had kept it from him…it was the fact that she/he seemed to be apologizing to him for it! All her/his talk about freaking him out with this seemed like bullshit to him!

That’s why, when Chihiro actually did apologize for deceiving him and making him uncomfortable…he kind of lost it.

“I don’t care about any of that!!” he found himself shouting, just to get Chihiro to quiet down for a moment so he could think. “I can’t make sense of all this with you blabbering on like this! Just shut up for a second, would ya??”

The instant those words left his mouth, regret poured in. He watched as Chihiro tried his/her best to remain composed but the moisture building in the corners of his/her eyes showed what the petite programmer was really feeling. And once again, Mondo felt like shit for making Chihiro cry. It didn’t matter that Chihiro was physically a boy, making him/her cry because he couldn’t figure this out wasn’t Chihiro’s fault!
And when Chihiro closed his/her eyes, as if preparing for him to assault her/him, something snapped inside Mondo…and he knew he had to make it right!

“Argh. Look, I don’t care about you wanting to be a girl or anything like that! And if you want me to keep it a secret, that’s fine too! I won’t tell nobody until you’re ready if you want! That’s not what I’m upset about!” he ended up shouting, although he hadn’t intended to.

But then again, he didn’t really know any other way to get his point across. He really didn’t care if Chihiro wanted to be a girl or not. Yeah, it was embarrassing for him because of how he’d obsessed over it earlier but in the end, that wasn’t that big of a deal! In the end, nothing had really changed between them…Chihiro still needed his help and he had to fulfill his promise.

Just as he was about to tell Chihiro that, he heard a slight sniffling and looked down to see Chihiro looking up at him with tears streaming down her/his cheeks.

“S-So…” Chihiro asked weakly, slowly opening…her eyes. “…you don’t hate me? You don’t think I’m…disgusting?”

Kind of offended that she thought so little of him, Mondo scoffed and answered, “Hell no! Why would I? Just because you like dresses and crap and want to be a girl…that’s all your call! It shouldn’t matter what anyone, especially someone like me, says about it! If you wanna be a girl, then it’s your god-damn business and no one else’s!”

Mondo hoped that she got the message that he wasn’t trying to be a bastard to her…and he got his answer a moment later…

“*If you wanna be a girl, then it’s your god-damn business and no one else’s!*”

Those words echoed in Chihiro’s mind over and over and over and over again. She could hardly believe her ears…and yet, at the same time, somehow she could. Mondo had been understanding, he had been kind…sort of, and he had been able to accept her…for who she really was.

A feeling of unparalleled joy surged forth from deep within her and for the first time in her entire life, she cried tears of pure happiness and acceptance.

However, Mondo only saw a crying girl and was instantly taken aback by the sudden flow of new tears. “W-Whoa! What the hell?! Why are you crying?! I thought I was being nice and shit?!”

An abrupt giggle erupted from Chihiro and despite her tears, she smiled warmly at him. “S-Sorry! I guess…I’m just happy!”

“O-Oh…uh…okay?” the biker said, obviously trying to understand why anyone could cry tears of joy. However, none of that mattered to Chihiro in the least.

She had been right to trust Mondo. She hadn’t known why or how, but something deep inside her had told her that he was the one she confessed to, he’d accept her. She had placed all of her bets on that and, despite the overwhelming odds and his stereotypical biker attitude, Mondo seemed to at least understand that she needed his help. And for that, she was eternally grateful…

Taking a moment to wipe away the tears from her reddened face, she smiled brightly for the first time in a long while as she said, “T-Thank you, Mondo…”
Despite the new knowledge that his ‘girl’ friend Chihiro was physically a boy, Mondo couldn’t help but blush as she thanked him. Quickly, averting his gaze, the biker gritted his teeth when he realized that he’d need to get used to feeling a bit uncomfortable when she smiled at him.

“It’s not fair…she’s too fucking adorable not to think of her as a girl! But at the same time…I can’t think of her as a ‘girl-girl’…at least not yet,” he unfortunately surmised, sighing as he cleared his throat to get her attention.

“T-There’s no need to thank me for anything. I’m just keeping my promise…that’s all.”

Even he knew he was acting tough, but at the moment, he didn’t have any other course of action open to him. And Chihiro must have understood that because she somehow lessened her smile and nodded to him.

“…Right,” was all she said in response, earning another flush from the biker, which he did his best to convince himself was only the room being humid from the pool.

“Now that we got that out of the way,” Mondo said, his tone turning serious, earning a confused look from Chihiro. “There’s…uh…something that I gotta know.”

“Y-Yes…?” Chihiro nervously replied, obviously surprised by his tone and attitude.

Not wanting to upset her any further, Mondo decided to just come out and ask, “Why the hell did you want to meet with me? I mean, of all people, why in the hell did you think I’d be the best person to tell your secret to? There are a shit ton of other people that would probably be more...understanding than I would be, right? Junko, Makoto…hell even Hina would have been a better choice than me! So why the hell did you need it to be me?”

As he asked, he noticed Chihiro slightly avert her gaze, as if she might be guilty about something…that couldn’t be a good sign.

“I was really hoping he wouldn’t ask that…but then again, I’d be curious too,” Chihiro mused before nervously lacing her fingers together. Definitely sure that telling him that she wasn’t quite sure would be a huge mistake, the petite programmer took an extra moment to decide on the right answer.

“Well, if I had to say why…it’s because I really admire you, Mondo.”

“What?!” a perplexed Mondo retorted, looking completely and utterly put off by her answer. “But…you’ve been keeping your secret all this time…and you had no idea how I’d react and shit, right?”

Knowing she needed to elaborate, Chihiro continued, “…Y-You’re right, but…” she hesitated for only a moment before looking him square in the eyes. “I want to change! I wrapped myself in lies because I’m weak…and…and…I don’t want to be like that anymore!”

If Mondo wasn’t visibly taken aback before, he was now. Shock exuded from him and it was as if he couldn’t really comprehend what she was trying to say. To that end, Chihiro felt that she needed to be even clearer with him, so that he could understand how much she needed him.

“I want to start working out, get myself physically stronger so that I can learn what it is to really be
strong! But to do that… I need your help, Mondo! I need you to teach me how to work out so I can become a stronger person… just like you!” she exclaimed, hoping that her explanation would be enough for him to understand.

And unfortunately…it was.

Mondo wasn’t quite sure when it happened but somewhere during Chihiro’s speech, her words of praise…began to feel more like insults.

“Strong?…She’s calling me of all people… strong?! The guy who got his own brother killed… the guy who lied to his entire gang just to keep them together?! How the hell can I be considered strong?!”

As those dark thoughts invaded his mind, Mondo only partially wanted to dismiss them. Saying them, even if only to himself in his own head, made the pressure building up within him begin to lessen. And just when he thought that he was going to be okay, just when he figured that he could control his temper… Chihiro continued her speech.

“You’re… you’re really strong, Mondo! Whatever secret Monokuma has over you… you’re strong enough to face it, right?” an eager Chihiro told him, smiling affectionately toward him. “I want to get stronger too! So that I can be as strong as—!”

Mondo couldn’t breathe… he could barely keep himself standing… as Chihiro threw those words in his face. He wasn’t quite sure when it had happened, but before he even realized it, Mondo found his hands clenched into fists and he couldn’t stop himself from lowering his gaze and saying, “You piece of shit…”

All at once, the air in the room seemed to thicken and Mondo heard Chihiro gasp as he cut her off. She’d obviously heard him… and the horrible thing was… he wanted her to.

“So what… you’re saying I should just come right out and say it?” he questioned, his voice deepening menacingly. Snapping his head up, he roared, “You’re saying that if I really am strong, then I should be able to tell everyone my secret?! Like you just did?!”

“H-Huh?” Chihiro squeaked, the terror brought about by Mondo’s change physically affecting her.

But honestly, that didn’t matter in the least to Mondo… not right now.

How could that little pipsqueak stand there and accuse herself of being weak and insist that Mondo was the strong one?! Chihiro had the courage to face her own weakness, confronting it as best she could! Even now, as terrified as she appeared to be, she was still acting far stronger than Mondo could ever hope to!

And why?! Because she had the balls to ask for help when she really needed it! She didn’t avoid people and cower in fear like he had! No, she faced her problems head on… like he should have but was too afraid to! Hell, even though she wanted to be a girl, Chihiro was more of a man than he was!

In fact, Mondo remembered his brother Daiya once told him that, ‘True men ask for help when they need it. Cowards run off to be alone’. Is this what he meant? Was Mondo being weak by trying to solve his problems on his own?!! And why did Chihiro of all people have to be the one to question his strength?! Was tiny, weak, pathetic little Chihiro actually stronger than he was—?

“I…I get it… I finally get it…” the frustrated biker thought as he stepped around Chihiro and headed
toward a stack of dumbbells on a rack that pressed against the nearby wall.

It all made sense…it finally all made sense to him! Chihiro, despite the supposed weakness she claimed to have, was actually stronger than he was! And it was because of that…because Chihiro was strong…just like Daiya had been…that Mondo felt his entire being becoming consumed with rage.

And just like that, Mondo could feel something creak inside his head…until something important snapped.

A bleak sense of horror had fallen over Chihiro as she watched Mondo’s behavior drastically change. She couldn’t fathom why he was being so aggressive now…why he was being so…mean to her.

“I…I don’t understand…Mondo…he accepted me…right? Why is he being so...”

Chihiro didn’t have time to ponder further before Mondo abruptly shouted at her again, “Are you making fun of me?! You think I’m strong! Are you fucking with me right now?!”

Caught off-guard by his insinuations, Chihiro’s fragile mind began to collapse as she answered, “I-I’m not making fun of you, really! I-It’s just…you really are strong, Mondo—”.

Suddenly, Mondo let out a furious shout more fearsome than Chihiro had ever heard before. Her ears rang loudly but despite that, she could hear the sound of Mondo…shouting at himself!

“What the hell did he want me to do?! What the fuck was I supposed to do?! Am I expected to just sit back and let my secret get exposed to the entire world?! And let it ruin everything I’ve done?!”

Chihiro had a hard time watching as the man she admired and respected more than any other berated and accused himself of such horrific things. His eyes dilated and he was frantically sucking air into his lungs, shouting each sentence as if it were his last. To others, they would have seen a mad man… but to Chihiro, he was a valuable friend that needed her help!

“T-This isn’t the time to be scared!” she assured herself as she inched toward her anger stricken friend. “It’s Mondo…he’d never actually hurt me…I know he wouldn’t!”

With that reassurance in mind, Chihiro bravely called out, “W-What’s wrong, Mondo?!”

The instant her words reached him, the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader immediately set his gaze upon her. Grabbing something from behind his back, Mondo strode over and towered above her, glaring down at her as if she’d committed some vile betrayal against him.

“You! Why did you have to tell me that I was strong?! Are you trying to rub my failure in my face?! Huh?!” he shouted down at her, his spit splattering against her face.

Despite the overwhelming fear and terror forced upon her, Chihiro managed to hold her ground. Her legs shook and her hands trembled but she didn’t relent. With tears beginning to fall from her eyes, she met his ferocious gaze.

“N-No…I just…really admire you,” she told him in the hope of getting him to calm down. Unfortunately, she then uttered the last thing she should have said, “I admire…your strength…”
Chihiro had no idea that those words...sealed her fate.

“I admire...your strength...”

Those words were like a dull knife twisting in Mondo’s chest...and he couldn’t let her get away with saying something so infuriating...and so...he pulled the dumbbell from behind his back...

“...That’s right... I am strong...” he seethed, feeling the weight of the dumbbell getting lighter as he lifted it up. “Strong...I’m strong!”

I’m strong...I’m strong...I’m strong...I’m strong...I’m strong...I’m strong...I’m strong, I’m strong, I’m strong, I’m strong, I’m strong, I’m strong, I’m strong I’m strong I’m strong I’m strong I’m strong I’m strong I’m strong strong strong strong strong strong strong strong...!!

Mondo could see the terrified visage on Chihiro’s face but it didn’t matter at all to him, not now...not after all she’d done to him! She needed to be taught a lesson! She needed to know that he truly was stronger than her!

“I’m stronger than you! And I’m stronger than DAIIIIIYAAAAA!!”

The moment Chihiro saw Mondo raise the heavy dumbbell over his head...she knew she’d done something horribly wrong. Even so...she didn’t blame him...not in the least...

“It’s my fault...all my fault...if only I was stronger...if only I hadn’t upset Mondo...it’s because...I’m weak...weak...weak...weak...weak...weak...”

That was the very last though that Chihiro had...before the dumbbell came crashing down on her head.

High up in the surveillance room on the fourth floor, a despair enthralled Junko squealed with joy as she watched the proceedings. Saliva trailed down her chin and dripped onto the floor, a euphoric visage plastered over her entire face.

“Yes! Yes! THIS...This is what I wanted...” a lustful moan escaped her lips as her eyes remained glued to the scene...until she saw something that completely broke her euphoria.

“...No...fucking...way...”

Honestly, Mondo wasn’t quite sure what was happening to him. It was like he was a spectator in his own body, watching as he flew into a rage and grabbed the nearby dumbbell. He felt his muscles strain as he raised it high above his head and prepared to bring it crashing down on...on...Chihiro’s...head...!
Just as that thought occurred to him, the biker swore he heard the voice of a friend shouting in his ear…

“I just don’t want you flying off the handle and killing someone! I don’t want you or anyone else to end up like I did! So calm the fuck down!”

Mondo recognized that voice…it was Leon’s voice! That’s right! It was the warning that the baseball star had given him just before coming up to see…Chihiro!

“Oh God! No! Chihiro! Noooooo!” the biker screamed in his mind as reality came crashing down on him.

All at once, Mondo became super conscious of everything that he was doing. The dumbbell in his hand was being swung down toward a terrified Chihiro’s head and time itself seemed to have slowed as the biker watched the heavy weight descending toward its target. Nothing could stop the dumbbell from falling, that was obvious, but there was still time to divert it!

With all of the strength Mondo could summon, he flung his other arm directly into the dumbbell with crippling force. The biker prayed that it would be enough to move the heavy weight far enough away from its intended target…but was horrified when a sickening sound abruptly reached his ears.

*Crack*

Chihiro’s head bobbed from the force of the attack and an instant later, her entire body went limp, crumbling to the floor with a deafening thud.

At this time, Mondo’s follow through with the dumbbell came to a halt. As the heavy weight slipped from his fingers, a mortified visage overtook the biker’s face. Tears poured out of his eyes as his mind tried to catch up with exactly what he’d done to the poor petite programmer. And as soon as he could draw breath into his lungs…Mondo let out a despair filled wail.

“CHIIIIIIIIROOOOOOOOOO!!!!”

Far away, in the belly of the library, Byakuya continued to take notes on Genocide Jack’s weakness. That is, until that sickening wail reached his perfectly groomed ears.

“CHIIIIIIIIROOOOOOOO!!!!”

At once, the Ultimate Affluent Progeny was at attention, leaping up from his seat and assuming a defensive position. When he determined that nothing within his general vicinity was a threat to him, he immediately began to broaden his perspective. That despairing wail, despite being wrapped in agony, obviously belonged to the violence prone biker…but why was he calling out the petite programmer’s name?

Almost unbeknownst to himself, Byakuya let a dastardly smile decorate his lips as he said, “It seems that the game is afoot once again…”

This was just the sort of activity he needed to get his mind off of that Genocide Jack nonsense, and he certainly wouldn’t let a good hunt go to waste. Feeling a rush of excitement, the Togami Heir was about to take off when he decided to spend an extra moment thinking the situation out.

“In this case, either Chihiro attacked Mondo, Mondo attacked Chihiro…or someone else attacked
them together,” he said aloud to himself, knowing he was all alone due to the absence of the putrid
smell Toko harbored wherever she went. “In the first case, subduing Chihiro would be a simple feat.
The other two cases will prove more of a challenge…”

Glancing over at the desk lamp and extension cord, Byakuya let a grin overtake his lips. Reaching
out and grasping the lamp, he lifted it up enough to grab the head of the extension cord. Unplugging
it from the lamp, and giving the other end a quick tug to dislodge it from the wall socket, the Togami
Heir loosed the long cord before wrapping it around his arm.

Smirking to himself, Byakuya was pleased that, just in case he encountered a foe that needed to be
subdued, he could accomplish that with the extension cord alone.

“No need to destroy a perfectly good lamp when I could just as easily wrap this around the culprit’s
neck,” he mused aloud as he turned to face the door. “Alright then…this should be interesting!”

Without another word, he sped out of the library and headed down the hall toward where the scream
had originated from.

“Oh fuck! Oh God! What the hell have I…?” Mondo rambled as he fell to his knees beside Chihiro’s
body. And just as before, his mind was consumed with memories of his past sins…

...“Oh shit! Oh SHIT! Bro! Come on, Bro! Wake up!” Mondo screamed, shaking his brother’s bloody
body…slow grunts escaped Daiya’s throat as his eyes fluttered open…possibly for the last time...

...Tears flowed down Mondo’s cheeks as he added another sin to his memoir…

Chihiro lay there, completely still, devoid of all life whatsoever. Her adorable eyes shut tight…never
to open and grace this world with their beauty every again. Her slender arms lay at her sides, her
palms up and fingers slightly curled. Her mouth slightly agape as her last breath had undoubtedly
passed through her lips.

With dilated eyes, Mondo stared down at her unsettling visage…before his gaze drifted over to the
dumbbell, that had the slightly stain of blood on the edge…where it must have crushed Chihiro’s…
fragile skull. His vision shot up to where he’d struck her…the tiniest trickle of blood sticking to her
hair. Words failed him as he held his hands in front of his face…the hands that would forever be
stained with the innocent Chihiro’s blood—

“…erh…”

Mondo gasped louder than he thought possible as that tiny squeak came from Chihiro’s supposed
corpse. For a moment, he wasn’t sure if he’d really heard it, or if it was just his mind finally
collapsing under the weight of his crime. But then, the biker’s mind flashed back to when he’d seen
Sayaka, covered in blood and supposedly dead in Makoto’s shower, remembering that the pop idol
had had much more blood on her than Chihiro did right now! So…it was possible that—!

“A-A pulse! I need to see if she still has one!"

Sliding over and positioning himself right next to Chihiro, Mondo tried to remember how you check
for a pulse. He pressed his fingers to the programmer’s neck but was afraid of pressing to hard and hurting her...in case she was just unconscious. Growing more and more frantic, and not knowing the proper way to check pulses, the biker eventually slammed his fist into the floor.

No! Not again! He couldn’t let it happen again! His stupidity and pride had already cost him the life of his brother! He couldn’t let it happen again! He wouldn’t let it happen again!

“Dammit! How the hell does this work?! I don’t know anything about medical stuff—!” Gasping midsentence, Mondo realized that, while he didn’t know anything about CPR or medical practices, he knew someone who did! “Junko! I-I need to get Junko!”

Knowing there was no time to waste, the biker leapt to his feet but before he even took a step, a problem arose.

“Fuck…I don’t know what room is hers!” he exclaimed, his palm slapping his forehead due to his own stupidity.

However, a second later, Mondo remembered that his e-handbook had a map of the school, with each student’s room listed there as well! Pulling his e-handbook out of his coat pocket, he pushed the button on the side...and was greeted with silence. The usual tone of the device powering on didn’t trigger and the silence dug into the biker as he began to furiously press that power button with more and more ferocity.

It was then that Mondo remembered that his own e-handbook was still broken...and completely useless in assisting to get help for...Chihiro...

“Shit...shit...SHIT, SHIT, SHIIIIIIIT!!!!” Mondo screamed, his voice beginning to give out from the strain he’d put on it. But he couldn’t care about any of that, not when he still had no idea what to do to help Chihiro!

His frantic mind ran in circles, trying to find a way to get help. He could go banging around on everyone’s door until he found Junko’s door...but that could take too long and by that time Chihiro could...! Shaking his head and forcing away that terrifying outcome, Mondo continued to wrack his brain for a solution...but even he knew that thinking wasn’t his strong suit.

“God-dammit! Why now?! Why can’t I even think of anything when Chihiro needs me the most?! If only Taka were here, he’d know what to—oh fuck, why didn’t I think of that sooner?!”

Of course Taka would know what to do! He probably even knew where Junko’s room was too! He was smart like that...plus his e-handbook was still working so even if the moral compass didn’t know, he would just look it up! This would work...with this...he just might be able to save Chihiro!

Knowing that Chihiro probably had little time, Mondo prepared to speed from the room when a crippling thought occurred to him.

“E-Everyone’s gonna wonder...why the hell Chihiro’s in the guy’s locker room!” Mondo blurted aloud, turning to glance at his, hopefully just unconscious, friend.

Mondo was familiar enough with the locker room rules to know that each person had to scan their e-handbook to get in. He’d only been able to get in before because Chihiro had held the door for him, and the camera could see that they were both male. He was certain that the others...Byakuya or Kyoko in particular, would question that. And while it shouldn’t have outweighed the biker’s decision to leave immediately...he couldn’t forget the promise he’d made.

“I...I promised...to keep your secret...until you were ready...” he whispered to himself, battling
with his own conscience over what he should do. “If I get them…they’ll find out…you’re…physically…a boy…but if I don’t…then you might…”

He couldn’t finish his sentence, the reality of it still too fresh for him to revisit. However, just as he was about to give up and have to break his promise…he was struck by inspiration.

“If…they found you in the girl’s locker room…they’d never know!!” he shouted, feeling a plan come together.

With that infallible logic motivating him, Mondo prepared to transport Chihiro over to the girl’s locker room when another roadblock appeared…or rather he recalled it.

“…I can’t get into the girl’s locker room! Fuck!!”

Turning around and cursing, he smashed his fist into the door leading into the pool, the metal door flying open as he struck it. The humidity of the pool hit him instantly and he took deep breaths to try and calm himself…and then another idea came to him.

Stepping out into the pool area, he looked over at the door that led back into the girl’s locker room from the poolside. Dashing toward it, he prayed he might be right and grabbed the handle of the door, twisting and giving it a tug…but it remained steadfast.

“Fucking fuck!!” Mondo cursed again, abruptly kicking the door that prevented him from keeping Chihiro’s gender a secret.

Spinning around, Mondo was about to resign himself to having to just go and get Taka, having to explain everything to everyone in the process, when he noticed something sitting on one of the bleachers by the pool. Slowly approaching, the biker’s eyes widened when realized that it was exactly what he thought it was.

“An e-handbook?” he said, picking it up and turning it on. Again, he felt a surge of hope as he waited for the name to appear on it. And he wasn’t disappointed…

Sayaka Maizono

A relieved expression broke out on Mondo’s face as he realized his luck! He wasn’t sure how or why Sayaka had left her e-handbook in the pool room but he wasn’t complaining! With this, he could still keep his promise to Chihiro!

Dashing over to the door on the girl’s side from the pool area, he found another card reader on the wall and pressed it there, hope that even if it didn’t work, since there was no turret on this side, he’d be safe. And just as he suspected, an audible click reached his ears and he was finally able to turn the handle and gain access to the girl’s locker room.

Taking a quick peek inside, he saw that the girl’s locker room was essentially the same as the boy’s only with a pinkish hue on the floors and walls instead of the bluish one the boy’s had. Seeing that it was virtually identical to the boy’s locker room, a plan began to form in his mind.

Running back into the boy’s locker room, he took another glance at Chihiro…feeling guilty that he was taking so long to go and get help. Fortunately, even though there was a bit of blood in her hair, it didn’t seem to have dripped onto the carpet beneath her body, so he wouldn’t need to change that around or anything!

However, there was the matter of the dumbbell and Chihiro’s duffle bag. Both needed to be moved and he figured it was best to do that now, before moving Chihiro herself. Grabbing the duffle bag
was simple enough, but as he bent over to grasp the dumbbell, he froze. He could still see it, the images of him clocking Chihiro beside the head…her falling like a ragdoll to the floor…it was all his fault…!

Making a fist, Mondo punched himself across the face, as he’d done a few times today, and said, “Now ain’t the time for pussin’ out! I gotta get this over with fast!”

Steeling his resolve, Mondo forced his hand to grasp the dumbbell and lifted it up, the weight of it feeling heavier than it had before. Pushing that thought aside, Mondo chose to go out to the front of the locker rooms. He’d need to prop the girl’s door open for everyone once they got there, and decided that using the duffle bag would be the best way. Using Sayaka’s e-handbook, he easily gained access to the girl’s locker room again, this time placing the blue duffle bag in the way of the closing door, keeping it open.

As he set the duffle bag down, something slipped fell out of it. Mondo’s hand reached out to retrieve whatever it was, only to see that it was actually Chihiro’s e-handbook!

“Shit! I almost forgot about this! I can’t let them find this!” he said, stuffing the electronic device into his coat pocket, next to his broken one. Considering that her e-handbook could reveal her gender, it was best for Mondo to keep it…and if necessary, he knew how to dispose of it.

With that secure, he stepped into the girl’s locker room and headed for the identical spot where Chihiro lay in the boy’s locker room. Setting down the heavy dumbbell, Mondo felt a weight lift off him as he set it in place…although the guilt never truly left him. However, he continued to push all those thoughts aside, at least until he got help for Chihiro.

Now, with the both rooms open and prepared, Mondo was free to move Chihiro and put the plan into action. As he headed back into the boy’s locker room, he worked out what he’d tell everyone.

If he told them that he happened to find Chihiro in the girl’s locker room, which would be open for reasons he would pretend not to know, then no one would question her gender…and he could dodge the blame…for having attacked her.

A sharp pain stung his chest as he thought of lying about the attack…knowing that he should just fess up to it and get it over with. However…if Chihiro didn’t survive…then he’d become the school’s first real murderer…and he’d need an alibi. And with her being in the girl’s locker room, no one would suspect him, a guy, of being able to get in there to do it.

No matter how despicable it made him feel…to even consider this…he couldn’t die here. He couldn’t let everything he’d worked for…the gang that he and his…brother had built fall apart. He still had to keep that promise…the promise he’d made to Daiya as he’d breathed his last…

…

“My bad…Little Bro. Sorry…I fucked…up” Daiya said to him…his usual confident smile in place. Mondo was stunned into silence…because even now…his brother never blamed him for the accident…

“My…the rest is up to you. No matter what…you gotta keep the gang…together…”

Daiya…died in Mondo’s arms a few moment later…and that was when Mondo gave his word, as a man, that he would carry on his brother’s legacy…and keep the Crazy Diamonds together…no matter the cost!

…
That promise had been what was keeping Mondo going for many years now. Whenever times got hard, he’d remember the promise he’d made and would find a way to push through it…and this time was no exception…

Standing in front of Chihiro’s body…who he wasn’t really sure was alive or dead, he bowed his head in apology.

“Chihiro…I…I’m sorry…for everything…but still…I…I won’t…I won’t let myself die here! I gotta get out…for my boys…but…I also need to keep my promise to you…so…if you can hear me…please forgive me for what I have to do now!”

Bending down and scooping up the seemingly lifeless Chihiro, he carried her bridal style, which he thought would have been the most comfortable had she been awake, and headed out of the boy’s locker room from the front and moved toward the girl’s locker room. Like before, Sayaka’s e-handbook gained him access and once inside, he gently set Chihiro down on the carpet…minding her head as he laid her down.

Standing over her, seeing that everything was in place, Mondo now felt that he could safely go and get Taka. Sparing one last glance down at Chihiro, the biker’s hardened visage softened.

“I’ll be right back…just hang on a bit longer, Chihiro!”

And with that, he tore from the girl’s locker room, leaving the duffle bag holding the door open in place as he spend out the doors and down the hall.

Byakuya was already beginning to become bored of his searching. He’d examined all of the classrooms along his way toward the staircase leading down to the first floor but had yet to find anything.

“The only place left is the pool—”

Just as he said that, he heard furious stomping footsteps heading his way. Ducking behind a nearby pillar, he peered out and waited. As if on cue, the Togami Heir watched as Mondo sped out of the hallway and practically flew down the staircase, heading for the first floor. And although he appeared to be a criminal fleeing the scene of their own crime, Byakuya felt it necessary to investigate before blatantly labeling him a criminal.

“Though I doubt that won’t be the case…” he muttered to himself as he emerged from his hiding place and jogged down the hall toward the pool area.

Upon entering the area just before the dressing room, Byakuya instantly noticed the door to the girl’s locker room ajar. Cautiously, he went to the side of the door, and peered in. At first he saw nothing, indicating that Mondo may be the only perpetrator in this case. Courageously placing his hand on the door, he opened it fully to get a full view of the room.

As soon as he did, his eyes widened as he saw the lifeless form of Chihiro resting on the carpet in front of the exercise equipment. His shock only lasted a moment before he returned to his usual cold nature, taking a step inside and surveying the room.

Obviously he noticed the dumbbell with the tiny blood stain, and the minute amount of blood on Chihiro’s head as well, it was clearly visible to him even from across the room. Throwing caution to the wind and walking over to her, Byakuya felt a hint of nostalgia as he looked down at her
supposed corpse.

Briefly recalling his past oversight in the first case, he sneered as he said, “I will be sure of it this time.”

Without another word he got onto his knees and lowered his head. Pressing his ear against the Chihiro’s motionless chest, he listened carefully for the distinct sound of her heartbeat.

…

…

Thump-Thump…Thump-Thump

…

…

As much as it killed the thrill that another class trial would have brought, Byakuya wasn’t entirely upset that he could hear her heart still beating. Not only that, there were the faint sounds of her breathing as well, though they seemed few and hard to discern. It was almost as if she was in a coma.

“Well, that settles that, I suppose,” the Togami heir said, leaning back onto his knees and glaring at her. “I would have appreciated being able to use this opportunity to—“.

Just then, in the middle of his sentence, his brain clicked with a plan that would absolve him of any future problems. He looked around the area and found all that he would need to do exactly what needed to be done to rid himself of a bothersome, putrid smelling pest, once and for all.

“Genocide Jack…it’s time you made an appearance,” Byakuya said with a snide grin as he hoisted Chihiro’s body up and toward the exercise equipment, the extension cord still clutched tightly in his hand.

Like a bat out of hell, Mondo tore down the hallway toward Taka’s room, shouting at the top of his lungs.

“BRO!!! TAKA!!! WAKE UP, MAN!!!”

He knew that it wasn’t even nighttime yet, but he was certain that the moral compass had probably gone to sleep early, since almost everyone had retired to their room since Monokuma had announced the motive. He sped past the cafeteria, not even registering the two people inside who saw and heard him flying by.

Reaching his friend Taka’s door, he furiously pounded on it while simultaneously pressing the doorbell furiously. Almost immediately, the Ultimate Moral Compass’ door flew open and the man himself stood there, still completely dressed in his uniform. With a slight hint of shock at seeing Mondo so sweaty and out of breath, he asked, “Mondo! Are you alright? You seem out of breath, did you run here from somewhere?”

Despite knowing that he was essentially deceiving everyone, Mondo couldn’t help the momentary feeling of joy that swept through him as Taka showed genuine concern for him. And even though it hurt him to have to lie to his newfound friend, the biker was determined to keep both his promises…
regardless of the consequences.

Not only that, but at that moment, Mondo knew the desperation he felt in getting help for Chihiro wasn’t an act, and that gave him the courage to finally go through with it. Drawing in a huge breath, he shouted in Taka’s face, “IT’S CHIRHIO!!! SHE GOT ATTACKED!!!”

Taka’s face blanched as he heard this and Mondo took a moment to look down the hall to see both Sayaka and Leon staring down the hallway, looking directly at him. Their faces also seemed to lose color as the news registered with them.

“No turning back now…” Mondo realized as Taka began shouting instructions for Sayaka and Leon to begin gathering everyone.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! First off, since so many of you have commented about this, I feel that I must clarify something:

I am aware of the typo at the end of both this and last chapter with Mondo shouting Chihiro’s name incorrectly, and that was totally intentional…it’s not like I just really enjoyed finding it afterward because of you all mentioning it and decided it would be more amusing to just leave it! Nope! Certainly! I totally meant to make him sound flustered and stuff…maybe.

Anyway, oh no! Mondo did the dumb thing…again! Will the other students figure it out? Can Mondo really deceive them all? Is Byakuya going to continue to be a bastard? And, since there is no blackened in this case, will there even be a trial? You’ll have to tune in next time to find out!

Side note, I’m curious as to what your ideas are regarding what will happen next. Feel free to leave speculations or ideas in the comments or reviews. Again, I have to say that, even though I am very busy, please know that I wish I could respond to all reviews. However, I do my best and sincerely appreciate every single review that I get, long or short!

With that in mind, thanks to all of you for supporting my idea and leave a review if you have more questions or ideas! I will do my best to respond to as many of them as I can. Thanks again, and be sure to keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
“Ahhh, yeah…that’s the stuff…”

An ecstatic moan escaped Mukuro’s throat as she let the hot water glide over her nude body, her hands running through her hair and over her arms. It had been a day or so since she’d last bathed and, as shamefully as she had to admit, she was growing accustomed to showering. When in Fenrir, bathing was sometimes not possible for weeks on end, and she’d become used to being caked with sweat and dirt. But since coming to Hope’s Peak, particularly since the killing game began, she’d been bathing regularly, as per her sister’s orders. And even though it brought painful memories of her sister and her betrayal, Mukuro couldn’t deny how amazing it felt to take a hot shower after a stressful day of keeping her classmates from killing each other.

“If nothing else…I have to thank Junko for introducing me to this amazing feeling…”

Letting the water rinse all of her worries away, she stuck her head beneath the waterfall coming from her showerhead, letting her real hair get a thorough rinse before having to be hidden beneath that abominable wig once again.

“How can Junko stand having that much hair?” she muttered quietly, so that the camera in her room wouldn’t be able to hear her. However, at the moment, she truly didn’t care, as long as she could feel the blissful heat of the water rushing down her body, she’d gladly tell Junko how having such long hair was not only a hindrance in battle, it was just stupid to grow it out that long anyway!

“Who needs hair that reaches their lower back?! What purpose does that serve?!” she questioned, letting the splashing water at her feet obscure her voice.

Mukuro briefly pondered that notion a moment longer before allowing herself to get lost in the blissful stream of heat that encompassed her body. Sadly, she knew she shouldn’t linger in the shower too long. Mukuro knew that tonight would be vital to everyone’s survival, considering how terrifying this new motive was. She’d need to patrol the hall the entire night, regardless of how suspicious that would make her seem to the others if she was discovered. To that end, she determined that it was time to leave the magnificent steam-filled shower…in about five more minutes.

Meticulously scrubbing every hint of dirt and grime from her shoulders before moving her hands down to gently glide over each of her breasts, she let the soothing waters cleanse her of impurities…or so she would like to believe.

Deep down, she realized how ugly she truly was, and nothing would change that. Almost subconsciously, she lifted up her right hand to survey its injury. The wound was healing as well as could be expected, considering that a piece of metal had pierced completely through it. Scar tissue had built up around the edges of the hole, clumps of fragmented muscle and skin closing up the gaping wound, leaving a massive, ugly gash just above her palm.

And the worst of it was the backside of her hand. Flipping it over, she grimaced as the mass of scarring tissue and ripped skin completely obscured the proud soldier’s Fenrir tattoo, leaving the mark nothing more than a memory for her to mourn.

As if to amplify her depression, the stream of hot watery bliss abruptly cut off, and Mukuro knew
exactly what that meant.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

Ahem, this is a school announcement. It is now 10PM...

A dissatisfied grunt resounded through the shower as Mukuro heard the bear’s ‘lovely’ voice announcing the premature end of her shower time.

“Can always count on Junko to tear you away from what you love most and leave you cold and frustrated…” the soldier seethed as she grabbed the towel she’d left by the door.

Sitting on the floor just below the hanging towel was a pair of clean panties and a bottle of fresh water. As she toweled herself dry, the soldier briefly allowed her mind to wander…mainly as to why her passionate affair with the piping hot water had been cut cruelly short.

Actually, Mukuro had initially questioned why water was to be shut off at night anyway, but had since arrived at a few suspicions.

Firstly, in case a murder was to occur in a dorm room, blood couldn’t simply be washed off, leaving the culprit without a means to clean themselves or to help hide their crime. And while it might seem counter-productive to limit a potential killer’s options, to Junko at the very least, watching as you are forced to remain caked in the blood of your victim had the potential for maddening despair, which the younger twin sustained herself on.

Secondly, and more likely, it was to limit the students’ nightly activities. After a hot shower, there wasn’t much else anyone would feel like doing, especially if you bathed at night. However, by restricting the times you could shower, it put each student slightly more on edge, considering that they now had to manage their time to be sure they bathed properly. It forced them into a schedule, whether they wanted to or not. The nighttime rule shared a similar goal, designating a time of day when it seemed “wrong” to be awake.

Third and finally, because Junko knew how much Mukuro loved showers and wanted to take them away from her.

…Childish, to say the least but the soldier couldn’t help but feel that her sister would enjoy knowing that the night owl that Mukuro was would no longer be able to sneak a midnight shower…as she had done while the school was still in operation.

“Sometimes I think Junko hates me…” she sarcastically seethed, unscrewing the lid of the water bottle. Gulping down the plastic containers contents, Mukuro decided to let her body cool down before having to redress and head off to patrol the school all night.

Slipping on the pair of panties she’d prepared earlier, the mostly naked soldier pushed open the bathroom door, remnant steam from the shower filtering out into her sleeping area. Furiously toweling off her damp hair, Mukuro unabashedly strolled into the main area of her room, glancing up at where her room’s camera was placed, and grinned.

From the ceiling, one of the designer blouses that Junko had picked out for her to disguise herself with hung, held up by large pins she’d found in the student store, and obscuring the invasive camera’s vision.

“The rules say we can’t destroy or tamper with the cameras. It never said we couldn’t hang our shirts from the ceiling. Not my fault that sis placed a camera directly behind where I like to hang my laundry,” she said with a curt laugh.
She’d hung the shirt last night as a test, to see if her sister would have Monokuma remove it. However, even after being absent from her room all day and suffering though the announcement of the second motive, the brand name shirt still hung in place. It meant that either Junko consented to the fact that this wasn’t a true violation of the rules, or that she was just too busy or uninterested enough to let it remain there.

In either case, Mukuro was pleased that, even though she knew her sister could still hear her; she could no longer see her. That little bit of privacy was liberating, considering how much of a detention center the school had become.

“A shelter for Hope turned into a prison school… the perfect place to breed despair” the soldier quietly mused, only now realizing how ironic it was.

Tossing the empty water bottle into the trash and slinging her damp towel over her desk chair, Mukuro spun around and flopped onto her bed, her breasts still completely exposed to the cold air. She didn’t feel like covering up, not yet anyway. There would be plenty of time for that when she re-disguised herself and headed out on her nightingale duties.

For now, she just wanted to lie there and let her overheated body naturally cool itself, allowing herself a moment to rest her eyes—

* DING-DONG * DING-DONG * DING-DONG *

Springing up to alertness instantaneously, Mukuro’s eyes scanned the room as she determined what was happening. The furiously ringing could only have come from her doorbell, and it was followed by a furious pounding of the door as well.

*BANG*BANG*BANG*

Realizing that something was undoubtedly amiss, Mukuro quickly dashed over to her dresser and grabbed the huge mass of hair from the wig form. Pulling at the ribbon and hair clip holding the wig’s pigtails in place, she whipped the wig once to unfurl the mass of false hair. Slicking her still damp black hair back, the soldier effortlessly slung the pink wig overtop her head, clipping it into place with a few quick hand maneuvers; something she’d become accustomed to have to do in a hurry.

This was actually made easier by the fact that Junko had painstakingly crafted each wig to be customizable like this, just in case someone pulled out hair clip or something.

Using both hands to ruffle and loosen the stead-fastened wig hairs, so that mass of pink fluff trailed down her back as if she’d just finished showering, Mukuro made her way quickly over to the door. Adjusting her reapplied pink wig one final time to be sure it was in place, she grasped the handle of her door and inched it open, peering out into the hall but keeping all save for her head hidden from view.

She was still mostly naked after all…

To her shock, and soon to be horror, Hina and Sakura stared at her expectantly from beyond the door. She knew exactly what their presence meant but tried to remain optimistic…at least until Hina fearfully said:

“Something happened to Chihiro…”

Mukuro’s eyes widened, not from surprise…but from shame.
“Come on! Hurry the fuck up!”

Mondo led the charge, leading Makoto and the others up to the second floor. The Ultimate Lucky Student couldn’t fathom how this could have happened, and in such a short time! It had only been a few hours since Monokuma announced the motive. Was there someone among them really that desperate to hide their secret that they’d resort to—?

Makoto shook his head, knowing the truth without having to consider it.

“I…no, we know that it’s possible. After what happened to Sayaka and Leon…we all know that any one of us could…give in to temptation,” Makoto regretfully admitted, the darkness of his own thoughts chilling him to the bone.

Most of the students had been either gathered or notified with a select few lagging behind, save for Byakuya, who no one was able to find, casting suspicion already. Out in front, just behind Mondo, there was Makoto, Kyoko and Taka leading the charge, all mentally prepared for what they might find. Behind them trailed Celeste, Hifumi and Hiro, none of them eager to participate but inclined to nonetheless. Bringing up the rear were Sayaka and Leon, with the baseball star practically carrying the pop idol as they slowly headed after their classmates. Sakura and Hina had elected to retrieve both Toko and, more importantly, Junko, as the Fashionista’s medical knowhow would certainly be appreciated, if not vital.

In a mad rush, those already on the second floor followed the biker as they rounded the corner leading to the pool locker roomers. Pushing the doors open, Mondo pointed to the girl’s locker room and shouted, “She’s in there!”

No one questioned him as they all continued to follow after the biker, pushing open the pink door and finding a most horrific sight:

Petite, frail, lifeless Chihiro hung between two bars of the weight lifting equipment, a rope-like cord wrapped around both arms and around her torso to keep her suspended. A dumbbell with a bit of blood on its corner rested only a few inches from her feet. She was limp, her eyes closed tightly shut without a hint of life in her whatsoever. A hint of blood, visible on the side of her head, matted in with her hair, momentarily drew attention away from the other shocking visage the students found in the room.

Scrawled in blood across the wall behind Chihiro, a horrifying message loomed:

**Blood Lust**

And that wasn’t the only shock the students had to withstand. For out of all people, not one of the students expected to see Byakuya Togami, a light tinge of blood on his fingertips, quickly dismantling the rope that held Chihiro suspended. And they certainly weren’t prepared when he snapped his head back at them, a frantic expression marring his features.

Byakuya had no time to explain himself, however, before he was accosted by a furious and surprised shout from Mondo.

“W-W-WHAT THE HELL?! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING TO HER?!”

The biker was prepared to throw himself at the Togami heir when a pair of arms wrapped around from beneath his underarms, holding him back. Too infuriated to even bother looking back, Mondo struggled to free himself before the voice of his friend shouted in his ears.
“Wait, Mondo! You need to calm down!” Taka exclaimed, only just managing to hold the biker back. “He seems to be trying to help!”

“Bullshit!” a rage-blind Mondo retorted, shoving Taka off him and furiously pointing at the scene. “He’s even got blood on him! He’s the one who attacked her!” the biker insisted, making everyone aware of the blood decorating the heir’s fingertips.

A deep sigh escaped Byakuya as he said, “I was investigating to see if Chihiro’s wound was fatal and got a little blood on myself.”

“See Mondo! He’s trying to—”, Taka tried to reason with his friend but failed miserably.

“Chihiro wasn’t hanging like Christ when I found her earlier! She was lying on the God-damn floor! The only way this could have happened was if he—!”

“Enough!”

Everything halted as a commanding voice rang out, ceasing Mondo’s outburst. All of the students turned to see Junko, dressed in a baggy T-shirt and pair of incredibly short jean-shorts, pushing her way through the crowd. Her long pink locks were a strewed down her back instead of tied up in pig tails, and were a bit damp at places, like she’d been rushed from the shower.

Hina and Sakura followed directly behind her, with Toko bringing up the rear of that team. Once the four of them were out in front, they all got a good look at the scene.

Hina and Sakura blanched but said nothing, too shocked for words. Unfortunately for Toko, the instant she caught sight of Chihiro’s predicament, her eyes rolled back into her head and she passed out, collapsing to the floor with a loud thud. At the same time, Junko stood there, frozen as a gasp escaped her before her eyes narrowed a moment later. Unfortunately, she wasn’t given the chance to act upon her feelings, as she was halted by an authoritative voice.

“Wonderful, now we have two unconscious women to deal with. By the way, do you all plan to just stand around or are you going to help me get this one down?” Byakuya practically spat at everyone still conscious, somehow managing to keep his voice even at the same time. “Or would you prefer we don’t treat her wounds and simply let her fade from this world?”

A wave of shock washed over the students and none of them were more bewildered than Mondo, who stood gaping at the scene in utter confusion.

“Hold on…you mean she’s alive?!” Hiro shouted, as confounded as the rest of them. A mocking scoff escaped Byakuya as he turned back to his task.

“For now, but I can’t say for how long if we just leave her here,” the Togami heir quietly seethed, his fingers straining as he was finally able to unhinge the rope holding up Chihiro’s right arm. When he did, he miscalculated how fast Chihiro’s body would fall and his hand failed to grab and support her.

Luckily for everyone, Kyoko was already at his side and caught the slumping Chihiro as her body shifted, holding her upright as much as possible. When she did, Chihiro’s lower body pressed against her side and, even if it was only for a second, Kyoko’s eyes widened. However, she instantly returned to her usual stoic visage and did her best to keep Chihiro level as Byakuya continued to untie her.

A collective sigh resounded from the other students but it was cut short when Kyoko glared over her shoulder at everyone.
“We could use some assistance,” was all she uttered as she and Byakuya continued to free the suspended Chihiro. Like a jolt of electricity sparked in them; Junko, Makoto, and Sakura stepped up, helping to hold and untie the poor petite girl and ease her down to the carpeted floor. At the same time, Hina decided to attend to the unconscious Toko.

The moment Chihiro was laid down; Junko pushed everyone aside and knelt beside her. Lowering her head, the Fashionista pressed her ear to the programmer’s chest, a reassured smile appearing on her lips an instant later.

“She’s got a pulse! And it’s faint but I can hear her breathing too!”

All of the tension that paralyzed the students abruptly vanished at those words, with a great deal of relived sighs and joyful shouts following afterwards. Makoto in particular could hardly believe what was happening, but didn’t question providence when it occurred.

“I can’t believe it…I thought for sure that we’d be headed for another class trial. Guess we’re pretty lucky, aren’t we?” Makoto mused, letting a hopeful smile break out on his face. However, fate immediately had to turn on him as one of his classmates spoke up.

“I don’t mean to disrupt this pleasant moment, but I believe we have more pressing matters to attend to,” Celeste abruptly spoke up, gaining the attention she often enjoyed reveling in. “Or am I the only one concerned as to how Chihiro ended up crucified just before bed time?”

And just like that, all of the relief that had spread through the class shattered, replaced by growing suspicion and fearful glances.

“Uhg…it’s just not fair! This was sooooo close to being a real class trial worthy event!” she protested into the desk, her voice slightly muffled. “They don’t know the culprit, they have no idea that rich boy altered the scene, and best of all, Chihiro’s in a near-death state and can’t tell them anything… just like a real…case…”

As her own words registered in her ears, a frightful idea came into her mind. Slowly lifting her head from the desk, a malicious smirk decorated her lips as she abruptly stood and headed for the Monokuma control room.

Something about all of this was wrong, that much should have been obvious to everyone but unfortunately, they were too relieved by Chihiro’s survival to realize it. Kyoko couldn’t put her finger on it, at least not yet, but something about this whole affair reeked of deception.

As if to confirm her suspicions, a familiar tone rang throughout the school.
As one, the entire class turned their collective attention to the monitor up in the corner of the locker room. It buzzed to life and slowly a picture formed on the screen. To everyone’s surprise, the seat in front of the wall of monitors, where Monokuma usual resided, was strangely vacant. Not only that, the bear’s usual dulcet tones were missing as well. It appeared that, contrary to how these announcements typically went, there was a complete lack of their captor all together.

Immediately realizing something was amiss, Kyoko’s gaze shifted back to her classmates, scanning the entire room as she glanced between them. Unfortunately, just as she spotted a flash of something black and white, the disturbing voice sounded from right behind where Sayaka and Leon stood.

“So, what are we watching?! I hope it’s a gore flick!”

The resounding combined scream of Sayaka and Leon made even the stoic Kyoko flinch as they tripped over each other and toppled to the floor, using their feet to kick themselves away from the psychotic bear. Meanwhile, Monokuma spared them a sideways glance for about half a second before turning to and focusing his attention on the other students.

“Geez, what’s their problem? You’d think an axe murderer was behind them or something,” the bear cheekily said, laughing under its breath.

Somehow, despite how much he was shaking, Leon was able to pull himself to his feet before carefully hoisting up Sayaka, the two clutching onto each other in absolute terror. The image of those two visibly trembling was disheartening enough, but what was worse was that it seemed to particularly upset Makoto.

The Ultimate Lucky Student gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, obviously perturbed that the bear had pulled such a cruel prank and driven his two friends into a state of hysteria. And while Kyoko understood why Makoto had been keeping his distance from Sayaka, and by that extension Leon, as of late, it still amazed her that he considered them in such high regard.

Then again, she remembered his determination when he’d declared that he’d hold those two in his heart for the rest of his life…a feat that most men were incapable of doing. She also recalled that it was that moment that she found herself undeniable impressed with him. She admired his bravery and his commitment to what he believed in, even though others mocked him.

Because of that, she couldn’t let his emotional state overrule his judgment and possibly endanger himself. And considering that he appeared ready to charge the sadistic bear, she knew it was time to intervene.

“Now isn’t the time to lose your cool, Makoto…”

Folding her arms and stepping forward to get the bear’s attention, Kyoko stared at Monokuma with a stone faced visage and asked, “Do you have something important to announce? If not, please leave. We have to tend to Chihiro…and Toko as well, I suppose.”

The sound of her voice seemed to calm everyone, Makoto in particular, who turned her way with a thankful glance. At the very least, he seemed to appreciate that she’d intervened, which was enough for now.

“What? I can’t stay up with you all and watch the late night movie? That’s discrimination against bears!” Monokuma fired back, his face reddening but his tone suggesting he was merely trying to intimidate them.
“I assume you have a reason for such a grand entrance? Or do you simply enjoy terrorizing those weak-minded enough to be caught unaware?” Byakuya countered, wanting to get to the point as much as Kyoko did.

However, his insensitive words made everyone glare at him instead, especially Leon and Sayaka. In response, he merely scoffed as he lifted his head up and glared down his nose at them, obviously looking down on them. Neither party spoke for a few moments, the anger between them growing, just as Monokuma would have undoubtedly wanted.

Just before Kyoko thought she’d need to intervene again, she found an ally speak up for her.

“Would you just get the point, you damn bear?! We need to treat Chihiro’s wounds and you’re blocking the door!”

Kyoko’s gaze shot across the room as Junko, of all people, shouted her demands at the bear, a menacing scowl plastered on her face. Despite the fact that, like Leon and Sayaka, she should have a very validated fear of Monokuma, the Fashionista seemed to growing more and more brazen with the demented bear as time went on. And while it wasn’t uncommon for people to cope with fear in such a manner, it seemed out of character for Junko.

However, because it seemed to perturb Monokuma, judging by the way the bear fold its arms as it prepared to answer, Kyoko decided to put that thought on hold until the time was right.

With a huff, Monokuma stoutly replied, “I just thought that everyone would like to know that your e-handbook have been updated. Oh, and a couple new rules have been added!”

As he finished, all of the e-handbooks made an electronic beeping sound, signaling that the bear was telling the truth. This startling revelation shook all of them to the core, even Kyoko, who immediately pulled out her e-handbook, booted it up and swiped her way through to discover the new rule:

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In the event that one or more students are attacked or involved in an attempted murder, without an obvious perpetrator, Headmaster Monokuma reserves the right to hold an investigation and class trial to discover the culprit.

---

Choking back a hint of bile that rose up in her throat, Kyoko successfully kept her temper in check as she was forced to accept that their captor had just made a significant change to their lives. Glancing around, she saw that the other’s weren’t taking it well either.

Makoto tightly gripped his e-handbook as he read the message, his hands trembling with what she assumed was a mixture of fear and anger. Byakuya scoffed but otherwise remained silent, though it was easy to see the hint of excitement in his eyes from the potential class trial that would follow. Celeste giggled slightly but it was obviously to hide the fact that she wasn’t entirely pleased with the new rule either. Taka glared angrily at the screen, probably upset that the rule was added without due process, while Mondo simple looked like he was about to punch the screen in frustration.

Sayaka and Leon struggled to keep their breathing under control as they looked over the new rule, sharing a brief glance of worry before reading the rule again. Also, Kyoko noticed that, for some reason, Sayaka was actually looking over at Leon’s e-handbook instead of her own. Their newfound closeness aside, that struck her as odd, but she didn’t have the time to consider the repercussions of it at that moment.
Continuing to look at the other student’s reaction, she saw Hina’s eyes widen and Sakura’s eyes narrowed as they shared a look of concern over the new rule. Hiro and Hifumi both held incredibly shocked visages, but otherwise stayed quiet, possibly fearing to address this new issue.

“W-What the hell is this?!” Junko abruptly exclaimed, voicing exactly what everyone else was thinking. “You can’t just add a rule to make us have a class trial whenever you feel like—!”

“Oh, but I’m not,” Monokuma corrected her, its grin widening maliciously as it continued, “I, your merciful Headmaster, have no control over what you, the unpredictable students, do to each other. I simply have to act accordingly when tragedy strikes and punish those who defy—”.

“P-P-Punish?! What the hell do you mean punish?!” a frantic Leon interrupted, his face twisted in terror.

“He means execution, obviously.” Byakuya’s cruel voice shattered the air, leaving no room for doubt. “It’s a class trial after all. And at the end of each class trial—”.

“—there has to be a punishment!” Monokuma interjected, displeased that the Togami heir was stealing his thunder.

“B-But, you can’t do that!” the hopeful voice of Makoto rang out, shifting focus over to him. “Your own rules state that only the blackened can be punished at the end of a class trial!”

Silence reigned over the room for a few seconds after Makoto’s outburst, but it was quickly shattered by the hysterical laughter of Monokuma.

“Eyahahahahahahahah! Did you really think I’d overlook such a crucial detail? I wasn’t born yesterday! Only a year or so, in fact, but not yesterday!”

Before any of them could question what the bear meant, an electronic beeping caught their attention. In an instant, Kyoko reopened her e-handbook and flipped to the end of it, her grip on the electronic device tightening as she read another new rule:

---

Following a class trial with no true blackened, the students alone will be given the decision to punish the culprit responsible for disturbing the peace of the community. As per class trial rules, the decision will be decided by majority vote.

---

Rereading the contents of the rule several times to be sure she understood it, Kyoko was about to address it when one of her classmates beat her to the punch.

“Wh-What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!” Mondo abruptly shouted; sweat trickling down his neck as he tried to make sense the new rule. “Someone gets executed just for attacking someone else?! The fuck kind of rule is this?!”

Kyoko raised an eyebrow at Mondo’s sudden objection. She hadn’t expected him to react so fervently to such a rule. Considering he was the only one who found Chihiro unconscious in the first place, there was a chance he was the one who committed the offense in the first place, as unlikely as that seemed due to his honorable nature. Then again, with Mondo’s streak of anger fueled attacks, she could understand why he’d be concerned, considering how easily he flew off the handle.

Even so, the way he was acting was far more suspicious than he probably meant for it to be.
“So wait...if someone attacks someone else, but that person survives...then we get to choose if the guy who attacked the person gets executed or not?” a very confused Hiro tried to piece together, earning an irritated sigh from the class.

“Please refrain from speaking unless you’ve been given permission to,” Byakuya threatened while adjusting his glasses.

“B-But then I’d never get to say anything!” the clairvoyant fired back, sounding almost terrified.

“That would be the point,” the Togami heir admitted, before turning to face Monokuma. “In any case, put simply, the decision to punish whomever attacked Chihiro lies solely with us. Am I correct?”

A heavy sigh escaped Monokuma as he pointed to Byakuya, its head turned to face the other students. “See, why can’t you all be like Trust Fund over here and get it when I say it the first time?”

The menacing glare Byakuya shot the bear did little to stunt its vitality, gleefully dancing around while the situation was made clear to everyone. And while Kyoko did find Monokuma’s nickname for the Togami heir appropriate, that didn’t make the current situation any simpler. After all, there were still some other issues to be cleared up.

“Let me ask one thing,” she said, disrupting the bear’s dance and gaining its attention. “Do the same rules apply if we guess incorrectly during the trial?”

As she suspected, all of her fellow students instantly understood exactly what she meant. And it seemed that Monokuma did as well.

“Well of course! It wouldn’t be much of a class trial without stakes, now would it?” the psychotic bear informed them, before glaring directly at a now terrified Makoto. As if drinking in his visage, Monokuma’s menacing grin widened as it cackled loudly. “What’s the matter, Makoto? Don’t you trust your friends anymore?”

As that insult was hurled at him, Makoto couldn’t help but hang his head, angrily clenching his fists as he couldn’t find the words to retort. Seeing that example, one by one, the other student’s faces all lost their color as the truth dawned on them. And, unfortunately, Kyoko knew this truth was far harsher for a particular set of students.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw both Sayaka and Leon visibly trembling as they struggled to keep standing. The baseball star grasped onto a rack of dumbbells to keep upright while the pop idol desperately clutched his shirt, barely able to keep her shaky knees from giving way. It was hard enough for them to handle everything, considering they’d personally lived through it once before, but this time, they were seeing it from the other side.

Sayaka was especially skittish, considering she’d never experienced an investigation or class trial before. And Kyoko was certain that she had prayed she’d never have to.

“Fate, it seems, enjoys being cruel to her…”

“W-Wait...you’re saying that...that if we can’t find who...attacked Chihiro...we all...we all...die?” the weak voice of Sayaka questioned aloud to anyone that would answer, her eyes staring down at the floor with tears welling up in the corner of her eyes.

“So it seems...” Celeste blatantly answered, though she seem didn’t any more thrilled about the venture than Sayaka did.
The severity of the situation made clear to her, Sayaka couldn’t help but hang her head, tears slipping down her cheeks as she silently wept. Just as she felt her despair was going to consume her entirely, an arm wrapped around her shoulders. Sayaka gasped as she looked up to see Leon, his usual cheeky grin plastered on his face, holding onto her tightly before winking at her.

“Hey, don’t worry about it! We got this! Right, Makoto?” Leon brazenly insisted, sending as hopeful of a smile toward the lucky student.

Lifting his head up and seeing that Leon was relying on him for support, Makoto responded with a confident smile and replied, “Yeah…yeah! And this time, when we won’t let one of our friends get executed! It’s our choice this time!”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” the baseball star concurred before glancing back to Sayaka. “Let’s just do what we can, alright?”

Seeing both of them so confident that they could survive, Sayaka managed to wipe away her tears and nod. “R-Right…!”

No matter how much she tried, Kyoko couldn’t hide the tiny smile that formed as she listened to Makoto’s words of encouragement. Even though she could see that Leon was putting up a brave front, he genuinely seemed to believe in Makoto. And of course, their resident lucky student would do anything to help his friends, so he wasn’t going to back down, especially not in front of Monokuma.

Speaking of the demented bear, Kyoko turned to see that the bear had seen the entire exchange and was making motions as if vomiting.

“Uhg, get a room you three! You don’t have time for that crap anyway! If I were you, I’d get to finding out what happened to Lamb Chop over there!” the bear said, pointing at Chihiro as it finished cackling. “Oh, and just in case some of you are a bit slow…”

Monokuma spun around and pointed up at the monitor in the corner of the room as a familiar bell rang.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

Just like before, the students all shifted their gazes up to the screen, which this time did show the image of Monokuma upon it, despite there being another one right there beside them. However, they all kept silent about that fact as the Monokuma on the monitor cleared its throat and began speaking:

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*Emergency! Emergency! It seems we have a victim of bullying!*

*In an effort to find the perpetrator, you will be given a certain amount of time to investigate.*

*Please use this time wisely, the class trial will begin very soon!!*

---

Before the announcement had even come to a close, Kyoko looked around and discovered that the Monokuma that had been in the room with them had disappeared…leaving only the students behind, to uncover the truth for themselves.
“Shit! I never expected this!” Mukuro mentally panicked as she absorbed the situation. “I thought that if I could prevent the murders, it would stop the class trials and executions! Junko must be getting super bored with no deaths…and Chihiro’s miraculous survival didn’t help with that I’m guessing…”

It wasn’t unexpected that Junko would begin resorting to such underhanded tactics. Even so, it was more than disheartening for Mukuro, as she’d expected her sister to follow the rules she’d already set. After all, the soldier had been betrayed for breaking the rules and until this point, Junko had diligently followed them herself.

“Then again, the rules also state that more rules can and will be added at the Headmaster’s discretion,” Mukuro thought, recalling the very last rule in the e-handbook.

Around her, the other students were already mentally preparing for another class trial, or in Sayaka’s and her own case, readying themselves for their first. However, Mukuro suspected that the weight of the role each of them would play would be vastly different.

Sayaka would be focusing on trying to understand how the system works, and possibly be as confounded as her fellow classmates had undoubtedly been during the first trial. Meanwhile, considering her extensive career in the military, and the diligence acquired during that time, Mukuro could easily adapt to this life or death investigation. And even though it wasn’t her field of expertise, she knew that due to her unique situation; she would see things differently, providing a new angle to view this case with.

More importantly, she had enough confidence in her ability to keep a cool head under pressure to know that she could be as useful as Kyoko, in certain respects.

“Don’t get flustered, Mukuro. Focus on your task and you’ll be able to uncover the truth,” she reminded herself. “After all, Chihiro is still alive and as long as I can assist in the investigation, then —”.

“Whoa, was I down for the count or what?”

Reality itself shattered as the voice of someone Mukuro could never forget abruptly entered into the scene. Her head practically snapping as it jerked around, the soldier focused all of her efforts into keeping her panic in check. However, she couldn’t stop the horror from welling up as the voice returning, almost whispering in her ear.

“Sorry about that. That was kind of a shocker, huh? Was I the only one who went down?”

Standing literally right behind her, tongue slightly drooping out her mouth and eyes a bit loopy from the fainting, was Toko’s other personality…the Ultimate Murderous Fiend – Genocide Jack.

Against her will, Mukuro broke out into a cold sweat as the serial killer peeked over her shoulder and gazed down at the motionless Chihiro, completely ignoring the soldier altogether.

“Oooooh, is that a dead body?! Hey! Are you dead?!”

A noiseless gasp was shared by the entire room, as none of them were sure what to make of Toko’s new speech pattern and mannerisms. Well, all except for Mukuro…

“Shit! Why now of all times?! Fuck, fuckity, fuck-fuck!”
Mukuro continued to mentally cursed as Genocide Jack spun around and over to her side and continued examining the unconscious Chihiro, an elated expression coloring her pale face. However, once the serial killer got a good look at the programmer’s constitution, that joyful expression vanished and it was replaced by a disappointed frown.

“Ehhh? There’s hardly any blood at all? What’s up with that?!?” Genocide Jack questioned, pointing at the tiny gash on Chihiro’s head.

Everyone became taken aback by the new persona their usually mousey classmate was displaying. Even the arrogant Byakuya seemed visibly perturbed by her change, as he assumed a kind of defensive position, so subtle that only Mukuro would have noticed it. Then again, considering how much murderous intent the serial killer was emanating, it was no surprise that he would be on edge, considering his immense distrust of everyone.

But that wasn’t the worst problem…not by a long shot.

“I thought I could contain Genocide Jack inside Toko if I kept anyone from dying! With no blood for her to react to, Genocide Jack should have remained hidden! I can’t believe I was so stupid!” Mukuro reprimanded herself, tightening her jaw to keep from losing her composure.

Toko had done a remarkable job keeping her other side hidden away up until now. But there was no way for the writing prodigy to predict finding Chihiro in such a situation. None of them had, not even Mukuro…wait a second…

“The scene is made to look like Genocide Jack’s handiwork. However, the killer herself is openly shocked by everything she’s seeing. And considering her usual fervor and rigid guidelines she follows for each murder…not to mention that Genocide Jack only targets cute young men…and considering that she probably doesn’t know that Chihiro’s biologically male…the attacker isn’t her…she’d never hang a body if it was still breathing."

It all added up, and yet didn’t make any sense whatsoever. During their time together, when the school was actually a learning facility, Toko had managed to keep Genocide Jack a secret, for the most part. Junko figured it out only a few weeks after school had begun but decided to wait for the right opportunity to use that information.

Besides, ever since coming to Hope’s Peak, Toko’s other personality hadn’t killed anyone. Mukuro hadn’t given it much thought at the time, but when she really thought about it, the most likely reason was that Toko obsessive feelings for Byakuya Togami had stayed her hand for that first year. And then, with the rise of the World’s Most Despair Inducing Event, all other issues were quickly forgotten as the world fell into chaos. And the rest was history…

“But then, if Genocide Jack isn’t the one responsible…who made the scene look like—?!”

Realization struck Mukuro hard as she carefully turned her gaze back to gauge Byakuya’s reaction a second time. For the entire time since ‘Toko’ had awakened, he’d never taken his eyes off her. Also, he was keeping a considerable distance from her, and while that could have been chocked up to the rancid odor that Genocide Jack emanated, it seemed more like the Togami Heir was studying her…for weaknesses possibly. Not only that, his bloody fingertips made all the more sense, considering that Chihiro hadn’t lost enough blood to properly write the bloody message on the wall.

Byakuya was trying to pull the wool over everyone’s eyes, and unfortunately, he was succeeding.

“Cheeky son of a bitch…”
“This is certainly unexpected…” Byakuya seethed as ‘Toko’ staggered around, spouting gibberish. And while it wasn’t what he’d been hoping would happen when Genocide Jack surfaced, it was exactly disappointing.

Actually, all was going well, for the moment. Aside from the fact that no one suspected anything more amiss about Toko. Even though she was clearly acting out of character, it seemed that only he could discern the radical change in her behavior. Not even Kyoko seemed to be putting much effort into discovering the reason, which perplexed but relieved him.

“I had hoped to drag this side of her out in front of everyone, so that they would all become aware of her. But it seems that Genocide Jack isn’t as foolish as I had thought,” Byakuya mused, watching as she almost aimlessly wandered about.

It was at that time that Makoto’s concern must of finally outweighed his apprehension, as he approached ‘Toko’ and asked, “A-Are you alright?”

Spinning around to face him, Genocide Jack looked over Makoto for all of two seconds before she put on a surprisingly pleasant smile and said, “I’m fine, I’m fine, kyehahahaha…”

Her uncharacteristically menacing chuckle startled everyone and Hiro huffed in nervous laughter as he surmised, “She musta hit her head really hard when she fainted…”

A silent agreement seemed to be passed around the room, as everyone appeared to accept that conjecture. And it was all the more surprising because it came from Hiro, but Byakuya left that alone for the time being. Just as everyone was prepared to accept the one intelligent thing the clairvoyant had proposed, Genocide Jack just had to open her mouth and spew out very poetic words.

“The world has a front and back, a top lining and a bottom, a sea of truth and a web of lies!”

Although no one seemed to understand, the meaning of her phrasing was clear to Byakuya.

“She’s drawing parallels to herself, and how she is and isn’t the person we’ve come to know…how fascinating. Even her usual stutter is gone. It seems that was a trait only shared with her weak side.”

As much as he’d like to take more time dissecting her for possible weaknesses, Byakuya knew this wasn’t the time. The investigation needed to commence and he needed to prepare for his role in the upcoming class trial.

With that in mind, the Togami Heir scoffed and said, “She’s obviously delusional. Someone take her back to her room before she interferes with the investigation. Unless you’d all like her to destroy valuable evidence in her half-awake stupor?”

Although everyone seemed a bit surprised that he’d spoken up, he was certain that his insistence about how she could disrupt the crime scene would hide his true intention. If he was being honest, he just wanted her out of his sight as quickly as possible. She was a threat to him, in more ways than one, and he wouldn’t stand for her to be the reason the world lost his valuable presence.

Fortunately, at least one of his classmates proved useful in this endeavor.

“W-We’ll do it…Leon and I will take her back,” Sayaka carefully said, earning a confused look from Leon.

“We will? Why us?” he questioned just before she glanced up at him, her blue eyes hardened with
“Because we have to do what we can…right?” she answered before sheepishly averting her gaze. “Besides…it’s not like we’d be much help with the investigation anyway…”

As if a wave of guilt washed over them, both of them hung their heads. With a great sigh, Leon concurred, “…That’s fair, I guess. We’ll go drop Toko off at her room, then.”

At the mention of ‘her’ name, Genocide Jack practically leapt with joy as she shouted, “Nice! I’m gonna get dropped off! Bye now, everybody!” Wandering over to where Sayaka and Leon stood, which happened to be near the door, Genocide Jack smiled pleasantly at them and said, “Please take care of me!”

Her attitude made both Sayaka and Leon noticeably uncomfortable but since they had already agreed to it, there was no going back now. And so, with a loopy ‘Toko’ beside them, the three of them departed the locker room, much to Byakuya’s relief.

However, something other than Genocide Jack’s immediate depart began to weigh in on his mind as he observed how she’d acted around their classmates. Most noticeably, how she was playing dumb and not drawing too much attention to herself. Sure, it was obvious that she wasn’t herself but at least she hadn’t done anything that would give away her true identity. Byakuya had expected more than just her slip up about asking if Chihiro was dead or not, but it seemed that she had quickly evaluated her surroundings and acted accordingly.

Then again, considering her situation, that was to be expected. After all, she hadn’t managed to avoid the authorities for so long out of sheer luck.

As much as it pained him to admit, Genocide Jack had to be quite intelligent if she was capable of pulling off so many unsolved murders. And while the Togami Heir questioned the capacity of Toko’s personality, it was at least clear that this side of her could think ahead and plan out complex strategies to get what she wanted. It would have been the faintest bit impressive…if Byakuya wasn’t certain that her plan involved him plastered to the wall, suspended by those ungodly scissors.

“As long as I’m careful, I should have no issues exposing who she really is. And once that’s done, she won’t be able to get near me ever again…”

His plan was simple, and yet affective. By creating a scene that looked as though it was Genocide Jack’s handiwork, he would be able to push the class trial in that direction. And once he had properly revealed Genocide Jack’s identity, he could reveal Mondo’s betrayal to all of them. Sure, by that point, his classmates may have a hard time believing that he saw Mondo fleeing the scene, but with the right evidence, he could quickly drive the pathetic biker into a corner and force a confession.

Fortunately, he already had such evidence. No one seemed to notice that Chihiro’s e-handbook was missing, at least not yet. Only he knew that it was missing, having searched Chihiro’s duffle bag and pockets before suspending her. Mondo had undoubtedly taken the e-handbook, possibly used it to gain access to the girl’s locker room in the first place. And unless the insufferable fool had found a way to dispose of the e-handbook, then he undoubtedly still had it on him. After all, even a fool like him had to realize that if he couldn’t destroy the evidence, then hiding it would be the best option. And where better to hide it then on his person, where no one would think to look?

Byakuya realized, of course, that it was mostly speculation, but he had other resources as well. The dumbbell was exceptionally heavy; the idiot biker probably hadn’t even taken that into consideration when he’d chosen it. The way Chihiro was attack suggested that she was hit atop the head, and while Chihiro was rather short, Byakuya didn’t tower over her enough to leave a gash on the top of
her head. Not to mention that he would have had to get it from the boy’s locker room, because a
dumbbell of the same size and weight was still in the girl’s locker room.

This was clearly done because Mondo had premeditated the attack, and brought the dumbbell from
the boy’s locker room with him. This meant that Sakura, the only other candidate who would be able
to lift such a heavy dumbbell with such precision, could be factored out of the equation.

With all that information, Byakuya was positive that, when the time came, he would be able to
educate his naïve classmates into understanding who the true culprit in this particular case was.

“All I need to do now is focus on securing someone to corroborate the information I have on
Genocide Jack…and I have the perfect commoner in mind for that role.”

Byakuya’s eyes shifted and lingered on Makoto. A confident grin decorating the Togami Heir’s lips
for only a moment before he resumed his arrogant scowl.

Victory was all but assured for him.

An instant later, all of their e-handbooks beeped, causing everyone from Byakuya to Mondo to look
at their miniature devices. As Kyoko checked her own, she saw that, in place of where the
‘Monokuma File’ from the last case would have been, there was a different kind of file.

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Monokuma (Incident) File

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The file contained information about where Chihiro had been found, who found her, and even gave
an analysis of her head wound. At the side, there was also a tab that listed her status, which everyone
was pleased to see was: “Alive”.

Armed with this new information, it seemed that the investigation had officially begun.

And even though it took longer than Kyoko would have liked for everyone to figure out what they
were going to do to help with the investigation, before she realized it, a certain Moral Compass had
already taken it upon himself to rally everyone.

“Alright then, you all have your tasks!” Taka shouted, bringing order to the chaos. “Hina, Junko and
myself will take Chihiro to the nurse’s office and make her comfortable.”

“Even though moving her is a risk, considering it’s a head injury, it’ll be easier to take care of her
there than try to bring everything up her,” Junko concurred, earning a stout nod from Taka.

“As soon as I help get Chihiro to the nurse’s office, I will return so that Mondo and I can guard the
crime scene, like last time,” Sakura said, already cradling the unconscious Chihiro in her massive
arms.

“And the rest of us will begin the investigation,” Kyoko finally said, already having a few leads on
who may have been the attacker.

Before anyone could officially start their tasks, the authoritative voice of Byakuya spoke up.
“Makoto, you’re with me this time.” Everyone, especially Makoto, was shocked to hear the Togami heir’s demand. Seeing that everyone was confused, Byakuya scoffed and reaffirmed, “I’m going to let you cooperate with me during my investigation.”

“W-Why?!” the lucky student instantly inquired, looking quite uncomfortable with the idea.

Furrowing his brows, Byakuya let out a deep sigh before he answered, “You seemed to have limited use, that’s why I chose you. Does that answer your question?”

“N-No…not really,” a very nervous Makoto answered.

With a deep scowl, Byakuya glared directly at him and said, “I’m purchasing your talent, the same talent that helped you solve the last case.” As he said those words, both Sayaka and Leon slightly shuddered, thought it seemed the Togami heir didn’t care if they did. Thus, he continued, “Let’s go, we don’t have time to be standing around here.”

Without another word, the Ultimate Affluent Progeny moved around him and began heading for the door, much to everyone’s confusion.

“B-But…!” Makoto tried to interject to stop him, but it fell on deaf ears.

Initially unsure of what to do, the lucky student sent a desperate glance toward Kyoko. She instantly knew that his dilemma was that he didn’t want to disappoint anyone, even a bastard like Byakuya. He wanted to help him, and at the same time, he wanted to stay and help here. He was like a child asking permission to go…which Kyoko found a bit annoying but at least she understood. And if she was being honest, she did respect him for not just leaving with Byakuya when he’d been told to.

“At least he has enough backbone not to follow others blindly,” she surmised, knowing that she still needed to resolve the issue.

“Go if you want, it’s up to you,” she said to him, not missing the apologetic look that had overtaken his visage.

“Sorry!” he exclaimed with a single bow, before rushing off to catch up with Byakuya.

“Did…did Byakuya just bully Makoto into helping him?!?” Hiro shouted, unable to keep quiet any longer, especially considering Byakuya was no longer present to force him into silence.

“He better at least pay him for helping…” Hina commented, earning a few raised eyebrows. Taking notice, she nervously continued, “Well, he did say that he was ‘purchasing’ Makoto’s talent, didn’t he?!”

“I don’t think that’s quite what he meant,” Kyoko swiftly answered, putting a halt to that senseless conversation.

“Uhg, that guy is such a prick…” Junko muttered, as she, along with Hina and Taka, prepared to follow after Sakura, who carried Chihiro. “We need to get her into bed as quickly as we can. Let’s head out—!”

“Hey!” Mondo called out, stopping them just before they left. “Good…uh…good luck with all the medical crap and…stuff…”

Watching from afar, Kyoko glanced over to see Junko smiling with determination as she flashed him a peace sign.
“Don’t worry; we’ll take care of Chihiro. Count on it!” Junko reassured him before beginning to depart.

Kyoko watched as a confident smile flashing over Junko’s…overly…freckled…face…

As if a title wave came crashing down on her, a huge revelation was visited upon Kyoko.

Before she’d even realized it, her eyes had widened and she couldn’t tear her gaze away from Junko’s face, at least until the Fashionista had exited the room and was completely out of sight. Kyoko’s extreme attention to detail flared up and she couldn’t stop thinking that something about Junko’s appearance was unsettling.

At first, she couldn’t decide what it was, and she fell silent as she began to ponder.

She had seen the hint of freckles on the Fashionista’s face before, the morning of the first case. However, this time, she noticed something very out of place. All make-up was absent from Junko’s face, which of course meant that her appearance would be different but that wasn’t what surprised the amnesiac girl.

Kyoko had spent a good deal of her free time investigating the school, gathering information on absolutely everything she could. On more than one occasion, she stumbled across a few fashion magazines, most of which had articles about Junko Enoshima printed in them with an assortment of pictures. During that time, there was a very specific feature that Kyoko had unintentionally picked up on, which she only recognized just now.

"The shape of her face…it’s different in the magazines. Without make-up, it’s easier to see and that’s why I never noticed it before. It could just be photo-shopping, as Junko claimed, but…something feels…wrong about…"

Suddenly, a massive migraine pounded in Kyoko’s head, forcing her to close her eyes and turn away from Junko. This was happening more frequently, particularly when she tried to remember something from her past. Did this mean that…Junko was somehow connected to her past? But how was that possible? And even if they shared some kind of connection, why wouldn’t Junko have spoken up about it?

All this speculation caused the migraine to worsen and Kyoko was resigned to giving up on the matter, at least for now. There would be plenty of time to ponder how she and Junko could be connected later. Right now, she had an investigation to focus on.

She began by examining the dumbbell on the floor, already having noted the hint of blood on the corner where it much have clipped Chihiro’s head.

“She’s lucky it only clipped her. If it had hit her any other way, we’d be looking at a real class trial instead.”

Continuing her investigation, she found that the dumbbell was rather heavy, meaning that the culprit was most likely a man, considering that most women would have struggled to lift that much weight. Although it wouldn’t have been an issue for Sakura, and considering the attack occurred in the girl’s locker room…wait…

Dropping to her knees down onto the carpet, Kyoko began running her gloved hand through the fibers. When she was satisfied, she narrowed her gaze as she couldn’t find what she was looking for.

“No trace of blood on the carpet. If the attack happened here, there should be at least signs of the attack, like impressions from where the body fell. But there’s nothing…no blood, no deep
impressions…nothing. As if the crime wasn’t committed here at all. But if that’s the case…where is the true crime scene?”

Placing a hand on her chin, the amnesic girl could only conceive one other place where the crime could have occurred. However, despite how large of a clue that was, it was one that she had no true evidence of…yet.

“I’ll head to the boy’s locker room as soon as I finish here…” she reminded herself, filing the information away in her memories as she pressed forward with the investigation.

Turning her attention toward the wall behind the exercise machine, Kyoko moved closer to the bloody message on the wall, leaning in and examining it up close.

“Hmm, the message was written using a slender tool, and it seems that the writer had to reapply more blood frequently, considering how some of the letters are faded more than others.”

And there was only one person with bloody fingertips in this case…

“But that alone doesn’t determine the culprit,” Kyoko reminded herself taking a step back from the wall.

Deciding that there was no longer anything else to investigate her, Kyoko decided to spend the remainder of her time investigating the pool area. As she made her way to the door leading to the pool, her sharp ears couldn’t help but overhear a conversation between Makoto and Mondo. She hadn’t even seen Makoto return…and yet, here he was.

“Chihiro’s going to be okay…I just know it,” Makoto encouraged the biker, after hearing what he had to say about how he’d found the programmer in the first place.

Despite that, Mondo could only sigh as he lowered his gaze and replied, “Yeah…little dude’s tough, that’s for sure…”

As she stepped out into the pool area, the humidity already thick in the air, Kyoko calmly shut the door leading back into the girl’s locker room. Once she was alone in the pool area, she squeezed her eyes shut and sighed.

“…Mondo only refers to guys as ‘dude’…” she whispered, narrowing down her list of suspects considerably as she headed toward the boy’s locker room.

“That should do it for now…” Mukuro thought to herself as she finished bandaging Chihiro’s head. The nurse’s office had been relatively quiet, considering that her company had been Hina and Taka, but she wasn’t complaining.

Deciding that cleaning the wound could be dangerous at the moment, the soldier instead chose to simply conceal the tiny gash on the programmer’s skull with wrappings. The pressure applied wouldn’t be enough to cause undo harm but was firm enough to keep the wound from possible future bleeding.

Leaning back and inhaling a large breath, Mukuro barely had time to wipe the sweat from her brow before Hina practically materialized by her side.

“Junko, you’re amazing!” the swimmer exclaimed, her eyes beaming with admiration. “We’d be in
some serious trouble without you around!"

Mukuro inwardly flinched at the sudden praise, knowing that if Hina, or any of her fellow classmates for that matter, hadn’t been missing two years of memory…very different words would have been directed at her. However, committing to keeping up the guise, the soldier plastered on a smile and said, “I’m just wrapping bandages…it’s not a big deal. Even you could have—".

“I’m afraid I must disagree!” the stern, and yet supportive voice of Taka shouted at her from only a foot away. “Without your experience with first aid, I fear that we would be missing a few key classmates!”

Although he’d obviously meant it in the most positive of senses, Taka’s good intentions only served to further drive Mukuro down into a pit of self-loathing.

“We wouldn’t be in the situation at all…if I had been more diligent…”

“With that matter clearly addressed, I’m afraid that I must now address another serious matter!” Taka abruptly continued, startling Mukuro as he pointed a finger at her. “Young lady, just what are you wearing?!"

“…Huh?” an utterly confused Mukuro said, glancing down at the t-shirt and short-shorts she’d put on in her hurry to get to the crime scene. “Clothes?”

Her one word answer apparently didn’t appease Taka, as he clenched his hands into fists and exclaimed, “Barely any clothes! You should be more mindful of your attire! We may be captives here, but we are still on school grounds! Your legs are clearly showing far too much skin and that shirt is practically slipping off your shoulder even as we speak! What would happen were it to slide off and reveal something even more…revealing?! As the Ultimate Moral Compass, I cannot abide by such lewd proceedings! You must return to your room and change into a more school friendly outfit before the trial, for the sake of our survival!”

At first, Mukuro thought it was Taka’s very odd way of trying to get them all to laugh and relive tension. But the longer he kept ranting the more she realized he was completely serious…and for some reason, it bothered her.

“W-Why should it matter how much skin I show, jerk?!” she refuted, still trying to comprehend his reasoning. “And what does my choice of clothes have to do with our survival?!”

“Simple!” Taka countered, apparently ready for the comeback. “Studies have shown that men, and in some cases other women, are often distracted by how much skin an attractive young woman is showing! This is why schools have strict guidelines for uniforms! So that the students aren’t distracted by such…distractions! And we certainly don’t need any further distractions while we investigate what happened to Chihiro!”

A heavy sigh escaped Mukuro as she tried to comprehend how this was the most important issue that Taka felt needed to be addressed. And while she could understand his misguided attempts at keeping order, he seemed unusually bothered by her attire.

It was then that Mukuro pieced it all together…and just had to throw it back in his face.

“You’re just uncomfortable because you want to sneak a glance, don’t you?” she said mischievously, giving him a sideways smirk. “Plus, those ugly boots of yours are way more distracting than the little bit of skin I’m showing.”

The instant those words left her mouth, Taka’s face reddened, whether from embarrassment or rage,
she couldn’t tell. That is, until the Moral Compass narrowed his eyes and shouted, “My personal preferences have nothing to do with this! How dare you suggest such an immoral thing?!! I am the Ultimate Moral Compass; I would never stoop to such an act!” He paused for only a moment, clearing his throat and lowering his voice. “And besides, my boots are within proper school regulations! While your clothes violate at least 15 guidelines set by national regulations! Now, I’m asking you, very politely, to please change before the trial! For all our sakes!”

Even though he was being completely unreasonable, though he’d never know it, at the very least, Mukuro could respect his resolve. Regardless of him being uncomfortable with her appearance on a personal level, he genuinely believed everything he was spouting. And because of that, it was impossible to reject his request. So, she decided to give him exactly what he wanted…

“Alright, fine…”

Slowly reaching her hands down, she gripped the edges of her shirt and began to lift it up, her belly button coming directly into Taka’s pure-hearted view. The Moral Compass’ eyes widened as her entire stomach came into view, a sight she figured he’d probably never seen before.

“W-W-W-Wait! W-What are you doing?!” Taka stammered, throwing his hands in front of his eyes. With a devilish smirk, Mukuro kept her shirt lifted as she said, “Changing. That’s what you wanted, right? For me to get out of these clothes as quickly as possible—”.

“I-I didn’t mean right here!” the Moral Compass shouted, abruptly turning his back when he realized his fingers had separated and he could see through them. “G-Go back to your room and change!”

Continuing to enjoy the situation, the soldier falsely scoffed and said, “But you said that, ‘For all our sakes’, I needed to change as soon as possible. So, I figured I’d—”.

“Public indecency is not welcome in a school environment!” the frantic Taka shouted, still not brave enough to turn and face her. “Now go back to your room and change! Before I have to write you up!”

Mukuro thought it was kind of amusing that he instantly went into Discipline Committee mode when he was flustered, but otherwise figured that it was time to let him off the hook. They had more important issues to deal with anyway.

“Alright, Mr. Tight-Pants,” she chided, relenting with a fake sigh before turning toward a slightly confounded, but entirely amused Hina. “Take care of Chihiro while I’m gone. I should be back soon…if I can find an outfit that fits proper school guidelines.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll keep an eye on her,” Hina finally replied, suppressing her laughter and nodding firmly with a pleasant smile.

“Cool, be back soon!” Mukuro said, already walking past Taka as she headed for the door. “Yes, please do! But feel free to take as much time as you need to get properly dressed!” Taka somewhat concurred, his back still turned to her.

With a slight rolling of her eyes, she made her way to the door, slid it open and ventured into the hall, heading for the dorms. As she left, she could hear muffled voices following behind her.

“…forget-forget-forget…beam…”

“Uh, Taka? What are you doing?”
“Purging the impurities from my mind…would you like to try?”
“I’m good…thanks.”

“W-What is this?! How could anyone do such a thing?!”

Makoto had practically shrieked as he looked over the Genocide Jack file that he had been given. As the panic became evident, so did the look of understanding that flooded his eyes. Makoto’s mind was obviously piecing everything together…just as Byakuya had planned.

“I never imagined that he would prove so useful. Or so entertaining,” the Togami Heir mused as he watched the lucky student pine over the case file extensively, as if trying to memorize its contents in the short time they’d been given before the trial.

If all went as he planned, only Makoto would have the knowledge to help illustrate his claims that Toko was indeed Genocide Jack. And while Byakuya knew that giving his classmate this information was a double-edged sword, as it could be used as evidence against him, the thrill of going through another trial easily outweighed the risk he was taking.

After all, he’d enjoyed the first class trial immensely, watching as his classmates scrambled to find the culprit. And while he admitted that his initial assumption of Makoto being the culprit was off, it turned out more interesting in the long run. He’d barely investigated during the first case because he figured that Makoto truly was guilty and therefore the case was already solved, which bored him. But then, the lucky student had surprised him and, unintentionally, one-upped him, something he could not forgive. It was a small mistake but one that Byakuya would never let happen again.

Plus, since he already knew Mondo was the culprit, there was no other fun to be had in this game.

In truth, Byakuya wasn’t just using the lucky student for his own ends. He also wanted to test Makoto’s crime solving abilities. He had to know if the expertise his classmate had shown during the first trial was genuine or dumb luck. And while the latter would play into Makoto’s talent, the Togami Heir was still pressed to test it and see for himself.

“Let’s see just how lucky you are, Makoto Naegi…”

Despite herself, Mukuro let out a chuckle as she headed for her room.

It was probably the first time she’d really laughed…in years. Not even during the entire two years she’d been with her classmates had she really laughed. Then again, she hadn’t really acknowledged them as ‘people’ for the last two years. They had been her classmates, people she saw everyday but never really knew. And more importantly, they had been her sister’s guinea pigs, the subjects of her twisted desire to harvest despair.

It was strange that, only when Mukuro had been forced to be ‘Junko’, did she start to see them as human beings. Only when she was in disguise could she talk…and laugh, with all of them. It should have been a disturbing feeling, but ironically, she welcomed it. Despite the guilt she felt, the camaraderie she felt growing between her and her classmates was a feeling she hadn’t felt…since her time in Fenrir.
And, even though she realized that she should have been tenser about their current situation, considering its gravity, there was a gnawing feeling of confidence growing inside her. Even though she had plenty to worry about…

Junko’s new rules, finding Chihiro’s attacker, having to go through her first official class trial; all of it should have been so daunting. It should have been bringing her the despair that her sister obsessed over, but instead, she felt something akin to salvation. Like she had been liberated somehow, and that everything would be fine as long as they banded together and stood against their captor…her sister.

“Perhaps Makoto’s rubbing off on me,” she said with a tiny smile as she rounded the corner heading for the dorms.

As she entered the dorm area, she saw Leon and Sayaka standing outside Toko’s room. They turned to see her and almost instinctively, they appeared to relax. Raising their hands to wave at her, she returned the gesture with a pleasant smile. It eased Mukuro’s conscience to see them together, doing what they could to recover from their shared trauma.

“What up, guys?” she said as she got to her door, which was only a few down from Toko’s.

“Not much,” Leon instinctively answered before glancing at Toko’s door with a sigh. “Toko had a bit of a sneezing fit once we got her into her room and threw us out, though.

That news was a bit of a relief for Mukuro, knowing that Toko tended to switch personalities when she sneezed too hard. However, she needed to be sure that it was really Toko and not Jack that her classmates would see during the trial.

“How is she now? Everything okay?” she asked carefully, trying to sound worried.

Sayaka and Leon shared a concerned look before the pop idol answered, “She’s shut up pretty tight in there. We tried knocking but when she comes to the door, she just keeps muttering about not letting Genocide Jack get her.”

Mukuro suppressed a relieved sigh at hearing that; happy to hear that Toko was back and Jack was under wraps. It was a minor victory but Mukuro would take them where she could get them. Unfortunately, she noticed that Sayaka and Leon were still pretty shaken up by everything that had happened. Not that she blamed them.

“So, how are you two holding up?”

As her question reached them, they both seemed a bit shocked. They didn’t answer immediately, and when they did, it wasn’t what Mukuro had been expecting.

“We’re…just trying to stay out of the way,” Sayaka told her, a nod from Leon signaling his agreement.

A bit surprised by that answer, Mukuro furrowed her brows and replied, “What does that mean? You’re not going to help with the investigation?”

She knew she was interrogating them, something she really shouldn’t be doing, but she couldn’t fathom why they wouldn’t want to help. Everyone’s lives were on the line and even having just one more, or in this case two, sets of eyes looking around could find vital evidence. She could have gone so far as to tell them that, but their guilty expressions kept her silent.

“It’s…it’s not like we don’t want to help…we just…we don’t know how,” Leon spoke up for them, both he and Sayaka averting their gazes from Mukuro.
“I was…unconscious, for the first investigation…” Sayaka reasoned, her guilt made evident with every word.

“And I didn’t exactly want to help find the…killer, last time…” Leon admitted through grit teeth, his voice full of If-loathing.

Just as the soldier had suspected, the two ‘culprits’ from the first class trial were struggling with the weight of their sins. And while she understood that struggle, far more than they would ever know, she also knew that regardless of their actions, if they truly wanted to redeem themselves, they could.

However, she had no right to tell them that right now. After all, her sins were even greater than theirs…and far beyond forgiveness. These two still had time to be forgiven…and they needed to know that.

“Alright, I get it,” she said, a bit colder than she had planned. As Sayaka and Leon continued to avert their gazes, she took a deep breath and continued, “Then you two can watch over Toko and make sure she gets to the trial. That’ll be the way you can help, alright?”

A pause followed but soon, Sayaka’s voice spoke up, “Is…is that alright?”

“It doesn’t seem like much…” a depressed Leon concurred.

“We all gotta do what we can. Ain’t that right?” Mukuro encouraged them, not knowing any better way to help them.

“Right…”

“Yeah…”

Although their answers didn’t sound terribly encouraging, the soldier knew that time was of the essence and she needed to change and get back to the nurse’s office. If she didn’t, she’d lose her chance to investigate herself, and this time, she wanted to be more than a medic for the class trial.

Flashing both of them as confident a smile as she could, Mukuro motioned toward her room and said, “I’ve gotta change into more ‘school appropriate’ clothes, Taka’s orders. So you two hold down the fort out here for me, okay?”

“Yeah, we can handle that,” Leon answered, only half meaning it, she could tell.

Mukuro sighed before turning around and was just about to grab her doorknob when she suddenly got an idea. Glancing over her shoulder, she smiled brightly at both of them before saying, “And do me a favor…watch out for each other. We have to make sure things like this don’t keep happening. Think you can handle that too?”

“Sure...we can do that,” Sayaka half-heartedly replied, not looking directly at her.

Beginning to lose her patience with their depressing nature, she decided to throw out something random, something that Junko might have said while they were all back at school together.

Taking a large breath, she shouted, “And for the love of God, don’t let me come back out here to find you both staring at porn or something! We do that outside!”

For a moment, both Leon and Sayaka stood in complete shock. Slowly, they turned to glance at each other and something unexpected happened. They smiled. Mukuro almost thought she was imagining it but before she knew it, the two of them were just standing there, grinning at each other like idiots!
As far as she knew, this was the first time they’d smiled in front of each other since the first trial!

Suddenly, to her own shock, Sayaka and Leon turned that smile toward her and said together:

“You got it!”

The two of them stood there, holding onto each other for support, but still managed to press onward, something the soldier hadn’t expected to see. And, somewhere deep within her, Mukuro felt warmth that she couldn’t quite explain…like something inside her was giving her strength to continue on herself. In fact, it felt just like the times Makoto had smiled at her…

Pushing past her initial surprise, Mukuro nodded firmly before replying, “Cool. Take care!”

And with that, she pulled open her door and went inside, leaving the newly revitalized pair to keep watch.

High up in the surveillance room, Junko was practically salivating with despair-ful rapture as she watched everyone scampering around preparing for the “not” class trial.

“So, rich boy’s got everyone fooled, biker guy’s a loser dipshit cause he couldn’t take the final swing, and my sister is still doing a piss-poor job of imitating me…another day at Hope’s Peak everybody…”

Moving around the desk and heading for the Monokuma control room, Junko felt her body burning with despairing desire. With her new rules in place, there was nothing stopping her from achieving her goals! It no longer mattered if someone died right away or not, she’d force her former classmates down into the depths of despair!

“And the first one on my list…is my dear older sister!”

Mukuro breathed a sigh of relief once she was out of sight, feeling confident once more.

“If those two are getting alone again, maybe there’s hope for the rest of us…” she gently whispered to herself, letting that warmth from within envelope her once more. She would have like to revel in it for a while longer, but knew she needed to get changed as quickly as she could.

She moved to close the door and discovered that she didn’t have her own key in her hand, which she usually did once she re-entered her room.

Only then did she realize that her door had opened without her having to use her key. She must have left it completely unlocked in her hurry to get to Chihiro, but since everyone else had been there, there hadn’t really been a need to lock it. Despite that, Mukuro couldn’t help a growing feeling of unease and instinctively turned, glancing around her room until she found that she had made a critical mistake.

“Evening, Miss ‘Junko Enoshima’!”

All of the warmth Leon and Sayaka’s smile had given her vanished as that voice echoed in her ears. Standing on her bed, so that its height would be close to her own, a gleeful Monokuma stared at her.
Hands behind its back, as if hiding something, the bear chuckled to itself as Mukuro slammed the door, hoping that Sayaka and Leon hadn’t heard the bear’s voice coming from inside her room.

Pausing for a moment, the soldier waited but when she didn’t get a knock or her doorbell ringing, she assumed that her classmates hadn’t heard the demented bear. Once the panic was gone, anger replaced it and Mukuro turned and glared at Monokuma as it addressed her.

“Seeing that you left the door unlocked, I let myself in. Hope that’s alright—?”

“What the hell do you want?!” the soldier shouted, interrupting the bear. On reflex, her hand flew under her shirt to grasp her knife, only to discover that it was missing. Her eyes widened as she realized that she must have forgotten it when she left in a hurry earlier. As she angrily gritted for her lack of foresight, the grating voice of Monokuma called out to her.

“Missing something? Is it...this?!?”

A flash glinted in her eyes and Mukuro’s hand reacted before she even realized it, shooting up and grasping something metal between her fingers before it would have struck her in the face. It took only a moment to recognize that it was her missing combat knife. Her combat senses active, she flipped the knife around, grasping it by the handle and took a defensive stance.

“Oh, now that’s quite a shock!” Monokuma jeered with sarcasm, hopping off the bed before chuckling to itself. “I never expected the ‘Ultimate Fashionista’ to be capable of catching knives! Let me guess, they taught you that in the hospital too?”

Mukuro flinched as the bear provoked her, mocking the story she’d told to her classmates regarding her medical knowledge. But she didn’t react, she knew that would be an even graver mistake than forgetting her knife. She had no idea what her sister was up to, bringing Monokuma back to her room, but whatever it was, it had to do with the newly adjusted rules.

Or at least, that’s what her gut told her. What other reason would Junko contact her again, especially considering their ‘parting of the ways’ last time?

Wait…if that was the case, why was the voice speaking to her only in Monokuma’s usual tone? Normally, Junko would speak to Mukuro in her own voice. Was this her sister’s way of keeping her word to ‘never speak’ with her again? Did she think that by having Monokuma be its usual self, that negated the fact that she was contacting the soldier in secret once more?

Before she could get her head wrapped around her sister’s intentions, Monokuma scoffed and said, “I’m sure you’re wondering why the gracious Headmaster of our esteemed academy is coming to visit you, especially at such a dire time.”

Yes, Mukuro was indeed curious but she wouldn’t be coaxed into speaking so easily.

Picking up on the silent treatment it was being given, Monokuma sneered and continued, “Your expression says it all! ‘Oh, please Mr. Monokuma, tell me why you would deign to see me in my private room when an investigation is going on!’ Well, I’ll tell ya, toots!”

Mukuro gritted her teeth at the insult but kept herself composed as she listened to the bear’s rambling.

“I don’t like to see myself as an overseer here, but rather as an educator,” Monokuma spouted as it paced back and forth in front of her. “And while I could just give you all the answers that you and your fellow students want, then it wouldn’t be as gratifying when you finally uncover the truth for yourselves—.”
“What the hell are you getting at?!”

Mukuro surprised herself, thinking she had been controlling her emotions better than she had. She hadn’t meant to speak out, but her mind was aware that she was quickly running out of investigation time. And if nothing else, she needed to get back and see how Chihiro was doing.

Unfortunately, that seemed to be just what Monokuma wanted, as it turned its head so that only the glowing red, robotic eye was glaring directly into her sky blue irises.

“If you don’t hurry, one of your fellow students will be left aaaaaall alone. You don’t want that, now do you?”

A confused expression warped Mukuro’s features as those cryptic words bore deep into her subconscious, her mind desperately trying to figure out the meaning behind them. However, before she could form a reasonable thought, or try to pry information out of the bear, she heard a knocking sound. Spinning around to face her door, she waited for someone to ring her door, but was greeted with silence.

Again, the knocking came but this time, she realized that it wasn’t coming from her door!

Whirling around, she saw that Monokuma had moved itself to the far wall and was knocking at various places. Entirely confused for a moment, Mukuro began stunned when suddenly, a small portion of the wall opened up! It was like a hidden tunnel meant only for Monokuma, as it was barely big enough for the bear to step through.

Climbing into the secret passage, the bear turned and seemed to grin at her as it said, “See you at the trial!”

Mukuro could only watch as the bear tapped the wall again, the wall replacing itself as if it had never been moved. Silence engulfed the room for a few moments before the soldier flew into a rage. A furious scream erupted from her throat and she smashed her unarmed fist into the wall next to her, a small dent in the sheetrock visible as she retracted her hand, only to smash it against the wall a second time.

As her knuckles ached, she slowly took deep breaths as she tried to calm down.

“I’m such a fool! I knew there were secret tunnels for Monokuma set up in the school but I didn’t bother to think that there would be one in all of our rooms!” she said aloud, trying to let her anger out verbally. “And what the hell did he mean by leaving a classmate…all…alone…”

All at once, it clicked. Chihiro…Chihiro would be left alone during the entire trial! Just like Sayaka, she would probably be excused due to her unconscious state, leaving her virtually unprotected!

…but then, why was that so horrible? Junko wouldn’t violate the rules and kill her while the trial was going on, she was too committed to the rules for that to happen. And if that was the case…was there something else that Monokuma had implied by his words?

“Dammit, ‘If you don’t hurry, one of your classmates will be left all alone’, huh? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Wait…hurry, I need to hurry to—!”

Just as those words left her mouth, a familiar tone sounded through the school, leaving Mukuro distraught and frantic as the monitor above her abruptly switched on.

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“Um, so... I'm tired of waiting... let's get this class trial of mutual bullying underway! Please go through the red door on the first floor of the school!”

As Monokuma’s message played on the monitor above her, Mukuro felt her body grow cold and her legs wobbled as she realized she had wasted all of the precious time she’d been given before the trial.

“No... no! I didn’t have any time to help investigate, god-dammit!”

The instant she finished speaking, her eyes widened in realization before her brows furrowed angrily.

“So that’s her game... she wanted me to waste time trying to figure out her stupid puzzle, or maybe... she was just trying to buy time before the trail started... or she could have... I don’t... ARHG! Why did she have to be such a bitch?!”

Slamming her fist into the wall one final time, Mukuro took several deep breaths before retracting her hand, letting it limply fall to her side. Glancing over, she saw the same blouse, bra, and mini-skirt she’d been wearing before her shower still lying strewn about on the floor where she’d left them. Almost robotically, she pulled the baggy t-shirt from her shoulders, unbuttoned her jean short-shorts and tossed them aside.

In their place, she snapped on her bra, threw the blouse over her shoulders, and pulled the mini-skirt back into place. She didn’t want to bother with her wig, but knew that someone might question why, if she had spent so much time changing, hadn’t she bothered to redo her hair. Pulling the sweaty, damp mass of hair from her head, she let it drop to the floor before marching over to her wardrobe and securing yet another pre-prepared wig. Walking calmly over to her dress, she glanced in the mirror and used it to help ensure it was in place.

As she finished putting the stylized wig into place, she took another deep breath before furiously kicking her dresser. Panting from her sudden exertion, she was forced to admit that her emotions were still running wild.

“That’s probably what she wants...” Mukuro seethed, glancing at her reflection in the mirror, desperately wishing that the girl looking back at her truly was her sister... so that she could cut out her throat!

Instead of that, however, Mukuro resigned herself to taking another cleansing breath, regardless of the fact that she knew it wouldn’t truly calm her down. Inhaling and exhaling as deeply as she could, the soldier knew it was time to head to her next battlefield... one that she had absolutely no preparation for.

Her only hope was that someone... anyone, would have discovered the truth by now.

“Toko kept whispering to herself as she gripped her head, pulling at her own hair as the images of how they’d found Chihiro refused to leave her mind. Even after being assured by Leon and Sayaka that Chihiro was alive, she still had her doubts. After all, there was no way SHE would ever let a victim survive.
Continually chanting her words, like a mantra, her mind raced as she tried to find a way to get herself out of this mess. Unfortunately, just like her previous killings, she knew that no matter how she could try and spin it, the fact was that SHE had killed again and there was no way to change that. And the worst part was, the blame wouldn’t go to HER, but be directed at herself instead!

“W-W-W-Why…why d-d-do I have to be p-p-p-punished for what SHE’S done?!” she abruptly screamed, falling deeper into despair. Dry sobs wracked her body and just when she knew that all hope was lost…a single thought broke through her mind.

“M-Master…M-Master Byakuya will k-k-know what to do! He…He p-p-promised! He can—!”

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*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

“Um, so…I’m tired of waiting…let’s get this class trial of mutual bullying underway! Please go through the red door on the first floor of the school!”

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As that message tore through her ears, Toko let out a primal scream as fear once again began to take hold of her.

“NOOOOO!! It w-w-w-wasn’t me! It wasn’t m-my fault! Master!! Master Byakuya!! S-S-S-Save me!!”

Rushing to the door, she unlocked it and pulled it open only slightly, seeing Sayaka and Leon hanging around outside her door. And even though she knew she couldn’t trust those…murderers, they were the only ones she could turn to now.

As Sayaka and Leon noticed her peering out at them, Toko suddenly shouted, “Y-You! Go and g-get M-Mister Byakuya! Right n-now!”

Without giving them time to respond, she slammed the door and relocked it, so that they couldn’t force their way in and have their way with her. Pressing her back against the door, she panted for breath as she slid down and set with her back to the door. Now…all she needed to do was wait…wait for her Master to come and save her.

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**ATTENTION: Toko’s Fantasy**

(Toko sat, shivering on the floor. Suddenly, a heavenly voice called out!)

Byakuya: (Overflowing with concern) “Toko! I came as quickly as I could! What’s wrong?!”

(The voice of her love called from the other side of the door; enveloping her, strengthening her.)

Toko: (Almost shocked) “B-Byakuya! You came!”

(Again from the other side of the door, she heard him calling out)

Byakuya: (Lovingly) “Of course I did! I am here for you! Open the door and we shall escape this horrible place…together!”
Toko: (Moaning) “Oh…yes! I…believe…in you! I will…follow you…until the…end!!”

(As Toko unlatched the door, so too is her heart released from the pain of loneliness)

**EXITING: Toko’s Fantasy**

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Drool slipped down her chin as she reveled in that imagery, her mind clinging to it with all the sanity she could muster. Truly, her White Knight would come to save her…just as she knew he would.

It was then that she heard a knocking at her door…

___________________________

**To Be Continued…**

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Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! My beta isn’t feeling well so I had to edit this chapter myself. Please wish her well in getting better and sorry if I had any horrible typos this time around!

But enough of my poor editing skills! What a long and action packed chapter, huh? But now that the new rules have been implemented, how will everyone survive? Will Mondo’s crime be exposed? How will the presence of Mukuro, Leon and Sayaka affect the trial? Will someone ever punch Byakuya in the dick for being a dick? You’ll have to read on to find out!

So, what do you all think of the new rules? I had a hard time deciding if I wanted to add them but in the end, I think they will prove crucial to the overall story. I didn’t just want to add rules every time the plot of the story got harder to make work, because that would be boring. So, to that effect, I’m adding as few “new” rules as possible, to try and be more in-line with the canon story.

Also, just had to mention that I am proud of my “Obligatory Shower Scene” at the top of this chapter. Every great story needs an “Obligatory Shower Scene”, to create…tension…and stuff. For this, I chose Mukuro because she’s becoming increasingly important to the story…plus fan-service is needed in these kinds of situations…right?

…Wow, I feel dirty now…I did not intend that…I am so sorry…forget I said anything!

Anyway! As always, please leave a review/comment if you have questions or if you just want to let me know that you’re enjoying the story. Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Ch 2 Act 10

Chapter Summary

The second class trial beings. Sayaka, Leon and Mukuro work to contribute to the trial, while Byakuya continues to play his twisted games. Later, Genocide Jack makes her debut...with a vengeance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mondo leaned against the wall, his arms folded and his hands gripping the sleeves of his duster. After the assembly message went out, he and Sakura hastened to the first floor, making them among the first ones to arrive. While the biker assumed that the martial artist was concerned for the others, her friend Hina in particular, Mondo himself was consumed only with thoughts of guilt and disgust. "I…I outta just come clean," he had tried, and failed, to reason with himself ever since the investigation began. "If I just admit to it...no one has to die...but then, I'll have to tell them the truth...and Chihiro's secret will...will..."

For the first time in all his life, Mondo cursed his manly pride, as the honor that he’d lived his life by was now tearing his soul apart. If he spoke up, even if he didn’t reveal the exact reason why he’d attacked Chihiro, he’d have to explain how he’d gotten into the girl’s locker room. And he certainly couldn’t show them Chihiro’s e-handbook, tucked away deep in his pocket, because he knew someone smart like Kyoko would examine it and find out the programmer’s biological gender.

He could make up some bullshit about finding Sayaka’s e-handbook, also being kept hidden in his pocket, before he went to meet Chihiro and just forgot to give the device back to the pop idol. Then again, that would also give them cause to believe that he’d used Sayaka’s e-handbook to intentionally get into the girl’s locker room and attack Chihiro...

It would make him look like he’d been targeting Chihiro instead of trying to help her. And if that was the case, since his life was literally in the hands of his classmates, he wasn’t so sure they’d be willing to forgive him.

"I know I wouldn’t...if someone admitted to trying to kill someone else, I’d vote ‘em dead without a second thought..."

So, either he told them the absolute truth about his rage, and by that extension, his own weakness fueling the attack...or he did what he was doing now, keeping quiet until he could figure out what the right thing to do was.

"Hell...I know what the right thing to do is...I just...how can I...?"

As though a hole had been torn open in his heart, Mondo lowered his head and let those dark thoughts consume him as he waited for everyone to arrive.
You could practically taste the tension in the air as the students gathered in the small room leading to the class trial, only half prepared for an entirely different kind of ordeal than last time.

“Is this everyone? It feels like we’re short a few people,” Taka announced, standing next to the elevator. Glancing around, the moral compass instantly identified who was missing. “Has anyone seen Junko, Sayaka, Leon, or Toko? They should have been in the dorms when the announcement rang—”.

Before he could finish, the large red double doors were pushed forward, an appropriately dressed Junko holding it open for the slow moving Sayaka and Leon.

“Ah, Junko, Sayaka, Leon! Welcome! It’s good to see you all got here safely, and all dressed in appropriate attire as well!” Taka signaled as they joined the mass of people gathered for the trial.

A look of confusion spread over most of the students at the attire comment, aside from Hina who giggled, and Junko who simply rolled her eyes before closing the door after Sayaka and Leon were through. All eyes lingered on them, for reasons that were obvious to them all.

“I’m glad to see you could join us,” Celeste said to them with a sickening smile, her eyes focusing specifically on Sayaka and Leon. “It would be a shame for you to miss such an important meeting.”

Her insensitive comment only further increased the tension swirling around everyone. However, Leon and Sayaka chose to remain silent, knowing that answering her would be like kicking a hornet’s nest. Instead, Junko openly scoffed and said, “Yeah well, we were having a hell of a time trying to get Toko out of her room. We can’t all be spending our precious time sipping tea and being utterly useless, now can we?”

Beyond a light twitch that only a few students seemed to notice, Celeste appeared to be unfazed by her classmate’s curt words. With a sideways smirk, the gambler turned her back to the Fashionista with a light sigh.

“Indeed, it takes a refined eloquence to properly appreciate tea and it’s ceremonies. And while it seems I possess such eloquence, I’m afraid that I do not possess the tenacity for grueling detective work. I merely ‘did what I could’. I believe you are the one who keeps insisting that, is that not so?”

Junko narrowed her eyes and scoffed, “Yeah, well, I have serious doubts that you were actually doing ‘all you could’ and were just being a lazy bit—”.

“Enough prattle. We don’t have time to waste on this trivial finger pointing,” Byakuya abruptly interrupted, unexpectedly halting the conversation before turning to glare at Junko. “You mentioned that Toko refused to leave her room. Does she not understand how dire of a situation we are in?”

“Actually,” Sayaka spoke up, getting everyone’s attention. “She asked for us to come and get you.”

A raised eyebrow followed that question, as Byakuya clearly seemed perplexed by the request. However, unlike his usual demeanor would suggest, he didn’t immediately refuse. In fact, his features hardened as he said, “Very well. I’ll drag her from that room if I must—”.

“No need for that! I got it!”

Before anyone could react, the red double door flew open, startling everyone. Struggling to regain their composure, the students were shocked to see Monokuma waddle into the room, dragging a kicking and panicking Toko across the floor. Her face was reddened, and tears poured down her
“N-N-Nooooo! Let me g-g-goooo!” she screamed, flailing and trying to get free of her captor’s iron grasp. “I don’t want this! Y-You can’t d-d-do this!”

As sickening as this was, it seemed that Byakuya was enjoying the sight of Toko’s incessant screams, as he could only smirk as he watched Monokuma drag her right in front of the elevator and push the button to open the metal gate blocking the entrance. Once the elevator doors were completely open, the bear spun around to the other side of Toko and shoved her inside, despite her continued frenzy.

Glancing over its shoulder, Monokuma almost seemed to smirk as it said, “Everybody in! We’re already running a few minutes behind because of the wet blanket here—”.

“Hey! Leave her alone!”

Absolutely no one was surprised when Makoto stepped up, stepping around Monokuma and speeding to Toko’s side. However, when he approached, she immediately shirked away swatting her arms at him in a vain attempt to protect herself. Makoto’s face scrunched in anger and he turned to glare at Monokuma with the fury of a thousand suns.

“What did you do to her?” he demanded, barely able to hold himself back.

With a light huff, Monokuma turned its back to the lucky student and answered, “All students must be present for the class trial. When I went to fetch her, because she was late, she started resisting. So, to prevent her from being penalized for disobeying the rules, I **generously** offered to escort her myself. Really the nerve of you youngins, trying to label me the bad guy—”.

“That’s because you are,” Junko interjected swiftly, folding her arms and glaring at the bear with heated intensity.

“How can we? With Toko in such a state, will it not make the trial all the more difficult to proceed?” Celeste offered, twirling her hair as if uninterested in her classmate’s suffering.

“That sounds like a personal problem…” Monokuma nonchalantly answered.

As the tension was beginning to become stifling, Byakuya abruptly weaved his way through the crowd of students and marched directly up to Toko. His shadow cast over her, she slowly lifted her gaze to see him glaring down at her, his eyes unreadable.

“Now isn’t the time for sniveling. Pull yourself together.”

His tone was cold and cruel, and everyone expected Toko to burst into a fit of hysteria once more. However, they were all shocked when a strangely perverse smile erupted on her lips and she leapt up to her feet. Wiping away her tears, and drool, she nodded emphatically and answered, “Y-Y-Yes! I understand!!”

A sense of confusion settled onto everyone at the scene but none of them had time to process it before Monokuma shouted, “See? All’s well that ends well! Let’s get the show on the road—”.

“Hold on,” this time it was Kyoko who spoke. “I assume that Chihiro is excused from the trial, due to her condition. Correct?”
Obviously becoming fed up with the constant delays, Monokuma’s face reddened as it turned and flashed it’s claws at her, to which the stoic girl didn’t even flinch. Suppressing an angry growl, the bear cleared its throat and replied, “…Yes. Lamb Chop can stay peacefully sleeping in the nurse’s office until further notice…anything else?”

Already in the process of walking past him, Kyoko answered, “No, let’s get on with this.”

Once she said it, it appeared that everyone else consented as well, cautiously walking past the bear as they all piled into the elevator. When all of them were safely inside, the elevator roared to life, the metal gates closing and separating them from Monokuma, who remained with its back to them.

Without warning, the elevator began to descend, sinking into the earth and taking them to where destiny awaited their decision.

Left alone in the foyer where the elevator had been, Monokuma stood silent for a few moments before a low chuckle seeped out. “Confident, aren’t they? We’ll see just how long that lasts…”

As the overbearing hum of the elevator echoed all around, Sayaka felt what little strength she had fading. Her body was still weakened and there had been a great deal of walking and moving around today. After all, she’d nearly collapsed on her way to get breakfast, helped with the search for Chihiro and somehow managed to lose her e-handbook, all without having much time to rest. Then, with the realization that she may lose her life if they didn’t find who attacked Chihiro, her mental fortitude was spent as well.

She wouldn’t even be standing right now if it weren’t for Leon holding her up…which was another shocking development for her.

Briefly recalling their conversation in the cafeteria, she wasn’t quite sure what it was that made her suddenly feel more comfortable around him. Nothing had really changed. She was still his attempted murderer and he was still her attacker. And yet, somehow in the chaos of having to go through her first class trial, she’d completely forgotten about that. It was like it had been before that fateful night, with them just being classmates and fellow prisoners, doing all they could to survive.

In fact, Sayaka kind of surprised herself when she discovered that, before she had even realized it, she was grasping a tight hold on Leon’s hand, her fingers intertwined with his own. However, instead of wanting to let go, she found herself holding on tighter, fearful that if she let go, her resolve would go with it.

Little did she know, that Leon was having similar thoughts as the elevator came to an abrupt halt.

“Take your seats and shut up! No more delays! Get those young asses in gear!”

When the doors to the class trial room opened, they found that Monokuma was already there, sitting upon its throne and lazing about. The bear seemed impatient, waving its hand to encourage them to find their own spots.

It was Mukuro’s first time in the courtroom, aside from seeing it on the monitors in the surveillance room. She had never actually imagined she’d find herself here, always having thought her sister wouldn’t betray her and simply excuse her from the trail system altogether. Now, standing here in
this intimidating place, she fully understood her classmates’ horror at having to return.

“Let’s get this over with, shall we?” the smug voice of Byakuya interrupted the silence, the bastard himself already heading for his seat.

Without another word, everyone spread out to get to their assigned position. Mukuro easily found her spot between Taka and Sakura. Meanwhile, Sayaka was forced to hold herself upright in her own station, right next to Makoto of all people. Ironically, Leon, who had once been thrilled he wasn’t right next to Sayaka, now felt worry as he watched her using her arms to keep herself standing, holding onto the rail in front of her for support. Finally, in place of where Chihiro would have stood was a large sign that read:

SORRY! IN A BIT OF A COMA RIGHT NOW! AFK!

The sight of it made Mukuro uncomfortable, a sentiment that most of her classmates probably shared.

The room itself had changed too, some of them noticed. While the courtroom itself had the same structure, the walls and floor had been changed. Not that Mukuro had taken the time to really inspect what was different about the room itself. She’d practically raced through it last time, on her way to stopping Leon’s execution, giving her no time to even be able to identify differences, if there were any significant ones. Instead, she focused on paying attention to her classmates to try and help solve the mystery of who attacked Chihiro.

“This time, I’m just as much a player in the game as they are,” the soldier told herself, as mentally prepared for the class trial as she could be. “No room for errors this time. We gotta find out who attacked Chihiro or else…we all lose this time.”

As this class trial operates a little differently, allow me to explain the updates to the class trial system!” Monokuma brazenly announced once everyone was settled, focusing all attention toward itself.

As all of the students turned to listen, Kyoko took that brief opportunity to scan the room, looking for anything she could use in her investigation of the school. Once finished, she also diverted her attention toward the bear, intent on using whatever it could tell them to her own advantage.

“We are here to discover who it was that attacked and almost fatally wounded Chihiro Fujisaki. As per the usual rules, you may debate who is responsible and present any evidence you may have. And, following discussion, there will be a majority vote! If you can all figure out, whodunit? Then the choice to punish them will be left in your greasy little palms. But if you pick the wrong person…I’ll punish everyone besides the culprit, as per normal class trial rules!”

Kyoko listened carefully to each word but something felt off about that speech. She couldn’t quite put her finger on what, but something about those rules seemed to curry favor toward Monokuma’s side. However, she didn’t have time to focus on that right now, she could ponder the bear’s schemes once the culprit had been identified…though she already had enough evidence to suggest who it was.

As usual, Kyoko was keeping her senses sharp, ready to pick up on any inconsistencies or falsehoods she might overhear during the debate.
“Alright then! Now that that’s been settled!” Monokuma said, glaring around the room maliciously. “Let’s start this case off right with the ‘murder’ weapon!”

Finishing its speech, Monokuma leaned back to lounge in its seat to watch over the proceedings. It was then that another classmate decided to make his opinion known.

“Chihiro was obviously struck in the head with an iron pipe!”

Another heavy silence fell over the room as Hiro made his outrageous claim, earning a glare from not only Monokuma, but every single student present. At first, he didn’t notice, too pleased with the conjecture he’d presented. But slowly, he became aware that everyone was staring at him and he nervously laughed to try and cover up his ineptitude.

“Can we all agree that the dumbbell found on the floor of the girl’s locker room was the weapon the culprit used to attack Chihiro?” Makoto jumped in, dissolving any remaining confusion and getting the trial back on track.

“Can we also agree that this dumbbell shouldn’t be allowed to present more evidence?” Byakuya quipped, motioning toward Hiro with a sigh. Before anyone else could react, an enthusiastic voice shouted over everything else.

“Yeah! That’s right, Makoto! Do the thing!”

The entire courtroom froze for a moment before everyone turned to see Leon, who was looking at Makoto expectedly, brandishing those brave and easily misunderstand-able words. And no one looked more shocked than the lucky student himself.

“Uh, Leon…what are you talking about?” he questioned, his mind completely taken off the trial due to this unexpected shout out.

“You know, the thing! Do the thing, Makoto!” the baseball star insisted again, his eyes holding a great deal of hope.

“W-What thing? What are you talking about?!” a very flustered Makoto inquired, feeling his face flush as everyone began to look to him for answers to Leon’s madness. Particularly, he felt extra embarrassed when Kyoko stared at him, expecting a better answer than he’d given.

Feeling a bit embarrassed himself, Leon huffed and said, “Uhg, you know! That thing where you point at someone, tell them they’re wrong, and make them guilty! Do that!”

All at once, understanding flooded the courtroom, followed by some sighs and a few curt words spoken under breaths. Still looking at Makoto like he was going to ‘do the thing’ any second, Leon was oblivious to the angry glares that Hiro had been the subject of moments ago. At the same time, Makoto was becoming desperate for help, glancing around from Kyoko, to Junko, and even over to Byakuya; his eyes silently pleading for help.

A deep sigh escaped Junko as she came to Makoto’s aid, “Leon, he doesn’t make people guilty. They just are guilty.”

“Well yeah, but last time no one knew I was guilty until Makoto pointed at me and did the thing!” Leon bitterly defended, much to everyone’s chagrin. “So, come on Makoto. Do the thing! In fact, point at Byakuya! Point at Byakuya and do the thing!”

Adjusting his glasses, the Togami Heir scoffed, “Is this your way of insinuating that I could be the culprit?”
“That’s right!” Leon shouted, finally turning serious it seemed. “We found you at the scene with blood on your hands! Who else could it have been?!”

A curt laugh from Byakuya ceased the ballplayer’s instigations, allowing the Togami Heir to counter, “Well now, I never expected such a response from an attempted murderer. You’re logic is about as reasonable as Hiro’s was about the pipe.”

“…Hey,” Hiro briefly spoke up before falling silent as everyone shot another glare at him.

“As I explained before, the blood on my fingers was due to my checking if Chihiro had been fatally injured.” Byakuya wasted no more time, thoroughly explaining himself. “I believe that Kyoko also had to bloody her hands inspecting the body, did she not?”

All eyes turned to Kyoko, who remained utterly silent and stoic in response.

“Hey, well…that was after we found you alone in the room with Chihiro!” Leon tried to rally his cause again. “We don’t know what you did before we got there! For all we know, you were the one who strung up Chihiro—!”

“Why don’t we go over this case from the beginning? That way we can try and put all the pieces together,” Kyoko suggested, cutting through Leon’s protests. “Let’s start with why Chihiro was in the girl’s locker room in the first place. That is, unless, you happen to have that the answer to that already, Leon?”

Leon opened his mouth to protest but said nothing as a look of genuine confusion came over his face. “Uh…I mean, I know that Mondo was meeting up with Chihiro there but, I don’t know exactly why. Well, I can kinda guess but—”

“Pardon me, but I’m afraid I have to ask,” the sickly sweet voice of Celeste cut him off. “You knew that Mondo was going to be meeting Chihiro in secret?”

Raising an eyebrow, Leon answered, “Well, I don’t know about it being a secret but, I ran into him in the hall and he told me he was going to meet Chihiro.”

“When was that?” Celeste immediately followed up, her voice demanding an answer.

Although a bit frustrated with how she was grilling him, the baseball star thought for a moment and said, “I’m not really sure. It was a few minutes before the nighttime announcement, I think?”

Surprisingly, he received a pleasant smile from Celeste for his answer. “I see. Thank you for clearing that up,” she said plainly before turning to face the rest of the class. “It would seem that yet another one of us has been ignoring our self-imposed nighttime rule. Despite the tragedy that always brings.”

Although she hadn’t said it to either of them, both Sayaka and Leon knew it was a jab at them. They both cringed slightly at the implication but said nothing, out of shame or self-loathing, no one could say.

“Well, we all are kind of doing that tonight…” Makoto tried to joke to relieve some tension. However, it didn’t get so much as a chuckle. Forcing away his embarrassment, the lucky student returned his thoughts to the trial. “A-Anyway, we need to figure out why Chihiro was in the girl’s locker room first.”

“She probably wanted to exercise!” Hina jumped in, trying to help in her own way. “But, we still don’t know why Chihiro wanted to meet Mondo so late at night!”
Makoto nodded in agreement and said, “Alright then, let’s start with you, Mondo.”

Startled by suddenly being called on, the biker’s mouth hung open for a second before he replied, “H-Huh? Why me?!”

His surprised and defensive tone made it clear that he hadn’t been paying close attention but he was certainly aware now. Not to mention that, anytime someone was called upon during a class trial, the tension in the room spiked. After all, any insinuations could be deadly here and it was obvious that they were all on edge.

“You were the one who found Chihiro, right? Tell us what happened,” Junko insisted, diffusing the situation before it could turn sour.

“Oh…right, yeah,” Mondo concurred fumbling his way through until he took a breath.

> “Just play it cool. Just tell them that you found her like that…” Mondo told himself, pausing for a moment to collect his thoughts.

“So, Chihiro asked to talk to me. Told me to meet her outside the locker rooms,” he began, already getting skeptical looks.

A puzzled expression crossed Makoto’s face as he asked, “Do you know what she wanted?”

“N-No…she just asked me to meet her. I figured she needed help opening something or… something…” he half-lied, considering he didn’t know what she’d wanted at the time. “She caught me in the bathhouse changing room—”.

At the mention of that, a few of the students, including Celeste and Hifumi, gave him a raised eyebrow.

“She caught you in the bathhouse?” Celeste said suggestively, a mischievous giggle escaping as she raised a hand to cover her mouth. “In a state of undress, I am to assume?”

“I never imagined Mister Owada to be so forward!” Hifumi instantly backed up, a slight bit of jealous drool dripping down his chin.

No matter how much he tried to suppress it, Mondo found his rage beginning to return as the embarrassment their reactions caused began to overtake him. Leaning forward and glaring furiously at both of them, he defended, “It’s not like it was my idea! I went there to clean off after working out and she was there when I went to change!”

“I can vouch for Mondo, at least about the working out!” Taka inserted himself into the assessment, hoping to cease the rude treatment his friend was getting. “I offered to join him but he said he needed time alone…after the motive was announced.”

Being reminded of the motive, a deafening silence hung over the room. Most of them had forgotten it in the chaos of this new trial, and even though it had only been announced that morning, it felt so far away now that things had escalated back to this point. Mondo, however, couldn’t stop thinking about the motive…even now while he was trying to defend himself.

“Anyway,” Junko disrupted the silence, obviously wanting to get back to the trial. “So Chihiro asked you to meet with her? What happened after that?”
Reining in his anger, Mondo continued, “I, uh, went to go and meet her and ran into Leon.”

“Yeah, just like I said before,” Leon concurred with a nod. “I saw him in the hall and he told me he was going to meet Chihiro.”

“Did that happen after I saw you on my way back to my room?” Junko spoke up again, to which Leon nodded again.

“Yeah, only just after really,” the ballplayer confirmed. Turning back to Mondo, Leon asked, “So, what happened after you and I talked?”

On the inside, Mondo was pleased that the baseball star hadn’t mentioned exactly what they’d talked about. It reminded him that someone had been trying to help him keep from ending up in this kind of situation…and it hurt that he’d found himself here regardless. Plus, Leon’s testimony served as a kind of alibi, which the biker regretfully embraced.

“I went up to the locker rooms to wait for Chihiro,” Mondo continued, only now beginning to fabricate his story. “When I got there, I knew something was wrong because the door to the girl’s locker room was propped open. I thought Chihiro might be in there and I didn’t want to get riddled with holes by that freaking gun, so I stayed away from it and just waited. After about five minutes, I thought maybe Chihiro wasn’t gonna show. I thought about leaving but the way the girl’s room was propped open still bugged me, so I thought I’d call out to whoever was in there, tell ‘em the door was open—”.

“And what happened then?” Byakuya suddenly interrupted, eyeing Mondo suspiciously.

Even though it pissed him off, Mondo knew the bastard was just trying to get to him, probably suspected him. Which, unfortunately, he was right to do so. Even so, the biker couldn’t give in now. He had to follow through with his story.

With a huff, Mondo continued, “I shouted loud enough to see if anyone was there but heard nothing. I figured someone just forgot their bag or something and decided to pull it out of the door. When I did, the door flew open—”.

“That’s incredibly dangerous! You could have been shot, numerous times, just for trying something like that!” Taka immediately reprimanded, a concerned look mixing with his stern visage. “You should have come and gotten us and we could have gotten one of the girls to investigate.”

A hint of anger rose in Mondo as he retorted, “Yeah! Well if I hadn’t, I never would have seen Chihiro lying on the floor with blood on her head!”

His own words echoed and brought an uncomfortable silence to the courtroom. As everyone digested his story, Mondo wiped the sweat from his brow and took deep breaths. The hard part was over. In truth, he wasn’t sure he’d actually be able to lie to all of his classmates like that, considering he’d had no reason to lie to them up until now.

“Then again…I had no problem lying to my boys about what happened to Daiya…” he regretfully mused, blocking out that memory as much as possible.

“And that’s when you came to collect the rest of us?” the stoic voice of Kyoko sounded next to him, almost startling him.

“Y-Yeah…” he answered simply, relieved that his lying had come to an end, at least for now.
A surprised huff sounded from across the room and no one was surprised to see Celeste staring at Mondo with suspicion. “I’m surprised that you did not rush in to try and help her. Regardless of the gatling gun stationed above.”

Gritting his teeth, the biker practically snarled, “I didn’t know what the fuck I should’ve been doing! But I knew that I couldn’t go in there so I kept out!”

“Indeed, that’s what strange to me,” Celeste interrupted, looking away from him and over to Monokuma. “I have a question for you.”

With a disgruntled sigh, the bear pulled itself up out of the slump it had fallen into and answered, “Ask and thou shalt be made less stupid.”

Disregarding the bear’s obvious insult, the gambler asked, “Why was it that the boys were allowed into the girl’s locker room when we all went to investigate? Is it because Chihiro had been attacked and you were already planning to establish more rules?”

“Pretty much,” the bear said with a shrug of its shoulders. “Although, honestly, I didn’t expect to have to add those rules. They were kind of a back-up in case situations like this happened.”

“…That makes sense,” Junko unexpectedly said before quickly realizing she’d said it aloud. “I mean, it figures that even if we don’t actually kill someone, you’d come up with twisted crap like this!”

“It’s what we’ve come to expect from you. That’s much is clear,” Kyoko surprisingly agreed, to which even Junko seemed a bit startled.

“Okay, okay! Enough pampering your Headmaster’s ego! Get back to the case before I get super bored!” Monokuma shouted, obviously not wanting to stray too far from the trial.

“If no one minds, let’s move on to the discussion of the culprit,” Byakuya cut in, ignoring the fact that everyone seemed to mind his involvement. Regardless, there was an eagerness to him that no one had seen before as he continued, “Although, I believe the culprit in this case is already quite clear.”

A wave of shock shook the courtroom and the previously silent Hiro couldn’t stop himself from shouting, “Really?! For serious?!”

Without waiting for another interruption, the Togami Heir declared, “The one who attacked and crucified Chihiro…was none other than the fiendish serial killer, Genocide Jack!”

At the mention of her other half’s name, Toko felt ice run through her veins and her entire body trembled.

“No…no…it can’t be! I don’t…remember letting her have control! I mean…I took a nap after the motive today but I’m sure she didn’t get out! I always wake up with knots in my stomach after she takes control! How could this be happening?!”

As she tried to convince herself it wasn’t true, she noticed that everyone around her was disbelieving that a famed serial killer was among them. Toko felt that she may yet be saved…at least, until Makoto of all people told them about a file he’d found on Genocide Jack in the library!
“W-Wait! That's the same file that Master was looking at! Why does Makoto have it?!”

Turning her terrified gaze over to her Master, she noticed that Byakuya was purposely avoiding her gaze...as if to spite her. It was as if he was plotting to...to...to betray her!

“No! Master Byakuya would never do that to me! He...He's just trying to prove that I'm not the killer...He...He has to be! He would never break our promise!”

That tiny bit of hope was completely shattered when Byakuya spoke his next few words.

“Just a little more...and I'll be able to expose her to everyone, drag her into the spotlight where she can't hide from us anymore. With that accomplished, I'll have more eyes and ears open for if Genocide Jack tries to come after me!” the Togami Heir thought to himself as he set up the last piece of the puzzle he'd created for his classmates.

“So, apart from the bloody message, how would the person who attacked Chihiro have known about the method of crucifying Genocide Jack’s victims, if only high-ranking police officials knew about it? There’s only one logical explanation I can think of. And that’s because the culprit in this case...is the real Genocide Jack!”

As his claim reverberated off the walls, he noticed Toko becoming increasingly terrified, exactly as he'd planned. And just as he predicted, one of his classmates called him out on his claim, which he was entirely prepared for.

“You’re saying...Genocide Jack, is one of us?” Celeste inquired, which he found odd for a woman of moderate intelligence like her to be questioning but he didn’t have the time to be disappointed.

“Yes. In fact, it’s Toko.”

Although he couldn’t openly express it, a sick and twisted pleasure enveloped him as he saw the painfully betrayed expression on Toko’s horrified face. Completely ignoring her and her pain, Byakuya stared straight ahead without a hint of sympathy.

“Genocide Jack’s true identity...is Toko Fukawa.”

“No fuckin’ way...” Mondo stammered, surprised for more reasons than anyone could have guessed.

Not only was he floored by the news, it also came with a flood of relief. If that bastard Byakuya was telling the truth, it may actually have been Toko who strung up Chihiro. And, as heartless as it sounded, this would put them off of his own trail completely. No one would believe that the guy who found Chihiro was the one who attacked her, and with Toko as a scapegoat, he was essentially in the clear!

If that was the case...he just might get away with it...but then all his classmates would...get executed.

Suddenly, his feet felt cold as he momentarily glanced around the room, taking in the shocked faces of all his classmates...and his friends. His eyes lingered on Leon as his gaze passed him, feeling like
even more of a prick than Byakuya for what he was potentially doing. After all, even considering what the baseball star had done, he clearly didn’t deserve to be executed…none of his classmates did. And absolutely no one deserved it less than…his new Bro…Taka.

Shifting his gaze over, Mondo focused his eyes on his newfound friend. In all honestly, it seemed that Taka had been valuing their new friendship more than he had. Not that the biker didn’t get it, the bookworm probably didn’t have many…or any, friends before him. And now, here he was, about to throw that new friend to the wolves just to save himself. Sure, there was a chance that if he confessed, everyone would forgive him and not vote to execute him…but he doubted that…he really did.

Before he knew it, it seemed that Taka had seen him glancing toward him and turned to look Mondo in the eyes.

Misreading the biker’s worried glance, Taka smiled confidently and nodded firmly, as if trying to reassure him. All at once, Mondo felt like shouting the truth to everyone but his own fear kept him in check, unable to reveal what he’d done. He couldn’t…and he knew that. He truly was…a weak and pathetic coward.

“…I…I…I don’t know…if I can do this…but…I can’t break…my promise…what the fuck am I supposed to do?!?”

As those thoughts plagued him, the trial continued on, unabated.

“YOU LIIIIIIIIIEEE!!” Hifumi abruptly shouted in response to Byakuya’s insistence that Toko was Genocide Jack…although it was probably more because he was standing right next to her, rather than truly not believing the claim.

At the same time, Leon, who was standing to Toko’s right, inched away from her slightly, trying to hold a composed visage himself. By now, almost everyone was staring at Toko expectedly, for her to either refute Byakuya’s claims or to acknowledge them…no one could guess at that time. And when she did open her mouth, it wasn’t what they hoped to hear.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!” she stuttered furiously, incapable of answering due to shock, it seemed.

“Um, excuse me…I don’t understand something,” Sayaka finally spoke up after being silent for most of the trial. “Doesn’t Toko have hemophobia? A fear of blood? How could she be a killer if that was the case?”

Byakuya sent a crippling glare her way, as if to challenge her for questioning him but she merely stared back, completely unaffected by his gaze. With a huff, the Togami Heir decided it was best not to argue and simply answered, “Is Toko really Genocide Jack? The answer is yes…and at the same time, no.”

Although the riddle Byakuya proposed seemed to perturb many of the students, Makoto stepped up once more to do his thing.

“You’re talking about the fact that the police believe Genocide Jack has a split personality. I read that in the file too,” he surmised for Byakuya, feeling used somehow.

At the same time, a nervous Hifumi spoke up, “Okay, I get that but…to say something like that about Miss Fukawa is—“.
“Perfectly acceptable, if you think about it.” Again, Byakuya’s commanding tone demanded attention and everyone was forced to listen. “Toko’s strange behavior after we found Chihiro proves, without a doubt, that she has a split personality.”

“That’s true!” Taka agreed, nodding repeatedly. “Her melancholy tone was completely gone after she awoke and she didn’t seem bothered by the blood on the wall!”

“D-Don’t go assigning adjectives to my t-tone without permission!”

Everyone was startled when Toko abruptly spoke, not to defend herself, per se, but to correct Taka’s ascertain of her usual demeanor.

“Oh…my apologies,” the Moral Compass said with a bow, trying to be respectful, even in this situation.

With a disbelieving scoff, everyone turned as Junko glared at Byakuya and countered, “So…you’re saying that the reason Toko was acting weird and okay with blood was because her split personality that’s a serial killer came out at just that time? Do you know how stupid that sounds?”

No one was surprised to hear Junko refuting Byakuya’s claim, considering her obvious dislike for him. Unfortunately, it seemed that the Togami Heir was prepared for this, and replied, “Alright then, can you offer a better explanation for her strange behavior? Or, for that matter, why she felt the need to lock herself away in her room, like a criminal terrified of facing their own trial?”

Again, his words seemed to frighten the already frantic Toko, flinching at almost every syllable he spat out about her. Her entire body trembled horribly and she clutched her hands together tightly, as if holding onto the last bit of sanity she could muster.

At the same time, it seemed that Junko didn’t appreciate Byakuya’s asshole tendencies, narrowing her gaze as she challenged him. “Because she was terrified that she’d be attacked, obviously! That’s why she hid in her room! And so what if she was acting a bit weird after she woke up! You’d be out of it too if you saw what you thought was a real dead body and fainted!”

As if not really considering what she’d said, the Togami Heir countered, “What if she locked herself in her room, not to keep others out, but to keep her other side in?”

Before Junko could try and refute that, someone else joined the conversation.

“Wait…how would that work?” Leon abruptly interrupted, grinding the argument to a halt.

With a raised eyebrow, Byakuya questioned, “How would what work?”

Having been given leave to elaborate, Leon didn’t waste his chance.

“Okay so, let’s pretend for a second that you’re right, and I’m not saying you are, but hear me out on this one! How would Toko locking herself in her room solve anything? I mean, if she did have a split personality, and I’m not saying she really does!” He paused to glance at her apologetically for a moment before continuing, “What would stop her other personality from unlocking the door from the inside? It doesn’t make any sense!”

The entire courtroom was silent as Leon purposed that theory…to which no one seemed able to question. Even Byakuya stood there for a moment, staring blankly as he realized just how valid of a point Leon, of all people, had made. At the same time, Leon was feeling kind of proud of himself for mentioning it, even if it didn’t impact the case hardly at all.
“…Anyway, putting aside that…strangely valid point,” Byakuya continued, slowly recovering the ambitious attitude he’d had previously. “I will agree that Toko was indeed afraid…afraid of the murderous fiend inside her, afraid of it clawing its way out of her mind in order to kill one of us.”

At long last, it seemed that Byakuya’s words had dug too deep into Toko, as she slammed her hands down on the railing in front of her, getting everyone’s attention.

“H-H-H-How…” was all she muttered in response though, as if losing the rest of her sentence.

“Yeah! How can you know all of this?!” Hina chimed in, trying to defend her fellow classmate.

With a confident smirk, Byakuya replied, “…I do believe you misunderstood her. She wasn’t trying to ask, ‘How can you know this?’ Instead, what she’s most likely asking is, ‘How could you tell them?’”

“That’s crazy! You’re just trying to shift the blame away from yourself!” Leon shouted, clearly not believing what the Togami Heir was telling them.

Without bothering to even glance at him, Byakuya continued, “Earlier today, when we were all searching for Chihiro, Toko approached me and confided her secret to me. I have no idea what possessed her to do such a thing, but in all honesty, it makes the most sense.”

“Okay, let’s say you’re not completely bullshitting us,” Junko jumped in, seemingly getting more and more nervous as he continued, “What does that clear up exactly? We still don’t have proof she attacked Chihiro!”

Rather than immediately defend himself, like usual, Byakuya remained silent for a moment, locking eyes with Junko and having a battle of glares with her. When it became clear that neither of them would give in, the Togami Heir scoffed before smirking and said, “If you don’t believe me…why don’t you try asking Toko herself?”

“I think I will!” Hina intruded on the conversation, making a face at him before trying to smile gently at Toko. “Go ahead and tell us the truth. It’s all a lie, right Toko?”

Everyone’s gaze fixated on Toko, whose hands were grasping her own hair and tugging at it slightly. When she finally lifted her head, her eyes stared directly—no, accusatorily at Byakuya.

“Y-You said you w-wouldn’t t-tell anyone…!”

A wave of shock hit almost everyone in the room as she unfortunately admitted to everything Byakuya had said.

An almost elated smirk crossed Byakuya’s face as he answered, “You have only yourself to blame. I never asked you to tell me your secret.”

“B-B-But! Our promise!” she tried to reason with him, but he merely scoffed at her.

“You broke your promise to me, first. You said that, as long as you were here, you wouldn’t let Genocide Jack out—”.

“I t-tried! I tried to k-keep my promise!” Toko insisted, moisture building up in the corner of her eyes. “Y-You said that…if I kept my p-promise…you would g-go out with me! T-That’s the only r-reason I promised!”

As if she’d committed some kind of major offense against him, Byakuya’s face and tone completely
darkened as he glared at her, not minding her tears in the least.

“This is the real world. Not some romantic fairy tale. And besides,” he turned his face away from her and seethed, “I never said anything like that.”

In one last attempt to reason with him, Toko stared at him and shouted, “B-But! I t-ried to control her! I-I really did—!”

Before she could properly defend herself, the Togami Heir scoffed and finished, “But your efforts were useless. What a disappointment.”

“Uhg…I…hate you…” she choked out, her tone not as convincing as she probably wanted it to be.

“And with that, the opening act is finished,” Byakuya informed everyone, almost gleefully. An instant later, his cruel and calculating eyes bore into Toko’s, as if commanding her to obey. “All that’s left is to hear from the person in question…personally.”

A look of absolute fear overtook Toko as her brain understood what he wanted…and reluctantly started to obey. Trying to fight it off, albeit unsuccessfully, Toko’s final words came out just before she collapsed to the floor.

“The…p-p-person…you don’t…m-m-m-mean…!”

A great darkness was closing in on Toko with each word Byakuya had spoken, betraying her trust and violating her good name with the awful truth. Slowly but surely, her mind began to crack under the pressure.

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**ATTENTION: Toko’s Fantasy (Nightmare)**

(Toko shivers as her ‘lover’ shouts her secret to everyone. She collapses to her knees.)

Tokoi: (Begging) “How could you do this to me?! Did our love mean nothing to you?!”

(The pure white glow around her ‘lover’ vanished. Without a shred of kindness, he glared at her.)

Byakuya: (Angrily) “You broke your promise to me and let that fiend out! You have only yourself to blame!”

Tokoi: (Pleading) “But I tried! I did all that I could! Does my struggle mean nothing to you?!”

Byakuya: (Seething) “Face reality! I never loved you and I never will!”

(The aura around her ‘lover’ darkened and he turned his back to her, trapping her in darkness.)

Tokoi: (Prostrating herself) “Please! Give me one more chance to redeem myself! I beg of you!”

Byakuya: (Without turning back) “Your pleas are useless. You are nothing but a disappointment.”

(Her ‘lover’ begins to walk away…and a new presence appears behind Toko.)

??? : “It’s time for me to come out and play…right?”
Wailing at the top of her lungs, Toko’s legs lost their strength and she began to topple backward to the floor. Just before she hit the ground, darkness consuming her…and a voice echoes:

“…Showtime!”

From the deepest recess of Toko’s mind, Genocide Jack, or Jill depending on if you want gender specific pronouns, finally resurfaces. As she gained consciousness, and control, the first question on her mind was an obvious one.

“Oh…where the hell am I? This doesn’t look like a normal court room…a lot more colorful sure, but a judge’d have to be colorblind not to be disturbed by the crazy varieties!”

The second thing that her mind registered was that she’s on the floor, and she doesn’t like that.

“Alley-oop!” she thought as she flips herself up and back to her feet, finally being at eye level with everyone else in the room.

Third and finally, she quickly glanced around at everyone in the room and instantly recognized her audience.

“The gang’s all here!” she thought to herself, mentally checking them all off as she went around the room.

“Big Mac’s leading the charge…as usual,” she thought while staring at Makoto.

“And it seems Little Miss Psychic is having trouble standing…musta been penetrated by something fierce to knock her off her feet!” she chuckled as she glanced at Sayaka.

“Looks like Tick Tock is his usual stick-up-his-ass self, I wonder how many tickets he wrote today?” she considered as she noticed Taka.

“Huh…weird how Roid-Rage isn’t next to Milk Jugs over there…” she pondered, getting a good look at both Sakura and Hina respectively.

“Holy shit! I almost didn’t notice Scary Lady over there! I hope she keeps those of hers gloves on because if they come off, she’s gonna finger me for something!” she flinched slightly in paranoia as she saw that Kyoko was present too.

“Oh and Corndog made it here too! I’m hungry now…” she realized as she glanced at Mondo’s hair.

“Ohhhh, there he is! My Master! My Prince!” she thought, salivating at the sight of Byakuya before forcing herself to check on everyone else.

“Eh? Cherry’s missing? Off programming something or something?” she questioned, not seeing Chihiro anywhere among them.

“Oh and That-Lady-Whose-Name-I-Can’t-Pronounce is here too!” she finally noticed, getting a
good look at Celeste.

“Awww, and it looks like the Weenie is scared of me…that’s kinda hot, too bad he’s not cute enough for me to murder,” she calculated, seeing Leon’s terrified visage right next to her.

“Did Huffy lose weight? He’s panting like crazy for some reason…” she wondered, seeing Hifumi also trying to back away from his spot beside her.

“I feel like I’m missing someone…oh right! The Stoner! I didn’t even notice him for a second there!” she felt a bit embarrassed for a sec as she finally saw that Hiro was with them.

And finally, glancing over to the other side of the court room, she laid eyes on someone she hadn’t seen for a while.

“Oh and Muku is here too! Her wig looks great today! Going light on the make-up though, weird.”

After identifying everyone, Genocide Jill finally noticed that absolutely everyone was staring at her, as if expecting her to say something. She didn’t normally like being put on the spot, but she figured she could do it for her adoring friends!

“That’s what friendship is all about…right?!” she told herself with a maniacal laugh before deciding to address everyone.

“Well hello there! Is it me you all were hoping to see?!?” Not Toko said to everyone, a collective gasp resounding through the room. Leon and Hifumi, in particular, lurched as far away from her as they could, trapped in their places beside her. Without giving anyone time to speak, Not Toko shouted, “Well, here I am! The Ultimate Murderous Fiend! Genocide Jack…or better yet, let’s go with Genocide Jill. Gender pronouns are important, you know!”

If Makoto hadn’t been so utterly terrified and in complete shock, he would have said something about how calling her Jill had nothing to do with gender pronouns but he knew this wasn’t the time. An uproar of confusion suddenly spread through the courtroom, with many students shouting questions about who Not Toko was.

“What the fuck is this?!” Mondo shouted, completely dumbfounded.

“Toko…what happened to you?!” Taka questioned, his composure slipping.

“She’s so…intense! It’s like she’s not Toko anymore, man!” a terrified Hiro spouted, earning a death glare from the Ultimate Murderous Fiend.

“Uhg! ‘Not Toko’! That sounds so stupid! Plus…Toko is a loser’s name!” she instantly corrected before directing her intense gaze toward Taka, to answer his question. “What we’ve got here is a textbook split personality! Down to the ‘complete opposites’ analysis and everything! Kyahahahaha!”

The entire room felt ten degrees colder as the reality of Toko’s situation began to set in with everyone.

“So…it’s actually true?” Sayaka hesitantly asked, her hands trembling as she held herself up. “Toko really is…a serial killer?!”
“Well, as they say, ‘sound in murderous mind, sound in murderous body’! And can we please stop calling me ‘Toko’?! Its grating on my nerves! I’ve got an amazing name...so use it!” Genocide Jill assured her, making the pop idol flinch as the serial killer addressed her personally.

“This one is so different from the one we’ve come to know…” Sakura surmised, careful to respect Jill’s wishes and not address her as Toko.

As if given a pedestal from which to preach from, not that she wasn’t already, Genocide Jill cleared her throat, preparing to address everyone...again.

“Yes, well, the world is comprised of a front and back, you know.” Stealing a glance at Leon, she uttered, “Just like every inning has a top and a bottom.” Her gaze suddenly shot over to Junko for some reason, “Or how in the depths of every truth, lives a little lie…”

Junko visibly flinched at those words but no one seemed to notice...aside from Makoto. He figured it probably had to do with her secret or something and left it at that, instead returning his focus to Genocide Jill’s rambling.

Slowly raising her hands up to the sky, Jill finished, “Behind every dark and gloomy soul...lives another that shines as bright as the sun!! Kyahahahahahahaha!!”

Makoto couldn’t help but notice how...poetic the serial killer was. But then again, she and Toko were technically the same person. And if Toko could craft wonderful amazing lines for her romantic novels, then it shouldn’t be a surprise that Genocide Jill could do the same. Not to mention, that creativity probably lent itself to Jill when she first decided on her...killing method. Suddenly, the unwanted images of Genocide Jill’s victims began flashing before Makoto’s eyes, chilling him to the bone...

Shaking his head to get rid of such horrific thoughts, Makoto forced himself to concentrate on the trial.

“Um, excuse me...Miss Jill?” Hifumi spoke up, breaking through her laughter.

Surprisingly, Genocide Jill politely and, even with her tongue hanging out, beautifully smiled at him as she answered, “What’s up?”

“Some of us think...you may be the mastermind behind our imprisonment...any comments on that?” the fanfic creator asked, being very careful with his words.

Obviously enjoying the attention, Genocide Jill suddenly smirked and shouted, “Well let me tell you...I am the mastermind of all masterminds—just kidding! Kyahahahahahaha!!”

Picking up where Hifumi left off, Junko abruptly asked, “So, does that means that you don’t have any kind of connection to why we’re trapped here?”

For the first time since Jill had ‘arrived’, she fell silent and blankly stared at Junko. In fact, a look of confusion seemed to warp her already warped features. Just as she opened her mouth to reply, a hated voice spoke up.

“Of course she’s got nothing to do with it!” Monokuma shouted at everyone, reminding them all that the bear was still there. Glaring down at Junko from high on its judge’s chair, the bear continued, “How dare you try to impose some kind of connection between me and the scissor-scissor-cut-cut-bitch!”

Everyone was startled by Monokuma’s fierce words, which seemed far harsher than usual.
High up in the fourth floor Monokuma control room, the real Junko practically seethed as she held down the talk button used to speak through the bear.

“And another thing! The police and government on the outside are toooootally useless! They can’t even figure out that a closet case writer is a renowned serial killer! I mean, they just let this idiotic, blood-thirsty killer run wild all over town!”

Taking her finger off the talk button, Junko panted as she finished ranting, flustered over the fact that Mukuro had dared to insinuate that such a carefree killer would be connected to her. It had struck a nerve, comparing her brilliance to the sloppy work Genocide Jack...Jill...the scissor-scissor-cut-cut-bitch had been doing until being trapped in the school! It was maddening! It was infuriating! It...It...It really shouldn’t be bothering her this much but it was!

Junko had been so frustrated over Chihiro’s survival and even though the trial was mildly entertaining, mostly due to Trust Fund’s interference, it wasn’t as despair-inducing as she’d imagined it would be!

“Where’s the senseless accusation?! Where’s the pointless arguments?! Why hasn’t anyone called Byakuya a dick yet?! They’ve called him, like, everything else but that!” Junko shouted upwards, venting her non-despair frustrations.

If this trial had brought despair, she would be rolling in it, like she had been during the first trial. But considering that during the first trial everyone thought Sayaka was dead and were beginning to fall into despair, it made the apprehensiveness of her classmates during this trial nowhere near despairing! None of them were being backed into a corner, at least not yet!

Her only hope that was Mondo would eventually be found out and, due to him lying about everything and almost getting everyone killed, they’d vote to kill him off the island! Or, at the very least, the other outcome...

Taking a deep breath, knowing that now wasn’t the time to blow a gasket, Junko focused on pleasant memories to calm herself.

“Mass genocide...drowning puppies...imprisoning my classmates...” almost without knowing it, Junko’s voice began to get higher and higher as she spoke, and an almost too cheerful tone began to resound from her. “Clubbing baby seals, global warming, and, oh, Monokuma condoms!!”

Before she knew it, she wasn’t only calm, she was downright kawaii! Her hands made cute little gestures and her innocent sounding voice completed this new persona. She reminded herself to try out this persona more often, to keep from getting bored.

“Ooooh! I wonders what other kinds a personalities I can be?” Kawaii Junko asked herself before turning back to the monitor. “Ooopsie! I made a mistake and forgotton about them for a sec! Well, not a problem! I just gotta wait a bit longer! Uh-huh, that’s alllll there is to it!”

Taking her own sound advice, Junko slowly slipped back into her usual persona and returned to monitoring the trial.

“To live is to hurt other people! No one in this world can live without their very existence hurting
another…just kidding! Kyahahahaha!” Genocide Jill said in response to Monokuma’s taunts.

Strangely, Makoto noticed that no one seemed to be that unbelieving of the serial killer’s claims. They were surprised to be certain, but no one refuted the killer when she openly declared who she was. Perhaps it was Byakuya’s influence, the insistence he’d had during Toko’s questioning, but either way, the students were quickly forced to accept that their classmate, Toko, wasn’t present anymore.

Instead of worrying about that, Makoto simply stared blankly at her, his brain trying to solve an all encompassing question:

“If Genocide Jack—err, Jill, was the one who attacked Chihiro…why was she still alive? According to the police file, no one who’s had an encounter with Jill has ever lived to tell about it. Not to mention, there’s something else about this whole case that’s bothering me…”

Without even realizing it, his eyes drifted over and focused on the one who gave him the file. To the lucky student’s surprise, even though Byakuya appeared affected by Genocide Jill’s presence…there was a decisive calm about him…as if he knew this would happen all along. Before Makoto could gauge his fellow student any more, the Togami Heir adjusted his gaze, as if knowing he was being watched, and glared directly at the staring lucky student.

Instantly avoiding his gaze, Makoto’s mind was already piecing together all they knew about the case.

“And now for the final push…” Byakuya told himself as Jill dug her own grave.

“This should be enough to convince you that Genocide…Jill, was the one who attacked Chihiro,” the Togami Heir posed, folding his arms behind his back as if lecturing everyone. “There’s clearly a motive, so there should be no doubt.”

Even Byakuya knew he was laying it on a bit thick here, but he had to be sure that even someone as dimwitted as Hiro could understand exactly why they should believe it was Genocide Jill. A part of him knew it would make his counter argument that Mondo was the true assailant harder for his classmates to swallow, but if all went according to his plan, a certain someone would intervene to assist him…

“Motive…are you talking about our secrets?” Junko said, confirming what he was trying to get them to understand.

“Indeed. When faced with the decision of having her secret revealed, Toko or should I say Genocide Jill, took it upon herself to—”.

“Bzzzt! Sorry but you’re wrong about that!” Genocide Jill cut him off, not letting him utter another word. “As much as I hate to admit it, I’m not the one who attacked Cherry!”

A wave of confusion spread over the courtroom, not only from Jill’s confession but her apparent nickname for Chihiro…

All the while, Byakuya was forced into silence. A strange mixed expression of shock and anger marred his features as Genocide Jill cackled from across the room. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had interrupted him, actually forced him into silence. Honestly, he should be countering her right now, but if he was going to expose the real culprit in this case, he would need to
stomach her meager words for the time being.

It was almost time for him to become the villain.

“But other than yourself, I cannot imagine anyone else would be capable of doing such a bizarre thing as crucifixion,” Celeste openly admitted, challenging the serial murder’s claim of innocence.

“Nevertheless, nevertheless, it’s all true! I was just as shocked as anyone to see my handiwork laid out in front of me,” Genocide Jill refuted,

“…Do you really expect any of us to believe you?” Sakura countered, folding her arms over her massive frame.

“Yeah! I could never believe a word you say, you monster!” Hina concurred, followed quickly by a cacophony of agreement from other students.

“That’s right! A serial killer like you can’t be trusted!” Taka agreed, glaring at Jill.

“Case closed! Let’s vote for this bitch now!” Mondo suggested, cracking his knuckles.

“I would like to request a seat change, if I may?!” Hifumi pleaded, finally voiced how uncomfortable it was to be positioned next to the serial killer.

“Only if I get one too!” Leon insisted, almost bumping into Celeste, who glared at him as he put as much distance between himself and Jill as possible.

All too pleased with the chaos he’d created, Byakuya was prepared to sit back and watch until Makoto finally refuted them…just as he’d planned. However, in the midst of all that shouting, a melodic voice rang out over everyone else, forcing them into silence.

“Can everyone quiet down for a second?!?” Sayaka abruptly shouted, drawing attention over to her. She panted, obviously not wanting to have to shout over everyone, but with the roar of her fellow students, she must have had to. After several deep breaths, she said, “Something about this doesn’t make sense…why would Jill be the one to attack Chihiro?”

A bit of perplexion was shared by the students, but none more so than Byakuya himself. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined that a pop idol like her would be the one to question this situation. She had seemed just as lost as everyone…hadn’t she?

True he hadn’t exactly been keeping an eye on her, but he assumed that she had been quiet because she couldn’t understand the situation, like Mondo or Hiro had been. Had she really been paying so close attention…and he was only now noticing it?

For a time, all were silent, until Hiro nonchalantly replied, “Because she’s a serial killer?”

“Uhg…” Sayaka scoffed as she realized she needed to explain her point. “If Toko was the one who wanted her secret hidden, why would Jill be the one who attacked Chihiro? Toko wouldn’t give her control voluntarily and Toko’s smart enough to know not to copy her other side’s method of killing. It doesn’t add up!?”

Sayaka was almost frantic by the end of her speech, desperate to get them all to understand. And to Byakuya’s frustration, her words struck home. One by one, everyone began to mentally question her words, their expressions told him that. They were beginning to doubt him, which is what he had initially wanted, but it had come in a very different way.
He had expected Makoto, whom he’d practically groomed for this moment, to be the one figure out that detail…how on earth had Sayaka of all people been smart enough to figure it out? She couldn’t even handle murdering a simpleton like Leon, so how was she able to conclude a more complicated scenario so quickly? He couldn’t let this stand.

“While that may be true, there’s no refuting the evidence,” he countered, challenging Sayaka with both his words and a harsh glare.

To his surprise once again, she met this gaze head on and seemed to have absolutely no fear of him. It was the second time she’d done it and it only served to infuriate him. However, he didn’t have time to put her in her place right now. Instead, he decided that to pull out a trump card to kick-start Makoto if he wasn’t so quick to catch on.

“The method that was used to hang Chihiro, the modus operandi…is exactly the same as Genocide Jill’s previous cases…”

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“No, that’s wrong…” Makoto said, his usual fervor stunted. “Chihiro is still alive…and there weren’t any scissors used on her at all…”

“Eh, what the fuck do scissors have to do with this?” Mondo questioned, his words echoing the same thoughts as some of his classmates.

“All me to explain!” Genocide Jill shouted, leaping back and away from her seat, giving momentary relief to Hifumi and Leon. However, tension in the room skyrocketed when Jill flipped up her skirt, revealing her ‘Genoscissors’ strapped to each leg. With a flick of her wrist, the serial killer snatched up one from each leg, brandishing one in both of her hands. “If I ever commit murder, I would never leave out my trusty ‘Genoscissors’!”

Everyone reeled from the reveal that the serial killer was fully armed.

“She’s fully equipped!” Hifumi screamed, his arms flailing around.

Seeming to disregard the clear threat that Genocide Jill now presented, Byakuya scoffed and averted his gaze from her.

“However, this is merely an attack, not a kill. Therefore, your rule of having to use those scissors is null and void,” Byakuya mentioned, making a valid point…or so he thought.

“Don’t insult me!”

From across the room, a pair of Genoscissors flew, brushing past Byakuya’s cheek and slamming into the wood of Monokuma’s chair. The Togami Heir found his eyes widening as he’d felt the cool metal lightly scrap his skin, leaving the tiniest of marks. Very slowly, everyone turned to see Genocide Jill glaring at him with the fury of a thousand suns.

“If, and that’s a big if; I ever decide to kill someone…then they’re dead! I wouldn’t have left Cherry alive! Plus, if I was trying to get away with murder, then I wouldn’t have made the scene look like my work! And regardless of killing her, I certainly wouldn’t have left out the use of my Genoscissors regardless of whether or not I killed someone!’”

She paused only long enough to take a large breath before continuing.
“I’m a professional! I’m incredibly picky about my methods and my tools! I don’t half-ass my work! It would be like a famous Italian restaurant serving Chef Boyardee from a can right in front of you!”

Pausing again, and taking another huge breath, everyone figured they were in for another shouting bout…until Genocide Jill exhaled and said, “Whew, I needed to get that out. I feel so much better about myself now. Thanks for listening everyone!”

Abruptly bowing to everyone and returning to her seat, much to Hifumi and Leon’s chagrin, an uncomfortable quiet fell over everyone, and no one could muster up the courage to speak. Not even Byakuya, who was still visibly shaken by the scissor throw, seemed to be able to find words again. In fact, even though he was gripping the sleeves of his folded arms, the Togami Heir himself appeared to be trembling. He was putting up a brave front but he was obviously distraught over the fact that, if Jill had aimed just slightly to the side, he’d have a pair of scissors embedded in his face.

For nearly an entire minute, silence reigned over the classroom, until finally, a stoic voice interrupted it.

“Let’s get back to what we know about this case so far. That way we can discover whether or not Genocide Jill is really telling the truth,” Kyoko suddenly spoke up, much to Makoto’s relief.

The lucky student had noted how silent she’d been up until now, probably piecing everything together a lot better than he had. But now, when they were all too scared to continue, Kyoko had stepped up to get them back on track.

Drawing strength from her conviction, Makoto nodded firmly and concurred, “Right. Let’s figure out how Chihiro was suspended. There are actually two distinct characteristics of the Genocide Jack cases that need to be pointed out…”

A part of her felt bad for shifting all the focus onto Makoto, but Kyoko was prepared to accept it. The lucky student had already proved to be far more resourceful than she’d expected and, unfortunately, it was easy to take advantage of him for it.

Like last time, she’d stayed relatively quiet during the proceedings, already sure of whom the culprit was. However, she wanted to see if Makoto could solve it on his own this time, with as little interference from her as possible. She was testing him…and for the first time, she realized that she didn’t like doing it.

“By putting focus on him, he’ll become a target instead of me. I can’t say that I want that…but if I don’t let it happen, then it’ll make investigating the school much more difficult.”

Kyoko had spent a great deal of her free time investigating everything the school had to offer. She’d even found something rather interesting during the search for Chihiro. However, it was only possible because people like Junko and Makoto were actively interacting with everyone, drawing attention away from her actions. And while that shouldn’t bother her, for some reason it did.

For Junko, it was because she was becoming more and more of a mystery. Kyoko had noticed that Genocide Jill had been staring at the Fashionista as she’d talked about lies and truths. Even if no one else had noticed it, Kyoko just couldn’t let it go for some reason. And while she was sure that Junko probably had her own secrets, that feeling that she somehow knew more than she let on was bothering Kyoko.

She’d need to keep a closer watch on the Fashionista…
On the other hand, as for Makoto…she genuinely felt bad for using him. He was suffering ever since he’d spoken to Sayaka the other night. He hadn’t mentioned it to her, of course, but she could tell that he must have gone to see her, considering he couldn’t even make eye contact with the pop idol right now.

Kyoko knew he was suffering but didn’t feel…adequate enough to be able to help him. It was the only thing she actually didn’t feel capable of accomplishing, which was upsetting in a way she’d never experienced before.

“Makoto needs someone who can be there for him emotionally…something that I can’t do for him.”

It was the first time in her life, that she could remember, wanting to be there for someone other than herself. She felt that Makoto, more than anyone else here, deserved her respect. And that’s why she needed to find a way for her to be able to help him. At the moment, the only thing she could think to do was help guide him through the case, preserving their lives for as long as possible.

She could focus on how to help Makoto emotionally after she’d revealed Mondo’s betrayal.

“Now’s not the time to worry about Makoto. I need to get this trial back on track,” she told herself, turning to listen to the tail end of Makoto’s speech.

“…because of that, it’s clear that something off about this case!” Makoto finished explaining about how Genocide Jill always used her scissors to suspend the victims.

“That’s right!” Genocide Jill confirmed before pointing over at Makoto, “But there’s something Big Mac didn’t explain! There’s actually a third difference that he didn’t mention!”

“B-Big Mac?” a confused Makoto stuttered but was unable to stop Jill from continuing.

“The only kind of people I like to kill…are all adorable little men! Kyahaa! I can’t believe I finally admitted it! Suck it, Miss Morose! I’m getting my boy-on-boy fever on and you can’t stop me this time!” she shouted…pointing at herself from some reason.

“Was she referring to Toko when she said Miss Morose?” Makoto briefly wondered before realizing that it didn’t matter all that much.

“Ngh…nrrrhgh!” Taka abruptly groaned, loud enough for everyone to hear. “I just don’t get what’s going on anymore! Could such a heinous villain really be…innocent?!!”

The Moral Compass’ sentiment was shared by many, as they found themselves increasingly confused by the fact that Genocide Jill might not have been the one to attack their classmate.

Out of that confusion, an unexpected voice emerged.

“But…Chihiro was suspended like Christ, right? And nobody but the police knew about that, right?” Mondo announced, trying to make sense of everything.

“Isn’t that why we thought it had to be the real deal?” Leon speculated, trying to answer him as best he could. “Because none of us would know about that crap!”

All at once, Makoto came to a realization…there was one person who would know the method of Genocide Jack from before even coming to Hope’s Peak.
“Indeed, as long as that fact remains, only Genocide Jill could have been the one to attack Chihiro,” Byakuya concurred, his arms folded as if he’d made a decision.

The instant the Togami Heir spoke those words, Makoto felt that they were directed toward him. Even though Byakuya wasn’t even looking at him, the lucky student somehow knew those words were meant for him…and he didn’t like it.

Makoto felt like he was being set up. He honestly couldn’t tell how or why, but he knew that Byakuya was baiting him. After all, with all of the research that Byakuya had given him, it was obvious that the Togami Heir knew absolutely everything about the Genocide Jack cases. For Byakuya of all people to make such a mistake…it felt impossible.

Regardless, Makoto also recognized that he had no choice but to refute him.

“You could have already known about Genocide Jack’s methods. You told me your family had access to police records that no one else would be able to get, isn’t that right? Not to mention that you’ve probably already read the Genocide Jack file you gave to me,” he questioned, and was frustrated when he got an answer.

Silence.

Byakuya didn’t say a single word to him…to anyone for that matter. It was as if he was spectating, enjoying the show from a private box seat. It infuriated Makoto to think like that, but given the circumstances, it was the only logical explanation that he could come up with. And it only made him feel more used…like Byakuya had planned this all along.

Even so, that didn’t explain everything. Even if he was right, and Byakuya did crucify Chihiro…was he really the one who attacked her? How would he have gotten into the girl’s locker room?

There were still so many answers that Makoto needed to discover…

“You certainly took your time, didn’t you Makoto?”

It had taken longer than Byakuya would have liked, due to those unplanned interruptions, but at last, they were finally beginning to unravel the mystery he’d laid for them. The mark on his cheek actually served as a reminder of why he’d gone to so much trouble in the first place. Genocide Jill had shown that she was a danger to them all, himself in particular. Even if she wasn’t the culprit this time, he had no doubt at some point she’d try to come after him. But now, with everyone wary of her, Byakuya had multiple eyes and ears looking out for her at all times.

“My safety isn’t guaranteed but at least these fools will now know to watch their backs…like they should have been doing from the start,” the Togami Heir seethed, continuing to remain silent.

From the very beginning, he’d tried to warn them that forming friendships was dangerous. However, they’d all refused his superior logic and now that Chihiro had been attacked and new rules had been added, he hoped that they might learn from their mistakes. He doubted it, but there was always a chance of a miracle happening. But now wasn’t the time to be concerned over the fates of those inferior to him.

“All that remains now is to expose the true culprit…that should be rather easy.”

Stealing a glance at the biker seated across from him, Byakuya couldn’t wait to expose him and drag
him into the spotlight…just as he’d done with Genocide Jill.

“And now, the game can officially begin…”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Well, the second trial is officially underway and though it didn’t go that far, I hope your enjoying the…improvements I’ve made so far!

But what’s going to happen now?! Will Byakuya continue to manipulate his classmates as he predicts he will? Will Mondo’s guilt consume him and lead him to confess or will he continue to betray everyone? Will Leon or Hifumi ever get that seat change? You’ll have to wait for the next chapter to get the answers!

By the way, thanks to everyone who wished my beta well. She’s fully recovered and thoroughly corrected all the grammatical errors this chapter would have assaulted you with had she not been here. Other than that, I’m wondering if some of you picked up on something interesting that Genocide Jack…Jill…Scissor-Scissor-Cut-Cut-Bitch mentioned. Can you spot it?

Until next time, having a great day and keep on smiling my beautiful readers!
Ch 2 Act 11

Chapter Summary

The second class trial continues. Byakuya continues to test Makoto's intelligence. Meanwhile, Mondo starts to become aware that his crimes may be more apparent than he realizes. Later, Kyoko interrupts the trial to give everyone a startling realization about Chihiro.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“…I see. So now the suspicion falls to me, does it? Then I must ask, when did I first start acting suspicious?”

Byakuya’s overly confident tone perturbed everyone in the room, as if he was dangling a worm on a hook for an eager fish. Even so, they all knew that this wasn’t the time to analyze his intentions, they needed to find the truth of who had attacked Chihiro. To that end, Makoto stepped up once more.

“It was when we found you taking down Chihiro from the…crucifixion,” Makoto squeezed out, slowly becoming numb to the sickening feeling rising up within. For the sake of the trial, the lucky student pushed past the uncomfortable feeling and continued, “It was strange that someone as…unfeeling as you would care about the well-being of your classmate. That and you were there before anyone else…”

“What’s so strange about that? I was in the library, minding my own business until I heard shouting from down the hall,” the Togami Heir told them, seemingly ignoring the lucky student’s first comment about being ‘unfeeling’. Sending a slight glare at Mondo, he continued, “A certain someone was screaming bloody murder as they ran to gather everyone, so naturally I went to investigate what he’d found. I didn’t want the trail of the culprit to get cold while you all stood around, twiddling your thumbs—”.

“Can anyone corroborate that?” Junko’s confident voice interrupted, earning a glance from Byakuya. However, as expected of her, she didn’t even seem to notice as she pressed, “If you don’t have an alibi, then it’s possible you attacked Chihiro before Mondo even got there, waited for him to leave, then strung her up afterward.”

Although a bit perturbed by her interruption, Byakuya didn’t seem too upset with her deduction, a sly grin sliding over his lips as he answered, “It’s true I don’t have an alibi, but the same could be said for many of you. Anyone could have attacked Chihiro long before she was discovered—”.

“That’s where you’re wrong!”

Everyone was startled when, instead of Makoto, Leon shouted at Byakuya. He was pointing at the Togami Heir the same way the lucky student usually did, glaring ferociously at his previous tormentor.

“Me and Sayaka have an alibi! We were in the dining hall the entire time this was going down! Isn’t that right, Sayaka?”
All attention suddenly turned to the pop idol, who flinched slightly as they all waited to see if she would corroborate the baseball star’s story. Regaining composure almost instantly, Sayaka nodded and concurred, “We were searching for my e-handbook. I lost it earlier today and—”.

“Wait, you lost your e-handbook?” a bewildered Byakuya suddenly questioned, obviously not expecting this revelation.

“Yeah…sometime this morning, I think,” she simply replied, having not expected him to interrupt.

Everyone was shocked to hear surprise coming from the Togami Heir’s voice. Up until this point, he’d been nothing but confident and poised, as if positioning chess pieces for checkmate. But now, he seemed genuinely confused, as if this information was completely new to him. It made Makoto lower his head in deep thought, his suspicions about Byakuya beginning to waver.

“Did you find it? Your e-handbook I mean,” the stoic voice of Kyoko abruptly asked, glancing in Sayaka’s direction.

Shaking her head, the pop idol answered, “No, in the end we weren’t able to find it. We searched the entire cafeteria but it wasn’t there—”.

“You don’t think it was stolen, do you?!” Hina jumped in, making the pop idol jump a bit.

“Oh, I…I don’t know. Maybe?” Sayaka answered, beginning to piece together what she was getting at.

“Does that not mean that someone could have used it to enter the girl’s locker room?” Celeste posed to everyone. “More specifically, a boy could have used it to gain entry.”

“But Chihiro’s e-handbook is missing too. The attacker could have used hers to get into the girl’s locker room, couldn’t they?” Hifumi pointed out, making a point no one had thought of yet.

“Impossible!” Taka shot down instantly. “Didn’t Monokuma add a rule about loaning out our e-handbooks?! Using another student’s handbook like that would violate the rules! Because of that, it wouldn’t matter which of the girl’s e-handbooks were used! Not to mention how disgraceful it would be for a male student to enter the girl’s locker room!”

“Ah, but finding a lost e-handbook would not count as ‘borrowing’, now would it?” Celeste countered, ignoring his final comment. “At the very least, we can rule out Chihiro’s handbook for the time being, considering she probably had it on her when she was attacked and therefore it must have gone missing afterwards.”

“T-That’s…a good point,” the Moral Compass was forced to admit. “But if that’s the case, any one of us could have attacked Chihiro! Not just one of the girls!”

“Ooooh, a little girl on girl action! While I typically go the other way, I’m not opposed to a little scissoring, if you know what I mean!” Genocide Jill spoke up after being quiet for a remarkably long time.

As the serial killer’s lewd joke hung in the air, all of the students realized that this case was becoming more and more complicated. This meant that almost anyone could be the culprit, aside from those who could prove their alibis. Realizing that, another student abruptly spoke up.

“Anyway, I have an alibi too,” Junko announced, turning focus toward her. “I was with Sayaka for most of the day, helping her get around. I left her in the cafeteria to go shower but I ran into Leon on the way back and asked him to go and help Sayaka. Isn’t that right?”
She directed that last question at Leon, who nodded. “Yeah, and I watched as she went straight back to her room. Plus, it happened after Mondo had already left to go and meet with Chihiro, so she couldn’t have done it.”

A disturbingly sweet chuckle echoed as he finished speaking and they all turned to see Celeste, a hand delicately placed over her mouth, still giggling at him.

“You may have just slipped up,” she said, daintily folding her hands beneath her chin. “You don’t have an alibi until after Mondo went to meet Chihiro. That means that you could have attacked her before meeting Mondo and Junko in the lobby—”.

“But that doesn’t work either,” Sayaka interrupted, strangely coming to Leon’s defense. “Leon was exhausted and had to be carried back to his room earlier today. He wouldn’t have had the energy to do anything like this. And he couldn’t have been the one to hang Chihiro, because he was with me when that must have happened. Besides…”

Sayaka suddenly fell silent and, to the surprise of many, she almost bashfully hung her head. However, she abruptly shot her head up, an unwavering determination radiating in her eyes.

“…Leon’s learned his lesson. He wouldn’t do something like this…not after what happened last time.”

An almost uncomfortable silence fell over the students as memories from only a few days ago were recalled. Amidst the storm of conflicted feelings, Leon couldn’t help but stare at Sayaka, amazed that she’d not only defended him, but seemed to have grown a small bit of trust for him. As those feelings overwhelmed him, Sayaka turned her gaze toward him and, noticing his stare, smiled confidently at him. Almost without realizing it, the baseball star reciprocated the gesture and nodded, drawing strength from her determination.

“A-Anyway! None of that changes anything!” Mondo suddenly shouted, startling everyone. “Byakuya’s still suspicious as fuck! He’s the only one who was on the second floor when I went to go and get everyone! It has to be him!”

A huff of a laugh escaped Byakuya as he countered, “Where is your proof? If you don’t have any, do feel free to remain silent as the adults figure out who needs to be punished in this case.”

Infuriated by the Togami Heir’s insult, Mondo clenched his fists and appeared to be gearing up for another round of shouting but never got the chance to.

“We’re getting off track,” Kyoko abruptly interrupted, shocking everyone back to their situation. “Let’s review the differences between this case and Genocide Jill’s previous incidents. The proof that we’re looking for is hidden in there.”

“…Oh? Proof that I’m the culprit, you mean,” Byakuya spoke up without missing a beat, to which Kyoko averted her gaze and chose to remain silent.

Sensing her chance to take the spotlight, Genocide Jill came crashing into the conversation.

“Oh, you want to know more about my methods, eh?! Alright! I’ll tell you!” she shouted, far too enthusiastically. “I use my very own, special, one-of-a-kind scissors to arrange the bodies of my victims! No exceptions!”

“But, Chihiro was suspended using some kind of rope, was she not?” Celeste questioned, her gaze slowly turning toward Byakuya.
“That’s right! She was!” Taka confirmed, doing his best to help with the investigation.

“Spill it, Byakuya! Where’d you get that rope from?!” Mondo flat out accused his fellow classmate.

“Hmph…I’ve never seen that rope before in my life,” Byakuya retorted, his answer incredibly cliché and obviously suspicious. And that little comment was all it took for Makoto to finally piece this section of the trial together.

“No, that’s wrong!”

…”I honestly can’t believe how fucking lucky I am!” Mondo mused as Makoto continued to cross-examine that bastard Byakuya, explaining how he had used the extension cord to suspend Chihiro’s body. “At this rate, no one’s gonna find out…what I…did to…Chihiro…”

All at once, the memory of bashing the petite programmer upside the head invaded Mondo’s mind. He tried to force it away, tried to pretend like it had never happened, tried to lie to himself…convince himself that Byakuya really was the culprit.

However, he could still feel the weight of the dumbbell…the sound of metal connecting with bone as it came down…the horrifying image of brave little Chihiro crumpling to the floor…how light her body had been as he’d carried her to the girl’s locker room…

“No! Stop thinking about it, dammit!” the biker shouted in his own head, biting his tongue to keep from letting out an agonized scream. Somehow, he managed to reign in his fluctuating emotions long enough to see that Makoto was almost finished persecuting that rich bastard!

“There’s no turning back now…I know that…I know…that…”

“I see. So I used the extension cord to suspend Chihiro, is that right?” Byakuya continued to lead on his classmates, smiling internally the entire time. “If that’s true, how would I have created that bloody message? Chihiro wasn’t bleeding enough for such a huge message to be written.”

The Togami Heir knew he was practically leading Makoto to the answers now but he didn’t have a choice. Too many people were catching on to his act and had derailed the conversation far too often. He needed to get this out in the open as soon as possible, so that their opinions wouldn’t be strayed so far that he couldn’t correct them in identifying Mondo as the true culprit.

As if to taunt him, someone other than Makoto answered his question.

“Obviously you used your own blood,” Junko entered the discussion, glaring at him menacingly. “The blood that had been on your fingertips wasn’t Chihiro’s, it was yours. You probably cut your own fingers to get enough to write it all out with, since pricking only a single finger wouldn’t have been enough.”

With a seething glare, Byakuya answered, “I see. So you believe this case went down like this…” He paused to collect all his thoughts, a sly smirk stretching out on his lips. “I attacked Chihiro in the girl’s locker room, left and waited for someone to discover her. And when Mondo ran off, I returned and strung her up like a rag doll to make it appear like it was the work of a famous serial killer. Is that right?”
There were several contradictions that anyone could have spotted in his statement. Mainly, the idea of attacking and leaving Chihiro before returning to complete the job. Not to mention that it was odd that he wouldn’t have just killed her while he had the chance, though he wasn’t anywhere foolish enough to do such a boorish thing. Lastly, was the fact that he didn’t actually have a means of getting into the girl’s locker room. Even with the newfound knowledge that Sayaka’s e-handbook was missing, he didn’t have it on him and that was proof enough that he couldn’t have entered the girl’s locker room.

“If Makoto can pick out even one of these contradictions, then I suppose I can give him a passing grade. If not, I will have proven how useless he is and explain it all myself,” Byakuya mused as he waited to see how the scene would unfold. He knew by the scrunched brow of Makoto’s face, that the lucky student was on the cusp of having the answer.

A moment later, Makoto lifted his gaze and stared at Byakuya…with a hint of confusion in his eyes.

“You say that you attacked Chihiro in the girl’s locker room. But are you really sure about that? Couldn’t the attack have taken place somewhere else?” the lucky student posed, earning many skeptical glances.

Byakuya couldn’t help but feel utterly disappointed. Makoto had shot over all of the points that he’d so carefully laid out and instead focused on something completely unrelated to the case. Perhaps he’d expected too much from the lucky student, and the talent he’d witnessed from Makoto during the first trial was just a fluke after all.

“How disappointing…” the Togami Heir didn’t even bother to hide his frustration. “What kind of question is that? Even in this cacophony of disappointments, that is truly a letdown. Chihiro was found in the girl’s locker room. How could the scene of the crime be anywhere else?”

Byakuya was too focused on his own disappointment that he almost didn’t notice the fiery gaze that had begun to burn in Makoto’s eyes.

“I think that someone carried Chihiro to the girl’s locker room…after she was attacked in the boy’s locker room!”

As shock gripped everyone in the room, no one was more surprised than Byakuya himself.

“Attacked in…the boy’s locker room?” the Togami Heir asked, finding himself questioning not only Makoto, but himself as well.

Initially, he thought that Makoto was merely bluffing or perhaps misunderstood the true nature of the case. However, Byakuya recalled how, only a few days ago, the lucky student had all but solved how the first case had proceeded when no one else could…by noticing something that not even he had taken into account.

“The dying message from the first trial…I never even considered it. Is this similar? Has Makoto stumbled upon something that I have overlooked?”

No matter how desperately the Togami Heir wanted to tell himself that Makoto had to be mistaken, history had already proven him wrong once. And he would not make that same mistake a second time. His life was on the line here and he couldn’t risk failing to explore all possibilities…even if he knew who the true culprit was.

So, repressing his instincts telling him that Makoto had to be wrong, Byakuya was forced to rely on the lucky student to once again make the situation clear.
Mondo felt his entire body stiffen as Makoto proposed where the crime might have actually taken place. And while they were incredibly far from even catching wind of him being involved, something about this eerily reminded him of what had happened to Leon during the first trial. However, the biker knew that saying anything right now might give him away, so he chose to remain silent and listen as the trial continued.

“That was awfully specific,” Byakuya retorted, seeming flustered for the first time since this case began. “Please explain what you mean by that.”

Without any hesitation, Makoto answered, “The dumbbell that was used to attack Chihiro came from the boy’s locker room. I know that because I found the exact same kind of dumbbell on the rack in the girl’s locker room. Meaning that the one we found must have come from the boy’s locker room.”

“Couldn’t that simply mean that the attacker brought the dumbbell with him into the girl’s locker room?” Byakuya questioned, trying to get more specifics out of the lucky student.

Moreover, something about the way the rich bastard posed that question upset Mondo. He had specifically referred to the attacker as ‘him’ meaning that, for some reason, Byakuya thought that the attacker was a dude. And this time, he didn’t seem to be referring to himself with those statements.

“No…no fucking way. There’s absolutely no fucking way Byakuya knows it’s me!” Mondo mentally insisted as he continued to listen to their conversation.

“Maybe…” Makoto admitted, his moxie only slightly affected as he continued, “But that wouldn’t make much sense. It proves that the attacker is a guy, since none of the girls would be able to get into the boy’s locker room. We’re just lucky that the attacker didn’t put the identical dumbbell from the girl’s locker room on the boy’s locker room rack, otherwise we would have thought that it had to be a girl.”

Mondo gritted his teeth and seethed as he realized that he should have done exactly what Makoto had suggested. However, it wasn’t as if that was something he had ever really thought of, or would have considered in that situation. He’d been more concerned about…Chihiro…

Barely managing to repress his guilt, Mondo gripped the rail in front of him to keep himself composed as the debate continued.

“Makoto makes a good point,” Junko concurred, unsurprisingly agreeing with the lucky student. “The attacker probably used the dumbbell in the heat of the moment. They may not have even planned on attacking Chihiro, which is why they didn’t think about switching it out.”

“It could also be that the reason the attacker didn’t switch out the dumbbells was because they didn’t initially plan to move Chihiro to the girl’s locker room either, and they just forgot about it,” Makoto explained, lowering his gaze in thought. “I think Junko might be right in that the attack was probably something they did spur of the moment—”.

“That’s a bit absurd, don’t you think?” Byakuya interrupted, folding his arms and glaring at Makoto. “If what you’re saying is true, then why did they carry Chihiro to the girl’s locker room? They wouldn’t have done that if they hadn’t premeditated the attack.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t make sense!” Hina concurred, much to everyone’s surprise. “I mean, I don’t want to agree with Byakuya…and I mean I really don’t want to agree with him.” That statement was followed by a swift glare from the Togami Heir but she ignored it and continued, “But Chihiro’s a
girl. How would she have gotten into the boy’s locker room?”

“I would ask the same thing,” Celeste said, adding her own voice to the confusion. “It is possible that the attacker, whomever he is, tricked her into going into the boy’s locker with him. However, I doubt that, even given how naïve Chihiro tends to be sometimes, she would have gone in. She is naïve but not incompetent.”

All at once, Mondo felt a swell of relief as they couldn’t figure out the truth. He’d nearly panicked when he thought that they might uncover Chihiro’s true gender, which could lead them back to him. But it seemed that luck really was on his side as he noticed the look of pure confusion on Makoto’s face, which assured him that the lucky student himself had finally run out of ideas.

“That…I don’t know…” Makoto somberly admitted, hanging his head. “I mean…everything else matches up, except for that.”

A heavy silence hung over the room.

“In that case, it means that the culprit has to be Byakuya!” Taka abruptly shouted, startling everyone. “I believe that it’s time to place our votes!”

Mondo’s eyes widened as his Bro made that suggestion and he couldn’t stop himself from staring at Taka. The Moral Compass was unknowingly signing his own death warrant…all the while trusting every word that that biker had told him.

“Don’t be so fucking stupid, Bro! If you don’t vote for…if you don’t vote for…if you don’t vote for me…then everyone’s going to…going to…”

More than ever before, Mondo felt like shouting his confession to the entire courtroom. However, the paralyzing fear of punishment kept him silent and couldn’t be shaken off. Mondo wanted someone…anyone to tell Taka how utterly idiotic he was being! He couldn’t do it himself…he couldn’t tell them the truth…he wasn’t strong enough to—

“Seriously man, could you stop with always asking to vote?! It could get us all killed!” Leon protested, reminding everyone of how he’d, ironically, shot down Taka’s idea of voting prematurely in the first trial too.

A noiseless gasp escaped Mondo as he heard Leon’s voice, his words bringing the salvation that the biker hadn’t known he wanted his fellow classmates to have. Once again, it seemed that the baseball star was trying to keep them from ending up on the chopping block, even if he wasn’t completely aware of it.

“What? You don’t think that Byakuya is guilty?” the Moral Compass questioned, making Leon shrink back.

“Well…I’m not saying I don’t think that, but…” the baseball star paused and glanced at Makoto, obviously considering what the lucky student had proposed about Chihiro being attacked in the boy’s locker room.

“…Hold on a second.”

The entire room turned as Kyoko addressed them, her firm gaze stunning everyone in silence. Even so, Mondo couldn’t help but think that she looked as if she’d come to a difficult decision and was prepared to accept the consequences for it. And for reasons beyond his understanding, he began to feel afraid.
“I agree with Makoto. I think he’s on the right track about Chihiro…” Kyoko explained, making Mondo feel even more terrified.

And it was that fear that prompted Mondo to glare down at her, from his position beside her, and counter, “What the hell?! You finally open your mouth and that’s all you have to say?! There’s no way Chihiro could have gotten into the boy’s locker room, so—”.

Before he even had the chance to finish, Mondo instantly regretted speaking up. Her icy gaze shot up at him, penetrating through his very soul. It was as if she could see everything…everything that he’d done to Chihiro…everything that he’d done to deceive them during the trial…every rotten thing he’d done in his entire life felt as if it was being examined as her cold, calculating eyes bore into him.

And the most horrifying part was…that she seemed completely emotionless while she did it. As if no sympathy or empathy existed within her. Only the drive to know and expose the truth.

“Why are you so certain Chihiro had no way in?” Kyoko asked him directly, as if challenging his very existence. He wanted to refute her, tell her she had to be wrong…but he couldn’t. Instead, he just stood there as she continued, “There’s still one other way she could have gained access…”

No matter how hard he tried to hide it, Mondo knew that he slipped up when his eyes widened. As if taking note, Kyoko’s eyes narrowed and she averted her gaze from him. However, the biker couldn’t help but continue to feel as if he was singled out…as if she’d known the truth all along. But that was impossible…there’s no way that she could have figured out Chihiro’s was physically a dude…

“No way…there’s no fucking way she’s figured it out!” Mondo swore internally as he felt his composure slipping.

“That’s ridiculous! What other way is there?!?” Taka immediately questioned, backing up his Bro as best he could.

Without even looking at him, Kyoko said, “Well, to explain that…why don’t we take a little break from the trial. There’s something I’d like to show all of you.”

As confusion wrapped itself around the courtroom, it seemed that their captor was the most perplexed of them all.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, waiting wait I said!” Monokuma shouted, obviously not expecting such a bold request to be made, especially not in the middle of a trial. “Just what do you think you’re doing, missy?! You can’t call for a recess! Only I can call for a recess!”

As if anticipating the bear’s complaint, Kyoko lightly smirked and said, “Don’t worry, this will make the whole trial more interesting. I’m sure that thought must please you?”

Monokuma leaned forward, as if to challenge her but suddenly fell silent. The bear lowered its head in thought, lightly groaning as if coming to a decision.

“Hmmm, making things more exciting, huh?” Monokuma pondered aloud for a second longer before snapping its head up and cackling. “Well, alrighty then! It’s decided! I declare the first ever class trial recess! But I warn you, it had better be exciting or else…”

Abruptly, Monokuma showcased it’s razor-sharp claws and pointed them in Kyoko’s direction. However, the stoic girl didn’t even flinch as she replied, “Oh, I have no doubt it will meet with your…exclusive expectations. Now then, shall we go?”

“Uh…where exactly are we going?” a perplexed Makoto asked, to which she glanced toward the
“We’re going to visit Chihiro in the nurse’s office.”

If the students weren’t shocked before, they were now. All at once, a roar of confusion engulfed the entire room.

“Huh?! For real?!” Hina shouted in surprise, looking to Sakura for an answer. However, the muscular woman simply shrugged her shoulders, obviously not having the answer either.

“So then…we have to leave the courtroom?” Sayaka apprehensively asked, looking to Leon for walking support, despite the fact that Junko was closer to her.

“It seems so! Alright then, single file everyone! Let’s make this trip as orderly as we can!” Taka shouted, ready to herd everyone into the elevator.

As the cacophony of confusion swirled around them, Mondo felt nothing but absolute terror. He wasn’t quite sure what Kyoko was up to, but he knew it couldn’t be good! If they were off to visit Chihiro, then it meant that Kyoko probably did know more than she was letting on, which spelled disaster for him! And now that she’d gotten the bear to officially sanction her little field trip, there was no way for him to protest. All the while, the ever growing fear welling up inside him was becoming harder and harder to combat.

“This…this can’t be happening… this can’t be fucking happening…!”

Throughout the entire trip back up the elevator and through the hallways, Kyoko couldn’t help but second guess herself. Even though it was far too late for that now, she still couldn’t help but feel a bit ashamed of what she planned to do. However, she’d made her decision…knowing that she was the only one who could save her classmates now.

“Chihiro Fujisaki…I’m going to have to reveal your secret to everyone. It’s wrong of me to do so… but there is no other way to expose the truth. I won’t expect forgiveness for what I’m about to do.”

Not only that, she also felt guilty for what she knew she was doing to Mondo. He wasn’t exactly good at hiding his emotions and even though he was trying his best to hide it, he was beginning to lose his composure. She figured out he was the one who’d attacked Chihiro after how he’d referred to the programmer as ‘dude’, meaning that he already knew of Chihiro’s secret. It wasn’t the hugest bit of evidence but at the very least, if Mondo was the attacker, then all the pieces fit into place.

Even so, she couldn’t understand why he hadn’t simply told them all the truth at the start. They would have forgiven him if he’d had just admitted to it in the first place. The only logical explanation she could arrive at was that it had to do with his own secret, and he was willing to let them all die to keep it…

“There’s no way to know without asking. And that’s out of the question…for now.”

As everyone made their way into the nurse’s office, they found Monokuma already inside waiting for them.

“Geez, took you long enough! Any more waiting and I would have called off the whole recess thing! It’s for elementary kids anyway! So, what the hell are we here for, exactly?” the bear screeched as Kyoko made her way through the crowd to stand in front of everyone.
Luckily, it seemed that Chihiro was still peacefully sleeping off her attack, but otherwise was still completely unharmed. That was another reason Kyoko had wanted to come up here instead of simply telling everyone the truth, to ensure that Chihiro actually was alright, since she’d been left completely unguarded this entire time. Reassured that her classmate was alright, Kyoko moved on to the next stage.

“I’d like for one of us to thoroughly examine Chihiro’s body for any other injuries. And I’d like everyone present to see the results,” she answered swiftly and firmly, preferring not to drag this out any longer than she needed to.

“W-What?! You want us to ravage the body of an unconscious girl?!” Taka shouted, pointing furiously at Kyoko. “How could you suggest such a thing?! You’re a girl too, aren’t you?!”

“I simply want to examine her. Nothing more,” Kyoko defended her proposition, glancing down at the unconscious Chihiro. “We will be respectful, I assure you.”

Slightly calming down, Taka huffed and replied, “…I see. Let’s just get this over with quickly then. She needs her rest.”

Kyoko almost smiled at how considerate the Moral Compass was being, but knew that now wasn’t the time. Taka was right, they needed to get this over with as quickly as possible.

“Would anyone care to volunteer?” Kyoko asked, again not wanting to take the spotlight herself.

“Yeah, well, I mean, based on religious grounds…I don’t think I can do that,” Hiro wisely chickened out, doing something intelligent for the first time since the trial began.

“So when you say, ‘thoroughly examine’ Chihiro’s body? Do you mean like, with our hands…?” Hifumi creepily asked, his fingers slightly wiggling as an obvious idea popped into his head.

“Dude, that’s fucking gross,” Leon practically snarled at Hifumi, with Sayaka nodding firmly in agreement.

“…Very well. I’ll do it,” Sakura suddenly spoke up, crushing the fanfic creator’s dreams with her steadfast resolve. “Chihiro probably wouldn’t mind so much if a fellow girl was the one to do it. So just leave this to me.”

Kyoko held in a grimace, knowing the outcome might upset both Sakura and Chihiro later. However, she had to admit that Sakura was the best choice for this situation, considering how honorable she was and how gentle the marital artist would be with the programmer’s body.

However, the peaceful atmosphere was broken when a certain serial killer shouted, “Oh! I was right! We’re gonna get some specially girl-on-girl action! No scissoring but at least we’ve got potential!”

Instantly, Sakura twisted her head around and shot Genocide Jill a death glare. The serial killer squeaked for a moment before falling silent, obviously not used to having someone more fearsome than herself staring her down. However, much to everyone’s shock, she remained silent and simply watched with bated breath as Sakura prepared to examine Chihiro.

“Alright, here I go. I’m sorry Chihiro, please excuse the intrusion,” Sakura whispered as she carefully pulled back the covers, exposing Chihiro’s sleeping form.

Clapping her hands together, as if asking for forgiveness, the martial artist slowly began examining the top of Chihiro’s body, slowly working her way down. She was very careful and occasionally stopped when Chihiro unconsciously whined while being examined. Sakura made the choice not to
remove her clothes and simply lifted up Chihiro’s shirt to see if the programmer was injured.

Just when it looked like Sakura was about to pull back, her examination finished, Kyoko stepped forward and said, “Please be sure to examine her entire body. I believe that will solve this particular mystery.”

“Her…entire body?” the martial artist questioned with a raised brow. “I know you say that, but—”

And then, as Kyoko knew she would, Sakura’s hand traveled down and felt Chihiro’s pelvic area. The instant the martial artists hand felt a bulge, she recoiled back slightly, confusion warping her features. Everyone was startled at seeing the normally composed Sakura so frazzled but they waited as she slowly went back to that distinctive bulge under Chihiro’s skirt. Almost nervously, Sakura bent down and glanced underneath the skirt…

An instant later, Sakura let out a surprised and ferocious scream.

“HUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

Everyone gasped as the usually calm Sakura leapt back and panted heavily, her face suddenly burning crimson.

“Wh-What is it?!” Makoto instinctively asked, being the first to regain his composure after such a surprising sight.

“(…)Not possible…it’s not possible…” Sakura said aloud, obviously reeling from her discovery.

“NOOO!!” Hifumi unexpectedly squealed. “Don’t tell me Ms. Fujisaki is…a robot!!”

“No…no…that’s not…” Sakura tried to answer but found herself losing her composure. “This…this girl…is…is…a boy!!”

A heavy silence fell over the room for a moment as that information was processed. And then, before anyone else, Hifumi chuckled to himself and said, “Oh, I see! So ‘she’ was actually a ‘he’!

Interesting, that’s much better than her being a robot…”

Just when it seemed that he’d taken the new all too well, Hifumi’s features twisted as he screamed.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!?!?!”

And just like that, a wave of utter confusion and shock wracked each and every student’s body, even Byakuya seemed perturbed by this new discover, further proving he wasn’t the true culprit. In fact, everyone seemed to be unable to comprehend the situation…except for two that Kyoko made sure to monitor.

The first was obviously Mondo, who despite trying to appear shocked, seemed more ashamed than anything. And while she couldn’t fathom why, it was now clear that he had in fact known about Chihiro’s true gender. And, at least for Kyoko, it proved, without a doubt, that Mondo was the culprit in this case.

The other student who didn’t seem as shocked, which didn’t really surprise Kyoko much anymore, was Junko Enoshima. Sure, she appeared to be nervous and dazed but she certainly didn’t seem surprised, at least not to Kyoko. This meant that her initial assumptions about the Fashionista might be true after all, and she did know more than she was letting on. And while it was clear that Junko wasn’t working with the Mastermind, considering how the Mastermind had tried to kill her, that didn’t mean they weren’t connected somehow.
Unfortunately, there wasn’t time to ponder exactly what the connection was. The trial had to come first. But when it was over, Kyoko knew she needed to do some digging on who Junko Enoshima really was.

Turning her attention back to her other classmates, she found that many of them were still in shock about Chihiro’s true gender.

“This is a joke, right?” Hiro tried to reason, only to have Sakura glare down at him.

“I would *never* joke about this!” she shouted, waves of confusion and frustration radiating off of her.

“So he’s a cross-dresser!” Genocide Jill abruptly shouted, sounding entirely disappointed. “He’s an *adorable* little cross-dresser! Ooooooh, I just wanna stab him all up!!”

Her comment was met with fierce glares from most of the class, more specifically Kyoko, Junko and Sakura. Perhaps due to that, or maybe she just got bored, but the serial killer decided to keep quiet and simply seethed, occasionally glancing at Chihiro’s sleeping form. Kyoko noted that they would need to have someone watch over Chihiro at all times after this trial, to ensure that Genocide Jill didn’t get any ideas.

“Oh, so that’s what Kyoko wanted to show everyone! Interesting…very interesting…and fantastic!” Monokuma shouted in elation, throwing its paws in the air. “This certainly wet my appetite, if you know what I mean! A welcome addition to this trial! But now I’m afraid that we need to ride this wave of desperation all the way back to the class trial courtroom! On the double!”

Kyoko narrowed her eyes as the bear disappeared from view, obviously heading back to its chair in the courtroom. She’d given the Mastermind a great deal of pleasure, seeing their shocked and confused expressions, and it sickened her. However, this was a necessary step that needed to be taken if they were going to expose the truth…

She only hoped that her fellow classmates would be able to forgive Mondo for his deception. Otherwise, it was all for nothing. Monokuma’s motive will have truly beaten them if they chose to execute him…and she couldn’t allow that to happen—!

“Hey, are you okay?” a concerned voice asked her.

Kyoko’s eyes widened as she hadn’t even realized that Makoto was standing next to her, a worried look on his face. It was embarrassing, to say the least, that he’d seen her spacing out like that. But at the same time, she was thankful that it was he who had noticed, since he was the only person here that she really trusted.

Nodding firmly to him, she said, “I’m fine. We should hurry back to the courtroom.”

“Oh, okay,” he replied, as if not completely believing her.

Then again, she understood why. She hadn’t really opened up to him much, besides the little bit of time they shared watching over Sayaka. She wanted to, but knew it could be dangerous, especially in this kind of situation. If they survived long enough, she wanted to get to know him better…and possibly apologize for always letting him have the central focus during the trials.

But now wasn’t the time for such trivial things…

Holding out a gloved hand, to gesture that he should go first, Makoto flashed her a quick smile before accepting her gesture, walking past her and heading for the door.
Trailing behind him, speaking quietly under her breath, Kyoko couldn’t stop herself from whispering:

“…Thank you.”

“…God-dammit…God-fucking-dammit…!”

Mondo cursed himself as Sakura shouted those fatal words. Now they knew, they knew that Chihiro was biologically a boy and that knowledge was going to change everything. And while that certainly was upsetting, it didn’t hurt quite as much as the feeling of having let Chihiro down.

“I promised her…I fucking promised her…and I couldn’t even keep that promise for a fucking day!”

Everything was falling to pieces around him. He knew it was only a matter of time before Kyoko or Makoto found out the truth now. He wanted to give up. He wanted to give in. He wanted to admit to his failing right then and there…but he couldn’t. He just couldn’t tell them the truth…not now. If he did, they’d have him executed for putting their lives at risk, he knew that. But he also knew it was an excuse…an excuse for his own lack of strength…an excuse that prolonged the inevitable.

His body was trembling and just when he thought he was going to crack open, a firm hand landed on his shoulder. Snapping his head up, he shifted his gaze to see Taka standing next to him.

“I know it’s frustrating, but we need to keep our composure! If we don’t we won’t be able to bring Chihiro’s attacker to justice!” Taka assured him, obviously referring to how the biker had been shaking just now. “Come on, Bro! Let’s solve this case, together with everyone!”

Mondo’s eyes slightly widened as he realized that his Bro had mistaken trembling with fear for shaking with anger. And upon seeing that, his new Bro hadn’t thought twice about coming over and reassuring him, trying to do all he could for his friend. Mondo felt so much shame that it almost overwhelmed him but a new thought held him back, keeping him from admitting the truth.

“How…How the hell…am I gonna tell Bro the truth? What will…he think of me when he finds out what I did?!”

All at once, the memory of lying to his gang members about Daiya’s death revisited him. His boys had looked up to him, for both leadership and support now that his older brother was gone. And even though the guilt was tearing him apart, he knew that he needed to keep it together...for them!

Unfortunately, this situation was completely different than it had been with his gang members. He wasn’t being strong for anyone, in fact...he was just being weak.

If he told Taka the truth, it would destroy him. Mondo was his very first friend...how would you feel if your first friend betrayed you like that...and in less than a fucking day?! But if he didn’t own up to his crime, then his Bro might die. But if he did tell them all the truth, then his own Bro might vote to have him...executed! No...he couldn’t face that! He couldn’t bear to have that outcome happen! He had to hold out for as long as he could! Even if Makoto and Kyoko eventually exposed him...he somehow felt that was better than admitting to his faults right here and now! It would be a fitting punishment for his crimes...if it came down to that. He knew he was being a coward...but he couldn’t help it...he didn’t want to die! He had other promises he needed to keep, dammit! He couldn’t die here...no matter what!

Putting on his best grin, Mondo shrugged off Taka’s hand and said, “Yeah...let’s get this done...
Bro!

Holding up his fist, he watched as Taka laughed heartily before bumping it with his own. He continued to watch as his Bro turned and headed for the door, leaving Mondo alone in the room with the unconscious Chihiro.

Up until now, Mondo had avoided looking at the programmer at all, fearful of what seeing her might do to him. But now, as he prepared to go and face whatever fate waited him, he turned back to glance down at Chihiro.

The bandage on her head had a tiny amount of blood on it but otherwise, she seemed to be resting peacefully. He was happy about that at least. It seemed that she would make a full recovery, and that thought seemed to soothe him somewhat. Even with all the guilt he felt, he knew that, at the very least, Chihiro was going to live…

“I don’t think…I’m gonna be so lucky…” he thought to himself as he turned and exited the room.

“Alright! Welcome back to the courtroom! Recess is officially over! Time to get back to the trial!” Monokuma announced once everyone had retaken their seats and were prepared to continue debating.

Taking up her own position, Mukuro was desperately trying to piece together everything. She had always known Chihiro was a boy…though if she remembered correctly, the programmer identified as female. She wasn’t completely sure about that, considering she barely spent time with Chihiro during their school days. But she did recall Junko mentioning that the programmer wanted to be girl…

Shaking her head with an inaudible grunt, the soldier forced those thoughts away, since they weren’t of use right now. She needed to focus on who attacked Chihiro.

“Byakuya’s still the most suspicious and obvious culprit. However…Makoto seemed to believe it wasn’t him. And if what everyone told me about the first trial is true, Makoto is much more intuitive than I gave him credit for.”

Letting her eyes drift over to him, Mukuro saw that he was already in deep thought, no doubt doing everything he could to solve this mystery. Drawing strength from the conviction he displayed, the soldier felt a tiny smile grace her lips as she decided to follow his lead.

“If Makoto believes that someone else is to blame, then I’ll place my bet on that too. The only question is, if not Byakuya…who among us would be desperate enough to attack Chihiro?”

Wracking her brain, Mukuro tried to remember all of the secrets her classmates were hiding. However, apart from the obvious ones, like Toko and Celeste, she didn’t really know. She knew that Leon’s was about magazines or something, Hiro had to do with his fortune-telling getting him into trouble and that Hifumi’s dealt with some kind of manga taboo. But none of those secrets made her classmates seem desperate enough to make them murder sweet little Chihiro.

Then again, she couldn’t really deny that it was possible. After all, with everyone’s minds wiped, they were just a group of strangers to each other and that meant all bets were off…just like Junko had wanted.

“And the worst part is…I’m no better off than anyone else. I thought that, with my knowledge of our
school lives intact, I’d have an advantage. It seems I vastly overestimated myself… I don’t even remember who everyone usually hung out with! I mean, Sakura and Hina were friends and Leon and Sayaka had a thing but… beyond that… I don’t really know anything about… anyone…”

Mukuro hung her head as she realized that, all throughout her time with her classmates in school, she barely registered them as people. They had been her classmates, the people Junko enjoyed secretly tormenting. And since she had primarily been focused on pleasing her sister, she hadn’t really taken the time to know or understand any of them.

Makoto had been the only exception…

But everything was different now. Ever since she’d turned away from her sister, she’d been doing her best to learn about and become friendly with her classmates. In retrospect, without the killing game, she probably never would have learned that Leon hated baseball, that Sayaka felt such pressure for being an idol, or even that her own sister was willing to betray her for a set of stupid rules!

It was like her eyes had finally opened up to the real world, not just the world Junko had wanted her to see. And because of that, she knew that she couldn’t just give up now. Even though she was just as lost as everyone else, at the very least, she was determined to find a way to save everyone… including whoever attacked Chihiro!

With that resolve, she returned her focus to the trial just as Kyoko restarted the debate.

“…So then, there should be no issue with Makoto’s initial assertion,” Kyoko said, taking center stage. “I don’t know about their gender status, but since Chihiro was male, it means that they could have been attacked in the boy’s locker room and then carried to the girl’s locker room.”

Everyone noticed how Kyoko was referring to Chihiro, not using gender specific pronouns of any kind. Whether she was trying to be respectful or just wasn’t sure of how to address their classmate’s situation, no one could say. At the very least, it made them all consciously think about how they should talk about Chihiro in the future. Perhaps that’s what Kyoko had wanted, but it was too early to tell.

“That’s assuming that Chihiro’s handbook listed their sex as male,” Byakuya abruptly spoke up, shifting his gaze over to Monokuma.

Knowing the inquisition was directed toward itself, the bear scoffed and said, “Of course it listed him as male! It wouldn’t do to have a boy getting into the girl’s locker room, now would it?!”

Monokuma’s jeer visibly upset most of the students, since the bear was blatantly trying to label Chihiro as male, without regard for how the programmer might have felt. All of the students felt like correcting the bear but obviously feared the consequences, driving them further into frustration. It was at this time that a defiant voice spoke up.

“Why don’t we put off on labeling our classmate until we hear from Chihiro personally?” Junko surprisingly proposed, earning suspicious glares from both Kyoko and Byakuya. “We’ll have plenty of time to talk about how Chihiro wants to be viewed later…after we get through this bogus trial!”

As she finished, she sent a glare toward Monokuma, which was easily met by the demented bear. And while no one was really surprised at Junko’s boldness, it still felt strange to see the Fashionista challenging their captor. And despite the fact that most of them were just pleased that someone had
spoken up at all, it did generate suspicion from Kyoko, Byakuya and Celeste.

The epic staring contest between the Fashionista and the bear went on for a few moments before another reasonable voice rose up to support Junko.

“Yeah…I think Junko’s right! Let’s just focus on figuring out why Chihiro was moved from the boy’s locker room to the girl’s locker room!” Makoto unsurprisingly concurred, finally getting the trial back to the matter at hand.

Obviously conceding to that rationale, Junko quickly averted her gaze from the bear and said, “Alright then, let’s get to it.”

“Is there any proof that Chihiro was attacked in the boy’s locker room?” Celeste questioned, not entirely convinced.

“As a matter of fact, there is.” Kyoko’s assertion got everyone’s attention as she continued, “After examining the boy’s locker room, I found depressions in the carpet from where Chihiro must have fallen. Not only that, there was a tiny amount of blood between the fibers of the carpet.”

“You combed through the entire carpet?” a very surprised Hina asked. “Like, on your hands and knees and everything?”

“Of course I did,” Kyoko instantly answered, “I had to be sure that was the spot the attack took place.”

“Reeeeeeeally?!” Genocide Jill interrupted, her tongue hanging out as she spoke. “Getting down on your hands and knees in the boy’s locker room, eh? Never figured you’d be the type! Kyahahahahaha!”

That entirely lewd comment made over half the class glare at the serial killer, who scoffed at their gazes. “What? Did you expect me to be like Miss Morose and not vocalize my fantasies?! It’s not often I get to a chance to come……out from inside her! Eyahaha! Oh, I kill myself! Kyahahahaha!”

An awkward silence followed for a few moments as Jill’s voice echoed all around them, hopefully relieve some much needed tension she’d been holding in.

“If Chihiro really was attacked in the boy’s locker room, then it solves most of the mysteries surrounding this case,” Byakuya audibly mentioned, drowning out Jill’s rabid laughter.

“Yeah, well, mysteries solved or not, that doesn’t mean that you’re off the hook!” Hina jumped in, glaring at the smug Togami Heir. “It’s still obvious that you’re the culprit, right?!"

Instead of answering, Byakuya merely chuckled to himself and folded his arms, smirking all the while. After a moment of self-gloatting, the Togami Heir turned his gaze toward Makoto and said, “What do you think about that, Makoto? Am I really the culprit?”

Flinching for being put on the spot, the lucky student nervously answered, “W-Well, without a doubt, you were the one who altered the crime scene to make it look like Genocide Jill’s handiwork…but I don’t think he’s the one who attacked Chihiro…”

As expected, an uproar of disbelieve sounded throughout the courtroom.
“This wasn’t exactly what I had planned, but I suppose it will suffice,” Byakuya assured himself as Makoto continued to fight his battle for him, explaining how he’d left obvious clues like the extension cord, so that they could be traced back to him. “It seems that his talents aren’t just a fluke. He’s more useful than I ever imagined.”

“…not to mention that, when we found out the murder took place in the boy’s locker room, and just now when we all found out that Chihiro was male, you were caught off-guard, weren’t you Byakuya? Just like the rest of us,” Makoto continued, adequately defending him.

“While not as impressive as I would have preferred, he’s still piecing it all together quite nicely,” Byakuya mentally noted before sneaking a glance at Kyoko. “I see now why Kyoko’s been staying out of the trial so much. Such a cruel woman…making him do all the work for her while she reaps the benefits. Then again, I suppose it shows that she isn’t to be underestimated either…along with a certain someone who I never expected to survive this long…”

Byakuya couldn’t stop himself from quickly glancing Junko’s way as well. Her behavior had been suspicious to him ever since the first trial, as if she wasn’t the same person he’d begrudgingly met a few days ago. And while he knew from personal experience that trauma could strength one’s resolve, this was more of a case of personality upheaval than simple mind-set change.

It seemed that there were now three people he’d need to be wary of in the future.

“…Byakuya, if you really were the one who had attacked Chihiro, none of that stuff would have affected you, but it did!” Makoto finally finished, glaring at the Togami Heir as if demanding an answer.

“I suppose I can deign to confirm his suspicions,” Byakuya told himself, preparing to answer. “This game is starting to bore me. I’d rather get it over with so I can move on to…other inquiries.”

“While it bothers me that you don’t have more concrete reasons, I suppose I can give you a pass this time,” Byakuya smugly replied to Makoto’s inquiry. “You’re right. I’m not the culprit. I merely came across the unconscious Chihiro and decided to alter the scene a bit.”

A brief silence choked the room until a snarl from Mondo began to echo.

“Are you fucking with us right now?!” the biker shouted in absolute fury, obviously wishing he could be standing next to Byakuya to snap his neck.

“No, I am not…effing with you right now. I’m telling the truth,” the Togami Heir assured them all, glaring almost accusatorily at Mondo.

“I find that very hard to believe!” Taka refuted, not ready to admit that he had almost caused them to vote for the wrong person…two trials in a row.

“You go ahead and do that. Feel free to help get us all executed for your own stubbornness,” Byakuya countered, hitting the nail on the head. “But I guarantee you, I wasn’t the one who attacked —”.

“Then at least tell us why you strung Chihiro up like that,” Sayaka interrupted, her tone harsher than usual. “You could have killed her with that stupid stunt. Did you ever think of that?”

Although initially stunned by her fierce attitude, the Togami Heir shrugged it off and answered, “I
was sure to suspend Chihiro in a way that wouldn’t bring her much harm. I could have wrapped the extension cord around her neck to hold her up better, but I chose not to. I didn’t even have time to properly suspend her before all of you arrived anyway, so she wasn’t really hanging there for long in either case.”

Almost instantly, Leon scoffed and said, “I knew you were a twisted fuck but I never thought you were so much of a bastard that—”.

“I don’t need an attempted murderer talking down to me,” Byakuya loudly snapped, glaring daggers at Leon and continued to do so until the baseball star was forced to avert his gaze. Immediately afterward, the affluent progeny straightened his coat and huffed, returning to his usual unfeeling demeanor.

Everyone was shocked that Byakuya had so harshly put Leon down, considering that the Togami Heir hardly ever raised his voice. It had happened on one other occasion, when Leon had accosted him after the first case. Even so, it was odd for the usual smug Byakuya to lose his composure, even if it was temporarily.

After a few more seconds of silence, Kyoko spoke up to continue the trial.

“Regardless of why he did it,” she paused to send a quick glare at Byakuya. “It seems that someone else attacked Chihiro in the boy’s locker room.”

“For serious?” Hiro annoyingly voiced. “I thought we were all good.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not. I agree with Makoto. At the very least, Byakuya is innocent of having attacked Chihiro,” Kyoko said adamantly, locking eyes with the lucky student. “As long as other possibilities exist, we can’t excuse them. Because if we’re wrong, we all die here.”

“…That’s true. Very well then, I’m with you, too.” Celeste unexpectedly concurred, smiling daintily all the while.

Still unsure, Hiro continued, “But…no one but Byakuya could have done it—”.

“If Makoto doesn’t think Byakuya did it…then I believe him,” Sayaka suddenly cut him off, not even bothering to look his way.

“She’s right!” Leon concurred, giving Makoto a thumbs up. “We’re with you on this one! And no matter how much I want Byakuya to be guilty…I won’t vote until you do the thing Makoto!”

“Oh, that’s right! Makoto’s thing! Alright, count me in! Damn straight!” a newly persuaded Hiro abruptly changed his mind.

“Do you not have a mind of your own?!” Taka immediately countered, to which Hiro merely laughed and scratched his head.

Although she gave a small groan, because of Leon and Hiro’s comments, Junko smirked and winked at the lucky student as she also agreed, “You haven’t let us down yet, Makoto.”

Makoto nodded firmly in the face of their confidence in him and said, “Anyway, let’s discuss this all as a group one more time. Surely there’s something we’ve missed…”

The room fell quiet as everyone began thinking about everything that had happened in the case.

“All we know for certain is that the culprit has to be a boy,” Sakura assumed aloud, beginning their
“Yeah, all of the boys have their e-handbooks, right? So none of the girl’s would have been able to get in!” Hina surmised, supporting her friend’s claim.

“Did anyone other than Mondo see Chihiro before she was attacked?” Junko suddenly asked, drawing attention. “If we know where Chihiro was up until the time of the attack, we can eliminate suspects.”

A round of nodding followed as did a raised hand from Celeste.

“Actually, I saw Chihiro about an hour before they were discovered.”

“Oh really? Why didn’t you mention this before?” Byakuya questioned her suspiciously.

“It didn’t seem relevant at the time,” she nonchalantly answered, lacing her fingers under her chin and smiling. “And besides, without first proving that the culprit had to be man, I didn’t want to draw unnecessary attention and lead you all astray.”

“That’s fine, that’s fine! Just tell us what you saw!” Taka insisted, growing tired of her silver tongue.

With a slight huff, Celeste began her story. “I saw Chihiro in the dormitory warehouse. It appeared as though Chihiro was gathering items for a workout. A tracksuit and duffle bag—”.

“I see! That must be the same duffle bag we saw propping open the door to the girl’s locker room!” Taka surmised, cutting Celeste off.

Pursing her lips in annoyance, the gambler took a quick breath before continuing, “Come to think of it, Chihiro told me something kind of odd at the time—”.

“What?! What did Chihiro say?!” Mondo abruptly demanded, interrupting her again.

Taking a deep breath to keep calm after those interruptions, Celeste answered, “Chihiro said that they were in a hurry. Now, we can understand that meeting with you, Mondo, was probably the case, but why did Chihiro feel they needed to get there so early?”

“Come to think of it, that is really strange!” Taka said, being sure to let her finish this time before speaking. “If Chihiro only needed to see Bro, why would they need to hurry? Unless…they were meeting someone else?!”

“Byakuya! It has to be Byakuya!” Hiro shouted pointing at the Togami Heir fervently.

Everyone, not just Byakuya, sighed as Hiro went back to his previous mindset. This time, instead of correcting him, everyone just seemed to ignore his very presence.

“If Celeste is telling us the truth,” Byakuya said, ignoring a slightly glare from the gambler. “Then it’s obvious that Chihiro wanted to exercise, judging by the tracksuit and duffle bag found at the scene.”

“But Hina and I offered to exercise with Chihiro many times, but we were always refused,” Sakura mentioned.

“Yeah, but since Chihiro’s a guy, he probably didn’t want you to find out by accident or something,” came a surprisingly astute comment from Hiro, even if he wasn’t being respectful of Chihiro about it.

“Maybe…maybe Chihiro was nervous about something,” Makoto voiced, getting everything back
on track. “It could be that, the motive that Monokuma gave us, the secret that Chihiro had, was that they were male. And Chihiro wanted to get there early to open the door to exercise without anyone around to see!”

“It could even be that Chihiro wanted to work out a bit before meeting with Mondo, so that their secret wasn’t exposed,” Junko pondered aloud, turning some head.

“Ooooh, a secret meeting between two boys in the locker room, scandalous!” Genocide Jill cackled, making everyone remember that she was there.

“If Junko’s right about that, then whoever attacked Chihiro did it during that hour before Mondo got there,” Makoto assessed but instantly hung his head. “But then…it could have been anyone. There’s not much else to go on—”.

“…No, you already have what you need to make the connection.”

Everyone was startled when Kyoko suddenly spoke up, after being quiet for so long again. She locked eyes with Makoto and for a moment, he was stunned into silence. She looked as if she was placing all of her trust in him. In fact, one might say that she was giving him the answer, just by showing her faith in him.

“You know who the culprit is,” she said firmly, her conviction as irrefutable as her proclamation.

“Wh-What the fuck?! Makoto knows I’m the culprit!” Mondo mentally panicked, his eyes darting from Kyoko to Makoto. “No…no fucking way…he just said that he had no clue! What the fuck does she mean he already knows?!”

Against his will, he found himself shouting, “Who is it?! Who attacked Chihiro?!”

“Fuck! Why am I asking that?! It’s like I actually…want…to get…caught…”

That single thought echoed in his mind more than any other today. Did he…did he actually want to be caught? Was he unconsciously doing things that others would pick up on so that he would be found out? He had to admit…it was scary to think about…scary to think that he might actually want to be caught…and punished…for what he’d done.

He didn’t want to die…but he didn’t want anyone else to die either.

His guilt was so heavy now. Every step they took, getting closer and closer to uncovering what he’d done, tore him apart inside. He felt like his head was going to explode. There had been so many times that he had to stop himself from correcting them. Like when Junko said that Chihiro went early to exercise alone! Chihiro probably didn’t know the first thing about exercise! That’s probably why she—no, that was why she’d called him there in the first place…

She’d called him, trusted her secret to him, opened up to him.

And what did he do?! He’d fucking smashed her head with a dumbbell! And why?! Why had he done it?! He knew why…because he was weak…because Chihiro was…Chihiro was…Chihiro was stronger than he had been! Even now, as she fought for her life in the nurse’s office, she was still stronger than him!

It forced Mondo to realize that he’d never been strong. He’d only pretended to be. And he was still
Kyoko knew that Mondo was close to cracking. He hadn’t even noticed that she’d been stealing glances at him for a while now. And each time she checked, he was falling further and further into panic. And with each glance, she felt guilt of her own welling up…just like with Leon.

She’d backed Mondo into a corner and knew, once again, when she addressed everyone, she’d be sealing his fate. Even if there was a change that Monokuma was telling the truth, and if they chose not to, they could forgo execution…it didn’t take away the anguish she felt for intentionally bringing harm to her classmates.

However, she knew there was no choice. She had to speak up and help her classmates realize who had deceived them. Except this time…she had faith. Faith that a certain lucky student would piece it together and, in the end, save Mondo from his fate.

Holding onto that tiny bit of hope…she said, “Focus on the e-handbooks and it should become obvious who attacked Chihiro.”

A wave of confusion swept through the courtroom, as no one seemed to be able to understand what she was implying.

“What good would that do?” Hina was the first to voice her perplexion. “We know only a boy could have gotten into the boy’s locker room, and they could use their own handbook for that.”

“Wait…we still don’t know how the culprit got into the girl’s locker room when they moved Chihiro,” Makoto realized, his head snapping toward Kyoko. “Is that what you meant?”

“Come to think of it, Sayaka, you said that your e-handbook was still missing, did you not?” Celeste questioned the pop idol directly.

“Y-Yeah. I lost it sometime this morning and I don’t know where it is now. It could be anywhere,” she concurred, trying to remember where she might have misplaced it.

“Hmm, guess that’s a dead end,” Junko sadly admitted. “There’s no way to know who could have it by now.”

After another few seconds of pondering, Leon asked, “What about a girl using a guy’s handbook to get into the boy’s locker room? We never talked about that!”

“You’re right, we didn’t.” Byakuya didn’t attempt to hide his disgust as he turned and glared at the baseball start. “But that’s because all of the men still have their handbooks. And unless one of you simpletons leant out your handbook, then it means it’s impossible for a girl to have gotten in.”

“Oh…shit, right.” Leon hung his head as his own idiocy washed over him, falling silent once more.

“…If that’s the case, then there’s at least one man we can completely rule out as the culprit!” Taka suddenly shouted, much to everyone’s surprise. “Mondo went to exercise earlier today but he couldn’t get into the boy’s locker room…because his e-handbook was broken!”
Mondo gasped as Taka unwittingly gave him the perfect alibi. Without a way to get into the boy’s locker room, Mondo was in the clear. No one would guess that Chihiro had let him in and because of that…he might actually get away with it. He might get out of this hell hole of a school…

Why then…why was Mondo so pissed that his Bro was helping him get away with his crime?!

“Yeah, I can vouch for that too!” Leon abruptly joined the conversation. “Mondo and Taka had an endurance match in the sauna last night. It must have gotten broken then.”

Again, Mondo felt nothing but shame as now Leon unknowingly assisted him. First Bro and now his newfound baseball friend! Were they trying to cover for his mistakes?! Why were they both doing that?! Sure, they didn’t know they were doing it, but they still were! He had to stop them… he had to admit…he had to admit that…that… he—!

“YOU DID WHAT?!”

After being silent since Chihiro’s secret was revealed, Monokuma abruptly shot up from its seat and angrily glared at the biker.

“How the hell did you discover its weak point?! The only thing that can destroy your e-handbooks is extreme heat! Do you realize how much it costs to replace those?! Never mind that I can’t exactly have any more made right now anyway—urgh!”

Everyone knew the bear had slipped up and it brought a temporary halt to the trial.

“Mind repeating that?” Junko surreptitiously questioned, an almost maniacal smirk on her face. “Why can’t you have it replaced, hmm?”

Everyone now seemed more eager to have that question answered than to proceed with the trial. And unfortunately, Monokuma was able to pick up on that as well. With a flick of its wrists, long and sharp claws came out of each paw. Without warning, the bear leapt from its seat and gracefully landed on the railing right in front of Mondo, to which the biker reared back in surprise.

“Show me…show me your handbook’s really broken…or penalty!” Monokuma shouted, brandishing its claws menacingly.

Startled by the sharp objects in his face, Mondo reach into his pocket, the one that contained only his e-handbook, and pulled it out, extending it for everyone to see. Pushing the button several times, emphasizing that he was trying to get it to work, the biker effectively proved that his e-handbook was busted.

Suddenly, Monokuma’s claws retracted back into its paws, much to everyone’s surprise.

“It’s busted. No use crying over spilled technology. Guess you’re on your own from this point on,” the bear said, shrugging its shoulders and heading back toward its chair. Monokuma took the long way back, walking atop the railing all the way, making everyone it passed flinch.

As the bear finally retook its seat, and things settled down, the discussion resumed.

“So, we know that Mr. Owada is innocent, but what about everyone else?” Hifumi asked, as if trying not to make everyone suspicious of him.

“We’ll have to go over where everyone was, that’s the only way we can do this now,” Taka insisted,
ready to give a full report on everything he’d been doing since they’d all split up earlier that day.

All the while, Mondo kept going back and forth in his own head.

“If I don’t admit to it…everyone will die. But if I admit to it…admit how weak I am…then they’ll vote to execute me. I know they will…because I would…because anyone would. I should have come clean when I had the chance…should have told Bro everything after I left Chihiro in the girl’s locker room…”

Mondo was so deep in thought that didn’t notice Makoto staring at him, the lucky student’s eyes widening with realization.

“But then, that bastard Byakuya had to fuck with everything! It’s his fault! If he hadn’t crucified Chihiro…I would have…I would have…I…would I have admitted it then…?”

As that dark thought burrowed deep into his subconscious, he barely heard Makoto call out to him.

“Hold on a sec…Mondo. How can your e-handbook be broken? That doesn’t make sense…”

Mondo froze as Makoto’s question invaded his ears before he snapped his head up and stared at the lucky student. However, what truly terrified the biker was that his classmate wasn’t looking at him with malice or any kind of anger in his eyes. No…Makoto’s eyes begged for understand, as if he couldn’t comprehend something important.

It was at that moment…that Mondo knew his fate was sealed.

“What are you getting at, Makoto?” Taka jumped in to defend his friend. “We all saw how Bro couldn’t get his e-handbook to work. Were you listening when I explained that—?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about…” Makoto cut him off, staring at Mondo in utter shock.

“Mondo…you took out your e-handbook and used it when Monokuma updated the rules. I know because I was standing right next to you…and I watched you use it.”

All of the air in Mondo’s lungs collapsed as Makoto’s revelation was made clear to all. Slowly, each and every student turned their gazes on the biker. A chilling feeling spread through Mondo’s body, until he could barely feel anything at all. Was this how it felt…when he and everyone else had turned against Leon only a few days ago…?

Suddenly, Mondo completely understood everything that Leon had been trying to tell him. This crushing feeling of having your crimes exposed, the mixture of hateful and sorrowful stares of his classmates, the pain in his chest that refused to subside…it felt…it felt…it felt like he was dying…

Feeling completely cornered, something in Mondo’s mind twisted as he suddenly felt the need to defend himself.

“Y-Yeah I did! But I didn’t know it was broken!” the biker insisted, trying to lie his way out of this hole he’d dug for himself.

“Hold up! Didn’t Taka just say that you already showed him that it was broken? How could you not remember that?” Hina asked him, unintentionally driving him further down.

“Well, yeah, but…I mean I forgot that it was broken! When every else’s handbook started beeping, I forgot that mine didn’t work! Yeah…that’s it…” Mondo lied again, his own words sounding shaky in his ears.
“Then how did you know exactly what the rules said?” Kyoko instantly asked, not even looking his way. “You asked Monokuma about the rules when they first appeared, meaning that you must have read them. But how would that be possible with a broken handbook?”

Despite how much he tried to keep it together, her stern tone and harsh words made Mondo’s knees tremble as he tried to respond, “Well…you see…I…I…uh…"

With a deep frown, Kyoko turned toward him and, as though she could see right through him, she said, “It appears as though…you’ve dug your own grave.”

Mondo’s eyes widened as her words echoed in his ears and suddenly, he knew that there truly was no hope for him. His mind began to collapse, realizing that there was nothing he could do now…but wait for the inevitable.

“Perhaps he did, but you handed him the shovel, didn’t you?” Byakuya’s smug grin infuriated everyone, but no one could find the words to refute him. “‘Focus on the e-handbook and we’ll find the culprit’? What a load of nonsense. Then again, it worked as intended, didn’t it?”

“Ah, now I understand,” Celeste spoke up, eyeing Kyoko carefully. “It was a bluff, intending to draw a slip of the tongue from the culprit…I must admit, I’m impressed.”

Kyoko obviously didn’t appreciate their ‘praise’, averting her gaze as her hands gripped the sleeves of her jacket as she folded her arms.

“No…Mondo was my target from the very beginning.” Everyone gasped as she made that accusation, continuing before anyone could refute her. “Maybe you didn’t notice it, Mondo, but you tend to refer to men and women differently.”

“Say what?! What the hell’s that supposed to mean?!” the biker objected, in a last futile attempt to refute her.

Without missing a beat, Kyoko answered, “Every time you talk about a guy, you refer to them as ‘dude’. But for girls, you refer to them as ‘chick’. When you were talking to Makoto during the investigation…you referred to Chihiro as a dude.”

“Wait…but that means that Mondo must have known Chihiro was a guy!” Hiro abruptly shouted, as if making a discovery.

“…Exactly,” Kyoko decided to just take her classmate’s comment and roll with it. “Mondo already knew of Chihiro’s biological sex. And while I couldn’t initially connect that to this case, it all makes sense now.”

“No, I’m not the frightful one…not nearly as frightful as someone willing to lie to all of us, just for a chance to get out of here.”

Her pointed comment seemed to hit Mondo directly in the chest, because he grunted audibly and groaned. He hung his head, his pompadour almost hitting the railing in front of him as he silently
seethed.

“Well then, Mondo…do you have anything to say in your defense?” Celeste asked almost sadistically, smiling sweetly at him for good measure.

Before Mondo even had a chance to say anything, someone else rose to his defense.

“Impossible! None of this can be true! This is a false accusation!” the frantic voice of Taka shouted, his unbelieving tone seeping into everyone’s ears. It made Mondo’s head shoot up and stare, almost bewildered, at his friend.

Taking a large breath, Taka rattled on, “First off, Makoto must be mistaken about the handbook! Bro was just looking at his own broken handbook, he said it himself! And he probably just looked over at one of our handbooks and saw the rules! That’s how he knew about them when he yelled at Monokuma!”

Makoto hung his head for an instant before snapping it back up and saying, “I want to believe that, I really do, but…I heard the noise of his e-handbook booting up, I’m certain of that.”

Narrowing his gaze, the Moral Compass insisted, “It must have been someone else’s handbook you heard! There’s no way Mondo could have used his own broken handbook!”

“You’re right…he couldn’t use his own,” Makoto surmised before shifting his gaze to his left, looking at the student standing next to him. “But…if he used Sayaka’s, then its more than possible!”

A wave of understand flooded the room and the realization it brought was so fearsome that it even halted Taka’s stubborn defense. Time stood still as the true story of what had happened began to unfold before their very eyes.

“Mondo…you attacked Chihiro, didn’t you?” Makoto couldn’t stop himself from asking, much too almost everyone’s displeasure.

Mondo’s face contorted with a mixture of emotions and he stammered, “I…I…I…I…”

Before he could answer, and much to everyone’s shock, it seemed that Taka finally lost his temper, angrily shouting, “Why do you all keep accusing him?! Are you trying to suggest that Mondo somehow found a way into the boy’s locker room with Sayaka’s handbook?! That’s absurd! Even if he had Sayaka’s handbook, there’s no way he could have gotten into the boy’s locker room—”.

“No…that’s wrong,” Makoto countered, his usual fire stunted by what he must have known needed to be done.

Across the room, Leon felt chills roll down his spine, remembering what it had been like when Makoto had done the same thing to him. He’d been asking Makoto to do ‘the thing’ for a while … but now that it was here, the baseball star suddenly didn’t want it to happen anymore. In the heat of the trial, he’d forgotten that every time Makoto did the thing…someone ended up getting hurt.

And unfortunately, there was no way to stop Makoto as he said, “If Chihiro, whose handbook would get them both in, opened the door for him…then it’s possible.”

A heavy silence hung over the room but it didn’t last long before Taka shouted again, “I refuse to believe it! Mondo wouldn’t hurt a fly! He’d never attack Chihiro like that! Without hard evidence, it’s all speculation! Show me some proof that—!”

“…Everyone, empty your pockets!”
The entire room shook as Junko’s voice echoed all around them. As one, the entire class turned to her, mostly in confusion. Without warning she dug her hands into the pockets in her skirt and turned them inside out, showing that she didn’t have anything.

“What…are you doing?” Makoto hesitantly asked, still unsure of her intentions.

With a stern visage, Junko replied, “We’ll all empty our pockets. If anyone has an extra handbook, we’ll know that—”.

“We don’t gotta do that…”

Mondo knew it was over…he’d probably known it from the beginning. He’d just been delaying the inevitable. Maybe he’d been right about wanting to be found out…maybe he wanted someone like Kyoko or Makoto to uncover his crimes…shame him in front of everyone…prove he was nothing but a weakling who couldn’t keep his promises to anyone!

And now that everything was out in the open…Mondo finally felt free of the crushing guilt that had born down on him. In a strange way, he was satisfied with this. His classmates would undoubtedly vote to have him executed…which would be a fitting punishment for everything that he’d done. Not just attacking Chihiro…but for lying to his gang for so long about the truth behind what had happened to Daiya. Maybe now he could…let it all go.

It was finally time…to face his punishment like a man. Maybe then, he could find some sort of redemption. Yeah…maybe…yeah…yeah…

“Yes…yeah…I did it…I attacked Chihiro…”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Well…that was quite an interesting chapter wasn’t it? But what’s going to happen now?! Will Mondo be punished for his crimes? How will everyone vote for him? Is anyone going to comment on the fact that Jill’s being too much of a ‘free spirit’? You’ll have to tune in to the next chapter to find out!

By the way, my beta Dixxy Mouri, got sick again. The flu we think. I would really make her day if someone left a comment or review on her story “Haunted”. If you like my work, you’ll definitely enjoy hers!

Also, just to let you all know, nothing serious happened but I did have to visit the emergency room not long ago. Everything is fine, no health issues to speak of, but it did put me behind schedule with my writing. To that end, once this “Chapter” of the story is concluded, I will be taking a brief break in order to rest and get a few extra chapters done. It will be twice as long as my usual posting routine, so about a month. However, I’ve still got a few more “Acts” left before I finish this “Chapter”, so don’t fret!
Plus, as you all know, Chapter 3 of Danganronpa is kind of a cluster fuck (story-wise), so the time off will also be spent crafting exactly how I’m going to place everything to make it all make sense to you all! For now, we’re still on schedule and I will see you all for the regularly schedule update next time!

Oh, and thank you to everyone who keep reviewing! I do take everything you ask into consideration, even if I don’t have time to reply. My beta, Dixxy Mouri, and I always appreciate your comments and questions to help us craft a finer story! So please keep them coming! Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
With Mondo's admittance to his crime, the voting is about to begin. How will everyone vote? Mondo and Chihiro's fates hang in the balance.

“Yeah…yeah…I did it…I attacked Chihiro…”

Those words hung in the air for what felt like an eternity. No one dared to speak, most of them too shocked by the biker’s confession to form thoughts properly. Even with all the evidence and that confession, it was still so hard to believe. But the one question everyone had on their mind was—

“Why…?” Makoto bravely asked, his mouth speaking before his mind could reason for him to stop.

“Why did you do it…Mondo?”

Mondo made no move to respond, hanging his head in utter shame and choosing to remain silent. The reality of the situation began to sink in and all of the students found themselves still reeling from the revelation.

“Since he’s no longer willing to defend himself, I’m just gonna call this one!” Monokuma shouted, standing up in its seat. “The first case of bullying is solved! It was Mondo Owada, in the boy’s locker room, with the dumbbell!”

“It can’t be!!” Taka immediately protested, still unbelieving of the verdict. “Bro would never do something like that! Tell them, Mondo!”

Taka stared at his Bro, his eyes pleading for the biker to refute them. However, Mondo couldn’t even bring himself to meet his friend’s gaze, keeping his eyes shut while clenching his fists.

“…Sorry, man.”

All of Taka’s enthusiasm died in his throat as Mondo quietly refuted him. The Moral Compass’ complexion paled as the truth began to piece itself together in his mind. Even so, it appeared as though he adamantly disbelieved it, because if he accepted it as fact…he knew it would destroy him.

“No…it can’t be true! I refuse to believe it!” Taka insisted, blocking out the truth with excessive yelling. “B-Besides, we aren’t even sure if he really did attack Chihiro…we haven’t even voted yet!”

As if expecting that, Monokuma tilted its head to glare at the Moral Compass with its large red eye.

“Mondo Owada was the one who attacked Chihiro Fujisaki. I won’t repeat it again.”

Monokuma’s irritated voice sent chills down Taka’s spine as he was forced to accept the reality that bore down on him. Losing his strength, Taka felt his knees buckle and he barely caught himself on the railing, his eyes widened in pure shock.
“Oh, but don’t you worry, there’ll still be voting!” Monokuma continued without giving them a moments rest. “But I’m not gonna have you vote twice, that would just be redundant! So instead, now’s the time to decide the fate of the culprit who disturbed the peace of our fine school—!”

“Wait!” Makoto shouted, interrupting the bear. Everyone turned to the lucky student, who somehow kept himself composed as he glanced toward Mondo. “There’s still something we need to know first.”

Although a bit perturbed by the interruption, Monokuma didn’t seem all that interested in pursuing the vote right away. Instead, the bear seemed to grin knowingly as it asked, “Oh? And what’s that?”

Ignoring how much their captor was obviously enjoying themselves, Makoto kept his gaze focused on his guilty classmate as he asked, “Mondo, why did you move Chihiro into the girl’s locker room?”

The question was swift but the implication heavy. Mondo visibly flinched but again kept quiet. Whether from grief or shame or stubbornness, no one could say. However, in Mondo’s place, an authoritative voice spoke up instead.

“I knew you were a fool but I never imagined it extended to this level of idiocy,” Byakuya practically spat, glaring at Makoto. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? He was trying to cover up his crime, and confuse us—.”

“I don’t think that’s the case,” Sayaka cut him off, much to the Togami Heir’s frustration. “Unlike you, I don’t think Mondo enjoyed messing with the scene. In fact, if I had to guess… I’d say he did it to try and keep Chihiro’s secret from us.”

A wave of shock struck the courtroom at the pop idol’s suggestion. Even the arrogant Byakuya flinched slightly, as if actually considering the possibility. A heavy silence hung over the room, as everyone seemed to silently accept that conclusion.

“Regardless, he still tried to deceive us,” Celeste decided to remind everyone. “There is no guarantee that it wasn’t his intention from the beginning—”.

“Shut up…” Everyone, especially Celeste, was surprised when Leon snapped at her. “I’m tired of all the bullshit you keep spouting. Trying to make it sound like everyone’s just as twisted and heartless as you are!”

“Oh, does this mean you have a rebuttal?” the gambler inquired, a raised brow her only show of annoyance.

Not backing down, Leon huffed and said, “Hell yeah I do! You keep trying to make Mondo look like a fucking monster and that’s complete bullshit! If he was as cruel as you say he is, why the hell would he have come to get us to try and help Chihiro?!”

“That is because—”, Celeste began to answer before being cut off.

“That was a rhetorical question!” Leon shouted, ignoring a now fuming Celeste as he continued. “Because it was an accident! I bet he didn’t mean to attack Chihiro at all! And when it happened, he moved her into the girl’s locker room to hide her secret because that’s what Mondo does!”

Despite Leon’s utter incompetence in the ways of rhetorical questions, no one could deny that he’d brought up an interesting point. And while it didn’t change the situation at all, at the very least it was making some of the students reconsider their opinion of Mondo.
“That was a very astute observation. And I agree with it,” Kyoko spoke up, throwing her two cents in. Turning her gaze toward the biker, she asked, “Would you be willing to tell us everything that happened?”

“And we’d appreciate the truth this time,” Byakuya quipped, ignoring the stern glare from Kyoko. However, before Mondo could give any sort of reply, Monokuma cleared its throat loudly.

“In the interests of time, and my growing boredom, I’ve decided that a little show and tell would be more appropriate for this situation.”

Again, before anyone had time to question what the bear meant, the lights suddenly went out and a screen descended from above. A bright light shot out and struck the screen, and it didn’t take long to see that it was a kind of movie projector. Slowly lifting his head, Mondo gasped as he saw exactly what it was.

It was footage from the security cameras. It showed him talking to Chihiro outside the locker rooms. Then, it showed her letting both of them inside the boy’s locker room. The scene switched to the camera in the locker room itself and everyone watched in silence as the two had a conversation. There was no audio, so they couldn’t hear what was being said, but it was obvious that Mondo was growing more and more frustrated…until he abruptly grabbed the dumbbell and swung it.

A collective gasp rang out as they watched Chihiro crumple to the floor. An instant later, they watched as the dumbbell slipped from Mondo’s hand and he fell to his knees in front of Chihiro’s unconscious body. And then, the film went black.

A horrified silence followed the film, with many of the students left short of breath from shock. Byakuya and Celeste seemed eerily quiet, not having expected to see the crime itself taking place. Hina and Sakura looked to each other for support but didn’t have any words for each other. Leon and Sayaka had averted their gazes from the screen, memories of their own crimes coming back to haunt them. Hiro muttered some kind of Buddhist prayer while Hifumi murmured incomprehensively. Genocide Jill bit her own thumb as she contained her frustration, probably wanting to have committed the crime herself. Junko stared wide-eyed, as if she couldn’t comprehend what she was seeing. Taka hung his head, his expression unreadable as he processed this information.

Only Makoto and Kyoko seemed able to keep a level head as they watched the video, with the lucky student turning to gauge Mondo’s reaction.

Staring up at the screen, watching his own crime, Mondo reached a hand out toward the image of himself, as if trying to stop his past self from committing such an atrocity. With his teeth gritted tightly and tears forming in the corner of his eyes, it was obvious that guilt was overtaking his entire being.

“They say a picture is worth a thousand words! But that was a video so it must have been, like, millions of words!” Monokuma cackled as the lights came back on and the screen ascended back toward the ceiling. “Regardless of the circumstances, Mondo blatantly attacked Chihiro. Isn’t it only fair that someone who violated your trust should—?”

“This doesn’t prove anything!” Junko abruptly shouted, looking around the room anxiously. “We couldn’t hear what they were saying! For all we know, it might have—”.

“It very well might have been an accident. I can agree with that,” Byakuya interrupted, his voice
surprisingly somber. “However, that doesn’t change the fact that Mondo lashed out, in rage I might add, and struck down Chihiro.”

“But if it was an accident, then—!” Sayaka tried to interject but was interrupted.

“The facts are the facts. That video proved his guilt,” Byakuya said without hesitation, his eyes staring forward, avoiding eye contact with anyone.

“But Chihiro is still alive!” Leon refuted, slamming his fist down onto the railing in front of him. “It’s bullshit to have him executed when he didn’t mean to—”.

“Let me ask you this…” the Togami Heir cut in, finally turning and shifting his gaze back to his classmates. “If Mondo had actually killed Chihiro…can you honestly say that you wouldn’t vote to have him executed?”

At that implication, Sayaka, Leon, and Junko fell silent. And even though it was obvious that they wanted to say that they wouldn’t, realistically, if Mondo had actually murdered Chihiro…they would have voted for him already. It was a sick and twisted feeling and they hated it.

Amidst the silence, the stoic voice of Kyoko abruptly spoke up, “Regardless of what we’ve seen, we still don’t know his motivations. And until we do, we can’t make a rash judgment.”

Hearing that rational suggestion, everyone seemed to calm down a bit. No one seemed particularly eager to vote, not even the usually abrasive Byakuya. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean that all of them were content with just remaining silent.

“Wasn’t it to keep his own secret safe?” Hiro entered the conversation, much to everyone’s annoyance. “I mean, why else would he have bashed Chihiro upside the head like that?”

Oblivious to the seething glares most of his classmates sent him, Hiro continued to wait for an answer to his question. And unfortunately, he got it from the most unlikely source.

“If you really wanna know…I can tell you!”

No one had expected Monokuma to speak up, and they weren’t prepared for the revelation that was about to be made clear to them.

“You wanna know what Mondo’s secret is!! He killed his own brother!!”

Monokuma cackled as it jeered, humiliating the already dejected biker as his crime was made clear to everyone. Without warning, the demented bear gushed about the incident with Mondo’s brother, sparing no detail. And, as the truth of Mondo’s secret came to light, all of the students began to understand why Mondo had lost his temper and committed such an atrocity.

…To keep his own secret safe. Or at least, that’s what they were led to believe.

And, as much as she tried to understand it, in reality, Mukuro couldn’t wrap her head around what was happening. Sure, she knew that Mondo could fly off the handle sometimes, but he’d never gone so far before. Honestly, it was hard to believe that he had really been the one to attack Chihiro.

And while she could trust that the video they saw was genuine, the reason it was shown was obviously to incite anger toward Mondo for what he’d done. Her sister wouldn’t have introduced it if
she hadn’t thought it would bring out more despair. But even so, Mukuro still found it hard to accept.

During the two years she’d known Mondo, she had never heard this story. It was as much of a shock for her as it was for everyone else. Perhaps Junko had known about it but she’d neglected to relay it to her sister. And even if she had, Mukuro wasn’t sure that, at the time, she would have cared enough to remember.

And to make matters worse, Monokuma, or rather, her sister who controlled the bear from up on high, was verbally crucifying her classmate. The way the bear told it, Mondo was a monster that had blatantly lied about and even profited from his brother’s death, taking over their gang in one fell swoop. Not only that, he was a despicable traitor who had deceived his own friends and classmates, at least that’s how Monokuma painted him.

And while Mukuro didn’t understand Mondo’s motivations…not even in the slightest, she knew better than to blindly trust what her sister was spouting to all of them. And she’d be damned before she’d just let her sister have her way!

“—and are you really going to allow such a distrustful person to go unpunished for their crimes?” Monokuma chided, obviously encouraging them to begin the vote. “If I were you, I’d—”.

“Who’s voting? You or us? Just stay out of this!” Mukuro abruptly shouted, cutting the bear off midsentence. Without giving the shell-shocked automaton time to respond, she turned toward Mondo and asked, “Just tell us the truth…did you do this on purpose? Or was it an accident?”

She watched as Mondo flinched and hung his head, his hands grasping the wooden railing in front of him.

“It doesn’t matter…I still did it…I…I…attacked Chihiro!” the biker shouted, almost as if scolding himself. “I’ve done something utterly unforgivable! I let my anger…my own weakness take control of me! Chihiro…I was jealous of how strong she was! She was strong enough to face her own secret…strong enough to ask for help when she needed it! And she came to me for help! But instead…of helping…her…I…I…”

A deafening silence hung in the room for a moment before the horrifying sounds of Mondo’s sobs ripped through the courtroom. Tears fell from his eyes but he made no move to stop them, instead he lifted his tearstained face up for all of them to see.

“I don’t deserve to be forgiven! I almost killed her! She trusted me! She trusted me and I almost killed her! I don’t deserve to call myself a man! I’m nothing more than a pathetic piece of shit!” he shouted, his voice cracking as he berated himself. Taking in quick, shallow breaths, he let his head hang once more before he finished, “I won’t ask for forgiveness…just get to voting and get it over with! Execute me already!!”

Mukuro didn’t know exactly what she should be feeling as she heard that, but it was akin to a mixture of anger and sadness. She wanted to yell at him for being so stupid, scold him for giving up on life…but she realized how hypocritical that would be. After all, when Junko had abandoned her, she’d practically done the same thing.

The guilt was crushing him and Mukuro knew that, if someone didn’t do something, there would be nothing she could do to save him from execution. Sadly, there was little that she could do at this point.

All she could do was wonder how this was affecting her fellow classmates…especially a certain Moral Compass who could soon be losing his only real friend in this place. Shifting her gaze over to
Taka, she found him with his eyes downcast but an unmistakable anger exuding from him.

The Moral Compass was obviously feeling betrayed, and it was no surprise why. As far as Taka knew, the first person he had ever really opened up to had committed such a foul crime, and tried to deceive them all just to get out of being punished.

Honestly, Mukuro couldn’t remember if Taka and Mondo had ever been as close as they’d become in the last 24 hours. During their time in school together, Mukuro hadn’t really paid attention to who was friends with who; she’d been too focused on trying to please her sister to bother taking note about her classmates’ social standings. Plus, she’d seen Taka interacting with almost everyone at one point or another, but she didn’t know if he truly had made friends with anyone during their first year at Hope’s Peak.

But that didn’t really matter at this point. She at least knew Taka enough to understand that, even if they chose not to execute Mondo, their relationship would never be the same again. As depressing as it was to think about, by the end of the day, Taka was probably going to be friendless once again.

“Why…Why did…Why did you do it?…Bro…”

The images from the footage continued to replay in Taka’s mind, no matter how much he tried to will them away.

Throughout the entire film, Taka had been completely silent. He had stared in disbelief at what he had seen but couldn’t muster the courage to say anything at all. His eyes had followed Mondo the entire way through and he honestly couldn’t believe that his friend was capable of such a horrific act.

And even though he tried not to, it forced Taka to see his ‘Bro’ in an entirely different light.

He had thought that, despite his outer appearance, Mondo was a good man at heart. Before this incident, Taka had no doubts that his Bro was just misunderstood, and would eventually become an integral part of society after they escaped the school. However, after hearing about lying to his gang members about his brother’s death, coupled with the fact that he’d outright lied to all of them about Chihiro…Taka’s faith in his Bro had been shaken.

It hurt…and it was a pain he’d known all too well.

“Why…why does this always happen?! Why do the people I respect most…betray me?!?”

Although he didn’t want to, Taka couldn’t stop comparing Mondo’s betrayal to that of his grandfather’s. Even though the circumstances were entirely different, both of them had betrayed the expectations Taka had placed in them.

Ever since their time in the sauna, Mondo had been a source of strength for him, giving him courage to survive this hellish situation. The Moral Compass had even begun to idolize how purely and honestly the biker lived his life, and wanted to find the strength to do so himself. And he knew that if Mondo had needed his help, he would have done anything in his power to assist him.

“So why then…why did you do this Mondo?! Was our friendship one-sided?! Was I not a good enough friend that you felt you could trust me?! Why didn’t you come to me for help?!”

More than sadness, anger was coursing through Taka’s veins as he struggled to understand how things had gotten like this. Was it his fault? If he had insisted on working out with Mondo, could he
have intervened and prevented all of this? Should he have insisted that everyone reveal their secrets? Was there really anything that he could have done?

In the end, he just didn’t know. All he knew was that Mondo had not only betrayed him personally…but all of them. He’d placed his own safety above all of theirs and had attempted to graduate. It was unforgivable…and yet it was completely understandable, now that he knew Mondo’s secret. A tragedy, that’s what this situation was…and exceptions should always be made for such things!

And thus, an internal dilemma arose in Taka.

A part of him felt that Mondo needed to face punishment for his actions…but at the same time, he didn’t want to execute the only friend he’d ever had! Until now, Taka had always prided himself on doing the right thing but…what was the right thing to do in this situation?!

Did he betray the rules of justice and order…to keep his only friend from execution? Or…should he do as society would have demanded…and punish Mondo for his crimes?

“What…what am I supposed to do?!”

“Okay then, now that everything’s out in the open. It’s time for the voting to begin!”

Monokuma’s announcement shook the foundation of the room, as they honestly didn’t expect the choice to be thrust upon them so quickly.

Makoto’s mind was already racing with all of the information about Mondo’s past being thrust upon them. And he knew that voting now, after just hearing that, would affect how they might vote for the biker. That was probably the bear’s intention and Makoto felt the need to speak up about it.

“H-Hey, hold on!” the lucky student protested, trying to reason with the bear. “We’re not ready for —!”

“Just do it already!!” Everyone gasped as Mondo shouted at all of them, his head hung so low his pompadour almost touched the railing in front of him. “I know how this is gonna end…so don’t drag it out anymore! Just vote and get it over with!”

Mondo’s words echoed all throughout the courtroom, sending waves of unease through absolutely everyone. Makoto could only watch as the biker’s hands squeezed the railing in front of him so tightly that his knuckles turned white. Seeing his classmate so broken, so hopeless, so down-right defeated, it upset Makoto to his very core.

The lucky student wanted to reassure him that everything was going to be okay…but he honestly didn’t know. He couldn’t tell what most of his classmates were thinking, especially after seeing that video.

He wanted to believe that, after hearing about Mondo’s tragic past, everyone would understand the biker’s plight and vote to let him live. However, considering what had happened during the first trial, he found his optimism stunted. Even so, Makoto found himself clinging to that tiny thread of hope…already having forgiven Mondo for his mistake. He just hoped the others could find it within them to do the same…

“You heard the man! Let’s get to voting!” Monokuma cheered, spinning around in a circle gleefully.
“And I think I want to start with…Sayaka!”

The bear pointed directly at the pop idol, who shrunk back in fear before replying, “W-What do you mean…start with—”.

“Oh, didn’t I mention it before?” Monokuma said with a cheeky tone. “For a class trial without a blackened, we’ll be voting one at a time instead of using the levers. This way, everyone gets a chance to say why they voted for or against the culprit! Which remind me…!”

With a snap of its paw, Monokuma called forth a chalk board from behind his seat. On it, there were two pictures separated by a dividing line. On one side, was the image of Mondo’s head. But on the other…was a picture of a tub of butter.

“I’ll be making a tally for every vote! If you vote to let Mondo live…boring…I make a tally here,” Monokuma demonstrated by using a claw to swipe on the side with Mondo’s head. “And if you vote for him to be executed…much more exciting…then I’ll make a tally on the other side.”

Again the bear lifted its claw and pretended to make a mark on the side with the butter. Before Monokuma had the time to continue, a confused Leon called out, “Okay, so I get the Mondo picture but what the hell is the butter supposed to mean?”

Leon almost instantly regretted asking as Monokuma’s grin widened as it replied, “Well now…you’ll just have to vote for Mondo to be executed to find out, now won’t you?”

Feeling his anger rise, Makoto furiously countered, “Why do we need to vote individually anyway? Shouldn’t that sort of thing be private?!”

Turning and glaring at him, Monokuma sneered, “It’s the only way this can be fair. If we lose track of the votes, we’ll have to start aaaaaaaaall over again! You don’t want that, now do you? This way, there’ll be no confusion as to who voted for Mondo or the butter—err, I mean execution!”

Even before the explanation, Makoto knew there was more to it than that. Monokuma, or rather, the Mastermind behind their imprisonment, was trying to break them down. The Mastermind had been upfront about what they wanted from all of them…it wanted their despair. And what better way to get that than to force them all to say to Mondo exactly why they would vote to have him executed.

It was a cruel system but one that they couldn’t avoid. And so, like it or not, the voting began.

“Alright then, like I said, let’s start with Sayaka. After that, we’ll go counter-clockwise around the room until we’ve heard from everybody. Sound good kids?” Monokuma falsely asked before pointedly pointing at the pop idol. “Okay then, you’re up, doll-face!”

Sayaka frowned deeply at the nickname she’d been given and didn’t immediately respond. In fact, she seemed to have something weighing on her mind that she wanted to say. The students didn’t have to wonder long because she turned to face Mondo directly, staring at his downcast visage.

“Hey, Mondo…is it true? Do you really have my e-handbook?” she asked respectfully, much to everyone’s surprise.

A bit shocked himself, Mondo lifted his head enough to get a good look at her. She was staring at him with a serious expression and he felt compelled to answer, “…Yeah…I do…”
“Can I have it back please?” she said clearly, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

Almost reflexively, Mondo reached a hand into his pocket and pulled out her e-handbook. Without a word, he extended it out and Kyoko took it from him, passing it down until it arrived safely in Sayaka’s hands.

Upon receiving it, she pushed the button and it chimed as it booted up. Confirming that it was hers, Sayaka turned it off before slipping it into her pocket. Once it was there, she breathed a sigh of relief before smiling brightly.

“Okay then, I forgive you,” she said, much to everyone’s shock. Turning to Monokuma and scowling at it, she finished, “I vote for Mondo to live.”

Monokuma looked confused for all of two seconds before shrugging and whipping out a piece of chalk and placing a tally on the side with Mondo’s head.

“Okay then, let’s move on to...actually never mind, Makoto we’re skipping you,” the bear said quickly before placing another tally next to Mondo’s head.

Stunned by that treatment, Makoto angrily shouted, “Hey! You can’t skip me like that!”

“Yes, I can,” the bear insisted before glaring over its shoulder at him. “I already marked your vote for him to live, just like we all know you’ll vote, so it’s fine! Or did you want to vote the other way?”

“W-Well no, but—”, Makoto tried to protest but was cut off.

“Then it’s fine to skip you! Next up, Hifumi! Which way you voting?!” Monokuma said, brushing off the lucky student and turning his attention to the fanfic creator.

Hifumi, a bit startled from being called on, fidgeted with his fingers as he hung his head. A conflicted expression marred his face as he slowly lifted his head up to glance at Mondo.

“Forgive me, Mr. Owada...but I vote for execution.”

This time, almost everyone was surprised by the vote. Even Celeste seemed quite perplexed that the fanfic creator had actually voted in favor of execution. In fact, there was only one among them that seemed pleased with that decision.

“Awesome! That’s one! Finally!” Monokuma shouted gleefully, happily tallying a mark under the butter image.

Despite himself, Makoto couldn’t stop from turning to Hifumi with a perplexed gaze and asking, “...Hifumi, why would you—?”

“I’m sorry...I really am...but I’m more afraid than I am sorry,” the fanfic creator answered, his voice all too serious for once. “I know that...I tend to say some off the wall things sometimes. And...I can’t help but worry that I’m gonna say something to Mr. Owada that might anger him enough to...attack me, too. So...please forgive me!”

Abruptly bowing his head, Hifumi’s explanation came to an end. As if cold water had been poured on all their heads, the entire class shuddered as they realized that the fanfic creator wasn’t as naïve or foolish as they’d originally thought. He was a unique individual, to be certain, but underneath that pudgy exterior was a terrified young man who feared for his life. And absolutely none of them could refute him for feeling that way.
“Alright then! Let’s ride this emotional rollercoaster right into the ground!” Monokuma suddenly shouted, ignoring the harsh glares of the students. “Next up, we’ve got—”.

“Me! Me! Me! I’m up next!” Genocide Jill elatedly exclaimed. “I vote for the butter!”

A parade of shocked faces turned to face the serial killer, Monokuma surprisingly among them.

“I’m not complaining, just want to get that out in the open,” the bear said as it tallied the second mark on the butter side. “But yeah, kinda surprised a serial killer would vote for execution. Hypocrite much?”

“Well, it’s not my butt on the line, so why should I be worried?” Genocide Jill defended before smiling widely and staring at the tally board. “Besides…I really want to know what the butter means!”

Again, the students were surprised by how honest and straightforward their serial killer classmate was being. And while some of them wanted to reprimand her, none of them had the courage to do so.

“Okaaaay then…points for curiosity,” Monokuma commented before shifting its gaze over to the next person. “Alrighty Leon, time to make your—”.

“Finally! I’ve waited forever for this!” the baseball star shouted, much to the bear’s frustration. “It’s not fair for Mondo to get executed when he didn’t actually kill anyone! I didn’t get executed for…what I did…” He paused for only a moment before continuing, “…So Mondo shouldn’t either! He fucked up but that doesn’t mean he deserves to—!”

“Sheesh, we get it already. One more vote for him to live. Moving on!” Monokuma said while making a tally on the ‘let Mondo live’ side.

“Hey! I wasn’t finished yet—!” Leon tried to protest before he was cut off by the next voter.

“I vote for his execution.” No one was surprised to hear that response from Celeste, who laced her fingers together and smiled. “Mondo, I truly harbor no ill will toward you. But having you around is a gamble that even I am not willing to take.”

Mondo didn’t even flinch at her words, keeping his head pointed down and just taking her verbal abuse. Before any of the opposing students could chastise the gambler for her decision, the next voter stepped up without Monokuma’s intervention.

“I also vote for execution.”

Again, not a single student was surprised to hear Byakuya voting to put the biker down. However, what they didn’t expect was for him to remain silent afterward.

“Hmm? No words of wisdom for the soon to be punished?” Monokuma tried to encourage the Togami Heir. To everyone’s continued surprise, Byakuya slowly shook his head.

“I’ve said all that I need to.”

The Affluent Progeny folded his hands behind his back, and stood up completely straight. It almost appeared to be an uncharacteristic sign of respect, but no one dared to call him out on it. Still a bit confused as to why the usually antagonistic Byakuya was being so passive, Monokuma somehow clicked its teeth before shrugging and adding another tally to the butter side.
“As you all can see, that makes the current tally four to three, in favor of the butter!” the bear related to everyone, obviously pleased with the ranking so far. “So next, we move on to Chihiro—oh wait! We can’t! Because she’s in a coma!”

Mondo flinched again and the sympathetic students all glared daggers at Monokuma, who simply ignored them and decided to move on.

“Moving right along, next we have Hiro! Lay it on us, future-man!”

At the sound of his name being called, Hiro shuddered. He glanced around the room and found two different kinds of expectant gazes; ones wishing for him to show mercy, the others silently demanding he bloody his hands. Under the weight of their stares, Hiro quickly laughed nervously before shutting his mouth, realizing this was no time to be joking around.

Sweating from the pressure, Hiro decided to try and reason with everyone. “Well, uh, it’s not really that simple—”.

“Yes it is!” Monokuma interjected, making the clairvoyant jerk around and stare at the bear fearfully. “Vote for him to live or vote for the ultra, super secret butter…AKA execution!”

“Gah!” Hiro shrieked in surprise before nervously stuttering, “W-W-Well, I, uh, I mean that, well…I vote Mondo did a bad thing?”

A painful silence stung the courtroom as Hiro’s seemingly indecisive answer invaded all of their ears. However, before that frustration could give way to anger, Monokuma sighed audibly and said, “Alright then, another vote for execution.”

“Wait, what?! No! I didn’t—!” Hiro tried to back-peddle but the menacing gaze of Monokuma silenced him.

“You voted that he did something wrong. By my understanding, when someone does something wrong, they get punished. That means, you voted for punishment!”

“No! I didn’t…did I?” the indecisive Hiro questioned himself, not knowing he’d stepped into the bear’s trap.

“Indeed, you did! It was your choice, now you have to live with it!” the bear jeered as another tally was marked on the butter side.

A look of pure shame came over Hiro as all of his classmates, regardless of how they’d voted, glared at the clairvoyant for his stupidity. He’d lost his only chance to take back his own vote and decide properly, something that none of his classmates could overlook. Lowering his head, Hiro lifted his gaze up just enough to give Mondo an apologetic look, but other than that, he said nothing.

Not giving them time to rest, Monokuma shouted, “Moving forward, next we have—”.

“Me. And I vote for Mondo to live,” Hina interrupted, her features hardened with determination. “I won’t punish Mondo like this! Maybe he needs detention or something but he doesn’t deserve to die!”

Everyone, aside from Sakura, was a bit surprised by Hina’s staunch determination. The normally bubbly girl had obviously thought about this and come to a reasonable conclusion. Then again, given her peaceful nature, none of the students were all that shocked by her decision.

“Blughk! Too much sugar in that vote, if you ask me!” Monokuma sneered but added another vote
for Mondo to live to the board. “And I hope you don’t mind but we’ll be skipping you, Mondo. Can’t have you tainting the vote, now can we?”

Gripping the railing in front of him so tight you could hear it creaking, Mondo gritted his teeth and replied, “…Whatever. Just hurry this up and get it over with…”

“As you wish!” the bear gleefully agreed, saluting the biker before pointing to the tally board. “Currently, we have five votes to four, in favor of execution once again! Now, the next few votes will be critical, so I encourage all the remaining voters to—”.

“I vote for Mondo to live,” Kyoko’s stern voice interrupted, staring at the bear with absolutely no fear. “I believe that ties up the votes, does it not?”

Even with her emotionless expression, it appeared as though she had been waiting for the perfect moment to spoil the bear’s fun. Unfortunately, Monokuma didn’t seem to take that interruption well. Instead of using the chalk, the bear decided to slash a tally on the ‘let Mondo live’ side with its own claw, a grating sound reverberating and causing the students to flinch.

“Okay…then…whose…next?!” the bear furiously questioned through gritted teeth, not realizing exactly who was being addressed next.

“That would be me,” Sakura answered plainly, much to the bear’s chagrin. “I also cast my vote for Mondo to live. His actions, while deplorable, are not completely without merit. Specifically the actions he took to ensure Chihiro’s secret be kept hidden.”

A noiseless gasp escaped Mondo and he lifted his head up to stare, completely confused, at Sakura. Either he’d figured out that the odds were now in his favor to survive, because of that vote, or he honestly didn’t expect someone like Sakura to vote for him to live. In either case, the biker didn’t seem to let this revelation encourage him, averting his gaze from the martial artist and simply waiting for the next two votes…the ones that would truly decide his fate.

Meanwhile, Monokuma was busy practicing meditational breathing, possibly to keep from flying into a rage, when it decided that it was time to finish off the last of the voting.

“So then…with that vote, we now have six votes to five…in favor of Mondo’s survival.” The demented bear choked out the last word before clearing its throat and continuing, “With that said, the next votes will be the most important. If both votes are for execution, then it’s butter time!”

Although still confused about what that could be, the students who had voted for Mondo’s survival glanced over to the next vote and couldn’t help but smile. At the same time, Monokuma slowly turned his attention over and said, “Now then, Junko. Time for you to cast your—”.

Monokuma froze as it looked over to see Junko, with a cocky grin on her face, flipping the bear off with both hands. If the mechanical bear had been equipped with veins, several of them certainly would have popped at seeing that.

“Biker boy gets to live! ‘Butter’ try harder next time!” Junko taunted, her smirk widening.

“…Rude,” was all Monokuma uttered before kicking the tally board over and letting the sound of it clattering to the floor get everyone’s attention. “Fine then! Voting time is over! By majority decision…Mondo gets to live…”
Having not been paying attention to Junko’s “vote”, Mondo’s head abruptly shot up in utter surprise.

“W-Wait…what the hell?!” he shouted at everyone, still in shock. “I thought…I thought you were all gonna vote for me to get executed! I…I deserve it! I…I lied to everyone! I almost got all of you killed! I should’t be allowed to—!”

“That’s enough,” a stern voice halted Mondo’s self-deprecation.

Even though he shouldn’t have been surprise, he was still a bit shaken when he saw that Junko was the one glaring at him. And what was even more surprising, was the fearsome look she had in her eyes…as if she was going off to war or something. Whatever that look was, it was nothing like Mondo had ever seen before, and it was enough to keep him quiet as she cleared her throat.

“We voted for you to live. And you have to deal with that,” the Fashionista forcefully told him. Still stunned by her powerful voice, the biker remained quiet as she continued, “Instead of whining about not getting punished, why don’t you try to figure out how you’re going to apologize to Chihiro for what you did? Shouldn’t that be your primary concern right now?”

Each word Junko spoke was harsh and stern, but hit right on the mark. Even more terrifying was that she hadn’t raised her voice to him. Her entire being practically radiated strength and determination…the kind that Mondo had fought to gain for himself all his life.

“Junko…she’s…just like Chihiro…she’s strong, too…much stronger than I was…than I am…”

The biker jealously lamented his laughable state, feeling his anger beginning to rise again. However, as he felt his jealousy rise, the images of his crimes flashed through his mind, reminding him of his own weakness. His vision began to blur as he felt himself losing control of his anger once again…feeling the weakest he’d ever felt in his entire life.

And just as he felt he was going to be consumed by that weakness, he recalled Chihiro’s smiling face as she’d told him she wanted to get stronger…with his help.

“That’s right…Chihiro! I still…I still…have a promise that I need to keep!”

Almost instantly, he beat back down those feelings of anger and jealousy, knowing it was those feelings that had put him into this position in the first place. Lowering his gaze, Mondo could feel Junko’s eyes focused on him. More specifically, he could feel the strength she exuded over him. But this time, he didn’t let that upset him.

“So what if she’s…stronger than me…I just…have to get stronger…like Chihiro did!”

Slowly taking a deep breath, Mondo unclenched his fists and lifted his head up to meet Junko’s hardened gaze. Underestimating how difficult it was to maintain eye contact with the Fashionista, the biker hesitated for a moment but quickly found his resolve.

“You’re right…but I don’t just owe Chihiro an apology…I owe it to all of you.” As if hearing the magic words, Junko’s stern gaze softened and she let a warm smile decorate her lips as she nodded firmly to him. Nodding back, Mondo then turned and bowed deeply to everyone as he shouted, “Sorry I’m such a dumbass!”

Stillness fell upon the group, with seemingly no one willing to verbally accept his apology. As if to confirm that assumption, an irritated scoff echoed a moment later.

“Do you really believe a simple apology is enough?” Celeste said to him, brutally breaking the silence. With a slight huff, she averted her gaze and said, “Remember that not all of us voted in favor
of your survival.”

Her words echoed in Mondo’s ears and though he did his best not to let them affect him, he found himself sinking back into self-loathing. However, he had expected it and chose to be silent as this class trial came to a close.

Watching through Monokuma’s eyes, the real Junko frowned as her former classmates made the decision to spare Mondo.

“Uhg…so boring! I at least wanted a bit of melodrama!” she complained to herself before pressing her head into the monitor in front of her.

Just then, almost before she realized what she was doing, Junko leaned back, unclipped her Monokuma hair clips and quickly retied her hair in a pony tail up above her head. Reaching into her pocket, she whipped out a pair of fake glasses and slipped them over her eyes. Finally, she grabbed a nearby clipboard and held it as if she was taking notes.

“Well, all things considered, this was to be expected.” Her voice became sultry and silky, her new ensemble making her look like an educator. “Statistically, the odds were stacked against despair this time, what with Chihiro surviving and all. Therefore, when the first real murder does occur, the shock to their systems will be so great that the despair it brings will be greater than I first calculated. I suppose that will have to suffice for now.”

Quick as lightning, Junko discarded her glasses and clipboard, and re-clipped her Monokuma hair clips back into place to make her hair into pig tails again.

“Oh! I guess that’s right! Good thinking, me!” she said aloud to herself before making a mental note to add the ‘Sexy School Teacher’ persona to her new list of personalities to perform while she was bored. “In the meantime, let’s end the boring trial and move on to the next phase…”

Gleefully retaking control of Monokuma, Junko momentarily eyed the large bag sitting next to her chair, the bag itself filled to the brim with stacks of money.

“Alright you little brats! This concludes the end of the first bullying class trial!” Monokuma announced to everyone, getting a few relieved sighs in the process. “Also, I feel it’s important to note that, because it wouldn’t affect anything anyway, there wasn’t a need to get that last vote! So yeah, I wanted to personally apologize to you about that Mr. Honor Student!”

“…Whatever.”

That uncharacteristic reply came directly from Taka, who stared forward angrily. The sight of his apparent fury perturbed everyone, Monokuma included. Even Byakuya and Celeste, who had never been intimidated by him before, felt a shiver run down their spine at the utter rage that burned behind the Moral Compass’ eyes. Mondo in particular had a hard time looking Taka’s way, knowing the exact source of his friend’s anger.

Before anything else could be said, Makoto called out, “We should probably head back upstairs then. We need to check on Chihiro.”
“…Indeed, we do.” Again Taka spoke swiftly and decisively, not wasting a single syllable.

Just as everyone prepared to leave their spots and head for the elevator, the voice of their Headmaster stopped them.

“Oh! I completely forgot to mention something important regarding Chihiro!” Monokuma suddenly exclaimed, immediately getting everyone’s attention. “Due to her ‘special’ condition right now, she’ll be the only one allowed to stay in the nurse’s office for the time being.”

A huge wave of relief hit everyone, expecting there to be something more sinister.

“Is that all? That’s a huge relief!” Hiro voiced for everyone, not realizing it may have been wiser to remain silent.

However a moment later, Monokuma’s head slowly turned to glare down at the clairvoyant as it said, “A relief? Now why would that be? I mean, you’re all just leaving a defenseless kid alone until they wake up.”

Something about the way the bear said that sent chills down everyone’s spine. Narrowing her gaze, Junko questioned, “What exactly are you getting at?”

Looking her way with fake puzzlement, Monokuma tilted its head and replied, “Didn’t you hear what I just said? Until Chihiro wakes up, unless you have a medical emergency, absolutely no one other than Chihiro is allowed to be in the nurse’s office!”

A round of gasps escaped the students and it was quickly followed by a plethora of complaints.

“T-That’s crazy! How can we take care of her like that?!” Makoto was the first to voice concern.

“Yeah! She needs someone to be there for her when she wakes up!” Leon concurred, slamming his hands down onto the railing.

“You can’t expect her to properly recover if she remains unattended,” Sakura agreed, her aura becoming fearsome as she spoke.

Amidst the complaints, Kyoko decided to voice an important question. “And what happens if Chihiro were to come to harm while she’s recovering?”

“Oh, I never thought of that,” Monokuma answered with false surprise. “Well, since it was Mondo who put her in that situation, then any harm that befalls her will solely be his fault and he’ll need to be punished accordingly!”

“What?! But that’s bullshit!” a surprised but furious Mondo shouted, obviously not enjoying being reminded of his crime. “How am I supposed to apologize to her if I can’t even get in to see her?!”

“That sounds like a personal problem…” Monokuma jeered, basking in the seething glares all of the students were giving.

“At least allow one person to remain by Chihiro’s side until she wakes up,” Kyoko suggested, hoping her plea would be answered. “That way, we can be assured that you didn’t play a hand in any harm that might come to Chihiro.”

At that accusation, Monokuma’s face burned red with anger as it retorted, “How dare you assume I would do such a thing! I’m an impartial judge here and I would never personally involve myself in the game! It would violate the rules that only a student may participate in the killing.”
“I’m afraid that I must agree with Kyoko this time,” Celeste spoke up, glancing at Monokuma with calculating eyes. “Without a proper way to monitor if you were involved in a potential case, it would violate your precious rules. Would it not?”

Reeling back in obvious shock, Monokuma stuttered, “U-Uh…w-well, I suppose that’s a good point…” Realizing that it may have backed itself into a corner, the demented bear cleared its throat and clarified, “Alright then, one and only one student may remain in the room with Chihiro. No switching shifts or any crap like that! So, you’d better chose someone you can trust to—”.

“I’ll do it. I’ll look after Chihiro.”

Although they shouldn’t have been, most of the students were surprised that Mondo chose to volunteer himself for the position. As the students turned and gazed at the biker, most of them with scrutiny in their eyes, they couldn’t help but question if it was right to allow the very person who had attacked Chihiro to be the one to take care of her.

“I’m not opposed to it but…Mondo, are you sure?” Makoto cautiously asked, trying not to sound insensitive.

Although obviously a bit insulted by the lucky student’s lack of confidence, Mondo knew that he… that everyone had a right to doubt him right now. But that was why he couldn’t afford to let anyone else do this!

“Please guys…let me do this!” the biker pleaded, bowing his head. “I gotta make up for what I did! So please, let me make this right! Let me take care of Chihiro!”

A brief pause occurred as Mondo’s words echoed in the courtroom but it was shattered when Leon proclaimed, “I say we let him do it!” Now it was the ballplayer’s turn to get the scrutinous glances, which he shrugged off as he continued, “Hey, I was put in charge of helping Sayaka while she recovers. So I think we can trust Mondo to help Chihiro while she recovers.”

“I agree. We should give him a chance to prove himself,” Sayaka concurred, smiling brightly at Leon.

“Are you two certain about that?” the skeptical voice of Celeste questioned, making the pair glare at her. Ignoring them, the gambler continued, “Should we not be concerned that someone with such a violent temper, not to mention someone that tried to deceive us, will be in charge of Chihiro’s fate?”

Unwillingly, both Sayaka and Leon began to internally second guess themselves, knowing that there was some sense in what Celeste was saying, though they’d rather bite their own tongues than admit it.

“Personally, I think it would be fine idea.”

Everyone was shocked when Byakuya, of all people, threw his hat into the ring. Mondo especially raised an eyebrow at the affluent progeny’s apparent confidence in him.

“Oh? I’m surprised to hear you say that,” Celeste admitted, unable to understand the Togami Heir’s reasoning. “I wonder…is this your own way of seeking redemption for what you’ve done to Chihiro?”

Scoffing at her suggestion, Byakuya folded his arms and replied, “Hardly. I actually support the idea because, if something horrid were to happen to Chihiro this time, we’d have a clear suspect to convict. And there would be no voting to help weasel his way out of it…”
A fiendish smirk decorated Byakuya’s lips as his intentions were made clear. Before anyone could call him a soul-less bastard, Monokuma cheered and said, “Alright then! It’s decided! Mondo’s fate will be directly tied to Chihiro! And, if Chihiro happens to die under his watch…then he’ll suffer the butter!”

A puzzled look was shared by most of the class before Monokuma realized they still didn’t know the implication of the butter. With a deep sigh, the bear finished, “Execution…basically.”

“So what you’re saying is, if Chihiro dies, either from health complications or from another student attacking her, then Mondo is the one who will be punished?” Kyoko asked, more to outline the terms of the bear’s agreement to having someone watch over Chihiro.

“Grrrrh, yes! That’s how this is gonna go! Chihiro dies, so does Mondo! How much clearer can I make that?!” Monokuma shouted, sounding oddly weary. Then again, it was getting late and whomever was controlling the bear had to sleep sometime.

A few “ahs” were shared as the class fully understood the implications of having Mondo as Chihiro’s guard. With that all settled, Monokuma stood up, as if preparing to leave, and said, “If that’s all, I think I’ll retire for the evening—”.

“Hey, Monokuma…you said that only a student may participate in the killing, right?” Junko audibly questioned, her gaze lowering in thought as she repeated the bear’s words from earlier. “So you’re suggesting that if a student snuck into the nurse’s office, they could attack Chihiro?”

“Yes! Exactly!” Monokuma latched onto that comment, trying to claw its way out of the conversation so it could leave. “Therefore, you can be assured that I would never be personally involved in this, because I’m your Headmaster and not a student!”

“And how, exactly, can we be sure of that?” the suspicious voice of Junko asked, making everyone turn to her. “For all we know, it’s a student who’s controlling that stupid bear, right now!”

Absolutely every student’s eyes widened at the accusation, including Byakuya and Kyoko, both of whom had never considered that possibility. And while the revelation went over some of the student’s heads, Hiro in particular, because Monokuma had said that only a student could attack Chihiro, it made even Mondo wonder if the one who had trapped them here was indeed a student of the academy.

As that question hung in the air, a low chuckle slowly began to echo around them. It didn’t take long for everyone to realize that it was Monokuma who was chuckling, its laughter growing with each passing moment. In only a few moments, the bear was audibly roaring with laughter, much to everyone’s frustration.

“Hey! What’s so damn funny??” Leon shouted, irritated by the bear’s cackling.

“Is Junko right? Are you actually a student…just like us?!” Sayaka bravely spoke up, taking a cue from Leon’s momentum.

Slowly, the cackling bear came down from its laughter high and said, “Oh…oh…my sides! I haven’t had such a good laugh in years! Oh, am I the only one that finds that question hilarious?!”

Chuckling to itself once again, it seemed that the bear didn’t have any intention of answering, which prompted a certain Affluent Progeny to say, “Just answer the question. Now.”

Byakuya’s authoritative voice didn’t have the desired effect, much to his chagrin, as the bear’s laughter began to completely die down. Only once it was completely silent did Monokuma clear its
throat and answer them.

“I’ve been saying it all along but none of you paid attention, it seems. And I even added so many puns for it too—”.

“Enough of your games. Out with it. Are you a student or not?” Kyoko pressed, seeming almost desperate for the answer for the first time since they’d been sealed with the school.

Jerking its head toward her, Monokuma grinned widely and answered, “Of course…not! I keep telling you all that I’m not a person! I’m a bear! And bears can’t be students! That’s just silly if you ask me…”

“We aren’t asking you, we’re asking whomever is controlling you,” Kyoko further interrogated, completely unrelenting.

“I’m sorry…the number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service…” Monokuma said in complete monotone. “Please hang up and try your call again later…”

Kyoko’s eyes widened as she predicted what the bear was going to do and she called out, “Stop!”

But it was too late, the cushion of Monokuma’s judge chair suddenly gave way and the bear fell through, leaving the students all alone in the courtroom. Suddenly, a bang echoed and everyone turned to see Kyoko with her gloved fists pressed into the railing. Everyone was shocked to see the normally stoic girl gritting her teeth and silently seething, but at least they understood exactly why.

“Our best lead…and now it’s gone.” She took a moment to collect herself before returning to her usual stoic visage. “At least we have something to go on now. And we have you to thank for it, Junko.”

As all attention focused on her, the Fashionista flushed as she replied, “Uh…what did I do now?”

Kyoko watched her in silence for a moment before answering, “You managed to see something that most of us overlooked. And we were obviously on the right track. Considering how flustered Monokuma became as we pressed the issue.”

“It actually was more astute than I thought you capable of,” Byakuya joined in, almost intentionally mocking her…which earned him a glare from the Fashionista. “Although, I do have to wonder…what possessed you to say such a thing, hm?”

Even though she obviously disapproved of his selfish comment, Junko answered, “I dunno. I just thought that it may be possible some crazy student from the school decided to trap us in here. I mean, we are all Ultimates here, who’s to say that it’s not the Ultimate Kidnapper or something?”

“That very well may be the case,” Sakura concurred, lowering her gaze in deep thought. “We don’t know anything about who our captor really is. Any information we can glean from them gives us an advantage. You have my thanks for that.”

“Yeah, we all owe you big time, Junko!” Makoto chimed in, a bright and vibrant smile on his face.

Upon hearing her own name from Makoto, the Fashionista almost seemed to wince, as if hearing it somehow upset her. However, an instant later, she beamed for everyone and said, “Well, it was just luck, I guess. But you’re welcome anyway!”

Although that answer appeased most of the class, both Kyoko and Byakuya couldn’t help but ponder further. However, before either of them could act on it, the rest of the class began to grow restless.
“So, uh, can we get out of here now? This place kind of unnerves me,” Hina admitted, making everyone realize that they could, in fact, leave whenever they wanted.

“Right! Let’s head back up to the school.” Makoto enthusiastically shouted, before turning to head for the elevator.

As a group, everyone began to head for the elevator, with Mondo bringing up the rear. It was then that he notice that Taka hadn’t moved from his spot. The Moral Compass’ eyes were downcast and his expression unnervingly unreadable. And even though his better judgment told him not to, Mondo couldn’t stop himself from walking over to his friend.

As everyone passed Taka on their way to the elevator, no one spoke a word. The Moral Compass told himself it was out of respect, but deep down, he imagined that it was because they just didn’t care about his feelings on the proceedings.

“Why…why does my chest ache?!” Taka questioned himself, gripping his chest with one hand.

“Mondo was spared…but he didn’t face punishment for his crimes! This flawed system…it’s because we don’t have capable people to pass righteous judgment when we need it most!”

As Taka continued to mentally debate the failings of Monokuma’s court system, a voice that Taka didn’t want to hear invaded his ears.

“Uh…hey, Bro. The elevator’s gonna go soon…”

It was undoubtedly Mondo’s voice…there was no way the Moral Compass would ever forget the voice of the man that had betrayed him! Betrayed all of them! And didn’t even get sufficient punishment for it!

“Just like…Grandfather…”

Despite his wishes, the loathsome voice of his grandfather came back to haunt him.

…

“The fools will all see I’m right, sooner or later.”

“Responsibility? Why should I have to take responsibility for the masses misunderstanding my vision for Japan?”

“Of course my family understands the choices I’ve made! And they support me regardless!”

“Kiyotaka…my grandson…don’t ever go into politics…being Prime Minister is pointless anyway…”

…

His grandfather… a man that he had deeply respected…told him that his dreams and aspirations for becoming a politician were utterly pointless. And that hurt almost as much as his grandfather’s betrayal itself.

Taka had only been a child at the time of his grandfather’s scandal and it had warped his life in so many ways. People resented him and his family just for being related to his grandfather, and it was hard for Taka to make friends because of it. His grandfather’s betrayal had robbed him of any chance to be a normal citizen. Because of his grandfather’s selfish acts, Taka had to devote his life to
restoring his family’s good name.

Almost unbeknownst to him, Taka’s hands clenched into fists as he mentally seethed.

“Why does everyone have to be so selfish?! First Grandfather…now Mondo! Can’t they see how their actions affect others?! Why couldn’t they just—?!”

“Uh…Bro, we should probably get going before—”.

Mondo reached his hand out but before it even had the chance to get close, Taka abruptly slapped it away.

“Don’t ever call me that again. I’m not your ‘Bro’ anymore…” Taka seethed, glaring at Mondo with fiery red eyes. “From now on, don’t even bother talking to me…you traitor!”

Obviously hurt by his friend’s words, Mondo flinched and averted his gaze. However, it only took him a moment to shift it back over and say, “Bro—Taka! I…I’m sorry, man! I didn’t mean to—!”

Pure anger coursed through Taka’s veins as he interrupted, “Don’t make excuses! Excuses are for cowards! I thought you were better than that, but just like everyone else, you showed your true, deceitful colors! I trusted you! But you obviously didn’t trust me! Otherwise…you would have come to me for help rather than lying to my face about attacking Chihiro!!”

As the two of them shouted between each other, the rest of the students could only watch somberly from the elevator. Leon, in particular, wanted to jump in and interject, but he knew that nothing he said would fix what Taka felt right now. Unfortunately, there was nothing anyone could do to help either of them at this point.

Startled by Taka’s demeaning words, Mondo stuttered, “B-B-But…but I…I…I…I…didn’t want this to happen! You gotta believe—!”

“Enough!” Taka practically screamed, turning his back on his…former friend. “You had best stay away from me from now on! Because if you pull this kind of treacherous stunt again…I’ll make sure you’re punished for it!”

Without letting Mondo get in another word, Taka headed for the elevator, pushing past anyone that got in his way, earning concerned and surprised glances from his classmates.

Thinking about his words toward Mondo, Taka realized that it was the first time that he’d actively threatened anyone before…it was a sickening feeling and he didn’t like it. However, if he was going to enforce the rules and justice of society while trapped in this place, then something about him needed to change. He couldn’t afford to let something like this happen again! If he merely forgave Mondo as easily as he’d forgiven Leon…then someone else might get attacked on his watch! And that was something that he couldn’t allow to happen…ever again!

“No more pink slips…no more write ups…from now on, I’ll enforce order though any means necessary!”

As they all crammed into the elevator, the metal doors closed and the machine began to take them back up. In the semi-dark of the elevator, Taka’s red eyes burned…like a white hot flame.

To Be Continued…
Greetings, my beautiful readers! Now, wasn’t that an emotion rollercoaster of a trial! But what’s going to happen to everyone now?! How will Mondo cope with his guilt while guarding Chihiro? Has Taka gone over to the dark side? What will Junko come up with now that her plans have failed twice? You’ll have to wait for the next chapter to find out!

We’ve got one more ‘Act’ before this ‘Chapter’ is over and then I’ll be on a bit of a break, as I mentioned before. However, I’ve got a few interesting developments that I’m already working on, so I hope you all can wait for them!

As always, your reviews give me strength and confidence, so if you have any questions, concerns, comments, fears, tears, traumas, phobias…please let me know so I can address them. And once again, thank you all for reading and have a wonderful day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

After conclusion of the trial, the classmates retire for the evening. Leon and Sayaka worry for each other, while Byakuya is forced to deal with Genocide Jill's "affections". Later, Mukuro receives a special visit from her dear sister...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Alright, uh, I guess this is it…” Mondo said to everyone.

The entire group of students stopped just outside the nurse’s office…except for Taka, who wordlessly continued on toward his room with a speedy gait. Some of them spared a moment to glare at him but none tried to stop him, still unnerved by his reaction to the trial.

Not to mention that, with all but Mondo having been forbidden to enter for the time being, none of them were able to check in on Chihiro, which bothered almost all of them. Instead, the honor of guarding the unconscious programmer belonged solely to Mondo, who looked more than a little nervous about the task ahead. In fact, he looked almost like a dead man, forced to dig his own grave. And while some of the students, namely Byakuya and Celeste, continued to scrutinize him with their eyes, one of the students bravely approached.

“If anything happens, come and get us, okay?” Makoto said with a small but hopeful smile. “We’re here for you if you need us. So don’t hesitate to call.”

The lucky student’s words of encouragement provoked a stout nod from Mondo, but otherwise, he remained silent. Without so much as a ‘good night’, the biker turned and pulled open the door, stepping inside and firmly closing it behind him. It was almost as if he was trying to cut himself off from his classmates, not that it would have surprised anyone.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m exhausted,” Junko abruptly said, yawning loudly as she spoke. “I say we all call it a night and discuss what to do next in the morning.”

“Agreed,” Kyoko concurred, turning to address everyone. “Let’s all meet in the morning as we usually have. And everyone’s attendance would be appreciated.” She directed that last comment directly at Byakuya, who scoffed in annoyance.

“You all may do as you please. And so shall I.”

With those last skeptical words, Byakuya separated himself from the group, heading for the nearby stairs rather than his room. The instant he was out of sight, a delighted cackling softly echoed. As one, the students turned and were shocked to see that Toko was actually still Genocide Jill! The serial killer continued to chuckle to herself, looking off in the direction her ‘Prince’ had gone.

“Oh, I love a man that plays hard to catch!” the serial killer exclaimed before darting toward the stairs, flying up them with almost inhuman speed.

As the remaining students felt themselves breathe a sigh of relief now that she was gone, Hiro
unexpectedly asked, “So, uh, should we be worried that a serial killer just followed after Byakuya?”

“I don’t exactly think that ‘worried’ is the right word, but I get what you’re saying,” Hina offered, her disgust for the Togami Heir apparent. “I mean, Byakuya’s a total douche but I don’t know if I want a serial killer dismembering him or something.”

“…I wouldn’t complain,” Sayaka muttered under her breath, earning only a few stern looks from Junko and Kyoko.

“I think that, for now at least, none of us are in any danger,” Kyoko reassured them, drawing everyone’s attention. “Genocide Jill knows of our situation. I doubt that she would attempt anything so soon after being discovered either. She may not seem like it, but she must be rather intuitive to evade the authorities for so long.”

“I see,” Celeste jumped in, nodding politely. “So, what you’re saying is, because we all know she is here, she will be less likely to commit murder? I can agree with that, for now at least. But we will need to be extra careful around her regardless.”

“Don’t you seem calm about this,” Junko muttered loud enough for all to hear.

“But of course. As I said before, this is merely a part of adapting to our situation,” the gambler replied with a sickly sweet smile before turning her gaze directly toward Junko. “You experienced the lack of adaptation first ‘hand’, did you not?”

No one, especially Junko missed that subtle jab. The Fashionista clenched her still bandaged right hand, the eternal mark of her foolish attempt to defy the bear. Junko’s eyes narrowed at Celeste, who held up a hand in front of her lips, most likely to hide a victorious smirk. Just as it looked like a verbal war was going to break out, Makoto stepped between the two of them.

“F-For now, let’s all just head to bed. We’re all tired and a bit irritable because of what happened. I think we can worry about all that stuff in the morning, after we’ve gotten some sleep,” Makoto reasoned with a nervous smile, hoping they would listen to him. Luckily for him, it seemed that both Junko and Celeste were will to concede, averting their gazes from each other almost overdramatically.

Breathing a quick sigh, the lucky student then glanced at the staircase Byakuya and Jill had ascended. “As for Byakuya, I think Kyoko’s probably right. No, actually, I’m sure that both of them will be fine…at least until the morning.”

An awkward pause followed his suggestion and for a moment, the lucky student thought someone might refute him. However, he was surprised when most of them began nodding and murmuring in agreement.

“If Makoto thinks everything will be fine, then I’m sure it will be,” Hina said to everyone before glancing at Sakura.

“I agree,” the martial artist concurred with a firm nod. “Having him here has been quite the asset.”

“Indeed! Mr. Naegi hasn’t misled us so far, that much I can agree with,” Hifumi surprisingly added.

“Yeah, we’d have been dead in the water during the first trial if he hadn’t of torn through Leon’s lies,” Hiro chimed in before quickly realizing that both Leon and Sayaka were glaring angrily at him. “Uh…no offense?”

“…None taken,” Leon begrudgingly replied, his sarcastic tone indicating the opposite of his
“The point is: Makoto’s right.” Kyoko’s stoic but firm voice helped to dissolve the tension Hiro had unwittingly caused. “We need to rest. We can figure out the rest tomorrow, right Makoto?”

Almost blushing from all of their encouraging comments, Makoto nodded to her with a hopeful smile and said, “Right! Let’s head for bed everyone!”

Coming to that agreement, the students slowly began to head for the dorms. However, even as most of the students continued on, a pair of them remained behind.

Leon, who was carefully supporting Sayaka, remained rooted in place, staring at the closed door of the nurse’s office. A look of genuine concern crossed the pop idol’s face as she glanced at her companion. Her eyes couldn’t help but soften as she took in the immensely sad expression on Leon’s face…as if he was trying to muster the courage to knock on that door and speak with Mondo.

Sensing that he was getting bogged down with depressing thoughts, she shifted her weight slightly, getting his attention instantly. As he adjusted to better support her, his eyes met hers and she spoke softly to him.

“You can talk with him all you want to tomorrow. But for now, we should really be getting back to our rooms before it gets too late.”

A bewildered look crossed Leon’s face and he opened his mouth to reply but again, she beat him to it.

“I told you…I’m psychic,” she said with a cheerful smile. “Just kidding…intuition again.”

At first she thought her usual joke hadn’t worked, as the ballplayer just stared at her for a moment. However, he instantly let out a light chuckle and shook his head.

“You’re kinda scary sometimes…you know that?” he half-joked with her as they resumed their march toward the dorms.

“I do what I can,” she cheekily replied, glad that he didn’t seem as upset about the trial’s outcome as he’d been before. Not to mention, she kind of enjoyed startling people with that line, it was her default for making someone laugh and forget their troubles.

And, as much as it felt kind of wrong to admit…Leon really was too easy to read. He wore his intentions on his sleeve and subtlety wasn’t exactly something he’d cultivated. Makoto had been a bit of a challenge, considering his completely normal and somewhat bland personality but once she understood his thought process…it had made it simple enough to manipulate the both of them.

Her entire mood dampened as the weight of her own crimes revisited her. She was trying to do what Junko had suggested and just ‘do what she could’ for now. However, every single time she saw Makoto…saw the way he avoided her after she’d ridiculed him, she felt her chest tighten and she fought back tears. Many times during the trial, it had been difficult to maintain her composure, since she was positioned right next to him. Not to mention that she knew he would occasionally steal glances at her; whether out of concern or by coincidence, she couldn’t be sure.

And for the longest time, it had been similar whenever she saw Leon, except that she felt guilt more than anything. She’d almost killed him, twice! Once when she’d ambushed him, and then by writing
his name in blood.

She felt that she had to make it up to him, do something to set things right…but she had no idea how to even start. An apology would never be enough but that was all she could really offer. More than anything, she wanted to show him that she really appreciated everything he’d done for her. Not just helping her around and all that…but bandaging her when she had been bleeding all over Makoto’s bathroom.

Even if she’d never said it, she knew that it was because of him that she’d managed to survive that hellish ordeal that she’d forced them both into. If nothing else, he needed to know how grateful she was for him looking passed what had happened and trying to be friends with her again.

But again, that begged the question…what could she do to show her appreciation?

“Alright, this is your stop,” Leon abruptly told her, startling her back to awareness.

Sayaka’s eyes widened as she realized that they were already back in front of her door. She’d been so deep in thought that she hadn’t even noticed how far they’d gotten.

“Oh…right,” was all she could muster as they came to a halt just outside her room.

Leon graciously opened the door for her and helped her inside. Once she had made it all the way passed the door, a hand on the wall for support, she felt his grip loosen as he began to turn to leave. However, before he could take a single step, Sayaka found herself tightening her grip on him, preventing him from leaving.

Surprised that he was being held in place, Leon looked back to her with a raised brow and said, “Uh…everything okay? Did you need some food or something? Because I think that cafeteria is closed—”.

“No! No…I’m fine…I just…uh…” she fumbled with her words, feeling embarrassed that she’d held onto him without properly thinking it out. “You see, uh, Leon. The thing is…um…I kinda…w-would you like to come inside?”

Leon’s eyes suddenly widened, obviously surprised by such an abrupt and unexpected offer. Sayaka was even surprised at herself, not really sure why she thought that inviting him into her room would help things in the slightest. After all, the last time she’d done that, it hadn’t gone very well at all!

Just as she was about to put on her usual cheerful façade and tell him it was all a joke, the baseball star replied, “Uh…I don’t really know if that’s a good idea right now.”

Startled not only by his rejection but by how serious his tone was, Sayaka couldn’t stop herself from lowering her gaze. She really should have expected this, especially after all that she’d done. It was natural that he’d refuse. After all, he was only helping her around because the others had forced him to. He was probably just being kind to her out of guilt or pity…which didn’t make it hurt any less.

“I…I see,” she said slowly, still not meeting his firm gaze. “I should have figured…forget I said anything…”

“W-Well, it’s not like I don’t appreciate the offer!” Leon’s suddenly retorted, his voice sounding more flustered than before. Instantly, Sayaka’s face shot up and stared at him in shock, remaining silent as he continued. “Trust me, it’s…tempting. But…uh…I really don’t think that you’ve recovered enough to be doing…that.”
It took Sayaka less than an instant for her to understand exactly what he kept referring to.

“I didn’t mean THAT!” she practically shouted, her expression changing to a mixture of disgust and embarrassment. “I was just asking if you wanted to come in and…I don’t know! Talk?! Or Something?!"

Realization washed over Leon’s features and he breathed a sigh of relief before chuckling, “Oh! Right…I knew that. I was just…testing you?”

Even though he was laughing his usual cocky laugh, it was obvious by his reddened features that he was just as embarrassed as she was right now. Classifying this attempt at making it up to him as an utter failure, Sayaka finally released her grip on him and grabbed the door handle.

“Forget it. Have a good night.”

Without waiting for him to reply, she began closing the door, only for it to abruptly be halted by Leon’s foot. At first, she cringed, memories of him forcing his way into the bathroom flooding her mind. Fighting off the panic that arose, she took deep breaths to keep herself from losing her composure. Before she could muster the courage to say anything to him about making her feel that way, she heard his voice from beyond the door.

“Hold up a sec,” he called out to her, poking his head inside before continuing. “Seriously, is everything cool?”

“Yes, why wouldn’t it be?” she instantly and harshly replied, glaring at him for continuing this awkward and stressful situation.

“Well, you see…” he hesitated for a second before seemingly gathering his courage. “You got really quiet after we got past the nurse’s office. I mean, I don’t have very good intuition or anything, but I could tell that something was bothering you. So…uh…I just want to be sure that everything really okay…okay?”

All of a sudden, all the panicked feelings inside her vanished as Sayaka’s eyes widened in shock. She had figured that Leon was kind of dense…okay, she knew that he could be incredibly dense when it came to sensitive matters, but that’s why his sudden observation of her was so startling. Leon had actually noticed that something beyond just hunger or a missing handbook was bothering her…and he was honestly trying to find out what it was to help her with it. Perhaps because of that, she wanted to believe that he wasn’t only taking care of her out of pity or guilt for his own crimes. Maybe…just maybe…he really did want to become friends with her again. And even though she wasn’t quite sure if she was ready to let herself be someone’s friend again, obviously Leon was ready to give her another chance…she hoped.

“Uh, Earth to Sayaka? You in there?” Leon’s voice startled her back to the situation at hand, finally meeting his nervous gaze. “So…is everything okay? Or was there some, uh, other reason you invited me into your room?”

Again, she could tell he was at least trying to be sensitive and at the moment, it was the thought that counted. Even so, she really couldn’t find the right words to answer him. They stood in silence for a few more moments before she finally just went with her gut and decided to be straight with him. Opening the door wider, so that he didn’t have to peek inside, both of them straightened up as Sayaka nervously cleared her throat.

“I guess…I just don’t want to be alone tonight,” she answered plainly, to which the baseball star
raised an eyebrow at her. Concluding that his confused expression was the only response she’d get, she decided to continue, “I thought we could just hang out and…try to really get to know each other. You know…if you want?”

Sayaka felt more than a bit embarrassed about how the whole situation had progressed, but at least she’d posed the damn question! She only hoped that Leon didn’t find her offer creepy or anything, considering their history. However, the look of apprehension on Leon’s face told her everything. She could still read him like an open book, and it seemed clear that he’d already made up his mind.

Just when she was sure that he was going to refuse, Leon gave her an incredibly nervous smile and replied, “Do you promise not to try and stab me this time?”

Joyful surprise spread through Sayaka’s entire being and she was so thrilled by the prospect of him agreeing that she instantly replied, “Only if you don’t try to corner me in the bathroom…”

All at once, the reality of their jokes hit them and they simultaneously lowered their heads.

“Well…that was incredibly awkward,” Sayaka immediately commented.

“Yeah, I am so sorry about that,” Leon concurred, face-palming at the same time.

For nearly a minute they just stood there, determined not to meet each other’s gaze. However, very slowly, Sayaka found her eyes drifting back toward him and saw that he had done the same. As their eyes met, they both straightened up and silently stared at each other awkwardly. Finally, after what felt like ages, Leon scratched his head and nervously laughed.

“So…uh…about coming in and hanging out…I’m game if you are.”

From deep inside, Sayaka felt a pleasant warmth as he officially confirmed that he accepted her proposal. However, it obviously wasn’t quite as simple as she wished it had been.

Despite how happy she was that he’d accepted her offer, Sayaka knew that it couldn’t have been easy for him. She knew that he was struggling with his own guilt just as much as she was and that he had certain fears that others wouldn’t understand, like their shared terror every time Monokuma entered the room. However, she also knew that it had to take great courage for him to decide to trust her like this.

And although the circumstances were entirely different, memories from the last time he had come at her request still haunted both of them. For Leon to move past that and take her up on this offer…she hoped that it meant that he was at least willing to accept her heartfelt apology. And while she wasn’t looking to be forgiven, nor did she think she deserved it, she couldn’t deny that in the back of her mind…someday she hoped that he could find it in his heart to forgive her.

“Cool,” she finally answered him, her expression softening. “Come on in.”

For the first time since their tragedy together, Sayaka let a genuine smile spread out over her lips as she stepped to the side and gestured him in. With a nervous but equally true smile on his face, Leon stepped inside and she shut the door behind him.

For both of them, it was time for the healing to begin.
library. He wanted to take the file on Genocide Jack back to his room to comb through it again. Now that he’d actually met the serial killer himself, he wanted to compare how accurate the file was and update it himself, just in case.

On another note, he had to admit that even though he wasn’t entirely displeased with the outcome of the class trial, it still left a bad taste in his mouth. He honestly didn’t care if Mondo was executed for his crimes or not. As long as his safety was guaranteed, it didn’t really matter to him. And while Makoto had, once again, surprised him with his deductive skills during the trial, the Togami Heir now knew how to categorize the Lucky Student in terms of being a threat to him. That was a small but vital victory in and of itself.

Kyoko still remained an utter mystery but at the very least he didn’t consider her a threat to him as long as he avoided contact with her. And while her intelligence was certainly praiseworthy, the fact that she kept all personal information to herself put him at a disadvantage…and he hated that. Thus, he decided to spend the next few days trying to get as much information about her as possible, just in case she happened to be plotting something against him.

Then there was Junko Enoshima, who was becoming more and more of an enigma as the days passed. Her sudden transformation into a strong-willed woman wasn’t entirely out of the question, it just seemed odd that she went from pretending to be a valley girl to acting like a street-wise tough chick. And although it wasn’t unbelievable that a model’s true personality was completely different from the one they projected in public, this seemed almost like a separation from her previous self. To that end, Byakuya decided it was best to keep her at arm’s length and observe her from afar.

The three of them could pose a problem to him in the future…if he ever decided to play the game the way Monokuma had designed. However, since he planned to win the game by being the last man standing, rather than relying on murder and deception, if they truly didn’t have any drive to escape, all he needed to do was wait for someone more ambitious to deal with them for him.

“As long as I don’t rush into anything, then everything should work out according to—”. He abruptly came to a halt, ceasing to speak at the same time. With a hardened visage, he glanced over his shoulder. He could clearly see that he was being followed, and it was more than obvious who it was. Honestly, he’d been expecting this, which is why he’d come to the second floor in the first place. If it truly was who he thought it was, then he would have plenty of room to maneuver and counter whatever was thrown at him…quite literally in some respects.

“How long do you plan on following me around?” he said loudly, turning and staring at a nearby pillar.

“Oh, you knew I was here! I’d expect nothing less from Master!” a very particular voice replied from behind the pillar.

A moment later, Genocide Jill leapt out from her hiding place, flipping three times before sticking her landing and striking a seductive pose, a pair of Genoscissors in each hand. Although he shouldn’t have been surprised that Toko hadn’t resurfaced yet, Byakuya had to admit that he hadn’t expected the serial killer to be searching for him. He’d expected her to return to her room and hide away after being spotlighted during the trial. Obviously he underestimated her tenacity.

Beginning to regret not going straight back to his room, Byakuya stared down his nose at her, prepared to defend himself as he answered, “I can smell your foul stench from here. Has the concept of a bath never occurred in that tiny speck of gray matter you call a brain?”

“Oh, I would love to but I’m afraid I need someone wash my back for me. Care to fill the position?”
she said, flicking her long tongue seductively in his direction.

Suppressing the urge to vomit, the Togami Heir managed to maintain composure as he answered, “I’d sooner impale myself on your scissors than subject myself to that level of torture.”

“Oh really? That can be arranged if you want,” Jill lustfully replied, her tongue running the length of one of her scissors. Instantly, Byakuya regretting his choice of words and felt sweat trickle down his back before the serial killer abruptly threw her head back and cackled. “Kyahahaha! Oh yeah, that’s the stuff! I love that expression, especially from you, Master! You were honestly sweating bullets there for a sec, weren’t you?”

As she continued to cackle in his direction, Byakuya realized she was just toying with him. Feeling like he’d miraculously dodged a bullet, he replied, “Don’t speak to me as if we’re equals. And would you cease with this ‘Master’ business, it’s grating on my nerves.”

“No can do, Master!” she openly chided him, dancing around and snipping her scissors at the same time. “This is payback for the dick-move you pulled during that court case!”

For the first time since he’d begun speaking with her, genuine confusion warped Byakuya’s features. Using his better judgment, he decided that, for the moment, it was better to remain silent rather than provoke the wrath of the woman with an exceptionally high kill count. However, when she noticed his perplexed expression, the serial killer tilted her head to the side and blinked rapidly at him.

“Oh, did you think I’d forgotten all about how I was rudely forced into the spotlight to make yourself look innocent?” she posed, her tongue wriggling creepily as she spoke. “I may not understand the circumstances of exactly why you did that, but at the very least, I know that I’m not too pleased with it.”

At the mention of not knowing why he’d revealed her to everyone, Byakuya felt a different kind of confusion take hold of him. And this time, he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “How can you not understand why I altered the crime scene? It should be obvious.”

Scoffing, Genocide Jill replied, “Well, duh! I know it was to make it look like my handiwork but… why would you do that? I mean, what’s the point of trying to make it seem like it was me? What do you get out of it? Unless you were trying to earn my eternal adoration for showing such devotion to my methods?”

She winked at him but he barely noticed, too busy trying to comprehend what he’d just learned. Her words left him nothing short of perplexed…as if she didn’t comprehend the situation they were in.

“But how can that be? If she and Toko are the same person…shouldn’t they share each other’s knowledge?”

“Hey, don’t get me wrong!” Jill continued as the Togami Heir began to piece things together. “I love a man who’s as ruthless and cruel as I am. It gets my panties a sopping but if you wanted to see me you could have just—”.

“Wait a moment,” Byakuya interrupted her tirade. “Do you…understand the position that…we’ve found ourselves in?”

Now it was Genocide Jill’s turn to look perplexed, scratching her head with one of her scissors. “We’re trapped in the school with no way out. What else is there to understand?”

Byakuya groaned at her answer, mainly because it didn’t make sense…but at the same time it did. She obviously knew of their imprisonment and since she hadn’t mentioned being surprised by that,
he concluded that she must also know about the class trial system. But if that were the case…why
did she ask for his reason as to framing her? It was true that he didn’t plan on actually letting her take
the fall for Mondo, since that would result in his own execution, but she had no way of knowing
that.

The only logical conclusion he could come to was a bit too frightening for him to accept.

As much as he hated to admit it, under all of her vulgarity and crass behavior, Genocide Jill was
incredibly intelligent and gifted. She wouldn’t have been able to pull off so many murders if she
wasn’t that talented. That being said, it stood to reason that she was simply trying to understand why
he’d desired to single her out when he was, in fact, innocent. As far as she knew, he had no true
reason to frame her, making everyone vote for her would kill both of them. If that was her line of
thinking, then her comment about wanting to know why he’d take such a risk against his own life
was very understandable.

“I see, it all makes sense now,” he said to himself, to which Jill gave him a sideways glance. A
confident smirk appeared on his face as he continued, “You want to know why I tried to pin the
crime on you, knowing that it could result in my death if I made a mistake. Isn’t that right?”

Byakuya’s confident visage suddenly shattered when, instead of surprise, he saw Genocide Jill
grinning at him maliciously while twirling her scissors in her hands.

“Actually, what I wanted to know is…” she began walking toward him very slowly, spinning her
scissors on her fingers faster and faster as she approached. “…why did you think that exposing a
serial killer in front of everyone wouldn’t make you a target?”

Byakuya’s eyes widened and he uncharacteristically gasped as he felt waves of murderous intentions
radiation from her…and aimed directly at him. This had been a fatal miscalculation, one that had left
him utterly powerless.

With each step she took toward him, a new level of fear began forming in the Togami Heir’s mind.
Panic unlike anything he’d ever experience before began settling into his mind. His entire body froze
and his mind locked up, keeping him rooted in place through sheer terror. And in that instant, the
prestigious Byakuya Togami actually felt that his life was truly in danger. The way Genocide Jill
stared at him, as if she’d follow him to hell and back just to add him to her trophies, it sent chills
down his spine and made bile rise up in his throat.

And for the very first time in all his life…he truly regretted his actions toward another human being.

Suddenly, she stopped spinning her scissors and grasped them tightly in both hands, coming to a halt
only a stone’s throw away from where Byakuya stood. Meeting his gaze, which he tried to keep
even despite his growing panic, Genocide Jill’s grin widened to almost maniacal levels. Just when he
figured she was about to pounce, she pointed both scissors at him and laughed heartily.

“Good thing you were already my target from the very moment I met you! The target of my loooove
that is! Kyahahahahahahaha! Eyahahahahaha!”

Byakuya audibly gasped as she professed her love for him, having not expected to hear such a thing
from her at all. In fact, it seemed more like a tactic to get him to lower his guard. However, since he
was still unable to force his body to move, he suspected that her words might actually be genuine…
as horrifying as that notion was.

“W-What are you saying?!?” he suddenly found the will to speak, unable to keep himself from
shouting. “Don’t spout such absurd notions at me! You’re nothing but a merciless killer! What
reason is there for me to think that you don’t treat every one of your victims the same way?!”

As soon as he said that, he mentally cursed, realizing how, given her romantic nature, his words could be misunderstood. And unfortunately, judging by the now overjoyed expression Genocide Jill was exuding, it seemed that it was too late to rephrase that.

“Oh Master! Hearing such poetic words from you makes me drool…with both my upper and lower mouths!” she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around herself and licking her lips with her extra long tongue. Byakuya visibly cringed but she didn’t seem to notice as she continued, “And if you must know, I don’t usually talk with my victims. I prefer them to just be screaming…”

Gritting his teeth, Byakuya wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take. “If you’re going to kill me, then I’d prefer that you—”

“Out of the question!! I can’t let you die! Not yet away!” she fervently insisted, interrupting him as she continued to tremble from euphoria. “I mean, yeah, normally I would have penetrated you deeply with my scissors by now! But it’s different with you, Master! Until now, every time I got the hots for a guy…I had to kill him! I’m not sure exactly why, but just like the guy who almost died climbing Mt. Everest, I just knew that I had to do it! Reasons were irrelevant! But you…you, Master Byakuya! You’re the first pretty boy that I fell in love with that I didn’t want to kill! Even now, after you tried to throw me to the wolves, I can’t help but feel irresistibly attracted to you and all that you are! Like a single cherry-blossom floating in cup of sake, I eagerly await for your lips to consume me!”

Byakuya’s eyes widened in absolute terror as he began to understand his position. He had assumed that Toko, or Genocide Jill rather, would be furious with his attempt at framing her and thus would avoid him. And with everyone on high alert because of her presence, he thought he might finally be free of her incessant stalking. He never expected her to have such a sadomasochistic personality that she would actually still be attracted to him!

Even if she was being truthful and she didn’t plan to actually kill him, having her constantly following him around wouldn’t be any less difficult to deal with…especially since he was now her primary target in more ways than he had ever wanted! It seemed that his plan to expose her had backfired and now he was stuck with her…possibly until his dying day! And the worst part was…it was his own fault!

“This is not going at all how I planned…” he found himself thinking as he desperately tried to think of a way out. Suddenly, he was struck by inspiration.

“Are you sure that your other half is as devoted to me as you are?” he harshly questioned, a cruel grin spreading over his lips. “As I recall, she told me that she hated me just before you awoke during the trial.”

Finally feeling confident, Byakuya was certain that this would at least help to deter Genocide Jill’s feelings. However, as if to mock him, Jill started cackling once again.

“Eyahahaha! You really don’t get split personalities, do you?” she chided as she continued to cackle. “As much as I hate to admit it, Miss Morose and I are technically the same person. We share the same feelings and intentions. And I can guarantee you that if I’m still balls deep in love with you, then so is she! My darling, Byakuya Togami!”

If Byakuya wasn’t shocked before, he was practically horrified now!

“Are you saying that even after everything that I did during the trial, Toko is still ridiculously infatuated, with me?!” Byakuya demanded, still not completely believing the serial killer.
Raising an eyebrow at him and tilting her head, Jill replied, “Why wouldn’t she be? We love that absolutely cold indifference you have about you! The more you berate us, the more we know that you can’t get us out of your head! And the more you think about us, sooner or later we know that you’ll come to understand and return our feelings…no matter how long our passion might have to go unrequited before a seed of love blossoms within that dark and dreary soul of yours…”

Byakuya clenched his fists and gritted his teeth at the hopelessly romantic words Jill was spouting, now knowing that Toko certainly felt the same. And with that, it seemed that the illustrious Togami Heir…was put into check. However, it wasn’t quite checkmate just yet.

“If they’re both so dedicated to me…then I could certainly use that to my advantage. However, I will need to be extremely careful from here on out. If I outright refuse their feelings…who knows what they might—no, I know exactly what will happen to me.”

Images of Genocide Jill’s victims flashed through his mind and he was only barely able to force them away, not wanting his mind to envision that outcome any further. Not to mention that, now that his life was apparently out of danger, exhaustion was beginning to set in. He just wanted to get the file and get back to his room as soon as possible. But to do that, he needed to make sure that he wouldn’t be attacked once he turned his back.

“If that’s all you want, then I need to be going. It’s getting late and I’ve wasted enough time dealing with filth like you,” he brazenly said, regaining some of his authoritative nature.

Fortunately, just as he had hoped, Genocide Jill wasn’t upset with him in the slightest. Instead, her eyes were beaming and a huge open mouth smile clung to her face, her tongue dangling lower than her chin.

“Oh! Master’s talking down to me again! I’ve missed it so much! Damn you for taking up so much of his time, Miss Morose!” the serial killer excitedly shouted, snipping the air with her scissors. “But I don’t have to worry about her right now! It’s just you and me, Master Byakuya! Don’t hold back, Master! Scream at me, call me worthless, spit in my mouth!”

Grimacing, Byakuya scoffed and averted his gaze.

“I think I’ll pass. And for your information, I do not appreciate being followed. It gets on my nerves,” he tried to subtly hint. Unfortunately, Jill seemed to take the message in an entirely different direction.

“Well then, lucky for you I’m not following you…I’m stalking you! They’re very different!” she insisted, snipping the air with her scissors.

“For some reason, I highly doubt that…” Byakuya irritatedly voiced before bravely turning his back on her. After holding his breath for a moment, the Togami Heir let out a relieved sigh when she didn’t immediately stab him in the back, which hopefully meant that she was as dedicated to him as she’d insisted she was. Confident his extremely influential existence was no longer in jeopardy, he continued to ask, “Then, pray tell, what is the difference?”

“Well,” she answered, startling him as she almost seemed to materialize at his side. “I have very different intentions compared to following or stalking a beautiful young man. As long as it’s harmless stalking, then whoever I’m after is safe for another night…cause I just wanna stare at their beauty! But if I’m following someone, I have much more interesting intensions…like relieving all kinds of tensions, if you know what I mean! Kyahahahahaha!”

Getting the gist of what she was saying, Byakuya resumed walking toward the library and said, “So
then, you’re saying that as long as you’re stalking me, I have nothing to fear?”

“EYUP!” she exclaimed, trotting behind him with an overly pleasant smile plastered on her lips, her tongue hanging out from between her teeth. “So, if you don’t mind! I’ll get back to it! Continue onward, Master!”

Without another word, Genocide Jill spun around and dashed back behind the pillar she’d originally been hiding behind, peeking her head out and staring at him while snipping her scissors.

Byakuya had never imagined he’d be relieved that someone was stalking him in all his life. However, that didn’t mean that he could trust all that she’d told him. At the very least, it seemed that, despite his obvious dislike of her, she was still completely infatuated with him, which he could use to his advantage…if he lived long enough to make use of.

Even so, if he could somehow manage to tame her…his survival from this game would be assured! The only issue was, he had absolutely no idea how to comprehend such a mad woman…especially since she was licking her scissors while staring at him!

“I can only hope I manage to survive this…arrangement,” he somberly thought as he had to endure her ‘endearing’ gaze as he headed for the library.

Neither of them noticed the hallway security camera staring at them throughout the entire exchange.

Up in the surveillance room, Junko sat at her desk, completely slack-jawed at the scene she’d just witnessed. Picking her jaw up off the floor, she folded her legs and scowled.

“This…is unexpected,” she said to herself, glaring intensely at the screen.

Bored of her usual persona, she abruptly switched over to her sexy teacher appearance, complete with glasses and ponytail. “Indeed, it would seem we underestimated the memory wipe, as it seems that Genocide Jack might have retained her memories. However, without confirmation, this is merely speculation and further observation will be required.”

Instantly switching her getup back to usual, she then adjusted her tone to fit her Kawaii persona. “But if that’s true that scissor-scissor-cut-cut-bitch remembers, then we needs to be extra careful and see if we is able to inspire her demise.”

Without warning, Junko reverted back to her usual self and continued, “Unless our favorite serial killer, and yes we have other serial killers we follow, decides to penetrate Byakuya before he gets back to his room!”

With that reasoning, Junko went back to her monitor without a moment’s hesitation.

Silently, she watched as Byakuya safely traveled from the library down to the first floor, and then back to his room, which he most likely locked immediately, without Jill so much as pointing her scissors at him! And then, rather than camp outside his door like a proper stalker, Jill wandered around the hallway until she found Toko’s room and went inside, presumably for the rest of the evening.

“Well…I hate her now. I want her to be flattened by a steamroller…with Byakuya just out of reach…in a desert…fuck, I don’t know anymore.”
As much as she would like to deny it, exhaustion was just as quickly catching up with her as it was her classmates. However, she knew that the night was far from over. Putting her feet up onto the desk in front of her, she reached down into the mini-fridge she’d brought up to the surveillance room. With a tired sigh, she pulled out a can of an off-brand energy drink…because she wanted the despair of not supporting R** Bull and giving her money to a crappy energy drink company…even though the World’s Most Despairing Incident had made this choice worthless, another kind of despair she enjoyed.

Chugging down the foul tasting liquid, she cringed at the horribly taste, the despair of having to drink something so unhealthy giving her even more energy than the drink ever could have.

“I can’t just let things stand the way they are now,” she continued to talk to herself as she crushed the empty can and tossed it directly into the distant garbage can. “Big Sis Muku did a big no-no during the trial and now everyone’s got a slight advantage against me. That’s unfair, and if I’m anything, I’m unfairly fair to my captives.”

Swinging her legs over and off the desk, she pushed herself out of her chair and up to her feet, heading for the Monokuma control room.

“One way or another…there’ll be blood tonight!”

“Fuck, I’m tired…”

Mukuro groaned as she closed the door to her room and locked it, resting her head against it and closing her eyes as she breathed. Her little altercation with Celeste had worn her out even more than it should have because it was so late. Prying herself away from the door, she glanced up at her clock and let out a deep sigh.

It was already passed Midnight and she wasn’t in the mood for anything other than sleep.

“Well, we survived somehow…” Mukuro murmured to herself as she pulled the pink wig from her head and replaced it on her wig form. “And with Mondo guarding Chihiro…I should be able to rest, at least for tonight…”

Her black hair was matted with sweat and she rubbed her head to try and smooth it all out but quickly gave up as exhaustion caught up with her. Plopping down on her bed, she would have been content to just fall asleep right there…if a certain mechanical voice hadn’t whispered in her ear.

“…And here, we observe the fashion model body-double in her natural habitat.”

Instantly, the soldier’s eyes snapped open and she leapt forward off her bed, spun around and pulled her knife from beneath her shirt. She assumed a defensive position as her eyes locked onto Monokuma, who was looking at her through a pair of binoculars.

“…Crikey! I’ve been spotted!” Monokuma chided with an Australian accent.

Irritated from not only the trial, but lack of sleep as well, Mukuro gritted her teeth as she shouted, “Get out! I’ve had enough of you for one night!”

She wasn’t foolish enough to lower her guard, considering her opponent was her very cunning sister. Mukuro knew that if she was getting a visit from Monokuma at this hour, when Junko would normally be asleep herself, then it had to vital. To her or her sister, she couldn’t say yet. So, as she
continued to glare menacingly at the demented bear, she began to mentally prepare for the worst.

To her surprise, Monokuma tossed away the binoculars fairly quickly and instead lowered its head, as if to pout.

“Aww…that’s not nice. I was just foolin’! I figured we could let bygones be bygones and just forgive each other. I mean, I’ve already forgiven you for pulling such a cheap trick during the trial!”

Involuntarily, Mukuro winced as she recalled taking that risk. Suggesting that the Mastermind was a student, like them, was a huge gamble. However, she knew that if she was going to help her classmates survive, she would need to pass along as much information as discretely as she could manage. And obviously, since she hadn’t been punished, it seemed that Junko didn’t consider her little ‘suggestion’ a violation of revealing her identity.

However, Mukuro had been prepared for the worst when she’d made the revelation clear to her classmates. And while she hadn’t expected it to be that same night, it seemed that her little ‘chat’ with her sister was happening sooner than she would have liked.

“Is that so? How kind of you…” the soldier falsely praised, readjusting her grip on her knife.

“I thought so too! And just to show that there are no hard feelings! I’ll let you in on a little secret!” Monokuma cheered, waving its arms in the air.

Still on her guard, Mukuro knew that this would somehow connect back to the trial. After all, her sister had warned her before the trial had begun that something was going to be different. However, the trial seemed pretty average to her, even though it was her first. What then, could be so important that her sister would deny herself her beauty rest to convey?

She didn’t have to wait long before Monokuma placed its hands on its hips and said, “I gotta say, I’m proud of all of my students. You in particular. You figured out who attacked Chihiro, despite being a norm for this trial. And thanks to that, Mondo didn’t end up stuck here all alone!”

Mukuro raised an eyebrow at that last part. “‘End up here alone’? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

A deep sigh escaped Monokuma as the bear face-pawed. “You really don’t get it yet! It’s spelled out clearly in the rules…specifically rule number 6.”

Having memorized the rules long before they were introduced to everyone else, Mukuro mentally began going through all of them.

“Rules 6…Rule 6…If I remember right, it was that only a ‘blackened’ would be allowed to graduate —!”

An abrupt gasp escaped Mukuro as her mind began to piece everything together, to which Monokuma smirked menacingly. The soldier’s defensive position slacked a bit as she realized the truth depth of the new rules that her sister had introduced.

“Rule 6…only a ‘blackened’ can graduate,” she practically recited, saying it out loud to make herself understand the gravity of the situation. “To become a blackened…you have to kill a classmate. But since Mondo didn’t actually kill Chihiro…then even if he tricked us, and we’d all been executed…there would have been no one left to kill for him to become a blackened! And he would have—!”

“—Been trapped here forever? Yup!” Monokuma finished for her, pushing off her bed and waddling around her, heading toward the door. “So, you were all really lucky that Trust Fund fessed up about
not being the assailant. That and Mondo confessing way earlier than I expected!"

As much as she hated to admit it, Mukuro knew the bear was right. If they hadn’t of found out that Mondo was the attacker, then a fate far worse than death would have awaited the biker. If they had all been…executed, then Mondo wouldn’t have been allowed to leave, because he wasn’t a blackened. Instead, he would have been forced to stay within the school, completely alone, the guilt from his own actions tormenting him for the rest of his days…or until Junko snuck up behind him and knifed him in the back—

“Oh God…I get it now.”

This had been Junko’s plan all along…she wanted only one student left standing at the end. So that, when they least expected it, she would be able to kill them, becoming a blackened in the process and seizing victory for herself in this twisted game! It’s why she added the ‘bullying’ rules and ‘bullying’ trial in the first place! To give her a chance to win the game by following her own rules!

This changed everything Mukuro knew about the game and how to proceed. With those new additions, it was going to be a lot harder to keep all of her classmates alive! Especially when some of them were as cruel and ruthless as Byakuya had proven himself to be! And if things continued to escalate at this pace, the soldier wondered how long she was going to be able to keep a real corpse from popping up.

Amidst her revelation, Monokuma was already preparing to leave, having been successful in instilling a new form of despair in Mukuro.

“Oh, and just to make this clear, that information is for your ears only,” Monokuma jeered as it reached the door and reached up to grasp the handle. “If you let that slip and mention it, in any way, I’ll consider it a violation of our agreement and have you executed on the spot! So, be a dear and learn to keep your trap shut!”

Again, Mukuro couldn’t stop herself from gasping as the bear made its demands. “Wait! You can’t—!”

She tried to protest but it was too late, Monokuma slammed her door shut, leaving her alone with the despair this new information had visited upon her. A bit shell-shocked by this news, she stumbled backward onto her bed and sat down, staring at the floor in disbelief.

“I can’t warn them. I can’t even hint at it! I should have kept my mouth shut during the fucking trial! If I had, then…”

Her words trailed off as she thought about everything that she’d done. Particularly, she recalled the hopeful looks her classmates had given her after her revelation during the trial…especially the bright smile Makoto had given her.

Finding her resolve in that memory, she slapped her face with both hands and said, “No…I did what I had to. And if this is my punishment for it, I’ll just have to find a different way to help everyone.”

The only question was, what should she do now?

Standing guard in the nurse’s office was out of the question, after Monokuma had forbidden anyone but Mondo and Chihiro inside. Of course, that also meant that, if someone else managed to sneak inside and kill Chihiro under Mondo’s watch, and they didn’t catch them, another ‘bullying’ class trial could be held. Not only that, Mondo would be executed for not protecting Chihiro, which would severely dampen moral. It would be the first, official execution and Mukuro knew that, once
someone’s blood was truly shed in this place, there would be no way to stop the carnage that would
ensure.

Shaking her head, Mukuro reassured herself, “No! I won’t let that happen! Junko never said that we
couldn’t keep watch outside of the nurse’s office!”

Standing up and marching over to her closet and throwing open the door, she sifted through the
layers of designer clothing until she found an old outfit from her days in Fenrir. With a heavy sigh,
she pulled it out and steeled herself for the task ahead.

“…Fuck. Guess I’m not getting any sleep tonight!”

Hiro was feeling more than confident as he laid out the tarot cards on his table.

“Alright! Time for another prediction!”

Despite the late hour, the Ultimate Clairvoyant felt it necessary to try and gaze into the future. If he
was lucky, and his thirty percent accuracy rate just happened to fall in line with this prediction, then it
would be worth staying up another few minutes…unless he got a foul omen from this reading, then
he really should have gone straight to bed!

In either case, Hiro decided to try his luck and do his best to get a positive prediction for the future.
Since losing his crystal ball the other day, he had decided that an alternate form of fortune telling
would do. He wasn’t sure what formation to use; the star or the pentagon were good choices but he
wanted a more personal reading so he chose to use a formation he’d come up with himself.

Being the Ultimate Clairvoyant, he found ways around the stubborn traditions of ‘average’ fortune-
telling. One of which was creating his own style of telling fortunes, such as arranging the tarot cards
in the shape of a leaf…for good luck?

Placing each card in the appropriate spot, he began flipping them over systematically, the cheeky
smile on his face widening more and more with each turn of a card. Finally, as he finished
overturning the last card, he let out a triumphant cheer and raised his hands high.

“I knew it! I was right all along!” he assured himself before checking over the cards one more time,
to be certain of his prediction.

“According to this, a life-changing event just might happen tomorrow! And with it, all shall be made
clear about what we should be doing while trapped here. That means…tomorrow’s the day that we
finally find a way out of this crazy place! I’m at least 30% certain of it!”

Hiro let out a relieved laugh as he began picking up his tarot deck. Just as he was about to pick up
the last card, The Tower in the reverse position, a symbol of avoiding disaster, he glanced up at the
clock and his eyes widened. It was already past 1AM, and he desperately needed his shut-eye.

“Well, that should do it for me! Gotta get my beauty rest, after all! Need to be ready for all that
fortune that’ll befall us tomorrow!” he said, deciding to put away his tarot cards later.

He stretched his hands high up above his head and yawned loudly, before getting up from the table.
As he did, Hiro bumped the table as he reached over and turned off his light before stumbling his
way over to his bed. In the pitch blackness of the room, he was unable to see the last tarot card slip
from the edge of the table, floating down to the floor. As it hit, it miraculously landed face up.
Again, it was The Tower. Only this time, the card was upright; heralding a coming disaster.

…

…

…

Chapter 2: END

Two more students have lost the will to kill:

-Mondo Owada-
-Chihiro Fujisaki-

10 students ‘remain’

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Thus we have reached the end of Chapter 2! Heading into Chapter 3, there will be a lot of new developments because five people who should be dead will now be there. Because of this, as I mentioned before, I will be on a short break to get everything sorted out and write ahead a little bit. Trust me, it’ll be worth it! ;)

Also, a lot of you have been asking about the revealing of everyone’s secrets and what Monokuma will do with that motive. Rest assured, that time will come. However, I won’t say exactly how it will come about. It’s going to be early on in Chapter 3 but not immediately, so please bear with me. I think you’ll all enjoy it!

Now, I know this chapter was slightly shorter than the last two but I hope I filled it with a lot of mind numbing images and thoughtful thinking references for everyone! On that note, a big thanks goes to my beta, Dixxy Mouri. She’s been with me every step of the way and I’m glad she’ll be helping me with the next Chapter…because it will be hard to get done!

And with that, I must bid you all adieu for now. I will be back in about four weeks (twice my usual uploading time), and I know that you’re all going to love what’s coming next! Until then, thank you all for your amazing support, I truly appreciate everyone who leaves a review or visits my story! Thank you all again and keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Ch 3 Act 1

Chapter Summary

Unable to sleep, Sakura decides to train, only to be interrupted by an unexpected visitor. Meanwhile, Mukuro patrols the halls for any threats on Mondo and Chihiro’s lives. Later, Hina decides to get a midnight snack, only to find a certain programmer's head stuffed into a locker.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite the late hour, Sakura felt completely awake. Because of that, she felt the need to train and work off her extra energy. She had set up the four wooden posts she’d brought to school with her, and was in the process of weaving between and systematically striking them.

As she trained, her mind began to wander.

The trial had left her emotionally drained but physically wired. Her mind wouldn’t stop racing about how Mondo was the only person allowed to watch over Chihiro. She would have gladly accepted that role but had no qualms about the biker taking responsibility for his actions in this way. Nevertheless, she couldn’t help but feel that the Mastermind had some kind of scheme planned. And, of course, that brought feelings of guilt over being a spy for the Mastermind.

Sakura had regretted making that deal from the moment it had occurred, but knew that there was nothing she could do to change it. And it was far too late to renege on the arrangement, considering she’d already reported a great deal of information to the Mastermind. Not only that, having seen how merciless almost half of her classmates were, she knew that she would face dire consequences should she reveal her secret to them. However, it wasn’t herself she was worried for…but Hina.

A small smile appeared on her lips as she thought about how truly fortunate she was to have found a friend like Hina in this place. Since the very first day, the swimmer hadn’t been afraid to approach and become friendly with her, something that Sakura had been awed about. Most people saw her large stature and avoided her at all costs, but Hina was different. She had complimented how strong the martial artist was and had been fascinated by her training regimen.

Over the course of their imprisonment, Sakura had come to value Hina as her most trusted friend…and it was because of that that she couldn’t let the others discover her secret. Sakura feared that, rather than attacking her for the betrayal, they would turn to abusing Hina instead. However, if she stayed as the Mastermind’s pawn for much longer…she may be forced to do something she would forever regret.

“If only there were a way to be free of the Mastermind’s influence…” she pondered as she continued rotating between the wooden posts, her fists aching from the intense workout.

Deciding to focus on her training to dull the agonizing feelings of betrayal, Sakura pushed her body harder rather than backing down. Sweat trickled down her neck as she increased her speed and just as she was about to deliver a practice kick, a disturbing voice called out to her.
“Yeah! Teach that fallen tree whose boss!”

All at once, Sakura ceased practice and spun her body around toward the voice, her stance already defensive. Gritting her teeth, she seethed, “And just what do you think you’re doing here?”

Glaring over toward her bed, her rage-filled eyes focused on none other than Monokuma, who was currently waving a flag that said “FIGHT” high above its head. As Sakura’s harsh words reached it, the bear stopped the flag waving and slanted its head.

“I was just admiring your impressive footwork,” Monokuma said almost gleefully. “I mean, to outmaneuver a stationary object takes kindergarten level speed! You make it look so effortless! You’re just lucky that piece of dead wood can’t fight back—”.

“Do you need something?” a frustrated Sakura seethed, her body still in a defensive stance. “If not, then I suggest you be on your way. I am in no mood to speak with you this evening and I have no new information for you.”

Despite her proclamation, Sakura knew that the bear would not back down so easily. After all, if Monokuma had come to visit her in secret like this, then it meant the bear had a task it wanted her to complete.

“Why, my dear Sakura! I never expected such harsh treatment from you!” the bear replied with feigned surprise. “And after I went to all this trouble to get in here without you noticing…so that I could surprise you on our anniversary!”

“Anniversary of what?” Sakura asked, already knowing the answer.

With a malicious smile, Monokuma spun in a circle and jeered, “Today is the anniversary of the day we struck an accord and became partners in crime—”.

“No, it’s not.”

Monokuma’s spinning abruptly stopped, facing the martial artist directly. “Come again?”

Clearing her throat, Sakura repeated, “No, it is not our…anniversary. Those are annual.”

Clearly a bit embarrassed, the bear scratched its head and replied, “Oh…well…uh…oh! Then it’s our one week anniversa—”.

“It hasn’t been a week since our arrangement was set.”

“No, it feels a lot longer than that…are you sure it hasn’t been—?”

“I have been counting the days. And it has been five days since I was forced to become your pawn,” Sakura answered sternly, her eyes flashing with rage toward her captor.

Rather than continue the idiocy it had been displaying, Monokuma’s attitude grew abruptly stern as it replied, “Oh come now, is that any way to speak to your boss? I may have to fire you if you keep this up, young lady.”

As humiliating as it was, Sakura couldn’t help but flinch at Monokuma’s words. The bear held the fate of her family’s dojo in its claws, and even though it pained her, the martial artist knew there was no defying the Mastermind.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Sakura finally relaxed her muscles and stood up straight, being sure
to keep her guard up regardless. Glaring down at the bear, she said, “I assume you have come to me for a reason? Or did you simply wish to taunt me?”

“Hmm, a little from column ‘A’, a little from column ‘B’,” Monokuma snidely answered before getting serious. “More than that though, I actually had a proposition for you. And this time, I think you might be inclined to accept it.”

Something about the way Monokuma said that sent chills down Sakura’s spine, but she was curious nonetheless and couldn’t stop herself from asking, “What kind of proposition?”

Its menacing grin widening, Monokuma plainly answered, “What would you say if I told you that, if you do this one little job for me, I’d release you from my services…for the rest of the game.”

Sakura’s eyes widened and she almost took the bait, but stopped herself at the last moment. She knew it was too good to be true, everything involving that bear was. But even so…if it meant she would no longer have to be a slave to the Mastermind…it was at least worth hearing.

“What exactly would I have to do?” she asked, instantly regretting it when Monokuma’s red eye flashed.

“There’s a certain someone I want you to put to sleep…permanently.”

Sakura’s eyes widened as she said, “You don’t mean—”.

“Here’s the deal,” Monokuma cut her off, turning its back as it spoke. “If you hold up your end of the bargain, like I’d originally asked you to do, then you can have your family’s dojo back. And since snuffing out Lamp Chop automatically triggers Mondo’s execution instead of a class trial for you…I suggest you go for it before someone else beats you to the punch!”

Even before Monokuma had proposed it, Sakura was aware of that option. It was the reason she’d been unable to sleep. As horrifying as it was to consider, the martial artist had figured that it might come down to this. Ever since Monokuma announced that whoever killed Chihiro wouldn’t be punished, with Mondo having to be executed for it, Sakura had been certain that the bear would come here sooner or later.

“It’s a win/win really,” Monokuma continued, not giving her time to respond. “You get your dojo back and don’t have to be my indentured servant anymore, and I finally get an execution! Everyone wins!”

“…Except for Chihiro and Mondo.”

Sakura’s stern opposition actually seemed to startle the bear, as it looked back to her with a hint of confusion on its face.

“Oh, please! They dug their own graves! Why should we have to continue to suffer because of their mistakes?!” the bear countered, obviously trying to change her mind.

With a huff, Sakura replied, “I don’t believe that my suffering is as great as theirs. If anything…my worries are petty compared to—”.

“Oh, so you’re calling the ancient Ogami Dojo petty now, huh?” Monokuma interrupted, glancing over its shoulder at her. “If that’s the case, why did you volunteer to become my mole? Hmm?”

Sakura gritted her teeth and clenched her fists in order to keep herself from charging the bear. She knew better than anyone how despicable her actions were, and that the Mastermind was merely
trying to unnerve her. Unfortunately, it was working.

“Is this an official request? Or merely a suggestion?” she managed to ask, holding in her rage.

“Hmm…let me think about that,” Monokuma said, placing a paw on its chin and tilting its head in thought.

For nearly an entire minute, silence filled the room, safe for the frazzled breaths that Sakura inhaled while trying to calm herself.

Suddenly, the bear leapt off the bed and said, “Just a suggestion, I suppose. After all, if I order you to do it…then you have an excuse for why it wouldn’t be your fault. I’d rather you make the decision for yourself this time. I don’t want to waste the one time I’ll have you kill someone on something as petty as those two.”

Sakura flinched as her own words were thrown back at her. However, she couldn’t help but feel relieved that she hadn’t been ordered to kill her classmates. But that didn’t stop the guilt she felt for putting herself into this situation to begin with.

Without another word, Monokuma began waddling toward the door, relief flooding Sakura with the bear’s imminent departure. However, that feeling was stunted when Monokuma opened the door, glanced back and finished, “By the way, I may have forgotten to mention this but…there is a sixteenth student roaming the halls. And they won’t be playing by the conventional rules!”

As that revelation came down upon Sakura, the demented bear slammed her door, leaving the stunned martial artist with an ever growing feeling of despair.

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Like a shadow in the night, a pitch-black figure dashed down the darkened halls of the first floor. That figure, clad in a skin-tight black jumpsuit, was the Ultimate Soldier – Mukuro Ikusaba.

The bright neon colored lights that illuminated the hallway were an annoyance, and made traveling stealthfully cumbersome, but that was to be expected, considering that they remained on at all times of the day, even during the designated Nighttime. However, this was not Mukuro’s first sortie, and with her exceptional talents at both covert and offensive maneuvering, she didn’t break a sweat as she continued to patrol the halls.

After Monokuma’s, or rather her sister’s, warning following the trial, the soldier knew that she needed to step up her defensive measures. Honestly, she had no idea why her sister had included the form-fitting, black as night jumpsuit among the many designer blouses and skirts, especially considering it was originally something Mukuro had worn in Fenrir. She may have expected an expensive looking jumpsuit, considering her sister’s Fashionista tendencies, but this was the exact same one that Mukuro had brought back from the battlefield when she’d enrolled in Hope’s Peak. It was hand-made and perfectly fit her measurements; that alone proved it was hers. But again, why was it buried deep in the closet in the first place?

In the end, it didn’t really matter. It served her purposes and thus, Mukuro would make use of it.

The only lamentable issue was that, while there were many kinds of eye-catching hats and scarves in the closet her sister provided, there was nothing stealthy about any of them. Because of that, Mukuro was forced to discard the bright pink wig used to hide her identity and instead let her actual jet-black
hair frame her face as she continued keeping vigilant watch. She’d left her boots behind, the noise from them not suited for stealth missions. Instead, she chose to wear non-slick black socks over her feet, to reduce noise while walking. She’d also completely removed her fake fingernails, which was actually harder than she’d imagined but considering Junko had to practically put them on for her before the game started, it wasn’t all that surprising. She hoped she could remember how to reapply them, but realized now wasn’t the time to be worrying about such trivial things. But even if she couldn’t get them back on, she could just make up an excuse about not caring about doing her nails in this life or death situation. Her classmates would believe that. Finally, she had applied camouflage-esque face paint to help her face blend into the darkness, using the darker colors in her make-up kit, but Mukuro wondered how effective they truly were.

“As long as I stay out of sight, it should be fine,” she assured herself as she inched close to the doors just outside the nurse’s office.

The door was slightly ajar and light from within streamed out. Easing herself toward that opening, Mukuro closed one eye as she peered in with the other.

To her relief, it seemed that Mondo was doing just as he’d promised, sitting by the unconscious Chihiro like a watchful protector. Even so, the guilt was evident in his features, and it seemed that he couldn’t bring himself to look directly at Chihiro. It was a hard scene to watch, so Mukuro chose to give them some privacy, cautiously backing away from the door. Turning about face, she hid in the shadows as she headed back down the hall.

“All Clear. Heading for the rendezvous point.”

Staying in the shadows, she headed for a spot she designated for herself earlier. She chose this hallway because she could monitor all directions at once, assured that no one would be able to sneak past her. Having already checked the upper floor and gym, she had confirmed that the rest of her classmates must have returned to their rooms. As such, the only way to get to the nurse’s office would be this hallway.

Honestly, she wasn’t quite sure what she would do if one of her classmates did attempt to attack the nurse’s office. She could subdue them, certainly, but that would leave her in a compromising position. After all, unless she knocked them unconscious, they would know that someone other than themselves was here in the school with them. And while no one would suspect “Junko” of being the one who subdued a fellow classmate, if any one of them saw her face, she could be found out… which her sister would consider a violation of their agreement and have her executed.

That thought alone made her body tremble, remembering the spear that had pierced through her hand. The wound itself still ached and her dexterity with that hand had notably decreased, not that her classmates had noticed. Even if they did, it wasn’t exactly unexpected for someone with a hole in their palm to have a few complications.

Still, she remembered the agonizing pain that single injury had brought…and though she hesitated to admit it, the thought of being impaled all over her body with those spears sent chills down her spine. The very idea of that agonizing pain spreading out and consuming her entire being was an almost paralyzing thought. She surmised that, since she wasn’t used to feeling pain in general, her body had no tolerance for it. If she had known this could happen, she might have intentionally allowed herself to be injured in the past, to build up resistance to it. But that was a foolish notion and she knew it. Right now, she had a mission to complete and that took precedence over such naïve thoughts.

“Focus on the mission. Lives are at stake,” she reminded herself, finding resolve from the memory of her injury. After all, she’d already decided to keep watch over Mondo and Chihiro. It was far too late to be worrying about her own safety at this point.
Taking up her position in the shadows between the nurse’s office and the student store, Mukuro pressed her back to the wall and prepared for a long night.

“Arrived at RV. Maintaining position until further orders—”.

Midsentence, Mukuro realized that she had been speaking aloud to herself. Minding her face ‘camo’, she pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed.

“I’ve almost completely reverted back to my old self…it feels good. I never imagined I’d miss the thrill of a high-stakes stealth mission. Then again, how long has it been since I’ve felt this feeling? Two years? Maybe more…? This feeling…I’d almost forgotten it.”

As much as she hated to admit it, there was a trait that she shared with her sister. She too had an addiction to a very particular feeling. However, unlike Junko, who couldn’t truly feel an emotional response other than despair, Mukuro could at least understand other emotions and acknowledge them. Unfortunately, just like her sister, the soldier speculated that she too had a mental or perhaps brain chemical driven desire to seek out the one emotion that made her feel truly alive.

For Mukuro…it was the act of endangering her own life.

More specifically, it was the fight to survive, the battle that always ensued whenever someone tried to kill her. She could still vividly recall the moment she’d discovered this euphoria…

It had actually been the incident she’d half-lied to her classmates about. It was back when she was living on the streets with Junko while they were still young. It didn’t matter that she and her sister were only twelve at the time, the men who had tried to attack them…their eyes had glinted with lust and malicious intent. They had come at her with knives, having no intention to allow the two young girls to survive the encounter. They had come at her with knives, having no intention to allow the two young girls to survive the encounter.

How could they have known that, ever since Mukuro had been a small child, she’d fantasized about becoming a soldier? How could they have predicted that she already knew several forms of self-defense? And how, in an ironic twist of fate, could they have known that she had no sense of mercy?

Mukuro recalled how effortless it had been to snap her first attacker’s arm with her knee, disarming him and allowing her to arm herself. As her attacker had wailed in pain, she kicked him square in the chin, knocking out several teeth and dislocating his jaw. The attacker’s cohorts soon tried to rush to his aid, only for one of them to have the knife Mukuro had procured thrown straight into his eye. As the now one-eyed man screamed, she took advantage of the shock that had overtaken the third attacker, kicking him in the gut before slamming his head into a nearby brick wall, blood splattering all over her hands. A bit stunned by her own handiwork, she failed to notice the injured one-eyed attacker sneak up on her, grabbing her neck from behind in an effort to strangle her. Unfortunately for him, Mukuro was able to reach around and grip the knife lodged in his skull, mercilessly pull it out, and repeatedly stab him until he finally released her, the final attacker crumbling to the ground with a sickeningly wet-sounding thud.

As she had stood there, her attacker’s blood staining her clothes and hands, with no injuries to speak of for herself, that was when she had felt it…the euphoria of having survived such a horrific ordeal. The feeling of adrenaline pumping through her veins, the furious thumping of her heart racing, the unimaginable pleasure she had felt when fighting for her very life…that became the sole all-consuming emotion she wished to experience above any other.

All the while, Junko had just stood there and watched…grinning at the despair her sister had caused.

“I can still…remember how it felt…”
That euphoria…that adrenaline filled rush that she only got from endangering her own life, that became the reason she abandoned her sister so many years ago, threw herself in with a mercenary group even at such a young age. Her addiction for survival only intensified the more she fought, a mountain of corpses left behind after each battle. In that respect, she was exactly like her sister. Neither of them cared who had to die to get what they wanted. And as long as they could feel that amazing euphoria that only that special emotion brought out, then nothing else mattered.

Or at least…that’s how it used to be.

Ever since Junko had miraculously been able to contact her while she was with Fenrir, her priorities had begun to shift. Guilt for abandoning her sister had made her leave the euphoria of the battlefield and travel back to Japan to be with her sister again. Before she knew it, her only desire was to please her sister, to be forgiven, loved and accepted by the sibling she’d left behind.

That notion had almost consumed her…until she’d met Makoto – the boy who’d smiled at her.

From that point on, she began to doubt her sister and the world of despair she’d been trying to create, not that she’d realized it at the time. It wasn’t until after Junko had abandoned her to play the game that Mukuro had realized that those doubts must have been visible to her sister all along. If that was true, then her ‘punishment’ was probably planned from the beginning. The trap her sister had set for her, the one that Makoto had saved her from, it was all so that Junko could win the game herself.

And because of that, Mukuro had to find a new reason to keep on living.

And now, she was dedicating her entire being to helping her classmates survive. It was ironic that she was the Ultimate Soldier, always going from one ‘battlefield’ to the next, without a clear objective afterward. A part of it was that she wanted vengeance for what her sister had done to her, but she knew better than anyone that it was impossible to exact ‘revenge’ on Junko.

Junko Enoshima lived for despair. It didn’t matter if it was on others or herself, despair gave Junko purpose and she coveted it more than anything else. The despair of her own sister seeking vengeance probably made her mouth water…and killed any hope of Mukuro actually punishing her sister for her cruel deeds.

“Yes, you can’t beat her…even if she dies, the despair of death will excite her. I know that, that’s why I decided to help everyone survive, to decrease the despair she’s getting from watching us struggle. But…is that the only reason I’m doing this? Just to get back at her in this small way?”

Mukuro hadn’t had the time to ponder such notions since she’d been forced into the game. Now, in the dead silence of the hallway, hidden in the shadows, she couldn’t help but wonder what she was really fighting for.

She thought about how she’d miraculously been able to save Sayaka from bleeding to death, the rush she’d felt when she’d slid down the elevator shaft and raced down the hall to keep Leon from execution. She remembered the mixture of excitement and horror as she’d participated in her first class trial, and the rapturous feeling of one-upping Monokuma at the end of the trial.

What feeling did all of that give her? Pride? Accomplishment? Hope? No…the answer was…

“Euphoria…”

Mukuro momentarily stopped breathing as that revelation came to her. She’d been so busy ensuring everyone’s safety that she’d failed to realize that…she was actually enjoying the killing game. And while she wasn’t enjoying it in the same vein as her sister was, it was still a terrifying thought. The excitement of struggling to survive under debilitating conditions, having more restrictions put on her
than others, and contending with the notion of instant execution should she misstep…it made her blood burn with passionate fury. A feeling she hadn’t experienced since she had left the battlefield… left Fenrir behind.

Even now, though her desire was to protect Mondo and Chihiro from harm…she could feel her adrenaline pumping and her heart racing with delight. And her body didn’t fight it, the ecstasy from her euphoria mixing with the heavenly heat building up underneath her skin-tight jumpsuit. Her breath became hot as she panted slightly, finally acknowledging that mad delight for what it was.

Mukuro almost couldn’t believe it herself but…she was actually getting high off constantly working to save her classmates. Regardless of how sickening it made her feel, this revelation made it obvious that the same psychotic blood that coursed through Junko’s veins…flowed in her veins as well.

“Dear God…just how fucked up am I? I am…just like Junko, after all? Bouncing from one addiction to the next…am I really trying to save my classmates out of concern? Or am I just looking for my next high? What do they all really mean to me? Do I…do I even have a will of my own—?”

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps caught her attention, disrupting her thoughts and launching her into soldier mode.

“No time to think about the ‘why’ of it right now. Focus on the mission…” she told herself, suppressing all distractions as she assessed her situation.

Focusing on the echoing steps heading in her direction, Mukuro decided that staying in the shadows was too risky. She needed to know who was coming in order to prepare a countermeasure and for that, she’d need a proper hiding place. Fortunately, whoever was coming hadn’t rounded the corner yet, and that gave the soldier a small window to get to a better hiding position.

Choosing the closet door to her, the student store, she quickly and quietly opened the door and ducked inside, leaving the tiniest of cracks to peer out and see who might be making an attempt on Chihiro or Mondo’s life. Flexing the muscles in her arms, limbering them up for action if need be, she waited for the intruder to pass by.

Judging by the sounds their footwear was making, it was probably a boy. She didn’t hear the distinctive clicking of heeled boots or shoes that most of the girls wore. The footsteps were also rather quiet, suggesting someone of smaller size was approaching. With these assessments in mind, Mukuro held her breath as the steps echoed just outside the student store.

To her surprise, as she peered out through the tiny crack in the door, the massive build of Sakura Ogami passed by the door. Immediately backing away from the door, Mukuro suppressed her breathing, holding in a shocked gasp.

“S-Sakura! What the hell is she doing here?” the soldier questioned before moving back to glance out of the crack again. “Looks like she didn’t notice me. That’s a relief. But she’s camping out outside the nurse’s office. She probably had the same idea as I did, keeping watch from outside just in case. Sounds like something she’d do but…dammit, I didn’t expect this.”

Completely removing herself from her place behind the door, Mukuro took a step back to assess her new situation.

“With Sakura there…it’ll be hard to move around. Not to mention that if she stays there all night, I won’t be able to get back to my room and put on my disguise…what the hell am I supposed to do now? If I get caught here…it could be the end of me!”
Against her will, she felt her blood pumping and a wave of excitement washed over her. She was enjoying this stealth mission far too much. If she kept this up, she might not be able to revert back to “Junko” properly when the time came. Shaking her head to force away the rapturous feeling, she felt ashamed for her momentary lapse in commitment.

“This isn’t like me…I shouldn’t be thinking about this right now…dammit!”

Without thinking, she dug her fingers into her injured palm and winced. Like a switch had been flipped, Mukuro felt her euphoria completely vanish and rational thought returned. It took her a moment to realize why. The sensation of pain had brought her back…cleared her mind, reminded her that she needed to focus on her mission, like she always did.

Strangely, she found herself reciting the lessons she’d learned during her time in Fenrir.

“Don’t let your emotions break your focus…clear your mind of distractions…the mission always takes priority.”

As her own advice echoed in her mind, Mukuro closed her eyes and began a meditational breathing exercise she’d been taught by a fellow mercenary. Within moments, she felt her mind clearing and her demeanor returned to that of her usual self. Finishing one last cycle of breaths, the soldier slowly opened her eyes, firm determination replacing all of her previous doubts.

“First things first, how to get past Sakura without being discovered,” she decided, already looking around for anything that might be useful.

“I know I shouldn’t be scared…everyone’s still alive and all…but…”

Hina quietly wept as she lay on her bed, dressed only in her undergarments. Even though she’d put on a brave face, the trial had been excruciating. She couldn’t believe that so many of her classmates had voted to execute Mondo, even though he’d apologized and hadn’t actually killed Chihiro! He even volunteered to make up for it by guarding Chihiro around the clock until she woke up!

“How much more apologetic can you get?!” she pondered, hugging her pillow tightly to her chest.

Unfortunately, what hurt the most was the elevator ride back up. Everyone who had voted for Mondo glared at him like he was a rabid dog that needed to be euthanized. And no one came to his defense, even herself, she was ashamed to admit. Even Taka seemed to have abandoned him, not even sparing a word for him through the entire ride, and storming off toward his room without wishing everyone a good evening, like he was prone to do.

A somber mood had been instilled in everyone, and they’d all retired to their rooms for the night. Granted, it was late when the trial had finished. Chihiro had been discovered shortly after the nighttime announcement, and the investigation and trial had taken several hours. By all accounts, everyone should have been drained…Hina should have been drained.

And yet, here she sat, tears soaking her pillow as she tried to console herself.

“I…I wonder how Sakura’s holding up?” she briefly wondered, thinking back to how the martial artist had wished her a good night and headed straight for her room. Hina had thought it a bit odd, considering how resilient Sakura was. But she also realized that, just like everyone else, Sakura was only human and she was probably dealing with the stress as much as Hina was.
“Should I…would it be alright to go and see if she’s still up?” the swimmer asked herself before glancing at the clock and flinching. “It’s already two in the morning…even if she’s up, I doubt she’d be in any mood to chat…come to think of it, I’m not really in much of a mood for it, either.”

Burying her face in her pillow, she wiped away the stray tears that lingered on her cheeks. It felt like all she could do just to keep herself sane. For the first time in her life, Hina felt utterly powerless. She had always thought that, if she just had a positive attitude and kept herself active, she could make it through anything. However, since being trapped here, she’d begun to feel her usual pep begin to fade as the days slowly crawled by. She wanted to go swimming in the sunshine, run laps in the rain, make a snowman; anything was better than being trapped in this horrific school where morality seemed to become less and less applicable in their daily lives.

Feeling that pent up frustration get the better of her, Hina kicked her legs forward and sat up on her bed.

“Uhg, this isn’t like me at all! No one’s dead yet and I have no reason to worry right now! I just can’t think straight with all this captivity!” she seethed, a heated glare pointed at the camera bearing down on her. Suddenly, an idea came to mind. “Oh! I know what always cheers me up! Donuts!”

Turning to the side and slipping off her bed, Hina began gathering her clothes as she decided that a late night snack run was in order. Ironically, just as quickly as it came, that enthusiasm left her as she recalled the promise she’d made with everyone.

“Crap…the nighttime rule. I’m not supposed to leave my room after…well, actually, all of us violated that rule tonight. What with the investigation and night trial and all…I suppose one more little trip won’t hurt…”

Firmly accepting that excuse, Hina didn’t think twice as she pulled up her short shorts, slung her arms through her red training jacket, and decided to head for the first floor storage room.

*Slap*

“God-dammit, Mondo! Stay awake!”

The biker slapped himself across the face for the hundredth time that night, fighting off the exhaustion that worked to claim his consciousness. He’d tried everything to keep himself from falling asleep; walking around the room, punching the wall, kicking a chair, hitting himself, but nothing he tried seemed to keep him from fading. It had gotten so bad that he’d almost fallen asleep standing up. And while he knew that it wasn’t against the rules for him to sleep here anymore, he couldn’t stand the thought of leaving Chihiro defenseless.

“I don’t have time to sleep…Chihiro needs me. And I…I won’t let her down this time!”

Strangely enough, as he spoke those words, he felt himself waking up a bit. Maybe just talking to himself would help keep him awake? He’d never tried it before and it was worth a shot. The only problem was…he didn’t have anything he wanted to say to himself. He was still overcome with guilt and self-loathing, those heavy emotions giving way to despair. He closed his eyes for a moment to try and calm down but found himself drifting almost into slumber. So, he punched himself in the gut.

“Hrragh!”

He coughed and sputtered, falling to his knees. He hadn’t meant to hit himself that hard, but he
couldn’t deny that he was feeling more awake now. Almost ironically, when he lifted his head he found himself kneeling by Chihiro’s bedside. The biker’s eyes softened as he watched her chest rise and fall as she slept, and he cringed as he saw the bandage that was wrapped around her head.

As hard as he tried, he just couldn’t stop the image of bludgeoning her from flashing before his eyes. It was an image that would haunt him for the rest of his life…regardless of whether or not he made it out of this school alive. Then again, a large part of him had given up the hope of ever making it outside again. After nearly killing Chihiro, he felt that he didn’t deserve to get out of here. Even if, by some miracle, he was able to escape…there was nowhere to hide from the weight of his crimes.

“I don’t deserve…to be alive right now,” he found himself saying, his fists clenched tightly as he hung his head. “I…attacked Chihiro. And for what? Because I was a little bitch who couldn’t control himself! I’m the one who was weak! While Chihiro…Chihiro was…”

Against his will, tears stung the corners of his eyes and he didn’t even attempt to wipe them away. Instead, he lifted his blurry vision up to focus on Chihiro. She looked a bit pale from blood loss and trauma, like a fragile little doll. She was utterly defenseless, both from bastards like Byakuya and that maniacal bear Monokuma. Her life could be snuffed out with a fucking pillow, for God’s sake!

“Pillows…!”

Abruptly getting to his feet, Mondo looked around the room and found that each bed in the office had a pillow on it. Any one of them could be used to attack Chihiro! And that was something he couldn’t allow! There was only one recourse Mondo could think of…he had to get rid of them all! The only question was…how?

He couldn’t leave the room to throw them in the incinerator, not to mention that he didn’t have the key to get to it anyway. Instead, he looked around the office until he found a storage closet in the back. Speeding over to it and pulling it open, Mondo was shocked to see that most of the closet was filled with spare pillows!

“This is too dangerous for anyone to see!"

Without a moment’s hesitation, Mondo ran around the room, grabbing every visible pillow he could find and throwing them into the bowels of the pillow closet. After only a few moments, every pillow was safely tucked away in that closet, with Mondo having to furiously push the door just to get it to close. The only pillow that remained was the one Chihiro’s head rested upon, since he couldn’t figure out a way to take it without possibly hurting her.

With that finished, Mondo looked around and was thrilled to see a roll of duct tape on the nearby desk. He didn’t question why it was there, instead grabbing it and using it to seal the pillow closet shut from the outside! By the time he was finished, the entire roll had been used, the door had several layers of duct tape sealing it off, and Mondo swooned with pride for his accomplishment!

“It’s not much…but at least it helped me stay awake. Plus, now someone will have to get through me if they want a pillow to smother her with!” Mondo said triumphantly as he closed the closet door, shutting all of the ‘dangerous’ pillows away from Chihiro.

Returning to his spot next to Chihiro’s bed, the biker pulled up a stool and sat next to her.

“Oh, uh…Chihiro. That should do it for now. Those pillows can’t get to you now,” he said, a bit nervous to be talking to an unconscious person. “And don’t worry about someone trying to take yours. I’m gonna be here…I’ll be right here until you wake up. And then…and then…”
What ‘then’?

In all honestly, Mondo had no idea what would happen when Chihiro woke up. What would she say? What would she do? Would she forgive him? Would she hate him? Would…would she ever wake up at all?

That was a fear that Mondo had a hard time suppressing. If Chihiro never woke up…how would he apologize to her? The idea terrified him even more than getting executed. In fact, if it meant she’d wake up and be alright…he probably would have let himself get executed. However, he knew that wasn’t how it worked. No matter how much he punished himself, that wouldn’t change what he’d done. And it wouldn’t help Chihiro wake up.

Above all else, that’s what Mondo would never forgive himself for. If Chihiro never woke up, if she stayed in a coma for the rest of her life because of what he’d done…he’d never forgive himself.

Staring down at Chihiro’s unconscious form, Mondo felt something inside him break as he imagined her having to stay in that bed until her dying day.

“Chihiro…I don’t know if you can hear me but…ya gotta wake up…I need to apologize for what I did…I need to keep my promise to you and help you work out…but I can’t do that if you don’t wake up! I don’t care how long it takes…or if you hate me when you wake up…in fact…you can hate me all you want! Just…just please…please, just wake up soon!”

Tears rolled down his reddened cheeks as he openly sobbed, his tears dripping down onto the bed sheets. His hands dug into the sheets, gripping them so hard the material might rip. He was so distracted that he didn’t notice that the door had cracked open, and someone was looking inside.

Just outside the door, Sakura listened to Mondo’s plea for Chihiro to awaken…and grimaced. She opened the door a crack, just enough glance inside and see that both Mondo and Chihiro were alright…even though that wasn’t her initial intention. She felt as if she’d just seen something she shouldn’t have, and that led her to question herself.

“Why…did I come here?” she asked herself as she closed the door, hopefully without alerting Mondo to her presence. “I suppose I already have the answer to that question…”

Monokuma’s words from earlier echoed in her mind:

“By the way, I may have forgotten to mention this but…there is a sixteenth student roaming the halls. And they won’t be playing by the conventional rules!”

That warning had reverberated in her mind ever since, and even though it was possible that the Mastermind was simply lying to her, something told her that they were telling the truth. After all, from what she could tell, the Mastermind hadn’t lied to her or any of her classmates since the game began. Obviously, they didn’t tell the whole truth or would sometimes refuse to answer, but most of the time, it seemed as though their captor was being honest with them.

The more important question was, why did the Mastermind tell her about the sixteenth student at all? If the sixteenth student was working with the Mastermind, then telling her could jeopardize whatever they were planning. However, if the sixteenth student was working against the Mastermind, then why would they keep themselves hidden? It could be that the sixteenth student was the Mastermind but Sakura couldn’t imagine that was the case, considering how meticulous they were about their scheme.
“And if it’s true…if there is a sixteenth student among us, then something must be done,” Sakura told herself as she leaned against the wall just outside the nurse’s office. “We may have been forbidden to enter, but Monokuma didn’t bar us from standing watch outside.”

It was the only viable option that Sakura could come up with on such short notice. Just as she settled in for the rest of the long night, an all too familiar scream reached her ears.

Mukuro had been an excellent battlefield scavenger during her time in Fenrir, and this school was now her battlefield. The student store was overflowing with trinkets and other knick-knacks, surely there was something here she could use to her advantage. Wiping the sweat from her brow, a few black locks fell in front of the soldier’s eyes, and she was reminded that her black hair was completely exposed.

“Best to find something to hide my hair…just in case,” she thought, readjusting her search for that purpose.

Glancing around she found a number of masks hanging from peg hooks. One that particularly stood out was one that was the face of some kind of magical girl heroine with golden hair and her tongue sticking out…it even had eyeholes large enough to see out of properly. However, it wouldn’t be able to hide her hair, so she disregarded it.

However, the one next to it caught her attention immediately. It was an over head mask, large enough to obscure all of her hair…but it was unpleasant to look at. For some reason, it had the same red-eye design that Monokuma had, but on the forehead instead of the eyes. At the same time, giant oval shaped eye covers completely obscured where someone’s eyes would be, and a gigantic, not to mention demented, grin was plastered on the front. It almost looked like a completely black version of Monokuma but in human form. And regardless of how disturbing it looked, Mukuro couldn’t deny that it suited her purpose nicely.

Taking it down from the peg hook, Mukuro pulled the mask over her head and adjusted it accordingly. Turning to take a good look at herself in the mirror, she sighed against the latex.

“I look like a manga villain…but I guess it’ll do.”

With her new disguise in place, Mukuro returned to the door just in time for a horrified scream to reach her ears.

“That…that was Hina!”

Judging by the intensity of that scream, someone had to be attacking her! Taking only a moment to make sure her mask was in place, Mukuro sped out of the student store and dashed down the hallway toward the dorms.

“HINA!!!” Sakura found herself shouting as her friend’s scream reached her ears. She was just about to race down the hallway when suddenly the door to the nurse’s office shot open.

“What the hell was that?!” came the voice of Mondo as he leapt out into the hall. Spotting Sakura, he reared back in surprise as he shouted, “S-S-Sakura! What the hell are you—?!?”
“There’s no time to explain! That was Hina! I’m sure of it! I need to go find her! But I need you to stay here and keep Chihiro safe! Alright?!“

Although he was entirely confused, the biker easily understood that each of them had someone they need to protect. Placing his trust in her, Mondo nodded firmly and replied, “Yeah! Don’t worry about Chihiro! No one’s getting past me!”

With a determined nod, Sakura acknowledged his bravery before kicking off and speeding down the hallway toward the dorms. However, as she turned the corner at the end of the hallway, she looked toward the entrance of the doors and gasped.

A figure dressed entirely in black was racing down the hallway…and headed directly for the dormitory where Hina had screamed from! Was this the sixteenth student that Monokuma had warned her about?! There was no time to process that. Hina was in danger and thoughts of whom the attacker could be would have to wait!

Protective rage surged through Sakura and she gave a ferocious shout before speeding down the hallway with reckless abandon.

High up above in the surveillance room, Junko chuckled to herself as she watched the ensuing chaos. She was hoping this would happen, that Mukuro would meet up with Sakura while not in disguise and therefore get her secret revealed! That’s why she’d sent Monokuma to get the martial artist’s blood boiling. Sakura was the only person capable of contending with Mukuro, and since the soldier was trying to ‘save’ everyone, she wouldn’t be able to perform at her best!

All of that lovely despair was too much for Junko to handle, and she started salivating uncontrollably.

“This is going even better than I imagined! Once the two of them meet up, it’ll be a despair-filled bloodbath! And the best part is, it doesn’t matter who wins! If one of them kills the other, then the last one standing will get executed! Sure, I’m losing my mole but with how bloodthirsty Byakuya and Celeste are, I’m sure the game will get more interesting from here on out!”

Junko chuckled as she watched Mukuro put on, as she called it, the Despair Mask, and speed toward dorms. And she laughed as Sakura came barreling down the hallway straight toward her, her speed increasing with each powerful stomp.

Honestly, the only unexpected guest was Hina, who was, for some reason, running out of the bathhouse screaming like a mad woman.

“Hmm, I never meant for her to get involved,” Junko said aloud wondering why Hina was there. “I planted the seeds for Sakura and Mukuro but I never even considered adding her to the mix…why the hell was she in the bathhouse? Note to self: check the bathhouse audio logs.”

With that mental reminder set, Junko leaned back in her chair and shoveled popcorn into her mouth as she waited for the two forces to meet.

Hina couldn’t believe her eyes…she didn’t want to believe her eyes…but there it was…Chihiro’s disembodied head was inside one of the bathhouse lockers…and it was staring at her!
And now it was talking to her! Chihiro’s severed head that was stuffed into a bathhouse locker was
talking to her like she wasn’t even concerned that she’d been murdered and her head stuffed into a
locker! All reason vanished and Hina was left with only one recourse…to scream!!!

“EYHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH”

Stumbling backwards, she bumped into the divider just inside the door and fell to the floor, crawling
on all fours out of the bathhouse. Hyperventilating and struggling to keep herself calm, she didn’t
noticed that someone was in front of her until she ran into their legs, stopping her. Lifting her head
up, Hina’s blue eyes widened as she looked up.

A figured dress entirely in black stood over her, a malicious looking mask with creepy large eyes and
a menacingly wide grin covering their face. And once again, Hina had no other recourse than to
scream.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH”

“HINA!!!”

Shouting over her scream, Hina’s eyes teared up as she saw her friend Sakura racing to her rescue.
She wasn’t sure if this was all a dream or not, considering she’d seen Chihiro’s severed head, a
creepy masked manga-style villain, and now Sakura coming to save her…but she didn’t really have
time to question it!

Sakura charged the masked figure, who didn’t even seem to flinch as the muscular martial artist
charged them. Rearing back her fist, Sakura swung a heavy right hook directly at the masked figure’s
head. However, both Hina and Sakura were shocked when the attack hit nothing but air. It took a
moment for the swimmer to recognize what happened, but she was glad that she did when she saw
the masked figure, having leapt up above Sakura, poising to strike.

“Sakura! Above you!” Hina shouted, hoping she was in time.

“What?!” Sakura exclaimed in surprise before looking up and seeing the masked figure flipping up
above her.

Putting both hands up to defend herself, Sakura was only barely able to deflect the two legged kick
that the masked figure directed at her head. The martial artist prepared to counter when the masked
figure suddenly kicked off her arms. Instantly, Hina saw that the masked figure’s attack hadn’t been
an attack at all! The masked figure was rebounding off Sakura’s arms, leaping back around behind
the martial artist with what seemed like ease.

As the masked figure landed just behind Sakura, they didn’t seem prepared for another attack,
evident when Sakura spun around and sent a spinning backhand toward the masked figure.
Surprisingly, it turned out the masked figure was prepared, as they used their arms to block the
backhand. However, it sent them flying backward, with the masked figure doing a back-flip to help
regain balance.

Instantly, Sakura turned and readied herself in an offensive position, clearly intending to subdue the
masked figure here and now. However, in an unexpected turn of events, the masked figure abruptly
turned on a heel and ran toward the hallway past the dorms.

“Wait! Come back, you coward!” Sakura shouted, immediately giving chase.
“S—Sakura! Wait for me!” Hina couldn’t stop herself from shouting as she leapt to her feet and followed after her best friend.

Speeding to catch up, Hina slid around the corner just in time to see the masked figure kick off a wall and leap over Mondo, who must have been trying to impede the masked figure’s path. From there, they all saw the masked figure racing up the stairs to the second floor. Continuing to give chase, Hina sprinted and caught up with Sakura and together, they both sped down the hallway.

“Who the fuck was that?!” Mondo tried to ask as they approached, but neither of them had the time to slow down.

“Stay and guard Chihiro!” Sakura shouted to the biker as they flew past him and up the stairs.

Only when they reached the top of the staircase did either of them come to a halt. There was no sign of the masked figure and both of them were out of breath, having sprinted from the dorms all the way here. Hina leaned against a nearby wall for support, her lungs burning as she gasped for air.

As she did, she looked over and smiled at Sakura. Her friend had been there for her when she needed it the most and somehow, it renewed her hope that they might survive this hellish experience.

“Hina…are you…alright?” Sakura asked between breaths, to which Hina nodded fervently.

“Y-Yeah…just…a little…tired…” she replied, still breathing heavily. A few moments passed with both of them taking the time to collect themselves. Once they’d gotten in a few good breaths, Hina turned and asked, “Not that I’m complaining but, what were you doing in the hall, Sakura?”

With a hint of shock, Sakura answered, “I-I was keeping watch over Mondo and Chihiro from outside the nurse’s office, just in case.”

“Oh, that makes sense!” Hina said, clapping her hands together. “After all, Monokuma never said we couldn’t keep watch from outside the office, now did he?”

“Exactly,” Sakura confirmed before her expression hardened. “But when I heard you scream, I knew that I had to go and see if you were alright.”

Hearing that, Hina felt a wave of happiness at knowing that her friend cared for her so much. Such a kind-hearted gesture was becoming abnormal in this school and it did her heart good to know that Sakura would do that for her. Her eyes teared up a bit but she wiped them and said, “Thanks, Sakura. I owe you one! But who was that guy? I didn’t get a good look at him…except for the creepy mask.”

Sakura paused for a moment before replying, “I’m afraid I don’t know. I came running when I heard you scream and he was there. Did he hurt you, Hina?”

A bit surprised, Hina immediately answered, “What? Oh, no. I mean, I didn’t even know he was there until after I saw Chihiro’s severed head—”.

“C-Chihiro’s head?! What are you talking about?!” the martial artist abruptly stammered, clearly shocked.

“Oh, nothing! I must have been imagining things!” she immediately back-peddled, realizing that she must have been so hungry that she’d hallucinated seeing Chihiro’s head in the bathhouse. “I mean, if Mondo was guarding Chihiro then I’m sure she’s fine…I’m probably just tired…”

Now she was feeling kind of stupid. There was no way that Chihiro’s severed head had been in the
bathhouse, that was just crazy. And now she sounded crazy. Being trapped in the school was probably playing with her mind and it would only get worse the longer they were trapped here. Just as she was about to sigh, a large hand rested on her shoulder and Hina looked up to see Sakura smiling gently at her.

“As long as you’re alright, then I’m sure everything is fine.”

Hina drank in her friend’s words and smile before reciprocating, feeling relieved for the first time all night. She was just about to invite Sakura back to her room, safety in numbers and all that, when Sakura’s gaze suddenly turned firm.

“How, I want you to go back to your room and lock yourself in for the night,” the martial artist told her, much to her shock.

“What?! Why?! Don’t tell me you’re going to try and find that masked freak all on your own?!” she countered, positive that her guess was spot on.

“I can’t let him get away…not after trying to harm one of my friends,” Sakura seethed, the aura around her body seeming to intensify with each word. “It may even be the Mastermind behind that mask. We can’t afford to let this chance slip through our fingers. I won’t let this chance slip through our fingers!”

When Sakura didn’t even look at her, Hina knew that she was right. Sakura looked like she was on the warpath, and there was little that anyone could do to stop her at this point. Hina knew better than anyone, when Sakura decided to do something, nothing would be able to stop her. To that end, the swimmer decided it was better to just let her do as she pleased…but not alone.

“Then let me help you search! I’m not letting you go up against that masked freak alone!” Hina insisted, making Sakura turn to her in shock.

“Hina, I appreciate what you’re trying to do—”.

“Then you shouldn’t have a problem with me coming along,” Hina interrupted, meeting Sakura’s gaze without so much as flinching. Sakura opened her mouth, seemingly to protest, but quickly shut it. A smile replaced her worried features and she shook her head in defeat.

“I also know better than to argue with you. Very well, let’s search this entire floor.”

“Right! Let’s get to it, Sakura!” Hina exclaimed, ready to give it her all like usual.

As they began to check the surrounding rooms for the masked figure, Hina couldn’t help but feel proud and honored to have such a great person like Sakura as her best friend.

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“Holy…shit…those…two…can…run…!!”

Mukuro wheezed as she panted for breath, sitting on the floor as she recovered from the sudden marathon. She had closed the hidden door behind her, leaving her alone in the archive room hidden in the boy’s bathroom on the second floor. The only light in the room came from a crack underneath the hidden door.

Even with that limited light, she could make out the desk sitting in the middle of the room, as well as the large bookcase that lined the back wall. In those books, countless knowledge was contained.
Yearbooks, documents on the schools founding, records of any and all incidents committed on school grounds; it was all there, just waiting for one of the students to find. This had originally been a hidden room for Jin Kirigiri, or at least Junko had told her it was.

“Well…at least…I finally made it…into the…secret room…”

Just as she was catching her breath, a noise from the other side of the hidden door startled her. Instantly, she was back on her feet and pressing her back against the wall just beside the door. Listening intently, she heard someone walk into the boy’s bathroom. Every few seconds, the clanking of the stall doors being pushed open resounded, until the footsteps came to the storage closet just in front of where the hidden door was.

Mukuro felt her heart racing as another clank sounded, insinuating that the storage door had been forced open as well. However, a heavy silence followed and the soldier quieted her breathing as she waited to see if whoever was there could identify the hidden door. The next few seconds that passed felt like hours, until a cheerful voice shouted.

“No one in the boy’s bathroom room, Sakura! They must have gone down the hall toward the pool or the library!”

Mukuro instantly recognized the peppy voice of Hina and quietly let out the breath she’d been holding as she heard the swimmer’s footsteps head away from the storage closet. A few moments later, she heard what she assumed was the sound of the boy’s bathroom door closing. Now assured that she was truly alone, the soldier let out an audible sigh.

Resting her head back against the wall, Mukuro only now realized she was still wearing the creepy mask she’d found in the student store. With no need to keep it on, she ripped it off her skull and gasped, relieved to have the suffocating latex removed from her head. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at the mask in the dim light of the room.

“God, you’re creepy…” she whispered before tossing the mask onto the nearby desk.

As the adrenaline worked its way out of her system, she began to decide what she needed to do now. Three of her classmates had seen her but she didn’t think they’d identified much about her. The mask had been useful in that regard, but they obviously saw her as a threat and would now attack without warning if they spotted her. This would make future rounds during the night more difficult…unless she did so disguised as ‘Junko’, which presented other problems. I mean, who would believe that the Ultimate Fashionista was willingly patrolling the halls for danger? She’d be found out and subsequently executed in a heartbeat if that happened.

So many new problems…and Junko was probably laughing at her from her ‘boxed seat’ up in the surveillance room.

Then again, it wasn’t all bad. With Sakura, Hina and Mondo all worked up, she now felt confident that no one was going to make an attempt on Chihiro’s life tonight. Her initial goal had been achieved, albeit not in the way she’d wanted. And because of that, she decided that the best recourse was to withdraw for the night.

“My primary objective is to get back to my room without being caught. Sakura and Hina are on the second floor. Getting past them should be easy if they’re searching the other rooms. The only obstacle is Mondo. He’s probably maintaining his position on the first floor. Getting past him shouldn’t be too difficult though.”

She reached out and almost let her hand grasp the latex mask but stopped herself at the last moment.
As that creepy, despair-inducing mask stared back up at her, she couldn’t help but feel disgusted…if only because she realized that Junko probably enjoyed the sight of her wearing the gaudy thing.

“I guess I should be alright without it,” she reasoned with herself, turning away from the mask and heading for the hidden door. “But then, I’ll need something else to conceal myself…”

As she said that, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye, a large object sitting in the corner of the room. A confident grin appeared on her lips as she recalled a trick that had been taught to her during her time in Fenrir.

“Dammit, what the hell’s goin’ on?!?” Mondo seethed as he stood just outside the nurse’s office.

It had been a few minutes since that freak in the mask had rebounded off the wall, leapt over him, and sped up the stairs faster than he could see. Hina and Sakura went after whoever the hell it was and entrusted Chihiro’s safety to him...which he had been doing anyway. However, he also felt the need to go after them in case they needed his help. Even though he knew how strong Sakura was, he still felt like he should be there.

But then, no one would be there to protect Chihiro…and he couldn’t let that happen, no matter what! He’d made a promise to keep her safe until she woke up and absolutely nothing was going to distract him from that duty—

*KNOCK*KNOCK*KNOCK*

Suddenly, a very distracting sound reached his ears. It was almost like the sound of someone tapping their knuckles against a wall. At first, he wasn’t quite sure, but then he heard it again.

*KNOCK*KNOCK*KNOCK*

It sounded like it was coming from just around the corner, right in front of the stairs. Utterly perplexed and perturbed because of the masked freak’s previous appearance, Mondo said the only thing that came to mind.

“What was that noise?”

Even though he figured that he shouldn’t investigate, something deep within him stirred as he felt compelled to seek out the source of the noise. Cautiously walking down the hallway, Mondo clenched his fists as he prepared for someone to pop out and attack. When he got to the corner, he stopped and took a deep breath before jumping out with his fists raised.

To his surprise, no one was there...just a lonely cardboard box sitting in the middle of the hallway just in front of the room leading to the gym.

“Huh?”

Entirely confused as to how or why a large cardboard box big enough to hide an entire person underneath was just sitting in the hallway, Mondo again felt compelled to investigate. Carefully approaching the box, he noticed that the flaps that should have been underneath, holding the contents inside, were visible on the outside of the box. What purpose would that serve...other than to help hide someone inside the box?! But then...why would they have the box in plain view if they were hiding in it?
“No way…no one’s that stupid…” Mondo thought for a split second before realizing something.
“Wait…that’s the point! It’s so stupid that no one checks under the box and whoever’s there can
sneak around effortlessly! Well, it’s not gonna happen on my watch!”

Confident that he was making the right choice, Mondo strode up to the box and kicked it, sending
the square cardboard flying. There underneath the box…was absolutely nothing.

“Wha?” was all Mondo could muster, startled that his prediction was wrong. “Hold on a sec…if no
one was in the box…how did it get here and—oh shit! The box was a decoy! Chihiro!”

The biker shouted as he spun around and raced back to the nurse’s office. Flying through the
doorway, Mondo instantly scanned the room and fortunately, apart from the sleeping Chihiro, the
room was empty. A very relieved sigh escaped Mondo as he confirmed that his stupidity hadn’t cost
him the life of his unconscious friend.

“That’s it! No matter what happens, I’m not leaving Chihiro’s side!” he proclaimed before marching
over to the door and slamming it shut. Cracking his knuckles, Mondo moved to Chihiro’s bedside
and turned to face the door. “If someone wants to get at Chihiro, they’re gonna have to go through
me!”

With his resolve firmly set, the invigorated biker prepared to spend the rest of the evening vigilantly
watching to make sure no one tried to get inside the nurse’s office. He was so focused on his resolve
that he hadn’t noticed the shadow that had passed by the door when he’d turned to move next
Chihiro’s bed.

Mukuro’s door opened, she slipped in, and then shut it almost in the same second. She didn’t even
bother to turn on the lights as she panted, locking the door and leaning against it, completely out of
breath. Even so, she was completely relieved to be back in the safety of her own room. All the while,
she couldn’t believe how perfectly her cardboard box strategy had worked.

“I guess classic techniques still work…” she said to herself as she pushed off the wall and slowly
walked toward her dresser. “Good thing it was Mondo…and not Kyoko or someone smarter…”

Reaching a hand behind her back, she unclipped the tiny clasp on the back of her jumpsuit. She
moaned as her flustered and sweaty skin was finally exposed to air again as she peeled the jumpsuit
off her body. Tossing it aside with a damp slop, the soldier staggered away from it and decided that
she could wait until tomorrow to hide it within the deepest reaches of her closet.

Completely drained, physically and emotionally, the completely nude Mukuro flopped onto her bed
and didn’t both to cover herself up before drifting into exhausted slumber.

“Well…that was…interesting?” Junko commented as she finished watching the entire event between
her sister and the other students. Licking the buttery remains of popcorn off her fingertips, she found
herself grinning. “It’s funny how I’m used to it now…”

“Used to what, huh? Tell me, tell me, tell me!” she asked herself, switching over to her kawaii
personality.

“I seem to be growing used to my predictions and plans go awry, that’s all. It’s almost becoming
normal,” she answered her own question, swapping out for her sexy teacher persona, complete with glasses and ponytail.

“Yeah, what I said,” she chuckled, having reverted back to her usual persona and pigtailed appearance. “It’s weird…I’m not even mad about it. Then again, I don’t know what it’s like to really be mad in the first place. It wouldn’t do any good anyway. Plus, the despair from watching my dear older sister having to run from the very classmates she’s trying to protect was…refreshing.”

Standing up and stretching her arms above her head, she pushed her chest out and yawned loudly. Her arms fell back to her side and, seeing as she finally felt drowsy enough to sleep, she decided to retire for the evening. However, before she made her way out, her eyes accidentally glimpsed a small box filled with envelopes sitting on the desk.

“Oh shit, I almost forgot about you,” she purred, running a hand over the box tenderly. “I did promise to reveal everyone’s secrets…but just blurring them out during breakfast would be sooooo bormrrring! There’s gotta be a more despairing way I can—”.

At that moment, something else abruptly caught her attention on one of the monitors. It was one of the dorm rooms, the only one that still had its lights on actually. On the screen, furiously working at his desk instead of sleeping, was Taka.

He seemed to be fervently writing something but obviously become frustrated with it, crumpling it into a ball and tossing it directly into his trash. The trash was filled with crumpled paper and, surprisingly, even though it was trash, it was perfectly in order with no extra pieces lying outside the bin. Junko wasn’t sure how that was possible, or why the whole scene was so fascinating to her… until she saw how red the Moral Compass’ face was. Not only that, his eyes were bloodshot and angry tears stained his cheeks.

As that scene continued to play out on the monitor in front of her, it took Junko all of two seconds to decide what needed to be done, a malicious grin slathered on her lips.

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-The Next Morning-

“…but in the end, we never were able to find the person in the mask.”

All of the students in the cafeteria gasped as Sakura relayed the events of the previous night to them all…or at least most of them.

Makoto sat quietly and listened, occasionally stealing a glance at Kyoko, who listened with her eyes closed. Sayaka and Leon were sitting together, with the latter helping the former with her breakfast. Celeste sipped at the tea Hifumi had made for her, not a single word of praise for the fanfic artist’s struggle to create a tea that lived up to her expectations…though he didn’t seem to mind all that much. Hiro mumbled a chant to himself but otherwise remained useless. And Junko, who seemed particularly perturbed by this news, sat with her arms folded, her fake nails completely removed and only the slightest hint of make-up applied. Sakura and Hina sat back down after explaining all that had transpired, feeling disappointed that they’d failed to catch the culprit. They had wanted to wait for everyone to arrive but Hina couldn’t stop herself from bluring it out as soon as Makoto asked if she was alright, because, apparently, she’d been pale.

A number of their classmates, however, were still not present.

Mondo was still guarding Chihiro, and it hadn’t been decided who would bring them food yet.
Byakuya had excluded himself, though no one could really complain about that. Most of them weren’t ready to see him yet anyway, their disgust for what he’d done during the last case overruling their judgment. And absolutely no one was upset that Genocide Jill hadn’t shown up. If she’d have been Toko, they probably wouldn’t have minded as much, but considering that Toko was currently locked away inside Jill, it was better that neither of them were present.

However, the strangest thing of all was that Taka wasn’t there yet. He’d always been there at least fifteen minutes early…he’d prided himself on it. Some of them chalked it up to him being emotional over what Mondo had done but even so…

Then again, it was very early, about ten minutes until 7AM, and yet almost all of the students had gathered for the morning meeting already. It was obvious that most of them hadn’t slept well last night; lingering memories of the trial and the appearance of a certain Ultimate Murderous Fiend had kept many of them from having a restful evening. That’s probably what compelled all of them to arrive much earlier than usual.

“Do you remember anything specific about the masked figure? Anything at all would be useful. We need to gather as much information about this person as we can.” Kyoko finally opened her eyes and addressed Sakura and Hina. At first, the pair looked to each other but quickly let their gazes drop as they began searching their memories.

“Besides that freaky mask, I don’t remember all that much. I only saw them for a second…but I know that they were pretty tall. Taller than me anyway,” Hina recalled, doing her best to be specific.

“I, unfortunately, wasn’t concerned with memorizing their appearance,” Sakura concurred, averting her gaze in humiliation. “At the time, my only concern was Hina’s safety and I attacked without properly assessing my opponent. I am ashamed of myself.”

Taking in that information, Kyoko then said, “What about their actions? Did they say or do anything that might give us a clue as to their identity?”

Again, the two girls sifted through their memories to recall everything.

“Well…I don’t know if it’s all that important but…” Hina almost stopped until she saw everyone staring at her, waiting for her to continue. “Well, Sakura’s the strongest and fastest person I know…but whoever was in the mask was able to dodge and jump clear over her! They even blocked a hit from Sakura with their bare hands! I didn’t think anyone could do that!”

“While your praise is flattering, I don’t believe I’m that strong,” Sakura admitted, a deep sadness in her eyes. “However, I will admit that I was surprised by how agile my opponent was. They’ve clearly been trained in hand-to-hand combat. If it were anyone other than myself, I fear that we would have seen our first real murder in this place.”

Her tone made everyone flinch, particularly Leon and Sayaka. However, they didn’t seem as perturbed by the statement as they had been before. It was slow, but it was obvious that they were coming to terms with their actions. However, the underlying warning that Sakura was giving everyone was even more frightening.

There was a sixteenth person among them, who obviously meant to do them harm if given the chance…and they could strike at any moment.

“I’m just glad the two of you are alright,” the relieved voice of Junko said to them, getting everyone’s attention. “But why didn’t you come and get any of us? We could have helped you look for…whoever it was you saw.”
Hina and Sakura shared an embarrassed glance before the martial artist replied, “We considered that, of course. However, we felt that if we left the second floor, we might not be able to find the culprit at all.”

“But, in the end, neither of you were able to find the perpetrator anyway. Isn’t that right?” Celeste questioned, as if reaffirming their failure.

“Well, yeah…but we couldn’t just let a nut-job like that run around doing whatever they want!” an insulted Hina protested.

“And what would have happened if one of you had been hurt, or worse, killed?” Junko’s firm tone returned, staring the pair down with no hesitation. “Now that we know that someone other than ourselves is in here with us, we need to be more cautious.”

“Maybe we should set up a buddy-system?” Sayaka interjected, glancing around at everyone. “That way, if anything happens, we’ll never be alone.”

Surprisingly, Junko seemed to cringe a bit at the suggestion, but only Kyoko noticed.

“I don’t necessarily think we need to go that far,” the Fashionista replied, obviously trying not to sound rude. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a good idea, but I think that it might be difficult for us to spend all of our time together.”

“I must agree,” Celeste concurred, strangely siding with Junko. “If we do as Sayaka suggests, it might cause unneeded tension from constantly having to spend time with one another. And I, for one, need to have a certain amount of privacy.”

A few disgusted looks were sent her way but attention soon focused on Junko as she spoke up again.

“Whoever this masked person is, they won’t try anything for a while. Not after slipping up and letting us know that they’re out there,” the Fashionista theorized for everyone. “For the moment, I think that we just need to keep a look out for anything suspicious. So, if any of you find anything…anything at all, be sure to share it with everyone else, just in case.”

Everyone either nodded or verbally agreed with that notion, definitely not wanting anything worse to happen. At the very least, they all seemed to share that sentiment.

Not to mention that, by this point, no one was surprised that Junko was simultaneously concerned and cautious at the same time. Ever since she’d survived the trap Monokuma had failed to use on her, she’d changed dramatically. Before that incident, she didn’t seem to care about any of them, simply shouting about how bored and upset she was. But now, after saving Sayaka, and by that extension Leon, not to mention how useful she’d been during the second trial, everyone was beginning to see her differently. And while she wasn’t the paragon of hope that Makoto often tended to be, she was becoming a pillar of strength for everyone to rely on.

Perhaps it was because of that thought that Makoto spoke up, “Alright then, why don’t start by going up to the second floor and seeing if we can find anything that might lead us to—?”

Suddenly, the morning announcement rang out:

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

“Good morning everyone! It is now 7AM and nighttime is officially over! Time to rise and shine! Get ready to greet another beautiful day!”
As the announcement played, the closed doors to the cafeteria abruptly flew open, the backs of the doors slamming against the walls. Startled, everyone turned to see the last person they’d expected to kick open the door.

Kiyotaka Ishimaru strode into the cafeteria with a box under his arm, glaring furiously at everyone present. As he glared at each of them, they all noticed the white hot burning flames in his eyes. A chill ran down each of the spines as he finally addressed them:

“…Can anyone tell me why all of you thought that you could start the morning meeting that I proposed…without me?!”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Wasn’t that an explosive start to the next chapter of this story?! But what will happen now? Why has Taka burst in so angrily? Will Mukuro get found out by the others? What other plots does Junko have planned for the students? You’ll have to keep reading to find out!

And now, on a very serious note, I’m afraid I have an important announcement to make:

Due to many issues beyond my control, both at work and privately, I was unable to get further along with my writing during my break. And, unfortunately, that means that ideas didn’t get worked out and I need more time to work on them. With that said, I will have to take another four week break to sort everything out. I am not happy about it but I strongly believe that it must be done.

This is done purely out of my passion for wanting to give all of you, the readers, the absolute best story I can write! I have always believed that, if I’m not satisfied with what I write, then I need to improve upon it. Honestly, I could speed up my writing but I know that it would suffer greatly, as I discovered when trying to force myself to write faster during my break. I ended up burning myself out and disliking some of the ideas I wrote. My beta, Dixxy Mouri, and I believe that we need to address these issues in order to improve the story.

I am sorry if anyone is disappointed but I can guarantee you, the end result will be more than worth it!

So, for now, please feel free to ask any questions you may have and leave any comments/reviews you have for the story. I’ll do my best to respond to all of your reviews this time as well! I thank you all for your understand and I will see you all again soon! Until then, be sure to keep on smiling and have a great day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Taka confronts his fellow classmates and makes a drastic decision. It is time for all secrets to be revealed...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“No…this can’t be happening…it’s just not possible,” Taka whispered to himself as he stood outside the cafeteria. However, as if to mock his shock, the sound of his classmates’ voices echoed from just beyond the doors.

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“Do you remember anything specific about the masked figure? Anything at all would be useful.”

“Besides the freaky mask, I don’t remember all that much.”

“At the time, my only concern was Hina’s safety and I attacked without properly assessing my opponent.”

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Staring through the cracks of the cafeteria doors, a look of abject horror on his face, Taka stood completely rooted in place. However, he continued to listen to his classmates as they discussed what he could only assume was an altercation that that occurred last night.

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“I’m just glad the two of you are alright…”

“Now that we know that someone other than ourselves is in here with us, we need to be more cautious.”

“Maybe we should set up a buddy-system? That way, if anything happens, we’ll never be alone.”

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The sounds of their discussion were like nails on a chalkboard for Taka. It wasn’t even 7AM, and yet, everyone seemed to have gathered in the cafeteria...without him. They hadn’t even bothered to tell him that some sort of obviously dangerous altercation had occurred...which obviously meant that they didn’t feel that they could trust him!

“How...How could they do this...to me?” he quietly seethed. “They didn’t even...bother to...!”

His hands instinctively tightened around the small box he was carrying with him, his mind made up and his choice clear.
Taka grunted audibly to keep himself from cursing as he crumpled yet another piece of paper. Tossing it behind him, it landed perfectly in his trash bin, which was almost completely full now that almost the entire night had passed. Once again he began writing a draft for his plan to maintain order, and thus, keep everyone alive.

“Not that any of them seem to appreciate all my hard work!” Taka seethed as he became more frustrated. “So…if we start with this…and then go to here…then we can…No! No! That won’t work either, I didn’t even think about that! Rrrrahg!!”

This time, instead of crumpling the paper, he outright tore it to pieces. Throwing the shredded paper up as if it were confetti, Taka slumped against his desk and slammed his head into the hard wood, the shards of paper fluttering down atop his head and desk.

“…Why…why can’t I…what am I…why did…why did Mondo…why did Mondo have to—?!?”

As he spoke, Taka repeatedly pounded his fists on top of the desk in a vain attempt to understand why Mondo had betrayed him…betrayed all of them. However, he knew that beating the wood wouldn’t give him the answers he desired. But then, he wasn’t sure what he should be doing anyway.

Upon returning to his room last night, Taka had set himself onto this path, to keep himself from breaking down. And while he was frustrated and angry on the outside, deep within him, he was beyond distraught. He’d lost the only true friend he’d ever had…not to death or distance…but to murderous betrayal. And no matter how much he told himself that it didn’t bother him that Mondo had turned on him…he knew that it would never be true. And because of that, he couldn’t just go back to being the person he had been before befriending Mondo.

“...Bro, how could you? Did you not think of what your actions would do to the rest of us...to me?”

As if summoned by those dark thoughts, a familiar voice called out to him.

Taka didn’t have to lift his head to recognize the maniacal voice of Monokuma from across the room. A part of him wasn’t even startled that the bear had appeared before him, considering that it was responsible for everything that had happened. Even so, the Moral Compass knew to be cautious and slowly picked his head up, the shredded paper slipping off his hair and gliding to the floor. Retrieving another blank piece of paper, he resumed the task he’d given himself earlier that night and didn’t even bother to look at Monokuma as he spoke.

“Please don’t interrupt my studies. Unless you have an urgent matter that you need brought to my attention, please see yourself out.”

For a moment there was silence, and Taka could only assume that his statement had startled the bear. However, it wasn’t long before he heard the bear chuckling to itself.

“Well, that was unexpected. I never expected you to be so calm about someone intruding into your room—”. 
“As I said, I am quite busy. If you don’t have anything for me to address, then please leave.”

Taka’s tone was firmer that time, as if he were lecturing a delinquent that he’d caught running in the halls. In the back of his mind, he knew it probably wasn’t smart to talk to his captor like that. However, given his current state of mind, he couldn’t care less. He was falling back on the automatic reactions he’d gained during his time in the disciplinary committee, and that suited him just fine.

Monokuma, on the other hand, didn’t seem bothered by his tone, and continued to jovially reply, “All work and no play makes the stick up Taka’s ass go deeper.” When Taka didn’t even react to that statement, the bear must have decided that playtime was over. “But seriously, what have you been working on all this time?”

Taka gave another frustrated grunt before losing his concentration, thus messing up whatever he was writing. With one hand, he crumpled yet another failure of a plan and tossed it aside, pulling another sheet from a stack of rapidly decreasing blank paper.

“Why is it any of your business?” the Moral Compass fired back, beginning his writing anew.

Taka could practically hear the bear shrug as it answered, “I was just wondering what you’d been working on…the entire night!”

That made Taka’s bloodshot eyes widen and he whirled around to stare at the clock above him. To his horror, it was already 6:45AM, and that meant that he had only a few minutes to arrive early for the morning meeting! However, he couldn’t find the strength to stand…the weight of his failed attempts coming into view. Glaring at the trash can filled with worthless plans, Taka felt more shame than he’d ever felt before.

How could he go to the morning meeting so unprepared? Had he really wasted an entire night failing to come up with a proper solution to this problem? What would everyone think of him when he had nothing to offer this morning?!

“So…whatcha been working on?” Monokuma pressed, obviously enjoying his torment.

Despite himself, Taka gritted his teeth and glared at the bear as he answered, “I was…I was…I was working on a complete schedule for everyone to follow! One that would assure our continued survival and guarantee that no one would betray our trust ever again!”

Completely surprised, Monokuma remained silent for a moment before replying, “…Seriously?”

“I am always serious!” Taka shouted back, leaping to his feet and letting his chair fall over. “With a proper schedule, we can regulate our time together, form proper bonds of friendship, and learn to work together to be able to actually support each other when we need it most!”

Panting from his outburst, Taka felt like scolding himself for raising his voice so high but knew it was redundant. Instead, he focused on glaring at Monokuma, who simply stood in the center of the room, staring back at him. For a full minute, they both held their ground, locking eyes with each other. Just when Taka felt he needed to disengage and, regretfully, head for the morning meeting empty-handed, he heard Monokuma sigh.

“Hate to break it to you, but that plan just won’t work,” the bear said, turning its head away from him. “Let’s say you actually did have such a schedule, you couldn’t force everyone to follow it. That would cause more friction and eventually drive everyone apart…the exact opposite of what you want.”

His eyes widening, Taka furiously retorted, “W-What?! But everyone desires structure for—!”
“Unless you can convince Byakuya that friendship is magic, there’s at least one person who won’t go along with it,” Monokuma continued, ignoring the Moral Compass’ attempt to interject. “And I’m sure others would agree that they don’t want to be tied down by your idea of law and order. I mean, come on! You actually spent all night trying to come up with a complete schedule that suits each and every student here without even realizing why you kept failing? Well, let me tell you why…it’s because you know that I’m right!”

A noiseless gasp escaped Taka and he became frozen in place as the bear continued.

“You couldn’t find a way to please everyone so you kept giving up! Look at the pile of failures you’ve produced so far! That’s proof that everything I’ve said is correct! And while I applaud your tenacity…I have to point out how idiotic your idea was to begin with!”

With each word Monokuma spoke, Taka felt his willpower being drained away. He couldn’t deny that he agreed with everything the bear was saying. Everyone was just so different, he’d come to understand that while being trapped in the school with them. He’d tried, time and time again, to create the perfect schedule to compliment all of their needs…but it was impossible!

Some were easy to figure out, like Makoto! He’d go with anything logical as long as it was pleasant and simple. Kyoko and Junko would probably see reason, considering how much those two wanted to help everyone. But after that it got difficult! Firstly, Leon would be taking care of Sayaka, so they would be with each other most of the time. But that meant that the baseball star wouldn’t be able to do much of anything else, which was unfair to him! So, they would have to rotate taking care of Sayaka, but he couldn’t trust Byakuya or Celeste to agree to such a thing, so that wouldn’t be fair either! And then there was Genocide Jack…or Jill…or whatever the serial killer called herself! She’d need to be locked up and monitored 24 hours a day, stretching their manpower and making scheduling nearly impossible! They could always lock Byakuya in a room with her to keep her contained but that would be unfair to Byakuya! Not to mention that being trapped in a room with Byakuya was another form of torture…which was still unfair! And then there was Celeste and her lazy behavior to take into consideration! She’d never conform to his plan unless he offered her something she wanted and, from what he could tell, all she wanted was to be lazy! And if she was lazy, it was unfair to those who weren’t! Not to mention that Mondo………forget about Mondo for the moment! Chihiro would need looking after, at least Mondo would suffice for that but that was also…unfair. Plus, there was Hifumi to consider as well…which he had absolutely no idea how to handle because he couldn’t understand half of what the fanfic creator said half the time, which was unfair in a whole different way! Sakura and Hina would prefer a more active schedule, which would conflict with his purely study filled regimen he’d been planning, which was, of course, unfair for both sides!

And the worst part was…Taka couldn’t come up with a single group activity that would satisfy all of them!

He’d wracked his brain all night but still came up empty-handed, which only further proved that Monokuma was right…this task was far beyond his capabilities. But then…what use was there for him? What purpose did he serve if not to maintain order? Was he…not needed?

“No…that can’t be…and even if that was the case…I can’t just give up!” Taka shouted back at the bear, feeling his burning passion for order resurface. “My classmates need me! They might not be aware of it, but I am the only person capable of preventing any more acts of betrayal! I won’t let what happened between me and Mondo happen to anyone else! The betrayals shall end with me!”

Even with that declaration, Taka was still just as lost as he’d been before Monokuma arrived. However, for some strange reason, the bear actually seemed impressed by his words.
“Now that’s the spirit! I mean, how could you become Prime Minister someday if you buckled under a little bit of pressure like this, huh?” Monokuma cheered before pulling a small box out from behind its back. “And that’s why I decided to give you this! To help with your struggle!”

Immediately suspicious of this offer, Taka skeptically glared at the box and said, “And what makes you think that I’d accept any kind of help from you? After all, you are the one trying to force us to kill each other in the first place!”

“Oh! That hurts!” Monokuma grunted and grabbed its chest, as if Taka’s words had physically attacked him. However, the bear quickly recovered and gave the Moral Compass a side-ways glare. “But I’m afraid you’re wrong. I never told anyone that they had to kill anyone! I just told you about the only way to get out of the school. I never forced any of you to attack each other. You all chose to do that—”.

“But you can’t deny that that’s exactly what you want!” Taka fired back, still wary of the bear’s generosity. “I won’t be taken in by your tricks! I won’t let you—”.

“Expose the secrets that everyone’s hiding? Because that’s what I intend to do.”

Taka’s vigor suddenly vanished as those words echoed in his head. Instinctively, his gaze shifted down to the box Monokuma had brought. Seeing him staring, the bear flicked its paw at the top of the box, opening it for the Moral Compass to see its contents. Inside the open box was a stack of envelopes, none of them labeled. Before Taka could call the bear’s bluff, Monokuma pushed the box toward him.

“Go ahead…take a look. I put yours on top,” Monokuma encouraged. “I’ll even turn around so that I don’t see you do it!”

True to his word, the bear spun around and covered its eyes for good measure, leaving Taka with that temptation lying at his feet.

Warning alarms were blaring in his mind, and every fiber of his being told Taka not to trust the bear. All he needed to do was push the box back over to the bear, tell it to leave and then go to the morning meeting. That’s what he needed do…that’s what he should have done…but he didn’t. Before he’d even realized it, he’d bent over and picked up the top envelop and opened it. As he read the words on paper, he knew that Monokuma was telling the truth…this box contained everyone’s secrets…including his own.

Folding the envelop as neatly as he’d found it, he replaced it in the box, a horrified expression stuck on his face.

“Why…why would you give these…to me?”

As he asked, he lifted his head to see that Monokuma was no longer in front of him, but over by his now open door. With as much of a straight face as the bear could give, it answered, “Because I think that you’re going to make good use of them.”

Before Taka could interject, Monokuma disappeared behind the door, closing it ever so politely. Standing there, with a box that held the motive for his former friend’s betrayal…the Moral Compass felt something within him stir as he scooped up the box and practically raced toward the cafeteria.

Slowly opening his door, Byakuya Togami peered into the hall beyond. He glanced down the
hallway to the left, then to the right. He even took an additional moment to observe his surroundings, his calculating eyes examining every avenue before he dared to fully open the door and step out. Quietly closing his door behind him, the Affluent Progeny cautiously began heading down the hall toward the cafeteria.

It was still early, a few minutes before the morning announcement was set to play. And although he didn’t feel particularly inclined to, Byakuya decided to grace the morning meeting with his presence. However, it wasn’t to socialize, and it wasn’t because he knew the others would want to talk about how to proceed next. No…it was because his safety was absolutely guaranteed as long as he stayed near the rabble.

His run in with Genocide Jill last night still weighed on his mind. It had prevented him from getting a restful night sleep, something that hadn’t been difficult until she’d proclaimed her ‘affection’ for him. As a result, he was restless and even though they were naïvely infuriating, at least he could find amusement in his classmates’ stupidity. Not to mention that, even though he was relatively certain that Genocide Jill wouldn’t be after his life for the time being, it didn’t hurt to be cautious. After all, trusting the word of a known serial killer that targeted men like him…would be utterly foolish! It would put him on the same level as the irritatingly trustful Makoto. And he would rather be drawn and quartered than be compared to such a gullible fool.

“I may be surrounded by idiots but not even she would be foolish enough to try anything while in their company,” he assured himself, slightly picking up the pace.

However, as he reached the lobby area just outside the cafeteria, he noticed someone standing in front of the cafeteria doors. Almost against his will, Byakuya sped behind the nearby corner, completely hidden from whoever was standing in the lobby. He panted as he tried to remain calm, flashbacks from his encounter with Jill racing through his mind. However, he instantly felt ashamed for cowering in hiding.

"How shameful! I am Byakuya Togami! I am the alpha to this world’s omega! Get it together!“ he mentally scolded himself.

Taking a few moments to breathe and regain his composure, the Togami heir decided it was best to gather information on whoever was there instead of cowering. After all, he seemed to find himself in the most fortuitous of situations naturally, such as being the one who saw Mondo fleeing the scene of the crime just yesterday. This encounter could potentially prove useful to him.

And…if the person just around the corner happened to be Jill, then he could simply sneak back to his room and lock the door. It was a sound strategy, if a bit overly cautious. However, protecting his life came first. After all, if he were to die here, who would lead the ignorant masses of the world?

Carefully glancing around the corner, Byakuya found the last person he’d expected to see. Taka, the Ultimate Moral Compass, was peering through a crack in the cafeteria doors. His face was reddened and tearstained, and he seemed to be clutching some sort of box very tightly in his hands. Also, if Byakuya was not mistaken, it seemed that his eyes were almost on fire, as if his rage was burning from his irises. He was also muttering to himself, though the Togami Heir couldn’t even remotely hear what was being uttered.

However, one thing was abundantly clear:

“His mental health is clearly declining,” Byakuya said quietly to himself, a fearsome smirk appearing on his lips. “He’s becoming more and more unstable. It won’t be long before he snaps—”. 
“You think so?” a voice directly behind Byakuya pondered quietly. “He looks kinda constipated to me.”

Byakuya abruptly jerked around as that familiar, yet terrifying voice echoed in his ears. Just as he feared, standing directly behind him, peering around him to look at Taka, was none other than Genocide Jill. As usual, she bore a pair of Genoscissors in each hand, snipping them occasionally out of habit.

Despite the absolute terror that welled up as the sight of her, Byakuya managed to keep his voice low as he seethed, “What are you doing here?!”

With a confused head tilt, Jill glanced up at him and replied, “Spying, obviously. Tick Tock seems pretty thrashed. Maybe he needs a hug?”

Immediately, she went back to staring at Taka, who seemed to be growing more and more agitated with each passing moment. Byakuya also felt himself becoming flustered, but for an entirely different reason. Forgetting his fears of her for a moment, he grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back behind the corner, turning her so he could speak with her directly.

“I meant, why are you here instead of the cafeteria?!” the Togami Heir seethed as quietly as he could, still gripping her shoulder tightly.

Instead of answering, Genocide Jill let out a soft moan and glanced down at Byakuya’s hand. The Affluent Progeny realized he was still grasping her, he retracted his hand and wiped it furiously on his very expensive pants. A moment later, he looked up to see Jill wrapping her arm around her body lustfully, drooling all the while.

“Ooooooh…being man-handled by Master so early in the morning! I knew it was better to wait for you around the corner rather than in the hallway!” Genocide Jill half-moaned as she spoke, sending chills down Byakuya’s spine.

Just then, the full impact of her words dawned on him. She’d been waiting for him even before he’d left his room. Probably down at the farthest end of the hallway. She must have been waiting there for quite some time, eagerly awaiting the moment he would leave his room. Her dedication to her craft was beginning to make the Togami Heir understand how she’d never been caught during her crime spree. And the most horrific idea was…he hadn’t even noticed he’d been followed until she made herself known!

The only thing that had saved him…was the fact that she didn’t want him dead, at least not yet. If she hadn’t taken a personal interest in him, the great Byakuya Togami would have been slain, and this world would have been plunged into everlasting chaos. More than anything else, Byakuya could not allow that to happen. His family were the sole inheritors of the world itself. Without them, the entire world would crumble into nothing. And, if nothing else, Byakuya would never allow that to happen. The shame his family would have to endure would be unbearable. Regardless of his own life, he couldn’t allow his duty to shape the world be destroyed by a disgusting, perverted, utterly worthless serial killer like her!

It was time to regain his honor.

Straightening up to his full height, Byakuya Togami forced any and all fear of her from his mind as he glared down at her. At the same time, Genocide Jill stared up at him, unfortunately awed by his imposing stature.

“Would you cease with following—”.
“—Stalking!” Jill instantly corrected.

Byakuya’s face twisted in rage but he managed to keep his voice low as he seethed, “Would you cease STALKING me through the halls in the morning?! Or can you not see that I’m incredibly busy—”.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

“Good morning everyone! It is now 7AM and nighttime is officially over! Time to rise and shine! Get ready to greet another beautiful day!”

As the morning announcement interrupted Byakuya’s speech, a powerful voice suddenly erupted from outside the cafeteria.

“RRRRRAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!”

Byakuya and Jill flinched as an ear shattering scream reached them. The Togami Heir pushed past her and glanced around the corner. At the same time, Genocide Jill spun her scissors and went into a defensive position, keeping a watchful eye out in case someone tried to attack her Master.

However, neither of them were prepared for what awaited them just around the corner.

“What am I…supposed to do…?!"

Taka continued to question himself as guilt and anger began swirling around in his mind. He didn’t want to believe that his friends would betray him like this, meeting in secret without him. At the same time, he hadn’t believed that Mondo had been capable of deceiving all of them during the last trial, either. His perception of trust was being called into question and he wasn’t sure of what needed to be done anymore.

Glancing down at the box filled with everyone’s secrets, he felt sick to his stomach just holding such a package.

He had intended to do the right thing when he’d left his room: deliver the secrets to his classmates and let them all decide what should be done with them. It was the simplest option and one that everyone could discuss and hopefully find agreement with. However, all that changed when he heard his classmates discussing important matters…without asking for his input!

Did they not feel that his voice had worth? Did they think that his ideas weren’t valid? Did they not trust him to do as he promised, and keep everyone safe?

…Then again, he could hardly blame them for thinking those things, if they were in fact true.

Twice now, his carefully laid out rules hadn’t of been of any use, and innocent students had been attacked. However, in spite of that, he’d done his best to reduce tension between everyone. He’d tried to foster friendship with nicknames, graciously shortening his own, despite how uncomfortable it had initially made him. He also designated times for them to meet and become friendly with each other; the morning meeting in particular was meant to foster friendship but they treated it as some kind of chore!

They treated his ideas of unity as a joke and didn’t seem to respect his authority as a disciplinary committee member—!
Taka sharply gasped as a terrifying realization was visited upon him. All this time, he’d been trying to be something he wasn’t—a common student. He had thought that, if he was to forge friendships with others, he needed to change himself. However, that obviously wasn’t working. More than anything, he was a disciplinary committee member, someone dedicated to protecting the school and its students through rigorous enforcement of the rules.

“Could…could that be the case?” he pondered quietly to himself. “Is that why…I was unable to stop Mondo?”

If he had done as he’d originally wanted, reprimanding and punishing Mondo for being so aggressive, rather than being civil and accepting the biker’s challenge, and subsequently befriending him in the sauna, then the incident with Chihiro never would have occurred! Taka had chosen to foster a dangerous friendship rather than preserve the honor and safety of his classmates! He was being nothing short of a selfish fiend who thought only of himself! He was no better than Byakuya, as painful as that was to admit.

It was no wonder his classmates didn’t trust him, not the way he was right now! He hadn’t demonstrated that he could make difficult choices and follow through with them, regardless of the ill will he’d undoubtedly receive from his classmates. Even if some of them would hate him for it, Taka knew in his heart that a little bit of tough love was exactly what he and his classmates needed.

And now, in his hand, he held the key to evening out everything and setting everyone straight. And as he glanced down at the box that held his friends—no…his classmates’ secrets, it became clear to him exactly what he needed to do. It would serve as a warning and as a firm reminder that trust was not to be betrayed.

A part of him felt guilty for making this choice himself, without consulting everyone else. However, they had also violated his trust and injured his feelings by leaving him out of an obviously important meeting. They had only themselves to blame for their punishment.

“I will not falter…I will not allow my judgment to be tainted…! I will be the guiding light in this time of darkness! I am the one who will bring order from the chaos! I am the hall monitor, that patrols during the night!” Taka furiously thought, a feeling of power rising up from within his body. “I will ensure that all of my classmates are safe and that NONE of us are ever betrayed ever again!”

As if on cue, the morning announcement rang out around him.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

“Good morning everyone! It is now 7AM and nighttime is officially over! Time to rise and shine! Get ready to greet another beautiful day!”

The schools bell was like a switch that suddenly flipped in Taka’s mind, and all at once, he felt a surge of passion and strength unlike anything he’d ever experience before!

“RRRRRAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!”

From deep within, Taka unleashed a furious shout, so loud he felt that the entire room was shaking. His entire body shook and his hair seemed to gravitate upwards, a white sheen overtaking the usual ebony of his hair. As he opened his eyes after the shout, he feel the burning passion of discipline, feeling as though white hot flames raged forth from his eyes.

Without any hesitation, he lifted his foot and kicked open the doors to the cafeteria. All of his classmates abruptly turned and stared at him, complete shock on their face. Taka didn’t give them
any time to react before he drew in a large breath and shouted:

“…Can anyone tell me why all of you thought that you could start the morning meeting that I proposed…without me?!”

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A fearful chill swept through the cafeteria as Taka’s dramatic entrance stunned all of them into silence. His entire body seemed to shine with a furious glow, his features warped with anger.

Leon and Sayaka were completely taken aback by his sudden arrival. For Sayaka, it was because of his strikingly different visage. For Leon, however, it was because when Taka had burst in, the baseball star’s freshly made sandwich had slipped from his grasp and flopped onto the floor, splattering against the dirty linoleum and causing all of the layers to fly off in different directions, utterly destroying the innocent sandwich. Leon fought back tears at witnessing such a tragedy before looking up and gasping at Taka’s appearance, now disturbed for two reasons.

As for Hifumi, all he could do was stare at Taka’s transformation and whisper, “He’s…he’s become…the ‘Legendary Super Moral Compass’!” However, no one seemed to even bother being surprised by his strange comments at this point.

For some unexplainable reason, Hiro didn’t seem all that bothered by Taka’s visage, waving a hand and saying, “Oh, hey Taka! Weird how Mr. Sticks-to-the-Rules would be late for once, huh?” His joke didn’t seem to have any effect, so he simply chose to remain quiet afterward.

Hina didn’t seem to know how to react, just staring at Taka in confusion. However, she did lean over to Sakura and whisper, “Are his eyes on fire?!” to which the martial artist could only shrug. At the same time, after sizing him up for a moment, Sakura couldn’t help but put herself on guard. Although she doubted that Taka would attempt anything violent, it was obvious that he was disturbed by what had occurred the day before, and that put the martial artist on edge, especially considering what had transpired last night. And though she didn’t believe that the Moral Compass was the masked figure who had attacked her, she couldn’t deny the possibly. After all, while Taka may be a bookworm, he couldn’t hide how physically fit he was underneath that uniform, at least not from Sakura’s discerning eye.

Junko looked as if she wanted to ask what was wrong but she must have been so distracted by his new found appearance that she couldn’t find the words. Even the cynical and antagonistic Celeste found herself wordlessly shocked at seeing the normally composed and collected Taka in such a furious state. In fact, the only student who seemed to keep their composure was, unsurprisingly, Kyoko. More to the point, she seemed preoccupied, not with examining his new appearance, but with the small box he held in his hand. The hand resting on her chin tensed as she noticed a certain symbol printed on the side of the box…the crest for Hope’s Peak Academy. Instantly, she knew that whatever was in the box spelled disaster for all of them.

Finally, Makoto’s stunned expression shifted into concern as he slowly recovered from the shock, and he seemed to be the only student able to compose himself enough to slowly approach their obviously distraught friend.

“T-Taka? Are you okay—?!”

“I’m fine! Isn’t that obvious by my being here?!” the Moral Compass shouted without even glancing Makoto’s way before briskly walking passed him and heading for the front of the room.
“I’m not so sure about that…” Junko retorted, as pleasantly as she could manage. However, Taka said nothing as he moved to pass beside her. As he did, the Fashionista scoffed and asked, “And what’s with the intimidating aura? Did someone piss in your cornflakes—?”

“LANGUAGE!” Taka abruptly screamed, suddenly stopping beside her and thrusting his finger in her face. Rearing back in surprise, Junko visibly flinched, as if stopping herself from doing something. However, Taka didn’t seem to notice as he continued his tirade. “Such vulgar language is not allowed on school grounds! You may use the words ‘urinate’ or ‘tinkle’. I will even allow the use of the phrase, ‘Going Number 1’! However…that word, will not be tolerated! Do I make myself clear?!”

As spittle splattered onto her face from his excessive shouting, Junko’s entire visage shifted. She scowled fiercely and narrowed her eyes dangerously, taking in a deep breath at the same time. She was obviously working quite hard to keep her growing anger in check, and she looked as though she was going to explode at any moment. And a second later, she did.

“Fine then…tinkle off, jerk!” she fired back at him.

Her comment instantly made Taka glare at her and for a moment, it seemed as though an altercation was going to break out between them. However, to everyone’s surprise, the Moral Compass calmly reached into his pocket and pulled out a pink notepad. Without a word, he scribbled something down on the pad, tore it off and held it out for Junko to take. Not wanting things to get more awkward, the Fashionista snatched the page from him and glanced at it. When she did, her jaw dropped.

It was a disciplinary pink slip. Written on it was a single phrase: First Offense – Verbal Warning.

As if on cue, Taka said, “As this is your first offense, I shall graciously forgo punishment this time in favor of a verbal warning. However, I won’t be so forgiving next time. So watch your mouth, young lady!”

Not giving her time to respond, which she couldn’t because she was so flabbergasted anyway, Taka stepped around her and made his way toward the front, leaving everyone even more shocked than they had been upon his arrival. Junko angrily crushed the pink slip in one hand before turning and glaring daggers at Taka’s back as he reached the head of the long table everyone always sat around.

Before he could set his mysterious box down, Makoto cautiously called out to him, “Taka, what’s gotten in to you? I know that everything that happened yesterday was upsetting, but—”

“Yesterday’s events have nothing to do with this,” the Moral Compass harshly cut him off, practically slamming the box down. “The reason for my being here right now is because we all agreed to meet this morning…but it seems that you all felt the need to go behind my back and have an even earlier meeting without so much as informing me!”

Like a building fell over on them, everyone in the room began to understand what he was talking about.

“You were eavesdropping on our conversation?” Kyoko stoically asked with no hint of remorse, probably because she didn’t believe they had done anything wrong.

“Oh, Kyoko,” Hina abruptly spoke up, trying to decrease tension, “If you say it like that, it kinda sounds like we were having a secret meeting without him.”

“Which we totally weren’t!” Leon jumped in, trying his best to help convince the Moral Compass. “We just all happened to get here really early and then Sakura and Hina told us about what happened
last night with someone attacking them—”.

The instant Taka registered those words he slammed his fist onto the table, startling Leon into silence.

“I knew it! You were all discussing something horrible that happened and you couldn’t be bothered to let me in on it!” he shouted before pointing around the room at everyone. “I heard everything! Someone in a mask attacked two of our classmates and yet, no one thought it was appropriate to gather everyone and hold a meeting to see if we could discover their identity?! Not only that, you didn’t even wait for everyone to arrive before relaying that information! What else can that mean other than you don’t trust whoever wasn’t present for the meeting?!”

“Please hold on for a moment,” Sakura reassuringly called out. “Our intentions were merely to let everyone know of the danger. We planned on informing you once you arrived for the meeting. We had no intention to keep this from you.”

“That’s right!” Hina concurred, folding her arms and glaring at the powered-up prefect. “Besides, it’s not just you. Byakuya and Toko aren’t here either! We would have waited for them too! So, it’s not just you, we didn’t plan to keep you in dark or anything like that!”

For a brief moment, Taka’s powerful aura seemed to falter, as though he was actually considering what the swimmer was saying. There was indecisiveness in his eyes and just as it seemed that he might ‘power-down’ from his rage-induced state, a lazy voice spoke up.

“Except that we don’t really trust Byakuya or Toko either, so I don’t think any of us would have waited for them to get here to tell everyone about what happened,” Hiro absent-mindedly blurted, earning a harsh glare from almost everyone in the room. Taking note of their glares, the fortune teller shrugged and said, “I mean, it’s not like any of us actually trust them, right?”

All at once, it seemed that the tension everyone had worked so hard to erase flooded the room once more. Hiro’s foolhardy words were all it took for Taka’s rage to be re-ignited and he instantly hardened his visage. His eyes narrowed dangerously, the indecision that had been there a moment earlier completely replaced with firm resolution.

Lowering his gaze only slightly, he said, “…I see. So trust is not only an issue you have with me… but with Byakuya and Toko as well.”

“That’s not what we meant,” Sayaka finally spoke up after remaining silent for so long. Her voice was calm and even, and she hoped it would help him understand her sincerity. “We don’t feel that we can trust Byakuya or Toko because of what happened during the trial—”.

“And I suppose that you would say the same about Mondo then?” Taka rudely interrupted, lifting his head and staring down his nose at her. “After all, he betrayed us all far worse than they did!”

Sayaka flinched at his shouts but said nothing, her face showing the confliction she had on the subject. However, before she could find the words to retort, a firm hand reached out and grasped her own. She looked over and smiled, unsurprised to see Leon grasping her hand and glaring at Taka in her place.

“At least he didn’t mess with Chihiro when she was unconscious or was secretly a serial killer!” Leon defended, meeting Taka’s harsh gaze. “Mondo may have fucked up but at least he admitted it and asked to be punished! As far as I’m concerned, we’ve got more to worry about from that bastard and his stalker than we do from Mondo!”
Leon turned and shared a small smile with Sayaka, who reciprocated the gesture and tightly grasped his hand.

However, Taka glared and huffed at Leon’s comment before replying, “Again, I must reiterate. Language.” He quickly wrote up another pink slip and slid it down the table toward Leon, who crumpled it upon receiving. “Secondly, I should have known you’d side with him. Both of you.” He paused and glared at Sayaka as well. “After all, neither of you were properly punished for what you tried to do either!”

At the mention of punishment and the reminder of their crimes, both Leon and Sayaka visibly tensed, never expecting Taka to hurl such cruelty at them. Leon was especially shocked, considering how the Moral Compass had express remorse for voting for him in the first trial. This asshole that claimed to be Taka, who looked like he belonged in a shounen manga, he wasn’t the same person the baseball star had unintentionally boded with in the sauna a few nights ago. It was like he was a completely different person…

And they weren’t the only ones to be stunned. Makoto’s eyes widened and his mouth hung open in pure shock. Hiro nervously scratched his head and tried to ignore the horrible things the Moral Compass had said. Hifumi shrunk a bit as he felt powerless to stop the cruelty happening before him. At the same time, Hina and Sakura looked as if they were about to walk up and smack some much needed sense into Taka too. Kyoko, although stoically quiet, averted her gaze, obviously disappointed. Even Celeste held a hand over her mouth, hiding the look of disgust on her face. And finally, Junko, who’s fists were clenched tightly at her side to keep her from losing her temper, was barely able to contain herself as she stood there and glared menacingly at the scene.

“However, as your ‘punishment’ was already decided, I won’t intervene now,” Taka continued to berate them, as if looking down on them. “But don’t think that I’ve forgotten what you both tried to do! As far as I’m concerned, neither you can be trust—”

“Okay, that’s enough!” the powerful voice of Junko shook the room, halting Taka’s words instantly. Everyone, including Taka, turned to see her. Most of them weren’t surprised to see her gritting her teeth at the Moral Compass, not after what he’d said, but they were surprised when she suddenly slammed her un-manicured hand on the table and seethed, “Just because you’re upset about Mondo doesn’t mean you can take it out on the rest of us! You have no right to talk to Leon or Sayaka like that! I mean, who the hell do you think you are, Taka?!”

The entire room shook as she made her argument, and no one other than Taka even thought about refuting her. In fact, it looked as though some of them also wanted to give Taka a piece of their minds, Hina and Sakura in particular. As Junko’s furious shouts died down, Taka hung his head for a moment.

Just when it seemed like her speech had gotten through to him, the Moral Compass let out an audible scoff and said, “Don’t call me that…ever again…”

Confused, Junko put her hand to her ear and said, “What’s that?! I can’t hear you!”

Without a moment's hesitation, Taka lifted his fiery gaze up and shouted, “Don’t you ever call me ‘Taka’ again! Any of you!”

“W-What?! But you told us to call you that?!” Junko fired back, not willing to back down now.

“And now that offer has been rescinded!” Taka said, reaching out an arm and miming ripping an imaginary item back from everyone. “I did that in order to foster friendship but if you all refuse my friendship and would prefer me to act as an enforcer of the rules, then I shall! From now on, you will
address me as…Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru!”

A look of disgust and anger flooded everyone’s face as Taka openly mocked them.

“This is so stupid,” Junko retorted, pinching the bridge of her nose in annoyance. “Why the hell would you give yourself such a ridiculously long title?!”

“Silence!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru ordered, swiftly swiping his hand to one side in order to emphasize his command. “From this moment on, I shall take on the great burden of supervising all of you. Clearly, decisive leadership is needed during these trying times, and only the swift hand of the Disciplinary Committee can resolve such matters without loss of morals…or life.”

“Pardon me,” Celeste, at last, spoke up, politely raising a hand. “But I don’t believe that any of us asked for you to take on such a…burden, if you will.”

Turning his burning gaze toward her, Taka almost seemed to smirk as he replied, “And you have no need to thank me for it! For I know now that, with firm enforcement of rules and diligent management, we can overcome this valley of distrust and ascend into the rolling hills of acceptance!”

As he continued to ramble on, everyone was beginning to get exhausted. Even Junko, who was still plenty upset about his cruel words toward Sayaka and Leon, seemed to be running out of steam as he prattled on and on about rules and responsibility. Just then, a hand shot up that belonged to none other than Hifumi.

“Um, excuse me, Mr. Ishimaru?” he said, careful not to use ‘Taka’. Though given the fanfic creator’s respectful nature, he probably would have called him ‘Mr. Ishimaru’ regardless, as he had up until this point. “I have a question about—”

Hearing his name called, Taka snapped his head over and interrupted Hifumi by saying, “Hmmm, Mr. Ishimaru instead of Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru…I suppose it’s easier to say…very well! I shall allow you all to call me Mr. Ishimaru, but only upon occasion! We need to maintain discipline here and using my full title is the best way to start!” He placed his hands on his hips, evidently proud of himself and completely oblivious to the furious glares everyone was giving him. Nevertheless, he didn’t let that stop him from continuing, “Now, what can I do for you, Hifumi Yamada?”

A bit taken aback by the use of his full name, Hifumi hesitated for a moment before answering, “Well…as I was saying, I was curious as to what you brought that box along for? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Yeah!! What’s in the box?! What’s in the boooooooox?!” a familiar voice suddenly shouted, turning everyone’s attention to the cafeteria doors. Standing just inside in front of the doors were none other than Byakuya Togami and Genocide Jill, with the serial killer being the one to have called out earlier.

“B-Byakuya! Tok—err, I mean Genocide Jill! What are you two doing here?” Makoto took the liberty to ask, just as surprised by their appearance as everyone else.

“I believe that someone requested that we all be present for the morning meeting,” Byakuya curtly replied, stealing an accusatory glance at Kyoko before turning to glare at Taka. “We arrived just after the Disciplinary Committee Chairman,” he continued, not bothering to hide the mocking tone he used when addressing the title Taka had assigned himself.

“So, you two have just been hanging out in the back this entire time? What, were you making out or
“Dammit! I missed my chance!” Genocide Jill said before turning to her Master and puckering her lips. “It’s not too late Master! We can sneak in a quick one—”.

“I have no time for your perverse games,” the Affluent Progeny abruptly shot her down, but not before flinching in disgust. An instant later he pushed past her and advanced toward the center of the room before addressing Taka directly, “I’m also curious as to what you’ve got hidden away from us. Care for a little ‘show and tell’?”

Byakuya almost regretted it as, immediately after being asked, Taka glanced down and smiled, almost menacingly, at the box. Honestly, the way the Moral Compass stared at the box slightly disturbed Byakuya, having never seen such a malicious look cross Taka’s face before. The Togami Heir had seen that look on many people before; business rivals, his family members, janitors, etc… but seeing it on the usually annoying Moral Compass felt…wrong, almost dangerous.

A second later, Taka then let out a low but disturbing chuckle as he replied, “I’m glad that you asked. I had almost forgotten about it. Thanks for reminding me.”

The way he spoke sent chills down everyone’s spines, as if that box had been the key to his sudden transformation. They watched as he slowly pulled the lid off, revealing a number of folded pieces of paper stacked on top of one another. Aside from Genocide Jill, who made a groan of disappointment, no one said a word as Taka pulled the first one from the box.

“This box was given to me by Monokuma! Each of our secrets are written on each of these pieces of paper!” A collective gasp followed this announcement and Taka took that opportunity to continue, “In the spirit of fairness, I will now read them out loud to everyone!”

Multiple forms of shock registered around the room at Taka’s announcement. Most of them gasped, those that didn’t flinched unexpectedly, and a select few of them felt anger of their own rising to the surface.

“Y-You can’t do that!” Hina abruptly shouted, beating everyone to the punch. “That’s an invasion of privacy!”

“I must agree,” Celeste quickly spoke up, a bead of sweat trickling down the side of her face, the first sign of nervousness they’d seen from her since the game began. “You have no right to expose our secrets in such a way…if you do indeed have them.”

“Not to mention that, if Monokuma was the one to give it, then how are we to be certain that our secrets are indeed contained within?” Sakura posed, hoping to appeal to the Moral Compass’ logic.

However, it seemed that Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru would not be swayed on the matter, as he defiantly protested, “I have verified the contents for myself! I read my own secret first, proof that this box contains only the truth!”

Taka’s steadfast opposition to their protests further increased tension as he reached into the box and pulled out the first secret.

“Hold on,” the authoritative voice of Byakuya rang out, stopping Taka before he could even unfold the first paper. “What purpose do you think revealing our secrets will serve? If you’re trying to inspire camaraderie then you’re sorely mistaken in your methods.”
“Agreed,” Celeste instantly concurred, nodding fervently. “We have already seen the damage our secrets have caused. Do you not think that revealing everyone’s darkest and most private thoughts would instead sow distrust amongst us? Have we not already been plagued by enough suspicions of everyone’s character lately?”

While it was odd to see Byakuya and Celeste speak for the benefit of the entire group, it made sense that they would be opposed to it, with their own dirty laundry about to be laid bare for all to see. And even if their motivation was purely in their own self interest, since it aligned with what the rest of the students agreed was a foolish idea, the rest of the class was content to let them dissuade the dysfunctional Moral Compass. However, as if anticipating their argument, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru scoffed audibly before addressing everyone.

“Fear not!” Taka shouted, holding up his hand to silence everyone, an all too calm smile on his face. Lifting up the folded page in his hand, he held it out for all to see as he continued, “As you can see, they are not labeled, and the messages inside them don’t contain our names. These are different from the ones we received from Monokuma before. As I recall, at the very least, mine had my name written inside along with my secret. If I simply read them as they are, only the secret itself will be revealed.”

“So then, you’re suggesting that we won’t know who each secret belongs to. We’ll only hear the secret itself,” Kyoko pondered aloud, looking not the least bit nervous about possibly having her own secret revealed. “That way, no one will be singled out for what they’ve done. But in turn, we all will know each other’s pasts. Is that what you believe?”

“Exactly!” Taka assured her, pleased that someone seemed to understand his intention. “By having only the secret itself revealed, we can begin to truly understand each other and, with nothing left to hide from one another, there will be no reason to distrust your fellow classmates!”

“E-Even if that’s the case, those secrets almost cost us two of our friend’s lives! I don’t think we should tempt fate by revealing all of them so casually!” Makoto suddenly protested, trying to get the Moral Compass to understand the dire consequences of his actions.

“Finally, someone who’s talking sense!” Junko immediately agreed, folding her arms as she continued. “We’ve seen how devastating revealing our secrets can be. We should learn from what happened with Chihiro and Mondo, and just let sleeping dogs lie.”

As the Fashionista’s words echoed around the room, more and more of the students began to voice their own objections.

“Yeah, what they said!” Leon concurred, wiping nervous sweat from his brow. “B-Besides, most of our secrets are probably lame anyway!”

“I’m not quite ready for anyone to know my secret either,” Sayaka bravely admitted, looking away as some of her classmates eyed her suspiciously.

“I would also like to add that mine should never be revealed…for personal and private reasons,” Hifumi added, twiddling his fingers nervously.

“While I understand your motivation, I do think it’s misplaced,” Kyoko said, trying to ease tension as best she could. “Rather than read them aloud, should we not be given the chance to come forward with our secrets?”

“I believe that would be best,” Sakura agreed with a firm nod. “We should talk this over with Mondo and Chihiro, once both of them are able to do so. It’s unfair to leave them out of this altogether.”
“Even though we know what their secrets are, it still feels uncomfortable to leave them out…secrets being revealed aside,” Hina confessed, adding her voice to the opposition.

As everyone began to turn against him and his decision, Taka felt his rage boil up unlike ever before. Gritting his teeth and snarling from being disrupted so many times, Taka slammed his hand down on the table, the reverberating smack startling everyone into silence.

“Why…why can’t any of you see what I’m trying to do?!” the Moral Compass shouted, pointing his finger toward all of them. The white sheen of his hair glistened and his eyes burned with incalculable fury as he insisted, “If I don’t do it this way, then Monokuma will surely find a more diabolical way to spread them! With this, at least, the threat of our hidden secrets will be diminished, and true order can be born from this chaos! Now, be silent as I read them!”

Stunned into silence by his crude logic, none of the students were able to stop him before he lifted the paper in his hand up, unfolded it and read it aloud:

“One of us has a huge stockpile of…idol porn!!”

A loud and abrupt gasp caught everyone’s attention and they couldn’t help but turn to see Leon, panic etched into his face, his mouth hung open in pure shock. At the very least, they didn’t have to wonder whose secret that belonged to. However, that didn’t stop the anger that rose up in all of them.

“How could you do this?!” Hina protested as her face turned red, genuinely shocked that Taka had gone through with his threat.

“Indeed, such vile behavior,” Celeste concurred, averting her gaze and scowling.

“No matter how you look at, what you’re doing is wrong! You need to stop!” Makoto shouted at Taka, hoping to get him to understand the gravity of his choice.

“Believe me…I am just as distraught as the rest of you…” Taka suddenly admitted, much to everyone’s shock. However, the shock instantly vanished as the Moral Compass slammed his fists on the table and shouted, “It is imperative that I am made aware of who is stockpiling such…filthy material on school property! And while I can’t force the perpetrator to come forward, I will be lenient if you decide to speak with me privately about the matter later!”

“You could not be further from the point!” Junko insisted, who appeared to be contemplating walking up and snatching the secrets away from him.

“Excuse you, Miss Enoshima, but ensuring that this school remains pure and functions only as a place of learning does not fall upon your shoulders, but mine! So if you would please refrain from interrupting, I have a very serious task to continue!” the Moral Compass scolded without hesitation.

A massive groan from all of the students followed his inane decree, not that Taka seemed to notice in the least. Instead, he began to reach for the next secret. However, as he grabbed one and lifted it up, a gloved hand gripped his arm. He and everyone else were surprised to see Kyoko physically stopping him from getting the next secret read.

Her lavender eyes were cold and stern but the strength behind them startled even the powered-up Taka. In a low and even voice, she said, “You need to stop this now. Before you do something that you’ll forever regret.”

Unexpectedly, Taka flinched as her words hit him. With yesterday’s narrowly avoided execution still fresh in everyone’s minds, it was obvious that he was struggling with the advice his stoic classmate
had given him. Kyoko was never one to mince words, and she had no trouble speaking up if she thought one of her classmates was acting inappropriately. However, for her to actively put herself out there, forcefully stopping him from continuing on his destructive path...it was a side of her that none of them had seen before. Some could speculate that Junko’s newfound straightforward attitude might have attributed to it, but in the end, no one could really say.

What was clear, however, was that Kyoko was no longer satisfied with keeping her distance from everyone. Up until now, she’d been a voice of reason, but that was all, just a voice of conviction for everyone to listen to. But now, seeing her go out of her way to try and help her classmates with this situation, it brought a whole new aspect of her to light. Her posture, her tone, and the determination in her eyes showed that Kyoko Kirigiri was not to be trifled with, especially when she thought you were doing something wrong.

For a moment, hesitation became clear in Taka’s eyes, and he completely stopped moving for a second, as if in deep thought. He, too, must have been shocked by Kyoko’s intervention, at least enough for him to seriously consider his actions until this point. As he seemed to come to a decision, he looked directly at her as if he was about to reply.

Instead, however, a high-pitched voice called out, “Now, now, Kyoko. It’s not right to deny another student’s right to free speech, now is it?”

The entire room flinched as Monokuma suddenly appeared on the other side of the room, wearing a fedora with a small paper stuck on it that had the word ‘PRESS’ clearly displayed, and holding a camera with which it took many flashy pictures.

“I can see it now! The headlines will read: ‘Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru assaulted by crazy beggar woman! See more on page 8’,” the demented bear jeered as it continued to snap pictures.

Everyone was stunned by the bear’s sudden appearance. Kyoko and Taka turned and stared at Monokuma, almost in disbelief that it was interrupting them. Sayaka and Leon reacted as they had since their incident, holding onto each other as their bodies trembled, though they seemed much more composed than any other time this had happened. Junko took a brave step forward but otherwise said nothing, glaring angrily. Makoto kept his cool, but also held surprise on his face at seeing the bear’s strange appearance. Genocide Jill tilted her head in confusion but chose to remain silent, much to Byakuya’s relief. Byakuya and Celeste glared at Monokuma with utter annoyance, both of them already perturbed by the possibility of their secrets getting revealed. Hiro and Hifumi stood off to the side, as if trying to blend into the scenery and not get involved with either situation. Hina scowled at the bear, knowing that everything was going to get more complicated now. And finally, Sakura clenched her fists as a murderous red glint appeared in her eyes as she stared down Monokuma.

“Fiend! Is it true that you were the one who gave Taka all of our secrets?!” Sakura immediately shouted upon seeing the bear, her aura practically scorching the air around her.

“That’s confidential,” was all Monokuma uttered as it continued to photograph Kyoko’s manhandling of Taka.

“Confidential, my ass…” Junko muttered, confirming what they all already knew. “You’re probably the one who put this whole disciplinary committee crap in his head too.”

“Hey, give the boy some credit!” Monokuma jeered, pausing a moment from taking pictures. “He decided on this new identity all on his own. At least we don’t have another case of split-personality.”

“Eh, it’s better this way. After all, I wouldn’t want someone else muscling in on my shtick,”
Genocide Jill said with a shrug.

Whether from embarrassment or displeasure, Kyoko slowly released her grip on Taka’s arm and turned to face the bear. “And to what do we own the honor of your presence?” she said evenly, not showing a hint of emotion whatsoever.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m here getting the scoop of the century as Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru makes history by unveiling everyone’s secrets,” Monokuma cheered, waving a paw enthusiastically. “I mean, sure, nobody but me will know exactly whose secret is whose, but the speculation that all of you will have about whose secret goes with who will surely be enjoyable to watch. Besides, I did promise to reveal them one way or another…or would you rather have all your darkest moments be made public by yours truly?”

A wave of uncertainly swept through the room as the students began to analyze what the bear was implying. With Taka, their secrets would be revealed but without their names attached to them, but only within the confines of the school. However, Monokuma implied that, if the Mastermind were to be in charge of revealing them, the entire world might come to know their deepest secrets.

Either way, there seemed to be no way to forestall the inevitable. One way or another, everyone’s secrets were about to be exposed.

The instant the bear finished speaking, Kyoko turned her determined gaze back to Taka and said, “Do you see now? You’re being manipulated. This is all for Monokuma’s twisted pleasure—”.

“To be fair, I never said that it wouldn’t be when I gave them to him!” Monokuma briefly interrupted before letting her continue.

“You’re playing right into his hands,” Kyoko reiterated, trying to get Taka’s attention away from the bear for a moment. “He knows that revealing our secrets could cause us to become suspicious of each other, especially if we don’t know whose secret belongs to whom. You need to stop before—”.

Suddenly, Taka held up his hand to silence her. Falling silent, Kyoko held out hope that her words had reached him. However, as he lifted his gaze, she saw that the fire burning in his eyes had only strengthened, as if he had come to a decision that, regardless of the consequences, he would see through to the end. In that moment, she knew that it was already too late.

“While I agree that Monokuma may have ulterior motives, that doesn’t change anything that I said before,” the Moral Compass explained, his voice growing louder with each sentence. “Without strict moral discipline, none of us will be able to trust each other, let alone survive! If I must bear the burden of your anger so that order may be established, then it shall be done! I’m used to everyone failing to understand the importance of rules and discipline, I dealt with it every day before coming to Hope’s Peak and I won’t falter now! And if it’s the last thing I do, I will ensure that all of you learn a valuable lesson from this situation!”

“But Taka—”, Makoto tried to interject before the Moral Compass pointed an accusatory finger at him.

“That’s Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru to you!” he shouted, his words forcing Makoto to reluctantly back down. “Now everyone take a seat and be respectful as I finish reading all of our secrets aloud!”

Everyone was on the verge of protesting when Monokuma abruptly concurred, “Yeah! Quiet down! This Press Conference has had enough interruptions for one morning! Sit down and shut your traps!”
No one missed the clear order that Monokuma was giving them, and they all knew the price for defying him. Junko glanced down at her bandaged hand for a moment before striding over to the table and taking up her usual seat. She looked completely defeated and entirely frustrated, which didn’t help ease the group’s tension. Knowing they couldn’t argue about this any longer, the rest of the students slowly began taking their seats.

Leon and Sayaka stayed where they were at the long table, having not gotten up since the commotion began. Hina and Sakura sat next to each other with Hiro and Hifumi on either side of them. Celeste took a seat at the end of the table, her hands folded in front of her face, obscuring the scowl she didn’t want her classmates to see. Byakuya decided to sit at the table that was removed from the group and began to regret it as Genocide Jill pulled up a chair directly behind him, salivating noisily, to his displeasure. Makoto sat in his usual seat, which was close to the head of the table, a worried expression on his face.

Finally, Kyoko took a step away from Taka, lowered her gaze and slightly shook her head in disappointment before walking over to join them, taking the empty seat right next to Makoto.

With all of them properly seated, Monokuma let out a prideful laugh at it continued to snap pictures. “Alright then, now that order has been established, go ahead and do what you came to do, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishi—!”

“Be quiet! Can’t you see we are in the middle of an important meeting! If you’re going to be a distraction, then be off with you!” Taka abruptly shouted at Monokuma, all of his rage directed at the bear in that single moment.

“Gghhh!” the bear shrieked, obviously not expecting such a reaction. “I-I was only trying to—”

“Disrupting the peace of our meeting is not to be taken lightly!” Taka shouted, fearlessly standing up to the bear. “I may have taken on more responsibilities but I still don’t intend to let you have your way! We will find a way to escape from you eventually, and when we do, I shall have the full force of the law come down on your head!”

Even if it was only for a moment, Makoto and the others felt that the original Taka had come back to them. Even though his hair had that white sheen and his eyes burned with furious passion, the way he stood up to Monokuma and earnestly wanted to escape from here with everyone surprised them. Unfortunately, it seemed that Monokuma didn’t appreciate being talked down to.

“Upupupupupupu…I see, the law, huh?” Monokuma mischievously jeered. “Good luck with that.”

Without a moment’s notice, the bear suddenly leapt off the table and slipped into the kitchen and out of sight, presumably leaving them to their own devices. Taka took that opportunity to clear his throat and ready himself, turning to address his classmates.

“Before I begin, let me just say that, if you wish to confess which secret is your privately, then see me after this meeting and we shall discuss proper discipline, if the secret warrants it.”

And just like that, the little bit of renewed faith they had in Taka dissolved. Then, like a teacher reading a note passed in class, Taka picked up the next secret and began reading:

“One of us wet the bed until they were in fifth grade!”

Although he said nothing, Makoto’s face instantly reddened and he prayed that no one was looking at him. A moment of silence passed before stifled snickering and repressed laughter could be heard from a select few students…one of which being Leon. However, Taka shot the baseball player a
stern look, which ceased any and all laughter from that point on.

Confident that it had settled in, the Moral Compass drew the next secret.

“One of us has…a crush on Makoto?”

“What?!” the lucky student instantly shouted, his face now completely red from two forms of embarrassment.

Glancing around, Makoto tried to guess which of his classmates it could be…but he honestly didn’t have any idea. It was strange how someone else’s secret put him on edge this much. Plus, he wasn’t a detective or anything, so he wouldn’t know where to begin figuring out who this secret belonged to.

In fact, the only thing that stuck out in his mind was that fact that Kyoko was currently averting her gaze from him, as if trying to hide something. Then again, it could also be the fact that her efforts to stop this whole event had been derailed…was it because this was her secret and she didn’t want him to know?!

At that thought, Makoto smiled and whispered to himself, “No way…it couldn’t be that simple.”

As he dropped his head down and conceded to the fact that he may never find out who had the crush, he failed to notice Kyoko glancing at him out of the corner of her eyes. And both of them failed to notice that Junko was eyeing them both throughout that exchange, a hint of jealousy in her eyes.

“Hmm, what a strange secret…” Taka objectively said, not understanding how delicate a situation this could become. “Despite that, I do encourage whomever this secret belongs to please be careful about getting into a relationship while attending school! It will undoubtedly interfere with your studies—!”

“You would know…” Junko muttered under her breath, which Taka luckily didn’t hear.

“That being said,” the Moral Compass droned on, “If you wish to convey your feelings, I must ask that you do it privately! Public displays of affection have no place in a school environment!”

“And yet you made the fact that someone has a crush very public,” Junko again muttered before lowering her gaze to the down to the table, seeming strangely sad for some reason.

Due to his inability to read the atmosphere, Taka soldiered on with his task, pulling out the next secret before clearing his throat.

“One of us……killed their own brother.”

An awkward silence filled the room as that secret was read, knowing exactly who it belonged to. Without so much as commenting on it, Taka placed the paper atop the other ones he’d already read and hastily grabbed another one, obviously wanting to distance himself from that topic.

“One of us…is actually a boy.”

Again, no one felt the need to say or do anything. Memories from the last trial flared up in all of their minds, as did a few growing concerns.

“…Did anyone check on Mondo or Chihiro this morning?” Makoto bravely asked, looking around to see if anyone would answer. Most of the students shook their heads, while others like Byakuya
and Celeste merely shrugged unapologetically. “Oh… I see. We should probably get some food over to them after we’re done here. At the very least, Mondo’s probably starving.”

“Yes, I imagine he is,” Kyoko unabashedly replied, sending a quick glare in Taka’s direction.

If Taka noticed her gaze, he didn’t show it as he reached into the box to once more pull out a secret that he would reveal to them.

“One of us ruined a pop idol’s career.”

At the mention of ‘pop idol’, the students couldn’t stop themselves from stealing a quick glance at Sayaka. Byakuya in particular sent her a nasty glare, but she pretended that she hadn’t seen it. At the same time, Makoto sent a worried expression her way before averting his gaze, not wanting to ask if the secret was indeed hers.

In reality, she could feel all of their gazes, both the harsh and the sympathetic, forced upon her and did her best to keep an even and stoic visage. However, she couldn’t keep her hands from trembling no matter how hard she tried, until Leon slipped his hand down and laced his fingers in between her own. She almost gasped but held it in, looking over to see him smiling encouragingly at her. Almost without realizing it, she smiled back and was finally able to keep her hands from shaking.

After what he considered to be sufficient time passed, Taka drew another secret from the box.

“One of us… bribed a teacher by working at a Maid Café?!”

Taka’s shock was shared with almost everyone in the room, although for very different reasons than his own.

“Bribing a teacher is grounds for expulsion! I demand to know—”.

“No one has to tell you anything!” Junko interrupted, glaring at him menacingly. “Whoever it was probably had a good reason. And besides, they can always confess to you privately, can’t they? That’s only fair, right?”

Taka opened his mouth to protest but quickly shut it, knowing that he would be contradicting the rules that he himself had been setting for everyone. Taking a moment to compose himself, he finally answered, “Fine then… as I promised the others, if you decide to confide in me privately… your punishment will be lessened. But don’t think you can simply get away with something so—”.

“Yeah, yeah, we get it! Bribery is bad and all that…but seriously? How is working at a maid café a bribe anyway?” Hina asked, utterly confused.

“It is the best kind of bribery, if you ask me!” Hifumi couldn’t stop himself from replying, shouting over everyone else. “I must know! Ladies, who among you have come to play for my side of the team?!"

Before anyone could be disgusted by the fanfic creator’s lewd comment, Leon smirked as he said, “Without a doubt, it has to be Celeste. I mean, she already half-dresses the part anyway.”

“… What?” the Ultimate Gambler barely had time to seethe before Hifumi suddenly appeared right next to her, a surprised yelp from her echoing as he inched closer to her.

“Of course! I should have known by your eloquent tastes Miss Ludenberg! Tell me, what kind of—”, he licked his lips before continuing, inching closer and closer as he did so, “—special events did you participate in? Perhaps wearing some kitty ears? Or having to call your guests Master—?”
Before he even finished, Celeste suddenly pressed her hand in the center of his face, gripping him so tightly he feared his eyes would pop out. Her eyes flared with unfathomable rage, snarled at him with gritted teeth, and just for a moment, her mask fell, revealing a raging she-demon behind it.

“Listen up, lardo! Don’t you ever say such a thing to me ever again! Got it?!”

Hifumi felt himself gripped by an unimaginable fear and panic, but that was mainly because, with her grappling his face to harshly, he couldn’t get away from her! He couldn’t even muster the words to answer her. Instead, he fervently nodded his head and prayed that she decided to show him mercy.

His prayers were answered when she effortlessly replaced her gritted teeth with a sickly sweet smile and slowly retracted her hand from his face. The instant he was free, Hifumi darted back to his chair but didn’t sit in it. Instead, he meaninglessly hid behind it, hoping that it would be enough to fend off the gambler’s wrath.

“Ah…now then, since it is now obvious that this secret doesn’t belong to me, let’s move on to the next one. Shall we?” she said daintily, folding her hands under her chin and smiling at everyone, despite their horrified and disturbed visages. In particular, Leon cowered behind Sayaka, afraid to even look Celeste in the eye right now.

Rather than asking about her sudden change in demeanor, and risk having to be exposed to it again, the students decided that it was best to just let Taka read the next secret, which he already had in hand.

“One of us has amnesia.”

To this, many of the students were puzzled. None of them seemed too confused or perplexed about their situation. Rather, everyone was doing all they could to help in any way they could.

“Um, I hate to ask but…if someone has amnesia, why haven’t they told us yet?” Hiro questioned, not realizing how insensitive he was being. “I mean, they should know if they have amnesia right? Unless they forgot that, too…how would that work?”

As the clairvoyant’s strange commentary went on, Byakuya couldn’t stop himself from saying, “You know, somewhere there is a tree that is working twice as hard to replace the oxygen you’re currently wasting. Now go apologize to it.”

To that, Hiro’s expression twisted into confusion and he said, “Uh…I don’t get it.”

Another scoff came from the Togami Heir and he promptly answered, “I have neither the time nor the crayons to explain it to you.”

Finally registering that it was an insult, Hiro pointed an accusatory finger at him and said, “Yeah, well…you spout so much hot air that you need, like, twenty trees to replace all the oxygen you waste! You…you…tree killer!”

For a moment, Hiro was proud of his comment but it instantly vanished as Byakuya smirked and chided, “I’ve been called worse things by better people.”

Before Hiro could lose his temper and embarrass himself more, Taka stepped in and shouted, “Fighting is not permitted on school grounds! Even if it’s verbally! Now, apologize!”

A perplexed look overtook Hiro’s features as he asked, “Wait, why do I have to apologize to him for —?!”
“Very well then,” Byakuya surprisingly consented, with those who understood his thought process already piecing together what he was about to say. “I apologize for trying to teach the idiot how to comprehend rational thought. I should have known better. There. Let us move on to the next secret, please.”

“Alright then, since you asked politely, I’d be happy to move on,” Taka immediately agreed, drawing another secret.

“H-Hold on a second!” Hiro tried to speak up before Taka glared at him.

“I will have no further interruptions from you, Yasuhiro Hagakure! If you insist on disturbing us, you will be placed in detention!” the Moral Compass threatened, ignoring the clairvoyant’s pleas for understanding.

Not wanting to complicate matters further, Hiro regrettably fell silent as Taka opened up and began reading the next secret.

“One of us…got hard during sexual education class.”

This time an awkward silence filled the room. However, it wasn’t because they wondered who this could belong to, it was because it didn’t seem all that secretive to them. The ‘got hard’ bit referred to a guy, obviously, but it wasn’t exactly abnormal for a guy to get hard during sex ed., especially when they played videos explaining how to do everything with the opposite sex.

Hiro kind of looked like he wanted to point that fact out, but after what happened last time, he decided to keep his trap shut just in case he got insulted by anyone again. Even Taka didn’t seem all that perturbed by the revelation, setting that secret aside and grabbing another from the box without a single word. In fact, everyone was a bit surprised when he started reading the next secret.

“One of us…no longer a virgin!”

At this, an uproar of confusion overtook the students, with each of them glancing around at their fellow classmates, trying to figure out who it could be. And no one was more vocal in his surprise than Taka.

“This. Is. Out. Rageous! To have your purity taken before you even get through high school…before marriage even! How could someone let this—?!?”

“Does it really matter all that much in our current situation?” Kyoko suddenly asked, stopping Taka’s rant before he had a chance to suspect someone.

The Moral Compass turned his furious gaze directly toward her, obviously suspecting her because she spoke up. However, he didn’t have time to voice his opinion before someone else interrupted.

“Besides, that’s a completely private matter. We have no right to intrude on it,” Junko concurred, folding her arms and glaring at Taka. “What someone else chooses to do with their body is their decision and their decision alone. Or do you plan on disrespecting our personal space as well as our privacy?”

At this, Taka’s face reddened with anger as he shouted, “How dare you! I am the Ultimate Moral Compass! I would never consider doing such a thing! I just think that it wouldn’t be proper not to speak up about—!”

“I’m not a virgin,” Genocide Jill abruptly interrupted, staring Taka down while twiddling with her scissors. “I mean, it’s not like I had sex or anything but I can certainly tell you, I popped my cherry
in a very different way—!

“T-T-That’s quite enough!” Taka abruptly cut in, not wanting to know about what kind of ‘cherry’ a serial killer would have popped or how. “V-Verly well then, as before, if anyone wants to confess… speak with me privately…”

“Hopefully not too privately, if ya know what I mean!” Genocide Jill chided with a wink toward Byakuya, who completely turned away from her in response.

“S-Silence!” the Moral Compass ordered, grabbing the next secret from the box. “Now isn’t the time for such things—”.

“But I’m sure it will be later…” Genocide Jill finished with a smirk before falling silent.

Despite knowing how dangerous she was, the Moral Compass bravely glared at her for a moment, to be sure she wouldn’t interrupt him again, before slowly opening the paper in his hand so he could read the next secret.

“One of us is secretly aiding destitute members of their family.”

Again, the students were perplexed by how unimportant the secret seemed to be. Byakuya, however, remained eerily silent, doing his best not to draw attention to himself. He just wanted this to pass so that his secret could be kept secure. If he made any comment, it would draw attention, which, for once, he didn’t feel he needed for now.

“Well, I don’t know who this secret belongs to, but I think that’s sweet!” a smiling Hina said to everyone. “We should all learn to be a little more like that person!”

At the mention of that, Byakuya couldn’t stop the low chuckle that erupted from his throat. The irony was just too perfect for him not to react, despite how much he knew he needed to remain silent. Unfortunately for him, Hina had overheard his stifled laugh and didn’t seem too pleased.

“And what’s so funny about that, huh?!” she demanded, turning and glaring at him furiously.

Thinking quickly, he responded, “Am I not entitled to find it humorous that you’re wanting to be like someone you know nothing about? One good deed doesn’t make them a saint, you know.”

All eyes were on him now, just like he hadn’t wanted. Fortunately, none of them seemed to have pieced together that it was his own secret, only that he was being insensitive toward Hina and her comment. He only prayed that it was enough for them not to consider the matter further.

Luckily for him, it seemed that no one picked up on his subtle hinting, especially when Hina retorted, “A cold hearted bastardly like you could learn to be a little kinder to people!”

Again he let out a low chuckle, but this time it was to further demonstrate the point he’d just made. A moment later, everyone gave him the same disgusted looks he’d become accustomed to getting and turned away from them. Only when they all averted their gazes did the Togami Heir allow himself to breathe a relieved sigh…for that was almost too close.

However, as Byakuya lifted his head up, his eyes widened as he saw that Kyoko was actually still staring in his direction. However, before he could react further, she abruptly turned away, as if to mock him. Gritting his teeth, Byakuya felt anger boiling up inside him for allowing a moment of weakness to be observed. He would need to be more careful in the future.

As he continued to seethe, Taka drew the next secret from the box and prepared to read it.
“One of us is...Genocide Jack.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh! That’s me!” the serial killer immediately shouted, waving her scissors and striking a formidable pose. “The enigmatic ender of pretty boy lives is here for your pleasure...and mine too! Eyahahahahahaha!”

Everyone groaned a bit but didn’t feel the need to discuss that reveal further. Byakuya in particular eyed the box with their secrets, mentally willing Taka to draw the next one as soon as possible to stop Jill’s absurd laughter.

With no further need to deal with this secret, Taka did as expected and pulled the next one.

“One of us is involved with...uploading raw manga?”

For a moment there was confusion, as many of them didn’t have a clue as to what Scanlation was. However, they soon began to understand when Hifumi began to laugh loudly, in a vain attempt to cover up his nervousness.

“W-W-Who would ever be involved with such a thing?! Not me! That’s certain! I wouldn’t know anything about scanning manga and putting it online for people across the world to see just because I believe that all manga should be distributed equally! Nope! I certainly wouldn’t be involved with that! Ahahahahahaha!”

By now, it was more than obvious that he was the culprit but no one seemed to have the heart to reprimand him. That was most likely because most of them, aside from Kyoko and surprisingly Byakuya, didn’t know that uploading raw manga was very illegal, especially in Japan. However, they both decided to keep that information to themselves: Byakuya, so that he could use it as leverage if he ever needed it, and Kyoko, because she didn’t believe that bringing it up now would help resolve the tension they all felt.

At the same time, Taka raised an eyebrow at Hifumi’s speech before replying, “Well, it’s great to hear that you aren’t involved with that sort of thing! Or else I would have to report it to the school board! Ahahahahahaha!”

As Taka laughed heartily, completely believing the fanfic creator’s obvious lie, Hifumi’s laughter slowed until it became a very low whining sound, which the Moral Compass didn’t seem to notice but everyone else did.

Without waiting for anyone else, Taka grabbed what appeared to be the final secret left in the box. As he opened it and read it, he paused and stared at it for a moment.

“This one is...actually confusing to me,” Taka admitted, making everyone a bit curious.

“Well? What does it say?” Byakuya insisted, obviously losing his patience.

Seeing that everyone was staring at him, Taka looked at the paper one more time before reading it aloud:

“It’s just a name...Taeko Yasuhiro...”

To Be Continued...
Greetings, my beautiful readers! What a jam packed chapter after being gone for so long! But what’s gonna happen now?! How will Celeste react to that last secret? How will these secrets being revealed affect everyone? Did we even get to all of the secrets?! (one is missing for a spoiler-ish reason and will be in the next chapter) You’ll have to keep on reading to find out!

Now, I do have another important announcement, and it’s not that I’m going to be gone again. In fact, updates should be back on track from this point on! Anyway, I wanted you all to know that my story was recently plagiarized by another writer. However, I contacted the person in question and resolved the issue peacefully.

In addition, I would appreciate it if any of you happen to find my story being plagiarized in someone else story, to let me know of it as soon as possible. I am only one person and I can’t monitor everything, so your help would be greatly appreciated. A special thanks goes out to the person who informed me about the previous incident: Thank you very much!

Again, if you’re enjoying the story, feel free to let me know! I also take questions and do my best to respond to all reviews/comments that I get! I always appreciate you all letting me know how I’m doing and what I can do to improve my writing, so thanks to all of you who review/comment/read my story!

Until next time, keep on smiling my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Now that the secrets are revealed, how will everyone react? Taka continues his oppressive attitude and finds support from an unlikely ally. Monokuma takes a vacation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s just a name…Taeko Yasuhiro…”

Somewhere…deep within…a part of her soul snapped…and a rage unlike anything this world has ever seen burst forth…however…somehow…it was contained…hidden away…buried beneath years of rigorous discipline…and a mental fortitude that most professional gamblers failed to achieve…

Externally, Celestia Ludenberg showed absolutely no hint of emotion, her mask perfect and her posture showing no weakness. That was very fortunate for the gambler, because if any of the other students had been able to see through her at that moment, they would have seen a classmate so blood-thirsty and ruthless that Monokuma would have blushed.

The mere mention of that name boiled Celestia Ludenberg’s blood. She could feel every hair on her body standing on end, her body itself rejecting the moniker that had been forced upon her at birth. The disgusting reminder of who she used to be…it made her want to vomit blood. Even now, after several years of burying that name, someone had unearthed it. Not only that, they had foolishly announced it to each of the worthless idiots that she’d been misleading since the game began.

All around her, the other students expressed nothing less than confusion at the revelation of this secret. Fortunately, no one looked her way or seemed to suspect her. A part of her actually questioned why no one would consider it to be her secret, since it was obvious that she was hiding her real name. However, she wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth and decided to just let them think what they wanted.

Just as the moment seemed to pass and everyone appeared ready to move on, Makoto had to go and open his mouth.

“It’s just a name? That’s weird,” Makoto said aloud before turning and glancing toward Hiro for some reason. “Yasuhiro…that’s your full name isn’t it, Hiro? Is this someone related to you or something?”

Just a twitch…that’s all it was…the tiniest twitch of rage tugged at Celeste’s facial features…the only sign that she was in any way perturbed by that fucking absurd comment!

“Why the fucking fuck would that make any sense?!?” she mentally shouted while keeping her features as normal as possible. “It’s obvious that the Yasuhiro part of the secret is their family name, not their given name! So why would it matter?! How could anyone make such a childish mistake?! And why the fucking shit would you associate them with a shit-tard like Hiro?! That’s disrespectful on every possible level!”
As if to add to her humiliation, Hiro let out a chuckle and scratched his head as he replied, “‘Ya got me! Maybe they’re some distant relative or something? I mean, how ironic is it for two completely different people to have the same name, right?’

It took every ounce of willpower Celeste had to keep from walking over and stabbing that worthless loser right in the eye with her finger talon accessory. And she wouldn’t have stopped there! She would have needed to break both of Makoto’s legs as punishment for even suggesting such a bullshit notion. Sure, it would reveal her secret, but it would make her feel oh so satisfied! And since she wouldn’t have killed them, just horrifically maimed them, there would be no reason for a true class trial, just another wannabe ‘bullying’ trial. However, with the level of animosity she’d been throwing at everyone lately, she decided against it, considering they could decide to have her executed via the new rules…but god-dammit she really did want to cut a bitch right now!

However, that was a gamble she wasn’t prepared to deal with right now. For the moment, she knew that it was best to keep up her usual act and just let things pass by. That way, when they least expected it…she would strike! And right now, the target of her rage was the one who revealed her secret in front of everyone.

Lifting her gaze up, she carefully glared Taka’s way as he set down the last secret, her secret, thus finishing out the twisted scene.

“And with that, all of our secrets are out in the open!” Taka triumphantly shouted at everyone, his hair still a white sheen and his eyes burning passionately. Misinterpreting their harsh glares as appreciative glances, he cocked a smirk and continued, “There’s no need to thank me! Now that there are no secrets between us, we will be able to—”. Taka’s triumph was cut short by Byakuya’s interruption.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” the smooth and authoritative voice of Byakuya interrupted, much to Taka’s displeasure. However, the Moral Compass allowed him to finish, like a gentleman should. “I was keeping count while you read them off and if I’m not mistaken, there were only fourteen secrets but fifteen of us.”

“T-That’s impossible!” Taka protested, diving back into the box and checking to be sure he read them all. Finding none left, he picked up the stack of open secrets and flipped through them, counting as he did so. “…twelve…thirteen…fourteen…! For the love of all that is moral discipline! Byakuya Togami is correct! One is missing!”

A wave of realization swept through the cafeteria as everyone mentally recounted how many secrets had been revealed. At the same time, Taka’s eyes widened and he felt himself go weak in the knees, feeling failure creeping up on him so soon after his ascendance.

“Don’t you all find that odd?” Byakuya continued, glancing knowingly around the room. “We were promised all the secrets and yet one has been omitted. Is it perhaps because it is your secret, Chairman Ishimaru?”

As that accusation was hurled at him in that snide tone, Taka felt his newfound anger powers revitalize and his aura unexpectedly brightened as he retorted, “How dare you! Suggesting that I, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru, would deign to leave out my own secret! I can tell you for a fact that my secret was already revealed with the rest of them—!”

A menacing chuckle resounded, interrupting him and making everyone turn. They were unsurprised when they discovered Celeste, covering her mouth with one hand, stifling the end of her laugh.
“And how are we to believe that?” she insisted, her eyes seeming more dangerous than usual. “Do you have any proof that you are not, in fact, hiding your own secret from us?”

Flabbergasted by her hostile attitude, Taka shouted in protest, “Don’t be absurd! I would never commit such a foul act! I am just as laid bare of my secret as the rest of you! This is all just some kind of mistake! I swear it!”

To this, Celeste chuckled again, this time even more sinister than before. “If you cannot prove your innocence, then what you have done can be classified as a form of ‘bullying’, yes? Perhaps we should call Monokuma to see what he makes of all this?”

“Indeed, I believe we should,” Byakuya agreed before turning and glaring at a nearby camera. “I’m sure you must have heard that. Show yourself before I begin to lose my patience.”

At the mention of the bear’s summons, everyone tensed and prepared for the worst. After all, there was no way the Mastermind wouldn’t step in, especially after being called out personally.

“Oooooh! This is getting good! I don’t wanna get up but I have to!!”

High up on the fourth floor, hidden away in the camera control room, the real Junko watched the scene through the monitor. It had been thrilling so far, especially watching Celeste’s obvious internal freak out at having her real name read. And now the added pleasure of Taka having misplaced one of the secrets was spicing things up even more! She really wanted to continue watching but nature was calling and she couldn’t hold it in much longer.

“They’ll just have to wait ‘til I get back! It’ll raise the tension even more!” Junko squealed joyfully as she moved to stand up.

Unfortunately, her attention became instantly refocused when, as she’d stood up for her pee break, she stepped on something. Raising an eyebrow as she looked down, she bent over and picked a lone piece of paper up off the floor and unceremoniously unfolded it. As she read it, her need to pee vanished.

Junko’s eyes widened as she stared at the piece of paper in her hand, the final secret that she had forgotten to place in the box next to the others before giving it to Taka. It had been an honest mistake, accidentally leaving it out. After all it wasn’t her fault it ended up on the floor and not in the box. Plus, if Trust Fund hadn’t pointed it out, then they probably wouldn’t have been the wiser. But that wasn’t really the pressing issue.

“Well…this is gonna be awkward…or is it?” she said with a smirk as she handed off the letter to a waiting Monokuma. “Rush delivery – coming right up…after I pee!”

Her bladder lurched as she dashed for the nearest restroom, confident the students could wait.

To everyone’s surprise, Monokuma didn’t arrive immediately. In fact, almost an entire minute seemed to pass in utter silence. Then two minutes…then five minutes…ten minutes…then a quarter of an hour went by and still no Monokuma. Meanwhile, all of the students stood there simply waiting for the Mastermind to reveal its pawn. It was incredibly surreal.
“Do you think he’s really coming?” Hiro foolishly asked, the first one to voice anything since the bear had been summoned. “Not that I’m complaining—”.

“That sure as hell sounded like a complaint to me!” the high-pitched tones of Monokuma abruptly erupted from the behind all of them. Spinning around, they saw the demented bear waddling into the cafeteria from the hallway entrance.

“Perfect timing…although considerably late,” Byakuya said, a malicious smirk spreading over his lips. “We believe that we have a case of—”.

Suddenly, the Togami Heir’s breath caught in his throat as he saw something familiar gripped tightly in one of Monokuma’s paws. Everyone else, however, was so stunned when Byakuya, of all people, had found himself speechless, that they hadn’t noticed yet. Taking advantage of that, the bear sighed heavily before addressing them.

“Jeez! You kids work me to the bone!” the bear mimed wiping nonexistent sweat from its brow before continuing. “I just happened to be talking a walk, I have to keep my bear-ish figure somehow, and happened to come across this just outside the cafeteria.”

Lifting its paw up, all of the students were both relieved and horrified to see another piece of paper, exactly like the ones that contained their secrets, held in the bear’s clutches.

“Is that—?” Celeste tried to ask but was cut off.

“The final secret!” Monokuma answered, ignoring the menacing glare the gambler shot its way as it interrupted her. “I can only assume that Mr. Chairman Ishimaru dropped it on his way here this morning. You guys sure are lucky I was doing my usual rounds!”

As usual, the bear cackled as it waved the final secret disrespectfully above its head, making everyone glare fiercely at the demented automaton.

“Yes, yes, you’re quite generous. Now may I please have that? I need to finish my task so that we can move on to other agendas!” Taka said, holding his hand out insistently.

Monokuma huffed and whispered, “Being pushy is how Chairmen get assassinated…”

However, the bear didn’t delay, waddling over and presenting the final secret to Taka, who decided that it was best to simply get it over with and unfolded the paper. Without any hesitation, he read the contents aloud:

“One of us…sold ‘oregano’ to a minor?”

It took a moment for most of the students to register exactly what that secret meant. Those that understood it immediately, namely Kyoko, Byakuya, Celeste, and surprisingly Sayaka, all turned their gaze to an increasingly nervous Hiro. At that time, most of the other students followed their classmates’ gazes until almost the entire class was staring directly at the now frantic Ultimate Clairvoyant.

Unsurprisingly, under the weight of all their stares, Hiro broke instantly.

“How was I supposed to know that he was a minor?! Or a yakuza for that matter?!” the clairvoyant blurted, throwing up his hands before clutching his head and rubbing his skull. “He said that he was older than he looked! He had an honest face! How could I possibly have known?!”

A resounding sigh was shared as a clear picture of the incident came to light. Most of the students
shook their heads in disappointment, while the others were dumbfounded by the fact that he’d admitted it so readily. However, much to everyone’s shock, Taka abruptly started laughing heartily. As one, the class turned to stare at him, utterly perplexed by his reaction to this shocking secret. Just as Kyoko was contemplating speaking up, the Moral Compass spoke.

“Aahahahaha! Foolish Hiro,” he said with an understand smile. “Children can’t cook for themselves! So they would have no use for oregano or any other spices for that matter!”

Realizing that the Moral Compass didn’t understand the full implications of his crime, Hiro nervously laughed along with him and answered, “Ahhhh…haha…yeah! Kids can’t cook…haha…ha…”

As Taka continued to laugh at what he considered to be an absurd secret, the rest of the class fell into utter disbelief. By this point, even those unaffiliated with these kinds of situations, like Makoto and Hina, fully understand that Hiro had been dealing in narcotics. However, for Taka to completely misunderstand that was actually a blessing in disguise, since he wouldn’t be on the warpath over the issue any time soon.

Unfortunately, that didn’t mean that others wouldn’t be inclined to enlighten Taka. Strangely enough though, the primary candidates for that, Byakuya and Celeste, were choosing to remain silent. However, just by looking at them, it was obvious by their smirks that they intended to use this information as leverage if they ever needed it. Not to mention that they probably didn’t want to have to deal with a rampaging, super stick-up-his-ass Taka right now anyway.

The only fear now was Monokuma, who stood right next to Taka as the announcement had gone out. Again, strangely, it seemed the bear was no more eager to correct him than anyone else…which was more frightening than anything else.

“Alright then, now that we’ve got all of the secrets exposed! I suggest we test the limits of our newfound faith in one another by doing a trust building exercise!” Taka shouted to everyone, the white sheen around his body and burning eyes still radiating brightly. A collective groan sounded but he promptly ignored it, most likely having anticipated their reaction. “I know, I know, this can be difficult but we shall overcome this uneasiness about our classmates together! Now, the only question is, what kind of trust building exercise shall we do?”

“Oh! Oh! I know the perfect trust building exercise!” Monokuma excitedly proclaimed, leaping up and waving its paws.

With a skeptical glare, Taka asked, “And what might that be?”

Without any other pretexts, Monokuma leapt up onto the table and struck a dynamic pose, pointing upward with a single finger. “Since you all survived another class trial, though it was considerably different, I shall graciously allow you all to advance up to the third floor!”

Mukuro’s eyes widened, as did everyone else’s, as they learned of Monokuma’s ‘generous’ gift. Instantly, the soldier searched her memory for everything that was on the third floor.

“The Rec Room, the Art Room, art supply room, the physics lab and the storage room just beyond it. The art room doubled as a classroom, and there are two actual classrooms on that floor, to the right after getting up the stairs, if I remember correctly.”

Internally, she grimaced as she realized that the third floor was one of the largest in the entire school and had various tools to be concerned about. The wood working utensils and other art supplies could
easily be turned into tools of murder in the wrong hands. The same was true in history; hammers and sickles that were forged in order to create and help harvest were turned into deadly weapons during wartime. This school was quickly becoming more like a battlefield than a place of learning in Mukuro’s mind.

“We must…go upward!” Inexplicably from behind its back, the bear pulled out a pair of spiky red sunglasses, donning them while still pointing upward and shouting, “For you all are the students that will pierce the heavens!”

“Copyright!! That is copyright!” Hifumi instantly shouted, pointing accusatorily at the bear. “Even if you changed the phrase a bit, it’s obviously a rip-off of—”.

“And I suppose you’d be the expert on ripping manga…now wouldn’t you, Mr. Ultimate Fanfic Creator?” Monokuma jeered, silencing Hifumi instantly.

The soldier watched as the fanfic creator swallowed the lump in his throat but otherwise didn’t move for a moment, obviously weighing his options. It didn’t take him long to decide, however, as he sat back down a few moments later and said, “…please continue.”

With a menacing grin, Monokuma took in a deep breath…and then began to sing:

“A whole neeeeeeew wooooorld! A new fantastic place to kill! Don’t matter what you use! There’s stuff to peruse! As long as one of you ends up dead tooooodaaaaaaay!”

As the bear sang, completely off key, all of the students cringed, wishing they could un-hear the song they had been subjected to. Mukuro noticed that Hifumi, in particular, had to hold himself down in his chair, probably to keep from shouting about copyright again. Then again, that wasn’t really even the issue, a point that Mukuro decided needed to be stressed.

“You’re not even being subtle about it anymore…” the soldier jeered, frowning angrily at Monokuma.

Without hesitation, the bear answered, “Screw subtlety! It wasn’t getting me anywhere! Kill each other!”

Even though everyone in the room was more or less used to Monokuma’s antics, the fact that the bear was blatantly telling them what it wanted was kind of terrifying. Mukuro could understand why it was acting like this though…Junko must have been getting bored, and that wasn’t good for anyone. The soldier knew that her sister could change her mind or opinion at the drop of a hat, mainly because it was a daily occurrence.

However, with the lack of corpses this game had produced, it was obvious that Junko wasn’t getting a return on the ‘investment’ she’d put into creating this game. And while it seemed that Junko was still actively following her own rules, for the most part, considering she added new rules for the last trial, Mukuro wondered exactly how long she’d stick to those rules. Because when Junko completely lost patience…she’d do something drastic. And that was something the soldier didn’t even want to think about right now.

Instead, she chose to focus on her own advice and just do what she could for now. It was all any of them could do at the moment…especially with the way Taka was acting.

“Very well! So then, as Monokuma suggested, we shall now go and investigate the newly opened
floor!” Taka shouted his orders at everyone before walking around the side of the table and heading for the door. “Everyone, get into a straight line! Single file now!”

“Wait a second,” Sayaka asked the Moral Compass as he passed her and Leon. Surprisingly, Taka came to an abrupt halt and turned his fearsome gaze toward her, a questionable expression on his face. Without a hint of apprehension, the pop idol gestured to her food and asked, “Can’t we at least finish eating first? At the very least, I know that Leon hasn’t had anything to eat yet.”

With a sympathetic smile, Sayaka turned to look at Leon, who was now dejectedly looking at the destroyed sandwich that had slipped from his hand when Taka had burst in. Carefully, she set her good hand on his shoulder, patting him gently with a consolingly smile; as if to say ‘you can make another one’. The baseball star looked back to her and couldn’t help but smile back with a look that said ‘but it’ll never be the same…’.

Confident she was getting her point across, the pop idol shifted her gaze back to Taka and continued, “And I’m sure the rest of us would enjoy finishing our meal—”.

“Then perhaps you all should have thought about that before meeting in secret this morning!”

No one was prepared for the sudden explosion of fury that Taka exuded, shouting directly in Sayaka’s face, spittle splattering on her cheeks. Startled, the pop idol rebounded backwards, losing her balance and almost falling, if not for the fact that Leon sprung into action and caught her. A relieved sigh escaped both of them as the baseball star slowly lowered her down into her chair, a brief appreciative smile shared between them.

However, it almost instantly vanished as Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru continued his tirade.

“If all of you had simply waited for me, and by that extent Byakuya and Toko, then we could have all had a pleasant morning meeting, eaten heartily, and then explored the new floor together peacefully! Instead, you all chose to go behind my back and forced me to take up my previous position as Disciplinary Committee Chairman just to keep order in this place—!”

“No one forced you to do anything, jackass!” Junko immediately retorted, leaning toward him with her hands on her hips. “If anything, you’re the one making trouble for the rest of us! It’s been difficult enough dealing with this messed up killing game! We don’t need someone going all rule-Nazi on us on top of all that!”

“Though I loathe to associate myself with such a vulgar woman, I regrettably must agree with Junko,” the smug voice of Byakuya rose up from behind everyone, with the Fashionista sending him a menacing glare for his comment. However, he ignored her sour glance, as usual, and continued to address Taka. “You can’t possibly expect us to follow your ludicrous notions of order. After all, you are nothing more than a mere student here, the same as the rest of us. Perhaps your family used to be influential in the past, but as of now, your name means less than nothing.”

A visible twitch tugged at Taka’s features as Byakuya finished, a smug grin on the Affluent Progeny’s lips. At the same time, almost all of their classmates shared a look of confusion. Even Junko seemed utterly baffled by that comment, falling into silent contemplation. The only one among them that seemed aware of what Byakuya referred to was Kyoko, who had narrowed her eyes at him for the implication.

“Excuse me, but, I fail to understand your implication,” Celeste brazenly asked, an almost sadistic glint in her eyes. “How exactly do you mean that his name used to be influential?”
Although her question seemed innocent enough, it was obviously to everyone that it was dripping with venom, more than likely due to having her and everyone else’s secrets revealed. Celeste truly didn’t seem to know what the Togami Heir was referring to, but she could see that it perturbed Taka, and was willfully prodding at the open wound that had been exposed. Unfortunately, while the rest of the class felt repulsed by her and Byakuya’s actions, none of them could deny that Taka had brought it upon himself.

With a cruel smirk, Byakuya turned to address everyone, clearing his throat loudly for emphasis.

“Our esteemed Committee Chairman is the grandson of Former Prime Minister Toranosuke Ishimaru.” He paused for a moment, letting that information sink in. However, when he noticed the confused glances of classmates such as Hiro and Hifumi, he decided that he needed to elaborate, for the simple-minded folks. “For those that remain ignorant of our country’s political history, I should mention that Toranosuke Ishimaru was removed from his position due to a scandal involving the embezzlement of a large amount of funds.”

A sense of understanding flooded everyone’s mind and one by one, they turned to glance at Taka. The Moral Compass’ gaze was downcast, his burning red eyes closed as he quietly listened to everything Byakuya had to say.

“Oh, now I understand. As I recall, the Ishimaru family continues to struggle with sizable debt that was left in the wake of that scandal. How horrifying…” Celeste maliciously commented, adding insult to injury.

“It’s more along the lines of pathetic,” Byakuya added, his snide smirk shifting into a look of genuine disgust. “You obviously inherited your grandfather’s penchant for making a fool of himself. As it stands, you have absolutely no right to hold yourself in a higher position than the rest of us. In fact, you’ve clearly overstepped your bounds. Perhaps we should consider your little spat with Sayaka as a form of bullying and—”.

“Just stop it, guys!” Makoto almost pleaded, instantly drawing everyone’s attention. In particular, Celeste and Byakuya sent him a fearsome glare, to which he flinched slightly before continuing. “W-We don’t have time to be putting each other down like this! We need to stay strong and work together—”.

“Unfortunately, I must disagree with you, Makoto Naegi!”

Everyone was shocked when Taka abruptly shouted, the aura around his body intensifying. His burning red eyes snapped open and the white sheen around his hair shone brighter than ever before. A wave of unsettlement passed through all of the students, and even Byakuya and Celeste felt a pit growing in their stomachs as the Moral Compass suddenly began screaming.

“If anything…this series of unfortunate events has opened my eyes to the truth! As we are now, there is absolutely no way that we can act as a single unit!” His voice rattled the very air as he turned his gaze toward Celeste, a sense of power flowing out of his visage. In that moment, even if it was only for a second, the tiniest bit of fear registered on the gambler’s face. “Celestia Ludenberg! You are correct that my family is in debt, but at least we live a good, honest life! The same, I fear, cannot be said for you!”

As that insinuation rang out, a blank expression overtook Celeste’s features, as if she couldn’t comprehend how to process those words. When she finally seemed to regain her senses, she merely frowned and gave a swift huff before twirling her hair between her fingers…possibly in order to keep herself from strangling him. Seeing that she was more or less speechless, Taka then set his sights on the Togami Heir.
“And you, Byakuya Togami! You are correct that my grandfather was a fool! However, insisting that I am also a fool simply because I am his grandson is beyond petty! Your family should be ashamed of how pathetic you’re acting! As the scion of the Togami family, you need to learn humility before you can ever hope to succeed your predecessor.”

For a moment, all Byakuya could do was flinch, never having expected someone he’d just thoroughly humiliated to throw such disrespectful words back at him. He gritted his teeth and prepared for a counter argument but never got the chance, as Taka completely turned away from him, as if ignoring his existence. This further humiliation only served to ignite the Togami Heir’s fury, his hands clenching into fists with his nails digging into his own palms.

However, before Byakuya had the chance to regain his dignity, a flash suddenly shot past him. Before he or anyone else knew it, Genocide Jill stood directly in front of Taka, poised to strike with her scissors at the ready in both hands.

“You…how dare you insult Master Byakuya!” the serial killer screeched, barely holding herself back. “That is a fate punishable by multiple eviscerations! A fate that I shall carry out—!”

Much to everyone’s shock, a glass of water was suddenly splashed in her face. As the water dripped off her and splattered to the floor, Taka lowered a now empty water glass and set it on the table next to him.

“It is against my moral code to strike a woman, but you certainly needed to cool off. I certainly hope I’ve made myself clear,” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru told her firmly, wiping off the little bit of water that had landed on his own hand.

A confused expression overtook Genocide Jill’s features as her brain struggled to register what had happened. Her braided pig tails were, miraculously, the driest part of her upper half, with the wet and matted bangs of her hair clinging to the skin of her forehead. Her glasses, obscured with droplets of moisture, slipped down slightly and hung on the edge of her nose. The top of her uniform was also dampened, clinging to her chest tightly enough to see the mounds of her breasts.

When she was finally able to think straight, Genocide Jill sputtered a bit, blowing air out her nose to clear out all of the water that must have splashed up inside. After only a few moments coughing and sputtering, she slowly pushed up her glasses with her middle finger, intentionally it seemed. When she lowered her hand, an intense blood-lust radiated from her eyes and she narrowed her gaze dangerously at the one who had done this to her.

All the while, Taka simple glared at her, not an ounce of fear present in his visage.

“You…little…bitch…you got water up my nose! Don’t think that you’ll…that you’ll…” Genocide Jill began to say before wrinkling her nose as water dripped off it. Suddenly, she blinked her eyes rapidly, tears forming in the corners, as if trying to forestall something. “O-Oh no…! Not…now! Ah…ah…ah…ACHOOO!”

As that sneeze echoed around the room, everyone was shocked as Genocide Jill’s visage suddenly shifted. Her eyes held no hint of blood-lust, her confident smirk was replaced by a fearful frown, and she was visibly trembling as her eyes scanned the whole room frantically. It was then that she noticed her dampened appearance, which only seemed to perplex her further.

“H-Huh…? W-What…? What’s g-going…on? Why a-am I…all w-wet? Weren’t we h-having a c-
class t-trial?” Toko asked hysterically, trying to make sense of everything that had happened.

In that moment, it became obvious to everyone that, somehow, Genocide Jill had switched back into Toko. An almost collective sigh was released as this became evident, with Byakuya showing visible relief for the first time since the trial yesterday.

Unfortunately for her, Toko almost immediately noticed that she was holding her other personality’s favored killing tool and couldn’t stop herself from screaming. Desperately looking around the room, it was obvious that she expected to find bloody corpse rather than a gathering of her fellow students, all of whom were staring at her. In the midst of her panic, she turned her gaze to see the newly transformed Taka looming over her, his expression chilling her to the bone.

“How are you, young lady!” Taka shouted before she could recover, still stunned by everything that had happened. “If you don’t put those cutting tools away this instant, I will have to report you to Monokuma for bullying!”

Only now did Toko take in Taka’s new appearance; the white sheen of his hair, the burning fury in his eyes…it was reminiscent of a horror novel she’d read as a child, the kind to scare little kids, about a vicious monster that took human form to feed on children. And it seemed that, for her at least, it had the same effect on adults.

Unrelenting fear gripped Toko and, unsurprisingly, her legs buckled and she fell to the floor with a terrified wail. Almost immediately, she lifted her skirt and attempted to replace the scissors into the holsters on her legs. However, as panicked as she was, she couldn’t quite get them back in, more than likely because she wasn’t used to replacing them. That honor more than likely went to her other half, not to mention that her hands were shaking out of fearful desperation.

Just when she felt that she was going to break down into tears, a steady hand gently gripped her own and guided the first pair of scissors into place. Toko’s gaze shot up and, rather than it being her Master, as she’d hoped, she found that Junko was the one helping to get her situated. The writer flinched and instinctively pulled away from her, shouting, “I-I d-don’t need y-your help! You h-hussy!”

As she shouted that, she tried to replace the other set of scissors, only to accidentally scrape them against her own thigh. Luckily, it was only a tiny scrape and no blood came out but she winced regardless. She didn’t have time to react before Junko carefully grabbed her other hand and once again guided the scissors into the holster.

Embarrassed that someone she despised had to help her, Toko had no other recourse other than to shout, “D-Don’t think I o-owe you or anything! I would h-have gotten it just f-fine on my own! You p-probably think I-I’m useless, right?! That I c-can’t do anything for m-myself, right?!”

She paused and waited for Junko to retort but strangely, nothing happened. It had been nearly ten seconds and the Fashionista hadn’t tried to refute or agree with her statement. Honestly, it kind of scared Toko because she’d never known someone not to react when she acted like that. At the same time, she didn’t say those horrible things about herself for attention, she actually believed that must be what people thought of her. And weirdly enough, Junko remaining silent actually…felt like a compliment.

It was as if…Junko didn’t feel the need to reprimand or console her. She had just helped her and moved on…which confused the already perplexed writer even more!

Taking a chance, the bespectacled girl lifted her gaze up to see Junko, who had stood up and stepped in front of her, absolutely fuming. However, she didn’t seem upset about the things Toko had said.
Instead, the Fashionista seemed downright pissed at Taka.

Mukuro was seething, her vision was flooded with the color red and she was struggling to maintain her composure, let alone her disguise. Not since her sister betrayed her had she felt such rage. Taka had far overstepped his boundaries this time…insulting and screaming at Sayaka, demoralizing Toko for her other personality’s actions…it was enough to make her sick!

“Just who in the hell do you think you are…?” she seethed, keeping her voice low and menacing. “I don’t care if you call yourself Committee Chairman, or even Prime Minister for that matter. You’re way out of line and you need to—what the fuck, again?!”

During her tirade, Taka wrote up another pink slip for her use of language and was already working on writing up another for her coarse language a moment ago.

“Every offense needs strict discipline,” Taka practically recited as he held out the two pink pages, dangling them in front of her face until she finally broke and snatched them away from him. Almost reflexively, she gripped the edges of the slips and prepared to rip them apart, but was stopped when the Moral Compass stated, “And remember, tearing up an official notice from the Disciplinary Committee is another offense. So please bear that in mind.”

Mukuro’s hands clenched while holding the slips, wanting nothing more than to turn them both into confetti. However, rather than deal with Taka’s absurdity in writing out at least three more, two for each paper and another for committing the offense, she instead stuffed them into her blouse pocket, looking slightly defeated.

Despite that, she still found the will to reply, “This is what I’m talking about! You’re going way too far with this whole Disciplinary Committee sh—”, she barely managed to keep herself from swearing and instead redirected her wording. “—stuff…Disciplinary Committee stuff. I can guarantee you that this isn’t the way to keep us safe or help us escape from here. Just look at what you’ve done in the last few minutes. You’re putting everyone on edge and it’s only going to lead to more problems.”

The soldier gestured toward Sayaka and Toko, trying to emphasize how appalling his behavior had been. Taka took a brief moment to glance their way, with Sayaka nervously staring at him and Toko slowly crawling toward the door while still on the floor. Furrowing his brow, the Moral Compass took a moment to ponder and Mukuro hoped that her insistence would be enough to at least get him to back down for the moment. They could all talk about how to deal with him later, if need be, but right now, he was like a rabid dog snapping at everything that annoyed him.

After a few moments of silent contemplation, Taka lifted his gaze and met Mukuro’s eyes. As a seasoned soldier, Mukuro could see that he had made a steadfast decision, and as much as she wanted to be reassured by that, she could also see the distrust he bore her and everyone else within his crimson irises.

“You’re quite right. I haven’t handled this situation as I should have, and I apologize for that,” he began, daring to let everyone have the slightest hint of hope. However, it was instantly crushed as he continued, “That is why, from here on out, insubordination will not be tolerated! We’ve all seen how disruptions from challenging authority can have disastrous results! As such, from this moment on; anyone who has complaints will answer directly to me!”

All color drained from Mukuro’s face as that proclamation was uttered, and she knew that her battle to keep everyone alive had just entered a new stage of warfare.
“This is the only way to establish order now,” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru reassured himself. “Junko is correct that I am not handling this situation appropriately...however, tough love, I believe they call it, seems to be the most effective measure to take with everyone at the moment.”

Although he’d been a bit slow on the uptake, the harshness of his recent actions finally dawned on him. He hadn’t meant to frighten Leon or Sayaka, even if they had provoked him first, but the fact remained that he’d responded sternly to their complaints. He could have approached the matter more carefully. Granted, they were being belligerent and there was no place for such behavior in the school environment he was building. Next time, he’d simply remind them of their own fatal mistake during the first case, which would be enough to get them to reconsider how offensive they were being towards him and their classmates.

As for Toko, or Genocide Jill rather, she was being disruptive and needed to be taught a lesson in manners. And since it was unbecoming to strike a woman, he figured cooling her off with water was more appropriate. And it had worked; she’d completely reverted back to her more manageable state, a blessing that his classmates surely appreciated as well. Her excuse of having a split personality didn’t diminish her disruptive attitude, and thus, he had given her a stern verbal warning.

But then, Junko had to spout expletives in succession and needed to be reminded that a lady does not use coarse language, regardless of the circumstances. Even so, she had made a valid point. Although it was unintentionally, he seemed to be putting everyone on edge. He simply needed to give them time to adjust. After all, even he would have been surprised if a fellow classmate had suddenly decided to take complete authority over all of their lives. However, he was confident that they all would soon come to understand that this was the way things needed to be. It would be a difficult adjustment period, but he was confident he could instill the same level of respect he’d demanded from his years as a hall monitor!

Someday, they would thank him for being so vigilant against rule-breakers and dissenters. It was all for their own sakes, after all.

“By taking on the burden of enforcing the school regulations myself, rather than allowing Monokuma to run rampant, I can bring order from chaos and prevent further acts of betrayal at the same time. Even if they can’t see it right now, I’m sure that my classmates will eventually understand that everything I do is for the sake of their survival. Someday, we shall all look back on this moment and recall it as the moment when I brought salvation to this horrific situation!”

As if coinciding with his thoughts, the burning white aura around his body intensified as reassurance flooded his being.

“From this moment on, any and all enforcement of the rules shall be carried out by the Disciplinary Committee!” Taka announced to his classmates with no hesitation, completely ignorant of their fiery gazes. “And since I am the only acting member of the committee, it falls to me to distribute punishment for each offense committed!!”

“…Okay, this isn’t going anything like I expected…and that’s why it’s so interesting!”

Junko Enoshima practically squealed with joy as she watched the scene on the surveillance room monitors. After giving Super Stick-Up-His-Ass the nameless secrets, the Mastermind honestly hadn’t
known what would become of it. For all she knew, he could have simply turned them all over to his fellow classmates without reading them at all.

But then again…if she’d really expected that to happen she wouldn’t have given them to him in the first place.

“Despair can take so many forms, that’s why it’s so fulfilling,” she reminded herself, gazing longingly at the dejected faces of her former classmates. “Torture and cruelty are the most common progenitors but, in these rare moments, good-will can instill more despair than a freight-train crashing into an orphanage while on fire!”

With a spring in her step, Junko leapt up from her seat and skipped toward the Monokuma control room, the devious glint in her eyes reflecting off the monitors as she passed by.

As Taka’s proclamation reverberated in their ears, reactions varied from angered expressions to pained looks.

Makoto’s shock was probably the most evident, as his mouth hung open and his eyes slightly dilated. However, he wasn’t the only one, both Hina and Sakura held startled visages of their own, the former seeming a bit more frazzled than the latter. And while Sayaka shared their worried expression, Leon could only express frustration at this news, his hands clenched into fists as he glared at his sauna buddy. Kyoko was the only one who didn’t seem rattled by this revelation, the look in her eyes suggesting that she had predicted this outcome long before Taka had conceived it. Rather than being shocked, Hiro didn’t seem to fully comprehend exactly what the Disciplinary Committee Chairman was imposing; this was evident by the fact that he kept looking from one person to the next, hoping one of them would explain it. At the same time, Hifumi was pondering over which story-line their new dystopian-type leader would follow; would it be ‘Ishimaru of the Rebellion’ or ‘Divergent Taka’? In either case, the fanfic creator was confident that with his vast knowledge of plot and character development, he could survive in any harsh environment Taka forced upon them. Meanwhile, Celeste continued to glare harshly, wishing the dagger she was staring at Taka weren’t metaphorical. Byakuya, strangely, didn’t seem all that perturbed by this development. In fact, if one looked closely, the tiniest trace of a smirk tugged at his lips, as if he was preparing to enjoy the ensuing chaos. Trembling somewhere behind him, Toko had managed to pull herself up off the floor and was currently trying to figure out where she was and why Mondo and Chihiro were missing. Finally, as the one who stood almost directly in front of Taka, it fell to Junko to showcase the look of abject horror that all of them felt deep down inside.

However, above all, a sense of confusion began to settle in as they all tried to make sense of their classmate’s sudden rise to power. In the midst of this perplexion, a single voice broke through the confusion…and it was not one they had expected.

“Oooooh, I like the cut of your jib, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru!” Monokuma suddenly cheered from atop a nearby table, making its presence inescapably known. “In fact, I appreciate your dedication to the rules so much that, I think, for the time being, I’ll allow you to be the sole enforcer of the school regulations until further notice!”

Gasps of shock and looks of horror struck almost all of the students as the demented bear relayed its support of Taka’s newfound position.

“T-That’s crazy!” Junko immediately retorted, a contortion of terror and anger twisting her features. “Giving a student that much authority is—!”
“—Perfectly within my power as Headmaster of Hope’s Peak! Or do you plan on going against my instructions again, Little Miss ‘Holier’ Than Thou?” Monokuma jeered cheerfully, its words a proverbial slap in the Fashionista’s face.

Junko gritted her teeth and subconsciously rubbed her injured hand, the memory of her first rebellion still a fresh wound. Seeing that the Fashionista was backing down, Monokuma took that opportunity to cement its decision.

“But don’t you worry, I’m not relinquishing complete control. Whenever a student becomes a blackened, or violates the bullying rule, a class trial will still be held and presided over by yours truly! However, minor issues like running in the halls and the policing of profanity shall hereby be carried out by the school’s newest Disciplinary Committee Chairman!”

Immediately following those words, Taka bowed deeply to the bear and shouted, “Thank you for the honor! I promise I will do my best!”

Junko stood there, flabbergasted by her classmate’s display, her will to resist slowly dissipating. Her hands closed into fists and her arms shook with suppressed rage, knowing how utterly powerless she was to stop her delusional classmate. In the midst of all that, another student approached Monokuma from the side, which took the bear a moment to notice.

“What’s your goal in this?” Kyoko bluntly asked, locking eyes with the bear without backing down.

“Goal? I haven’t scored a goal yet! If anything, the score is up 2 to zilch, in your favor! Besides, I’m an educator, not a Brazilian!” the bear replied while miming missing kicking an imaginary soccer ball before falling on its back. Picking itself up and putting on a pair of thick glasses, the bear continued, “And as an educator, it is my duty to teach you little punks a lesson. And what better way than allowing one of my students to ‘teach’ in my absence. It’ll be like real world experience…if the real world were reality television.”

Kyoko raised an eyebrow at that comment and replied, “Will you really stay your hand if one of us violates the rules?”

A heavy question but one that Monokuma seemed prepared for. “As I said, unless it’s class trail worthy, any and all disciplinary measures will be handled by Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru.”

“Is that a guarantee?” the lavender haired girl pressed, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

“I promise you that I won’t interfere unless it’s absolutely necessary! Trust me, as a bear, my word is my bond!” Monokuma cheerfully expressed, a hint of malice in its voice. “With that said, I think it’s about time Mr. Monokuma gave himself a nice long vacation!”

Inexplicably from behind its back, the bear pulled out a Hawaiian shirt and lei, donning them both immediately. Pulling out a plane ticket from the shirt’s breast pocket, Monokuma waved the expensive looking ticket for everyone to see before waddled toward the door, humming a playful tune as it went. As the demented bear reached the door, it spun around and pointed directly at Taka.

“I leave everything in your capable hands, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru! I know you won’t let me down!”

Giving a passionate salute, Taka answered, “Of course! Leave everything to me! Enjoy your vacation!”

Monokuma gave a quick salute back before dashing out the door. An instant later, the sounds of an
airplane taking off resounded through the school’s PA system, much to everyone but Taka’s chagrin.

“Did he just get on a plane?” Hiro asked, looking upward as if he might spot it. “Does that mean there’s an airport here? Do you think we could use it to escape?”

A collective groan from the rest of his classmates was all the answer Hiro needed.

Once Hawaiian shirt clad Monokuma made its way safely back into its secret hideaway, the real Junko stretched her arms above her head and giggled to herself.

Everything was set now. With Taka enforcing her rules, tensions between everyone were certain to slowly begin to rise. It would start off small, with him continuing to write pink slips and giving his classmates detention. But once he realized that those weren’t as effective as he assumed they were, he’d soon turn to more drastic measures. She wasn’t quite sure what that would be, but given his recent mental instability, she could only imagine the worst!

“As they say, to test a man’s morality…give him power!” Junko paraphrased, patting her legs cheerfully.

And while she knew that it would be a long time before Taka took his responsibilities to that level, she also knew that eventually, the Moral Compass’ constant pestering would push one of the others over the edge. If she combined this with the motive she planned to unleash later on, it would be a recipe for the first blackened to officially appear.

“I suppose I’ll just have to…play my cards right,” she chuckled, glancing at the duffle bag filled to the brim with stacks of money.

With a delighted yelp, she stood up from the Monokuma control panel and headed back out into the surveillance room. Plopping down into her chair and focusing on the screen surveying the cafeteria, Junko let a merciless grin overtake half her face as she settled in.

“And now, I play the waiting game…”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Quite an interesting development, isn’t it? Do you think that Monokuma will keep his word? How far will Taka take his new position of power? Is there really an airplane on campus? You’ll have to tune in next time to find out!

On a side note, I do want to add that my beta, Dixxy Mouri, particularly enjoyed the airplane noise through the PA system. Sometimes it’s the little things that make it all worth it! Oh, and I heard that NicoB also had Monokuma sing “A Whole New World” for his playthrough…I did not know that when I wrote this chapter…
Anyway, no huge announcements this week, I’m just getting back into the groove of updating on schedule. As always, I appreciate every review and comment you all give and if you have questions or theories, be sure to send them my way! Until next time, keep on smiling my beautiful readers!
Ch 3 Act 4

Chapter Summary

Taka demands that everyone investigate the third floor. Celeste elects to excuse herself, causing a confrontation. Later, Leon and Sayaka make a startling discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the aftermath of Monokuma’s absence via plane take-off, most of the student’s were rendered speechless. Whether it was because of the bear’s abrupt and over the top departure or the heavy promise of non-interference the Mastermind had made through the bear…no one could really say.

“Well, that certainly was…interesting,” Junko spoke up, the first the break the silence.

“The bear certainly has a flair for the overly dramatic,” Byakuya concurred, adjusting his glasses at the same time.

“But, do you think he truly meant what he said?” Celeste questioned, making everyone turn to her. “As far as I can foresee, this means that, for the time being, we are currently free of Monokuma’s influence. As such, we should use this time to—”.

“What we should be doing is investigating the third floor!” Taka blatantly interrupted her, ignoring the death glare she sent him. “It’s time that we all ventured upward and gathered information! We have been delayed from this task for far too long as it is!”

“And whose fault is that,” Junko muttered under her breath, not wanting another pink slip.

Most of the students agreed with Junko’s silent sentiment, still very displeased with how Taka had managed to become their new dictator. However, with Monokuma having given his official sanction, all of them knew that the Moral Compass now stood for something far beyond just a noisy fellow classmate. He was the Mastermind’s enforcer, whether he agreed with that sentiment or not, and that alone was enough to spark discontent among the student body.

Just when it seemed that another argument was bound to break out, a voice of reason appeared.

“I know it’s a bit frustrating guys but…Taka does have a point. We do need to investigate the third floor,” Makoto said to everyone, a hopeful smile on his face. “I mean, I know it’s not exactly the morning we all thought it would be, but at the very least, Monokuma’s not gonna be around to bother us for a while. We should take advantage of that and see if we can find a way to escape!”

As the lucky student carefully explained this, slowly a murmur of agreement began to swell within the students’ ranks.

“Ya know, Makoto’s right!” Hiro unexpectedly said. “I mean, after all the craziness of this morning, finding a way out would be like divine providence!”

“I doubt it’ll be that easy,” Sakura said swiftly before a small smile graced her lips. “But there is nothing wrong with hoping for the best.”
“Right! We won’t know unless we try!” Hina concurred, her bright smile finally returning.

“I suppose it will be beneficial to see what the Mastermind has in store for us next. I only hope that whatever is on this next floor will provide more entertainment than the last,” Byakuya snidely commented, earning more than a few disgusted stares.

Makoto smiled as he saw everyone slowly beginning to get up. He hadn’t expected everyone to respond that well to him but it seemed that he’d been mistaken. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw someone glancing his way, but when he turned all he saw was Kyoko and Junko preparing to leave…maybe he was just imagining it?

On the other side of the room, Leon got ready to help Sayaka to her feet, minding her broken wrist that was still in its sling. She leaned against him for support but managed to pull herself up almost completely on her own. Her legs wobbled a bit but it was clear that her strength was slowly returning.

Catching a glimpse of that, a sad smile decorated Makoto’s face, pleased that they both seemed to be getting better, albeit slowly.

“Very well then! We all seem to be in agreement!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted, earning an exasperated grunt from almost everyone as he reminded them who was in charge. Marching toward the double doors and throwing them open, Taka pointed toward the dormitory exit and decreed, “Now then, follow me up to the third floor! Stragglers will not be tolerated! Let’s go!”

Before he could even take a step, however, the voice of reason once again called out to him.

“Hold up just a sec!” Makoto suddenly shouted, as if remembering something important.

Immediately stopping in his tracks, Taka looked over his shoulder and said, “What is it now, Makoto Naegi?”

His tone was a bit harsh and it made the lucky student flinch but he managed to swallow his fears and say, “Well…we still need someone to bring food to Mondo and Chihiro. I can’t speak for Chihiro but I’m sure that Mondo’s gotta be starving.”

As his former friend’s name reached his ears, the passionate aura around Taka wavered for a moment. And, even if it was only for an instant, the white sheen around his hair darkened to his original color, and his flame in his eyes flickered. However, less than a moment later, his new appearance returned in full force.

“…I see. Indeed. We will need a volunteer that will take them something. As such, we need a volunteer—”.

“I’ll take care of it,” Junko said while raising her hand. “I can clean up the kitchen while I’m at it.”

At the sound of her generous offer, two pairs of eyes shot over to her.

The first was Byakuya, who found her sudden generosity a bit off-putting. Not that it didn’t seem appropriate for her to offer to help, because it did, especially since she’d proven herself very capable during the first two cases. However, it was a fact that only a moment ago she’d been more than hostile toward the Disciplinary Committee Chairman but now she appeared to be actively cooperating. Something about it perplexed the Togami Heir, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He needed to keep a closer eye on her from now.
At the same time, Kyoko observed the Fashionista with a similar degree of scrutiny. However, unlike Byakuya, who she also noticed had noted Junko’s strange behavior, her desire to investigate the Fashionista came from an entirely different angle. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but something about the way Junko was acting seemed…predatory. Like a hunter that was waiting for the right moment to strike. Despite that, Kyoko also felt a genuine concern for her classmates emanating from Junko. And it was that confliction that drew the amnesiac girl’s attention. Further observation would be required if she wanted to uncover what the Fashionista was hiding.

Unbeknownst to both of them, Junko was very aware of their eyes on her. However, she pretended not to notice and simply waited for a response to her offer.

“Ah! Already seeking to redeem yourself for your use of profanity! I applaud you, Junko Enoshima!” Taka suddenly praised, much to everyone’s annoyance.

With a nonchalant shrug, the Fashionista replied, “Yeah…sure…whatever…”

“Oh, and once you’re finished, be sure to join us up on the third floor!” the Disciplinary Committee Chairman instructed before spinning around and facing the exit. “The rest of you could learn a thing or two from her. But now is not the time for that! Onward to new territory!”

Leading the charge himself, Taka led the group of students out and toward the hall leading to the upper floors, never minding the groans and whispers about him that weren’t the least bit flattering. In fact, he was so busy leading that he failed to notice that not quite everyone was following.

Instead of heading for the dormitory exit, Celeste turned and made for her room. However, she didn’t make it very far before a concerned voice called out to her.

“Hey Celeste!” Hina, who surprisingly wasn’t accompanied by Sakura, called as she walked over. “Where are you going? The third floor’s the other way.”

With a hint of annoyance, the gambler came to a stop and turned to face the swimmer. “I am aware of that. However, I am afraid I don’t feel inclined to explore right now. As such, I shall return to my room and rest for a while.”

Hearing that, Hina only grew more concerned as she asked, “You sure that’s a good idea? I mean, what with Taka going rule crazy and all that?”

With a slight huff, Celeste turned her back to the swimmer and said, “As I recall, there is nothing in the rules requiring us to explore new floors. Therefore, I shall explore at my leisure and leave the preliminary investigation to the rest of you. Besides, thirteen people investigation a single floor is a bit much, if you ask me.”

Without another word, Celeste’s heels clicked against the floor as she hastily walked back toward her room, leaving a shocked and a bit miffed Hina standing there alone.

Mukuro waved to everyone as they left the cafeteria, patiently waiting for the last of them to exit. As soon as she was sure that she was alone, she strode over to the kitchen, marched directly up to the room’s metal fridge and punched it as hard as she could. A tiny, almost unnoticeable dent formed from her attack, but she couldn’t care less. She was too infuriated to give a shit!

“Damn you…you got us good this time!” she seethed through gritted teeth, letting the pain from her strike settle her down.
For several moments, she stood there, hunched over with her fist indented into the fridge. She wanted to calm down, but just couldn’t. So many things had gone awry lately; her patrol last night, everyone’s secrets getting somewhat revealed, and now Taka being appointed as her sister’s enforcer!

“Junko….we’re all dancing in the palm of her hand!”

Mukuro could only surmise that the reason her sister had given Taka these ‘honors’ was to increase tension among the group. The Moral Compass was obviously off-balance since the proceedings yesterday and she had instantly taken advantage of that. If things continued as they were, it would only be a matter of time before Taka stepped over the line and provoked someone into attacking him…if not killing him!

“And that’s just what she wants! And I can’t do anything to stop it! I’m just as powerless as everyone else in this game!”

Unceremoniously, Mukuro slapped her forehead into the metal of the fridge, lightly banging it several times in succession. She could feel it, the weight of her own despair that she fought to keep at bay ever since being forced into the game. It was growing more and more taxing each time she beat it down, and she feared that before she found a way to save her classmates, it would consume her completely.

As that thought sprang up, another just as powerful came to the forefront of her mind. Well, it wasn’t exactly a thought as much as it was an image, one that continued to give her strength…and that was the image of Makoto, smiling hopefully just after he’d rescued her from certain death at the start of the game.

Almost unwillingly, a tiny smile formed on her lips and even though it was only for a moment, she felt at peace. She couldn’t allow herself to give up, not now. At the very least, Makoto seemed to be relying on her…on everyone to pull together and help each other. And, if for no other reason, she owed Makoto that much. She had to repay her debt to him, no matter the cost.

Slowly pulling herself back and away from the fridge, she took a deep cleansing breath. Retracting her hand, she instead wrapped it around the fridge’s handle and pulled it open.

“Focus…on what I can do…” she reminded herself, rummaging through the fridge to find something appropriate for Mondo and Chihiro’s breakfast.

Unbeknownst to her, a pair of lavender eyes had been watching her from the kitchen door, slipping away before the soldier turned back around.

“Geez, she didn’t have to be so rude about it,” Hina scoffed as she made her way up newly opened staircase leading to the third floor. “The least she could have done was—”.

“Aoi Asahina! I thought that I said I would not tolerate stragglers!”

Hina groaned as Taka met her at the top of the stairs, Sakura standing behind him, obviously waiting for her as well. The martial artist gave her a gentle smile, which she reciprocated for a moment before noticing that Taka was still glaring at her.

A depressed groan escaped the swimmer as she said, “Yeah, sorry about that. I kind fell behind because Celeste—”.
“Celestia Ludenberg? What about her?” Taka interrupted again, looking behind her and growing increasingly impatient. “I don’t see her with you. Counting you, we are still short one! Where is she?”

“She said she wanted to go back to her room and rest—”.

“Unacceptable!” the Moral Compass interrupted her a third time, practically fuming. “Does she not realize the danger of leaving herself alone and vulnerable to attack?! It was decided that we all would investigate the upper floor! Not some, or a few of us, but all of us! I must go and fetch her post haste!”

Taka pushed past Hina almost immediately, walking very quickly down the stairs as running wasn’t allowed in the hallways. When he brushed past her, the swimmer accidentally lost her footing and stumbled backward, teetering at the edge of the top of the stairs. Hina waved her hands to try and steady herself but it seemed useless as she began to fall. However, a muscular hand shot out and grasped her arm, pulling her away from the stairs and helping to steady her.

“Are you alright, Hina?!” Sakura almost frantically asked, having feared her friend might have tumbled down the stairs. A protective fury raged in the martial artist’s eyes as she glared toward the stairs. “How can he be so inconsiderate?! His recklessness is appalling!”

Seeing her friend in that frenzy, Hina instantly put on a reassuring smile and said, “It was an accident. I’m sure he didn’t mean to.”

“Hmm, I suppose you’re right. But still…” Sakura said as she let go of her friend and stared at the stairway. “He’s already beginning to act carelessly. We may need to have a discussion about his behavior sooner rather than later…”

“Maybe, but personally, I’m more worried about Celeste at the moment…” Hina admitted, following her friend’s gaze to the stairs.

“I win…as usual.”

Celeste sighed as she finished her game of solitaire, sitting at the table in her room, which was covered with a black satin tablecloth that had a white circular cloth in the center that housed a vase with two fake roses inside. Now that she was back within the confines of her room, she felt her previous anger dissipating somewhat. Taking a moment to glance around the room, she impressed herself with how well she’d decorate.

Her bed was styled with black satin sheets with a set of large fake red roses at the foot of her bed. Not far from her bed were two female body forms used to display two other gothic dresses she possessed. She recalled bringing more with her to the school but after waking up and subsequently being sealed inside, she’d found that only those two and the one she wore were still present. And since she didn’t favor the other two as much as she did her current ensemble, she chose to simple wash and reuse the one she always wore. Sure, she had some regular clothes stashed away but she’d be damned if anyone saw her wearing something as humiliating as a T-shirt. Also, a gothic chandelier that she’d brought with her had already been installed when she’d retired to her room on the first day. She had no idea who installed it for her but she didn’t complain, it accented the room perfectly. All in all, her room felt as perfect as she was, which settled her nerves.

“Ahhh, being back in my element always does wonders for my health,” she said, just starting to
relax. However, her mind wandered back to what could be on the third floor. And although she was curious, she definitely wasn’t going to be leaving her room any time soon. Resting her hands on her lap, she felt a lump in her pocket and got an idea.

“Well, I guess I don’t have to leave to see what’s up there,” she said to herself, any trace of her accent abandoned now that she was alone. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her e-handbook and set it on her table. “The stupid thing should have updated by now. I can just see what’s up there and check out what I want later.”

Delicately, she reached a hand out and pressed the button on the side. As the small device booted up and the screen came on, all of the tension and frustration that she’d gotten rid of suddenly revisited her. There, in large bright letters, was the name that had sent her into a frenzy in the first place:

TAEKO YASUHIRO

All at once, the repressed rage she’d fought to keep under control overflowed and she gave a frustrated scream. Grabbing the e-handbook, she flung it as hard as she could at the metal plate on the adjacent wall. The small device clacked against metal and dropped to the floor, landing face up. Unsurprisingly, it was still operating and still displaying the name she despised.

“You stupid fucking thing!” she yelled, getting up from her table and slamming her shoe down onto her e-handbook. Lifting her foot, she saw that it was completely undamaged, as expected due to its unbreakable nature, but unfortunately that didn’t satiate her rage. And so, as futile as she knew it was, she slammed her heeled shoe down onto it again and again, screaming all the while, “Go! Away! You! Stupid! Putrid! Worthless! Name! God-dammit!”

After a few minutes of useless stomping, her movement began to slow until eventually, she stood there, staring down at that hated name with frustrated tears stinging the corners of her eyes. In that moment, she realized how pointless her efforts truly were. Not just in trying to destroy the device that displayed her name, but in her attempts to adapt to this miserable place.

She had honestly tried to follow her own advice at the start, trying to adapt to being forced to live her with a group of people that infuriated her! Most of them were goddamn idiots! Like the otaku nerd and the useless fortune teller! Those that weren’t completely clueless were too interested in rules or fitness or computers! Then there were Leon and Sayaka, the potential murderers who could just be pretending to be reformed in order to stick a knife in her back the instant she let her guard down! And the few among them that were actually intelligent weren’t much better! Junko, who was surprisingly intelligent for someone who used her looks to succeed in life, was annoying because she always tried to get on everyone’s good side! Byakuya was interesting, handsome, and highly intellectual but he was far too dangerous to associate with! She’d heard rumors of how powerful his family was, and getting involved with them was more than a dangerous gamble…it was practically suicide! Then there was Kyoko, who when she wasn’t spending her time being an enigma was too unpredictable to even try to approach! And for the love of all things holy, if she had to listen to one more of Makoto’s naive speeches about not giving up hope, she was gonna hurl, possibly all over him!

She was trapped in a school full of worthless people who couldn’t understand how fucking boring they all were! None of them could understand the struggle she’d gone through before getting into Hope’s Peak, the massive endeavor she’d undertaken in order to achieve her dream.

Her dream of buying a castle in Europe.

Truthfully, she could see why others would find it a strange dream, but they could go fuck themselves as far as she cared! That castle represented everything that she’d ever wanted in life! A
stable foundation, a beautiful setting, and one that was far far removed from the place she’d been born! Once she had that castle, and the servant boys she longed to wait on her ever need, then her life could finally begin! And once it did, she could truly become the Celestia Ludenberg that she had always wanted to be!

But now…she was trapped in here…in this hell…with pathetic losers that only hindered her dream! And even worse, now they all knew what her real name was! All the time she’d spent crafting her new image was in danger of being taken away from her! She wouldn’t let that happen…not again!

But what could she do? Just as she couldn’t smash her e-handbook, she couldn’t escape from this place either. And while she thought she was willing to do anything to escape…a part of her was still hesitating. She knew she needed to kill someone and that didn’t bother her, these people were just insects to her anyway! Even so, something was holding her back, keeping her from even planning out her perfect crime yet.

She told herself that it was simply because the time wasn’t right, and when it was, she’d strike! That had to be the reason she was hesitating…right? She didn’t feel anything for her classmates, nothing at all. After all, how could she feel compassion for the steps she had to climb in order to reach her goal!

However…this would be the first time she’d ever actively worked to take someone’s life. She’d taken everything from her victims before; their money, their pride, their savings, their clothes…but she’d never taken their lives.

And…if she was being honest…she didn’t necessarily want to take their lives.

It was the one lie she couldn’t convince herself of. As a talented liar, she could even deceive herself into believing whatever she needed to in order to claim victory. However, for some reason, deep down inside, she knew that, truthfully, if there was a way to escape without bloodshed, she’d rather take that route. That’s what had kept her in check for so long, even during the darkest of times when she wanted nothing more than to bludgeon one of those idiots over the head with a pipe. That single truth kept her from playing the game the way Monokuma wanted.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep herself from considering ‘graduation’ as her only remaining option.

“Don’t be hasty,” she told herself, trying to settle her nerves. “Just like always, I just need to wait for the right moment. It’ll present itself eventually and until then—”.

At that moment, a furious knock came at her door. A bit startled, Celeste took a quick breath before reaching down and retrieving her completely undamaged handbook before replacing it in her pocket. Before heading for the door, she glanced at herself in her mirror and checked that her unshed tears hadn’t smeared her make-up. Fortunately, she still look as radiant as ever, even taking a moment to wink at herself before marching toward the door, irritated that whoever was there still banging on it.

Only when she began unlocking it did the furious pounding stop and she took a moment to compose herself before slowly opening the door. Sadly, she saw the one person she desperately wanted to avoid right now.

“Celestia Ludenberg! What is the meaning of this?! The white haired and burning eyed Taka shouted at her, pushing open her door so that he stood directly in front of her. Startled by his sudden intrusion, the gambler fought to keep herself composed as he continued to shout at her. “I specifically remember saying that I didn’t want any stragglers as we left to go and investigate! And yet, I heard from Hina that you blatantly abandoned your duty! Explain yourself!”
Celeste resisted the urge to click her teeth. “Dammit, Hina! Could she be any more useless?!”

Putting on her best smile, the gambler replied, “Indeed, that is the case. Or are you suggesting that resting in my room is somehow against the school regulations?”

Her accent was back in full force and she hoped it would help somehow. Unfortunately, it seemed that Taka was in full-enforcement mode and nothing was going to dissuade him.

“No, it is not against regulations,” he said calmly enough, only to burst into shouts a moment later. “However, I cannot allow a student under my supervision to be off on their own, unsupervised as the rest of us search! Already, I am wasting valuable time having to come and retrieve you! Now, I would appreciate it if you would please come with me and help the rest of us investigate the third floor!”

Celeste’s ears were ringing by the time he was done shouting and she fought to keep her passive mask in place. Fortunately, she managed to rein in her steadily increasing anger. At this point, she could have argued with him further, but knew that it would waste valuable time…well, hers not his. She couldn’t care less about how he spent his meaningless life, but she recognized that acquiescing to his request would overall be the better solution. Her hearing would thank her.

Besides, she didn’t have to actually be around him while she investigated, which was enough of a reward.

With a deep sigh, that she made very clear to him was his fault, she turned her back to him and said, “Very well. But I insisted that you give me a moment to prepare. I need to tidy up a bit before I venture to the next floor. Go on ahead, I will follow shortly.”

Honestly, she just wanted him to close the door long enough for her to vent her frustrations about his asinine attitude. After that, she’d reluctantly head up and explore but would do it with a smile pleasant enough to fool her classmates into believing she chose to do so of her own free will.

She was very pleased when his answer was, “Ah, I see! Very well then! I will be on my way!” Just when she thought that he was finally going to leave her be, he continued, “But first, I must ask, what must you tidy up before accompanying us upstairs?”

The tiniest twitch tugged at her right eye as she heard that, infuriated by how insensitive this bastard was being. However, she managed to keep her composure and simply turned around to answer him.

“If you must know, I was in the middle of refining my talent when you arrived. I don’t wish to be out of practice when I finally get out of this place.”

It was a half-lie, she knew that, but it was close enough to the truth regardless. Not that she was obligated to give him the real truth…which was to get away from Mr. Stick-Up-His-Ass himself! Confident that this answer was sufficient, she was incredibly shocked when, seemingly out of nowhere, he scoffed.

It was a sound she’d never actually heard from him before and yet, here he was, openly scoffing at her comment. It startled her so much that she let him respond, “I’m afraid I don’t understand the need to refine your ‘talent’. Considering it’s based entirely upon luck.”

Again, she was utterly stunned by his attitude, particularly because he seemed to be…ridiculing her! Who did this bastard think he was to try and ridicule her like that?! She’d show him what it was to ridicule someone!

“Hmhmhm,” she said, sporting a laugh to cover for her anger. “It seems you are uneducated in the
ways of gambling. For while luck is certainly a factor, there is far more involved in successful gambling. I suppose you cannot help it, it is beyond your understanding—”.

“I fully understand the nature of gambling,” he insisted, forcefully cutting her off. “I have read several books on the subject and have learned that, aside from using underhanded tricks, gambling is all about luck. That is why I said that it was odd that you were practicing your talent.”

Insulted but also intrigued, Celeste decided to humor him before verbally ripping him apart. “Oh? And why is that?”

As she waited for his answer, her mask perfectly in place to keep her emotions hidden, she was utterly confident that nothing he said could unnerv e her. After all, he was pathetic, rule-obsessed prefect that had no true life experience. She’d lived a life that would have broken him within minutes of involvement. After all, professional gambling was a dangerous business if you weren’t careful.

“Considering how below average his luck is, there is nothing he can say that would—”.

In the middle of her thought, Taka abruptly spoke, “It is strange that you are trying to refine something that you do not have. For gambling is, in fact, not a talent at all. It is a facet of luck and nothing more. Therefore, Celestial Ludenberg, you have no true talent to refine.”

…

A crack…that’s what it was. The tiniest crack began to form in Celeste’s usually perfect mask.

“Uh…come again?” she asked politely, shock and perplexion clear in her voice.

Taka had absolutely no hesitation in his voice when he repeated, “You, Celestial Ludenberg, do not actually possess a talent. Gambling is a form of luck and we already have an Ultimate Lucky Student within our ranks. Therefore, you are wasting your time trying to refine something that does not exist.”

…

…

The crack widened…consuming most of her visage. A deep frown settled onto her features but otherwise, she remained silent as he continued.

“You would be better off washing your hands of such rubbish and pursuing educational endeavors instead. If you wish, I will assist you at a later date.”

…

…

…

Multiple cracks spread throughout her mask, threatening to crumble at any moment. The slightest push would break her mask apart and unfortunately, that final push was imminent.

“However, I realize I’ve kept you from tidying up, as unnecessary as that is. As such, I shall excuse myself and wait for you on the third floor. Please be quick about it.”

Grabbing the door handle, Taka pulled the door shut with a swift jerk, practically slamming it right in front of her. The instant that door closed, Celeste’s passive mask shattered into a million pieces.
Her eyes grew wide and wild with rage, her teeth gritted so tightly she felt them grating, and her hands balled into fists that she raised over her head. Tears spilled from her eyes as she mercilessly screamed at the top of her lungs and slammed her fists into her door with unyielding rage. If Taka had delayed for even a moment longer, she would be beating him to death with her own hands. Instead, she continued bash her fists against her own door, ignoring the pain each strike caused.

“You SON OF A FUCKING BITCH! HOW FUCKING DARE YOU!” she screamed, ripping her throat apart in the process. “I DO HAVE A TALENT! YOU’RE THE ONE WITHOUT ONE! NOT ME! YOU!”

She continued to yell obscenities at her door, smashing her knuckles against it furiously, imagining she was pummeling that worthless bastard to his deserved demise. If her room hadn’t of been soundproof, then even the students up on the third floor would have certainly heard her. Not that she would have cared, given her current rage induced state.

Very slowly, her furious beating came to a standstill. Her legs buckled and she collapsed to the floor. Her head hung low, tears streaming down her cheeks, dripping off her chin and onto the ground. Her painstakingly applied make-up was smeared, wet mascara running down each side of her face. Her breathing hitched as uncontrollable sobs racked her body. All the while, her body trembled from a mixture of rage and sorrow.

And then, all of a sudden, it all stopped. Her tears ceased to flow and her body quit shaking. And how did she accomplish this? Simple…her mask had been replaced. It took time, but she finally managed to regain control of her emotions and fully lock them away again. It had been over five years since she’d allowed her mask to shatter like that, and now she remembered why she’d created it in the first place.

It was the only way…the only way for her to truly become Celestia Ludenberg. The mask was a part of who Celestia Ludenberg was…and that bastard had managed to break it. That, above all else, was an unforgiveable sin!

“…I swear,” she said quietly to herself. “Even if it takes the rest of my life…I’m gonna fucking kill him!”

“You sure you’re feeling good enough for this?” Leon asked Sayaka as she held herself up by latching onto the workbench in third floor Art Storage room, the assorted arrangement of crafting hammers just behind her. “You almost fell on the stairs three times on the way up. You don’t have to push yourself since I’m here to help you get around.”

With a slight roll of her eyes, the pop idol answered, “I’m not going to get my strength back if I’m constantly hanging off you. Have a little faith, alright?”

“Faith…right,” Leon repeated, a noticeable worry in his eyes.

Sayaka almost wanted to smile at him but knew it would only exacerbate the situation. She truly appreciated the sentiment, but if he kept babying her she’d end up staying attached to his hip for the rest of her life. And although the thought wasn’t 100% unpleasant, it was at least 20% disconcerting. Besides, she could easily stand up on her own again; it was just getting around that was troublesome.

Because of Leon, she was eating healthfully, something she hadn’t expected from him, and it seemed that her recovery was progressing smoothly. Even her broken wrist was feeling much better lately.
She still wasn’t quite ready for it to be out of its sling but given some time, she was certain that it would heal completely.

“…If I live long enough for that to happen,” she automatically thought before shaking her head free of her own pessimistic comment.

As she used her good arm to help steady herself, she decided to try venturing out away from the workbench. Taking a brave step outward, she grasped onto a drawer handle for balance. Unfortunately, she also tugged on that handle and discovered that the drawer was not as firmly rooted as she’d believed. The wood drawer shot out, pulled completely out from the bench and crashing to the floor, and with it, Sayaka lost her balance entirely.

A surprised yelp erupted from her throat as she tumbled forward. Before she even got close to the floor, however, Leon already had his arms wrapped around her, holding her up while minding her injuries as best he could. Sayaka gripped onto him with her good hand and let him steady her back onto her feet.

With an embarrassed flush on her face, the idol said, “…Thanks.”

To her surprise, the same cocky grin that had decorated Leon’s face when they had first spoken so long ago abruptly returned, a sight she had never imagined seeing ever again. And even though it was obvious that he was a bit embarrassed himself, he didn’t let that smirk falter as he replied, “No biggie! And…there ya go!”

Much to Sayaka’s surprise, he slowly pulled away from her, allowing her to once again stand all on her own. However, he did stay within reach, obviously still worried due to her recent tumble. It took her a moment to realize that he was trying to honor her wishes to get around on her own, even though her fumble a moment ago clearly caused him to believe otherwise. However, he chose to simply stay by her side, just in case, rather than insist on doing everything for her. The gesture was actually a lot sweeter than he probably even knew and Sayaka couldn’t help but smile warmly.

But then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted something on the floor. Turning her gaze downward, she saw that the drawer she’d pulled out had been overturned and its contents littered all around it. Those mainly consisted of rulers and other measuring tools but one object was decidedly out of place. It was an overturned photograph, she could tell because of the way the laminated back shined.

“What’s that?” Leon suddenly asked, making Sayaka realize that he must have followed her gaze and seen the overturned photo too.

“I think it’s a picture,” she replied, taking a careful step toward it. As mindful of her abdomen wound as she could be, she knelt down and slowly picked up the photo.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t stand up as easily as she’d descended, something Leon noticed immediately and extended his hand as a silent offer for assistance. Without hesitation, Sayaka rested her arm on his palm, so that she could still hold the picture as he pulled her up enough for her to stand on her own again. She was just about to thank him again when she noticed him staring, completely dumbfounded, at her hand. She hadn’t even realized that she’d inadvertently turned the photo over to see its contents, but when she followed his gaze and saw what the picture contained, she couldn’t help but gasp.

It was a picture of Mondo, Leon and Chihiro…inside what appeared to be a school! Even more confusing was that all three of them were smiling brightly, like they had been friends for years. Mondo had his arms wrapped around both of them, rubbing Chihiro’s head and playfully jabbing at
Leon’s chin. At the same time, Leon had his arm around the back of Chihiro’s head, keeping her from escaping both him and Mondo. And Chihiro appeared to be cheerfully accepting their ‘abuse’ with a smile that everyone feared may be lost forever due to her current condition.

“Wha…what is this?” Leon squeezed out, staring at himself in the picture. At the sound of his confusion, Sayaka looked over to see a disheartening mixture of uncertainty, sadness, and joy on his face, tears stinging the corner of his eyes.

Just as perplexed as him, Sayaka finally gathered her courage and asked, “Leon…when was this?”

Still unable to tear his eyes away from the image, Leon slowly shook his head and answered, “I…I don’t…know! I mean, I never met either of them before coming here!”

Thinking on his words for a second, Sayaka then asked, “Is it possible you just forgot that you’d met them before?” She knew it was a bit of a long-shot but she was just as desperate to understand as he was.

Finally averting his gaze to meet her, she saw how frantic he was becoming as he replied, “No way! I may not remember some of my old friends from my old school but if I’d met those two before, I’m sure I’d remember it! Especially because it looks like we’re going to the same school or something!”

Absorbing his answer, the pop idol turned and looked at the picture again, noting the uncovered windows just behind the three in the photo. Strangely, it was an odd sight to behold, considering she’d become accustomed to the obscure metal plates and bolts that kept them sealed within.

“We need to show this to everyone,” she said firmly, snapping him out of his confusion somewhat. “We may have found a vital clue to discovering how we ended up here in the first place.”

“Yeah…right! C’mon, Sayaka!”

Instantly, Leon began walking quickly toward the door but stopped just before he reached the handle. Sayaka almost smiled as he must have realized that he was completely leaving her behind, considering she had barely taken a step since he’d left her side. With an apologetic look, he strode back over to her side and took her good arm.

“Sorry…let’s take it slow.”

Just as he promised, he didn’t rush her along, despite how anxious he undoubtedly was. Sayaka smiled and decided to forgive him for his rash decision, letting him assist her in getting out of the room, where they hoped to find someone else to show the picture to.

Mondo leaned back in his chair next to Chihiro’s bed, breathing deeply and peacefully…a light snore sounding as he drifted in and out of consciousness. At least until a loud knocking abruptly startled him into awareness, a loud snort echoing as his tired eyes shot open.

“W-Wha?! W-Who the hell’s—?!” he stammered as his vision swam, trying to refocus after his unintentional nap. He rubbed his eyes furiously, wiping away the sleep from his eyes and blinking furiously as he oriented himself.

Again, the knocking startled him, making him turn aggressively toward the door, prepared if someone came through looking to do Chihiro harm. However, instead of that, a concerned voice from outside called to him.
“Hey, Mondo! You awake in there?! I’ve got some food for ya!”

It took the biker a moment to actually place the voice but quickly he realized it was Junko’s dulcet tones shouting for him. And while a part of him wanted to be suspicious as to why she’d suddenly showed up with food for him, his brain was too busy processing two important details:

1. Hungry!!!
2. Food!!!

Stumbling a bit as he walked to the door, Mondo could smell the freshly cooked meal. As he opened the door, he saw the most beautiful sight he could have ever imagined.

There, in all her Fashionista glory, stood Junko…with a huge stack of pancakes! Syrup had already been applied to their fluffy deliciousness, with melted butter dripping down the sides!

Mondo’s mouth instantly watered, saliva leaking out the edges of his slack-jawed mouth, to which Junko reared back in disgust. “Eww, dude, c’mon! You’re drooling!”

Noticing that she was backing away with his meal, the biker instantly wiped his mouth on his sleeve and said, “U-Uh, sorry about that…guess I’m hungrier than I thought!” He tried to hide his embarrassment but fell vastly short, as he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the doughy goodness he wanted to very much to devour.

Rather than continue to be disgusted, Junko’s expression softened and she extended plate of pancakes out to him with a smile. Stepping out into the hallway, Mondo reached for the plate with shaky hands and grabbed the pancakes from her. Instantly, he dove in, not even bothering to use the fork she’d put on the plate. In fact, she kinda looked as though she feared he’d eat the utensil along with the pancakes. But either way, Mondo didn’t care, he was too busy stuffing his face.

He hadn’t even realized how hungry he was, he’d been too focused on keeping watch over Chihiro all night to even notice. Thinking about it, he hadn’t eaten dinner the previous night, due to the motive being revealed and his subsequent fall into attempted murder.

As that thought dawned on him, his pace of eaten dramatically decreased, feeling a lot less hungry than before. His tired eyes shifted over to glance at Chihiro’s sleeping form, his gaze softening sadly. Slowly, he handed the half-eaten plate of pancakes back toward Junko, who stared at it in confusion.

“I’m…not really that hungry,” the biker half-lied, guilt overtaking his judgment as he continued to stare at the unconscious Chihiro. Just then, he was surprised when he felt the plate being pushed back in his direction. Snapping his head over, he saw that Junko was refusing to take the plate, her hand pushing the meal back against him firmly.

“You haven’t eaten since yesterday. You need to eat and sleep—”.

“I’m fine…” he flat out lied, his voice practically growling. “Besides…if Chihiro can’t eat…then why should I—”.

“Don’t be such a fucking idiot!” the Fashionista instantly snapped back at him, startling him once again. “We can find a way to feed Chihiro after you’ve eaten! Seriously, if you don’t eat and get some rest, how are you going to have enough strength to protect Chihiro?”

The instant the word ‘strength’ reached his ears, something inside Mondo crumbled and he felt his willpower fade. His thoughts began a downward spiral and he felt despair taking root as he was forced acknowledge the truth once more.
“Strength…? What strength?!” he snarled at himself, not even acknowledging Junko at the moment. “If I had ‘strength’ then this never would happened in the first place! If I had real ‘strength’, then Chihiro wouldn’t be lying there, unable to move a fucking muscle! I don’t have any real ‘strength’! Chihiro…Chihiro has more strength than I ever will! Even you…you have a shit ton more ‘strength’ than I ever—”.

“Oh, get over yourself!!”

Mondo froze as Junko interrupted his tirade, slowly shifting his gaze over to the Fashionista. She locked eyes with him, her gaze almost penetrating his very soul. In the midst of being overwhelmed by her visage, Mondo heard her scoff.

“You think you’re the only one who’s pissed that they fucked up?! For Christ sake, I almost got myself skewered! And do you want to know why?” She paused for a moment, but didn’t really give him time to respond before she finished, “Because I was scared shitless! That’s why!"

Shock overtook Mondo as he listened to Junko’s confession, unable to comprehend how someone as obviously strong as her could open up about her weakness so easily. His eyes widened as she glared at him, looking slightly vulnerable for the first time since she’d survived being impaled. It reminded him of Chihiro…and how strong she had been to tell him her secret, despite how terrifying it must have been. Except…that Junko didn’t seem to have the same kind of strength that Chihiro had. The Fashionista had always been strong-willed and vocal about, well, everything! So, to see her openly admitting to her own faults was…a bit overwhelming.

However, Mondo found himself powerless to do anything but stand there and listen as she continued.

“‘I have a shit ton more strength than you’? I’m not any stronger than anyone else here! If anything, I was the one who gave up first…defying Monokuma like a freaking idiot even though I knew what might happen.” Her good hand drifted over to grasp her injured palm, tenderly caressing it subconsciously. Staring down at the floor, she continued, “Honestly…I’m still scared shitless. I may not show it, but I’m just as desperate to get out of here as everyone else. Only I’m not willing to go along with Monokuma’s twisted little game in order to do it. Even so…each day’s a struggle to keep it together…and it’s getting harder and harder to keep myself from going crazy…”

A deep silence hung between them for a moment, the tension so thick you could feel it in the air.

Moreover, Mondo found himself in a state of disbelief. How could someone as strong as Junko have this much insecurity and fear? She openly defied Monokuma, in front of everyone no less! Was that all an act too? It certainly didn’t seem like it. In fact, whenever she confronted the demented bear, that’s when she seemed to be at her strongest! So how the hell could she call herself weak when she constantly showed how strong she was?!

“Well then…why do you keep acting so tough then?!?” the biker couldn’t stop himself from asking, more to try and do the same for himself rather than to discover her own reasons. “If you’re really as scared as you say you are, where the hell do you find the strength to keep going up against Monokuma all the fucking time?!”

Just then, to his shock, Junko’s demeanor shifted. She let go of her injured appendage and clenched both her fists tightly before lifting her gaze up, a determined look in her sky-blue irises.

“It has nothing to do with strength…I’m just doing what I can, that’s all. Besides, I’m not willing to let the bear have his way!”
As she spoke, Mondo felt something exuding from her, a kind of power that he’d almost forgotten…
it was the same feeling he’d gotten whenever his brother had given him a pep talk during their early
days as bikers. And because of that, he remained utterly silent as she finished.

“So shut up and eat you’re god-damn pancakes before I have to force feed them to you!”

Again, Mondo felt something powerful radiate from her, not only in her appearance but her voice as
well. Only when she fell silent did he finally understand what it was…true strength.

At the time, her answer, in and of itself, completely contradicted her, or at least Mondo thought so.
While Junko wasn’t the most physically strong person, she obviously had a will that no one could
overtake. Hell, she had the courage to smile in the face of danger and the balls to defy the odds and
come out on top!

That’s why she…Junko Enoshima…was strong! It was because she didn’t rely on strength. She
didn’t even consider it a factor. She just did exactly what she felt needed to be done, regardless of
how scared she was. And the most amazing thing was, she didn’t see that as strength! To her, it was
just a part of living, something that needed to be done in order to survive!

“…Just like Big Bro Daiya…”

For the first time since his death, thoughts about Daiya didn’t hurt to recall. In fact, in a strange way,
Junko kept reminding him of the way Daiya kept their gang together years back, motivating
everyone and trying to keep everyone from killing each other. And for some reason, that really put
the biker’s mind at ease. Just knowing that someone like that was trapped in the school with them
was enough for him momentarily forget his own guilt and pull the pancake plate back toward
himself.

“Uhg, fine…” he grumbled as he resumed stuffing his face, only a little displeased to be eating the
fluffy deliciousness again.

All the while, Junko knowingly smirked at him, watching to make sure he devoured every last bite.
Once he finished, she held her hand out and gestured for him to give over the plate, which he did
almost immediately.

“Next time, just eat your damn food. And for the love of God, if I bring you a fork, use it!” she
protested, reverting back to the Junko he’d always known.

“Yeah, yeah…” he paused to yawn loudly and rub his eyes. “…whatever.”

Almost instantly following that comment, he noticed Junko looking at him with a scrutinizing gaze.
He reared back a bit as she narrowed her eyes at him.

“You didn’t get any sleep last night, did you?” she asked, though her tone indicated she already
knew the answer.

“What was your first clue?” the biker retorted with a scoff, suppressing a belch that he felt would be
inappropriate to spew at her, regardless of how annoying she was being.

“If you want, I can stay out here and keep watch while you get some rest,” Junko abruptly offered,
much to the biker’s surprise.

It was a tempting offer to be sure, but one that Mondo felt he didn’t have the right to ask for,
regardless of how exhausted he was. And it wasn’t because he didn’t trust her, far from it actually, he
had more faith in her than almost anyone else…maybe Makoto but for very different reasons.
However, he had too much pride to admit the truth and instead said, “Nah, it’s cool. Now that I’ve got food in me, I should be good.”

Raising her eyebrow at him, Junko huffed and replied, “Really? You look ready to keel over if you ask me.”

Mondo flinched, embarrassed that she could see through him so easily. And as that embarrassment took hold, he found himself resorting back to how he usually acted around a pretty girl when he was flustered…by yelling.

“Oh yeah! Well, I don’t need a fashion obsessed diva watching out for me anyway!” he shouted down at her, getting so close that his pompadour almost poked her forehead.

Almost instantly, the biker realized how much of a douche bag he was being, but he also knew it was too late to take it back. However, much to his shock, Junko didn’t even flinch at his standoffishness.

“Hmph, someone had a rough night…” the Fashionista correctly surmised, giving him a sideways glance, which somehow relieved the biker somewhat.

“Yeah…” Mondo half-heartedly replied, feeling even more embarrassed than before. “God-damn box tricked me…”

“What?” an utterly confused Junko questioned, to which the biker simply shook his head.

“Nothin’…it’s nothin’. Anyway, thanks for breakfast, but I better get back to watching out for Chihiro,” he insisted before reaching for the door, preparing to shut himself away again. However, before he grasped the handle, a thought surfaced in his mind that he couldn’t ignore. “Oh, right, I thought I heard everyone else going by earlier. What’s that about?”

Suddenly, a grim look crossed Junko’s face and she hesitantly replied, “Well…let’s just say that we had an eventful morning. Oh, and Monokuma opened up the third floor for us to explore.”

“Oh, I get it,” Mondo answered, feeling as though she was still leaving something out. However, he had something else weighing on his mind that he needed to ask about. “So…how’s my bro—err, Taka, holding up?”

Again, a pained look spread over Junko’s as she took a deep breath. “Honestly, he could be better…we all could…”

“Oh…right,” was all Mondo could respond, glancing back at Chihiro. “I guess you were right…we all just gotta do what we can…for now.”

A sense of calm slowly overtook both of them, even in this tense atmosphere. It had taken a bit of yelling but it seemed that they both understood each other a lot better. Mondo, in particular, felt that his opinion of the Fashionista had changed drastically. He had been kind of jealous of her strength…but now, he admired it. Perhaps, one day, he could become that strong as well…

“Pardon me, but would one of you mind stepping aside? You’re obstructing the hallway.”

Junko and Mondo both jumped as they heard the voice of Celeste not too far from them, turning to see her slowly walking down the hallway toward them. At first, the biker kind of growled at her, remembering her cruel words from the trial, not to mention the vote she’d cast to have him executed. However, once he got a good look at her, he found himself a bit perplexed.
Usually, the Lolita dressed gambler looked at him with distain in her eyes, as if she was harshly judging him. However, at that moment, she didn’t look as if she held any negative feelings for him in the slightest. She wasn’t sporting that obnoxiously sweet smile today either, which kind of crepted him out. In fact, as she got up to them, Celeste just stood there, politely waiting for one of them to respond to her request, an almost stoic look on her face.

Because of that, he felt strangely compelled to accommodate her, which is something he never thought he’d be willing to do. Nevertheless, he sidestepped and cleared the way for her, almost wordlessly.

“Thank you,” Celeste plainly replied before moving past him and heading for the staircase leading upstairs. The instant the gambler was out of sight, Mondo let out a confused sigh.

“That was weird…” he commented aloud before turning to glance at Junko. To his surprise, the Fashionista was staring intently in the direction Celeste had gone, a very concerned look on her face. It was so worrisome that Mondo couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Somethin’ wrong…?”

“Hmmm…” Junko hummed for a moment before saying, “Something’s off…she’s reapplied her make-up since I last saw her, which was only about twenty minutes ago.”

Perplexed, Mondo inquired, “ Seriously, she redid her make-up? Wait, how can you tell?”

“Fashionista.”

“Oh, right… that makes sense.”

For a few more moments, Junko continued to worriedly stare toward the staircase until she finally let out a deep sigh.

“I don’t like the looks of this. I’m gonna go see if I can find out what’s up.” Before departing, the Fashionista turned and held up her fist, silently asking for a fist bump, a confident smirk on her lips. “Don’t worry, I’ll be back to let you get some sleep. Just tough it out until then, ‘kay?”

For a second, Mondo froze as he stared at her, almost dumbfound. Then, just as quickly as it came, his confusion vanished and he eagerly fist bumped with her.

“Take your time! I could do this all day!” he boasted, trying his best not to yawn at the same time. Whether she noticed it not, he couldn’t say. In either case, she turned on a heel and began quickly walking toward the stairway.

However, just before she got out of earshot, she glanced over her shoulder and shouted, “Don’t let me catch you sleeping on the job! Keep on keepin’ on!”

And with that, she darted up the stairs, presumably to go and meet up with Celeste and everyone else. Once Mondo was all alone again, he lowered his gaze slightly and let a tiny smile spread across his face.

It was refreshing, and unexpected, that Junko had been so supportive. The way she reassured him and treated him like an equal honestly shocked him a bit. He hadn’t figured that any of his classmates would see him in the same light as they had before the trial. And, if nothing else, he felt that he couldn’t let her down!

“Alright! Let’s get back to guard duty!” he shouted to himself, closing the nurse’s office door and marching back to his seat next to Chihiro. As he sat there, now almost completely revitalized, he suddenly had hope that everything was going to work out.
Greetings, my beautiful readers! Well, this certainly was a difficult chapter to write but it was well worth it! So, what do you think will happen now that Leon and Sayaka found the picture? Will they be able to show it to everyone or will it be lost? How do you think Celeste is going to act now that Taka lit a fire under her? Is Chihiro ever going to wake up? The answers to these questions will be answered soon, so keep reading to find out!

Just to make this clear, if any of you have read my other story, “The Ultimate Hope” then you may have pieced this together already but…I’m currently head-cannoning that Mondo absolutely loved pancakes before his untimely demise canonically. That’s why Monokuma decided to spread his “Mondo Butter” all over pancakes for his execution…for the added despair! At least that’s what I’m head-cannoning now! What do you all think of that?

Also, slight editing note, my beta was very busy this week so I edited the chapter myself. Dixxy works hard to catch all the errors and often find ones I completely miss, so please let me know if you see any typos that need fixing or anything like that.

Anyway, thanks for continue to read my story up until now! Don’t forget to leave a review or comment if you have questions, concerns, comments, fears, tears, traumas, phobias, or anything of the sort! I love to hear from all of you and truly appreciate your opinions, so feel free to tell me what you think!

Until next time, keep on smiling my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Leon and Sayaka share their discovery with Taka. Meanwhile, Celeste quietly plots her vengeance. Later, after everyone discusses their discoveries on the third floor, a startling revelation is proposed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Where is she? I told her not to delay but it seems that she’s insisted upon being tardy,” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru said aloud to himself, already writing up a pink slip to give to Celeste once she arrived. However, even he realized that these lightly colored pages wouldn’t be enough to keep everyone in order for very long.

“I will need to devise some form of detention for repeat offenders. A stern talking-to might suffice but I’m afraid it wouldn’t be effective on everyone. Besides, enforcing detention would be a challenge, not that I am not more than capable enough to—”.

Just then, Taka heard the distinct sound of heels clicking against linoleum and he lifted his head to see Celeste finally ascend to the third floor. At first, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary, until he saw that her make-up had been reapplied, and he could only tell that because he’d seen her only a few minutes ago. It instantly dawned on Taka that, perhaps, the reason for her initial tardiness was due to wishing to reapply foundation, though that didn’t excuse her offense.

“Thank you for joining us, Miss Ludenberg. With your added assistance, we should be finished exploring this floor within the hour!” he said politely, to which she only stared at him. Her eyes were rather vacant, he noticed, but something else glinted behind her crimson irises as he spoke to her. Being of a positive mindset, Taka chose to believe that glint was one of shame and embarrassment, since she was clearly being silent due to having humiliated herself not long ago. Deciding that it was best to reassure her, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman cleared his throat audibly before addressing her.

“I am glad to see that you have found the error of your ways and decided not to disgrace yourself further,” he said with a hearty laugh, assuring her that she had made the right choice. In response, Celeste closed her eyes and took a deep breath, obviously still embarrassed, and possibly frustrated with herself, due to the fact that Taka noticed her fingernails were currently digging into her palms.

“Indeed…I will not disgrace myself further,” she repeated slowly, her usual tone slightly muffled, likely due to her embarrassment. That’s why, an instant later, she finally seemed to collect herself and regain some of the regality she usually showed. Lacing her fingers together and resting her chin atop her knuckles, she smiled widely and finished, “I shall do all I can to ensure escape from this place.”

Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru swelled with pride as he heard those words. It was obvious that his interaction with her a few minutes ago had already planted deep seeds of inspiration, ones which he knew would eventually lead her to becoming the person she was meant to be.
“If only I could as easily reach the others as I have her…perhaps a stern talking-to would be better than detention after all! If I can sort out someone as antagonistic as Miss Ludenberg, then surely I can do the same for everyone else! My course is clear!”

Inspired by his new ideal, Taka decided that encouragement was the best motivator and said, “I am glad to hear that! Let us find a way out together! Go ahead and search wherever you’d like, I shall remain here to guard the stairway so that no one may leave until the investigation is finished!”

Hearing that, Celeste’s smile faltered for a moment, stealing a quick glance behind her at the stairs. However, she recovered almost immediately and said, “I see. Then I shall start with this room for now.”

Without waiting for his leave, she walked over to the Rec Room door and pulled it open, stepping inside and closing the door quietly behind her. Once she was gone, Taka couldn’t help but nod to himself. Only when he began putting away his pink slip pad did he notice that he had failed to present the one he’d already written to her a moment ago.

However, unlike usual, he couldn’t just rush off after her and dispatch justice. After all, if he left his post and someone slipped by him, who knows what travesties they might commit!

“I’m sure she will finish examining the room shortly and I can present it then. If I were not the Chairman of the Disciplinary Committee, I may have been willing to forgo the slip, due to her pleasant attitude. However, I must be unbiased and fulfill my duty, regardless of how much her transformation into a model student has impressed me!” he said aloud to himself, a confident smile on his lips “Everything is proceeding smoothly I have no doubt that under my supervision, no more betrayals shall befall—”.

Suddenly, there was a loud shuffling from the opposite end of the hall, instantly drawing Taka’s attention. Listening closely, he could tell that it wasn’t quite running but it certainly didn’t seem to be walking either! His gaze shot over and he glanced down the hallway just in time to see Leon and Sayaka hastily make their way around the corner. Tearing off the pink slip meant for Celeste and slipping it into his shirt pocket, he immediately set to writing another on his pink slip pad.

He noticed that Leon and Sayaka both visibly tensed when they saw him, but he figured it was due to guilt from their previous deplorable actions being exposed. And once they saw that he had seen them, they obviously knew that they needed to present themselves in front of him to be administered discipline. Slowly, at the pace that they should have been going all along, they made their way over to him.

“Hey, Taka! We think we found something important!” Leon shouted as they neared him, apparently refusing to call the Moral Compass by his title as the Disciplinary Committee Chairman.

Once they were within respectable distance, Taka wasted no time in reprimanding them.

“Sayaka! Leon! Rushing through the halls is not acceptable in a school environment! You could hurt yourselves or others! Not to mention that shouting at someone is generally rude! What do you have to say…for…yourselves?”

Instead of responding, they held up a small picture, the very sight caused Taka’s eyes to widen. In that frame stood his former friend…Mondo, with Leon and Chihiro in it as well. All of them were smiling…with nothing less than cheerful expressions on their faces. As he continued to stare at it, Taka’s red irises focused intently on the image of his former friend…an unexplainable discomfort welling up inside.
Taka reached his hand out, silently demanding to hold the photo, until Leon handed it over to him. Once it was in his hands, the Moral Compass stared at it with great scrutiny, a pained look crossing his face as he was forced to acknowledge the picture’s contents.

“We’re not quite sure what it could mean,” Sayaka said to him, trying to explain. “Leon doesn’t remember this ever happening but we think that we should show this to—”.

“Where…did you get this?” Taka interrupted, unable to tear his eyes away from the photo.

Leon and Sayaka shared a look before the ballplayer answered, “Uh, in the art storage room? What does that have to do with anything?”

Leon’s question hung in the air as Taka continued to blindly stare at the picture.

He couldn’t look away from Mondo’s happy expression. He seemed as though he was having the time of his life…like he didn’t care about anything…especially not someone else’s feeling regarding the utter betrayal he’d committed! How dare he look so pleased with himself! Did he not care that his actions would have irreversible consequences?! How could he hang off of Leon and Chihiro, pretending that everything was alright…especially after what he’d done?!

Unbeknownst to him, Taka’s hands began shaking as he gripped the photo. His teeth gritted tightly and his white aura abruptly flared, the flames in his eyes raging as he stared at the offensive picture.

“Yo, Taka? You alright—?” Leon tried to ask before he was cut off by a horrific tearing sound.

Sayaka gasped as she and Leon were forced to watch as Taka abruptly tore the picture in half. And he didn’t stop there, tearing each half into fourths and those fourths into eighths, continuing to rip the photo into smaller and smaller pieces right before their eyes.

“What are you doing?! Stop!” the pop idol shrieked, lurching forward to try and stop him from destroying their first valuable clue.

However, she lost her footing and only managed to fall forward. Luckily, Leon’s reflexes saved her from toppling to the floor, and she had to latch onto him just to keep herself upright. It took both of them a moment to get her back upright and by then, it was too late. That little bit of time had been enough for Taka to finish tearing the photo into tiny pieces.

Both of their expressions shifted to anger as the Moral Compass clutched the pieces tightly in his hands, some of them littering the floor beneath were he stood.

“What the fuck, man?!” Leon shouted, the only thing keeping him from throttling Taka being the fact that he had to hold up Sayaka. “Why’d you do that?! We could have used it to—?!”

“Language!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted back at him, silencing the ballplayer instantly. “Regardless of the situation, offensive language is not permitted! I will write up a citation for you later!”

Without waiting for them to respond, Taka stepped around them and pushed open the Rec Room door. Stepping inside, with Leon and Sayaka desperately trying to keep up with his pace, the Moral Compass marched over to the nearby trash bin before turning and facing them.

“As for the…photograph!” he said, holding the pieces over the trash bin for a moment before aggressively slamming them into the bottom of the bin. “It is obviously a fake and therefore needs to be disposed of!”
“You don’t get to decide that!!” Sayaka screamed at him, tears stinging the corner of her eyes as she stared at the trash bin. “We finally found a real clue that could have helped us find out what’s going on here! How could you just—?!”

“Don’t presume to contradict me! I am the one in charge of everyone’s safety!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted at her, his aura flaring as he continued. “Since Leon has no recollection of it, then it obviously is a fake and therefore will not assist us in getting out of the school! It was obviously planted by Monokuma to try and confuse us, which it obviously did! And so, to reduce the chances of our being swayed from finding the truth, it needed to be destroyed! It is as simple as that!”

Throughout his entire lecture, Sayaka and Leon grew more and more agitated. Their gazes narrowed and it almost looked as if they were ready to strangle him. Just before it seemed that they were going to explode, a familiar voice called out from behind them.

“And who the fuck died and made you king, asshole?!”

All of them turned to see none other than Junko standing in the doorway, glaring ferociously at Taka. She immediately marched up to him, stomping her heeled boots with each powerful step, until she stood between him and Sayaka and Leon. Before she even had a chance to speak, Taka held up a two pink slips, due to her crass language, which she snatched out of his hand and stuffed into her blouse pocket.

Glaring at him menacingly, she seethed, “Just because Monokuma isn’t around, doesn’t mean you can act like you own the place. You’re out of control, Taka. And sooner or later, you’re going to—”

She immediately ceased talking when the Moral Compass abruptly held up his hand directly in front of her face, gesturing her into silence. Slowly lowering his hand, he stared at her with his burning eyes and said, “All I am doing is enforcing school rules. Nothing more and nothing less.”

“Yes, except that you tore up the only clue we’ve found in this damn place!” Leon countered, pointing angrily at the trash bin.

“A photo. It showed Chihiro, Leon and Mondo having fun at school,” Sayaka informed her before sending a glare Taka’s way. “We wanted to show it to everyone but someone thought it was fake and—”

“Wait, you guys found a picture?! Like, and actual photo?! As in, something we could have used to try and figure out why we’re trapped here?!?” Junko cut in, surprise overtaking her features. Not only that, there was a hint of desperation in her voice as well. But all of that vanished as it turned to anger when she faced Taka, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “And you tore it up?!”

Even though she was being very hostile, Junko still wasn’t violating any regulations, so no matter how disrespectful she was being, Taka knew it was only fair to answer her question.

“Indeed I did,” he said, almost too prideful. “As I was explaining to Miss Maizono and Mr. Kuwata, it was obviously planted by Monokuma and therefore a fake. I did what was necessary in order to maintain stability while we remain trapped here.”

Hearing this, Junko appeared completely flabbergasted, her mouth hanging open as she tried to process his rationale. Eventually, she shook her head, and groaned audibly before shouting, “And
you didn’t think that it was unfair to decide that all on your own?! Why would you even think about doing that—?!”

“Excuse me for interrupting, but I must admit that I’m rather curious as well.”

All at once, everyone turned to see Celeste, who had been standing near the magazine rack this entire time, slowly approaching them. Taka had forgotten that she was in the Rec Room and the other three hadn’t even noticed her, since they’d been preoccupied arguing with the Moral Compass.

“Why did you feel the need to tear the photo apart?” she said plainly, but with a hint of mischief in her voice. “It wouldn’t have to do with that fact that a certain former friend of yours was in it, now would it?”

Unintentionally, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru flinched as she asked that very poignant question. However, it was not enough to make him waver from what he knew was his duty. And so, pushing aside all the swirling emotions that threatened to overtake him due to that comment, he simply laughed heartily and replied, “Certainly not! I simply didn’t want anyone else to be confused by it, so I chose to do what I felt was necessary as the Disciplinary Committee Chairman!”

Even though Sayaka, Leon, and Junko all stared at him skeptically, he knew that everything he said was true. Yes, he had been a bit frazzled at the exact moment it had happened, but that didn’t change the fact that he had done the right thing by destroying misleading evidence!

“I see,” Celeste said in response before giving him a sideways glance. “However, that still does not change the fact that you did not allow the rest of us to view the photo. I believe that it should have been presented to everyone when we all met again to discuss our investigation. That is why we have all been brought here, is it not? To use this time to investigate while Monokuma is not here to interfere?”

Again, Taka felt a slight twitch as she voiced her opinion. She was certainly skillful with words and knew the right questions to ask. Perhaps his stern talking-to had not been as effective as he’d first imagined. However, in either case, she was forgetting her place and that needed to be rectified immediately if he was to have any hope of keep everyone in-line.

“That would have been unacceptable! To allow a fake piece of evidence to influence our decisions would have been the height of foolishness!” he insisted, hoping that she would understand her own folly. However, when she merely stood there, as if asking for another reason, Taka was forced to given another answer. “Not to mention that the two who found it were Miss Maizono and Mr. Kuwata, who’s actions as of late are not the most reputable!”

At the mentioning of their crimes, Leon and Sayaka cringed as well as sneered, obviously displeased with how they were being viewed. At the same time, Junko appeared to be getting fired up to defend them, her sky blue irises narrowing dangerously. However, much to everyone’s surprise, someone else came to their defense.

“I fail to see what that has to do with their discovery,” Celeste effortlessly refuted, sparking shock from everyone present. “While they have made poor choices in the past, that does mean we can discredit evidence they find. To do so would be crass and foolish.”

A few moments of silence followed Celeste’s words, with no one seemingly able to comprehend them. Up until this point, the gambler had never spared a single kind word for either Sayaka or Leon. And yet, here she was, saying that their find was just as credibly as if it had come from her or anyone else in the school. It was actually kind of scary to hear her defending them, considering that she was never one to mince words when it came down to who to blame.
Unfortunately, for her anyway, her reasoning didn’t pierce Taka’s defiant stance on the subject, as he answered, “Regardless, what is done is done! We can discuss the importance of the photograph at a later time if necessary! In the meantime, I suggest that all of you go back to investigating the remainder of this floor! I’ll be outside watching the stairway!”

And with that, Taka stomped past them and headed out the door into the hallway, no longer interested in discussing the matter with them. However, just before it left his field of view, he glanced over at the trash bin one last time.

“I had to get rid of that photo! I did it to protect everyone! This is all for the greater good of everyone trapped here! It has nothing to do with my personal feelings! Nothing!”

With that thought empowering him, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman took his leave.

As Taka shouted his demands and left ahead of them, Sayaka and Leon prepared to rummage through the trash bin. However, before they could, Junko stepped in front of them and whispered, “There’s no point going after it right now. If Taka sees us with whatever’s left, we’ll be in for more than just a pink slip. Let’s just get out of here for now and come back for the picture later.”

“Okay, but what if he takes part of it with him or something after we leave?” Leon questioned, unable to tear his angry glare away from the door the Moral Compass had departed through.

“We’ll just have to take that chance. If we try to get at it now, it’ll only make things worse,” Junko insisted, quickly stealing a glance at the door to be sure Taka wasn’t listening in. “Trust me, I’m pissed too, but there’s not much else we can do right now.”

Leon shifted his gaze and glared angrily at the trash bin, as if unable to make up his mind. Only when the ballplayer felt someone tug on his collar did he finally tear his eyes away to find Sayaka staring intently at him.

“She’s right, Leon. Besides…we never should have gone to Taka with this in the first place.”

Leon flinched at the pop idol’s words as well, remembering that, in his rush to show someone the photo, he hadn’t really thought about who he was handing it over to. A wave of guilt overtook him and he slowly began to calm down.

“You’re right…sorry. “

“I should have known better too,” Sayaka immediately insisted, seeing the guilt in his eyes.

“And above all, it’s not either of your faults that he tore up the photo,” Junko told them, sending one last glare toward the doorway. “And we can’t change any of that now—”.

“Focus on what we can do’, right?” the pop idol said with a knowing smile.

Somehow, even in this hopeless situation, her smile was genuine. Or at the very least, it appeared to be. Regardless, when Sayaka smiled at them, Leon felt his worries vanish and he reciprocated, which in turn gave her strength as well. Without even realizing it, they were becoming each other’s pillar, something that was desperately needed during Taka’s reign as Champion Hall Monitor or whatever he called himself.

For a moment, it looked as though Junko was going to ask how she knew what she’d planned to say
but instead she shook her head and smiled, “Right! Let’s go see what else is on this floor!”

“I believe that I will remain here for the time being, if that is alright with everyone,” Celeste cut in, making them realize that they had effectively left her out of the conversation. “I had not finished examining this room when the commotion began, so I will follow after you all later.”

None of them had been expecting her to continue to be so…pleasant with them, especially after Taka had departed. Sure, they all had a common dissatisfaction for the Moral Compass right now, but it was still strange for her to be acting so casual with them. Junko, in particular, gave her a perplexed stare, unsure if the gambler was actually being honest with them. Sayaka, on the other hand, could only give a skeptical look, feeling that something was definitely off about Celeste today. And Leon was just so confused about the fact that she had spoken to them at all that he didn’t really know what to say.

“Oh…sure?” was all Leon could muster, still uncomfortable with how civil she was treating them.

“All right then, I shall see you all back in the cafeteria later,” Celeste finished before turning around and heading back over to the magazine rack, picking up an issue that seemed to have gothic features.

Sayaka and Leon looked to Junko, silently hoping she knew about the gambler’s sudden change in attitude. However, all the Fashionista could give them was a confused shrug, and a final concerned glance as they headed toward the doorway.

Slowly and carefully, Sayaka, Leon, and Junko made their way out of the room and headed off toward the opposite end of the hallway, leaving Celeste completely alone in the room. Once she felt that significant time had passed, the gambler put up the magazine she’d been perusing and quietly walked over to the abandoned trash bin.

As she glanced down at the many fragments of the torn picture, a malicious smile decorated her lips.

“Oh…now this is interesting,” the real Junko said as she sat at her desk in the surveillance room and viewed the Rec Room monitor, watching the entire scene play out in real-time.

As she watched in silence, her hands worked on folding a paper origami flower, which she finished in only a few seconds before setting it in a pile of nearly twenty or so already made paper flowers.

After depositing that flower, she reached for another paper and continued to meticulously fold without even looking at her hands, captivated by the images on the screen. Junko became particularly giddy when she watched Taka tear up the incriminating photo she hadn’t known was still in the building.

“I suppose I made the right choice, making him my assistant,” Sexy Teacher Junko said to herself, switching due to boredom of her current personality but continuing to fold origami flowers. “If everyone had been allowed to see that photo, it may have undone a part of the memory wipe. And that could have been disastrous.”

“Yup-yup! It’s great that Mr. Stick-Up-His-Ass dealt with it for me! That way, I doesn’t have to does it myselfes! Yay!” Kawaii Junko spoke up, again switching due to intense boredom and possibly hunger, since her stomach growled.

Patting her belly, the Mastermind set down the now completed origami flower in her hand before reaching into her mini-fridge and pulling out a pudding cup. Tearing it open, she glared at it for a moment and said, “Hello darkness, my old friend…”
With reckless abandon, Junko devoured the contents of the cup, finishing just in time to watch Celeste lean over the trash bin in the Rec Room. Seeing the despairingly evil look on the gambler’s face sent waves of pleasure through Junko’s body and she trembled as she said, “I think now’s the time to set up the next motive…”

Shifting her gaze over to beside her chair, she chuckled as she prepared the bag filled to the brim with money, which would finally be put to use.

“Whoa…what is this?!”

Makoto walked into a room at the end of the third floor hallway, where a large cylindrical machine buzzed loudly. Staring at it with a perplexed expression, the lucky student couldn’t possibly guess what its purpose was.

“Maybe it’s a time machine?” he jokingly said aloud to himself, shrugging his shoulders.

“Actually, I believe it’s an air purifier.”

“Eyahhh!” Makoto shrieked as he looked up to see Kyoko standing on a walkway near the top of the device, her lavender irises glancing down at him. “Jeez, Kyoko! You scared the crap outta me!”

“Sorry, that wasn’t my intention,” she quickly apologized while continuing to look over what she had identified as an air purifier. After a few more moments, she headed to a nearby ladder and climbed down to where Makoto eagerly waited for her. “Anyway, I think I’m finished examining this room. Although, I am a bit concerned…”

As she finished, she stole another glance at the air purifier, prompting Makoto to look at it as well.

“Is there something wrong with it?” he asked, taking a wild guess at what she was thinking. When he turned to look back at her, he was surprised to see her with a slight smile tugging at her lips, as though she was somehow impressed.

“No, or at least I believe it’s functioning normally. However,” she paused and turned toward it again, that concerned expression returning. “This device seems to be the only thing creating fresh air for us to breathe…which begs the question, why is there a need to create clean air?”

Makoto took a moment to seriously consider that notion before answering, “Maybe because it’s air tight in the school or something? Maybe the Mastermind is trying to completely cut us off from the outside and needed the purifier because of that?”

“Perhaps, but then we must ask ourselves; why has the Mastermind cut us off entirely? Is there more to it than simply sealing us within the school?” Kyoko questioned, more for herself than Makoto. At the same time, she frowned as she looked over the purifier one last time. “Not to mention that there isn’t a panel to control the air purifier…at least not one that we can reach.”

Finally beginning to understand, a frightening thought occurred to the lucky student. “Does that mean that…if the Mastermind wanted to, could they turn off the air and suffocate us?!”

“It’s too soon for us to know, but it’s certainly a possibility.” Kyoko admitted before turning and meeting his worried gaze. As she took in his visage, her expression softened ever so slightly and she said, “I’m sure that, for the time being, we don’t have to worry about the purifier malfunctioning. After all, the Mastermind wants us to turn on each other and succumb to despair. If they intended to
kill us, they wouldn’t keep providing food for us. So, for now at least, there is no cause for concern.”

Hearing her reassurance, Makoto couldn’t help but exhale a breath he’d been holding and smile. “Yeah…I guess you’re right. Guess, I’m panicking for no reason…sorry about that. Anyway, I appreciate you cheering me up! Thanks, Kyoko!”

The lavender haired girl froze for a moment and averted her gaze, eventually turning her back on him. For a second, Makoto thought he may have upset her, that was, until she eventually answered him.

“You’re welcome…” she said it very plainly and simply but somehow, Makoto knew it was genuine. An instant later, she cleared her throat and said, “I’m going to check out the back room. I’ll see you later.”

“Oh, I haven’t been in there yet,” Makoto told her, stepping up beside her. “Can I come with you?”

Glancing his way for half a second, Kyoko almost smiled as she said, “I won’t stop you.”

And with that, she headed for the back room, with Makoto eagerly nipping at her heels.

-Later That Day-

“…Does anyone else have anything they’d like to share about what they found on the third floor?” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru asked everyone, his powered-up appearance practically scorched into their irises.

Muffled groans and stern glances followed that question, the exhaustion of the entire class, minus Taka, showing through.

After returning to the cafeteria upon finishing their individual investigations, the students were then subjected to two long hours spent going over their findings on the third floor: Hifumi raved about the art room and the craft supplies, Kyoko and Makoto expressed concern over what their discoveries with the air purifier, though everyone agreed to let sleeping dogs lie for now, and Sakura and Hina lamented that the steel plating over each window was as solid as ever, leaving no means of escape.

Throughout the entire discussion, however, a few key players remained silent. Junko was strangely quiet, almost averting her gaze as Taka droned on and continued to enforce his twisted vision of order. Not only that, Celeste, apart from mentioning that she’d visited the Rec Room, had nothing to add to their conversation, which was odd considering her usual antagonistic attitude. And although it wasn’t exactly out of the ordinary, Byakuya stayed out of the discussion completely, letting everyone else explain their findings without interrupting, which was strange for him. Finally, Sayaka and Leon, rather than offering opinions or at least trying to contribute, as they normally did, sat quietly in their seats, heated glares staring at Taka the entire time.

Due to the silence that followed Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru’s last question, the Moral Compass decided that everything that needed to be said had been spoken.

“Well then, since there is no more business, I adjourn this meeting until tomorrow morning! And I expect every last one of you to arrive on time or there will be consequences!” Taka shouted to everyone as he walked around their meeting table and headed for the exit. “I will be patrolling the halls for miscreants until further notice. I suggest you all return to your rooms and begin studying, in preparation for our eventual escape and return to normal school life!”
Without waiting for anyone to respond, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman strode out the door and appeared to head out of the dormitory area. Once the sounds of his boots stomping eventually faded in the distance, most of the students began to stand up, presumably to leave. However, before anyone had the chance to get away from their chairs, a stoic voice called out to them.

“Please wait just a moment,” Kyoko said sternly but quietly, making everyone turn to face her. Rather than answer right away, however, the stoic girl quickly stood up from her seat and headed for the doors. Stopping just outside the cafeteria’s double doors, she glanced down the hallway Taka had departed before turning back to face her classmates. With a stern gaze, she said to them, “I believe that we all need to take some time to discuss our new…situation.”

No one needed to ask what she meant by ‘situation’, not even Hiro or Hifumi. A moment of silence followed that request, but not without every single one of the previously departing students slowly returning to their seats. Once they were all seated, an authoritative voice finally spoke up.

“As reluctant as I am to admit it, I’m afraid I must agree with her,” Byakuya said, rising to his feet and marching over to the head of the table where everyone was sitting…it was almost as if he were taking Taka’s place. “By now, I think that everyone should agree that we need to do something about the ‘Disciplinary Chairman’—”.

“Hold up for a minute,” Junko abruptly cut in, breaking the silence she’d held. Byakuya gave her a stern glare but let her continue. “You sure it’s a good idea to talk behind his back again? That’s what started this fucked up mess in the first place—!”

Suddenly, a very loud set of three knocks rang throughout the room. As one, the students turned to see Kyoko, her gloved knuckles resting against one of the doors, glancing at them over her shoulder. “If I see or hear Taka coming, I’ll knock.”

Understanding worked its way around the room as they all understood her plan. She would alert them if need be, which would give them the privacy needed to discuss this sensitive matter. For a second, everyone seemed fine with it, until a certain lucky student piped up.

“Wait a sec, Kyoko! If you do that you won’t be able to help us discuss what we should do!” Makoto interjected, already standing. “Let me switch with you! I’ll watch in case Taka—”.

“That’s not necessary,” Kyoko cut in, turning her gaze out toward the hallway. “I can simply listen for now. Besides, I feel like I am the most qualified to handle this task.”

Makoto flinched, as if he’d been stung by something. However, he quickly recovered with a nervous smile as he said, “Right…you do have an extreme attention to detail, don’t you?” He almost seemed to be trying to console himself but no one called him out on it. After all, they had more important matters to discuss.

“Well then,” Byakuya said before clearing his throat. “With that matter settled, let us discuss something that I believe we have all been pondering…do we have a traitor in our ranks?”

A wave of confusion overtook the cafeteria as the Affluent Progeny made that suggestion. Sakura, in particular, clenched her fists in anger, most likely frustrated by the very notion. Unfortunately, when no one immediately replied, Byakuya couldn’t keep himself from giving a deep, disappointed sigh.

“I am really the only one to consider such an option? I would think that it should be obvious,” he practically scolded everyone, which only earned him more spite.

“Why the hell would you think there’s a traitor in the group?” Junko fired back at him, almost
Glancing her way, the Togami Heir scoffed before answering, “It’s standard procedure for these kinds of situations. And I wouldn’t put it past the Mastermind to have an agent or two among us, to sow discord in case their plans go awry…”

“H-Hold on a second!” Makoto replied, a concerned expression on his face. “You don’t really think that one of us is working for the Mastermind, do you?!”

“Indeed, I do.” Byakuya’s words were swift and concise, with no hesitation anywhere in his voice. “If you ask me, I’m surprised that it took this long for the Mastermind to show their hand.”

A heavy silence suffocated the room, leaving everyone unable to speak as they processed that idea. All the while, Byakuya couldn’t help but smirk. They had ignored his warnings up until now, but it seemed that they had finally begun to see that if he chose to share information with them, they should just be silent and appreciate—

“Excuse me, but there’s something Leon and I need to tell everyone,” Sayaka suddenly interrupted the silence, earning an irritated glare from the Togami Heir. Ignoring him, the pop idol continued, “We may have found a clue to help us figure out why we’re trapped here.”

The instant she said that, everyone, especially Kyoko, turned to stare at her. Under their scrutinizing gazes, Sayaka felt herself shrink until Leon spoke up, “Yeah, we found this weird picture in the art supply room. The crazy thing was, it had me, Mondo, and Chihiro in it! And it looked like we were going to class in a normal school or something! And we were all smiles and stuff, like we were best friends!”

A short pause hung in the air before Hiro scratched his head and asked, “Uh, so… how exactly is that a clue?”

Flabbergasted, Leon almost sputtered, “W-What do you mean ‘how is that a clue’? It’s a freaking picture of me, Mondo and Chihiro! How is that not a clue?!”

“Well, it’s just a picture, man. It doesn’t really explain anything or—”, Hiro tried to explain before being cut off.

“Do you remember when the picture was taken?” Kyoko abruptly asked, glancing over her shoulder for a moment before resuming her watch, but obviously still listening for his answer.

“No! That’s the thing! I didn’t know Mondo or Chihiro before we got trapped in here!” Leon finally explained, only now understanding that he left that part out.

“That’s the part you should have told us first!” Hina slightly scolded before abruptly perking up. “But yeah, that’s weird! How could the three of you be in a picture you don’t remember taking?”

“Perhaps Mondo or Chihiro could give better clarification…” Sakura offered solemnly, subtly reminding everyone of their situation.

“Yeah, let’s have Mondo tell us about it later!” Hina swiftly agreed, fist pumping excitedly. “Maybe Chihiro will wake up soon and we can ask her about it too!”

“See, I told you we found a clue!” Leon chided at Hiro, to which the clairvoyant shrugged in embarrassment. “With this, we may be able to figure out why it was us the bear wanted to trap here!”

“It may be a bit too soon to celebrate, considering we don’t know what that photo could mean,”

sounding a bit offended.
Sayaka forewarned, trying to be realistic without dampening everyone’s enthusiasm. “However, at least we now have something to go on.”

“Right! And something is better than nothing!” the baseball star insisted, feeling especially proud. As he finished, Sayaka gave him a confident smile, which he appreciated. But she wasn’t the only one, all of the students shared hopeful glances as this revelation was made clear to them, especially a very hopeful friend of theirs.

“That’s great, you two! It sounds like we may actually have a chance to figure this out! And it’s all thanks to you!” Makoto cheerfully replied, looking at them as eagerly as everyone else.

For a moment, Leon and Sayaka felt a swell of happiness as the lucky student praised them. At the same time, for Sayaka, hearing Makoto’s praise also brought feelings of guilt for how she’d treated him. However, just for that moment, she allowed herself to smile, feeling somewhat relieved.

Unfortunately, that relief instantly reverted back to apprehension when the lucky student asked, “So, where is it? Can we see it?”

As he asked that, both Leon and Sayaka’s moods dampened, their heads hanging a bit. This immediately disheartened the rest of the students, and they understood the sudden change in attitude when Sayaka begrudgingly chose to answer.

“We…we don’t have it anymore…” the pop idol was forced to admit.

“How convenient…” Byakuya’s mocking tone resounded, earning glares from almost the entire class. “You claim to have found a clue but then provide nothing, raising everyone’s hopes, just to crush them underfoot. Are you, perhaps, trying to buy our trust with falsehoods? As you both have done in the past?”

“Y-Yeah! It’s just like Master Byakuya said!” Toko abruptly shouted, forcing everyone to acknowledge her presence. “The t-two of you must be trying to trick us a-again! Attempted murderers never change!”

“Like you’re one to talk! You’re an actual murderer! So, shut the hell up!” Leon immediately shouted, making Toko yelp and shirk away, slightly ashamed. The baseball star then met the Togami Heir’s harsh gaze with no hesitation. “We didn’t lose the picture on purpose! Taka confiscated it and tore it up!”

“Hmph, a likely excuse,” Byakuya seethed before fiendishly smirking. “Though it is believable that, in his current state, Taka might be capable of doing such a thing, it also seems counter-intuitive. He may have lost a great deal of common sense, but I can’t imagine that even he would foolishly destroy evidence on a whim. Therefore, it is more likely that all of this is simply a fabrication the two of you have created for your own purposes.”

“Oh yeah! Well, I can vouch for them!” Junko abruptly entered the conversation, staring Byakuya down as if he were nothing. “I heard Taka shouting at them from the first floor and when I came to see what was up, I saw that he’d thrown away something that looked like a torn apart picture.”

Hearing that, Byakuya paused for a moment before saying, “So…you arrived after the photo had been disposed of? Did you happen to see the photo for yourself?”

A bit startled, the Fashionista hesitatingly replied, “Well…no, but—”.

“Then how can you be sure that it was not some sort of elaborate set-up constructed by the
Mastermind?” the Affluent Progeny questioned, an overly pleased grin on his lips.

“Just what are you getting at?” Junko seethed, slowly rising from her chair to challenge the Togami Heir.

With a menacing smirk and an accusatorily glare aimed at Sayaka and Leon, Byakuya confidently answered, “I am merely expressing the possibility that we may have a few traitors among us. I believe I mentioned that before, didn’t I?”

The venom in his voice practically oozed into everyone’s ears, further increasing everyone’s dislike of him. Then again, none of the students, especially Sayaka and Leon, were surprised by his abrasive attitude. After all, his disbelief and distrustful attitude were practically becoming an everyday occurrence. Unfortunately, his words also seemed to be affecting some of the other students, considering that Hiro and Hifumi were staring at Sayaka and Leon with nothing less than distrust.

It was then that an unexpected source decided to refute the Togami Heir.

“Actually, I believe that Leon and Sayaka are being honest with us,” Celestia Ludenberg graciously commented, earning shocked glances from everyone present, especially Sayaka and Leon. Despite everyone’s stunned expressions, the gambler continued, “At the very least, I believe they are telling the truth about Taka destroying the evidence.”

As expected, Byakuya was one of the first to shake off his surprise, quickly asking, “And why would you say that?”

Giving him a quick and almost devious smile, Celeste replied, “I happened to be in the Rec Room during my investigation and overhead Sayaka and Leon speaking with Taka. I heard a great deal of shouting and then, a few moments later, I saw Taka storm into the Rec Room and throw away what appeared to be torn pieces of a picture. Then, Junko arrived and everyone else departed. However, Taka remained just outside the room until we all were called back to report our findings for the investigation.”

Narrowing his gaze, the Togami Heir scowled deeply as he retorted, “I see. But again, you didn’t happen to actually see the photo, did you?” Without giving her time to respond, he jerked his gaze back over to Sayaka and Leon and asked, “For that matter, if Taka merely discarded the photo, why didn’t you bother to retrieve it? It should have been a simple matter to wait for him to leave—”.

“You don’t think we didn’t try to do that?!” Junko furiously retorted, finally getting the Togami Heir’s attention. “Sayaka, Leon, and I went back to the Rec Room after we saw that Taka wasn’t watching the room anymore. But the pieces were already gone! We don’t know where—”.

“You don’t think I am the cause of this misunderstanding,” Celeste suddenly interrupted, her tone surprisingly apologetic. Reaching into the pockets of her dress, she carefully pulled out what appeared to be torn pieces of a photograph. Gently setting them down on the table, and ignoring the gasps and gapes from her classmates, the gambler finished, “I feared that Taka might come back to retrieve them, so I retrieved them myself. For safe keeping, of course.”

After setting them down, the gambler did her best to try and rearrange the pieces so that the image side was facing upward, to give them some clue of what the photo had once shown. For a time, all the students could do was stare bewildered at the fragments of the once perfect picture. And while it was hard to make out, some parts of it were very clear: Leon’s red spiky hair, Chihiro’s soft smile, Mondo’s outrageous pompadour…and a classroom with no metal plates over the windows.

Even from her spot at the door, still keeping a lookout for Taka, Kyoko could make out all of those
features…and her intrigue about the true meaning of the killing game vastly deepened. However, even with this monumental discovery, there was only one question eating away at all of the students’ minds, and only one student was able to voice it.

“But…why would Taka do something like that? Even with the way he is now, it’s just not like him!” Makoto questioned aloud, trying to make sense of everything.

As if to answer his question, everyone heard Celeste give a deep, audible sigh and turned her way. Noticing that they were staring at her, she let a sad expression decorate her features as she decided to voice her concern.

“Although it is unpleasant to think about…I fear that, just as Byakuya suggests…we may have a traitor among us. And that traitor…is Kiyotaka Ishimaru.”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Quite a shocking revelation, isn’t it?! How will the students proceed knowing that a traitor may be among them? Will Taka end up taking his duties too far? And what, exactly, does Celeste have planned? You’ll have to keep on reading to find out!

EDIT: Just after I posted this chapter, I found out that my audition for a fan reading of Danganronpa: IF. When it comes out, you will be able to hear me as Byakuya Togami. If any of you don’t know, I’m actually an actor for a living and this is very exciting for me! I will give more information about this project as it becomes available.

So, I almost wasn’t able to get this chapter out because my computer crashed! Luckily, I was able to recover some of my files and this story was a top concern! As you can see, I managed to recover it without losing any of my fanfictions. Had to buy a new computer…which didn’t help my poor wallet any but now I’m able to keep my schedule without issues!

On that note, I want to thank everyone whose been leaving reviews/comments and favoriting my story! It’s always great to know that you’re all still enjoying it so much! I’ve been posting for over a year now and it’s thanks to all of your support that I kept going! The biggest shout out goes to my beta, Dixxy Mouri, who keeps me on track!

As always, reviews are love…reviews are life! So, if you have questions or just want to leave a comment, please do so! I love hearing from you all! Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Celeste contemplates her new strategy while Hifumi serves tea. Meanwhile, Mondo is made aware of all the hostility his Bro is causing. Later, Hina takes a chance and ends up with something she never knew she needed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Celestia Ludenberg couldn’t keep from pleasantly humming to herself as she sat alone in the cafeteria, waiting for Hifumi to return from the kitchen and deliver her tea. Everyone else had departed, either heading back to their rooms for the night or, in Junko’s case, delivering food to a hungry Mondo. In any case, nothing could spoil the gambler’s mood right now.

“That went even more smoothly than I had planned,” she mused as she twirled her hair on her finger. “Now that everyone is suspicious of Taka, it won’t take much to drive someone to backstab him... literally.”

Her plan was simple but effective. By insinuating that he was working with the Mastermind, she could manipulate her classmates into distrusting him. And once the Moral Compass became drunk with power, as she knew he eventually would, she could easily persuade one of the more small-minded students to take matters into their own hands and end Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru’s reign of terror...permanently.

“Sure, if I let someone else kill him for me, I won’t have a way to escape this hell hole, but it will be worth it to be free of that infuriating little bitch once and for all!”

Almost without noticing it, a malicious grin crept over her lips. However, when she realized how she must have looked, she replaced her grin with an eloquent smile to avoid suspicion, just in case a certain fanfic creator happened to come out of the kitchen.

“All I need to do is stay on everyone’s good side for a few days and let their suspicions and assumptions for his actions make them reckless. One of these idiots will break sooner or later and with a little ‘persuasion’, I can get one of them to off that worthless bastard for me. And the best part is, I won’t even have to lift a finger.”

Again, she subconsciously let a menacing smirk decorate her features as she pictured all the ways Taka could be murdered. A backstabbing would be easy and he wouldn’t see it coming, but then again, she really wanted someone to bludgeon his fat head into the pavement too! Hell, maybe she should just skip the whole ‘getting someone else to do it’ part and just take matters into her own hands—

“No...” she said aloud, her malicious appearance instantly disappearing. “I can’t take that risk...”

If Celeste was nothing else, beyond a genius gambler that is, she was cautious. Nothing good came of rushing, whether in life or her gambling career. After all, she hadn’t amassed a large amount of cash by being hasty, and that applied now more than ever.
In all of her gambling forays, she never once bet anything higher than a dollar amount. There had been times, very tempting instances, when someone had attempted to persuade her to gamble with something more…such as her body. When it first happened, it was utterly sickening. She had been thirteen at the time and it was disgusting that a middle-aged balding man had dared to suggest that, since she had been low on chips at that moment, she bet herself in lieu of currency. That same night, she walked away with that man’s entire life savings…and didn’t resort to his suggestion the entire time. After that, she established a personal rule to never allow herself to fall that low. Money could always be reclaimed, even if she went bankrupt, but her dignity could not be recovered so easily.

And while being trapped in this school had made her slightly less cautious than she usually was, she still had enough sense not to lay her very life on the line…unless her victory was utterly assured, which she doubted was possible.

“Right now, there are too many variables to worry about. Even if I constructed a fool-proof plan, one mistake could cost me…everything. Besides, there’s always the small chance that eventually a way out can be found that doesn’t involve bludgeoning someone into the pavement. Even so…”

Her blood boiled as she recalled the way Taka had spoken to her about her talent…daring to insinuate that she was talentless. No one had ever said such a thing to her and even though deep down she knew that she should be cautious and just forget about it…she also knew that she couldn’t forgive him for essentially calling her useless!

It was the first time that Celeste had ever wished for the death of another human being. No one had ever insulted her…ridiculed her…made her question herself as much as that bastard had! When he had told her she was talentless…it was like telling her she didn’t have the right to exist. Her entire being hinged on her talent, she had poured her very soul into becoming Celestia Ludenberg, the Ultimate Gambler…and he, that worthless, good-for-nothing, pink slip writing, rulebook fucking, detention loving, god-damn soulless piece of shit had no right to—

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” Hifumi called as he lumbered out of the kitchen, taking great care not to spill the fancy cup of tea he carried over on a tray.

Despite the rage she’d been feeling, Celeste managed to push it all aside and smile pleasantly as he approached. Thankfully, the fanfic creator didn’t seem to notice anything was amiss about her, but that was to be expected of him. In Celeste’s mind, Hifumi had two purposes; to provide her with tea, regardless of how horrible his brewing talents were, and to provide amusement with his utter stupidity.

Although she would never admit to it aloud, she found a kind of twisted amusement in his constant ramblings. The way he would suddenly quote anime or manga was somewhat entertaining…well, it was mainly watching him be scolded for acting like an overly obsessed fool, but such was the fate of being an otaku. Not to mention that Celeste took great joy in reminding him of how pathetic his failings were, which always seemed to lift her spirits.

In short, Hifumi Yamada was the perfect punching bag for her and she knew that she would have gone insane long ago if he hadn’t been around for her to torment. Speaking of which…

“You certainly took your time,” she said, resuming the use of her accent as he placed the tea cup and saucer directly in front of her. “I hope that it is at least suitable for ingestion this time.”

“Not to fear, Miss Ludenberg!” Hifumi exclaimed, putting his hands triumphantly on his hips. “I have been practicing and I feel that I have cultivated something truly delightful this time! You can tell by the sweet aroma of the—”.
“My dear Hifumi…anyone can appreciate the simple aroma,” she cut him off sharply before smirking overly sweetly up at him. Delicately wrapping her finger around the cup handle, she gently lifted the cup up and let her nose inhale…a surprisingly pleasant aroma. It almost startled her because…it actually smelled delicious, not that she would ever give him the pleasure of knowing that. Undeterred by this unexpected development, she swiftly continued, “However, it is the taste satisfies the palette…”

Without further ado, Celeste braced herself for the same disgusting taste that she knew would invade her mouth as she lifted the tea cup to her lips. Delicately, she sipped the hot beverage and let its flavor wash over her tongue…stifling a gasp.

“No…fucking…way…”

To her complete and utter shock, the milk tea that she had expected would needed to be forcefully ingested…completely rocked her world! It was a perfect blend of milk brewed with the tea, not too sweet but not bitter in the least! She had to stop herself from practically gulping down the tiny fraction of the heavenly concoction resting on her tongue, instantly wanting more of it in her mouth! He’d only been making her tea for the last few days and she hadn’t been exaggerating on how horrible it had been the first time. Had he really come so far in only a few days? And with so few attempts?! It was almost as amazing as the café she used to frequent—no…it was even more delicious than their ‘professional’ brewing! She needed more of this and she needed it now! However, not only would that burn her tongue, it would also show Hifumi that his creation was appreciated…and she couldn’t have that!

“Well…how is it today, Miss Ludenberg?” the fanfic creator asked as if on cue, a hopeful expression daring to spread over his features.

Somehow managing to keep her mask in place throughout that entire experience, she gently set the tea cup down before glancing up to Hifumi with that overly sweet smile.

“It is consumable, but not the most enjoyable brew,” she outright lied, feeling a swell of joy as his hopeful visage crumbled into disappointment, hunching his shoulders over with a depressed expression. “For the time being, this is sufficient. If you can, please continue to produce at least this level of quality.”

“I…I see,” he said slowly, straightening himself up and reaching for the saucer. “Well, if you aren’t really enjoying it, I can take it back—”.

“No, this is fine,” Celeste found herself instantly but calmly refuting, not wanting him to take away her precious cup of delicious tea. However, she also knew that she was contradicting herself with her statement a moment ago and had to think quickly. “While it isn’t particularly enjoyable, it is not unconsumable. And I simply refuse to waste freshly brewed tea, as long as it can be properly ingested. Therefore, I shall bear the slightly less enjoyable taste and finish what I have started.”

She lifted the tea to her lips again, sipping that heavenly concoction while pretending it wasn’t the greatest thing to ever slip past her lips. Fortunately, her act seemed to convince Hifumi and he simply stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do.

“Oh, um, alright then…” he said nervously, before glancing around like a lost puppy.

Celeste instantly took note of his incompetence and let out a deep sigh. She wanted to enjoy her tea in private, mainly so that she could properly appreciate it, but knew that was impossible as long as the fanfic creator was around. Seeing an opportunity, without so much as looking away from her tea, she said to him, “Hifumi, dear, make yourself useful and see to the clean-up. It is getting close to
nighttime and I would rather not violate our shared night time rule.”

As if energized by her words, Hifumi’s vigor suddenly returned and he held up both arms enthusiastically as he exclaimed, “Then I shall see to the clean-up, Miss Ludenberg! If you have need of me, you need only call and I shall hastily return to your side!”

“Very well then, off with you,” she said with a dismissive waver of her hand, sipping her lovely tea slowly to fully enjoy it while it lasted.

As per her instructions, Hifumi instantly spun around and headed back into the kitchen. The moment he was out of sight, Celeste couldn’t stop herself from taking a large gulp of her tea, a tiny trace of it escaping her mouth and trailing down her chin. With lady-like grace she used a napkin to clean herself up before letting out a very satisfied sigh.

“Why the hell couldn’t he have made it like this before?! This shit’s better than heroine! And it only took him a few days to get it this perfect! His dedication to a task is almost inspiring…if not for the massive amounts of sweat that drip off his fat head. And I have to admit that it’s nice to have someone who’s always willing to do exactly what I want…like my own personal servant.”

Another sigh, this one of disappointment, resounded as her thoughts continued rolling on.

“If only he wasn’t so gargantuan…he would have made an excellent vampire-esque servant for my future castle. Perhaps I could employ him as my official tea brewer? As long as he stayed out of sight…and always served this orgasmic tea, I’d be willing to let him serve me. It’s a shame that, once I find a way to win Monokuma’s game, he’ll be executed along with everyone else. You can’t buy that kind of loyalty. I mean, he already does just about anything I…tell…him…to…”

As that thought entered her mind, she let another malicious smirk grace her lips.

“Miss Ludenberg, I am almost finished with the dishes!”

As she heard him call from the kitchen, she instantly refocused her attention back to keeping her mask perfectly in place, a calm demeanor overtaking her features. A moment later, Hifumi reentered the cafeteria just as she finished the last of the heavenly brew he’d created. Setting the tea cup on the saucer, she waited patiently for him to take it from her, like she was a customer at a café.

And, just as she expected, without even being asked, he took her saucer, and tea cup with it, and headed back toward the kitchen.

However, before he made it back, the gambler abruptly called out, “By the way, Hifumi…have you been working on any…projects lately?”

That question stopped the fanfic creator in his tracks and he cautiously turned around to bewilderedly stare at her.

“Well, now that the art supply room is open…um, I suppose I have but…why do you ask, Miss Ludenberg? Excuse me for assuming but…you don’t seem the type to be interested in…that kind of thing.”

Celeste successfully fought back her urge to smirk, knowing she could read him like an open book. His expression told her that he was utterly surprised that she’d even mention such a thing, but she could also see that he was incredibly excited by the fact that she’d taken even a passing interest in his work.

“This is going to be easier than I thought…” she mused as he eagerly awaited her response.
“I may have a ‘project’ that I would need your assistance with…if you are interested?” she coyly said to him, knowing that she had already ensnared him.

A few moments passed before Hifumi let a huge smile overtake his features as he said, “Well, I have been working on something that I’m currently calling…Robo Justice!”

“I can’t tell if she’s trying to manipulate him or seduce him…” the real Junko said as she watched the monitor closely, slipping her newly folded origami flowers onto a string. “I never did figure out if those two were involved or not. Guess it doesn’t matter anyway, apocalypse considered. Even so…”

The Mastermind tied off the string of origami flowers and set it aside, picking up another string and threading more paper flowers through it.

“Scanlation would do just about anything for Ms. Talentless, either by manipulation or otherwise. And with how bloodthirsty she is right now, I may not even need the motive right now…” Junko considered, still watching the screen carefully.

Celeste sat there calmly, listening as Hifumi exuberantly told her about his cosplay project. The gambler held her passive mask in place but Junko’s expert eye saw through her instantly, noticing the tiniest twinge of annoyance every time the fanfic creator shouted in her face. Seeing that slight hint of frustration made Junko smirk, gears turning in her mind already.

“On second thought…perhaps a little motivation would be enough to push her over the edge. After all, she’s been playing it too safe for a gambler…she needs to live up to her talent, after all.”

The Mastermind stopped threading origami flowers for a moment before rising from her seat and picking up a duffle bag, one large enough to hide a body in, that was full of money from beside her desk. Slinging it over her shoulder, she headed out of the computer room to initiate the next motive.

The instant she’d left, on one of the corner monitors, a lavender haired detective slipped out of her room, and headed for the second floor staircase.

“Holy shit…all that happened today?!”

Mondo’s surprise didn’t faze Mukuro…it almost didn’t seem real to her either. She had just finished explaining everything that had happened that day to the biker as he finished the evening meal she’d brought him. She had considered keeping some of the information, primarily about Taka’s transformation, hidden from him. However, she knew the potential dangers of withholding information from her classmates, a lesson the second motive had forced them all to recognize. So, in the end, when Mondo asked how his Bro was doing, the disguised Mukuro couldn’t bring herself to keep him in the dark.

For the first time in probably his whole life, Mondo just stood there and patiently listened as he was told about everything; Taka’s transformation and subsequent rise to ‘power’, the strange photo that Mondo himself was present in, and the idea that there might, in fact, be a traitor amongst them.

“That bitch…” Mondo abruptly cursed, which startled the soldier out of her daze. “She’s got a lotta balls calling my Bro a traitor! Even with all this crazy disciplinary shit, there’s no way Taka would ever side with the bear!”
Mukuro didn’t have to guess who he was talking about. Ever since she’d mentioned Celeste’s bold assumption of the Disciplinary Committee Chairman, the biker had grown increasingly more irritated. However, at the same time, it was obvious that he was doing his best to keep his temper under control. Only a few days ago the biker would have flown into a rage and stormed off to find Celeste and give her a piece of his mind…or perhaps a fist in her teeth. But now, after his rage had nearly gotten them all killed, he seemed to be doing his best to take his anger in stride.

Because of that, Mukuro couldn’t stop the tiny smile that appeared on her lips. Mondo had made a horrible mistake, but he was also doing his best to try and make up for it. Not only that, despite how much Taka resented him at the moment, the biker wouldn’t let go of the friendship they had both cherished. It was refreshing to say the least, considering all of the terrible happenings the morning had brought.

“So where’s that picture now?” Mondo suddenly asked, snapping her out of her trance as he held out his now empty food tray.

“Oh, Kyoko’s hanging onto the pieces. She said she wants to try and tape it back together or something, which won’t be easy since some of the pieces are missing. But she seemed confident enough, so no one objected,” the disguised soldier informed him, taking the tray back and preparing to head back to the cafeteria.

“So, uh, where’s Taka right now?” Mondo apprehensively asked, almost unsure if he wanted to know the answer.

Taking that into consideration, Mukuro let out a sigh before replying, “Not sure, but wherever he is, he’s definitely putting the ‘dick’ in dictator…”

“Yes, well, that’s the point of being a dictator right? To be a dick with power?” Mondo asked, convinced he was on the right track.

“Yeah…something like that,” Mukuro answered, turning to head for the cafeteria. “Anyway, I better get stuff back to—”.

“H-Hey, hold up!” Mondo almost shouted as she turned, making her stop and turn back to face him. For a moment, the biker’s eyes were downcast, like he was struggling with something internally. However, an instant later, his gaze shot up and he said, “I…uh, shit…uh, I’m not good at this crap…uh, Junko!”

He was shouting again, his face a tinge of pink from embarrassment, but he somehow found the will to continue.

“I-I…I used to think you were a nothing but a stupid, prissy, bitch!” Mukuro’s eye twitched at hearing that but she decided to let him finish. “But…ya know, I was wrong! I mean, yeah, you’re still a fashion queen and all that, but…I guess what I’m trying to say is…you’re not just some stuck-up hot chick! You’re a hot chick who’s pretty badass!”

Mukuro almost dropped the tray as those words echoed in her ears. At first, she wasn’t sure what to make of that comment. But as her brain processed it, she felt something strange slowly rise up from within. It was similar to the first time Makoto had smiled at her, but at the same time it felt entirely different…she just wasn’t sure how!

“Come to think of it…when Leon and Sayaka told me I was…amazing, it felt like this…what the hell is this feeling?!”
Almost against her will, she felt her face flush, but she just couldn’t help it! It was the first time anyone had told her she was…attractive. Not even Makoto had ever told her such a thing! Granted, the lucky student was probably too shy to ever do something like that but it was still true! Even though she figured that part of it had to be the fact that she was dressed up like her sister, it still felt amazing to be complimented like that! And while it was obvious that Mondo hadn’t meant it romantically or anything like that…hell, he probably told that to a lot of girls…it didn’t change the fact that right now…he had told Mukuro that she was…pretty.

The notion completely caught her off guard, something that she had never imagined her classmates being capable of. And at the same time, a warm and pleasant feeling welled up inside her chest…

“It’s probably just my pulse racing from being startled,” she told herself without hesitation. “My adrenaline is pumping…that’s all. It’ll work its way out soon…I hope.”

It was definitely something the soldier had never imagined encountering while pretending to be her sister! Plus, she hadn’t expected Mondo to be so…forward! And the shouting certainly wasn’t doing her any favors! If anyone was nearby, such as a certain Disciplinary Chairman, it would certainly escalate and become utterly humiliating!

Her soldier’s instinct kicked in and she decided it was best to retreat before her own thoughts led to her defeat!

Lifting her gaze up to meet his, she realized Mondo must have been awkwardly staring at her for a while now, or at least if felt like it had been a while. Falling back on the Fashionista persona she’d cultivated, she barely managed to regain control of her emotions in time to smirk at him.

“Hmm, trying to charm your way into my pants, are ya?” she chided, praying her façade was as perfect as it normally was. Fortunately for her, it seemed that Mondo was too busy being flustered by her comment to notice if anything was different about her.

“W-W-What?! No! That’s not what I—dammit, I really suck at this!”

Seeing him flustered made Mukuro feel empowered, a feeling she knew well and could manage…unlike a few moments ago. Finally regaining full control of her emotions, the soldier decided it was best to remove herself from the situation.

“Haha! You’re fine! I’m just fucking with you!” she said with a laugh, lightly punching his shoulder at the same time. “Anyway, you good for the night? It’s almost night time and I wanna get the dishes back to the kitchen and be back in my room before the announcement plays.”

Mondo took a moment to shake off his embarrassment before answering, “Yeah, I should be fine. Thanks for covering while I used the can, too.”

“No prob. I can cover for you whenever you need me. And be sure to let us know when Chihiro wakes up,” she told him as she turned to head for the cafeteria and dispose of the tray. Just before she left though, she glanced over her shoulder and grinned as she said, “Oh, and try not to dream about me tonight! Later!”

Just before she turned around, she saw him embarrassingly avert his gaze before he slammed the nurse’s office door, to which she let out a hearty laugh before hastily making her way down the hall, rounding the corner as nonchalantly as possible.

However, once she made it around that corner, the soldier broke out into a run, speeding through the entrance to the dorms, into the lobby outside the cafeteria, into the mess hall itself, and finally coming
to a halt as she slammed down the tray of dishes next to the kitchen sink.

She panted heavily, her breath hot and her face reddened…but not from the run.

Mukuro’s mind was still fixated on the fact that someone other than Makoto had complimented her! Yeah, Junko had given her compliments from time to time but it was always a backhanded one; such as telling her she looked good when her face was covered in someone else’s blood! But this time…it was an honest to goodness compliment that was meant only for her! And it made her heart soar as she briefly allowed herself to revel in it.

Unfortunately, her reverie didn’t last long, as dark thoughts soon began to cloud her mind. No doubt her sister had seen the entire affair and would undoubtedly have some choice words for her once she got back to her room…unless Monokuma, or rather her sister, had been telling the truth about not interfering until a class trial needed to be held.

“Junko hasn’t lied to us yet…avoided the truth certainly, but not outright lied. Then again, that doesn’t mean that now isn’t a good time for her to start…”

In the midst of her thoughts, she suddenly felt someone approach her from behind, almost out of nowhere. Her soldier’s instincts took over and she clenched her fist, preparing to defend herself. Once she felt the presence get within striking range, she shifted her stance and prepared to attack. However, just as she began to spin around and swing her fist, an authoritative voice shouted at her.

“Miss Enoshima!!”

Mid-swing, Mukuro recognized the voice and immediately shifted her weight in order to halt her attack. Luckily, she was just barely able to stop her fist from colliding into the side of her classmate’s face, her knuckles just barely stopping next to their cheek. It was fortunate that Mukuro had such powers of restraint…or else she would have knocked the Disciplinary Committee Chairman on his ass.

Meanwhile, Taka seemed to only be slightly fazed by what had almost happened to him. The white sheen was still present in his hair and his burning red eyes held a hint of surprise, but most likely it was because, as far as he knew, he’d almost been smacked across the face. He had no way of knowing that, if Mukuro had attacked as she’d intended, he might have been nursing a broken jaw for the next month.

Very slowly, Mukuro retracted her fist and stood there, nervously facing him. The air itself stood still as a few quiet moments passed, neither of the two speaking. However, that didn’t last long, especially since Taka was on the verge of exploding. His fearsome aura abruptly flared and the fire in his eyes burned brightly.

“Junko Enoshima! I certainly hope that you have a reasonable explanation for what you have done and almost did!” he shouted in her face, bits of spittle splattering against her cheek, making her rear back in disgust for a moment.

Wiping her face with her sleeve, Mukuro instantly furrowed her brows and retorted, “Maybe if you hadn’t snuck up on me and screamed in my ear, I wouldn’t have tried to smack you, dumbass!”

The instant that last expletive left her mouth, she knew what was coming. Without a single word, Taka whipped out his now signature pink notepad and scribbled away on it. Faster than she thought possible, he wrote out her citation for swearing, ripped it off the pad, and extended it out to her. Narrowing her eyes, the soldier snatched it from his hand, only to be shocked when he instantly went back to the notepad, seemingly writing up another one.
“Whoa, whoa, hey! What’s that one for?!” she exclaimed, pointing at the citation he was currently writing.

Without lifting his head, and continuing to write all the while, he replied, “That was for your first offense, I now have to write up the others…”

An entirely confused look overtook the disguised Mukuro’s features as she questioned, “O-O- Others?!”

“Indeed!” Taka announced ripping his current pink slip off and handing it to her, which she took from him almost in a daze. “That one is for use of profanity when speaking in the hallway with…Mr. Owada.”

Surprise overtook Mukuro as she came to a startling realization. “Wait…so you were listening in on our conversation?” she asked, obviously shocked that he’d overheard them.

“That was not the case!” the Disciplinary Committee Chairman defended himself, already writing up the next citation. “I happened to be finishing my rounds and was heading for the dormitory when I heard the two of you…conversing. During that time, I heard you use profanity and decided to… politely wait for you to finish your conversation before addressing the matter with you!”

Again, Mukuro was shocked, but not because he’d admitted to eavesdropping. Regardless of all his bluster, it seemed that Taka was not ready to even speak with Mondo yet, considering he waited for the biker to shut himself in the nurse’s office before approaching her. Normally, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman would have simply inserted himself into the conversation and presented the pink slip at that time. The very idea that Taka ‘patiently’ waited to present her with a citation after she’d left Mondo’s company proved that, on some level, the Moral Compass was still reluctant to even acknowledge his former friend.

Mukuro probably would have found the situation more heartbreaking…if Taka wasn’t still in the process of writing her up!

“There you are,” he said, handing her another pink slip, which she begrudgingly took. “That one is for reckless endangerment of yourself.”

“Reckless endangerment…of myself?” Mukuro repeated with a raised brow.

“Indeed! As I followed after you to write up your citation, I watched as you began running through the halls like a mad woman!” Taka shouted, his powerful aura intensifying with each word. “You could have fallen and hurt yourself, or shamefully collided with another student! How could such an act not be classified as ‘Reckless Endangerment’?!”

Feeling exhausted just by being in his presence, Mukuro let out a deep sigh before asking, “Alright, fine, I’m sorry. Can I go now? It’s getting late—what the hell?! There’s more?!”

In the middle of her asking to leave, the Disciplinary Chairman began writing up another citation. However, he did seem to be speeding up his writing as he presented her with the next slip rather quickly.

“Another profanity violation just now,” he briefly explained before instantly writing up the next one.

Realizing it was better to just keep her mouth shut and wait, the soldier leaned against the counter behind her and lowered her gaze, sighing audibly. In a matter of moments, she was presented with her fourth pink slip in the last five minutes.
“And what’s this one for?” she said as she reached out and grabbed it from him.

“And another reckless endangerment, but this time for nearly assaulting me when I came to greet you,” the Moral Compass explained, his gaze narrowing angrily. “I realize I startled you, but you must consider the consequences for your actions! What if you had struck me in a way that would have made me fall over and bump my head?! If that had happened and I didn’t regain consciousness, it would have resulted in another bullying class trial! The very thing that I am trying to prevent would have occurred and it would have been your responsibility to make amends for it!”

“If I had hit you, you wouldn’t have been unconscious, you’d be wailing in pain! Plus, I’m not sure any of us would care to find whoever knocked your ass out anyway! We’d all be too happy celebrating the fall of a tyrant!” Mukuro couldn’t stop herself from thinking as she silently allowed the Moral Compass berate her.

“Next time, just calmly turn around and address whomever is speaking to you with the grace and patience befitting a woman of your age! You are old enough to know how to behave in public, young lady!”

As his insults reverberated in her ears, Mukuro prayed, for Taka’s sake, that he was finished… because if he wrote her one more pink slip, she wasn’t sure if she could stop herself from breaking his legs—oh, the fuck, hell, shit, what?!?!?!

“And finally, this last citation is for both your vulgarity and profanity when I first addressed you,” the Disciplinary Chairman said, handing over what appeared to be the fifth and final pink slip of the evening. “However, I was kind enough to have them as a single citation instead of two. I hope you are grateful for my benevolence.”

With a trembling hand, shaking from rage, Mukuro took the last pink slip from him and put it with the others before slipping all of them into her pocket. Taking deep, cleansing breaths to keep from strangling him, the soldier calmly asked, “May I go now?”

At the sound of her request, Taka’s features suddenly shifted and a proud smile overtook his lips as he replied, “Indeed you may! Thank you for asking! I was going to suggest it anyway, since it is almost night time and the cafeteria will soon be off limits!”

“Thank you…” Mukuro said swiftly, stepping around him and heading for the kitchen door. However, before she reached it, that irritating voice called out to her again.

“Wait a moment!” Taka practically shouted, causing Mukuro to halt and snap her head to glare over her shoulder at him. Seemingly unaware of her rage, the Moral Compass pointed to the food tray she’d left by the sink and continued, “You did not finish taking care of the dishes! However, as time is of the essence, I will graciously allow you to finish them in the morning, as I would not want you to violate the off limits rule of the cafeteria over such a minor issue.”

“How kind of you…” Mukuro slowly replied through gritted teeth.

“How kind of you…” Taka said with a hearty laugh before marching past her and out of the kitchen. However, he immediately poked his head back inside and said, “Now please hurry! Or I will have to write up another citation for violating the night time rule that Celestia Ludenberg so generously bestowed upon us!”

All at once, Mukuro’s anger subsided as the Moral Compass bestowed that bit of knowledge to her. He actually considered Celeste’s self-enforced rule to be valid? Was that the reason he was patrolling the hall right before night time? It made sense, considering that the Disciplinary Committee Chairman
wanted to avoid casualties as much as the rest of them, but she never imagined he’d take it this far. Perhaps there was a method to Taka’s madness after all…

“Miss Enoshima!” Taka shouted at her again, this time pulling out his pink notepad. “If you delay any longer I will have no choice but to fill out another citation!”

“Never mind…he’s still a fucking dick!”

“Alright, alright! I’m coming!” she finally replied, following him out of the kitchen, through the cafeteria, and all the way into the hallway leading to their rooms.

Almost immediately upon returning to her room, Mukuro pressed her back to her door and exhaled deeply. Her hand shot up and, with a fierce tug, she pulled the pink wig from her scalp. Her arm fell to her side, wig in hand, as her other hand reached into her pocket and pulled out the five pink slips that Taka had presented her. Lazily, she lifted that hand up and glared menacingly at the small pink pages, tightly clutching them angrily.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with these?” she questioned aloud, looking them over as if they were foreign currency.

In truth, she’d never been written up for anything before. Taka had largely ignored her during their time in school and she always made sure she kept the ‘duties’ she performed for Junko secret from everyone. Compared to that, a little swearing was the least of her crimes…

“If he knew about how much blood I have on my hands…he’d be reporting me to the authorities instead of giving me useless write-ups.”

A sad chuckle escaped her and a melancholy smile traced her lips as she slowly walked into the main area of her bedroom. She’d meant to reassure herself but had only managed to increase her anxiety. The soldier had done her best not to consider the irony of her choices in this killing game. After all, what right did she, a mercenary, a killer…a murderer, have to try and save her classmates lives?

If the irony wasn’t enough, despite how successful she’d been so far, considering recent developments, Mukuro had begun to question whether or not she possessed the skills to complete her mission. One mistake is all it would take to have her executed…which she honestly didn’t care much about. She’d accepted the fact that she wasn’t getting out of this school alive, but if she died before ensuring that her classmates survived, the shame of having failed them would surely follow her even after death.

Then again, if she did fail and was executed along the way…would she come back as a ghost and haunt the school? She’d never really believed in that kind of thing but she knew from experience that anything was possible.

“If that happens…I’m totally going to haunt Junko for the rest of her life…” Mukuro briefly glanced at the pink slips in her hand again before adding, “And maybe Taka…yeah…‘Write a pink slip for me now, bitch!’”

Finally, a genuine laugh sounded from her and she managed to shake her head free of all depressing thoughts. Instead, her thoughts became preoccupied with showering before night time and actually getting a good night’s sleep tonight, considering the debacles that had occurred the night before.

However, just after she replaced her wig on the wig form and tossed her pink slips on the dresser, a
familiar tune sounded throughout the school.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

“The night time announcement? I wonder how Junko’s gonna handle that with Monokuma on ‘vacation’…oh, shit that means no shower too!”

An irritated groan sounded from Mukuro as she decided to glare up at the monitor, directing her frustration toward it. However, Mukuro instantly became surprised when the screen flickered to life…and the image of Monokuma, dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and holding what appeared to be a martini, sitting on a whicker beach chair in front of a pool, suddenly appeared on the monitor. Mukuro’s mouth hung open for a moment before the bear cleared its throat to address the school.

“Gooooooood evening, everyone! Did you think that just because I was on vacation that I would forget about the daily announcements? Anyway, the time right now…where you all are anyway…is 10PM! As such it is officially night time! You know the drill by now; dining hall doors locked, a chance for murder to occur, yada yada yada. Since I’m not around to enforce absolutely everything about your lives, I suppose a subtle message is best…go the fuck to sleep! Goodnight!”

Utterly exhausted by the bear’s ramblings and disappointed by the fact that she couldn’t enjoy her oh-so-lovely shower, the soldier decided it was best to cut her losses and just rest. Flopping onto her bed, still fully clothed but not giving a shit, Mukuro dared to let a hopeful thought invade her mind.

“Hopefully…things will get better tomorrow…” she whispered as sleep consumed her.

“Yearbooks…class registrations…funding notices…perhaps this was an archive?”

Kyoko Kirigiri sat at the lone desk in the secret room hidden in the boy’s second floor rest room. The only light she allowed to illuminate the room was from the open door she’d entered. That way, if someone happened to sneak in behind her, she would see their shadow and wouldn’t be caught unaware.

Currently, she was perusing through all of the books that she could find but wasn’t having much luck discovering anything that could lead to how or why she and her classmates had been imprisoned in their school. She’d cleared most of the yearbooks and registrations from previous years and only just got to what would have been their current year.

“The 78th Class Registration…” she read aloud, flipping open the book and glancing through the files.

It detailed who their homeroom teacher, whose name she didn’t recognize, would have been if everything had gone according to plan. It also held information about each individual student. The very first was Makoto Naegi, listing everything from his talent and special skills, all the way to how and why he’d been selected to join the school. Instead of immediately moving on, her curiosity got the best of her and she decided to skim through his entire file, reading about the series of unfortunate events that had led to Makoto being selected as the ‘Ultimate Lucky Student’.

“Ultimate Unlucky Student’ seems more appropriate by this account,” she mused with a half-smile.

Knowing Makoto as much as she did, she could easily see these kinds of misfortunes following him. In fact, perhaps it was misfortune rather than luck that brought the very average boy to this school…only to be caught up in this horrible experience. A slight frown dragged her lips downward as she
felt a hint of guilt for having information on him without her willing to give any to him.

Perhaps…one day…she’d feel comfortable enough to open up to him…but now wasn’t the time for such thoughts. Moving past his page, she decided to thumb through the other files as well.

As she scanned the rest of her classmates’ files, she found that there wasn’t much information to piece together. Aside from their names, talents, and reasons for being drafted into the school, not much information was given. Toko’s file, for example, had no mention of her split-personality. Then again, if the school had been aware of the fact that she’d been a serial killer, they certainly wouldn’t have invited her to join their roster…would they? A part of her wanted to discover that mystery alone but knew that she had more pressing matters to look into.

As she continued to read, she was surprised by how little there was to be found. In fact, there seemed to be a definite lack of info. Could that be due to the Mastermind’s interference or was it intentional?

Alternatively, she also wanted to see if another piece of information was present…

“Dammit…” Kyoko quietly swore as she reached her own, thoroughly disappointed. There was nothing there aside from a picture of her; the rest of the file had been completely removed…as if someone had altered it somehow. “But if that’s the case…then the Mastermind knew this room existed…and left it here for us to find. But why would they do that? Why leave such a vast library of information hidden if they had already removed sensitive information?”

As she pondered this notion she continued to flip through the files until she found a very peculiar page. It was a page incredibly similar to hers, except that it bore no picture, only a name and a scratched off talent. Squinting her eyes, Kyoko quietly read what little was legible from the page.

“…Mukuro…Ikusaba…Ultimate ---------….Class 78…student number…sixteen!”

Kyoko almost fell over as she read that, steadying herself as she reread that short passage over and over again until it was burned into her retinas. When she was positive that she’d never forget that passage, she finally allowed herself to set the book down and process the information. Her brow creased as she frowned…a seething anger slowly beginning to overtake her.

“…There’s a sixteenth student…a sixteenth student…that could be inside the school with us…could they be…the Mastermind…?”

“Awww, c’mon!” Hina groaned as she glared at the locked doors of the cafeteria. “I know that I only had a few minutes but I didn’t think it would be closed already!”

Despite Monokuma’s absence, the doors to the cafeteria remained locked during the night time hours, as well as the water being turned off. Hina had thought to grab a quick snack before bed, but now it seemed that she would have to do without.

Her shoulders slumped in disappointment as she said, “I knew I shouldn’t have eaten all the donuts in the storage room…now all that’s left in there is cheese puffs…I hate cheese puffs.”

Actually, that wasn’t true, Hina adored cheese puffs. In fact, on cold winter nights, nothing soothed her more than those rich, cheesy balls of fluffy goodness! However, right now, those delectable puff balls couldn’t sate her craving for something sweet…something sugary…something circular with a hole through it…
“Donuts...why are there...no more...donuts...?” she questioned aloud, her legs carrying her out of the dorms and into the hallway.

Even though it was already night time, and Hina knew she was violating Celeste’s night time rule, her appetite drove her to wander the halls. As she traversed the halls, her carnivorous hunger for the doughy delight unsated, she eventually passed by the student store. Her feet came to a halt as she turned and stared at the door for a moment, reaching into her pocket and fishing for something. A moment later, her hand emerged from the pocket of her red sports jacket with a tiny coin in hand… one that bore Monokuma’s likeness.

Taking a moment to stare at the ‘Monocoin’, Hina recalled how the other students, mainly Makoto, had found several of them lying around under desks and in other odd places. This particular coin had been discovered in the corner of her own room, and its presence further increased Hina’s curiosity. The same insignia was printed on a strange prize dispenser in the student store…could it be…?

A mighty growl from the swimmer’s stomach abruptly echoed in the brightly lit hallway, causing Hina to sadly look down and pat her belly. With a heavy sigh, she said, “I’ve got nothing to lose…”

Having justified her own reasoning to herself, she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

All manner of trinkets littered the store, ranging from strangely decorated glass cups and vases, all the way up to multiple sets of suspicious suits of armor. However, no small packs of candy or other kinds of edible treats were in sight, forcing Hina’s attention directly over to the prize dispenser machine. Stepping toward it, she leaned forward and read the label aloud:

“Monomono…Machine?”

The very name confused her, but she wasn’t the type to question things that didn’t make sense to her. Instead, she glanced through the clear glass of the machine and stared at the various prize balls it housed. Her gaze became scrutinizing as she tried to imagine what each of them contained. It was a rather large machine and each prize ball could hold something considerably big, or at least that’s what it looked like. Not to mention that the mystery of not knowing what you might get was… actually kind of exciting!

Of course, all Hina’s hunger driven mind could conjure the balls held were various snacks, candies, and possibly even tiny little donuts that you could easily fit into one of those prize balls!

However, as she glanced down at her hand, staring at the single Monocoin she possessed, she couldn’t help but hesitate. After all, she only had the one coin, and if it wasn’t food the mystery ball contained, then she’d become even more depressed than she was now. Looking from the coin to the machine, Hina just couldn’t force herself to take the risk,

“Get it together, Hina! Just think…what would Sakura do?” she tried to psyche herself up, attempting to draw strength from her friend’s example. After a moment of contemplation, the swimmer clutched the coin tightly in her hand and said, “She would do whatever it took to achieve her goal! And so will I!”

In one fluid movement, Hina slammed the Monocoin into the coin slot and turned the handle. The coin was sucked down into the machine as the insides churned, a metallic click signaling that her prize awaited her below. Lifting the metal plate at the bottom of the machine, she reached in and grabbed her prize ball.

To her shock, it was a lot longer than she had expected…which could only mean that something great could be inside! Picking it up with both hands, she proceeded to pop open the lid, already
envisioning what could be waiting for her inside. Perhaps it was a candy bar, or a big bag of mini donuts, or it could be…

“…What the heck is this??!”

Resting in her hands was a strange doll-like cylinder, and a fairly long and tall one at that. It had odd features, with the tip of it being a head that was shaped like a Japanese doll, that looked as though it could be twisted off, and an ominous red button on the bottom. As Hina continued to examine the weird object, she noticed something written on the side of it.

“Kokeshi…Dynamo?” Confusion warped her features as she looked over her ‘prize’ once more. “A kokeshi’s like a bottle for mixing drinks right? So, what’s the dynamo part about—?”

As she asked that, her hand accidently pushed the small red button on the bottom of the prize. Instantly, the long cylinder began to vibrate, causing a shocked Hina to reel back in shock, nearly dropping the ‘prize’. Immediately, she switched it off and set it down, standing straight up, on the counter next to her.

Drawing in large breaths, with her face slightly reddened, a flustered Hina could only stare at her ‘prize’ with a number of mixed feelings rushing through her mind. Once she’d caught her breath, she stepped away from the counter and turned toward the door.

“I-I think I’ve lost my appetite! I should really get to bed!”

Her feet quickly took her to the door, her face still a tinge of pink as she grabbed the door handle and prepared to leave. However, at the last possible moment, she peeked over her shoulder and couldn’t stop herself from staring at the Kokeshi Dynamo. At the same time, it was almost as if the doll head atop the ‘prize’ was staring back at her, beckoning her, pleading with her, calling out to her, overwhelming her…

Hina bit her lip as an internal battle raged in her mind, one that she was quickly losing. Then, before she knew what she was doing, she marched back up to the counter, grabbed her ‘prize’, and shoved it deep into her jacket pocket before heading directly back to her room.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Well…that certainly was an interesting turn of events, now wasn’t it! How do you think Celeste will go about her revenge? Will Mukuro ever understand those mysterious ‘feelings’ she keeps having? Is Kyoko closing in on who the sixteenth student might be? And just what the hell is Hina gonna do with the Kokeshi Dynamo?! You’ll have to stick around to find out in the next few chapters!

So, the idea for using the Kokeshi Dynamo and its brilliant introduction goes to my beta, who reminded me of its existence. And for those of you cringing right now, trust me, I can guarantee you, it wasn’t added just for kicks. Be prepared… Just to reiterate from last time, I was recently selected to provide the voice for Byakuya
Togami in a fan reading of Danganronpa IF. I’m stoked for the opportunity and I’ll let you all know when it’s available.

Also, I wanted to take a moment to thank all of the guest reviewers. Sometimes, really good questions or ideas come from guests. I know that I get busy sometimes but I do try and respond to questions when they are asked. So, if you’ve got a burning need to know something, I’d be happy to answer!

As always, a review or comment will make my day and help inspire me, so if you have anything you want to ask or need clarified, don’t hesitated to ask! Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru continues his reign of discipline. Sayaka and Leon spend time together and have an unexpected confrontation with Makoto. Meanwhile, while observing from on high, Junko reminisces about what despair truly means to her.

A few days came and went under Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru’s reign. For the most part, it wasn’t that different from when Monokuma had been their overseer. As long as no one violated a rule, Taka wouldn’t appear out of nowhere and enforce his ‘justice’. At the same time, it didn’t change the fact that everyone was becoming more and more frustrated with his self-appointed position. Many pink slips were written, mainly for Junko who couldn’t keep her mouth shut when he confronted her about her ‘indecent’ fashion choices.

Unfortunately, suspicions against Taka grew with each passing day. His endorsement by Monokuma, coupled with his aggressive actions against most of the students, not to mention Celeste’s outright accusation of his character, had put everyone on edge. Hope was beginning to wane under Chairman Ishimaru’s dictatorship.

However, it seemed that, somehow, a few of the students were able to find time to enjoy themselves…

“We should have done this sooner…” Leon whispered with a husky voice, anticipation clear in his voice. “We’ve put this off for too long…”

“For once…I have to agree…” Sayaka was barely able to respond, concentrating on finishing. “Leon…I’m almost there…just…a…little…more….ammmmnd there! It’s perfect!”

As she finished speaking, Sayaka put the finishing touches on what could only be described as the most delicious looking sandwich anyone had ever laid eyes on.

“As promised, Leon…I present to you…‘The Super Double Meat Triple Decker Sandwich’!”

Three toasted hamburger buns slathered with butter sat atop, below and in the middle of the massive sandwich. In between those heavenly buns were all different kinds of meat; sliced ham, turkey, and chicken breast, all piled high in a triple stack. Condiments such as honey mustard, mayonnaise and vinaigrette dressing were equally distributed on all three stacks. And the pièce de résistance was the toothpick that held an olive, for visual aesthetic, piercing the top of the magnificent sandwich!

Taking a step back from its majesty, Sayaka allowed herself a moment to recover. The kitchen was an utter mess from all the preparation to make such a masterpiece but the pop idol definitely felt that it was worth it. Even if she was a bit short of breath due to moving around the kitchen so much while
preparing the sandwich she was still feeling remarkably better, all things considered. Her recovery was proceeding smoothly, even though her right wrist, fresh out of its sling, ached a bit from putting the sandwich together. And while she didn’t have complete use of her right hand just yet, Junko had told her that it should be safe to start using it again, as long as she was cautious. Additionally, she was standing completely upright without the assistance of Leon or a table to hold her up. She could stand up and walk completely on her own again, a feat she hadn’t realized she’d miss so much. Of course Leon was always beside her, just in case she lost her balance, but that didn’t bother her in the least…not anymore.

Speaking of the baseball star…

Leon’s mouth wasn’t watering…it was crying tears of joy as his tearful eyes surveyed the masterpiece that Sayaka had created for him. At the same time, the Ultimate Pop Idol smiled to herself as she looked at his overjoyed expression, allowing his infectious happiness to overtake her as well.

“So, what do you think?” she asked with a true smile, one that she’d only been able to produce for him since being trapped in the school.

Without hesitation, Leon responded, “I think I’m in love…” As soon as those words left his mouth, both of them flinched. Sayaka’s eyes widened and she felt her face flush but was too stunned to say anything. Leon, trying to catch himself, sputtered, “…with the sandwich! That’s what I meant! Yeah, i-it’s amazing! If this sandwich was a woman…I would marry it!”

Upon hearing that, Sayaka tried to stifle a laugh, but failed. “Pffft! Hahaha! You wanna marry a sandwich! For real?!”

As she continued to laugh at him, the baseball star’s face burned with embarrassment as he replied, “W-Why not?! If it’s the most amazing sandwich in the world, why wouldn’t I want to marry it?!”

 Barely able to hold back her laughter, Sayaka snickered at him with a confident smirk and said, “You do know that means you can’t eat the sandwich, right? You’d just have to look at ‘her’ until she got all moldy and gross.”

Not backing down and with a proud smile of his own, Leon answered, “Well, that’s what divorces are for.”

“How, what a gentleman…” the pop idol sarcastically replied, a half-smile on her face.

Seeing that, the baseball star let a cocky grin overtake his lips as he finally shrugged off her comments and said, “Whatever…”

Without further ado, Leon reached for the sandwich she’d created for him but was stopped when Sayaka’s hand thrust in front of him, keeping him from reaching the delicious mass of bread and meat.

With a betrayed glance, he stared at the pop idol’s smiling face as she asked, “What was our deal?”

Immediately, Leon’s memory clicked and he let out a deep sigh as he replied, “…You get the first bite.”

Sayaka almost felt a bit sorry for him, looking at his utterly dejected face. However, she also knew how much this sandwich meant to him…it almost meant as much to her as well, but for very different reasons. Of course she’d taken note all the times he’d failed to get his sandwich over the last few days and really wanted to ensure he got one. So, she offered to make him her signature ‘Super
Double Meat Triple Decker Sandwich’ in order to lift his spirits. Not to mention that…it also helped ease her conscience as well. And even though it was a relatively small gesture, she still wanted to do something to make up for everything she’d done to him…

And so, instead of taking a large bite, as she’d originally intended, she carefully picked up the gigantic sandwich and took the tiniest of bites from the side of it. The flavor of her creation hit her taste buds immediately and she couldn’t help but let out a pleasurable moan. At the same time, Leon stared at her with utter disappointment that he wasn’t enjoying what she was enjoying at that moment.

Seeing that, Sayaka decided to mess with him one last time before letting him have his prize.

“Mmmmh…” she moaned, emphasizing how orgasmic the sandwich truly was. “Now this is an amazing sand—”.

Suddenly, she ceased speaking as she glanced around behind Leon and saw someone standing in the kitchen doorway. Her breath hitched in her throat and she lost all will to speak as she saw none other than Makoto standing there, holding a tray of dirty dishes in his hands.

Instantly, she forced herself to scowl at him and averted her gaze, unable to even look at him out of shame. During that time, Leon, who was utterly confused by her sudden silence, turned his head to see the lucky student, his attitude also dampening. However, he immediately picked himself back up and smiled toward his classmate.

“Yo, Makoto! What’s up?” the baseball star said cheerfully, trying to cut through the obviously thick tension that had just enveloped the room.

“Uh…not much,” the lucky student said with a nervous laugh. “I was just, uh, finishing taking food to Mondo when I heard the two of you talking but didn’t want to interrupt—”.

“You’re not interrupting anything,” Sayaka sternly cut him off, sending a quick glare his way. “Go ahead and just leave the dishes in the sink, we’ll get them. We gotta clean up our mess anyway.”

“Oh…that’s okay, I’d rather just do it myself and get it done with,” Makoto said slowly, a hint of disappointment in his voice.

“Uhg, fine. Just be quick about it, alright?” Sayaka forced herself to sneer at him, her heart aching with each word.

The lucky student then walked past them and over to the sink, slowly placing each and every dish in the sink before turning on the water and beginning to wash them. As he did that, Sayaka continued to send him a hostile glare, her hands clutching Leon’s sandwich so tightly some of the contents fell out. However, she didn’t seem to notice, she was too busy silent wishing that Makoto would leave faster, so she wouldn’t have to be reminded of the horribly atrocity she’d put him through.

She was so focused on mentally wishing him away that she didn’t notice the awkward and concerned look that Leon was giving her, and not because she was partially destroying his sandwich.

Eventually, Makoto finished washing and set the dishes on a nearby drying rack. Drying his hands with a towel, he was shocked when Sayaka abruptly said, “You’re done, right? If so, please leave.”

She saw his head snap up and glance at her, obvious hurt in his eyes. At the same time, Sayaka had to fight off the pain she was causing herself by pretending to be cold to him. It certainly wasn’t easy to lie to someone she’d respected so much…but it was precisely because she held him in such high regard that she felt she needed to lie.
“This is how it has to be. After everything that I did, I don’t deserve to be called his friend. It’s better if he just stays as far away from me as possible. That way, even if it’s not on purpose, I can’t hurt him anymore—”.

“A-Actually, Sayaka…I was hoping we could…talk for a minute?” Makoto abruptly asked, a hopeful glint in his eyes.

Again, her breath caught in her throat and the pop idol didn’t quite know how to respond. However, she managed to recover fairly quickly and replied, “I’ve got nothing to say to you. So please leave.”

Makoto visibly flinched at her words but somehow decided to press on regardless. “Well…I-I was just wondering…how you’re feeling these days? You don’t have your arm in a sling anymore and you’re walking on your own—”.

“Yes, I’m feeling much better,” she sternly interrupted, mustering the most hurtful glare she could manage. “If that’s all you want, then leave already. I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

Finally, it seemed that her harsh comments sank in and Makoto reluctantly fell silent, lowering his gaze slightly.

“Oh…okay then. I guess I’ll…see you guys tomorrow…” he said quietly before heading for the door. Both Sayaka and Leon watched as he slowly made his way out of the kitchen, stopping only for a brief moment to glance their way before departing into the cafeteria.

Once he was gone, the pop idol let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, almost dropping the Super Double Meat Triple Decker Sandwich at the same time. However, she caught herself and managed to hold onto the massive sandwich, extending it out to Leon a moment later.

“Here…enjoy it.”

Almost reluctantly, Leon reached out and took the delicious sandwich from her. She took a step back and waited for him to take his first bite, hoping to regain the feeling of joyfulness they had been experiencing before Makoto had arrived. She watched as Leon, who held a strangely conflicted expression, slowly opened his mouth to take a bite. However, much to Sayaka’s surprise, before his teeth even got close to it, he stopped, pulling his face away from the meaty breaded delight. She was even more shocked when the baseball star suddenly groaned and set the sandwich down on a plate next to him.

“Okay, I’m sorry but…what the hell was that?!” Leon almost shouted, thoroughly surprising the pop idol.

Taking a moment to think, Sayaka hesitantly responded, “Uh…I handed you the sandwich you coincidentally also want to marry?”

A massive groan escaped the ballplayer as he face-palmed. “Not that! Makoto! What the hell was with you?! Why were you being so…so…I don’t know?!”

Almost reflexively, Sayaka scowled defensively at him, not appreciating being questioned like this. However, she knew that she couldn’t possibly tell him the truth, which only meant that now she had to lie to him, too…which was not something she felt comfortable with.

With a firm gaze, she replied, “I told him we would take care of the dishes since we’d have to do that anyway—”.

“Yeah, and then told him to get out!” Leon cut in, making her scowl deepen. “He was just trying to
do the freaking dishes and you snapped at him!”

“That’s not what happened. I talked to him the same way I do everyone else,” she defended, trying to keep from getting angry herself. After all, she wanted to avoid having this argument as much as she wanted to avoid contact with Makoto.

However, Leon didn’t seem too keen on letting it all slide, evident when he scoffed and argued, “Don’t give me that! You got all up in his face for no reason! He was just asking how you were doing and you got all pissy!”

Narrowing her eyes, Sayaka chose to keep her voice even as she replied, “I didn’t ‘get in his face’. I asked him to go once he was done because I wanted to spend time with you. Or is that a problem?”

“No! I mean, yes! Maybe?!” Leon fumbled, trying to get out of the hole he’d just dug himself into. “We both know that it has nothing to do with spending time with me!”

“Oh, is that so?” Sayaka instantly replied, giving him an angry sideways glance. “So, are you saying that you don’t enjoy spending time with me? Is there something wrong with wanting to spend time alone with you?”

Even Sayaka knew she was playing dirty now, insinuating that her spending time with Leon had anything to do with her attitude. Plus, even though it had only been a few days, they had grown rather close due to all their time together. Implied that being nasty to Makoto was only to continue to be alone with Leon was a backhanded tactic that she wasn’t proud of…but it was easier than admitting the truth…a fact that proved to her that she was right in keeping Makoto away.

And just as she’d unfortunately predicted, her tactic had the desired effect, as the baseball star stumbled over his own words, struggling to get back on topic. The pop idol could see through him just as easily as ever and she could tell that there was something he wanted to say but was keeping it bottled up.

And honestly, that kind of scared her. She needed to find a way to get off this subject before either of them said something they’d both regret. After all…she didn’t want to lose another friend to her own incompetence.

“Never mind…” she said before Leon could muster the courage to say whatever it was he’d been thinking. Turning her back to him, she finished, “I’m gonna get this all cleaned up. Go ahead and eat your sandwich…”

“Forget about the stupid sandwich!” Leon surprisingly insisted, pushing the plate away from him as emphasis. “I wanna know why you’re being such a bitch to Makoto!”

Hearing that offensive comment froze Sayaka in her place. However, it wasn’t out of anger that she’d stopped. The truth was…it’s because she knew that he was right. She’d been an outright bitch to Makoto ever since she’d survived her failed graduation attempt. Even so, she was still convinced that, no matter how guilty or horrible she felt about what she’d done, there was no way she should be forgiven for what she’d done to him. She knew…knew that Makoto would forgive her…and she didn’t want that. She didn’t want to be forgiven for what she’d done to him…but she didn’t want to be ‘punished’ either.

Sayaka didn’t know how to feel about their situation…it wasn’t as if she’d ever been in this kind of position before! She deserved to be punished but feared it, and she didn’t know how to make amends either! It was too hard for her to figure out on her own…and she didn’t want to drag anyone else down to her level…
In the end, it was easier for all of them if she just avoided Makoto…perhaps she should have done the same with Leon, too. She’d tried…but somehow he’d managed to break through her cold attitude…and gave her a reason to smile again. She’d let him in…opened up to him…but now it was only serving to hurt both of them. He didn’t deserve that, not after all she’d put him through.

Maybe it was time to distance herself from him too…

“It’s got nothing to do with you,” Sayaka finally replied, not bothering to even turn and look at him. She heard him gasp, and a twinge of pain ached in her chest, but she ignored it and continued, “If you don’t want to spend time with me, then just leave me alone. Go and spend all of your time with Makoto for all I care. I won’t stop you.”

Even as those words left her, she regretted them. She didn’t want him to go…she didn’t want to be alone…again. However, she also knew that it was the right thing to—

“That’s…! That’s not the issue, dammit!” Leon shouted at her, thoroughly startling her.

Slowly, she glanced over her shoulder at him, her eyes widening as she could see in his eyes that he’d come to a difficult decision…and there was no way for her to stop him. Before she could even muster a response, the baseball star audibly groaned and hung his head.

“Look, I know that you’re feeling guilty about tricking Makoto and everything, but treating him like crap and pretending to be angry with him so he’ll stay away from you won’t—!”

“Stop it!”

Sayaka found herself shouting before she knew what was happening. She didn’t want to hear the truth…the honest, unavoidable truth that she’d managed to keep hidden as best she could…until now. In her mind, as long as those words remained unspoken, then it wasn’t true. However, now that she’d heard them herself…she couldn’t deny them…but she couldn’t let Leon know that!

“I’m not pretending anything!” she practically screamed, turning to fully face Leon, fighting back tears all the while. “I used him! I planned to use him from the moment I saw him! He was just a gullible idiot that I could manipulate!”

“That’s bullshit!” Leon fired back, getting right in her face. “I’m not stupid, you know! I can tell that you’re just feeling guilty for what happened!”

“That’s not true!” she insisted, shaking her head fervently.

“Yes, it is!” he continued, not letting up in the slightest. “You think that I don’t feel like shit every time I see him! That I don’t want to apologize to him for everything that I did! I tried to make him take the blame for my murder attempt—!”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with you!” Sayaka shouted, meeting his gaze once more.

“Like hell it doesn’t! I’m involved whether you like it or not!” Leon shouted back, his eyes locking with her. “And I know you’re lying because I heard you crying after he came and talked to you that one night!”

Suddenly, Sayaka’s eyes widened as she realized that, despite how much she could deny it, Leon already knew the truth. Not only that, if it was true that he’d overheard them that night…then it meant he already understood…everything. However, almost against her will, her rage suddenly began to burn through as she narrowed her gaze at him.
“So, you’ve been eavesdropping on me, huh?! Are you trying to be like Toko and be the world’s best stalker or something?!” she fired back, her anger overriding her better judgment.

Leon flinched but didn’t seem ready to back down, instantly replying, “It wasn’t like that!”

“What was it like, then?!” she snapped, pounding her uninjured hand on the counter.

“I was on my way back to my room when I heard the two of you talking! You left the door open and I was worried!”

“Oh, so that means it’s okay for you to spy on me, huh?!”

“That has nothing to do with how you’ve been treating Makoto! You’re just avoiding the issue and you know it!”

Unintentionally, she flinched, knowing that he’d caught her. For a moment, her determination waned and she did her best to meet his gaze with as firm a visage as before…but she just couldn’t. Feeling defeated, she resolved to just back away and head out of the kitchen and back to her room to try and sort everything out.

“Forget it, I’m done! I’m going back to my room! Move!” she told him firmly, adjusting her footing to prepare to move past him.

This turned out to be a mistake as, unlike how she’d predicted, he didn’t back down, stepping directly in front of her and blocking her path. She couldn’t help but gasp at his sudden aggressiveness. A chill ran down her spine as she was unintentionally reminded of their fateful encounter so many nights ago…for he had the same determined look in his eyes now as he had back when he’d followed her into the bathroom. Fighting to keep herself calm, she slowly took a step back but he grabbed onto her shoulder to keep her from retreating.

“Listen, Sayaka! You and I both know that he’d forgive you—!”

“Stop it! And let me go!!”

“—if you just talked to him about it! I know that—”

“Shut up! Shut up! Let go of me!!”

“—you want to be friends with him again!”

“I SAID LET GO!!!”

With all her strength, she pushed him back and away from her, making him stumble backward and barely catch himself on the countertop. On instinct, Sayaka’s left hand reached for whatever was closest to her to defend herself with…which happened to be the plate that the sandwich was sitting on. As she lifted it up, the Super Double Meat Triple Decker Sandwich splattered to the floor as she raised the plate above her head. Then, with all of the strength she could muster, she chucked that plate in Leon’s general direction.

The second it was released from her hands, she knew that it was going to go off target, and a part of her was okay with that. What little bit of rational thinking was still function told her that she didn’t actually want to pelt Leon with the plate. After all, considering the method Monokuma had planned for his execution, it would be rather traumatizing.

Fortunately, her aim was very off, flying upward above Leon’s head, making it obvious that the
flying disk wasn’t going to get anyway near him. Unfortunately…that didn’t mean that her aim was completely off either.

*CRASH* *CRINK*

Both of them froze as the sound of the plate smashing into metal reached their ears. As one both of them shot their gazes up to the corner of the room…only to see the security camera for that room bent to the side, a large dent in the side of it. Fragments of the shattered plate scattered all around, and fell to the floor just beneath where the busted camera hung.

Sayaka’s complexion paled as she was forced to realize that she’d just destroyed one of the school’s security cameras…an offense punishable by execution.

Both of her hands flew over her mouth as she gasped, unable to tear her eyes away from the destruction she’d caused. Her eyes dilated as panic quickly began to set in, her mind racing as she struggled to keep from screaming. Her entire body began trembling as she recalled Monokuma’s words from just after she’d awoken in nurse’s office following her incident.

...I am your delightfully vigilant headmaster, and as such, I feel that it is my duty to keep you all safe and sound while you’re in my school. And if there are any, shall we say, concerns that you might have about another student…I may be persuaded to discipline them...

Sayaka had been on ‘probation’ ever since returning to the class. One mistake, one tiny little rule breaking could cost her life…but this wasn’t a tiny rule breaking…it was a monumental one! Destruction of school property was against the school regulations, tantamount to a death sentence! Even someone as harmless as Makoto wouldn’t have been forgiven, even if it was accident! There was no way a ‘ pervious offender ’ like Sayaka wouldn’t get punished, regardless of it being an accident! And with how blood-thirsty Monokuma had been recently, there wasn’t any doubt that punishment is all that awaited her...

“No…please…no…!” she whispered as the weight of her situation hit her. “I…I don’t…I don’t want to…”

“Sayaka!”

The pop idol’s vision suddenly focused and she was startled to see Leon was standing right in front of her. She hadn’t even noticed him until now. He placed both hands on her shoulders before looking her right into her eyes. As their gazes met, Sayaka’s heart furiously thumped as she drank in his determined visage.

“Sayaka, listen! It’s gonna be okay!” he tried to reassure her, despite the clear panic exuding from her.

“No…no, it’s not! I’m…I’m gonna…I’ll be…executed…” she mumbled, tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

“No! I’m not gonna let that happen!” Leon exclaimed, shaking her a bit as he spoke.

“There’s nothing you can do!” she insisted, feeling all the more hopeless. “I’m…I’m…”

“Just be quiet and listen to me!” he shouted, shaking her to get her attention. When she finally
returned her gaze to him, she gasped as she read his intention through his eyes. “I’ve got a plan! When Monokuma shows up, we’re gonna tell him I did it! I threw the plate! Not you, me! Got it?!”

Shock overtook Sayaka as those words sunk in and for the first time since her panic began, she fully registered what he’d said. As his words echoed in her head and she fully processed them, an overwhelming fear rose up inside her. Almost instantly, she forgot about her own anxiety and scoffed at him.

“No! You can’t!” Sayaka insisted, grabbing onto his shirt and shaking him. “It won’t work anyway! The camera—!”

“Couldn’t see where we were when the plate was thrown!” Leon spoke over her, trying to get her to be quiet before pointing at the dent in the side of the camera. “We were in its blind spot! Otherwise it would have hit the lens and not the side!”

A moment of relief hit Sayaka before it was replaced with utter terror, her mind already piecing everything together.

“No…no! That only means that you’ll be executed instead! Leon you can’t—!”

“Yes, I can!” he suddenly cut her off, a look of pure guilt on his face. “Listen…I am not gonna let you die because of me…not again!”

All of a sudden, everything Sayaka questioned was being pieced together. The look of guilt on Leon’s face…the crushing feeling of hurting someone you care about…knowing that you would do anything to take back what you’d done…unbeknownst to her, Leon had experiencing the same feelings that she had held for Makoto since she’d betrayed him.

Not only that, it was obvious that he blamed himself for their current situation. And while it was true that him suddenly grabbing her shoulders led to Sayaka losing her temper and throwing the plate, she knew that it wasn’t his fault. After all, he hadn’t meant to startle her, he was just trying to help…just like the time…he’d broken in the bathroom…because he was worried about her…

Sayaka had thought that the guilt she felt for almost killing him had been unbearable…but it paled in comparison to the crushing anxiety she felt now. Once again, Leon had only been trying to help her…and she’d condemned him to death…for a second time.

And, despite his brave words and fearless expression…she could feel that Leon was shaking. He was just as terrified as she was, perhaps even more so. After all…he’d been on the chopping block once before, but this time, there wouldn’t be anyone who could save him.

However, in spite of all that, it was obvious that Leon wasn’t going to let that stop him. He was preparing to sacrifice himself…for her! For the person that had betrayed and hurt him…the person who didn’t deserve to be forgiven for her actions…he was going let himself be executed…for her?

Just who the hell did he think he was?!

“Like hell I’m gonna let you do that!” she abruptly screamed, startling him as she shook him. No… No, Leon! You’re not going to die for me, you hear me?! I won’t let you! It was an accident! I caused it and I’ll be the one to take responsibility for—!”

“Dammit Sayaka, it’s the only way!” the ballplayer shouted over her, making her fall silent. “We don’t have much time! Just tell Monokuma—!”

“Leon, shut the hell up!”
The pop idol’s usual melodic voice became hoarse as she shouted, breathing heavily from overexerting herself during their exchange. More than her language, the sound of her raspy voice silenced Leon, his eyes widening as she gripped his shirt harder and forced him to meet her gaze.

“I’m not going to let anyone die for me! I’m tired of making the people I care about suffer because of my mistakes!” As she said that, she couldn’t keep her body from trembling but she forced herself to continued. “I’m scared…no, I’m terrified…but at least…I can finally be punished for what I’ve done to—”.

Suddenly a voice from out in the cafeteria shouted to them…and both of them recognized who it was.

“Leon! Sayaka! You guys alright!” Makoto shouted, making both of them whirl around to face him.

As expected of him, Makoto came barreling through the kitchen door, stopping only when he hit the countertop on the other side of the door. Taking a second to look around, it took the lucky student a few moments to realize what happened. He glanced to the pieces of the broken plate on the floor, looked up and gasped at the bent and dented camera and finally turned to look at the horrified expressions on Leon and Sayaka’s faces. However, before he could ask them anything about what happened, another voice shook the room.

“What has happened in here?!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted from the kitchen doorway, surveying the mess with his enflamed eyes. “I come to discipline Makoto for running in the halls and this is what I find?! Someone…explain to me what transpired!”

Surprisingly, Sayaka was a bit relieved to see Taka instead of Monokuma. Then again, anything was better than dealing with that two toned psycho…wait, where was Monokuma?

Sayaka had been so panicked by what had happened that she’d failed to notice that the bear hadn’t instantly appeared to punish her. But that didn’t make sense, even for Monokuma. Surely the bear would appear to deal out justice itself, considering that a serious rule violation had occurred. Unless…could it really be true?

Had the bear completely given up its rights to discipline and gone on ‘vacation’ just as it had told them? Monokuma had said that it would only appear again if another class trial incident occurred, and since this wasn’t class trial worthy…did that mean that the bear wasn’t going to punish her? Did her fate truly lie in Taka’s clearly unstable hands?

As if mirroring her, Leon seemed to have come to the same conclusion, glancing around the room and looking just as perplexed as she was. However, there was no way for either of them to know if their assumption was correct…especially when Taka continued shouting at them.

“Well?! I’m waiting for an explanation!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru demanded, shouting at all of them. “If no one comes forward then I will have no choice but to punish all of you —”.

“It was me!” Makoto abruptly interrupting, much to everyone’s shock. “It, uh, it was an accident. I slipped and accidently sent my plate flying into the camera. I’m really sorry!”

Giving the Disciplinary Chairman a deep, apologetic bow, Makoto fell silent as he waited for his punishment to be decided. At the same time, both Sayaka and Leon were stunned into silence, almost unbelieving that Makoto had decided to take responsibility for their mishap.

As horrific as it was, fear kept them silent as their friend once again defended them from execution. It
was a sickening feeling and it made their self-loathing deepen.

As that feeling began to sink in, Sayaka lifted her gaze up and wasn’t surprised to see Leon staring at her with a great determination in his eyes. Seeing his resolve burning deep within his crystal blue eyes, the pop idol felt her own resolve welling up inside her as well. Her visage hardened and the two of them shared a stern nod. Gathering their courage, they finally felt strong enough to speak up and refute Makoto’s false claim.

However, before they could utter a single word, a hearty laugh came from Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru.

“Ah, I see! Well, I must say this is refreshing!” the white haired, burning eyed Chairman said to all of them. “Normally, no one is brave enough to admit to their failings! But you, Makoto, always seem to own up when you’re at fault! It’s rather commendable! Besides, I’m not too fond of those cameras anyway! Hahaha!”

Leon and Sayaka were so shocked by Taka’s sudden approval that they completely forgot that they had meant to interject and refute their friends claim. That small moment of hesitation was all Taka needed to continue on with his judgment.

“Even so!” Chairman Ishimaru said, his voice suddenly becoming stern. “As an authority figure, I cannot ignore the fact that school property was damaged! Therefore, Makoto Naegi, your punishment shall be…to serve detention with me!”

“What?! Detention?!” Makoto shouted in utter confusion. “We have detention now?!

And he wasn’t the only one. Both Sayaka and Leon held surprised expressions as the Moral Compass announced his judgment. However, more than anything a feeling of relief flooded all of them. Considering that usually they’d be looking at a possible execution for such an offense, a simple round of detention seemed like a god-send!

“Indeed we do, Makoto Naegi!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru said cheerfully, ignoring the perplexed visage of his classmates. “I came up with the idea just this morning! For major offenses committed, the offender shall serve a one-hour detention with me in the cafeteria an hour before nighttime! How fortunate you are, Makoto Naegi, to be the first to test if this new system will help prevent further rule violations!”

“Yeah…lucky me….” the Ultimate ‘Lucky’ Student answered half-heartedly.

Pleased with how everything had proceeded, Taka gave a hearty laugh and headed for the door, stopping momentarily to look over his shoulder and say, “Report to the cafeteria as 9PM for detention! Tardiness is not acceptable! Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to return to my room to gather materials for detention!”

After that decree, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman departed the kitchen, undoubtedly to prep for the first ‘detention’ the school of mutual killing had ever seen.

A long silence followed Taka’s absence, as the three left behind still feared that a certain half and half bear might suddenly appear and dispense their own judgment. However, as a few minutes slowly passed, and Monokuma failed to materialize, it became clear to all of them that, somehow, they had been spared the bear’s wrath.

However, Sayaka, instead of feeling relief at this knowledge, couldn’t stop herself from glaring angrily at Makoto.
“Well…I’d say we got off easy on that one!” the lucky student joked, a nervous smile on his face. Once he caught a glimpse of Sayaka’s glare, however, he gulped and tried to sound reassuring. “G-Good thing Monokuma decided to be on ‘vacation’ or whatever. That could have been pretty bad —”.

“‘Pretty bad’…’pretty bad’?! Is that all you have to say for yourself?!”

As the pop idol screamed at him, Makoto shrunk back a bit as he took in the infuriated expression warping Sayaka’s face. Her face reddened from anger and she tried to take a step forward but found Leon still holding onto her shoulders.

“Sayaka! Calm down—”.

“NO!”

As she refuted him, her hands slapped away the arms that held her, making the ballplayer take a step back. Leon, too shocked by the fact that she’d pushed him away, couldn’t react fast enough as she marched over to a now very afraid Makoto.

“You goddamn idiot! What the hell were you thinking?! Pretending to be the one who broke the camera!” she shouted in his face, her teeth grit and her eyes wild. “You could have been executed! Ex-e-cu-ted! Killed! Dead! Never coming back! Is that what you wanted?! Huh?!”

Surprisingly, the more she screamed at him, the calmer the lucky student became, listening carefully to every word she shouted without interrupting…as if letting her get everything out.

Noticing this, Sayaka only flew into more of a rage and continued, “You’re such a naïve little idiot! You always think things will just end up alright if you try hard enough but they won’t! Just like with me, you put too much faith in people and it only gets you hurt even more! Why do you do that to yourself?! Why can’t you understand that other people would be sad if…if…”

Sayaka trailed off for a moment, her voice hoarse and raw from so much screaming, but also considering what she’d just said in her fit of anger. Just as she’d feared, saying it aloud forced her to accept her true feelings. As much as she wanted to deny it, if anything happened to Makoto, she’d be more than devastated. After all, in her mind, she hadn’t really apologized to him for what she’d done…or for how she’d treated him since. And that guilt was eating away at her soul…

A few feet away, Leon looked on quietly, knowing better than to interrupt, especially now.

Slowly, Sayaka felt her rage dissipate and her drive to scream at him completely vanished. Instead, it was replaced with a burning desire, a need to understand his actions. Slightly hanging her head and averting her gaze down to the floor, she took a moment to take in a few deep breaths.

“…Why? Why would you do something like that?!” she quietly questioned, her voice cracking as she spoke. Choking back unshed tears, she forced herself to say, “You could have…died. And it…would have been my fault…so why did you…?”

At that critical moment, her voice failed her and she lost the will to speak, hanging her head so low that her bangs covered her eyes. Just as she felt the silence digging into her very being, Makoto gave his answer:

“Because you’re my friend, Sayaka…”

His answer was short…simple…and a very Makoto-like…there was no room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding. To him, a friend was in danger and he was just doing all he could to help. It was
exactly like the time she’d seen him help that swan trapped in their middle-school... he was the same person that she’d put her faith in... the person that had promised to help her escape from this horrible school... he was Makoto... her most cherished friend.

Before she knew what was happening, her mouth began to say the words she’d desperately wanted to say to him ever since that night she’d ridiculed him in her room.

“I... I’m... I’m...!”

As she fumbled with her words and tried to respond, she suddenly felt moisture trail down her cheeks. The instant she realized that she was crying, it was like a dam bursting in her mind. Her legs buckled and she fell to her knees, her hands shot up and covered her eyes, and loud, heaving sobs escaped her throat. Through that painful sobbing, she barely managed to take in enough air to shout.

“I’m... I’m sorry...!!!”

As that apology finally left her mouth, she felt a pair of arms wrap around her and pull her into a warm embrace. Her blue eyes snapped open to see Makoto kneeling in front of her, holding onto her as tightly as he could. Instantly, she returned the embrace, pressing her tear-stained face into his shoulder and crying audibly.

Just then, a second pair of arms wrapped around the both of them, but neither Makoto nor Sayaka had to look up. Leon pressed himself into the hug as well, holding onto both of his precious friends as tightly as he could, as if to say ‘I’m never letting you go’. Slightly adjusting, the three of them came to embrace one another, each of them shedding tears that had long needed to be shed.

For the next few minutes, the three of them sat there on the floor, comforting each other. Very slowly, the sobs and heaving came to an end, and they all carefully pulled away so that they could look at each other.

Leon had a goofy grin on his tear-stained face, Makoto managed to hold onto his hopeful smile even though all his tears, and although Sayaka’s make-up and hair were a mess, she looked happier than either of the boys had ever seen her before. For another few moments, they simply sat there in silence, drinking in each other’s relieved visages.

However, when that silence began to become uncomfortable, Leon took it upon himself to say, “… So, who talks first? Do you guys talk first? Or do I talk first? I’ve never done this before...”

His cheeky smirk and lame joke was enough to get both Sayaka and Makoto chuckling.

“I don’t think it really matters,” Makoto admitted, wiping away his tears as a radiant smile lit up his face.

“Me neither...” Sayaka almost embarrassingly concurred, her smile a bit nervous but undoubtedly genuine.

“Great!” Leon suddenly said to them, rising to his feet and offering them his hands.

Without any hesitation, they both grabbed a hold and he pulled them to their feet, both Leon and Makoto ready to help Sayaka if her injuries inhibited her. When they were both up, the three of them shared another pleasant smile, a warm and comforting feeling spreading through all of them.

It was then that the baseball star grinned widely and said, “Alright then! To celebrate us becoming friend again, we’re making sandwiches! And not just any sandwiches, oh no! We’re gonna remake Sayaka’s patented ‘Super Double Meat Triple Decker Sandwich’! One for each of us!”
Leon fist pumped as he shouted that, to which Makoto also shouted in approval and raised his fist. However, the baseball player instant noted the minor look of panic on Sayaka face, a foreboding feeling replacing his previous joy.

“Actually, Leon…” she began, her expression already confirming his worst fears. “You see…I kind of used up all of the meat we had just to make the first one, so…we won’t be able to make another sandwich of any kind at least until the fridge gets restocked tomorrow…”

Sayaka’s words were like a knife that pierced through his heart and all of the joyous feelings he’d had only a few moments ago suddenly disappeared, replaced with a hollow, depressing feeling. His mouth hung open and a gurgle of disappointment sounded from him, his mind unable to conjure words to express his sadness.

Suddenly, a pair of arms wrapped around the depressed Leon and he looked down to see Makoto giving him a comforting hug. And although it felt a bit awkward, the baseball star couldn’t stop the slight smirk that spread out over his cheeks as he returned the hug. Watching the scene, Sayaka couldn’t help but giggle to herself before walking over and wrapping her own arms around the both of them, holding them just as tightly as they had held her previously.

“…Thank you,” she whispered, knowing they could both hear her.

“Okay…this hopeful crap is getting on my nerves…” the real Junko Enoshima seethed as she tapped a large red button with her fingernails, not daring to actually push it though…even though she really wanted to.

That red button was used for sending out a message to the entire school, this one detailing how someone had broken the rules and would be punished for it. Junko had only had the pleasure of hitting it twice since the game began, once for Sayaka’s ‘body’ being discovered, then for Mondo’s ‘bullying’ of Chihiro…which was far fewer than she’d predicted or would have liked!

What killed her was that she’d been so excited when Sayaka had thrown the plate and smashed the side of her kitchen camera. Well, she wasn’t entirely sure it was Sayaka, since the camera wasn’t facing her or Leon at the time, but since she had heard the pop idol screaming and then a plate being thrown, it certainly seemed that it was her. And then, since audio on the camera still worked, she heard Leon planning to take responsibility for it! That made her mouth water, imagining the despair Sayaka would have to live with after he was executed for her stupid mistake!

History did tend to repeat itself after all…

But then, just as she’d reached for the button…she was forced to stop herself. Her own promise of not letting Monokuma enforce the rules until it was class trial worthy echoed in her ears, as if mocking her. And, because there would have been no class trial here…she was forced to stay her hand and let dopy Taka give out a freaking detention sentence rather than a death sentence…which wasn’t entirely unexpected.

After all, it’s not like she was counting on Taka to start handing out death penalties left and right. If he did go bug nuts crazy and executed someone, props to him! Otherwise, he’d fulfill his role of increasing tension and hatred amongst the students until it boiled over and someone found him drawn and quartered. And it would be worth it to see that happen! Only problem was…it required Junko to be very…very patient.
“If I interfere now… the despair they feel won’t be strong enough!” she had told herself, still utterly infuriated. “They need to turn on each other completely! Until they start actually killing each other, I need to stay out of it as much as possible!”

For the sake of her mission to gather the greatest amount of despair, and showcase it to the entire world, she knew that she had to keep her word and keep Monokuma away. She knew first hand that directly causing despair wasn’t nearly as tantalizing as manipulating others into causing their own despair. And so, instead of pressing the button, she continued to tap her bright red fingernails atop it, pretending she was pushing it over and over again.

It wouldn’t have been so bad, honestly…if Makoto hadn’t showed up and made the situation a despair-induced wet dream!

When the lucky student had tried to take the rap for both Leon and Sayaka, the potential despair of executing him for his good nature skyrocketed! It was a perfect chance to execute the little goody-goody two shoes and severely decrease morale among the remaining students! She knew that Mukuro, in particular, would have been devastated, and it could have possibly forced her sister back into the despair that Junko loved so very very much!

But nooooooooooooo! Taka had to be a rule-obsessed, non-bloodthirsty dictator and simply assigned detention! And to make matters even more bat-shit infuriating, even though she couldn’t see what Leon, Sayaka, and Makoto were doing after Taka left, just by listening she could tell that their hope meters had been restored and were approaching dangerous levels!

In fact, there was only one little consolation prize that Junko could do to keep from tearing her own hair out!

“I’m not restocking the fridge tonight… he can go without his fucking sandwich…”

Leaning back in her chair, Junko already felt her ‘anger’ fading. Then again, it wasn’t really anger at all. Just like despair didn’t truly give her ‘joy’ and her constant failings didn’t bring her real ‘sadness’. In fact, all of these emotions she often expressed… were completely fake.

In this moment of silence, she questioned why she even bothered to pretend that she was experiencing these emotions, especially since there was no one around that she needed to convince she had them anyway. Sure, it was mostly done out of ‘boredom’ but even that emotion wasn’t exactly real to her.

“It’s not like I actually feel anything away…” she said aloud to herself for unknown reasons.

Ever since she was a child, Junko Enoshima had known she was different. Not because of her incredibly high intelligence, her otherworldly beauty, or even her ability to read people with a single glance. No, the thing that separated Junko Enoshima from the rest of the world… was that she didn’t feel anything.

Even at a young age, she surmised that something in her brain was different, not wrong by any stretch of the imagination… just different. She just couldn’t feel things, and since it was all she’d ever known, it was completely normal for her.

However, she also knew that other people would find it distressing, and not wanting to disrupt her ‘normal’ life, she chose to simply let them believe she was the same as them.

She was told what happiness felt like, but had never felt it. She had been shown what anger was, but could not express it herself. She had seen sadness on other people’s faces, but it could never be seen
on her own face. She understood what people meant when they said they were bored, but she couldn’t understand if she was actually bored or not.

Because of that, for the first few years of her life, she simply mimicked everyone around her, pretending to know what anger felt like, what it meant to cry when she faked being sad, and how to smile when she knew everyone wanted her to display joy.

To a lesser extent, Mukuro had been the same way…except that she could actually feel those emotions, she just didn’t understand what they were. Mukuro had been withdrawn, preferring military magazines to dolls and dresses, but at least she could feel something. If Junko had been capable of feeling jealously, she might have felt it for her sister. But since she didn’t, Junko treated her sister the same way she treated everyone else…pretending to have emotions and feelings while she quietly observed.

As far as Junko was concerned, people were just creatures for her to observe. Discovering how people worked and why was a favored pastime, mostly because nothing could hold her attention. It stayed that way until one day, she got an idea.

At the time, she had been ‘friends’ with a boy named Yasuke Matsuda, mostly because he seemed interested in being around her, for reasons she couldn’t fathom. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that, after his mother’s death, she told him that she could be the most important person in his life. The notion was mainly proposed as a way to distract herself, never imagining that he would develop a kinship with her.

Regardless, she chose to experiment with his emotions, to see if she could manipulate them. It was a simple experiment, one that she had never expected would change her life.

She spent nearly every day for an entire month going to the beach with Yasuke, each day putting a lot of time and effort into building a sand castle replica of the Sagrada Familia Church. With each passing day it became more elaborate and awe-inspiring, just as she’d planned. And considering that the real Sagrada Familia was never finished, she proudly proclaimed that she would finish it in sand castle form.

But then, the night before she would have finished it, she snuck out of her home, made her way to the beach and completely destroyed the sand castle herself.

Seeing all of her hard work completely wasted…she felt a twinge of something, but ignored it. Even so, on her way home, she noticed that she suddenly felt lighter…and had more energy. However, she wrote it off as adrenaline from being in such a hurry, dismissing any other possibility.

Then, once the sun rose and she and Yasuke went to the beach, and they came across her destroyed sand castle, Junko once again pretended to have emotions, and forced herself to cry. At that moment, Yasuke flew into a quiet rage, desperately seeking the person who had destroyed her hard work. All the while, Junko watched him growing more and more distressed as he failed to find the culprit, without him ever realizing that she had done it to herself. And once again, she felt that strange twinge of something stir deep inside of her, but continued to ignore it, believing it to be hunger or some other inconsequential thing.

Later that day, when Yasuke had finally given up on trying to find the culprit, Junko read his expression and saw something that she’d never seen before. And instantly, recognized it as that strange twinge that she’d felt so many times that day!

Despair…she could see the despair on Yasuke’s face as he realized that he’d failed his friend…and
then…stronger than ever before, that strange twinge of something slowly began to grow stronger! It was unlike anything Junko had ever experienced before! Her body felt warm and light at the same time! Blood rushed to her face and a feeling of euphoria spread through her body! Her entire world brightened and she felt sensations that she had never imagined existed!

In that moment…for the first time in her life…Junko Enoshima felt completely ALIVE!!

Nothing she’d done before had ever created that kind of feeling in her! Hell, it was the first time she could actually identify that she was feeling anything! At long last, she understood why everyone made such a fuss over having so many emotions! This feeling of being alive, this is what everyone else had felt! This was the feeling that she’d been denied since birth! Even that very notion sent a wave of pleasure through her as her body trembled with joy. It was like her life had finally begun! After living in a shell for almost her entire life until that point, she felt freed from her imprisonment!

And then, when she admitted to Yasuke that she’d been responsible for the sand castle’s destruction, and he subsequently asked why she’d done it…she could proudly answer him:

“I just wanted to get you out of your house. You’ve been so lonely lately…”

It wasn’t a complete lie; she had wanted him out where she could observe him. But moreover, the lie served another purpose. The expression on Yasuke’s face, the look in his eyes…the instant Junko saw that, she knew that she had been successful in her mission. She had manipulated another human being into delivering her exactly what she wanted…and the guilt from hurting her friend with her deception…brought such lovely despair!

Ever since that moment…Junko Enoshima had lived for nothing but despair…in any form…be it on herself or anyone else. It was the one thing that made her feel like she truly existed, that she wasn’t just here to observe the world and leave it without doing anything! Despair became her purpose, her raison d’être, her entire existence.

As time went on, her desire for despair deepened, and just like a drug addict, it soon became difficult to enjoy low-level despair. Soon it became harder and harder for her to even register normal levels of despair. She needed high grade—no, weapon’s grade despair to even feel anything at all! And she would do anything to have it!

And the peak of despair had come…when she’d murdered Yasuke Matsuda. She put months of planning into his death, spent various resources to ensure that her scenario would go as expected…and just as she planned, the despair from having killed one of the two people she truly cared about was more than orgasmic!

Nothing before that even came close to how much despair she inflicted upon herself! Even as she cursed herself, dealt with self-loathing over having purposefully killed someone so important to her, ultimately she didn’t care as long as she could taste the tantalizing despair one more time!

Despair was love, despair was life, despair was joy, despair was sadness, despair was…despair! And it didn’t stop there!

Junko Enoshima had ended the world, caused the apocalypse, trapped her former classmates in a school and forced them to try and kill each other…purely in pursuit of despair. Everything she did was just to get another taste of that heavenly despair!

…and right now, she wasn’t getting anywhere near enough of it!

At that moment, a thought entered her mind and she decided to act upon it. Reaching over and
opening one of the drawers of the desk she sat at, she carefully reached inside and pulled out a battered and worn notebook. Wiping the dust off of it, she grinned as she read the words printed on the cover:

Ryoko Otonashi’s Notebook

“Hmmm, let’s see…” she whispered as she flipped through the pages, skimming through obscure notes and informative one-liners.

Finally, she settled on the page that had been a source of great despair for her. Several crude illustrations of Yasuke Matsuda littered the page, all painstakingly drawn during the time Junko had erased her own memories. As she gazed at the images of her now deceased friend…she felt…nothing…absolutely nothing…not even a twinge of emotion sparked inside her.

Junko frowned as she glared at the illustrations. “It’s been too long. The wound’s closed. Yasuke’s memory doesn’t even bother me anymore.”

It used to be that every time she even looked at that notebook, her heart would ache and she would get to experience the lovely despair that she’d inflicted upon herself. However, just like everything else, she had grown bored of her own despair over Yasuke’s death. And even though she knew that she could still feel something akin to ‘pain’ just by looking at his portrait, it still wasn’t enough to satisfy her lust for despair.

Despite that, as she stared at the illustrations, Junko subconsciously found herself reliving the moment when the most important person to her had died.

Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke… Yasuke…

…Yasuke…

“…Nope, nothing…”

That was all she uttered as even the precious memories of her deceased love failed to make her fall into despair. If she could feel disappointment, she would have felt its throes at that moment.

In the past, just looking at the notebook physically hurt her, the memories kept within and the reminder of what she’d done…it all made her want to burn the damn thing just to forget!

But that’s why she had kept it! Each time she looked at it, despair overwhelmed her! However, with each instance she viewed it…the feeling of despair lessened. And she feared that, just as the saying goes, ‘time heals all wounds’. She was slowly becoming numb to the knowledge that she’d murdered one of the two people closest to her…which is why she’d decided to involve her classmates in her killing game.

It wasn’t anything close to the feelings she had once held for Yasuke, or even her sister Mukuro, but she still felt a kinship with her classmates. They were important to her, more than just lab rats or experimental subjects, she actually viewed them as people. And while most people would find that though horrific, for Junko Enoshima to see you as something more than just a means to attain despair, that meant something.

Then again, she was using them as a means to get despair, so perhaps it wasn’t all that special for her to consider them people after all. In any case, she chose them because she knew them. She knew their goals and dreams for the future, what they all held dearest, and what it would take to break each
and every one of them. Above all, because she was close to them, she could intimately identify with their suffering and revel in the despair their deaths would cause.

That’s why she kept them alive…for the despair of watching more people she cared for perish.

Returning the worn notebook back into her drawer, Junko slowly turned her gaze back to her classmates…wondering if their deaths would ever be able to give her the same despair-induced satisfaction that Yasuke had given her. Then again, she was still hopeful that it might be the case…

“‘Hopeful’, huh?” she chided herself, a grin seeping onto her face. “That’s really ironic…despairingly ironic!”

A slight shiver went down her spine as the tiny bit of despair hit her…but it wasn’t enough…not nearly enough to satisfy her!

“They’d better find my little surprise soon…or I just might have to do something desperate to get my despair,” Junko muttered to herself as she glanced down at her control console.

In particular, her eyes focused on a button that was far removed from the rest of them, with a label that read ‘CAUTION’ sitting just above it. That button…was the shut off switch for the air purifier. Her last resort…her trump card…the instrument that would bring her and her classmates’ lives to an abrupt end…in a fit of heavenly despair!

Junko Enoshima didn’t care if she had to die to get it…she would do anything to feel her despair…anything…just to feel alive one more time.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Such interesting developments on both sides this time! What do you think Junko’s ‘little surprise’ might be? Will things finally start getting better for Leon, Sayaka and Makoto? Will Leon ever get his sandwich? You’ll have to keep reading to find the answers!

Well, this is a milestone…30 Chapters down…I have no idea how many to go!

You may have noticed that I posted this chapter early, that is because, due to unforeseen circumstances, I need to take a quick hiatus. I don’t think it’ll be that long, possibly not even a few weeks, but there are things that I need to take care of. It’s nothing horrible, so don’t worry, I just need some time to get myself in order. Hope you all can understand.

So, some of you may be wondering about the fact that there were no veggies or cheese on Leon’s sandwich, only meat…this is because, when I wrote this chapter, I had just returned from visiting my brother, who is vegan, and thus had not had meat for several days. Don’t get me wrong, vegans are awesome people, but I need my meat! So yeah…I hope that explains that.
Also, my beta wanted everyone to know of a grammatical error I made while writing. At one point, I had Sayaka comment that there was “A Makoto” instead of just Makoto. This has inspired an in-joke of ‘a wild Makoto appeared’ and now I am ashamed for making a Pokemon reference. In addition, when Junko talked about Leon, Sayaka and Makoto’s hope approaching dangerous levels…my beta and I had to keep ourselves from saying “Nagito levels of hope!”

Oh, we’ve begun work on the Danganronpa IF dub but I have no idea when it’ll be out. As promised, I will keep you all updated and if you want to hear my dulcet tones as Byakuya Togami, then I encourage you to check it out when it becomes available!

As always, reviews really make my day and inspire me. So, if you have any comments or questions that you want me to address, feel free to ask! Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Celeste's plot begins to move forward. Makoto gets lucky and then not. Later, Monokuma's third motive comes into play.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, it seems that I am the victor...once again.”

Celeste sat at a round table in the Rec Room on the third floor, playing poker with her entire class, taking all of their money and, in Byakuya’s case, also their dignity. Hifumi, dressed in a butler outfit, served her the most delicious tea she’d ever tasted as she cleared out the last of Hiro’s savings...a feat that brought a delicate smile to her lips. And although the rest of her classmates were outwitted easily, every once in a while, Makoto would get lucky and earn back what little he could. However, even the Ultimate Lucky Student soon fell to her poker face! She was up six hands and once she cleaned out this lot, she would finally be able to procure her castle! She could practically see it in the distance...just waiting for her to claim it!

“All in,” she said confidently, her eyes never leaving the large European castle just beyond her reach.

Victory was within her grasp...she had bet all of earnings, knowing she was about to seize her castle...she laid down the hand that would earn her the life she’d always dreamed of...until those words suddenly roared all around her...

“...Celestia Ludenberg, you have no true talent to refine...”

The instant those words echoed, everything changed. The royal flush she’d laid down suddenly turned into a row of jokers, all of which looked like Monokuma, openly laughing at her for the blunder. A startled gasp escaped her and she lifted her head up to see her opponent, who was holding her previously coveted royal flush, glaring at her. Only then did she recognize that her opponent for this final round...had been Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru!

“Stop!! You can’t!! My dream!!”

The white haired, burning eyes Committee Chairman paid her no heed as he mercilessly set down “her” royal flush, earning victory for himself.

Celestia Ludenberg stood there helplessly as the money she’d earned from this game suddenly vanished from her side and reappeared next to Taka. Even more horrifying, her castle, the vision that had given her strength, also materialized just behind the Moral Compass, a spoil of his victory. Upon seeing that, the gambler’s rage abruptly burst forth and she leapt from her seat, intending to charge him. However, before she even had a chance to move, cold steel wrapped around her neck. She froze for a moment before slowly lifting a hand up and touching the metal collar that had latched around her slender neck.
Fear unlike any other gripped her as she suddenly realized where she was. She wasn’t in the Rec Room sitting at a round table with her classmates…she was standing at her place in Monokuma’s class trial courtroom…with all of her classmates glaring at her unforgivingly.

“No…no!! It’s not possible! I…I should have won! You can’t do this to me!!” Celestia Ludenberg screamed, her voice hoarse and cracking as a chain attached itself to the collar around her neck before suddenly pulling her down a long hallway.

Without mercy, she was drug along the ground toward her fate, her Lolita dress shredded and ripped apart, her hair extensions were cruelly torn out, taking tufts of her hair with them, and her delicate figure battered and bruised as her lithe body tumbled down the long hallway. Eventually, the chain around her neck tugged her upward, lifting her off the ground for a moment before slamming her already beat-up body against a large wooden stake. Immediately, ropes appeared from all around, tying her to the wooden pole so tightly she fought just to breathe. At the same time, an ominously large amount of firewood was piled at her feet all around her.

Forcefully bound there, breathless and wracked with pain, Celeste barely managed to look up and get one final glance at her castle. However, her crimson eyes widened as she saw a large construction crew demolishing the castle’s pristine glory. She screamed and begged but nothing she said stopped the destruction of her dream home. Once it was completely cleared away, another building rose up in its place. To her utter horror, what appeared there was none other than Hope’s Peak Academy. And there, standing atop the newly risen learning facility, was Taka, bearing down on her with a condescending glare.

Just as she felt her rage return and she struggled against her restraints, an intense heat suddenly roared beneath her. Her terrified eyes looked down to see the wood at her feet had been ignited, the flames inching closer and closer to her. As the raging inferno lapped up at her legs and she felt the incredible pain of her leggings catching fire, Taka’s voice called down to her one last time…mocking her very being…

“…Taeko Yasuhiro, you have no true talent to refine…”

All at once, the fire leapt up, encasing her body in flames and scorching her porcelain skin, burning her alive. A guttural scream of agony and rage ripped from her throat as she was consumed by the blaze…

“EYAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Celeste shot up in bed, screaming at the top of her lungs. An instant later, she gasped for air, flinging the sheets off her bed in an attempt to cool herself, tossing away her pillow for good measure. Slowly, she regained composure as she realized that she was safe in her own bed, having awoken from her nightmare. Her entire body was slick with a cold sweat that trickled off her forehead, slid down her back, and even lingered on her palms. Her black nightgown was utterly soaked, her hair matted and disheveled. Her eyes shot over to see that both her gothic dress and hair extensions were just where she had left them.

As she continued to sit there, drenched in her own sweat, she gritted her teeth and seethed, “Again! Can’t I even get a God-damn peaceful night’s sleep?!!”

As much as she hated to admit it, Taka’s snide remark days ago refused to leave her, and every time she saw him, she was reminded of how deeply his words had cut her. No matter how much she tried
to block out those words, they continued to plague her every waking thought. She found brief moments of respite, mainly while coercing Hifumi into attending to her whims, but it never lasted long.

Just like tonight, every night since their encounter had been sleepless. Even when she did manage to rest her eyes, nightmares such as this one had plagued her. She hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep for several days and no matter how much she tried to hide it with make-up, it was starting to show through. It had taken hours for her to fall asleep tonight, a fact that only amplified her frustration.

“I wish he’d just die already! Hell, if it would help me sleep, I’d strangle him right now!” Celeste seethed, getting up to change into a different nightgown.

Tugging the damp black satin upward and over her head, she tossed the expensive nightgown into her laundry bin before opening her closet and rummaging through to find something comfortable to sleep in. She eventually settled on an older, plain white nightgown, one that, if it got covered in sweat, she wouldn’t lament throwing out.

“Who the hell does he think he is?! Destroying my castle like that! I’ll beat him to a bloody pulp next time I see him!”

Using a towel to clean the sweat from her body, she slowly pulled the plain white nightgown over her head and adjusted the fabric to make it comfortable. As she made her way back over to her bed, she took a few deep, cleansing breaths, in an effort to calm down. After all, she knew there was no way she’d get any sleep if she was so pissed off she couldn’t think straight.

Slowly climbing back into her bed, which was fortunately not too damp from sweat, she laid her head down on one of her spare pillows and stared up at the ceiling, still too frustrated to fall asleep. As she lay there, glaring upward, she slowly went over her plan to have vengeance against the bastard who had done this to her.

“It’s been slow, but it seems that I’m not the only one that bastard’s been pissing off. I just need to wait for the right moment. It’ll make all that time listening to that annoying bag of lard talk about his anime fetish worth it if I can just get him onto my side,” she told herself, settling back in for the night. “Sooner or later, Taka’s gonna find out something he finds unforgivable…like finding out what Hifumi’s secret really means…and when he does, he’ll step over the line in order to enforce his ‘justice’. And when that happens…I’ll be there to give Hifumi the little push he needs to take matters into his own hands. My pawn will take the king and it’ll be checkmate! Even if it only ends up a bullying trial, it’ll be enough to make him pay for what he’s done to me!”

A malicious smirk crossed her lips as she let that thought ebb her back toward peaceful slumber. Unfortunately, less than an instant later, a certain annoyance sprang up.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

Good morning from Hawaii everyone! Where you all are, it is now 7AM! Time to rise and shine like the beautiful tropical sun that none of you get to experience yet again today! Be sure be on your best behavior while I’m goooooone!

Celeste audibly groaned and her tired eyes shot over to her wall clock to see that, unfortunately, the bear was correct. It was time for her to get up and start the day, despite getting little to no sleep. Knowing that she couldn’t miss the morning meeting, or else she’d have to deal with Taka again, the gambler felt her anger rise once again.

Flipping over and grabbing the edges of her bed, she slammed her face into her pillow and let out a
muffled scream of fury.

For the first time in a while, Makoto was actually feeling pretty lucky. The morning meeting hadn’t been as horrible as he’d imagined, but then again, he was becoming accustomed to Taka’s ramblings about regulations while every had their breakfast. Plus, it seemed that everyone was slowly beginning to tolerate the Moral Compass’ morning antics. Celeste, in particular, had kept a sweet smile for the entire meeting, which was great because it meant that she was adapting pretty well.

“Well, she was the one who said we just needed to adapt,” Makoto said aloud, a light smile on his face. “I’m glad that she seems to be doing okay.”

He hadn’t really talked to Celeste that much since they’d been trapped in the school. He’d occasionally spoken to her about her gambling exploits but he didn’t really feel like he got to know her very well. Maybe he should ask if she wanted to hang out with him, Leon and Sayaka some time?

Speaking of which, he’d just finished spending some quality time with both Sayaka and Leon before deciding to head back toward his room to relax for the foreseeable future. It had only been a day since he and Sayaka had become friends again, but already it seemed that they had regained the trust and familiarity they had once shared. Add to it that Leon kept making dumb jokes and seemed to meld well with both of them, it seemed that the three of them were going to become close friends… something that had seemed impossible in this hellish place.

He’d even managed to survive Taka’s ‘detention’, which largely consisted of the Moral Compass shouting about the political structure of Japan and demanding that the lucky student solve math equations that Einstein would have struggled with…

However, now that it was all past him, in this brief moment of peace, Makoto was finally able to dare to hope…hope that they might all make it out of the school alive. Even if he couldn’t do much himself, he truly believed that if they all did everything they could, just like Junko said, they might be able to endure and survive.

As he made his way toward his room from the cafeteria, he happened to see someone standing in the corner of the lobby area. A smile appeared on his face as he saw that it was Kyoko, her gaze downcast, obviously deep in thought about something. At first, he hesitated to call out to her, not wanting to bother her if she was busy with something. However, he also had something important that he wanted to talk to her about and had let his own nervousness stop himself from speaking with her many times before. After weighing his options for a moment, the lucky student decided to see just how ‘lucky’ he really was.

“Hey, Kyoko!” he called out, making her snap out of whatever train of thought dominated her mind. She lifted her gaze and upon recognizing him, he could have sworn he saw a hint of a smile on her face. As he approached, he asked, “Whatcha doing? Thinking about stuff?”

Instantly, Makoto cursed his lack of tact. Obviously she had been deep in thought, otherwise she wouldn’t have been standing in the corner all silent like that. He really should have thought out what he was going to say before opening his big mouth. Just as embarrassment began to overtake him, the stoic young woman closed her eyes and nodded to him.

“I was actually pondering about what Monokuma had told us earlier,” she confessed, keeping her actual thoughts on the matter to herself. “Anyway, did you need something from me?”
Typical Kyoko, she always found a way to shift the conversation away from her and back to him. And while he wanted to respect her privacy, every time she avoided talking about herself in any capacity, it only made Makoto more interested in getting to know who she really was underneath her stoic appearance.

“N-No, not specifically,” he admitted, again cursing that he hadn’t through this out before talking to her.

Because of that, instead of striking up a conversation with her, like he’d wanted, all Makoto could do was stand there and stare at her. It took him a moment to realize that he was staring right into her lavender irises, and she was staring right back, their eyes locked. When his brain finally clicked that he was getting lost in her eyes, his cheeks flushed and he averted his gaze, staring down at the floor and feeling more embarrassed than ever before.

After what felt like hours but was really only about ten seconds, Kyoko cleared her throat, making him lift his gaze up to her.

“Well then, if you don’t need anything, I’m afraid I need to go,” she said as she pushed off the wall and began to walk away. “I have something to take care of. Goodbye.”

“H-Hold on!” the lucky student found himself saying before he knew what was happening. Upon hearing him, Kyoko stopped and glanced over to him again, giving him an expectant look. Knowing that he had only one shot to pull this off, Makoto swallowed the lump in his throat and asked, “W- Would you like to hang out later today? Like, after you’re done with…whatever you’re doing?”

His question hung in the air for only a moment, but to him, it felt like an eternity. All the while, Kyoko showed no sign of whether or not she’d accept his proposal, which only intensified his fears. Should he have been more specific about what he wanted to do? He wanted to talk to her, no, thank her for encouraging him to talk to Sayaka so long ago. Without her, he may never have had the courage to keep trying to be friends with Sayaka, he owed her a lot for that. And…he genuinely wanted to get to know her better. She was a mystery to everyone but she didn’t seem like a bad person. If anything, she seemed to be one of the most kind-hearted people here! If not for her, Makoto knew that he’d never have survived the first class trial. And not just while finding the culprit. She’d stopped him from charging Monokuma just before Leon was dragged away, an act that would have cost him his life.

Just as he was about to retract his own offer and excuse himself, to wallow in how stupid he felt, Kyoko suddenly answered, “That’s fine. I may be a while but if you’d like, we can meet around noon. Is that alright with you?”

For the first time since he’d been given his title, Makoto Naegi truly considered himself to be the Ultimate Lucky Student. A smile brighter than ever before erupted on his lips as he answered, “Uh, yeah! That sound great! I guess I’ll see you then!”

To his surprise, Kyoko let a small smile of her own decorate her lips as she nodded back to him. “Alright then. Later.”

And with that, she departed, heading toward the exit of the dorms. Makoto was barely able to hold in his excitement as he also turned and began heading back to his room. He was so excited that he didn’t notice Hina and Sakura entering the lobby, stopping Kyoko before she left and handing her something.
“Just what are they up to now?” the real Junko questioned, switching between several monitors as she tried to keep track of everyone as they made their way through the various school halls.

The Mastermind had noticed that some of them were acting suspiciously and had been intrigued at the level of secrecy they were displaying. A part of her wanted to believe that a murder was finally in the mix, but as soon as she noticed that all of the students were seemingly coordinating with each other, all of them distinctively avoiding Taka, it became painfully obvious that murder wasn’t in the cards for her. In fact, it seemed to be a secret meeting of sorts, with almost all of the students gathering in the cafeteria.

“Perhaps they are plotting a group murder of Mr. Ishimaru?” Sexy Teacher Junko asked herself, pushing up her fake glasses as she continued to survey the screens. “Wishful thinking, I know. But one can always dream…”

Just as she finished, she noticed that a certain lucky student didn’t seem to be included in the assembly. In fact, he had confined himself to his room for the last few hours…and he appeared to be waiting for something, or someone with lavender hair, to come visit him. She’d seen his exchange with the amnesiac detective earlier, which had made her gag, and promptly ignored him ever since. She lamented that she didn’t have access to Monokuma at the moment, otherwise she would have had a private ‘tutoring’ lesson for him, just to shake him up.

However, at that instant, on another monitor, she saw someone approaching Makoto’s room. A malicious smirk spread out on her lips and while she knew that, even though it would be small, a taste of despair was heading her way.

“Alright, almost time…” Makoto told himself as he looked up at the clock, indicating that it was almost noon.

The Ultimate Lucky Student sat on his bed, shoes already on and ready to get going the instant the minute hand reached the 12-hour mark. He was still ridiculously excited to spend time with Kyoko, and even still a bit shocked that she’d agreed! Actually, he was kind of curious what she needed to do when he’d asked her initially. He’d just been so elated that she’d accepted his invite that he didn’t even question what she needed to do. Then again, he could always ask her…but maybe it was best to just mind his own business.

After all, he didn’t want to be rude, especially if it was something…girl related.

At the same time, he couldn’t deny that he was concerned about the fact that she often disappeared for long stretches of time. He hadn’t noticed it until recently, when he’d begun to try and seek her out to speak to her, but she often couldn’t be found anywhere! One day, he searched all three floors but still came up empty handed! He tried not to be worried about it, but it definitely bothered him. Perhaps he’d bring that up while talking with her today?

With Monokuma seemingly absent from their lives until further notice, things seemed to going in the students’ favor. And while he wondered how long that would last, he tried not to question good things when they happened to him. And though he would admit that things weren’t exactly perfect, considering how much of a Rule-Nazi Taka was being, it didn’t seem all that horrible in the school right now.

“The ‘detention’ wasn’t as horrible as I thought it would be, either… even if I did have to do practice questions out of Taka’s personal study guides,” Makoto pointed out to himself as he leaned back onto his bed, taking a few minutes to relax and compose himself before heading out to spend time with Kyoko.
Suddenly, Makoto jolted up from his bed, as someone pounded on his door. His heart became all aflutter as he presumed that it had to be Kyoko knocking. She must have finished early and come to see him! Without any hesitation, he stood up and practically dashed over to his door. Placing his hand on the handle and taking a cleansing breath, he slowly opened it.

“Hey, you're early—”.

“Hey! Makoto! What's up, man?!” the overly enthusiastic voice of Hiro invaded his ears.

Disappointment unlike anything Makoto had ever felt took hold as his door was suddenly pushed open and the tall clairvoyant rushed in, slinging his arm over the lucky student’s shoulders. Makoto’s happy mood drowned under a sea of questions, and a surge of panic encased him as Hiro had suddenly latched himself onto him. However, before he had time to say anything, a small piece of paper was thrust before his eyes. It read:

*Meeting in the cafeteria! Need to talk about Taka and stuff!*  

The first thing the lucky student noticed was how well written the message was, he could hardly believe Hiro wrote it. But after digesting its contents, Makoto felt a chill run down his spine. Personally, he didn’t think that Taka had crossed any lines…at least not yet. Yeah, he was getting to be annoying but it wasn’t anything that extreme. Between the way Taka had been acting or the way Monokuma had previously treated them, the lucky student would gladly live under Taka’s dictatorship, no argument.

Even so, Makoto also knew that not everyone was going to be as easy going about this as he was, and so, he decided it was best to hear everyone out…despite the bad feeling he was getting.

“C’mon, man! Let’s get some grub! Hop to it!” Hiro said to him, putting away the very well written note and leading Makoto toward the door.

“Uh, wait! I already have plans—!” the lucky student tried to protest, secretly hoping Kyoko would arrive and save him.

“We don’t want to keep everyone waiting. They should all be in the cafeteria by now,” the clairvoyant interrupted, looking around suspiciously as they entered the hall. After glancing around, he carefully whispered, “We don’t want Taka to know what we’re up to…play along for now, man!”

Although he still wanted to protest, the fact that Hiro had mentioned that *everyone* was there caught his attention. Did it mean that Kyoko had been called there too? Figuring that might be the case, the lucky student unfortunately decided to go along with Hiro’s insistence and silently headed for the cafeteria with him.

“So much for lucky…” Makoto thought as he let Hiro tug him down the hall.

“The gang’s all here now! Well, most of us anyway!” Hiro announced as he and Makoto arrived at the cafeteria, with all of the students, minus Taka and obviously Mondo and Chihiro, already present.

Each person had a tray of food in front of them, so that if they were discovered by a certain suspicious Committee Chairman, it would seem that everyone had simply, and coincidentally,
decided to have lunch together all at the same time. It had been hard to coordinate, with a number of notes being passed between everyone. Not to mention that Hiro had to personally fetch Makoto.

However, somehow, they had all managed to meet in the cafeteria just a little after noon. And now, everything was set for them to discuss the issue that had been plaguing all of them for the last few days.

“Before we begin, we need to appoint someone to watch outside, to be certain that someone does not overhear and suddenly interrupt us,” Byakuya instructed everyone, earning a few disgusted looks due to his authoritative attitude. “Makoto, I believe you will suffice.”

“W-What?! Why do I have to—?” the lucky student tried to say but was unable to finish.

“Because you were the last of us to arrive,” Byakuya swiftly explained, leaving no room for him to debate. “We even had to send the rabble to fetch you.”

“Hey…” Hiro quietly refuted before falling silent.

Ignoring him completely, the Affluent Progeny continued, “We could have begun the meeting much sooner if you had simply been more aware of your surroundings. This exercise should help you increase your awareness. You should be grateful that I’m affording you this opportunity.”

As he spoke, a few of the students glared at Byakuya fiercely. Among them was Junko, who was carrying a large, lavish purse for some reason. And she wasn’t the only one, Sayaka and Leon both sent the Affluent Progeny a disgusted look. Even Kyoko, with her features as stoic as usual, had her eyes locked onto Byakuya, an unmistakable disapproval behind her lavender irises.

However, being the non-confrontational person that he was, Makoto didn’t fight against Byakuya’s reasoning.

“Uh…okay, I guess.”

Without getting a chance to gather any food of his own, Makoto apologetically waved at Sayaka, Leon, and Kyoko, who had graciously saved him a seat that was nestled between Kyoko and Sayaka, with Leon sitting next to the pop idol to complete that little group. This made the pop idol and the baseball star glare even more fiercely at the Affluent Progeny but he seemingly ignored them, probably because he was getting exactly what he desired.

Once Makoto took a seat at the table furthest in the back, his eyes aimed firmly at the slightly open cafeteria door, the meeting officially began.

“I believe that we all know the reason we’ve gathered here today,” Byakuya began, not even taking a moment to thank Makoto for standing watch. “Concerning a certain Disciplinary Committee Chairman…we need to discuss how to proceed—”.

“Yeah, this is getting crazy! For serious!” Hiro loudly complained earning an annoyed stare from Byakuya. “I got a pink slip just for walking down the hall! I mean, yeah, I was talking pretty loudly to myself but that doesn’t mean I deserve a ticket for…” the clairvoyant took a moment to read his slip, “‘Excessive Loudness’! I’ve never been excessive about anything in my entire life!”

Everyone groaned as they all knew just how ‘excessive’ the clairvoyant could be, but they all knew now wasn’t the time to challenge his claims.

“Anyway, we all know that we need to do something,” Leon spoke up, a determined expression on his face. “So, I know this is a bit extreme but hear me out…one of the girls needs to do us a solid—”. 
“No!” Junko immediately shot down, glaring at Leon for his subtle suggestion.

“Oh, come on! It’s not like you’d have to marry him or anything!” the baseball star tried to convince everyone, earning more than a few infuriated looks from the girls. “We all know he’d probably loosen up if—!”

“You’re forgetting that sexual promiscuity is unacceptable in a school environment,” Kyoko harshly reminded him, her voice for once not completely stoic.

“Well, yeah, but…”

Before he could speak another word, a hand gripped his shoulder. In utter horror, he slid his gaze over and found Sayaka giving him the most terrifying glare he’d ever seen. If he was pressed, he would have called it more frightening than the one she’d given him during their encounter on that horrible night.

“No…” she said softly, her voice unnervingly calm.

Feeling a cold chill run down his spine, Leon instantly backed down and said, “Alright… fine, but we still have to do something about this! I don’t know about the rest of you, but I can’t take much more of this crap—!”

“You can’t take much more of this?!” Junko immediately retorted, ripping open her large purse and dumping its contents all over the table. To everyone’s shock, the bag had been filled to the brim with nothing but pink slips. “That bastard’s written me enough pink slips that I could recreate the tree they were made from!”

“Yeah, and poor Makoto had to serve detention with him…” Sayaka guiltily added, sending a sympathetic glance toward her friend. Everyone slightly cringed at that news, imagining a fate worse than death.

“How was that, by the way?” Byakuya snidely commented, obviously pleased with himself.

Rather than frustration, Makoto nervously scratched his head and averted his gaze.

“…Is it too late be homeschooled?” he tried to joke, only to have his humor drowned out by artistic wisdom.

“I must say, that is an impressive amount of building material!” Hifumi said to Junko, almost awed by the sheer amount of pink paper before him. “I’m a bit surprised you actually kept all of them. You could certainly use it as building material for a model if you wanted! Recreating a tree might be a waste but I will not stifle your creative intentions!”

With a heavy sigh, Junko answered, “I wasn’t serious about the tree thing… then again…”

As she glanced down at the pieces of scattered paper, a thought snapped into her mind. As the others began resuming their conversation, she carefully began scooping all of the pink slips back into her large purse.

“In any case, we need to discuss what should be done about him,” Celeste spoke up, trying to initialize the discussion. Even she seemed a bit tired, possibly from dealing with Taka in her own time. “We already know that he has some sort of connection with our captor—”

“Actually, we don’t know that… yet,” Junko interrupted, barely finishing gathering all of her pink slips. A perturbed expression marred her beautiful face as she continued, “Yeah, he’s acting like a
jerk but that doesn’t mean he’s a spy.”

“Hmmmm, I suppose you are correct,” Celeste surprisingly conceded, much to everyone’s shock. “But that does not mean that we should be subjected to his peculiar form of justice, either. After all, you have personally been victimized by him.”

Celeste’s eyes momentarily glanced at Junko’s large purse, her indication clear to everyone. However, the Fashionista simply picked up her accessory and set it on the floor next to her, out of everyone’s sight.

“Does anyone have any good ideas on how we can help Taka?” Junko posed, sending one last quick glare toward Leon, who hung his head. At the same time, a set of calculating eyes focused on the Fashionista.

“H-Help? You th-think that h-he’s the one who n-needs help!” Toko abruptly spoke up from her place standing behind Byakuya, much to the Affluent Progeny’s dismay. “With h-how he’s been t-treating us, he isn’t the one who needs h-help! H-He’s a monster! He m-might have us all executed just for m-meeting in secret like this!”

With a raised eyebrow, Junko answered, “Does anyone else find it ironic that a known serial killer is accusing someone else of plotting to kill us?”

Toko abruptly turned red upon hearing that insult, pointing angrily at the Fashionista. “D-Don’t compare m-me to her!” the writer shouted, obviously referring to her other half. “And don’t ch-change the subject! Y-You really think that th-that bastard deserves any k-kind of help from u-us?!”

“Well, yeah!” Junko answered, not intimidated by Toko or her question. “He’s obviously unbalanced, right? He’s gone into this…Disciplinary Chairman mode to try and cope with the fact that, twice now, some of us almost died!”

“Indeed, that would appear to be the case,” Celeste again concurred, but not without countering. “However, that does not change the fact that our lives have been put in danger due to his newfound position. While I do pity him, I think that not acting would be a far greater mistake.”

“Oh, so I suppose you think we should tie him up and leave him in the closet somewhere?” the Fashionista fired back.

“I cannot say that I wish for such an outcome,” the gambler calmly retorted, her true intentions hidden behind her perfect mask. “I simply want to be rid of the possibility that he might abuse his position. As it stands, all of us have the same fear, correct? Should we not take matters into our own hands and deal with the situation accordingly?”

“And what exactly do you mean by ‘dealing with it accordingly’?” Kyoko suddenly inserted herself into the conversation, her eyes working to see past the gambler’s mask.

With a light laugh, Celeste continued, “I do not propose doing anything hasty. At the same time, we have little time to discover a solution to our problem. I am simply trying to help everyone realize that.”

“But what about trying to help him?” Makoto asked from his place near the door, continuing to watch just in case Taka appeared. “I mean; we were able to help everyone else that…went down that path.” He paused, feeling a bit guilty for singling out Sayaka and Leon, who hung their heads in shame. However, he pressed on regardless, “But there has to be something we can do to—!”

“At this point, I’m afraid there is little help that can be offered. None of us are qualified to properly
handle someone as unbalanced as he is,” Byakuya announced, surprising all of them. However, none of them were shocked by his following words. “Moreover, because of that, he is all the more dangerous. We have to face that fact that, sooner rather than later, his mind will snap completely and at that time, he may order one of us to be executed. And I, for one, will not have my life put in jeopardy over a minor issue like running in the halls—”.

“Now it all makes sense,” Hina abruptly interrupted, glaring at him angrily. “You’re just worried about yourself! That’s why you wrote that message to me and Sakura in the first place! Asking us to get everyone together! You just want the rest of us to come up with a way of stopping Taka for you!”

With a cocky smirk, the Togami Heir answered, “But of course. However, since this matter also has value for the rest of you, as I assume none of you want to be executed, there should be no need to argue. Instead, we should focus on what we need to do to be rid of Mr. Ishimaru and his influence. And besides, if he really is the traitor, then it will be like killing two birds with one stone.”

All at once a cacophony of voice sprang up, all of them shouting at the same time.

“Wait, you were the one who organized the meeting?” Junko exclaimed, obviously upset about this development.

“I thought Junko was the one who called us all here!” Leon protested, feeling tricked.

“I can’t believe you tricked us like that! Have you no shame!” Hina shouted directly at Byakuya, who seemingly ignored her.

“Hina, please calm down. Everyone, we need to stay calm,” Sakura tried to convince everyone but to no avail.

“I was in the middle of completing a very important project! How could you tear me away from that?!” Hifumi complained, adding his voice to the group.

“It’s so nice seeing everyone agree on something,” Celeste chided, not entirely upset about the outcome before her.

Just then, among all of those voices, one of them grew louder than all the others.

“Oh! Hey, Taka! What’s up?”

Everyone immediately quieted down and turned to see that Makoto was no longer sitting at his seat. In fact, the cafeteria doors were open and he appeared to be just outside. He must have seen the Disciplinary Committee Chairman approaching and decided to stall him rather than draw attention by calling out to everyone. At first, everyone wondered if Taka would notice the fact that Makoto had practically shouted his greeting at him, but…

“Greetings, Makoto Naegi! Finishing lunch are you?” they all heard Taka reply, his distinctive voice already annoying them. Nevertheless, they all used that time to return to their seats and resume eating their meals.

“Yeah…just finished!” they heard Makoto answer, some of them feeling bad because he hadn’t gotten to eat anything. “Anyway, I’m heading back to my room for now—”.

“Wait just a moment, Makoto Naegi! I have something I need to speak with everyone about! We need to gather everyone as quickly as possible! Let’s start by seeing if anyone is in the cafeteria!”
“Actually—Taka wait a second!” Makoto obviously tried to delay him, but it apparently failed.

Everyone tensed but could do nothing as Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru burst through the doors of the cafeteria, his hair still a brilliant sheen of white and his eyes burning with scholastic passion. Upon seeing that virtually everyone was present, however, he became immediately suspicious.

“Well, Makoto Naegi,” Taka shouted as the lucky student rushed in after him. “It seems that everyone is already gathered! But why is that?! Were you, perhaps, having another secret meeting without—?!”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you!” Makoto bravely interrupted, shrinking a bit as Taka abruptly turned his burning gaze toward him. “I…uh, I came to eat lunch and almost everyone was already here! I mean, it’s noon and that’s lunch time and…yeah.”

For a moment, Taka glanced around the room, as if to judge each and every student that his eyes came across. However, upon seeing most of them with eating utensils, their plates mostly full of food, he slowly began to nod to himself, coming to a decision.

“Oh, well I suppose that makes perfect sense! It seems I overreacted, my apologies everyone!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru unexpectedly announced, laughing heartily before abruptly shifting into a frown. “But now isn’t the time for eating! Everyone, I need you to follow me to the gymnasium! I have found something…troubling. Let’s go now! Single file! And no stragglers this time!”

His gaze lingered on Celeste at the mention of stragglers but quickly shifted away, turning his back and heading out the door, as if leading everyone. For a moment, no one moved, that is until Kyoko abruptly stood up from her seat.

“We’d best go and see what he’s found. It could be vital for all of us,” she quietly insisted, already marching toward the door.

“I suppose she has a point,” Byakuya conceded, getting up from his spot and departing.

Soon, everyone slowly began to pick themselves up and begrudgingly head for the door. Leon, in particular, stomped his way out, glancing back at the sandwich that he’d failed to get a single bite of due to being called away.

Trailing behind all of them, almost unnoticed by everyone, Celeste seethed with a quiet rage as she made her way toward the gymnasium.

“Just be patient…just be patient…” Celeste mentally instructed herself as she followed behind everyone on their way to the gym.

Her fingernails had dug into her palms when Taka had subtly called her out with his ‘stragglers’ comment, which brought up memories of the sin that would eventually cause his downfall. However, somehow, she was able to contain her rage, reminding herself that she had a plan and needed to work toward it.

“Now isn’t the right time to spring the trap,” she told herself as she followed everyone down the hall and passed the nurse’s office. Taking a moment to stare at the closed door, she averted her gaze.
"I won’t let my emotions get the better of me. If I did, I’d be no better than that pompadour idiot. What I need to do now is keep calm and let the distrust fester amongst everyone. Once it’s at its peak, then I’ll see about instigating a clash between that bastard and the manga freak."

As she rounded the corner behind everyone else, heading toward the trophy room just before the gym, she couldn’t help but smile to herself due to her own cleverness.

"I may not even need to provoke either of them. They might start a clash all on their own. The best case scenario would be that they take each other out. And while that means that I would still be trapped here, at least I wouldn’t have to deal with them for the remainder of my time here. I’d miss Hifumi’s tea but that’s a sacrifice I’d have to make once I ‘graduated’ anyway."

Making her way into the trophy room, pausing only to catch a glimpse of herself in the display’s reflection, she noticed that her smile was still visible and instantly corrected it. Assuming a neutral visage, she continued on toward the gym to see what Taka had discovered.

"For now, I just need to be patient. Patience is a virtue, after all."

Walking through the doors to the gymnasium, Celeste instantly noted that everyone was staring at something. Curiosity took over and she began making her way through the crowd of fellow students. However, when she finally noticed what they’d all been staring at, her jaw dropped.

Sitting there, atop the podium that Monokuma often stood on, was a large stack of money. At first, Celeste believed that she was imagining it, that her tiredness was finally catching up to her. However, as if to confirm if it was real or fantasy, Taka went up on stage and pointed to the mass of money.

"Classmates! I found this…astonishing sight only a few minutes ago! Not only that, it came with a note from Monokuma! I decided to gather everyone before reading the notice, so thank you all for being present! I shall now read the message aloud!" Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted, holding up a piece of paper for all to see. Lowering it to read the message, the Moral Compass cleared his throat.

"To my wonderful students. I hereby present you with an added reward for any of you who successfully graduate. This stack of…ten billion—" he paused for a moment as he drank in that amount before continuing, "—big ones should be enough to get even the lowliest of you motivated! Yours truly, Monokuma!’"

In truth, Celeste was only half listening as Taka read the message aloud. All she really heard were the words, ‘ten billion’ and ‘graduate’. And perhaps it was the lack of sleep, but to her tired eyes, the way the money was stacked, high on the ends but shallow in the center, reminded her of the towers in a castle. And even though she held a surprised visage, the same as any of them, inside, a part of her was twisting excitedly.

"If I added that to my current accounts…I’d have more than enough to buy my castle! Hell, I could have one built! Two even! One as my main home and one in a separate location to act as a vacation resort! Both of them, just for me, to fill with as much gothic decorum as I want! And with plenty of vampire servants to keep me entertained for the rest of my life…with no one to who will ever know my old name… no one to tell me who I am or am not…and no one who can deny my obviously real talents—!"

Just as she began to get lost in her thoughts, she immediately stopped herself. Unfortunately, she knew that, in spite of being offered such a great prize, it was not worth risking her life over. After all, she could simply win that much after she escaped from here…but…if escape also meant getting ten billion to spend on whatever she wanted—
“No! Stop thinking like that! I need to be patient! If I rush into this, just because of a little more money, then I’m no better than a common thug! If I’m going to live long enough to enjoy my upcoming life of luxury, then I need to keep calm and just wait for the right—”

As if to interrupt her thoughts, Hiro, who happened to be standing next to her, just had to quietly utter, “Whoa…that’s a lotta cash…with that I could…oh, money…money…money…money…”

…

“Who the fuck does he think he is? That’s my money, bitch!!”

Despite herself, Celeste couldn’t stop herself from quietly sneering at him. The way he was talking not only disturbed her, it insulted her! For someone as pathetic as him to even consider going after a prize that was only fit for someone of her standing…it was infuriating! No, it wasn’t just infuriating or insulting, it was downright insanity! How dare he look at her money and think—!

“No, no, no, no! It’s not my money…not yet anyway! I need to be patient! I need to keep my composure! I need to wait for the right opportunity! I need to convince everyone I’m trustworthy! I need to make sure that—”

“Classmates! I know this is a startling discovery but please listen to me! Obviously we cannot allow this money to continue to plague or tempt us!” Taka suddenly shouted to everyone, instantly getting Celeste’s attention. Her crimson eyes flared as she glared at him while he continued, “Due to the possibility that it could be used to drive us apart, I suggest that we burn all of it! Just to be safe!”

As his words echoed in her mind, and she envisioned her castle made of money bursting into flames and being destroyed …something inside Celeste hardened, and any reservations she’d had about graduating suddenly vanished. And even though her outward demeanor hadn’t changed, keeping her visage as stoic as possible, on the inside, she felt a fury that no one on this earth could match.

“Fuck patience! I’m not letting that son of a bitch destroy my dream twice!!”

“Perhaps we should reconsider that option,” Celeste said to everyone, a pleasant smile on her face. “After all, this is an official motive from Monokuma. How are we to be sure that we will not be punished for destroying his property?”

No one was surprised that Celeste was the one to suggest sparing the pile of money. However, they also couldn’t deny that her reasoning actually seemed valid. Even Taka, who brought a box of matches and had been prepared to light the stack ablaze right there, hesitated as she brought that point up. At the same time, that didn’t quite deter everyone from feeling more than a little suspicious.

“Oh, and I suppose your reservations have nothing to do with the possibility of taking that money for yourself?” Junko outright accused Celeste, earning a mocking chuckle from the gambler.

“Actually, I have no need for such a trifle amount.” Her words shocked everyone into silence as she continued, “I have already earned over a billion through my own exploits. There is nothing I cannot obtain through my own talents. Besides, I have no need for anything that I have not earned for myself.”

For some reason, she spoke the word ‘talents’ quite harshly but no one seemed to pay it too much
mind. And while it was obvious that opinions were mixed on whether they believed her or not, no one felt the need to openly refute her. Instead, the silence paved the way for another to voice their opinion.

“Well, it won’t make a difference anyway,” Hina assured everyone, a happy-go-lucky smile on her face. “I mean, we’ve come this far together, right? We’re not gonna let something like money turn us against each other, are we?”

Almost instantly, an annoyed huff from Byakuya drew everyone attention’s. “Please. Are you incapable of learning from past experiences?”

“And what is that supposed to mean?!” the Ultimate Swimmer refuted, not understanding his comment.

Without even looking at her, the Affluent Progeny scoffed and answered, “Have you already forgotten what both of the previous motives led us to? Even if no one lost their lives, you cannot deny that each time Monokuma tempts us, one of us falls to the temptation. Personally, I’m a bit disappointed in our captor. I would have preferred a motive that didn’t affect only the more destitute of our classmates.”

“Hey! What do you mean destitute?! I’m just in debt, that’s all!” Hiro shouted, immediately aware that he’d just outed himself as having been interested in the motive. “Not that I’d ever consider murdering anyone just to get out of debt! Not me, nope!”

“I rest my case,” Byakuya uttered before folding his arms and falling silent.

Much to Hina’s disappointment and embarrassment, she was utterly defeated by Hiro’s stupidity and could only glare at him accusingly before Sakura tapped her on the shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile.

“In any case, we need to decide what needs to be done with this motive,” Sakura said to everyone, caution clear in her voice. “Is it really safe to just leave such a large volume of money out in the open like this? We should find a proper place to store it for the time being.”

“I agree,” Kyoko concurred, a serious look on her face. “If we leave it in the open, one of us might take it for themselves, which could lead to distrust among us. Instead, we should store it in a place where it would be hard to—”

“In that case, I shall confiscate it until further notice!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted to all of them, making them all remember that he was still there. And while he didn’t appear upset at being left out until now, he obviously didn’t appreciate them making decisions without his insight. “I shall keep the money in my room until we can find a better place to keep—!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold up! You can’t keep it all for yourself!” Hiro interrupted, becoming a bit nervous as everyone began glaring at him. “W-What I mean is…should we, like, split it all up amongst ourselves? Ya know…to keep it fair and all that?”

As if expecting that retort, the white haired and burning eyed Taka replied, “As the Disciplinary Committee Chairman, I am the only person who is capable of resisting the corruption this motive might bring to you all! And until we can decide what needs to be done with it, this is the only viable option!”

Without warning Taka grabbed a nearby duffle bag and began scooping the stacks of bills into it.

“I can’t believe I’m gonna say this but…I have to agree with Hiro,” Junko surprisingly voiced,
turning more than a few heads. “Now, I don’t agree with the whole splitting it up amongst us thing, but I do think that we shouldn’t just let one student hold on to—”.

“Junko Enoshima! I would appreciate it if you would not insult me like that!” the Moral Compass shouted at her.

“Oh, I’m sorry. How would you like me to insult you then?” the Fashionista chided, a confident smirk on her lips.

Stopping for a moment, obviously to help control his anger, Taka didn’t immediately respond. However, an instant later, he turned and glared directly at her and said, “You have questioned my position as the Disciplinary Committee Chairman on multiple occasions, but this is the final straw! I will not take any more insolence from you!”

Hearing that, Junko’s smirk widened as she shouted back, “Oh yeah! And what are you going to do then, huh?!”

Narrowing his eyes at her, Taka finished packing all of the money into the large duffle bag, calmly walked down off of the stage and approached the confident Fashionista. As he stood in front of her, the white sheen on his hair shimmering and the fire in his eyes blazing, he slowly set down the duffle bag and reached into his pocket.

Immediately, Junko tensed, as if she was expecting him to attack her. However, much to everyone’s relief, Taka simply pulled out his large blue pad of paper and quickly wrote something on it. Tearing off the piece of paper and handing it to her, the Fashionista snatched it from him, her eyes widening as she read it over.

“What the…heck…is this?” she questioned, her voice deep and menacing.

Without a hint of remorse, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru replied, “Normally, that is a notice for expulsion. And while I cannot have you expelled from school, due to our current circumstances, I certainly believe that confining you to your room should suffice—”.

“Y-You can’t do that!” the horrified voice of Makoto called out as he rushed over. “Junko was just trying to—!”

“What she was doing was being disruptive!” the Moral Compass countered, not backing down from his decision. “If she cannot control herself, then I have no choice but to restrict her actions! I will not have an insolent student running around disrupting the peace of our community!”

It took a moment for Makoto to register everything Taka had said to him, but as he digested it, the normally non-confrontational boy clenched his fists angrily.

“But that’s—!” he tried to say but was instantly cut off.

“Makoto…it’s fine,”

Junko’s calm voice took Makoto by surprise, as did the determined visage she held. An entirely perplexed expression overtook the lucky student’s features as he stared at the Fashionista. Unfortunately, he was so shocked that he couldn’t find the words to refute her.

Taking advantage of his silence, Junko turned her gaze toward Taka and said, “I don’t want to cause any more trouble. I’ll do what you want, Mr. Ishimaru.”

Seemingly pleased with her compliance, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman put away his blue
pad and met her firm gaze. He stared at her for a long moment before giving a slight huff.

“Thank you for complying. I will be lenient and allow you to leave your room twice a day. Once for the morning meeting and another for an evening meal. That will be your punishment for inspiring distrust toward your Disciplinary Committee Chairman,” Taka told her, picking up the duffle bag and moving past her, toward the gym’s exit. Just before he left, however, he glanced over his shoulder and said, “Let that serve as a lesson to the rest of you! I will not tolerate insubordination! Good day!”

And with that, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman departed, leaving them all more than a bit shell shocked.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Now that was quite a shock, wasn’t it? What will Mukuro do now that she’s been confined to her room? How are the other students going to react to this new form of punishment? Are they ever going to find Alter Ego?! The answers to all this and more will be given in the next chapter!

Quite note: we all know the DR 3 anime is running right now. Please avoid putting spoilers in your reviews/comments as much as possible. Thank you!

As always, I appreciate all the reviews/comments you all give! If you have questions, concerns, idea, gripes, or general notions, please leave me message and I’ll be sure to get back to you! Until next time, thank you so much for reading my story and keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Ch 3 Act 9

Chapter Summary

The student's discuss how best to deal with Taka. Hina accidentally causing Mondo to panic. Later, a certain AI program is finally discovered...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A heavy silence hung around the students following Taka’s departure. So much had happened in only a few minutes and no one was more shocked than Mukuro.

She had known that Taka was getting more and more delusional as the days went on, it was the reason she had tried to convince everyone that they needed to help him instead of plotting how to overthrow him. However, she never imagined he’d take his duties in this direction. She shouldn’t have been surprised that he’d eventually resort to this sort of punishment. After all, forcing someone to remain in their room was actually a good way to keep them and everyone else safe.

At the same time, however, this also presented a lot of problems for Mukuro.

With his increasingly erratic behavior, it was only a matter of time before Taka stepped over the line and unintentionally provoked someone to attempt murder, particularly on him. And now that she would be forced to stay in her room, there was no way she’d be able to prevent one of her classmates from committing that fatal sin!

Not only that, the new motive her sister had left for them sent up all kinds of red flags. She had actually been in favor of letting Taka burn the money, even knowing that it could potentially cause Taka to become a target of some of their greedier classmates. Fortunately, some of her classmates, such as Byakuya, were not tempted by money. For that, Mukuro felt very lucky, because while she was a capable fighter, she was no match for the Togami Heir’s cunning if he did try his hand at playing Monokuma’s game. No, this time around, the real threat would come from the students who had the most need for that money.

In particular, Mukuro knew that Celeste could absolutely not be trusted with this motive in play. The soldier honestly didn’t know much about her personally, but while they had been in school together, Celestia Ludenberg had proven that she would step over absolutely anyone to get what she wanted. And, unfortunately for her, no matter how perfect her mask was, Mukuro could see the glint of greed sparkling deep within her crimson irises.

In addition, Celeste had been acting strange for the last few days. She’d completely given up on insulting or teasing almost all of their classmates and had focused solely on proving that Taka was the mole that Byakuya was so fond of mentioning. Not that Mukuro believed there was a mole to begin with. After all, she had been that mole, but now that she’d switched sides, she knew that Junko had no one in her pocket to manipulate events. In either case, she couldn’t figure out what Celeste was up to…which bothered her all the more.

“I was the one who predicted that she’d be the first to commit murder…I hope that I’m wrong.”
Before Taka had sentenced her to isolation in her own room, she’d been planning on trying to talk with Celeste, possibly follow her around if she did anything suspicious. But now, she had no way to prevent whatever the gambler might be planning. And while she couldn’t be absolutely sure that she was plotting anything…her soldier’s instincts told her to be on guard around the gambler for the time being.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t much she could do, as Taka had unwittingly decreased all of their chances for survival because of his absent-minded obsession with maintaining order! However…Mukuro knew that he wasn’t completely at fault for what had happened…

“Good job, Mukuro…” the soldier mentally scolded herself her hands clenched into fists. “All I had to do was keep my mouth shut…but nooooo! I had to go and insult the power mad, order obsessed, Rule-Nazi! And for what? Just because he gave me an entire purse full of pink slips doesn’t mean I should have antagonized him!!”

“…the fuck are we supposed to do now?” the voice of a certain baseball star caught her, and everyone else’s, attention. They all turned to see Leon, standing dejectedly next to Sayaka with his head slumped forward. “I hate to say it but…Taka’s going off the deep end, fast. We should…probably think about tying him up or something—”.

“No!” Mukuro instinctively found herself saying, unintentionally drawing all eyes to her. Stumbling a bit under their gazes, she continued, “W-We don’t know what Monokuma will do if we jump him or something. Yeah, it sucks to be me right now but, I think I’d better just do as he says and—”.

“But it’s not fair!” Sayaka interrupted, her voice low and menacing. “You didn’t do anything wrong! You shouldn’t be punished because he’s being a fucking asshole!”

There was a slight gasp as she openly swore, and very loudly at that. The pop idol took all of two seconds to glance around the room before raising an eyebrow at her classmates.

“What?” she said to everyone, not the least bit embarrassed. “When I’m pissed off, I can swear too!”

Mukuro fought off a smirk that threatened to break through, a little bit impressed with Sayaka’s deviation from her usual attitude. She’d been fairly soft spoken for quite a while now, and although it was kind of shocking to hear such coarse language from her, it felt more natural somehow…like when they all were back at school and Sayaka would lose her temper when one of them did something dangerous and/or stupid.

Mukuro guessed that it was Leon’s influence that had awakened that part of her personality but she was forced keep that to herself. After all, now wasn’t the time to be speculating just how much of their subconscious memories had or would ever return.

As if on cue, a stern scoff interrupted the silence.

“Hmph, foul language aside, I agree that something must be done,” Byakuya told everyone, much to their chagrin. “Our task now will be to decide how to best dispose of Kiyotaka before he—”.

“‘Dispose’?! What do you mean ‘dispose’?!” Hina abruptly cut him off, a horrified yet angry expression on her face.

“It is a common term used to describe means of removing obstacles from one’s path,” the Togami Heir answered, not even looking her way. However, before he continued, he glared at her out of the corner of his eye and finished, “Perhaps you need to update your vocabulary—”.

“That’s it! I’ve had enough of your bullshit!” Leon shouted over him, his fists clenched and
seemingly ready to charge at him. “You keep talking down to us like you’re better than the rest of —!”

“That’s because I am,” Byakuya harshly countered, a confident smirk on his lips. “I am destined for greatness that your plebian mind can’t even comprehend. And besides, what’s wrong with suggesting those lower than myself pursue higher education? Inconsequential fools such as yourself should be grateful that I’m even bothering to assist in disposing of traitors—”.

“Oh yeah! Well how do we know that you’re not actually the traitor!” the baseball star fired back, making Byakuya raise an eyebrow. “You keep talking about how there must be a traitor! You’re probably just trying to get everyone to believe that it’s someone else when you’re the one working for Monokuma!”

“Absurd,” the Togami Heir said with a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose under his glasses. “For starters—”.

“T-That’s right!” Toko interjected, pointing furiously at Leon. “There’s no way someone as…d-devilishly handsome and in-incredibly reliable as Master would e-ever stoop to being a l-lapdog for the Mastermind!”

Glaring at her for interrupting him, Byakuya seethed, “Enough of your prattle. If I desired your input, I would have said so. Now, until I give you leave, be silent.”

“Eeep! Yes, Mast—” the writer said quietly before slapping her hand in front of her face to stop herself, dutifully following his commands.

Turning his attention back to the baseball star, Byakuya cleared his throat before continuing, “As I was saying, if I was the traitor, I would not have drawn attention or put the idea into your minds. Besides, if we’re going to accuse anyone of being suspicious, it would be Junko.”

Hearing that, Mukuro felt her heart skip a beat but she knew better than to show any surprise. Instead, she narrowed her gaze at the Togami Heir and seethed, “What was that?”

“You heard me. Ever since your miraculous rescue during the first trial, you have acted very suspiciously,” Byakuya pointed out for everyone, glaring at Mukuro accusatorily before huffing and focusing his gaze on his classmates. “Before that incident, Junko’s personality was incredibly different than what it is now. Don’t any of you find that disturbing?”

Before Mukuro had a chance to respond to his accusation, Sayaka abruptly interrupted, “And I suppose that nearly getting killed by Monokuma wouldn’t change your attitude?”

Mukuro turned and almost gasped as she saw the menacing glare that the pop idol was giving Byakuya. She’d never seen Sayaka sport such a terrifying visage, not even during their time in school together. Seeing her act openly aggressive like this…it no longer surprised Mukuro that the pop idol had once been close to murdering her classmates. And while a part of the soldier felt grateful that her classmate was so quick to come to her defense, she also knew that arguing was only going to exacerbate the situation.

“Great, we’re already getting at each other’s throats! The reason I went along with Taka’s demand was to avoid confrontation. We can’t afford to start turning on each other now! It’s exactly what my sister wants!”

Just then, as if trying to ease her worries, Makoto stepped up and said, “C’mon guys, now isn’t the time for all this. We should focus on doing what we can—”.
“Ah yes, ‘do what we can’. ” Byakuya’s mocking tone returned, immediately intensifying the tension. “That’s practically become Junko’s catchphrase, hasn’t it? Right alongside your ‘You’ve got that wrong’, Makoto.”

“W-What?! I…I don’t say that all the time…do I?” Makoto asked, glancing around at everyone, to which they could only nod or murmur a ‘yes’.

“My point is,” Byakuya continued, his harsh criticism earning several glares. “Junko has been slowly worming her way into all of your minds. Her actions are not unlike those used by a certain Nazi-Germany interrogator, Hanns-Joachim Gottlob Scharff. This interrogator would use kindness to get secrets from his prisoners, often giving them food or comfort when they needed it most. He would become their friend and ally, then they would voluntarily give him information. Is that not eerily similar to how Junko has been portraying herself ever since her brush with death?”

Mukuro did her best to keep her temper in check as Byakuya flexed his intellectual muscles for everyone. A part of her actually felt a bit proud to being compared to such a famous interrogator, but a larger part of her was insulted by the Togami Heir’s insinuation. However, she was even more frustrated by the fact that she was inadvertently standing out, despite knowing how important it was to keep a low profile. And if Byakuya had noticed her odd behavior…then so had someone who actually had the means to uncover her identity.

As surreptitiously as she could, Mukuro glanced over her shoulder at Kyoko, who had elected to remain silent all this time, which made the soldier all the more nervous.

“Shut the fuck up!!” Leon suddenly screamed, stomping his foot at the same time, as if preparing to rush Byakuya. Fortunately, Makoto quickly grabbed onto him, his grip just barely stopping the ballplayer from charging the Togami Heir. However, it wasn’t enough to keep Leon from continuing to run his mouth. “Junko’s been ten times more useful than you this entire time! You have no idea what it’s like…almost being killed…having to live with…your own guilt…you have no idea what that feels like!”

Almost subconsciously, Leon patted his stomach where those few baseballs had struck him. At the same time, Sayaka also felt her hand trace the length of the scar on her abdomen. Even Mukuro couldn’t stop herself from glancing down at her scarred right hand…the ugly gash almost healed but still visibly disturbing.

“Besides, we don’t need someone as twisted as you helping us anyway!” Leon insisted, growing angry once more. “After what you did to Chihiro, I’d say we’re better off without you, ya bastard!!”

Surprisingly, Byakuya’s smirk was replaced by a menacing scowl and a low growl escaped his throat.

“Well, isn’t that the pot calling the kettle the whore,” the Togami Heir snidely responded, scoffing down at both Leon and Sayaka specifically. “I don’t know why you bother comforting each other. Your actions have already doomed yourselves.”

Narrowing her gaze, Sayaka took an angry step toward Byakuya and said, “And what exactly do you mean by that?”

A malicious grin spread over Byakuya’s face as he replied, “Even some of your most dedicated fans will abandon you once they learn that their idol is an attempted murderer. After all, who wants to have a girl with bloodstained hands sing a joyful pop tune?”

Sayaka flinched at his words, tears brimming in the corners of her eyes. Seeing that, Mukuro felt her
anger rising. It was the first time anyone had put words to the pop idol’s worst fears, a truth that no one could help ease. But to ruthlessly throw that in her face... it was beyond forgivable. It took all of Mukuro’s mental fortitude to keep from breaking both of Byakuya’s legs.

Not giving them time to respond, Byakuya glanced at Leon and continued, “Not to mention that no one in their right mind would sign you to anything more than a janitor’s position, and that’s without your attempted murder record.”

Leon gritted his teeth so hard he felt they might crack and struggled to get free of Makoto’s grip. However, the lucky student fervently held on, not wanting his friend to endanger himself. Seeing that his words finally had the desired effect, the smug Togami Heir added one final nail to the coffin.

“Even if you both survive this game; I assure you that your actions will be made public. And even if you’re not punished by the law, the damage will be irreversible. In fact, I will personally ensure that neither of you will ever be able to show your faces in public again—”.

“You son of a bitch!!” Leon shouted, finally breaking away from Makoto’s grasp and charging Byakuya.

Time seemed to slow down as Mukuro watched the scene unfold, powerless to do anything to stop it. True, she could easily dash over, intercept Leon and smash in some of Byakuya’s perfect teeth for good measure, with the allegations lodged against her fresh in everyone’s mind, she knew it would lead to her identity being discovered. And while she didn’t know if her sister would act right away, considering that Monokuma was MIA at the moment, she knew that if she intervened, her life would be lost...

Grimacing at her own powerlessness, the Ultimate Soldier was consumed with self-loathing as she was forced to watch as all her efforts to keep everyone united fell apart right in front of her.

…It was then that a miracle stepped up to answer her silent prayers for assistance.

Leon charged directly at Byakuya, who smirked fiendishly as the ballplayer approached.

However, before Leon could get close enough to attempt anything, a large figure intercepted, speeding in front of him and holding him back with one massive hand. Shocked, both of the men stopped and stared upward to find Sakura Ogami glaring angrily down at both of them, her eyes wild and furious.

“Stop it! Both of you!” the Ultimate Martial Artist demanded, her deep voice resonating through the entire gymnasium. Gently pushing Leon back, so that he didn’t stumble, Sakura looked between the two of them and said, “This isn’t the time for petty infighting. If you wish to continue this recklessness... you will have to go through me.”

Inadvertently, Leon and Byakuya flinched, knowing all too well how impossible of a feat that was.

“Well? Do you wish to continue?” Sakura asked, assuming a defensive stance.

As her voiced echoed all around them, a sense of calm slowly befell the group. Somehow, her words reached both Byakuya and Leon, who, although quickly glaring at each other, seemed to desist. Once it seemed that neither of them had any intention of provoking the other, Sakura relaxed her posture and stood up straight.
“Good,” she said calmly, trying to ease the tension. “Now, let us get back to our previous discussion. I believe that our primary concern should be figuring out what needs to be done about Monokuma’s motive.”

“I agree. We need to come to a decision on how to properly avert this motive,” Celeste concurred, finally speaking up after being silent throughout the previous exchange. “As I said before, I do not believe it is wise to destroy the motive. We would not want to incur Monokuma’s wrath due to our carelessness.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Kyoko begrudgingly agreed, also only now voicing her opinion. “However, as long as Taka remains in his position of power, it will make discussion of this matter difficult.”

A mocking scoff reached everyone’s ears and they turned to see Byakuya folding his arms and scowling at them.

“This is why I initiated the conversation about how we should go about neutralizing him,” the Affluent Progeny insisted, changing his wording from before. Whether or not he refrained from using the word ‘dispose’ due to their previous argument was unknown.

Barely acknowledging him, Kyoko nodded before saying, “We’ve found ourselves in a precarious situation but one that cannot be resolved quickly…”

The whole group fell silent as they all pondered the situation. In a way, it was obvious what needed to be done, but at the same time, it wasn’t. Taka needed to be removed from his position but there was no way to do that without potentially provoking Monokuma and causing another bullying trial. Not to mention that tensions were already sky high and the fact that distrust was quickly sowing between them only amplified how hopeless the situation was becoming.

“This whole situation’s all kinds of screwed up…for serious,” Hiro commented, further adding to the dismal atmosphere.

“Indeed,” Hifumi concurred, his shoulders slumping in depression. “It’s even stranger than the time Pudgy Princess Piggles was turned into a sea slug and forced to fight an army of crustaceans.”

“Yeah…” Hina said, almost absent-mindedly. “It’s even weirder than the time I saw Chihiro’s severed head in the changing room…”

All at once, everyone snapped their heads toward the swimmer, shocked expressions on all of their faces. It took Hina a moment to realize that everyone was staring at her, but when she did, she blinked rapidly in surprise.

“…What?”

“What the hell do you mean you saw Chihiro’s head in the changing room?!” Mondo shouted at Hina as he and everyone else gathered outside the nurse’s office.

“That’s why we’re here,” Makoto told him, trying to calm him down. “We wanted to make sure she was okay.”

“Of course she’s—”, Mondo began but quickly silenced himself, a worried look overtaking his features. Spinning around, he dashed into the nurse’s office. A moment later, the sounds of sheets ruffling was heard, along with a heavily relieved sigh. Loud footsteps preceded Mondo’s return as he
dashed back out of the office with a thumbs up. “Yup! She’s fine! Her body’s still there and everything!”

“That is a relief,” Celeste said aloud before turning toward Hina. “Now then, the question is, what is it that you saw in the changing room if it wasn’t, in fact, Chihiro’s head?”

A bit embarrassed to have caused such a scene, Hina dropped her gaze to the floor and said, “I-I don’t know... I mean, it happened on the night when I was attacked by that masked weirdo and—”.

“And you didn’t think about sharing that information earlier?” Byakuya harshly commented, looking at her with utter disapproval.

Snapping her head up, the swimmer glared at him and replied, “O-Of course I did! But... I figured it was just a hallucination brought about by hunger!”

“In either case,” Kyoko jumped in before another argument could break out. “We need to verify if what you saw was really a hallucination or not.”

“Huh...? Really?” Hina responded, more than a bit confused. “I mean; we already know that Chihiro’s alright. What else could it have possibly been?”

“We won’t know until we go and see for ourselves,” Junko encouraged everyone, obviously ready to head out.

A murmur of agreement was shared by most of the students, with Byakuya remaining silent but obviously invested in seeing what it could have been. Just as the students began to depart, Mondo abruptly called out to them.

“Hey, I’m coming along too!” the biker’s ferocious voice stopped all of them in their tracks, and they all looked back at him. Walking toward them, pounding his fists together, Mondo cracked his neck as he said, “I won’t forgive anyone who tries to pull a freaky stunt like that with my friend’s head!”

A moment of silence followed before Makoto, with a dejected visage, took a step toward him and said, “Uh, no offense, but what about Chihiro?”

“What about Chihiro?” Mondo asked, utterly confused before it suddenly hit him. Face palming so hard it echoed down the hall, the biker cursed under his breath and said, “Dammit, I can’t believe I forgot about that!

Chuckling as she approached, Junko walked over to him and said, “How about this? I can stay out here and watch Chihiro. I did promise that I’d take over guard duty at some point right? Might as well be now. Besides, you’ve probably got cabin fever from being trapped in there for so long.”

Mondo’s cheeks unintentionally flushed as she chided him and he instinctively replied, “Yeah, something like that. Anyway, thanks. Take care of Chihiro for—”.

“I’m afraid that won’t do,” Byakuya interrupted, a menacing smirk on his lips. “Shouldn’t you be running on back to your room about now, Junko? I’d hate to imagine what kind of punishment would befall you if Taka were to see you out and about like this.”

Junko opened her mouth to retort but quickly shut it, gritting her teeth as the Togami Heir continued to grin at her. All the while, Mondo had a very perplexed look on his face, clearly feeling left out. Before he could inquire about it, however, a sickly sweet voice chimed in.

“I think it should be fine to allow her to investigate the changing room with us.” Everyone was
surprised to hear that from Celeste, who continued to smirk at all of them. “After all, no one said that she needed to return to her room right away, now did they?”

The gambler directed the last question toward Byakuya, who scowled at her interference but replied, “I suppose that should be fine. After all, it’s not as though I’m the one making the rules.”

Again, the overwhelming tension began to engulf everyone. However, just before it began to peak, Makoto stepped forward and said, “Okay, so we need someone else to watch over Chihiro for Mondo then…”

“Then why don’t Leon and I watch over Chihiro,” Sayaka proposed, giving the ballplayer a pat on the back. “We can go and check out the bathhouse later, if it turns out to be something special, that is.”

“That’s cool with me,” Leon agreed before smiling at Mondo. “We got this, bro! You go and see what’s up for me!”

At first, Mondo was a bit shocked by their selflessness but he quickly snapped out of it and nodded firmly to them. Whether their resolve had inspired him, or he was simply pleased that everything had worked out, no one could say…not that it particularly mattered regardless.

“Thanks, guys. I owe ya one!”

Leon and Sayaka smiled back and nodded, already moving past him to stand just outside the nurse’s office. Once they were there, and the remainder of the class started heading for the bathhouse changing room, Mondo turned to Junko and said, “So, why the hell do you have to go back to your room?”

With a heavy sigh, Junko readjusted the large purse on her shoulder before answering, “Long story…let’s just say that I’m not carrying this bulky purse around just as a fashion statement.”

...Analyzing Data...63%
...Analyzing Data...63%
...Analyzing Data...63%
...Analyzing Data...63%
...Analyzing Data...63%
...Analyzing Data...64%
...Motion Detected......Scanning...
...Multiple Lifeforms Detected...
...External Camera Operational...Performing Facial Scan...

...Zero Percent Recognition...

...Referencing........................Referencing Complete...

...Classmates of Master Chihiro Fujisaki Recognized...

...Analyzing..............................Analysis complete...

...

...

Kyoko Kirigiri: Highly intelligent. Mysterious. Master finds her cold personality unnerving but essential for their situation.


Byakuya Togami: Jerk. Hateful. Master finds his attitude unappealing and wishes for “a bus to run him over twice”. Reference ‘bastard’ for more information.

Aoi Asahina AKA “Hina”: Joyful. Attractive. Master finds her chest area very appealing and expressed a desire to ‘motorboat’.

Sakura Ogami: Stout. Powerful. Master describes her as “a force to be reckoned with.” Reference ‘ogre’ for more information.

Toko Fukawa: Quiet. Foul-smelling. Master finds her to be disturbing due to foul odor and an obsession with Byakuya Togami.

Celestia Ludenberg: Japanese. Two-Faced. Master is very wary of her but admits to admiring her ability to hide her true nature.

Hifumi Yamada: Otaku. Pervert. Master finds his level of ‘otaku’ knowledge impressive. Once described as a ‘vast wealth of knowledge on subjects far too complex” for Master to understand. **Possibility of usefulness for Master’s secondary objective: Information Gathering**

Yasuhiro Hagakure AKA “Hiro”: Lazy. Unintelligent. Master has no references beyond these initial descriptions.

Junko Enoshima: Beautiful. Motherly. Master describes her as “a beautiful angel that does her best to keep us together”. **Master had once spoken her name very loudly while observing her image on a ‘fashion magazine’**

Mondo Owada: Strong. Dependable. Master speaks of Mondo Owada the most often. Master finds his strength and determination to be “the coolest”. Master has expressed numerous wishes to be more like Mondo Owada. **Master last departed to speak with Mondo Owada in private**

...

...

...Confirmation Of External User Input Detected...

...User Accessing ‘Alter Ego’ Application...
Everyone in the room gasped as the computer, bearing Chihiro’s likeness, introduced itself as the programmer herself! It had been shocking enough to find what they had initially thought to be a broken laptop sitting in one of the small lockers, but the fact that it turned on and displayed their friend’s face was even more perplexing! Stunned into silence, none of the students could muster the will to speak.

Of all of them, however, Kyoko was the only one who seemed to understand the significance of this discover.

“An AI program running on the school’s laptop…could there be files left behind on it? I doubt the Mastermind would leave such a valuable piece of information just sitting in the library, regardless of the fact that it appeared to be non-functional. If we can use this to access the internet…we may be able to send for help.”

A part of her doubted that was possible, since the Mastermind appeared to be rather thorough. At the same time, the Mastermind had proven that even they made mistakes, such as being unable to tell that Sayaka had actually survived her near-fatal wound. However, Kyoko couldn’t help the nagging feeling that if the Mastermind left the computer out in the open, then it probably didn’t contain any information that would help ease their plight.

As Kyoko continuously tried to wrap her head around the Mastermind’s possible error in judgment, her lavender eyes scanned the room, passing over each of her classmates.

As expected, Makoto was utterly shocked but held a hopeful glint in his eyes, a sight that made a tiny smile tug at Kyoko’s lips. Byakuya, though normally composed, held a faint expression of shock on his face, obviously having disbelieved Hina’s earlier claims. The swimmer herself held her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with surprise. Next to her, Sakura also stared bewildered at the laptop, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. Far in the back, Toko nervously fidgeted, probably feeling more than a little confused. Not too far from her, Hiro scratched his head with his mouth hung open, the very picture of dumbfounded.

Of all of them, though, Mondo was certainly the one who looked the most dejected. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the screen, the image of Chihiro practically burning into his retinas. Not to mention how he’d twitched when he heard her voice. Kyoko could only imagine how torturous it
must have been for him, having to see the smiling face of the person he’d had yet to apologize to. And yet, she could see in his eyes that a part of him was relieved, even if it was only there for a moment.

Everyone appeared to be having the same reaction, more or less…except for two individuals.

Hifumi stared at the laptop, his eyes sparkling with a twinkle shimmering behind his gaze. He had begun sweating profusely, pulling on his collar and swallowing a lump in his throat. It was almost as if he was…nervous, which was odd because he’d been nothing but unabashedly confident the entire time they had known him. And his expression, the way he longingly gazed at the laptop…it put Kyoko on edge.

However, that was nothing compared to the stoic gaze Celeste focused on the computer. And while, by comparison, it shouldn’t have been as disturbing as Hifumi’s obvious interest, Kyoko couldn’t shake the feeling that something more was hidden behind the gambler’s perfect mask. In fact, the way she barely reacted at all was perturbing, considering her odd behavior of late. It was as if she was intentionally keeping that stoic visage in place, in an effort to hide something…exactly what she was hiding, Kyoko could only speculate.

“Whoa…what the hell is this?” a voice from just behind Kyoko suddenly startled her, though she showed no hint of it.

The amnesiac girl glanced behind her to see Junko peering over her shoulder, a look of true and complete confusion marring her features for the first time since the game began. Honestly, it was kind of refreshing to see the Fashionista thrown off her game, since it happened so rarely. To that point, ever since she’d survived being skewered with spears, she’d taken a lead in trying to assist and encourage everyone. And while Kyoko didn’t object to that…the fact that Junko never seemed truly surprised about anything had stuck out…as if she was privy to information that none of the rest of them were. But now, seeing her completely in shock at finding the laptop, a part of Kyoko felt at ease. It meant that Junko didn’t know everything and that she was just as much in the dark as they were about its existence, which was and wasn’t a good thing.

Even so, that didn’t excuse all of Junko’s other odd behaviors, such as the way she talked to herself while in the cafeteria a few days ago. Kyoko hadn’t meant to eavesdrop but she couldn’t deny that it had happened…and it only increased her suspicions as to what the Fashionista’s true agenda could be.

“She’s definitely hiding something,” Kyoko mentally noted, averting her gaze to keep from looking suspicious. “Whether whatever it is has to do without situation or not…I can’t say right now.”

Tearing her thoughts away from suspecting her classmates for a moment, the amnesiac girl refocused her vision on the laptop that held Chihiro’s visage. Her mind was already processing guesses as to its purpose but at the very least, one thing was abundantly clear.

“Either way…things are about to get a lot more complicated…”

After a few more moments of silence, the computer spoke again, “Eheh…I always get embarrassed during introductions.”

As the voice from the computer interrupted the silence, the shock that had paralyzed the students suddenly came undone.
“T-That voice…the tone and everything…!” Makoto blurted, his mouth trying to catch up with his brain. “It’s…It’s Chihiro!”

“Indeed, that does seem to be the case,” Sakura concurred, glancing at the laptop with an inquisitive gaze. “But still…it is obviously not Chihiro.”

“Alter Ego…that was the program’s name,” Kyoko pondered aloud, a gloved hand resting on her chin. “With Chihiro’s skills as a programmer, it’s not inconceivable that she would be able to recreate the program that earned her the title of Ultimate Programmer. She most likely used a support vector machine and reinforced learning software to develop it…”

As her analysis of the laptop concluded, the amnesiac girl turned to see a number of her classmates, including Makoto and Hiro, perplexed by her explanation. And although she felt a tiny bit frustrated that they couldn’t grasp how vital of a find this was, she supposed that it couldn’t be helped. After all, not even she could remember exactly where she learned all of that information…

“Uh…English please?” Hiro abruptly asked, utterly confused by the large terminology Kyoko was using.

With an annoyed sigh, Kyoko answered, “To put it simply, it’s an AI program that can learn and gain experience through repeating tasks and gathering information. The personality of the AI is often based on whomever created it.”

“And that is why it is called ‘Alter Ego’, correct?” Celeste suggested, seemingly fascinated by the device. “Like most creatures, the program can create memories, process ‘thoughts’ and evolve over time. The process isn’t much different from how humans grow and learn. If one were to create their own AI and have it learn at the same rate as oneself, then it truly would be an ‘Alter Ego’, would it not?”

Nodding to her, Kyoko finished, “A perfect duplicate of yourself that will never age and will continue to grow forever. That is what Chihiro has created…”

A heavy silence fell upon the room as they all processed exactly what they had stumbled across. And while the explanation went over some of the student’s heads, they at least understood that it was a computer program that Chihiro expertly designed, and that was enough for now.

“Oh crap, that’s right!” Mondo loudly proclaimed, disrupting the silence while slapping a hand to his forehead. “I completely forgot about this thing!”

At once, everyone shot their gazes over to the biker, making him feel more than a bit anxious.

“Mondo…you knew this was here?” Makoto carefully asked, just as shocked as everyone else.

“Huh? Oh yeah…” the biker answered, sadly recalling the time he’d met Chihiro here…just before the incident. “I saw Chihiro leave it in here…when she asked to talk to me about…herself.”

As he explained, a silence fell over the group. Even though it had been a few days, the wounds from the second trial were still healing. Not to mention that, with Taka’s newfound position making their lives hell, there hadn’t been much time to recover.

“You mean to say you actually knew of this thing’s existence beforehand and didn’t bother to inform the rest of us?” Byakuya said, inserting himself into the conversation. As his harsh words reached Mondo, the biker sent him an ugly glare.

“Just what the hell are you getting at?” Mondo sneered, his voice an obvious warning.
However, Byakuya paid the threat no mind, staring down the biker with absolutely no fear. “I’m just curious what else you might be keeping from us? Secrets do appear to be your forte—”.

“You little bitch—!” Mondo shouted, gritting his teeth at the Togami Heir.

“That is enough.” Both men froze as Sakura’s powerful voice called out to them, her eyes flashing a silent warning. “Right now, we need to find out what this laptop is used for. And possibly, how it relates to both Chihiro and our situation.”

Taking a moment to send one last glare Mondo’s way, Byakuya scoffed and turned his back to the biker. Walking toward the laptop, the Affluent Progeny said, “I suppose you have a point. Let’s see if this thing can be of any use to us, shall we?”

Just before he could stand in front of it, ready to discover its secrets, Kyoko unexpectedly stepped in front of him, her back to his face. Abruptly halting, and a bit surprised, the Togami Heir scowled deeply as she put herself in front of the screen, leaving him unable to even see properly.

“Agreed,” Kyoko backhandedly concurred with him, her gloved finger already resting on the keyboard. “Let us see what we can discover.”

Instantly, her fingers began typing and although Byakuya grunted angrily, he said nothing as she typed her first message to the computer entity. The words were instantly displayed in the text box just below Alter Ego’s head.

**[What are you?]**

As if taking a moment to think, Alter Ego smiled and said, “I’m an AI program created by Master Chihiro Fujisaki.”

The instant the word ‘Master’ was spoken, Hifumi seemed to flinch and couldn’t stop himself from saying, “Oh…all of this ‘Master’ talk…yes, yes…it makes me feel…”

Kyoko shot him a quick glare, which he instantly noticed and coughed to hide his intentions. Slowly averting her gaze from him, the amnesiac girl typed her next message.

**[How much do you know about our situation?]**

Pausing for a moment, as if reading her message, Alter Ego quickly replied, “Master gave me a general idea of what’s happening. It’s seems that you’re all really fortunate that no one had died yet.”

“You can say that again,” Junko said with a sigh, glancing at her scarred palm as Kyoko rhythmically typed her next question.

**[Why are you here?]**

‘Seeing’ the next message, Alter Ego’s face became slightly serious as she answered, “Master brought me here, to keep my existence hidden from the Mastermind. I’m currently analyzing the information kept on this computer’s hard drive. Master believes that the files may contain information about Hope’s Peak Academy, due to the fact that the protection on them is surprisingly strong. Perhaps they may even hold…the secret of this school.”

A gasp was shared by all the students before faint looks of hope began to spread over their faces. Before anyone had time to think, Kyoko furiously typed a message to Alter Ego once again.

**[How long will it take for you to unlock the files?]**
Looking over the message, Alter Ego answered, “I’m busy trying to decrypt them as we speak, but it’ll take a while for me to finish. But I promise that I’ll work as hard as I can to finish them soon!”

“Well, that’s good at least,” Junko said softly, a small sigh accompanying her. “As long as we’re patient, we should be able to get to the bottom of this pretty soon!”

“Indeed,” Celeste concurred with a smile. “It seems that Chihiro is still working to help us, despite her condition. We will have to thank her when she awakens.”

At the mention of Chihiro, Mondo sent a glare the gambler’s way but quickly averted his gaze, guilt from his actions still haunting him. Very quietly, he agreed, “Yeah…we will…”

Stepping up one last time, Kyoko typed her last message to the computer program.

[Keep it up but be careful not to be discovered by the Mastermind.]

Taking in that message, Alter Ego gave them all a cheerful smile before answering, “Don’t worry, I already have a secret plan for that! If someone I don’t know comes in here, my built-in camera will see them…and I’ll scream real loud!”

“Kind of a basic plan…” Makoto commented before smiling. “But it should work. We should be able to hear it from anywhere on the first floor, so as long as one of us stays on the first floor—”.

“Pardon me,” Celeste politely interrupted, trying not to cause a scene. “But what will we do about the night time? If we all abide by the night time rule, then none of us will be able to hear a scream at night.”

To that, everyone fell silent for a moment, trying to come up with a solution. A moment later, a deep sigh reached their ears, accompanied by a suggestion.

“How about this then. Since I can’t leave my room anyway, I’ll leave my door open all night, just in case.” Junko offered, her face completely serious. “After all, Taka never said I had to keep the door closed.”

“W-What?! No! That’s way too dangerous!” Makoto instantly objected, concern written all over his face. “What if something happens?! Like the Mastermind tries to attack you or something?!"

Furrowing her brows and folding her arms, Junko cocked a hip as she retorted, “Trust me, I can take care of myself. Did you already forget that I had to live on the streets for a while? I’ll be fine—”.

“Not good enough! There ain’t no way I’m gonna let you do that!” Mondo suddenly protested, earning a stern look from Junko. However, it had little effect on the biker as he continued, “I’ll watch over Alter Ego! There ain’t no need for you to put yourself in danger like that!”

Shaking her head, Junko replied, “That won’t work. You’ve gotta watch over Chihiro, remember?”

Again, Mondo felt a wave of stupidity wash over him as he face-palmed, groaning with embarrassment as he realized his mistake. Before he could muster up the courage to try and get her to desist, a stoic voice entered the fray.

“But why don’t I leave my door open as well?” Kyoko suggested, making Makoto’s eyes widen. “That way, if one of us is attacked the other will know about it. And we will both be able to hear if Alter Ego screams—”.}

“Not you too, Kyoko!” the lucky student protested, seemingly even more worried than when Junko
had offered, much to the Fashionista’s chagrin. “It’s too dangerous! I can’t let the two of you—.”

As if anticipating a long argument, Kyoko snapped her eyes over to Makoto and said, “It will be risky. We both know that. But I can guarantee you, neither of us will go down without a fight.”

Her words resonated around the room, seeping into everyone’s ears and sending chills down their spines. Kyoko had never been this assertive before, and now that she was, it was obvious that she had the willpower to back up her words. There was a strength unlike anything any of them had felt before. She was completely confident that both of them would be alright.

Not wanting to be outdone, Junko slapped her fist into her palm and concurred, “You said it, sister! I won’t let anyone take me by surprise! You guys just leave this to us!”

Just like Kyoko, the Fashionista radiated a power of her own, one that even Mondo didn’t feel he could challenge. At the same time, Junko’s strength was something entirely different from Kyoko’s. It was…natural. Almost primal even. As if she had been born on a battlefield and was ready to face the cruel hardships that came along with it. She was…almost like a hardened soldier…

Looking over to her and nodding, Kyoko looked back at her classmates as she replied, “We won’t let you all down. That I can promise you.”

“B-But…” Makoto tried to protest, only for his words to be stifled by the determined visages of Kyoko and Junko. Realizing that there was little he could do to change their minds, the lucky student hardened his features and said, “At least promise that you’ll wake us all up if something happens.”

“…I can agree to that,” Kyoko conceded, glancing to Junko for approval. “Is that alright with you?”

“No objections here,” Junko concurred, a confident smirk spreading over her lips. “Just leave guard duty to us!”

Makoto knew it was impossible to argue with them after such a display, opting to simply smile at them instead, which they both seemed to appreciate. The strength of their determination was almost overwhelming. Even Byakuya didn’t feel the need to protest their decision, although that may have been due to the fact that the risk involved amused him, but no one could say for sure. Feeling confident about this decision, everyone soon began to relax a bit.

That is, until Alter Ego decided to raise a concern of her own.

“Excuse me, but I have a question.” Everyone turned and looked at the computer as it spoke. “So, I haven’t seen Master for a while now. When you all got here, I assumed Master would be with you. Why is Master…not with you?”

All at once, the tension in the room returned, even more ferocious than before. The way Alter Ego had asked that question…there was a hint of desperation in her voice…as if she was afraid to hear the answer. Despite that, and knowing that it needed to be done, Kyoko didn’t hesitate for a second before typing out a response. Her answer was clear and concise.

[Chihiro is unconscious. Mondo attacked her.]

Everyone watched as the smile on Alter Ego’s face slowly fell and almost inexplicably…tears formed in the corners of Alter Ego’s virtual eyes.

“Oh…I see.” Alter Ego paused, as if taking time to consider a response. “I had feared that Master might have been killed. And while I’m happy Master is still alive…”
Alter Ego fell into silence, obviously contemplating how to act in this situation. However, before the AI program had much time to consult, Mondo abruptly approached. Gently pushing Kyoko out of the way, the biker crouched down to stare at the screen. The instant he did, Alter Ego looked up at him, shock encompassing the AI program’s face.

Mondo flinched a bit, gritting his teeth and nearly averting his gaze. However, he managed to keep himself there, refocusing his eyes on Chihiro’s avatar. Tears began to well up in the corners of Mondo’s eyes but he refused to look away, despite how much he wanted to run away. Tightly clenching his fists, the biker took in a shaky breath to try and calm himself…it didn’t work.

“I…I…I’m sorry, Chihiro!” the biker shouted at the screen. Even though he knew it wasn’t the real Chihiro, the fact that it had Chihiro’s face made him temporarily forget that. “I…I was such a dumbass! I…I hurt you…You came to me for help…and I hurt you! I don’t deserve your forgiveness…and I won’t ask for it! Just…just…just know that I’m sorry!”

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he bowed deeply to the screen, his deep sobs echoing all around the room. All the while, a very confused and teary eyed Alter Ego stared back at him.

After a few moments of enduring the biker’s sobs, Alter Ego slowly asked, “Why is…Mondo crying?”

Since the biker was in no shape to answer, Kyoko took it upon herself to slide her hands in front of him and type a response.

**[Mondo apologizes for attacking Chihiro.]**

The instant those words were recognized by Alter Ego, a bright and warm smile erupted onto her face.

“Don’t worry, Mondo! Master would never hate you! Master respects you more than anyone else!” As Alter Ego’s words reached him, Mondo’s gaze shot up and he stared, blurry-eyed, at the smiling AI on the screen. Seeing that he was listening, Alter Ego continued, “I don’t know what happened between you and Master, but I know that if you apologize, then Master will forgive you!”

Hearing that, Mondo took in a shaky gasp, struggling to breathe through his tears. “…You…you really…think…she can…forgive me…?” he asked, not understanding that the computer couldn’t hear him.

Despite that, however, Alter Ego smiled and finished, “I know that Master will forgive you! Master truly cares for all of you, especially you Mondo!”

As those words sank in, Mondo felt a part of him suddenly get lighter, as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. And although it didn’t come close to clearing his conscience completely, the undeniable relief he felt resonated through his entire body. Slowly, he was able to take a full breath and exhale deeply, feeling as though all his negative emotions were being forced out along with that breath. And for the first time since the incident with Chihiro…Mondo dared to have a little bit of hope that he might eventually be forgiven.

A sudden pat on the back forced Mondo to turn and see a smiling Junko standing next to him. “You gotta stay strong, alright. For Chihiro.”

Taking another moment to breathe, Mondo nodded fervently before furiously wiping the tears from his eyes. “Yeah…yeah…do what we can, right?” he replied, smiling back at her.

Her smile widening, Junko nodded back and said, “Hell yeah!”
A moment of peaceful quiet resonated in the small room, with only the ceiling fan making any noise. At least, until one of the students found that they couldn’t keep their excitement contained any longer.

“Aww, that was beautiful!” Hina commented, unable to stop herself from smiling and fist pumping. “Alright! All things considered, that’s the best news we’ve gotten in, like, forever!”

“Indeed. Well done, Hina.” Sakura said, placing a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “It was all thanks to you finding Alter Ego. You should be proud.”

“Yeah…seriously,” Mondo abruptly joined in, his face still red from tears but smiling nonetheless. “I owe ya one. Thanks a lot!”

Hina cheeks flushed as she heard the praise, nodding happily and saying, “Sure! No problem!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Byakuya abruptly commented, bringing the mood down. “We still have no idea if the information on that laptop will be of any use. Besides, we were likely to have come across it the next time we bathed anyway, considering the locker was open when we arrived.”

The Togami Heir’s borderline abusive comment stung Hina deeply and she practically flinched as he spat his words at her. However, she also furrowed her brows and scowled deeply at him, with Sakura showcasing an equally perturbed glare of her own. However, before either of them could retort, they received help from an unlikely ally.

“That is not necessarily true. In fact, Hina does indeed deserve praise for this accomplishment.”

Everyone was shocked when Celeste suddenly spoke up on the swimmer’s behalf, moving to stand next to Hina and Sakura. Staring down Byakuya without fear, the gambler smirked as she continued.

“If we had delayed for too much longer, the Mastermind may have discovered our newfound trump card, and we would still be at square one. Personally, I am feeling quite relieved now that we have found something that could potentially lead to discovering how we became entrapped here and possibly how we can escape. And it is all thanks to Hina. You should show a little more appreciation, rather than jealousy for not discovering it yourself.”

A slight gasp escaped Byakuya’s throat before he sneered, “How dare you…!”

Instead of replying, the gambler simply gave him one of her sickly sweet smiles, closing her eyes and turning away from him, as if ignoring his existence. Meanwhile, everyone, excluding Byakuya, held completely surprised expressions as Celeste came to Hina’s defense. Not only that, she effortlessly put Byakuya in his place, a feat that few of them had been able to accomplish.

“Wow…Celeste…that was really nice of you!” Hina proclaimed, happily smiling at the gambler. “I think I may have misjudged you. You’re not so bad after all!”

With a tiny laugh, Celeste nodded and said, “Why thank you, dear. And I meant every word. Besides, you are not so bad yourself.”

“All according to plan…” Celeste said to herself, smirking on the inside. “It’ll take a bit more time, but soon enough, I’ll convert them all over to my side. Byakuya’s an idiot if he thinks that constantly antagonizing everyone will win them over. His stubbornness will be his undoing.”
As the gambler effortlessly went along with her charade of being friendly with Hina, she knew that a few of the others were watching her like a hawk. Celeste wasn’t foolish enough to believe that everyone would fall for her ruse, particularly Kyoko, Byakuya, or Junko. However, if she had enough of the others believing in her, then perhaps it would be enough to enact her plan ahead of schedule…especially now that she had two new pawns to utilize.

“Hina will make an exceptional pawn for my strategy, as will Chihiro’s avatar. And if need be, I can sacrifice either one of them. All that remains now is to secure the services of my knight…the one who will strike down King Taka for me!”

As surreptitiously as she could manage, Celeste let her eyes linger on Hifumi, who was too busy staring at Alter Ego to even notice.

The Togami Heir had never been so insulted in all his life! First Mondo had dared to raise his voice to him, then Kyoko had upstaged him in communicating with Alter Ego, and now Celeste had denied him the right to show how foolish it was for them to become overconfident just because a talking laptop may have useful information!

Did they not realize that, in the event the information was useless, their newfound hopes would be dashed and therefore make it harder for him to utilize them? A ruler was only as effect when he had sufficient tools to work with, but it seemed that the plebeians he surrounded himself with had no intention of serving his grander goals.

However, he was graciously trying to show them the proper way to survive the game and they spurned him for it. In truth, he didn’t need them to be victorious in this game. He could win this little game all on his own. Once he was the last man standing, and the game was won, they would look at him from beyond the grave and wish they had listened.

“Fine then. If they want to let their foolishness lead them to an early grave, then I’ll let them.”

It took him a few moments, but Byakuya finally managed to calm down, adjusting his glasses as he returned to his usual smug visage.

“Unfortunately, for you, I must disagree,” Byakuya countered, gesturing up toward the corners of the room. “As you can see, there are no cameras in this room. The Mastermind is blind here. Therefore, it would not matter how long we waited. They would never have known of it regardless.”

“Except for the fact that there are still audio devices in the room, jackass!” Mukuro furiously thought to herself, knowing that she couldn’t speak up.

A part of her wanted to believe that she might be able to hint about the listening devices but knew that it would be too risky. She’d been standing out way too much lately and she didn’t need any more fuel added to the fire. Despite that, she hoped that some of her more capable classmates might suggest it.

Fortunately, for all of them, it seemed that one of her classmates had the same train of thought as she did.
“The Mastermind may not be able to see in here, but it’s still possible they may be able to hear our conversation,” Sakura informed them, taking everyone by surprise.

Byakuya, in particular, sent her a glare but she easily matched it, to which he averted his gaze. A half smile crept over the fighter’s lips at that sight, wanting to repay his disrespect toward her good friend Hina.

“That’s a good point,” Kyoko concurred, glancing around the room. “From now on, we should be careful with our words, in case our conversations are being monitored.”

“…I suppose that is the best course of action,” Byakuya was forced to admit, obviously still bitter about the whole affair. “However, I must ask that we refrain from speaking about this to the Disciplinary Committee Chairman. It will only exacerbate the situation.”

“On that, we are agreed,” Celeste said, a sad expression on her face. “The way he is acting now… we cannot be sure that he won’t take Alter Ego for himself.”

“…That’s definitely a possibility,” Kyoko concurred, although begrudgingly. “Very well then. For now, we’ll keep Alter Ego a secret between ourselves.”

“Would anyone mind if I showed Alter Ego to Leon and Sayaka later though? They are kind of missing all this,” Makoto asked, looking around for approval.

“That’s fine, just be sure that you’re not discovered,” Kyoko warned, to which Makoto happily nodded.

“Uh, hey guys…who’s this Disciplinary Commission guy anyway?” Mondo asked, having never heard the term before. “Is that what Monokuma calls himself now or something?”

A brief silence followed the question, causing Mondo to raise an eyebrow in confusion. Before he was left in the dark too long, however, Sakura chose to be the one to break the news to him.

“Actually, that would be…Kiyotaka,” the martial artist informed him, already predicting the fallout that answer would cause.

“What?! Hold on a sec! You want us to lie to Bro?!” Mondo shouted at Byakuya before the martial artist placed a hand on his shoulder, stopping him instantly.

“I know it’s cruel, but I’m afraid it cannot be helped,” Sakura told him calmly, trying to settle him down. “Besides, with our conversations possibly being listened to, it would be best to keep this information quiet.”

“B-But that’s no reason to keep this from Bro!” the biker tried to insist, only to be met with the saddened expressions of his classmates.

“As much as I hate to say it…they’ve got a point,” Junko spoke up, startling Mondo a bit. Before he could interject, the Fashionista continued, “Taka’s not exactly in the best state of mind right now… and we don’t want to make things harder…for him or for us…”

Still unable to accept this decision, Mondo growled under his breath and said, “T-That’s no reason to ___!”

Suddenly, the hand on his shoulder squeezed tight and the biker looked up to see that Sakura was
still there, holding him back. “I realize how painful this must be for you…but if we are to have any hope of escape…I’m afraid this is how it needs to be.”

Mondo paused for a moment but his eyes showed that he desperately wanted to object. However, in the end, he must have realized that there was nothing he could do.

“…Alright, fine…”

Taking her hand off his shoulder, Sakura secretly let out deep breath, a bit embarrassed that she had to be the one to express this concern. However, having dealt with the Mastermind personally, she knew just how crafty they could be. It was best to simply leave Taka out of the loop for the moment and hope for the best.

Unfortunately for Sakura, thinking about the Mastermind also brought about other depressing thoughts.

Her role as the mole hadn’t been utilized for the past few days, making Sakura believe that Monokuma was indeed leaving them to their own devices, at least for now. However, she couldn’t help but fear reprisal once the Mastermind ‘returned’. It had kept her up at night for the last few days, always expecting the bear to pop in and ask her to end a classmate’s life.

“Perhaps that is one of the Mastermind’s strategies,” she pondered silently to herself. “Once I let my guard down, the Mastermind might ask me to do the unforgivable! I must remain vigilant…for my friend’s sakes.”

All at once, crippling guilt overtook Sakura’s entire being. She had spent the last few days free of the Mastermind’s influence…and for a time, she’d forgotten that she was in the Mastermind’s employ. However, cruel reality had finally caught up with her, making her realize that her actions to protect her classmates would result in her family’s dojo being defiled…

“No…I mustn’t think about that! I need to focus…on keeping my friend’s safe!”

Despite her internal encouragement, deep within her mind, there was still a part of her that was unsure if she could control herself if Monokuma truly threatened her family’s sacred dojo.

“Oh, now I get it!” Hiro suddenly shouted, nodding fervently and making everyone turn to him in surprise. “So, basically Chihiro created this little guy to help us escape! And she left him in here so that the Mastermind wouldn’t find it! Wahoo! Props to you, Chihiro!”

All at once, everyone let out a deep sigh, realizing that Hiro had just now put everything together. As the clairvoyant let out a hearty laugh, a large hand suddenly gripped his shoulder. Immediately ceasing his laughter, Hiro turned to see none other than Hifumi glaring at him.

“Excuse me, but I believe you meant that Miss Fujisaki hid ‘her’ in here!” The fanfic creator’s words echoed in the small room, his voice surprisingly deeper and more masculine than usual. “Since Miss Fujisaki obviously prefers to be identified as female, then it’s only natural to think of her creation as female as well!”

Hiro, very unaccustomed to someone shouting in his face, reared back in shock as he stammered, “W-Well, I guess that makes sense—”.

“Indeed!” Hifumi shouted, pointing toward the laptop with a mischievous grin. “This wonderful
maiden is like a princess who has been trapped in a steam filled castle! But now, her hero has come to liberate her from the chains of oppression and shower her with all of my—“.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, man!” Hiro cut in, a shiver running down his spine at seeing how…passionate, Hifumi was acting. “I thought you were only into the 2D, man?”

Hifumi paused for a moment, but only long enough to place his hands on his hips and shout, “But of course my only interest is in the 2D! And she is the most EXCELLENT kind of 2D!”

“But…it’s just a computer program,” Hiro countered, feeling more and more uncomfortable having this conversation.

Adjusting his glasses with a wild smirk on his face, the fanfic creator answered, “Oh, I assure you, that aspect is no problem. I’m quite used to it actually…”

“TMI, man…TMI…” the clairvoyant shuddered as he replied, feeling the worst kind of goosebumps spreading all over his body.

“Grand delusions aside, we must decide what to do with it,” Byakuya intervened, tired of their irritating performance. “Since Chihiro left this machine behind, I propose that we—”.

“Wait just a fucking minute!” Mondo interrupted, his voice easily canceling out the Affluent Progeny’s demands. Being silenced, Byakuya was forced to turn his attention over to the biker, who had walked over and was now towering over him. “Chihiro didn’t ‘leave her behind’! She hid Alter Ego here to keep ‘her’ safe from the Mastermind and weirdos like him!”

The biker’s last statement was aimed directly at Hifumi, who gasped at hearing that accusation and retorted, “How…dare you! Comparing my pure-hearted feelings to those of our captor’s! Have you no soul?! As that insult was hurled at him, Mondo slowly turned about face and glared angrily down at Hifumi. “What did you say, punk?! Try saying that to my face, asshole!”

“Ha! You see! A brute will always be a brute!” Hifumi countered, puffing his chest out defiantly. As he stared down the furious biker, he further tempted fate by continuing, “You’ve no more control over your anger than before! Someone like you is unfit to call himself a man! It’s no wonder you attacked Chihiro—!”

“You son of a bitch!!” Mondo screamed rearing his fist back and preparing to smash the otaku’s glasses into his face. However, before he could let his fist fly, a stern voice stopped him.

“Alright, that’s enough!!”

Quicker than either of them had realized, Junko stood between them, a hand on both of their chests, keeping them from attacking each other. Both of them were rather shocked that she effortlessly held them back, but then again, she was proving to be an extraordinary woman!

“If you’re gonna do this, at least do it outside!” the Fashionista shouted, retracting her hands and pointing toward the exit. “Then, when Taka sees your dick measuring contest, you’ll both be confined to your rooms, just like me! Won’t that be fun?!"

A thick silence fell upon both of them as the Fashionista waited patiently for their answer. And slowly, answer they did:

“…No, not really…” Hifumi sadly conceded.
“…Hell no…” Mondo concurred quietly.

Smirking at them, Junko let her arms dropped and said, “That’s what I though. Now let’s get the hell out of here. This steam is gonna mess up my hair!”

Leading the way, Junko headed toward the partition just in front of the changing room entrance, with her classmates following after her. Before leaving, Kyoko decided to close the locker door that housed Alter Ego, just in case Taka found himself in the changing room for any reason.

However, Mondo lingered behind for a moment, unable to get the Chihiro-like visage on Alter Ego’s screen out of his mind. For despite the AI’s kind words, the biker knew it would take much more than Chihiro’s forgiveness for him to atone for his crimes. With an uncomfortable sigh, the biker finally followed after everyone.

As he stepped out into the main hall, however, a familiar voice angrily shouted, “And just what do all of you think you’re doing in the bathhouse at the same time!”

Each and every student froze as the furious voice of Taka engulfed them. Slowly turning their heads toward the entrance to the dorms, they all saw him stomping toward them, a fiery trail blazing behind him as his burning eyeballs fixated on them.

“You should know that unisex bathing is **definitely** not allowed in a school environment!!”

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**To Be Continued…**

**Chapter End Notes**

Greetings, my beautiful readers! A few crucial developments this time around, but what will come of it all? Will Alter Ego be able to help the students? How will all of the in-fighting affect moral? Is unisex bathing really unacceptable in a school environment? Keep on reading to find out!

As you may remember, I did say that I would be happy to discuss the DR 3 anime with anyone who PMed me. I should have mentioned that I usually won’t be able to watch the new episodes until late night on the day they come out. If you want to ask me something, please ask if I’ve seen the episode first. I almost got spoiled, which wasn’t anyone fault, but I HATE spoilers. Anyway, I do enjoy discussing the subject so don’t be afraid to PM me!

Also, I want to give a huge shout out to my beta, Dixxy. I get a good amount of praise for this story but I know that it wouldn’t be as great as it is without her help. She’s the best beta any writer could ask for and works very hard to make this and all of her own stories amazing! Please go and check out some of her stories, she helped inspire me to write this story!

As always, I appreciate each and every review/comment that you all give me. Seriously, reviews/comments are the life-blood of writers like myself, so even if it’s just to say you enjoyed the chapter or are enjoying the story as a whole, please let me know! It inspires
me and helps pick me up when life gets tough!

Until next time, have a great day and keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

And now...the moment you've all been waiting for: The Bathhouse Scene!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Taka, we can explain—”, Makoto insisted, only to be cut off mid-sentence.

“I have no use for your excuses!” the Disciplinary Committee Chairman refuted, emphatically waving one arm in a gesture of silence. “Do any of you realize how many violations you’ve just broken?! Merely being in the same room with a member of the opposite sex is suspicious enough, but in a room where people are meant to disrobe?! How can you all live with yourselves after such a display of indecency! Do you not realize this is…”

Much to everyone’s chagrin, Taka appeared to be in no mood for conversation, continuously spouting regulations at them, with seemingly no end. Their ears deafened as he continued to drone on and on, his mouth going dry as he verbally assaulted them with regulations and restrictions that some of them were convinced only existed in the mind of Taka. Nevertheless, as he berated them, all of the students shared a look of understanding, knowing that this outcome was far better than the crazed Rule-Nazi discovering their new ‘acquaintance’ in the changing room.

Even if some of them might need to procure hearing aids after such an onslaught, the cost to their hearing would be well worth the price if Alter Ego could uncover the mysteries they all desperately desired to be unearthed. Even Byakuya understood that this was an ordeal that needed to be dealt with quietly, as he stood with the rest of them, taking the verbal abuse without the slightest hint of annoyance.

At the same time, standing close to the back of the group, Celeste clenched her hands into fists as the unending scolding continued…her patience beginning to wear thin.

As Mondo stepped out into the hall just outside the bathhouse changing room, his eardrums were assaulted by almost unintelligible shouts. Being taller than most of his classmates, it didn’t take much for him to peer above them, his eyes widening as they fixated on the image of his Bro.

Junko had warned him that Taka had ‘transformed’ but he hadn’t thought she meant literally! Those black locks that had been stained pure white, the merciless flames that spouted forth from those once determined eyes, the malicious aura that radiated in all directions…it…it just couldn’t be true…that couldn’t be…Bro…

As his retina’s burned the newfound image of Taka into his mind, a single thought consumed him:

“…This…I did this…this is because…of me…”

Amidst the shouting, the biker found his feet carrying him toward the front of the group. It wasn’t
until he stood face to face with the furious demon that had once been his Bro, that Mondo realized just how deeply his betrayal had cut into his friend.

“…grounds for expulsion! How could any of you allow this to happen?! Not to mention that I specifically—!”

As though a miracle had been bestowed upon them, Taka’s verbal assault ceased as his fiery gaze caught sight of Mondo standing directly in front of him. Unbeknownst to him, the intimidating aura that altered Taka’s appearance flickered, traces of his jet black hair and extinguished eyes momentarily returning to view.

For a few brief moments, Kiyotaka Ishimaru once again stood before the class, a look of fear and anguish contorting his features. It had been so long that some of his classmates found it odd to see him reverted back to his old self, but for Mondo, it felt entirely different. It was almost as if…Taka was silently pleading with him. The way his Bro stared at him, a mixture of confusion, anxiety, and frustration in his eyes, it was the same look that many of his biker gang fledglings often gave him…like they wanted to ask for help, but just couldn’t…

Then, almost inexplicably, Kiyotaka’s visage was swallowed up as that menacing aura returned, whitening his hair and setting his eyes a flame. In place of where his Bro once stood, Mondo found the Disciplinary Committee Chairman angrily glaring at him, any trace of his friend seemingly extinguished from this world.

“Mondo Owada…” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru said slowly, almost cautiously. “How strange to see you out here…abandoning your post and leaving Chihiro vulnerable to attack!”

Unintentionally flinching, Mondo struggled to answer, “Wha?...I-I…I didn’t…”

He didn’t even have time to explain before Taka interrupted, “It was decided that you were to act as Chihiro’s guard as atonement for your crimes! And yet, here you are, betraying our expectation once again!”

Sharp pain stung Mondo’s chest as each accusation hit him, but he fought it off and managed to reply, “T-That’s not it! I didn’t abandon Chihiro! I was just trying to help—”.

“Oh, but of course, trying to help yourself!” the Disciplinary Chairman countered, sneering all the while. “You never consider the consequences of your actions! What if something has already happened to Chihiro—”.

“No, that’s wrong!”

As that familiar phrase was spoken, everyone turned to Makoto, who slightly flinched as attention suddenly focused on him. Despite that, he shook off his apprehension and continued, “Sayaka and Leon are standing guard outside the nurse’s office. So, I’m sure that Chihiro is fine.”

“Hmm…I see,” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru said with a huff. Abruptly snapping his glare back to Mondo, he shouted, “So, not only did you abandon your post, you manipulated others into being your scapegoat in case something happened to Chihiro!”

Taka’s hateful words seeped into everyone’s ears, sending chills down most of their spines as he relentlessly insulted his former friend.
From inside the group of watching students, Mukuro visibly trembled…not from sadness or fear, but rage. With her teeth gritted tightly and her fists clenched, she couldn’t keep herself from frowning as Taka continued to berate his ‘former’ friend. With that infuriating display right in front of her, everyone around her knew it was only a matter of time before she stepped in.

However, before she could take a single step, a stern hand grasped her shoulder. Snapping her gaze around, the soldier scowled harder as she traced the hand back to Byakuya Togami.

“I suggest keeping your temper under control,” he whispered, his voice stern and authoritative. “I doubt that our Disciplinary Chairman would be the least bit forgiving if you interrupted him again. Or do you wish to have an added sentence in conjunction with your ‘house arrest’?”

Mukuro’s sky-blue irises narrowed with each word, her anger quickly rising. However, ultimately she knew that his warning was valid, which was the only reason she gently pushed his hand off her shoulder…instead of breaking all of his fingers. As she readjusted her gaze, helplessly watching as Taka continued to insult Mondo, she heard Byakuya murmur behind her.

“Besides…” Even though she wasn’t looking at him, she could hear the malicious grin in his voice. “You wouldn’t want to ruin their ‘reunion’, now would you? After all, entertainment like this is hard to pass up.”

It took everything Mukuro had not to slam him into the pavement and beat his smug face until he was an unrecognizable lump.

“N-No! It’s not like that!” Mondo tried to defend himself, his usual defiant attitude stunted by the harsh words of his friend. “I wasn’t abandoning Chihiro or anything! I was gonna head right back! You gotta believe me, Bro—!”

“SILENCE!”

Taka’s voice strained as he vigorously screamed that word, ushering everyone into a state of quiet. No one, not even Celeste could hide the surprise that shout had created. The sound that had erupted from Taka’s throat almost didn’t sound human, as if he thought his voice alone could negate the words Mondo had spoken to him. After what felt like an eternity, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman tilted his head upward, glaring down his nose at the biker.

“Don’t…ever…call me that again…” Taka’s voice seethed and rumbled, his volume low and menacing. “I won’t allow you to fool us again. We all know that you can’t be trusted. Chihiro…paid the price for your betrayal. We won’t make the same mistake twice. So…no matter how much you claim to regret your actions…it doesn’t change the fact that you tried to have us all killed just to keep a promise to a dead man!”

An abrupt gasp was all Mondo could respond with, his mind far too shocked to achieve much more. A twisted expression of guilt overtook the biker’s features as his crimes were revisited upon him, the images of his brother’s death and his attack on Chihiro flashing before his eyes. And no matter how hard he tried to will them away, he just couldn’t keep them from appearing in his mind, with Taka’s words taunting him as they replayed for him…over…and over…and over…and over…

“That is quite enough, I think.”
Making her way through the crowd of students, all present were surprised when Celestia Ludenberg approached, standing before Taka with a sweet smile on her lips. The Disciplinary Committee Chairman immediately eyed her suspiciously but said nothing, affording her an opportunity to speak.

“I don’t believe there is a purpose in constantly reminding Mondo of his past transgressions,” Celeste calmly stated, her smile never faltering. “While it is true that he committed a heinous crime, that does not mean that he is not doing all he can to redeem himself. There is little that can be done to reverse what he caused, but at the very least, he has taken strides toward atonement. Is that not admirable in and of itself?”

Shock was all the students could register as Celeste came to Mondo’s defense. The biker himself couldn’t stop staring at her, confusion warping his features as his mind tried, and failed, to comprehend her involvement. It was certainly out of character, considering she’d been a key antagonist for the better part of their time together. However, none of them had forgotten that only a few minutes ago, she readily came to Hina’s defense during their conversation in the changing room. Not only that, she’d been noticeably kinder to Sayaka and Leon lately. It hadn’t been anything miraculous, at least not until now!

The way she actively put herself out there in front of everyone, her confidence when dealing with Taka’s recent reign of terror, the conviction she’d displayed when opposing said Disciplinary Chairman’s attitude…it was almost as if she was becoming an entirely different person. Some of it may have had to do with the fact that she seemed to believe that Taka was the traitor, thus why she was acting more hostile only toward him. However, that had nothing to do with how she’d been slowly warming up to her classmates…especially since the last class trial.

And while some of the students, such as Makoto and Hina, welcomed this side of her…others such as Byakuya, Kyoko and Junko, were decidedly more skeptical.

However, at the moment, her attitude was having an undeniably profound effect on Taka and his insults, which is why even those skeptical of her chose to remain silent. At the same time, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru undoubtedly disapproved of her sudden involvement, evident when he turned his body to face her entirely, glaring at her with flames burning fiercely in his eyes.

“Celestia Ludenberg…” he began slowly, never taking his eyes off her. “I find your newfound sympathy for our classmates surprising. Were you not the one who distrusted both Sayaka and Leon? Did you not condemn Mondo for his actions against the class during the last trial? And did or did you not vote for all of them to be executed when given the choice?”

“Indeed, I did.” Her answer was swift and concise, with no remorse of hesitation behind it.

Further scowling, Taka continued, “Why then would you suddenly defend them? Do you not distrust them as much as the rest of us?”

Contrary to what he imagined, Celeste’s smile only seemed to widen as she answered, “I would be lying if I said that I had complete faith in them.” Before the gazes fixated on her could sour, she continued, “However, I also will not discount the fact that they seem to be honestly working toward our survival. Leon, Sayaka, and Mondo…all of them have done what they could to contribute to our struggle. And while I have not forgotten what they tried to do…I do not blame them for their transgressions. After all, none of us chose to be put into this place, forced to play our captor’s twisted game. In that respect…they are the same as the rest of us.”

As she finished her explanation, Taka’s brows furrowed and he calmly retorted, “Unfortunately, you are wrong, Celestia Ludenberg. They are not the same as the rest of us. They made the choice to
disregard our lives for the sake of their own. That cannot go unpunished—”.

“Have you never made a mistake in all your life?” Celeste abruptly questioned, her smile ever present.

Taken aback by her statement, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman took a moment to ponder before answering, “Of course I have. No one make his way through life without making a few mistakes.”

As he said that, a distinctive huff from Byakuya echoed, as if silently refuting that claim.

Ignoring the Togami Heir’s non-verbal interjection, Celeste chose to respond, “Not even I am immune from the occasional mistake. I can admit that the way I have been treating my classmates recently was undoubtedly an error in judgment on my part. What is more important is realizing those mistakes and working to better yourself.”

Swiftly averting her gaze away from Taka and glancing back toward her classmates, Celeste’s smile finally faded, changing into a serious frown of sorts.

“Therefore, who are any of us to say that Mondo or Sayaka or even Leon are without redemption? Should we not foster feelings of forgiveness instead of rejecting them? Do you not think that constantly reminding them of their crimes might, in fact, spurn them into committing them again?”

Again, everyone was stunned to see Celeste actively appealing for leniency on behalf of not only Mondo, but now Sayaka and Leon as well. What’s more, her sudden shift in behavior seemed to utterly perplex Taka, who was flabbergasted by her suggestion.

“Such thinking is beyond dangerous!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru protested, his aura flaring up. As Celeste turned to look back at him, he stepped forward and shouted in her face, “We cannot take such a risk during such a delicate time! If we allow ourselves to be taken in by their lies, we will surely be—”.

“On the contrary,” she effortlessly interjected, her sweet smile returning. “Only by working together and adapting to our situation will we find the means to survive this ordeal. If it means putting unconditional faith in all of my classmates, then…it is a gamble that I am more than willing to take.”

Taka’s face contorted in fury as her words breached his eardrums, echoing in his head regardless of how much he wanted them to stop. All the while, Celeste continued to bravely smile at him, her unflinching determination seemingly too much for him to overcome.

However, it didn’t take long for Taka to regain his fervor, snapping back at her, “And what, pray tell, has inspired such a change in you, Miss Ludenberg! Were you not one to always be cautious instead of foolishly disregarding obvious dangers?!?”

At this, Celeste honestly seemed take a moment to stop smiling and ponder. However, after only a few moments, her smile spread over her lips again as she answered, “As I have always said, ‘if you cannot adapt, you will perish’. After witnessing two class trial…I must say that it would be more foolish to continue as I have been. Instead, I believe that by adapting, and by that I mean learning to place my trust in others, it will increase my chances for survival—”.

“Aha!” Taka cut in, pointing an accusatory finger at her. “So you admit that your desires are purely selfish! How can you allow yourself to—?!?”

“The same way that you allow yourself to be ruled by selfish impulses, I suppose.” Celeste’s harsh words stopped Taka cold, his mouth hanging open in utter shock. Without giving him a chance for
repose, she continued, “I admit that my shift in attitude is for personal benefit. However, as long as it does not negatively affect anyone else, is it truly a problem? And, unlike yourself, I am not allowing it to overrule my judgment, as it is obvious that you harbor a great deal of aggression toward Mondo for his betrayal. And you often take that aggression out on the rest of us, due to being unable to deal with them appropriately—”.

“B-Be silent!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru screamed, gesturing emphatically as he continued, ‘That is certainly not the case! I am impartial in my judgments! I would never stoop to allowing my person feelings to influence my decisions! Such an act would make me unfit to be called the Disciplinary Committee Chairman!”

As the two of them continued their ‘discussion’, little did either of them know that someone else found their stand-off enthralling.

No matter how much he tried, Hifumi couldn’t stop all of the feels that rose up from within, threatening to consume him entirely. The way that Celeste had opposed Taka was straight out of the manga he’d always dreamed of writing! He could envision it now…oh how he wished he had a fresh piece of paper to inscribe their epicness!

[The Heroine (Celeste) stood her ground against the evils that were brought about by the Evil Overlord (Taka). The Heroine (Celeste) was a changed woman, no longer cruel and evil as she’d once been. Instead, she chose to rebel against the injustice of the Evil Overlord (Taka) and eventually defeated him, thus saving them all from certain destruction!]

As he stared at her back, a look of pure admiration in his eyes, Hifumi awed as he whispered, “She’s just as amazing as Pudgy Princess Piggles…oh, if only she were 2D.”

While it was true that Celeste dressed and spoke almost nothing like his manga idol, the way she took command of this situation, stood up for what she believed in, and didn’t relent in the face of adversity was exactly the way Pudgy Princess Piggles handled herself in all of her manga volumes. Heck, even the way she mistreated Hifumi reminded him of the way Pudgy Princess Piggles tormented a side character in the anime. It had been added for comedic effect but that didn’t mean that Celeste embodied his idol less!

As he felt his admiration for Celestia Ludenberg grow…he felt resentment for Kiyotaka Ishimaru begin to stir.

A part of it certainly had to do with the fact that Taka would undoubtedly take Alter Ego away from him—err, them! But that wasn’t the only issue. Over the last few days, he’d quietly watched as the Disciplinary Committee Chairman had fallen deeper and deeper into madness. The way he spoke out against the class, constantly tortured all of them with pink slips, and insisted that his view was the only correct one…it created a hostility that Hifumi had never imagined possible.

And although Hifumi definitely didn’t want to hurt Taka, he certainly wouldn’t mind putting the stuck-up jerk in his place! After all, he was openly shouting in Celeste’s face, quite rude for someone who claimed to be member of the Disciplinary Committee.

“How dare he treat a lady like that…” Hifumi angrily whispered as Taka continued to shout in Celeste’s face. All of the fanfic creator’s chivalric tendencies began to boil to the surface but they quickly died down as Celeste effortlessly refuted all of Taka’s idiocy. Watching her defend herself, the fanfic creator felt the tiniest bit embarrassed. “…Perhaps she doesn’t need my help after all.”
Nevertheless, as he continued to watch them argue, Hifumi held out hope that, if she really needed help to deal with Taka, he’d be there to take down the Evil Overlord and become more than just a side character in Celeste’s story!

Just as the argument between Celeste and Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru seemed like it would escalate, a nervous figure approached both of them.

“C-C’mon, guys! Calm down, this is all a big misunderstanding!” Makoto tried to reason with both side, only to have both of them glare at him.

“Misunderstanding?! How could insubordination be a ‘misunderstanding’?!” Taka turned to shout in Makoto’s face. “Furthermore, none of you explained why you were all coming out of the bathhouse together!”

Makoto couldn’t be sure, but out of the corner of his eye, he could have sworn he saw a strange glint momentarily sparkle in Celeste’s eyes.

“I believe that we offered to explain when you arrived,” Celeste chimed back in, her sweet smile radiantly returning. “If you would like, I would be happy to explain how the girls and I were about to leave for tea, while the men enjoyed the bath.”

A wave of surprise overwhelmed the entire class as Celeste outright lied directly to Taka’s face. In particular, all of the men shared worried glances, completely caught off-guard by such a predicament. The girls, however, immediately saw this as an opportunity to dissolve the situation.

“Yeah, it totally sucked too!” Junko abruptly affirmed, faking sadness as she continued. “We had a rock, paper, scissors contest but we ended up losing! Makoto and his luck won the day for the boys!”

As she finished, Makoto noticed the suggestive glance she gave him and he just barely managed to pick up on her intentions.

“W-Well, it’s not like I wanted to compete! The guys chose me to represent them, that’s all!” he insisted, hoping Taka wouldn’t see though his nervous lie.

“Y-Yup, we sure did!” Hiro chimed in, doing his best to run with the lie. “I sure am glad we chose Makoto. We probably would have lost if we’d have gone with Byakuya!”

Immediately, Hiro felt a cold stare of death from beside him, not even realizing that the Affluent Progeny was standing right next to him. Suddenly, Hiro’s clairvoyant talents told him that even if he survived this killing game…his life might still be in danger.

“If anything, victory would have been assured had I been selected,” the Togami Heir said, deciding to back up the false story. “It was simply luck. In that respect, I suppose we were destined to win, regardless.”

No one was quite sure how to take Byakuya’s backhanded compliment, so they chose to just move on without acknowledging it.

“Damn it all,” Junko falsely complained, drawing attention back to her. “I really wanted a nice soak before having to be cooped up in my room.”

Suddenly reminded of that, Taka sputtered a bit as he said, “J-Junko Enoshima! You should have
reported back to your room by now! Why were you with them in the first place?!”

“You never said that she needed to report back to her room immediately,” Kyoko answered, the tiniest hint of a smile on her face. “We tried to use that as leverage against the boys but they insisted on using the bath first.”

“Ah, but of course!” Taka surprisingly concurred, much to everyone’s shock. “It would be unfair just to give up on bathing just because of something trivial like that!”

“…Trivial…?!” Junko menacingly whispered, barely managing to hold herself back.

“Anyway,” Celeste interjected, seeing Junko almost at her limit. “Having lost, the girls decided to share tea together while we wait for our turn. That is when we encountered you…I suppose you now know the rest of that story…”

It took Taka a few moments to process everything, and although he had quite the skeptical expression on his face, his eyes showed that he regretfully accepted their story.

“I see…” Taka suddenly quieted down, the intensity of his aura somewhat lessening. “It does indeed seem that you truly were just deciding who would use the bath first.”

“That is so,” Sakura told him, her dedicated tone the final nail in the proverbial coffin.

“I feel so ashamed…” Taka seethed to himself before snapping his head up. “Very well then! In penance, I shall join the men in the bath to wash away my disgrace!”

All of the boys flinched as they quickly realized the situation that Celeste had unwittingly set them up for. Chief among them, Byakuya sent a quick glare her way, to which she smiled overtly back at him, obviously having hoped for this outcome. At the very least, there was one among the boys who seemed somewhat excited for this venture.

“A-Alright then! Let’s hit the bath guys!” Mondo tried to encourage everyone, carefully approaching Taka at the same time. “I can…uh…wash your back for ya, if you want Bro—”.

Without bothering to look his way, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman interrupted, “I believe I said never to call me that again, Mondo Owada.”

“Oh…right. A-Anyway, we can still—”, Mondo tried to continue only to find that Taka had already begun walking away, heading straight for the bathhouse ahead of all the other boys. And as he left him behind, the biker felt his heart sink deeper into depression.

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Celeste held onto her sickly sweet smile as the boys passed her, heading to their forced bathing with the Disciplinary Chairman.

“I do hope you enjoy yourselves,” she ‘kindly’ said to them, enjoying the feeling of power and control over their situation.

Mondo’s shoulders slumped and he exhaled deeply, passing by her without even looking her way. Makoto nervously smiled as he walked next to the biker, patting him on the shoulder. Hiro didn’t seem all that bothered with being a scapegoat, happily heading for the bath without a care in the world. Hifumi trailed behind the others, his gaze flashing toward Celeste momentarily before heading off to join the other men. Finally, with a glare that could almost kill, Byakuya slowly walked by her,
his expression showing visible contempt for her actions.

However, Celeste paid him no mind. After all, this too was a part of her plan.

“Taka’s stand-offish attitude will undoubtedly piss off the other boys. Sure, they may not be pleased with what I’ve done, but once they have to spend time, naked in a bath with Mr. Rule-Nazi himself, I’ll look like a fucking angel by comparison!”

Within moments, all of the boys had entered the steamy bathhouse, leaving the girls standing in the silence off the hallway. Barely managing to hide a grin at her success, Celeste turned only to be met face to face with a bright-eyed Hina.

“Wow, Celeste! That was awesome!” the swimmer shouted, obviously impressed. “You totally saved us all with your quick thinking! And the way you stood up for Mondo and Leon and Sayaka…I never would have thought you’d do something like that!”

Doing her best to take a polite step back, her ears ringing from Hina’s shouts, Celeste put on her best face and replied, “It was nothing special. After all, I am used to having to ‘think on my feet’, so to speak.” Hanging her head slightly and donning a sad expression, she continued, “As for your other comment…I’m not surprised you’d feel that way. I have been rather insufferable since we became trapped here.”

Surreptitiously glancing up, the gambler saw that her words had instilled a feeling of guilt in Hina, just as she’d expected. The swimmer’s bright visage softened, obviously feeling ashamed.

“N-No…it’s my fault too. I never really gave you a chance,” Hina admitted, averting her gaze shamefully. “I always invited the other girls to hang out…but never invited you. I’m really sorry about that!”

Hina abruptly bowed apologetically, a sight that made Celeste feel even more empowered. She already had the swimmer wrapped around her finger, which meant that she could now focus on the reason for befriending the enthusiastic athlete.

As if premeditating Celeste’s desire, Sakura suddenly stepped forward and placed a hand on Hina’s shoulder. The swimmer pulled herself upright and glanced up, smiling as she saw the martial artist. Returning the gesture, Sakura turned toward Celeste with an inviting smile and said, “I believe that I have also been quite rude to you, as I also did not give you the benefit of the doubt. I let preconceptions of you inhibit my judgment, and for that, I do apologize.”

“That is not a problem. I am used to people judging me for my appearance and attitude,” Celeste responded, secretly pleased that the martial artist was already becoming ensnared. “I also avoided the both of you due to preconceived notions. However, it seems that we have a great deal we can learn from each other.”

“Indeed,” Sakura concurred, folding her arms as she smiled. “With that in mind, would you like to spend time with us today? I know that you are not fond of training, so may I propose having tea?”

Instantly, Celeste purposefully brightened her expression and replied, “That would be lovely. After all, I was not lying when I said I wanted to have tea with all of the girls. In fact, would you mind if we invited—”.

“I’m afraid I need to be going,” Kyoko abruptly cut in, making Celeste gasp in surprise. The gambler carefully turned her gaze over to see the lavender haired girl suspiciously staring at her. However, less than an instant later, she continued, “I appreciate the offer, but I’m afraid I have more important
matters to attend to. Goodbye.”

Without giving any of them time to protest, Kyoko’s heeled boots clicked along the ground as she headed back toward the dorms, presumably back to her room.

Kyoko’s departure filled Celeste with a mixture of relief and annoyance. It was obvious that the lavender haired girl was skeptical of the gambler’s change of heart. In some ways, that played into Celeste’s favor, as she only needed to gain a majority of the class’ approval. Once she had over half the class dancing in the palm of her hand, it wouldn’t matter what one or two skeptical idiots thought.

At the same time, Kyoko was clearly disrespecting her and that really pissed her off! Unfortunately, there was no way for her to get back at Kyoko at the moment, at least not without making herself appear suspicious. To that effect, Celeste simply decided to ignore Kyoko’s rudeness and focus on earning the other girls’ trust.

With that in mind, she glanced over to Junko, who was definitely the most influential female in the group, only to see the Fashionista slap her hands together apologetically.

“Sorry but, I’m gonna have to decline too,” Junko said to the three of them. “I’ve gotta head back to my room before Taka comes out of the baths. I’ll see you girls later!” Turning and heading toward her room, she briefly looked over her shoulder to call back, “If you need me, my door’s always open!”

Celeste internally winced at her bad joke, recalling that Junko had promised to leave her door open in order to listen for Alter Ego. However, the gambler didn’t find her exclusion to be much of a hindrance either. For even though the Fashionista had proven herself very capable, Celeste couldn’t shake the feeling that she was hiding something from all of them. She knew a thing or two about keeping things under wraps, and the gambler could tell that Junko was keeping something very important to herself.

However, as long as she didn’t get in the way of her vengeance against Taka, then Celeste really couldn’t care less. In fact, as long as she got her castle…and Taka’s head on a fence post, she really didn’t care what happened to any of her classmates. If they died, that was unfortunate. If they survived, that was fine. If they needed to be sacrificed in order for her plan to succeed…then it was a sacrifice Celeste was willing to make.

“In the end…I can only rely on myself…”

“Aww, that’s too bad,” Hina sadly commented, glancing around at the now empty hall. “I guess we’re the only ones getting tea then.”

“Wait a moment,” Sakura suddenly said, drawing attention as she glanced around the area. “I don’t see Toko anywhere. Did we not want to extend an invitation to her as well?”

Absorbing that comment, Celeste and Hina also scanned the room, surprised to see that the martial artist was correct. Raising an eyebrow, the gambler answered, “She was here a moment ago. Where could she have gone?”

“Who knows?” Hina said with a shrug. “I’ve tried inviting her before but she never accepted.”

Quickly regaining her pleasant visage, Celeste smiled at both of them and said, “Well then, I suppose it will just have to be the three of us then.”

“It would seem so,” Sakura said, a bit disappointed but smiling nonetheless.
“Very well then, shall we go?” Celeste offered, gesturing toward the cafeteria.

Sakura nodded to her and began heading toward the cafeteria. However, before Celeste could start making her way, Hina nervously said, “Actually, would you two mind going ahead? I, uh, need to grab something from my room.”

Celeste and Sakura shared a slightly confused look but ultimately shrugged and nodded to her.

“Thanks! I’ll meet you in the cafeteria in a minute!” Hina shouted to both of them as she dashed toward her room.

“…Oh, this is gonna be epic!” Hina said to herself as she snuck back toward the bathhouse.

Only moments ago, she had watched from around the corner as Celeste and Sakura had headed into the cafeteria. She hadn’t been lying to them when she said she wanted to get something from her room. She had wanted to go and get some of the special candies that she and Sakura loved so much, the ones she had taken from the storage room to keep just for herself.

However, before she even got back to her door, her hand had slipped into her pocket and rubbed against something. Grabbing onto it, she pulled her hand out to discover her fingers wrapped around the Kokeshi Dynamo she’d won the other night! She hadn’t even taken it out of her jacket pocket, let alone thought about using it since acquiring it!

However, with it now firmly in her grasp, her face suddenly flushed and she had to shake her head to regain composure.

“Get ahold of yourself, Hina!” she told herself, quickly glaring at the slender Dynamo. “Why did I bother keeping this thing anyway? I need to get rid of it! But…how am I supposed to do that? I can’t just throw it away and I don’t want to keep it in my room! And I definitely don’t want to be caught with it…”

Just then, a loud shout from the bathhouse startled the already frazzled Hina, with the swimmer placing a hand on her chest as she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Jeez…that scared the crap outta me!” Hina said quietly, glaring toward the bathhouse. “Dumb boys…why do they have to be so loud? Someone oughta teach them a lesson—”.

Suddenly, inspiration sprang up from within as Hina glanced toward the bathhouse. Her vision trailed down to the Kokeshi Dynamo in her hand, an idea bubbling up in her mind. A mischievous smile spread over her lips as she let her imagination run wild.

“Alright, I’ve got it!” Hina quietly said to herself, speaking her plan aloud to reaffirm her own thoughts. “I’ll sneak into the changing room and leave this creepy thing right where they’ll all find it! They’ll all think that some perverted ghost left it there and they’ll scream and panic…just like I did when I thought I saw Chihiro’s severed head!!”

Hina giggled at the image of the boys running scared from the Kokeshi Dynamo. She could see it now:

Hiro would constantly chant scriptures to ward off the evil spirt. Byakuya would offer it money in
exchange for his life. Taka would threaten to give it detention and possibly confiscate it…which was creepy. Mondo would threaten to punch it. Hifumi would be scared that something 3D was coming after him. And Makoto…probably wouldn’t be all that freaked out but he’d be embarrassed!

Imagining all of that playing out in front of her as she and her friends watched, Hina chuckled to herself as she prepared to set her plan in motion.

“…Oh, this is gonna be epic!”

That’s why she waited until she saw Celeste and Sakura heading into the cafeteria before carefully making her way back toward the bathhouse. If she could pull this off, she’d have one hell of a story to tell her them once she got back! Cautiously glancing around, Hina pushed the door cloth aside and headed into the bathhouse, the Kokeshi Dynamo clutched firmly in hand.

Once Hina was out of sight, Sakura and Celeste made their way into the cafeteria. Just as they arrived, the gambler had a sudden thought and said, “Oh, I believe I have been struck by brilliance.”

Giving her a surprised glance, Sakura asked, “And what would that be?”

Smiling pleasantly, Celeste continued, “I have some special tea leaves that I have been saving for a special occasion. I believe that now would be the time to use them.”

For once, Celeste was being completely honest. The tea leaves she had were very expensive and hard to come by. She’d planned to have them as a form of celebration once she escaped from the school, but figured they could be better utilized here.

“…If that is what you wish,” the martial artist commented, gesturing toward the kitchen. “I’ll begin preparing the water. I will let Hina know if she arrives before you.”

“Thank you,” Celeste said politely before turning and making her way back into the hall just outside the cafeteria.

However, the instant the gambler stepped into the hallway, she stopped as she saw Hina, with a peculiar object in her hand, heading into the bathhouse where the boys were currently bathing. True surprise struck Celeste, her eyes widening and a tiny gasp escaping as she immediately understood what Hina was doing.

At the same time, a dastardly smile crept over her lips as another ingenious idea consumed her mind.

“…Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” Hina whispered to herself as she stood in the steamy changing room of the bathhouse.

At her feet, scattered all over the place, were articles of clothing the boys had carelessly thrown to the floor. Just seeing their clothes on the benches or in Byakuya and Taka’s case, in one of the clothing baskets, made the swimmer flush, her mind unable to keep from imagining what each of them looked like without their clothes.

In particular, she noticed Mondo’s jacket had been tossed aside, immediately imagining all of his rippling muscles being on display. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that douchebag Byakuya’s
tie hanging out of his clothing basket, wondering if his ego had anything to do with the size of his…what the hell was she thinking?!?!?

“…I need to get out of here…” she concluded, slowly turning to leave.

Before she got far, however, she then caught sight of Taka’s perfectly folded uniform, unable to keep from pondering if he was muscular or lithe under all those clothes. And to top it all off, there was Makoto’s hoodie, sitting on one of the benches, which made her curious as to how ‘lucky’ the Ultimate Lucky Student was—girth wise…

“…Oh God, what am I thinking?!” Hina whisper shouted to herself, shaking her head fervently. Glancing down at the Kokeshi Dynamo in her hand, she suddenly scowled at it. “This is your fault! You made me come in here! I just wanted to leave you in here to scare them! Make them think a perverted ghost had been watching them! I…I didn’t…want to…peep…”

As she said that, for the first time since sneaking in there, Hina’s mind contemplated doing exactly that. Her face turned a deep shade of red as her eyes subconsciously turned toward the door leading to the baths. Then, almost against her will, the images from before suddenly came back, raising her curiosity to its peak—

“No, stop thinking about it!” Hina aggressively whispered, clenching her eyes shut. “I didn’t come in here to see all those naked men in the bath…despite how muscular they might be…and how big their…things might—oh, god what am I saying?!”

Her face burned and her breathing slowed to a husky pant as this newfound desire slowly began to consume her, despite how ashamed she felt. Every time she looked at the plethora of clothes surrounding her, the more her mind envisioned the greatness underneath those clothes.

Never in all her life had Aoi Asahina been tempted to peep at anyone. Sure, she was attracted to naked pictures of Jason Statham, but what action loving girl wasn’t?! But…it’s not like taking a quick little peek would hurt anyone…right? She could take a quick peek…leave the Dynamo for the boys to find…and absolutely never mention this to anyone for the rest of her life!

“…Y-Y-Yeah…th-that’s totally…totally…fine…”

Even as that shaky logic coursed through her mind, Hina found herself slowly hesitating. After all, she wasn’t a perverted girl. Jason Statham aside, she never really looked at…suggestive images and rarely ever…relieved stress! She just wasn’t that kind of girl! Not that she thought it was particularly wrong for other girls to get excited and do that kind of stuff, but for her, it just wasn’t something she even figured she’d be comfortable with!

However, standing here, surrounded by her male classmates’ clothes, holding the Kokeshi Dynamo in her hand…she found herself unable to resist the temptation that she knew most girls would jump at the chance to have. By now, only the faintest hint of hesitation invaded her mind, quickly being drowned out by the burning sensation her entire body was experiencing.

And by this point, she couldn’t blame the steam for her body’s sudden change in temperature.

Slowly, Hina inched her way toward the door separating her from the boys…her heart began thumping wildly as she neared closer and closer to her new goal.

…

…thump-thump…
Her face was literally inches from the crack in the door, light from the other side hitting her face as she inched close enough to see through…

“…Oh, you’re quite bold, aren’t you?”

Suddenly, a voice from behind registered in Hina’s ears and the swimmer tried to gasp but found a hand firmly clasped over her mouth. For a moment, she struggled against the hand, until the soft voice continued.

“Now, now, dear…we wouldn’t want the boys to hear us…”

Recognizing that tone, Hina managed to turn her head enough to see that it was Celeste who had snuck up on her. Once she noticed that the swimmer had seen her, the gambler slowly took her hand away while making a ‘shhh’ motion with her other hand.

Obviously not wanting to be caught, Hina did her best to stay quiet…but she couldn’t keep herself from furiously whispering, “What are you doing in here?!”

A look of surprise crossed Celeste’s face before she whispered back, “I could ask you the same thing…”

Hina opened her mouth to object but quickly shut it…her already flushed face tinged a deeper shade of crimson as she realized she’d been caught. However, rather unexpectedly, Celeste let a
mischievous grin spread over her lips, the likes of which sent shivers down Hina’s spine.

“Please…do not hesitate on my account,” the gambler suggestively said to her, gesturing toward the door Hina had just been about to peep through.

“W-What?! I wasn’t gonna…” Hina embarrassedly whispered back, only to have Celeste delicately place a finger to her lips, silencing her.

“There’s no shame in it…any healthy young woman would do the same in your position,” the gambler tried to assure her, which only exacerbated the situation.

Pushing her hand away, Hina held up the Kokeshi Dynamo and said, “I wasn’t peeping, I was going to—”.

Just then, as she caught sight of the dynamo gripped in Hina’s hand, shock overtook Celeste’s face for a moment before she smirked, “Oh…I had no idea I was…interrupting…”

Hina raised an eyebrow at Celeste before glancing to the dynamo, then back to Celeste, then the dynamo again…until a look of pure horror engulfed her features, a silent gasp escaping her.

“No! No, no, no, no, no!” she furiously whispered, shaking her head all the while. “I was not doing that!”

“I am aware…” Celeste suddenly conceded, making Hina look to her hopefully. However, all the hope vanished as the gambler continued, “I interrupted and you never got the chance to—”.

“NO!” Hina said, slightly louder than a whisper, which made both of the girls freeze.

As one, they quickly moved toward the door and listened intently for any signs they had been noticed…

Fortunately for them, all they could hear was, what they assumed, pleasant bathhouse conversation between the men. A bit of splashing could also be heard but that didn’t seem out of the ordinary, considering it was a group of rowdy young men bathing.

Drawing in a huge sigh of relief, both of the girls turned and stared at each other once more.

“…Well, want to take a peek?” Celeste suggestively asked, remembering to whisper. Before Hina could answer, the gambler cocked her head toward the door and winked at her, further frustrating the swimmer.

“I…No, I don’t!” Hina fervently denied, her face returning to a lovely shade of pink.

Celeste took a moment to evaluate Hina’s expression, which made the swimmer feel all the more embarrassed. However, after only a few moments of inspection, the gambler seemed satisfied and merely gave a weak huff.

“…You shouldn’t lie to yourself, dear…It’s bad for your complexion…”

All at once, Hina felt her frustration turn into anger. Narrowing her gaze, the swimmer seethed, “I’m not…” She paused to quiet herself. “I’m not lying to myself…I really didn’t come in here to peep…”

Listening to each word, Celeste nodded slowly and replied, “…I can believe that…You’re not the type to enjoy this kind of…activity…”

“…Exactly!” Hina loudly whispered.
“However,” the gambler abruptly continued, a smile creeping over her face. “Now that we are here...are you sure you don’t wish to partake in the view? After all...chances like this do not occur often...especially in this school.”

Again, Hina opened her mouth to object but this time, no words came. She wanted to refute, she wanted to say that she *really* had no intention of peeping...but they both knew it was a lie. In a moment of weakness, Hina had succumbed to her lustful thoughts and almost became as perverted as...as...as Hifumi!

It was so embarrassing that she could just die!

On the other hand...Celeste didn’t seem all that bothered by any of this. Not the peeping, not the Kokeshi Dynamo, and certainly not about the fact that she had just caught another girl trying to sneak a peek at the boys! Heck, she even seemed eager to get a look in herself!

Why was that? What made Celeste so...so...confident?

It was like Celeste just knew that they wouldn’t be caught, like she knew that even if they did such a disgusting thing like peeping...it wouldn’t really change who she was. Celeste offered no apologies and didn’t make any excuses. Celeste did whatever Celeste wanted and did it without fear. And on top of all of that, Celeste was a strong, independent woman who didn’t take crap from no one...not even Rule-Nazi Taka!

And honestly...Hina really admired her for that.

Hina had always been concerned about the fact that she wasn’t very feminine. She’d never had a boyfriend, even though she knew she was fairly attractive, and she knew it was because she didn’t act like a typical girl. She hated make-up and didn’t care that spending a great deal of her time in the sun had tanned her skin so much. She wasn’t into dresses or other girly things like shopping. All she had cared about was being the best athlete she could be, even if it meant she was still single...despite wanting a boyfriend.

Heck, Sakura had even gotten a boyfriend before her! The martial artist hadn’t talked about him much, but during the night when Sakura had stayed over in her room, just before the first class trial, she had mentioned at least *having* a boyfriend before coming to school. And considering how sad she’d looked while mentioning it, it probably hadn’t ended well...

Celeste, on the other hand, had enough confidence in herself to get whatever she wanted. It was something that Hina had always struggled with. She knew she was a talented athlete but beyond that, she didn’t really feel all that confident or special. And while she was sure that Celeste probably had fears and doubts of her own...at least she didn’t let them stop her from going after what she wanted!

Hanging hear head, Hina suddenly felt ashamed. She was...jealous...jealous of how amazing Celeste really was. Sure, the gambler had been pretty cruel to her and her friends in the past, but at least she had the courage to try and be a better person, right? Why couldn’t Hina do that for herself? What was stopping her from doing exactly what she wanted to do right now?!

“I’m...I’m *not* a coward! I can do it...it’s just a peek! I’m *not* a bad person for peeking!”

“...Well?” Celeste suddenly said, interrupting her thoughts. Snapping her head up, Hina’s eyes locked onto the confident smirk the gambler wore as she continued, “…Shall we take a peek?”

For a few moments, all Hina could do was sit there, breathing heavily as the weight of that question bore down on her. However, after taking in Celeste’s cool and calm visage, there was one thing that
Hina couldn’t deny…she didn’t want to lose to her!

And so, regardless of the danger involved…Hina proudly answered, “…Alright…let’s do it!”

“N-Not so fast! Y-You cow titted h-hussy!”

Hina and Celeste quietly gasped as a new voice suddenly assaulted them. Fortunately, the owner of the voice was trying to be as cautious as they were, their tone just barely above a whisper.

“D-Don’t think that I-I’ll let you get a-away with peeking on M-Master!”

As soon as the voice mentioned ‘Master’, both of the girls recognized whom their secret observer was. Glancing around the room, the two girls finally caught sight of a petite figure standing behind a large potted plant in the corner. Actually, the more they looked at it, the more embarrassed they felt for not noticing her sooner, as the figure wasn’t even properly hidden behind the tall plant. They could easily see their classmate, Toko Fukawa, glaring at them from her ‘hiding’ place.

“T-Toko? What are you doing here?” Hina instinctively asked, her brain already piecing the answer together. However, as she thought about it, the writer’s earlier comment finally registered, making the swimmer scowl. “Hey, who are you calling a hussy?!”

“Oh, what an…unexpected surprise…” Celeste off-handedly mentioned, her tone anything but shocked. In fact, it almost felt as if the gambler was a bit…perturbed by the fact that she’d failed to notice such an obvious sight.

Ignoring Celeste’s comment entirely, Toko continued to menacingly stare at Hina, glancing down at the swimmer’s chest before gritting her teeth angrily.

“H-How dare you!” the writer angrily whispered. “Trying to s-seduce Master Byakuya with your ugly m-milk sacks!”

All at once, Hina felt a mixture of embarrassment and rage as she was verbally assaulted. “What the heck?! Why would you even say that?! And why would I ever want to seduce that douchey four-eyed fop?!”

As her insult flew back and hit Toko, the writer’s furious expression deepened. “You b-bitch! How dare you m-mock Master’s perfection!” As she spoke, Toko stomped out from behind the plant and marched over to Hina, who effortlessly stood her ground and returned the writer’s glare. “I w-won’t allow someone as p-perverse as you to see the grandeur that Master has been b-blessed with!”

Realizing what she meant, Hina fought off a blush as she quietly countered, “I don’t want to see his…grandeur! I didn’t plan on peeking in the first place! And who are you to call someone else perverted! You were hiding in here first, ya know!”

“O-Only to protect the in-innocence of Master Byakuya!” Toko fervently protested, her voice slightly raised. “And it s-seems I was right! Master Byakuya’s p-purity was in danger of being t-tainted by your f-flabby fun-bags!”

Despite herself, Hina felt her rage boiling over at being insulted not once, not twice, but three consecutive times! Besides, it’s not like she wanted to be graced with large breasts! And it’s not like she could control the fact that men lusted after her for them either! In fact, she kind of wished she did have smaller boobs! Hers kept getting in the way when swimming and she had to work extra hard so that they didn’t hinder her during sports meets!

But then to be insulted for having been born with genetics that made them slightly larger than most
other girls…that was the final straw!

“Listen you, I’ve had just about enough—!”

Before she had a chance to shout, a hand slapped over her mouth, silencing her. Hina’s eyes widened as she turned her head to see Celeste, her hand firmly over the swimmer’s mouth, smiling pleasantly at her.

“…If the two of you wish to take this outside, I have no objections. However…” Her tone was as eloquent as always, but as she continued, both of the other girls felt an unavoidable fury radiating from the gothic enthusiast. “As long as we are all in danger of being discovered here, I would prefer that the two of you keep your voices low……got it?!”

Her last few word came out as a growl, her face momentarily flashing a furious expression.

As her demand washed over Hina and Toko, both of them fell into utter silence, too afraid to even dare whisper an answer. Then, as quickly as it had come, Celeste’s angry visage vanished, once again replaced by her sweet smile. Hina shivered at the very sight of her swift mood shift, forced to acknowledge that there was far more to Celeste than she had ever let on before. At the same time, the swimmer also found herself impressed as well, considering that the gambler was able to compose herself so quickly after obviously being flustered. In fact, Hina was the tiniest bit jealous that she didn’t have as much control of her own emotions, just saying or doing whatever first came to mind all the time.

“Maybe…I should try to be more like Celeste?” Hina mentally pondered, unable to comprehend how to accomplish such a feat.

Just then, Celeste took her hand away from Hina’s mouth and slowly turned to Toko, a manipulative glint in her eyes.

“Now then, Toko…” the gambler began, making the writer flinch as all attention was focused on her. “I realize that you have certain… attachments to Mr. Togami. You do not wish for his honor to be sullied, a noble task I must admit. To that end, allow me to offer a proposal…”

Wary of the gothic Lolita girl’s words, Toko gave her a skeptical look before answering, “W-What kind of proposal?”

To this, Celeste could only smirk as she quietly conveyed her proposal to the other girls.

…Meanwhile, inside the bathhouse…

Makoto had found himself between a rock and a hard place. He sat on one of the few stools in front of large mirrors, various bottles of shampoo resting just within reach. A spray nozzle in hand, the lucky student couldn’t help but curse his ‘luck’ as he found himself sandwiched between two men.

On his right, naked save for a towel around his waist, was Mondo. The biker’s large muscles constricted and retracted as he carefully washed his hair, which for the first time since the game began, was let down and framed the biker’s face. As he rubbed shampoo into his hair, Mondo occasionally snuck a glance over past Makoto, guilt building up in his eyes.

And Makoto knew why, for on his left, nude except for a towel, sat Taka. Even in this environment, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman’s whitened hair and burning eyes blazed fervently, making it
hard for Makoto to concentrate on washing himself. Unlike Mondo, however, Taka didn’t even spare a glance toward his former friend, opting to instead instruct Makoto, and only Makoto, on the proper way to wash one’s hair.

“And then, after we have applied both shampoo and conditioner, we may use the nozzle to wash away the impurities that our hair has gathered! Like so!”

With one hand, Taka effortlessly rinsed off his shimmering hair, his skin practically glistening as the water crawled down his surprisingly toned body. Afterward, he ran a hand through his hair, slicking it back as his smoldering eyes passionately turned to his classmate. A confident and heartfelt smile overtook his lips as he nodded firmly, the powerful aura around his body almost too overwhelming to withstand.

Honestly, Makoto had been rather shocked to see that the Disciplinary Committee Chairman had such a defined physique, but quickly realized that since Taka was committed to all forms of excellence, it would make sense for him to have athletic prowess as well as academic.

“And there you have it! Our bodies have been cleansed and we are almost ready to enter the bath!” Taka loudly announced, glancing toward Makoto just as the lucky student finished washing his own hair.

“Uh…thanks,” Makoto nervously replied, not wanting to admit that, considering his age, he already knew how to wash himself.

“Think nothing of it!” the Disciplinary Committee Chairman shouted, slapping Makoto harshly across his back. The slap rebounded off all the halls and made Makoto groan as the impact stung his lithe body. Not even registering that he had injured his classmate, Taka continued, “I would gladly offer my services to any fellow student who asked it of me! Ahahahaha!”

As he made the proclamation, the sound of someone clearing their throat echoed, and Makoto turned his gaze over to see Mondo nervously glancing their way.

“H-Hey bro! Do you think you could…uh…show me the best way to wash my hair?” the biker asked, his longer hair still bubbly with suds and a hint of hopefulness in his eyes.

Without even acknowledging the question, Taka continued to speak only to Makoto.

“Now that we have finished washing ourselves, we must now show integrity by washing each other’s backs! Makoto, I would be honored to wash your back for you first! Here, let me get behind you!”

“Huh…?”

Makoto gasped, having heard Mondo’s question but was then immediately assaulted with Taka’s request. His gaze shifted back and forth, from the biker to the moral compass, with Mondo looking utterly dejected and Taka appearing ferocious and demanding.

“Uh, well…” he tried to say, continuing to look between the two of them. “I don’t really need to have my back washed…but I think that Mondo might—”.

“Out of the question!” Taka abruptly shouted, pointing furiously at the lucky student. “I cannot allow your back to go unwashed! What kind of role-model would I be if I didn’t assist you in your time of need?! Now, please be silent while I work on you!”

At that, Taka abruptly stood up and began circling around behind a very terrified Makoto. Instantly,
the lucky student protested, “Hold on, I really think that Mondo—”.

“Don’t worry about me, man.” Mondo’s usually powerful tone seemed dull and lifeless as he interrupted Makoto, prompting the lucky student to shoot his gaze over to the biker. The look in Makoto’s eyes practically begged for help but Mondo didn’t seem to realize that, too dejected by his former friend’s attitude to notice. Slowly, Mondo turned away from both of them and said, “I can take care of myself. Makoto…you, uh…you just enjoy it…alright?”

Rinsing the suds from his brown locks, the biker somberly stood up and prepared to head for the bath. Just before he left, Mondo glanced over his shoulder, the hurt and guilt in his eyes almost unbearable.

…There was no greater time that Makoto wanted to shout, ‘No, that’s wrong!’, but knew in his heart that, just as there was no way to deny his fate, nothing he could say would be effective in encouraging the biker.

An instant later, Makoto heard Taka place a stool just behind him and heard him sit down. Almost instinctively, he squeezed his eyes shut and prepared to face punishment for interfering in their business. However, as luck would have it, just as he felt he was going to collapse under the pressure of trying to help those two reconcile, a new player entered the game.

“How long do you three plan to play out this trite little act?”

“Whoa…Mondo’s just as manly as I thought…”

Hina whispered as she peered through the crack in the bathhouse door. She was crouched low and had to glance upwards but since she was kneeling, it wasn’t uncomfortable for her. Her eyes bulged as she took in Taka’s wet appearance, feeling a thumping in her chest as he sprayed water down his surprisingly toned body.

“Look at the muscles on Taka! I thought brainy kids were supposed to look skinny and boney… kinda like Makoto…”

“It is indeed a shock,” Celeste momentarily concurred before shifting her focus to glance around the room. The gambler stood next to Hina but leaned in and peered through the crack just above her head. “However, I do not find Makoto’s lacking physique completely unappealing. At the very least, I would not feel threatened if he tried to resort to violence.”

“M-Makoto wouldn’t do something like that!” Hina protested, also adjusting her gaze to glance at the lucky student. “I mean, yeah, he’s boney and stuff but it’s what’s on the inside that counts!”

“That’s just what ugly people say!” Toko suddenly inserted herself into the conversation, growling a bit as her eyes darted, searching only for her Master. She stood on the other side of Hina and was peering through the crack above the spot where Celeste was viewing. “B-Besides, who would want s-someone as pathetic as M-Makoto…”

“Hey, you take that back!” Hina instantly defended, looking away for a moment to glare at Toko. “Yeah, he doesn’t have a rock star figure but at least he’s a lot nicer than that jerk you’re fantasizing over!”

“Hmph, w-whatever! Just d-don’t forget your promise!” Toko felt the need to remind them. “If M-Master Byakuya c-comes into view, you b-both have to look away!”
“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

Hina held in a sigh, now the slightest bit curious to see if Byakuya’s half-naked glory would be as miraculous as the rude writer claimed. Then again, the swimmer didn’t want to take the risk of even being physically attracted to that bastard. So, for her, it was an easy promise to keep.

“But of course,” Celeste quickly acquiesced, remembering her own proposal. “However, if he elects to stay out of view, then it should be no problem to—”.

“There he is!!!”

Almost without realizing it, the man of the hour walked into their line of sight. Reflexively, both Hina and Celeste managed to pull themselves away, but not before sampling a view of the Togami Heir’s masterfully crafted abs. Sparing only a moment to look away and guarantee that her classmates had kept her word, Toko immediately pressed her face into the crack, trying to get as close to her Master as possible.

Hina sighed as she and Celeste were forced to avert their gazes, with the swimmer angrily glaring up at Toko…who was actually drooling over the sight of that heartless asshole’s half-nude body! Celeste didn’t seem as perturbed as Hina had expected, merely smiling pleasantly as she waited. If she was frustrated, it didn’t show at all as the gambler patiently bided her time by twirling a finger through a few strands of her hair.

Slightly shuffling away, so that Toko’s saliva wouldn’t drip on her, Hina began to consider leaving. After all, she’d accomplished her goal and felt a lot more determined because of it. It had been an adventure, one with risks and unexpected twists. And even though she still felt a bit ashamed to have peeped, she was 100% confident that, if the situation was reversed and the girls were the ones bathing, at least some of the boys would have attempted to peep…well, maybe not Makoto, he seemed too upstanding to resort to that kind of thing. Regardless, Hina couldn’t deny that she didn’t feel quite as bad about peeping as she had at that start, especially since she hadn’t been caught.

Just as she was about to get up and depart, she heard Toko’s husky voice whisper, “Oh…Oh god…I w-wish I had…my t-t-toothbrush…!”

For some reason, that statement startled Hina greatly and she couldn’t stop herself from asking, “… Why would you want your toothbrush?”

Hina instantly regretted asking as a perverse grin overtook Toko’s face and her hand slowly began to reach down toward her nether region. And then, in a voice so filled with lust that she could barely respond, she answered:

“…It’s electric…!”

For a moment, Hina just sat there with a puzzled expression. However, as her mind quickly began to piece that statement together, her face slowly tinged a bright shade of pink as she connected all the dots, her jaw dropping as the realization of that comment hit her.

Before she could be horrified by that statement, however, a loud shout and a ferocious splash startled all three of the girls.

“How long do you three plan to play out this trite little act?” Byakuya Togami, the unexpected answer to Makoto’s prayers, suddenly made himself known.
As with everyone else, the Affluent Progeny was clothed in but a single towel. His glasses, however, had been left behind, somehow giving him an even more menacing appearance. As expected of someone of his lineage, Byakuya’s body was also fairly toned, though it seemed to be more sculpted and refined than that of any other man in this bathhouse.

Makoto had never been happier to be interrupted by Byakuya, evident by the expression of utter joy that overtook his face as Taka turned away from him and instead chose to address the Togami Heir.

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean, Byakuya Togami?!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted, clenching his fist and gesturing emphatically.

“Hmph,” was all the Togami Heir muttered before narrowing his gaze at Taka. “If you want to have your little lover’s spat, then that’s your business. However, I, for one, am tired of being subjected to your childish antics while trying to enjoy the baths.”

“Childish antics’?! How dare you accuse me of such frivolity!” Chairman Ishimaru spat back, pointing furiously at the Affluent Progeny. “One must fully devote himself to his duties each and every day! That includes time spent bathing! And when I noticed that Makoto did not know the proper cleaning method, I graciously—”

“Again, you continue to act like nothing more than a spoiled child,” Byakuya harshly countered, stunning and silencing the Moral Compass. “Your constant chatter makes it impossible to enjoy the baths in peace and quiet. Even the rabble have managed to keep quiet, for once in their lives.”

As he said that, he glanced over his shoulder and sneered. Following his gaze, Taka peered around him to see Hiro and Hifumi pleasantly enjoying the large bath, although they had paused in order to watch the confrontation between the Disciplinary Committee Chairman and the Affluent Progeny.

“The point is, you are disruptive.” Byakuya’s harsh words cut deep into Taka, who flinched at being told off. Seeing that his words were having effect, the Togami Heir continued, “If you cannot learn to respectfully control yourself, then perhaps you should vacate the baths—”

“Hey, leave the poor guy alone!” Both of them stopped and turned to see Mondo, already cracking his knuckles, glaring at them. Well, he was actually just glaring at Byakuya but it was hard to tell with his long hair framing his face. However, as the biker drew closer to them, he towered over the Affluent Progeny and said, “If he wants to shout and make a scene, that’s his problem. If you can’t take it then maybe you outta be the one to leave, asshole!”

Rather than being relieved, Taka’s expression darkened as Mondo came to his aid, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists. His intense aura flared and just when it seemed that he was about to explode with disciplinary rage, a nervous voice cut in and stopped him.

“Look, let’s all just calm down, guys!” Makoto finally entered the conversation, trying to defuse the tension. “We came here to enjoy the baths. Not to fight!”

“Tell that to the bastard who hangs their classmates by a fucking electric cord!” Mondo couldn’t stop himself from shouting, his anger finally reaching its peak.

Byakuya didn’t initially respond to Mondo’s threats, instead deciding to viciously narrow his gaze at the biker. However, after a few moments of evaluation, the Togami Heir unexpectedly smirked and shifted his gaze back over to Taka.

“How quaint. It seems that the Disciplinary Chairman needs to have thugs fight his battles for him. It’s unfortunate that you are so powerless that you need traitorous scum defending you—”.
“How dare you…” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru seethed. “How dare you make such an accusation! I have no need for help from lowly and pathetic delinquents who cannot understand how much they have wronged us!”

As those words hit him, Mondo felt as if all his strength left his body. His legs shook and he struggled to keep standing. His eyes widened and became unfocused. Taka’s harsh words echoed though his already war torn psyche, and the biker couldn’t find the willpower to even deny such a statement. And the horrible thing was, he didn’t even want to refute it. No…it was more like he didn’t feel that he had the right to…

Mondo was so affected by Taka’s words that he didn’t notice Byakuya triumphantly smirking at him, feeling accomplished for tricking the Disciplinary Committee Chairman into destroying the biker for him. Just as he felt that his victory was assured, a relaxed voice suddenly called out to them.

“Uh, guys…it’s kinda hard to enjoy the bath with all that shouting,” Hiro spoke up from his spot in the bath, keeping his hair out of the water as much as possible, which everyone counted as a blessing considering he refused to wash it beforehand. Standing up and heading toward the end of the large bath, Hiro displayed his below average physique for them, a towel wrapped around his waist. “I mean, yeah, we’re all a bit on edge but c’mon guys! Let’s all just enjoy the bath together!”

“Indeed!” Hifumi instantly concurred, pulling himself out of the bath and walking toward them. His large and bulbous physique truly stood out amongst the other boys, his man-boobs jiggling with each step he took. “Now is not the time for arguing! Now is the time for—whooohoooooaa!!!”

Suddenly, Hifumi slipped on a small puddle of water. He tried to steady himself but ended up falling over to the side. Fortunately, the overweight student landed back into the large bath he’d just exited. Unfortunately, however, it caused a huge splash to shoot up, with water flying in all directions. One particularly wide line of water came barreling directly toward Byakuya.

With a slight huff, the Togami Heir side-stepped and easily avoided the oncoming water, letting it splash onto the floor without so much as touching him. Turning back to glare at Hifumi, he openly scoffed and said, “Perhaps you should have paid more attention to where you were going instead of meaninglessly—”.

Just then, Byakuya felt an odd breeze…down below. Very slowly, he glanced down to see that, to his embarrassment, his towel had come loose during his evasion of the water. As that white drying sheet fell to the floor, he couldn’t stop the foreboding feeling that suddenly overtook him.

“What’s going on?! What’s happening?!” Hina furiously whispered to Toko, whose eyes bulged at the sight just beyond the door.

However, the perverted writer couldn’t find the words to speak, she was lost…no, mesmerized by the once in a lifetime view that she had managed to claim. After so many sleepless nights imagining her Master’s majesty…she could now finally include that part of his physique in the ‘novel’ she was writing based upon Byakuya and his greatness!

“Finally…” she whispered to herself. “I have seen Master’s f-fat stack for m-myself…”

Unintentionally overhearing her, Hina’s eyes widened and her face flushed as she realized what must have happened. And even though a part of her was tempted to look, she kept herself at bay for the sake of the promise she’d made.
Toko’s glasses slowly began to fog up, not from the steam, but from her intense panting. Even though it was hard to see, she could still make out the entirety of her Master Byakuya’s figure… including his newly revealed area! And it was for her eyes only! No one else would be able to claim that they had—

“…Well, it seems Byakuya’s ego is well founded.”

Reflexively, Toko flinched as she heard those words. Slowly turning, her teeth gritted tightly all the while, she was horrified to discover that Celestia Ludenberg had resumed her position below her, peering through the crack in the door with a mischievous grin on her face.

“How DARE she defile Master Byakuya with her filthy eyes!!”

Fighting to keep her rage from bursting forth, and possibly getting them all discovered, Toko seethed through gritted teeth, “Y-You promised! How could you b-break your w-word!!”

Without looking away, Celeste answered, “As promised, I did avert my gaze. However, we never discussed for how long I would need to do so…”

Toko felt a vein in her head pop as she realized how much of a fool she was being made of! However, before she could even come up with a retort, Hina loudly gasped, drawing both girl’s attention.

“Toko…whatever you do…don’t touch your nose…” Hina quietly warned, scooting as far away from her as quickly and quietly as possible.

Celeste instantly turned and saw exactly what Hina had meant. Her crimson eyes widening, she also calmly encouraged, “…Perhaps it is time for us to depart. Now. Quietly.”

Unfortunately, their insistence only enticed Toko to reach a hand up and touch the area just under her nose. To her shock, she felt something warm and sticky there, but it didn’t feel like mucus at all. Lifting her hand up to eye level, Toko’s eyes widened and then immediately dilated.

“…B-Blood…?”

Before she even realized it, her body was already tumbling to floor…

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! How was that for fanservice?! But what will become of Hina, and Celeste now that a certain murderous fiend is on the way? Will the boys discover their peepers? Will Makoto ever get his back washed?! You’ll have to tune into the next chapter to find out!

So…DR 3 episodes keep getting delayed and I’m sure we’re all pissed about it. But let’s remember that mistakes happen…and Japan had a nasty storm that caused the delay. Hopefully we won’t have to wait for the next episode on the day it’s to be posted!
Also, I wrote a short one-shot not long ago! It’s about Hina participating in a historic event! If you’re a fan of Hina, be sure to check it out! It’s called ‘Diving Donuts’.

As always, reviews/comments are very much appreciated and inspire me to work harder and help me smile more! Thank you to everyone who reviews/comments and to everyone who has favorited, followed and more! You all are the reasons I keep going so don’t hesitate to let me know what you think about how the story’s progressing!

Until next time, I hope you all continue to enjoy the story and keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Part 2 of the long-awaited bathhouse scene...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“…oooooh, it’s all steamy here,” Genocide Jill observed as she lay flat on her back on the floor. “It’d be a great place for a romantic murder scene! Gyahahahahahahahaha—”.

Suddenly, Jill’s laughter ceased as she heard scurrying. Immediately kicking her legs up, she leapt upward and onto her feet, her hands already bearing two pairs of Genoscissors. However, much to her surprise, she couldn’t see anything. It took her a moment to realize that it was because the steam had fogged up her glasses, rendering her vision useless.

Instead, she chose to simply listen carefully for any sudden movements.

Hina froze in place as Genocide Jill shot up, bearing her deadly weaponry in both hands. Cold sweat trickled down her face as she feared the grizzly fate that was certainly coming for her.

Just behind her, Celeste also remained unmoving, grasping tightly onto Hina’s sleeve. The swimmer wasn’t sure if it was because the gambler was frightened or simply intended to use her as a shield! A thought that would have upset Hina more if not for the fact that, if their positions were reversed, she’d be cowering behind Celeste instead!

They both had tried to quietly flee the scene, only to be forcefully halted as Genocide Jill had resurfaced. And now, they were caught between two potential disasters: be discovered by the boys and face punishment for peeping…or get cut to pieces by a sadistic psychopath! Honestly, Hina was weighing her options when the serial killer suddenly tilted her head, as if confused.

Just then, Hina noticed that Jill wasn’t actually looking in their direction, in fact, she seemed to be silently listening for something. Instantly, the swimmer’s gaze shot to the serial killer’s glasses, and she let out a relieved but quiet sigh as she noted they were fogged over. Just as she felt herself begin to relax, a finger poked at her shoulder.

Resisting the urge to jump, since the poking was unexpected, Hina slowly looked over her shoulder to see Celeste very softly motioning for her to remain still before pressing a finger to her lips, urging her to stay silent as well. The swimmer replied with a weak nod before cautiously glancing back toward Genocide Jill…praying that somehow, some of Makoto’s luck had rubbed off on her…

After almost an entire minute of waiting…and hearing nothing, Genocide Jill allowed herself to sigh and relax.
“…Nothing. Ohhhh, what a disappointment. I was hoping I was here for more than just a bath, but I guess I’m not so lucky…”

Her long tongue slipped out and hung low, a low groan escaping the serial killer as she realized what had caused her other self to faint. The copper smell of blood invaded her nostrils and her tongue unintentionally lapped up a bit of the pink fluid that had dripped onto her chin. The unforgettable taste of her own blood made her giddy and curious, wondering what had caused her other side to get such a furious nose-bleed.

However, her curiosity only lasted a few moments before she shrugged and said, “Eh, whatever. I’m pretty sure I’m in the bathhouse…may as well enjoy myself…did Miss Morose remember to bring the toothbrush—?”

“Who’s there?!”

Genocide Jill’s entire body ceased as she heard the voice of her beloved Master nearby. All of a sudden, it all made sense. She was in the bathhouse, with Master, which meant naked, which meant Miss Morose got a nose-bleed, which meant it was finally her turn to play with Master!!

Empowered by that enlightening thought, her face instantly turned toward the direction her Master’s voice originated from, only for her cheek to loudly smack into the side of a door. Groaning and irritated that something was obstructing her pursuit of her Master, the serial killer did what any motivated woman would do when pursuing her man…destroy all obstacles in her path!

“To a woman in love…there is no such thing as doors! Gyahahahahahahahahahahahaha!!!”

With a mighty shout, she lifted her leg and smashed her foot into the wooden obstruction, removing the annoying obstacle that was preventing her from seeing her Master. She took a moment to wipe her glasses, why she chose to do this now and not before didn’t register with her. Finally readjusting her eyewear, she caught sight of the most beautiful image she could imagine…

“MAAAASSSTEEERRRR!!!”

“Byakuya Togami! Replace your towel this instant! Public indecency will not be tolerated in a school—”.

“Quiet!” the Togami Heir harshly interrupted Taka’s tirade, leaving the Disciplinary Chairman stunned into silence. Without taking his eyes away from the changing room door, Byakuya firmly continued, “Are you all as deaf and stupid as you look?…Can you really not hear it?…Just beyond the door…”

Taken aback by the sudden turn of events, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru focused his hearing, as did all of the other boys, listening for what their classmate was trying to indicate. And just as he’d said, a strange sound could be heard from just beyond the changing room door.

“…gyahahahahahahaha……nothing…what…disappoint…pretty sure…. bathhouse….toothbrush…”

“It kinda sounds like…a person?” Makoto noted, making all of them nod in agreement.

“Indeed, it does…” Taka agreed, tightening the towel around his waist as he prepared to fulfill his duty as the Disciplinary Committee Chair—
“Who’s there?!”

Byakuya’s authoritative voice called out, demanding whomever was hidden to show themselves. Taka inwardly growled, feeling that it should have been he who demanded those hidden present themselves for justice. However, he knew that shouting such a thing now would only be redundant and show-boaty, two things he certainly was not! Instead, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman steeled himself for whatever was about to appear before him!

At first, nothing happened. Then, a loud bang echoed, then silence…but a moment later…

“To a woman in love…there is no such thing as doors! Gyahahahahahahahahahahahaha!!!”

All of the boys tensed as they all recognized the voice of a certain murderous fiend screaming for attention. As they turned toward the doors leading to the changing room, the doors burst open, nearly becoming unhinged in the process. Standing there, scissors snipping in both hands, stood Genocide Jill, her mouth overflowing with saliva and a trail of blood leaking from her nose.

“MAAAASSSTEEERRR!!!”

Makoto’s eyes widened and he gasped in surprise, frozen in place from her sudden intrusion. Hiro instantly dove back into the bath and swam to the farthest spot away from the entrance, a look of pure horror on his face. Hifumi let out an ear piercing scream before dunking his head under the water, his shriek causing bubbles to form. Mondo, while looking shocked and a bit terrified, also found the courage to clench his fists, seemingly ready for a fight. Taka’s aura flared, the white of his hair shimmering while his eyes burned with disciplinary rage, a blue pad of paper somehow materializing in his hands.

Strangely enough, Byakuya showed almost no hint of shock or surprise…and even more puzzling was how calm he appeared to be. In fact, without so much as a tremble, the Affluent Progeny bent his knees and effortlessly retrieved his towel, rewrapping it around his waist without so much as a groan. Once done, all he did was stare, almost emotionlessly, at Genocide Jill as disappointment settled onto her face.

The serial killer’s eyes locked onto target, particularly the towel that obstructed her view, and instantly sped toward Byakuya. She was practically a blur as she dashed, her long tongue fluttering behind her as she raced toward her goal. Her scissors snipped wildly and even Taka could see that her lewd perversions had gone too far!

Not only that, given her history with killing her objects of affection, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman knew that his classmate was in imminent danger! He knew he needed to act fast and save Byakuya! Even if the man was a rude, selfish, incomprehensible miscreant that had deceived them all before…that didn’t mean that Taka could abandon his position as Disciplinary Committee Chairman and simply let the Affluent Progeny be torn to shred by—wait, what was she doing?!

To Taka’s utter shock, Jill suddenly lowered herself close to the ground, her scissors scratching across the floor as her eyes focused solely on the towel around Byakuya’s waist.

“A woman in love won’t be defeated by a towel!! Miss Morose got a full view and so shall I!”

Genocide Jill shouted, angling her scissors at Byakuya’s towel and away from his vital organs…well, most of them anyway…

Dumbfounded and stunned by her perverse nature, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru hesitated, unsure if his classmate was truly in danger or not. He knew it was his duty to put a stop to this indecency, but how was he to contend with a known serial killer without proper strategy?
That single moment of hesitation was all Genocide Jill needed to close in on her target, ready to do what any woman who was in love would have done in her situation. However, just as it seemed that she was going to tear the towel to shreds with her Genoscissors, her Master raised his hand.

“Stop.”

As if hit by a freight train, Genocide Jill came to an abrupt halt, her scissors only inches away from his towel. Slowly, the serial killer stared up at him, shivering with pleasure as his cold eyes bore into her very soul. And then, just as firmly as before, he gave her another command.

“Sit.”

Like a dog before its Master, Genocide Jill plopped her rear on the ground, staring up at him with feverish expectation in her eyes. All of the men were stunned into absolute silence as the previously feral serial killer now appeared to be nothing more than an obedient pet at the beck and call of its Master.

Taka, in particular, was left virtually speechless…for about half a second.

“Miss Genocide Jill! How dare you burst in here while the men are bathing! Such unforgivable actions cannot go unpunished!” Shooting his gaze toward the other men, he ordered, “Everyone! Please continue to enjoy the bath while I detain—”.

“That won’t be necessary,” Byakuya cut him off, drawing many suspicious glances from the other men. However, the Togami Heir ignored them and instead chose to glance at the now open doorway to the changing room. “There may have been others. I suggest you—”.

Before he finished, Taka abruptly sped past him, shouting at the top of his lungs as he charged like a madman through the changing room and out into the hall beyond. As he left, Byakuya let a wicked smirk overtake his lips.

“Even in his current state, he is easily manipulated…interesting.”

Taka rampaged through the changing room, nearly tripping over scattered articles of clothing, which reminded him to write up all of the boys, aside from himself and Byakuya, for disorderly conduct! However, he had more pressing matters to deal with! After all, peeping was one of the most unforgivable crimes a student could commit!

“Do they not realize that by engaging in such filthy conduct they are hampering their educational career? Peeping is an offense punishable by expulsion or worse…prison! How can they so frivolously throw away their chances at succeeding in life?! Whomever they are…they must be made aware of the gravity of their crimes!”

Just as he finished searching the changing room, the sound of furious footsteps echoed just outside the bathhouse entrance. Snapping his head in that direction, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman sped off to catching the culprit that put their future in jeopardy for a few cheap thrills!

Pushing aside the curtains of the bathhouse entrance, Taka dashed out into the lobby only to came to an abrupt halt. Standing before him, her towering figure poised and ready, stood Sakura Ogami.

“M-Miss Sakura Ogami! What are you doing here?!” he instantly demanded, his tone harsh and cruel.
“Hina, Celeste and I were having tea when we heard the commotion. I told them to stay behind while I investigated. Is everything alright?” the martial artist asked calmly, but obviously very concerned.

Unfortunately, rather than appreciate her concern, confusion overtook the Disciplinary Chairman as he stared at her massive figure.

“No…can’t be possible…Sakura of all people? Was she the one peeping? Or am I perhaps mistaken in believing that Genocide Jill had cohorts? After all, she usually works alone, doesn’t she? But I am positive that I heard more than a single pair of footsteps—”.

“Kiyotaka Ishimaru, can you please tell me what has happened?” Sakura asked cautiously, her tone deep and soothing. “At the very least…can you tell me if everyone is alright?”

As Sakura spoke his full name, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman snapped back into reality. Absorbing her words and taking a moment to process them, he nervously cleared his throat before answering, “It…It is nothing to be concerned over! Genocide Jill was just discovered peeping on the men in the bath. We have detained her and everyone is alright!”

As he relayed that information, Sakura visibly relaxed, letting out a breath she must have been holding for a while now. However, an instant later, her visage hardened and she folded her arms tightly.

“Do you require assistance in detaining her? If so, I would be more than willing to help. She is quite dangerous after all,” the martial artist innocently offered.

Despite how good natured her proposition was, Taka knew that he could not accept it. With all of the men still mostly nude, it would be inappropriate for a woman to enter the baths, even if it was to detain someone as despicable as Genocide Jill.

Placing his hands on his hips and puffing out his chest, Taka’s aura flared as he replied, “While your offer is appreciated, I believe that everything is under control! Byakuya managed to detain her and now all that remains is to administer her punishment!”

At the mention of punishment, Sakura’s eyes narrowed and her voice darkened as she asked, “And what kind of punishment do you have in mind?”

No matter how hard he tried, Taka couldn’t keep himself from slightly flinching as her words reached him. Her tone was a mixture of concern and aggression, as if warning him that she would not tolerate any kind of violence. A part of Taka honestly felt relieved by her attitude, for it showed that she cared deeply for her classmate, regardless of their crimes. However, it bothered him that she felt empowered enough to talk down to him, an act that he could not ignore!

“However, reprimanding her might lead to further conflict later on. So, instead of reminding her of her place, I shall simply prove myself more capable than she is!”

Gathering his resolve, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru smiled confidently and said, “Fear not! I would never resort to anything too extreme! Instead, I shall follow the path of justice and dispatch judgment in a matter befitting that of the Disciplinary Committee! Ahahahahaha!”

As his powerful laughter echoed in the nigh empty lobby, Sakura let a smile overtake her as she nodded firmly. “Very well then, I shall leave the matter in your capable hands,” she said to him with a slight bow of her head.

For the first time since he’d taken up the mantle of Disciplinary Committee Chairman, Kiyotaka
Ishimaru felt a swell of pride for himself. He knew that having such feelings was counter-intuitive for his position, but he could not deny that it made him feel even more empowered. Her evident confidence in his abilities reinvigorated him and the Moral Compass couldn’t help but bow in return.

“I thank you for your confidence in me!” he shouted as he lifted his head and turned back toward the bathhouse. Glancing over his shoulder, he smirked a bit and finished, “Let us survive this experience together!”

“Agreed,” Sakura replied with a warm smile.

With a final nod of approval, Taka swiftly departed, heading back into the bathhouse. He never even noticed the two small figures that had hid in Sakura’s shadow during their entire exchange.

Less than an instant after Taka left, Sakura’s visage hardened angrily and she slowly turned to glare down at the two girls that she had struggled to keep out of the Disciplinary Committee Chairman’s view.

Hina had pressed against the marital artist’s back to keep from being discovered and Celeste had huddled herself just behind her, using her arms to simultaneously hold down the sides of her gothic dress and hair extensions, effectively conceal her. However, now that the threat had retreated, the two previously peeping girls nervously stared up at Sakura’s imposing figure, knowing that they had traded one form of ‘punishment’ for another.

“S-Sakura…I, uh…” Hina nervously tried to find the words to explain but could find none.

Without a single word, Sakura held up one massive hand to silence her before pointing to the cafeteria that lay just behind them. Knowing their fate was sealed, Hina and Celeste slowly made their way across the lobby and into the cafeteria, Sakura marching behind them with a scrutinous gaze.

Once inside, Sakura took one last glance around the lobby before closing the cafeteria doors. With that done, the martial artist turned and slowly walked directly up to both of them, folded her arms and glared.

“Tell me everything that happened.”

Hina and Celeste shared a guilty look before the swimmer took a brave step forward. Slightly trembling under her friend’s disappointed gaze, Hina slowly began to recount their ‘adventure’ into the bathhouse.

“It…it all started when I found this weird Dynamo thing in the student store…”

When Taka returned to the bathhouse, he was surprised to see that little to nothing had changed. Byakuya stood guard over Genocide Jill, who was still drooling over his perfectly sculpted abs, with the other students keeping themselves at a good distance.

Hifumi and Hiro were wading at the far end of the bath, too afraid to try and leave while Jill was in the room. Makoto, on the other hand, stood near Mondo next to the wash station near the bath. And while it was obvious that the lucky student wanted to help in some way, it was also apparent that
there was little he could do. So, in the end, he was forced to stand at a distance while the situation was resolved by those far more suited to the task.

“A wise choice,” Taka noted, making his way to stand next to Byakuya.

“There were no other perpetrators. Sakura Ogami came to investigate and I doubt she would have hidden the culprits!” the Disciplinary Committee Chairman relayed to everyone before turning his attention to their captive. “It seems that Genocide Jill acted alone in this case!”

Instead of acknowledging his words, Byakuya chose to continue glaring down at Jill, who continued to lovingly stare up at him. Finally, the Affluent Progeny asked, “I’m only going to say this once, so listen well. What were you doing here?”

“I don’t know, peeping? At least Miss Morose was, I think?” the serial killer answered plainly.

“Was there anyone with you?” the Affluent Progeny poignantly asked.

“Dunno. My glasses were all _steamy_ when I woke up and I only cleaned them once I was sure Master was in view!” she answered, a twinkle in her usually disturbing eyes.

“I see,” the Togami Heir replied, disappointed in her ineptitude. “And why did you decide to break down the door?”

“To see Master’s penis!”

Genocide Jill blunt confession made each and every man in that bathhouse flinch…some from fear, others from sympathy…but mostly because her very direct comment actually made Byakuya hesitate. And although they could never admit it, it was satisfying to see the great Byakuya Togami fear for his ‘legacy’.

However, it took the Affluent Progeny less than half a second to regain his composure, somewhat, as he cleared his throat and prepared to address her.

“That…is already evident,” Byakuya angrily scoffed, lifting his chin and condescendingly staring down his nose at her. “What I meant was, why did you choose to reveal yourself? Surely, you knew it would result in punishment?”

Suddenly, a dreamy look encompassed Genocide Jill’s eyes and she drooled more profusely as she answered, “Any punishment you personally delivered to me, Master, would be cherished and remembered long into the distance future…”

Unable to keep from shuddering, Byakuya huffed to hide his growing uncomfortableness and said, “And if I were to leave the matter up to the Disciplinary Committee Chairman, what would you say to that?”

At the sound of his title, Taka stepped forward and glared down at her without a hint of mercy in his eyes. However, much to his shock, the serial killer slowly began to huff until it became an outright chuckle.

“Eh, punishment – shunishment! Anything Rule-Nazi comes up with can’t be that horrible! Unless you’re trying to ‘study’ me to death! Eyahahahahaha!”

Genocide Jill’s chuckle turned into outright laughter, mocking Taka even further. Before he could interrupt her, however, she suddenly ceased her laughter and gave them both a semi-serious expression.
“Besides, it’s not like peeping is illegal or anything! Trespassing *maybe* but not peeping! That’s just immoral…and I am *all about immorality*, if you know what I mean!! Gyahahahahahahaha—!”

“Your logic is flawed!”

The entire room tensed as those intense words shook the air. The atmosphere suddenly felt akin to a class trial, especially with that ferocious rebuttal. Instinctively, everyone turned their glances to Makoto, only to see him a look of shock on his face. However, the lucky student was in his typical ‘No, that’s wrong’ pose, finger pointed and everything, as if he had been poised to shout his catchphrase but had been cut off.

Only then did the men notice someone else was intensely pointing at Genocide Jill…his oppressive aura flaring as his eyes burned ferociously.

“Both peeping and trespassing are illegal in Japan!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru chastised as if he were prosecuting her in a trial. “Just because you choose to ignore the laws of our society does not mean that they do not apply to you! And just so we are clear! You may have eluded the justice system of our society but you will not evade punishment at this school!”

As Taka’s tirade reached its peak, Genocide Jill slowly turned toward him, tilting her head to the side with a combination of confusion and frustration. If the Moral Compassed noticed this, he didn’t acknowledge it as he continued to berate her.

“I have tried to be lenient with you because of your…‘condition’, but I’m afraid your actions have left me with no other recourse!” Taka lifted up the blue pad of paper and pen he’d somehow managed to smuggle into the bathhouse with him. With a few swift jottings, he wrote up a notice, tore it from the pad and held it out to her. “As with Junko Enoshima, from this point on, you will be confined to your room! Further violations will result in harsher punish—!”

Before anyone could blink, the blue slip in Taka’s hand exploded into confetti. All that remained in the Disciplinary Chairman’s hand was a tiny, scrunched up portion of the notice. As the remaining fragments of the paper fluttered to the floor, he looked down to see Genocide Jill furiously staring up at him, her scissors still snipping at the air menacingly.

“…Nobody puts Jill in a corner…!!” the serial killer seethed, continuing to remain seated in front of her Master. Her long tongue flicked up at him, as if flipping him off, as she continued, “You can’t keep me from my Master! None of you can! No one can stop the Ultimate Murderous Fiend! Nobody—!”

“Be silent. Your voice irritates me.”

Byakuya’s authoritative voice cut through her tirade like butter, ushering the serial killer into near silence.

“…yes, master…” she whispered before completely shutting her mouth, even going so far as to roll her lengthy tongue up into her orifice.

Once the beast was silenced, Byakuya turned his attention over to Taka. The fiery eyes of the Disciplinary Chairman met the cold and calculating cyan orbs of the Affluent Progeny, both of them vying for dominance. However, with years of business experience behind him, the Togami Heir’s presence suddenly overtook the Moral Compass’ with a snide smirk.

Not wanting to be outdone, Taka narrowed his gaze and asked, “Just what do you think you’re doing, Byakuya Togami? Don’t tell me you wish to protect this…criminal!”
At the mention of protection, the Togami Heir’s eyes flashed dangerously, a quiet rage forming behind his eyes.

“Hardly. If we were not in such an extreme situation, I would have had her disposed of long before now,” Byakuya answered plainly, not even sparing the serial killer a glance.

Unfortunately, for him, his cold indifference made Jill pant like a dog in heat, which was the opposite of Byakuya had wanted. But now wasn’t the time to focus on the useless actions of a mongrel like her.

“However, given the nature of our circumstances, I believe that you are overlooking an interesting opportunity,” Byakuya told him plainly, his voice carrying the air of authority they had all become accustomed to. “Instead of locking her away, which would only serve to intensify her urges, it would be better to direct her potential in a more beneficial way.”

Confused by his suggestion, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman raised an eyebrow and asked, “And how exactly do you intend to punish her while directing her potential?”

With a dastardly grin, Byakuya answered, “Like so…”

In one fluid movement, the Togami Heir turned and faced the Ultimate Murderous Fiend, a hand kept firmly on his towel to keep any more ‘accidents’ from occurring. As expected, the serial killer instantly focused her attention on him, salivating as she anticipated receiving her ‘punishment’ from her Master.

It was then that a cruel smile overtook Byakuya’s lips…

“Your punishment has been decided, Genocide Jill,” the Affluent Progeny proclaimed, his harsh words only serving to entice the serial killer further. That is, until he laid out his decry, “You will stand guard outside the bathhouse until we are all finished bathing.”

“Unacceptable!” Taka expectedly shouted in protest. “We cannot force a woman to perform such a duty! It goes against public morals and—!”

“Shut up, Tick Tock!” Genocide Jill abruptly shouted, startling the Moral Compass. Snipping her scissors rapidly, the serial killer pointed the ends directly at him before finishing, “Master is punishing me, so shut up and take it…or else!”

Stunned into silence by the serial killer’s fierce attitude, Taka was unable to finish his thought before Byakuya resumed the detailing of her punishment.

“As I was saying, Genocide Jill, you will stand guard outside and keep any and all intruders from entering. However, only non-lethal means are allowed. The use of your scissors is forbidden.”

Hearing that decry, the serial killer’s attitude sunk a bit but not enough to stifle her enthusiastic grin. Seeing that, Byakuya felt it was time to drive the last nail into the proverbial coffin.

“Furthermore, you are forbidden from so much as glancing in the baths general direction. If you violate this edict…then you shall be executed.”

Surprisingly, there wasn’t much of an uproar from the men as that idea was presented. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that it was a known serial killer that would be executed, but it seemed that most of them weren’t all that perturbed by the prospect of her life coming to an abrupt end. Even Taka was silent as he pondered the idea, showing no signs of interfering, at least for the moment.
However, there was at least one student who fervently objected.

“D-Don’t you think that’s a bit extreme!” Makoto tried to interject, feeling awkward that he was the only one speaking up. “I mean, it was just a little peeping. It’s not like she tried to kill anyone—”

“Would you shut up already, Big Mac?!”

This time, all of the men were shocked to hear Genocide Jill refute the only person trying to defend her. Makoto, more than any of them, found himself speechless as the serial killer scoffed at him.

“Can’t you see that Master Byakuya has given me the all-important task of protecting his dignity! I won’t let you take this away from me!” the murderous fiend shouted once more, her words startling everyone.

“Uh, I’m not sure that’s what he meant—”, Hiro tried to say, only to have a single pair of Genoscissors fly past his face, only just missing him. With a horrified shriek, the clairvoyant backed even further away from her, cowering pitifully.

“Who asked you, you filth?! You couldn’t possibly understand the deeply rooted thought process Master Byakuya has!” Jill shouted, putting away her remaining pair of Genoscissors. “Master chose *me* to protect his innocence and I refuse to let him down! Especially after he graced me with a glance at his Fat Stack!”

All at once, all eyes fell on Byakuya, who looked more than a little terrified that the punishment he’d assigned her only brought her more pleasure. No one could tell if the moisture dripping off his hair was water or sweat, making everyone incredibly thankful that they weren’t Byakuya Togami right now.

At this time, Byakuya truly regretted not hiring that body-double student he’d heard about before coming to this school….

Biting her thumb hard enough to draw blood, Genocide Jill seethed to herself, “I am the last line of defense, keeping my Master’s purity safe while he bathes! If I were to fail in this mission, I would take my own life! Execution is a fitting punishment for failure if I let so much as a single one of those other hussies get a glance at my Master Byakuya!!”

Without so much as waiting for leave, the serial killer leapt to her feet and dashed back toward the changing room doors. Along the way, she effortlessly grabbed the slightly unhinged doors and somehow managed to pop them back into place, using her scissors to refasten the door screws back into position.

Once that was completed, she prepared to depart through the newly fixed doorway, but stopped. Without glancing back, clearly remembering the conditions for her punishment, Genocide Jill called out to her Master:

“My Prince! You may bathe in peace knowing that none shall see your glory…save for these fools! Gyahahahahahahahahahahahaha!”

And with that, the serial killer slammed the refitted doors into place, leaving the men alone to bath in privacy once more.

Unfortunately, after that little distraction, none of the men quite felt comfortable anymore. It was as if
her invisible presence was watching over them, making most of them utterly incapable of enjoying themselves anymore.

“…Perhaps we should consider retiring for the evening?” Hifumi proposed, already getting out of the water.

“Uh, do you really wanna go out there with that crazy bitch keeping watching?” Mondo pointed out, not feeling ready to exit quite yet.

“…Good point,” the fanfic creator sadly concurred, slinking back into the water, staring at his already prune-looking fingertips. He’d been in the bath for so long that his overworked hands were already shriveled, a fate worse than death for a manga creator. A melancholy expression decorated his face as he said to himself, “But…how I am supposed to create works of art with hands like these?”

Unfortunately, no one overheard his plight as they all settled in for what appeared to be an extended stay. As they slowly got back into their washing and bathing routine, an annoyed voice abruptly spoke up.

“Great job, asshole.” Mondo’s accusatory tone drew the men’s attention as the biker glared at Byakuya. “Thanks to you, now we can’t even enjoy the bath in peace!”

Drawing the slightest bit of comfort from his displeasure, Byakuya scoffed and said, “I fail to see how her intrusion was my fault. If anything, you should blame our Disciplinary Chairman for failing to keep her out in the first place.”

Hearing slander against his former friend, Mondo was about to tear into the jerk but was swiftly cut off.

“Byakuya…you are, unfortunately, correct!” Taka abruptly shouted to everyone, forcing them to turn to him. “I did not take my role as Disciplinary Committee Chairman as serious as I should have! I shall rectify that immediately!”

A chill ran down each of the boy’s spines at hearing that, and only Makoto found the courage to ask, “Uh…what exactly do you plan to do?”

Instead of answering the question directly, Taka walked over and stood atop one of the wash stools, towering above everyone else. Once he was certain that they were all watching him, the Disciplinary Chairman addressed them.

“Listen up, everyone! From now on, there will be a strict schedule for bathing time for men and women in this bath! Obviously we cannot trust certain students to honor the moral code of our society! So, I shall create a schedule for us all to follow! Furthermore, anyone who does not show up for their scheduled bath shall receive detention!”

Collective shock washed over the men as they realized that they would have rather dealt with Genocide Jill’s antics than be subjected to more of Taka’s insane rules.

“T-Taka, that’s not really necessary!” Makoto tried to say, only to be cut off once more.

“Deepening bonds of fellowship is something you deem ‘unnecessary’, Makoto Naegi? Is that what you are saying?!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru countered, his aura flaring up more than ever before.

“N-No…not exactly…” the lucky student muttered, realizing it was pointless to argue.
“But! I don’t have time to bathe every day! I need to devote that time to creation of my work!” Hifumi protested, glaring angrily at Taka. Holding up his prune-like hands, he further insisted, “Not to mention that bathing for too long will hinder my creative prowess!”

“Then you will simply need to devote less time to such frivolous activities and devote more time to pursuing your educational studies!” the Moral Compass fired back before completely ignoring the fanfic creator’s increasingly infuriated expression.

“…How dare you…make a mockery of fan-art…!” Hifumi quietly seethed, doing his best to keep his rage from consuming him. “…You will…regret those words…I assure you…”

“Surely, you must be joking,” Byakuya said with a huff. “Do you not see that forcing everyone to conform to your ideals will only serve to—”.

“I am not forcing anyone to conform! Those who choose not to follow proper school guidelines will be subject to detention. If that is what they choose, then so be it! I have no control over the choices they make, after all!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru informed him, looking all too proud of his decision.

“But…” Hiro barely had time to utter before he was interrupted.

“I will hear no more excuses!” Taka flared angrily before a wide smirk crossed his face. “Fear not, classmates! With this new schedule, not only we will all bathe regularly and keep ourselves clean, we shall form bonds of trust that not even Monokuma can break! I will take it upon myself to inform the girls of this decision later, so please do not trouble yourselves over it! Instead, let us all celebrate this joyous occasion by singing songs of fellowship together! I shall start!”

As Taka’s voice screeched out the lines to one of his favorite songs, it became clear to all the men that Monokuma was becoming a far more appealing captor than the Disciplinary Committee Chairman.

All the while, Mondo couldn’t help but avert his eyes from the scene, blaming himself for making all of these horrible events come to pass.

“…and then we ran into the hall and hid behind you. And you know the rest from there…”

Hina sighed as she finished telling Sakura of her and Celeste’s ‘adventure’. By this time, the three girls were sitting at one of the tables, enjoying an enriching cup of tea that Celeste had prepared while Hina recounted their story. All the while, Sakura listened carefully and intently, not a hint of judgment on her face. However, now that it was over, a look of disappointment settled onto the martial artist’s face.

“Hina…what possessed you to go and try to pull a prank like that?”

She was careful not to mention anything about peeping, knowing that her friend wasn’t normally the type to enjoy that kind of activity. Once the question was asked though, Hina’s expression sank even further and she repeatedly sighed while trying to find words to defend herself. Finally, she started to pair words between her sighs.

“I…uh…I didn’t…I thought…it would be fun to scare them, I guess.”

More than anything, Hina seemed disappointed in herself. After all, what had started out as a
harmless prank had turned into quite an ordeal for both her and her friends. Sakura knew that, even though Hina was light-hearted and always smiling, she worried about her friends more than anything else. The fact that she had to be the one to defend Hina probably only hurt the swimmer more, which is not what she wanted.

“I’m really sorry, Sakura!” Hina abruptly bowed, tears stinging her eyes. “I never meant to put you on the spot like that! I’m so sorry!”

“I must apologize as well,” Celeste chimed in, a look of genuine guilt on her usually unreadable face. “I had meant to retrieve Hina without incident when I saw her enter the bathhouse. However…the temptation was far too great for me to pass up, and I further complicated matters. I hope you can forgive my foolishness…”

As the two girls apologized to her, Sakura felt a bit ashamed herself. She didn’t have any right to criticize them for their actions. After all, she defended them and outright lied to Taka to do it. Even if it was for good intentions, she had lied to her classmate…again. It sickened her that it was becoming so easy to lie to all of them. She remembered a time when she was almost incapable of lying to anyone, finding honesty to be the most virtuous trait she possessed. If her old self were to see her now…she would have certainly been ashamed…

“…It is fine,” she eventually said to them, trying to sound sincere. She must have failed, however, because Hina immediately shot her head up, her tear stained face staring right back at Sakura’s.

“No! It’s not! I should have never of gone in there! If it wasn’t for this stupid thing—!”

Hina reached into her pocket and dug around for a moment before shock encased her face. Slowly pulling her hand out to reveal that she held nothing, panic began to encroach upon her visage.

Noticing her friend’s distress, Sakura asked, “What’s wrong, Hina?”

“It’s…it’s gone!” the swimmer stammered, suddenly looking around the room. “The Kokeshi Dynamo thing! It’s gone! It was right here in my pocket but now it’s gone!”

“Oh my,” Celeste worriedly said, also glancing around. “You don’t think you may have dropped it while we fled, do you?”

“I…I don’t know!” Hina shouted, patting herself down once more just to be sure. “I can’t find it anywhere!”

In the midst of her friend’s panic, Sakura calmly said, “Hina…perhaps it is a blessing in disguise.”

A bit horrified by the notion, the swimmer immediately refuted, “But…but…what if someone else finds it?! What if they figure out I’m the one who dropped it?! What if it leads Taka back to me and he finds out that we were the ones peeping?!”

“Will he not find out anyway when he speaks with Toko?” Sakura pondered, unintentionally inciting Hina to panic further.

“Oh crap, you’re right! We’re screwed either way!” Hina screamed, slamming her head onto the table with a loud thud, whimpering as she realized that her attempt to hide her guilt were futile.

“Well…not exactly,” Celeste kindly proposed, resting a hand on the distraught Hina’s head. Slowly, the swimmer adjusted her head to glance toward the gambler, who smiled sweetly at her. “Right now, they should be contending with Genocide Jack…or is it Jill now? In either case, there is no guarantee that Toko will resurface any time soon. So we can count our blessings for the moment.”
Taking a moment to absorb that notion, Hina let it briefly comfort her before immediately moping again.

“Yeah, but what about when she does switch back to Toko eventually? Taka’s gonna find out and confine us all to our rooms…or worse!”

Somehow Celeste’s sweet smile seemed to sweeten even more as she said, “But who is to say that Toko is telling the truth about our involvement, hmm?”

Instantly recognizing what Celeste was insinuating, both Hina and Sakura turned their gazes toward her.

“What exactly are you proposing?” Sakura dared to ask, already knowing the answer.

With a confident smirk, the gambler answered, “It is simple. We all use each other as an alibi. As far as anyone else knows, we were all drinking tea, here, in the cafeteria. If Toko tried to claim otherwise, all we have to do is vouch for each other and all blame will be avoided.”

“But…isn’t that lying?” Hina pointed out, obviously not feeling comfortable with the notion.

To this, Celeste’s confident smirk vanished as she nodded. “I realize that it is not something you are comfortable with. However, sometimes, a small lie is necessary to keep peace between classmates. Or would you prefer that we threw ourselves as Taka’s feat and begged for his forgiveness?”

“No! I’m not saying that!” Hina defended, obviously feeling backed into a corner. “I just…I mean…I don’t know!”

Though distressed by her friend’s worries, Sakura was also feeling the pressure, but for a different reason. She wanted to reprimand Celeste for even considering such an option. It was underhanded, to say the least, and obviously not something Hina or herself would usually condone. However, with her own darkened history of betrayal, combined with her desire to protect her classmates from further dissent, she was finding it easier and easier to let the lie become the truth.

That is why, instead of refuting Celeste, she found herself agreeing.

“Perhaps…for the time being, it is better to keep this matter to ourselves…” the martial artist suggested, despite the stinging sensation in her chest.

Hearing that, Hina’s gaze shot over to her, completely shocked. “Are you sure about that Sakura? I-I mean, yeah, I don’t want to get caught, but I’m not sure it’s right to just lie like this…”

Sakura’s features hardened as she heard those words, realizing that she was unintentionally dragging Hina down into that same dark place that she had fallen into when she’d betrayed her classmates. Shame unlike anything she’d felt before seeped into her soul, making the martial artist regret even mentioning such a thing. For so long, she had put her personal issues ahead of her classmates. It had become simple enough to lie to them and Sakura feared that it would only worsen as time went on. How long would it be before she actually considered…murdering one of them? The dojo that she honored and treasured…could she truly care for it if her hands were stained with the blood of her classmates…her friends? Furthermore…would Hina ever forgive her for doing such a horrific thing?

It was then that Sakura suddenly remembered a promise she made to herself when she had first found herself trapped in this school…

“More than anything else…I swore to keep my friend’s safe…but I have not been strong enough to do that…but that changes here!”
Gathering her courage, Sakura lifted her head up high and said, “Hina…you are correct. Regardless of our personal feelings, it would be wrong to lie to our classmates. We should go and confess our mistakes to everyone before anything gets out of hand.”

As she listened to her friend, Hina’s eyes began to shimmer as she felt empowered by her friend’s courage. And as soon as Sakura finished speaking, the swimmer jumped up from her seat and shouted, “Y-Yeah, you’re right, Sakura! We should get it over with now, before things get even crazier!”

Hearing that, Sakura couldn’t help but smile at her best friend’s determination…and it gave her the courage to stand up for what she also knew was the right thing to do…

“The next time I am called by the Mastermind…I need to make a decision…”

As one, both she and Hina stood up and prepared to leave. However, before they could take a single step, a delicate hand rose up to stop them.

“Pardon me, but I have a suggestion,” Celeste said to them, making them remember that she was a part of this decision as well. Resuming their seats, the gambler waited for them to get comfortable before continuing, “While I find it quite admirable that you both wish to turn yourselves in…I’m afraid it may not be so simple.”

“How? Why’s that?” Hina questioned, as pure-hearted as ever.

Unfortunately, Sakura was not so pure of heart, as she understood that Celeste would rather lie her way through this endeavor rather than own up to her own mistakes. More than likely, Celeste was about to ask that they leave her out of their confession, and insist that she wasn’t present for the event at all.

“She will ask us to lie for her…I am certain of it…how is that any different than—”

“I would propose that we at least wait until Toko reveals us as her cohorts,” Celeste suddenly said, shocking Sakura and interrupting her thoughts. “I am not opposed to owning up to our mistakes. However, I do believe that it might be foolish to do so immediately, as we have all seen how ruthless Taka has been as of late…”

Surprisingly, Celeste’s words carried more weight than Sakura would have guessed. Not to mention that there was wisdom to be found in her suggestion. Trust would lessen if they immediately revealed themselves, which could lead to disaster. And while it was true that letting Toko reveal them later could be even more devastating, for something as simple as peeping, it was more likely to be forgiven. Taka would certainly want to ‘punish’ them but at least it wouldn’t sow distrust between their other classmates. Someone like Makoto or Hiro, for example, probably wouldn’t be all that hurt by the knowledge either way…

“So…you want us to not say anything for now?” Hina confirmed with Celeste, who nodded politely. “I don’t know…I’d kinda feel better just getting it over with.”

Reaching out, Celeste gently tapped Hina’s hand with her own before saying, “How about this, if Toko decides to reveal our collaboration, then we will own up to our mistakes. No lies or tricks. We will come clean. But until then, let’s just enjoy the fact that we had an ‘adventure’ together.”

As Celeste’s request came to a close, Sakura saw Hina’s face brighten at the word ‘adventure’. And although it was a bit unnerving, the martial artist could not deny that the gambler certainly had a gift for persuasion. Whether or not Sakura personally condoned such actions were better left
unmentioned. After all, Celeste had brought back Hina’s smile, which was enough for now.

“…Yeah, it was kind of an ‘adventure’, wasn’t it?” Hina slowly agreed, letting her usual bright smile finally resurface as she giggled. “I think we should avoid any more ‘adventures’ like that for a while though! I don’t think my heart could take it!”

As Hina joked both Sakura and Celeste found themselves smiling at each other, a warm feeling spreading through all of them.

“Adeed,” Sakura concurred.

“Most certainly,” Celeste nodded.

Suddenly, an arm wrapped around both of their waists and the two girls found themselves pulled into an impromptu hug by Hina. Holding onto both of them tightly, the swimmer let out a heart-felt laugh as they all recovered from a difficult ordeal. Sakura joined in, letting herself genuinely laugh for the first time since becoming the Mastermind’s pawn.

“Perhaps…everything will work out after all…”

For that moment, Sakura dared to dream as she allowed a tiny bit of happiness to consume her.

…Neither of them noticed the sly grin that spread over Celeste’s face as they continued to laugh.

Meanwhile, outside of the cafeteria, sitting on the floor of the lobby, the Kokeshi Dynamo innocently stared up at the ceiling…until a long shadow was cast over it and a gloved hand reached down, carefully picking it up.

Kyoko examined the strange object that had been left on the floor, turning it all manner of ways to fully examine it. Finally, after inspecting every inch of the cylinder-like device, she discovered the red button on the bottom. Without hesitation, she pressed the button, causing the Kokeshi Dynamo to vibrate furiously in her hand. Pressing the button once more to turn it off, then again to make it resume, she let it run for a moment before switching it off once more.

A tiny smile spread over Kyoko’s lips as she slipped the Kokeshi Dynamo into her jacket pocket and headed toward her destination…

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! The epic conclusion to the bathhouse scene brought a few unexpected surprises, didn’t it? But what will happen with Taka’s new bathing schedule? What exactly is Celeste plotting? And why, oh why, did Kyoko hold onto the Kokeshi Dynamo? (Hint: it’s not for the obvious reason) All these questions and more will be revealed soon, so keep on reading to find out the answers!
Attention: Again I just want to reiterate something I mentioned before. We all know the
DR 3 anime is approaching its conclusion and it’s getting more and more intense. I
know it can be hard, but please refrain from putting any spoilers of any kind in the
comments. My PM door is always open if you want to discuss theories or ideas about
the anime, but please don’t spoil the story for other readers on this site. Just send me a
PM asking if I’ve seen whichever episode you want to talk about, and I will answer.
Let’s all be considerate of others as we finish out such an amazing anime! Thank you!

Speaking of comments/reviews, I certainly do appreciate each and every one of them
you all leave me! They truly inspire me and help motivate me to write the best story I
can! So, as always, if you have questions, comments, ideas, or anything of the sort,
don’t hesitate to leave a comment/review to tell me about it!

Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Ch 3 Act 12

Chapter Summary

Mukuro prepares for long first night of keeping her door open. Kyoko investigates both 'Junko' and her own surroundings. Later, someone sneaks into the bathhouse for friendly 'chat' with Alter Ego.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Alright, that should do it,” Mukuro said to herself as she finished packing away most of the items lying around her room. Surveying the area one last time, she nodded to herself and said, “Typical Fashionista-like bedroom…I think.”

Ever since she’d been confined to her quarters, and subsequently promising that she’d leave her door open to keep an ear out for anyone going after Alter Ego, she knew she’d need to change her room around a bit. After all, if anyone passed by and happened to see a wig form on her dresser, it could be a life-threatening issue. Not to mention that the skin-tight jumpsuit she’d used when she’d been caught patrolling had been left on the floor, which would be the reddest of red flags! Plus, her room had become a lot more of a mess lately, given that she devoted more of her time to keeping her classmates alive and almost no time taking care of her living quarters. However, she was determined not to let anything keep her from fulfilling her promise to everyone, hence the massive cleaning she’d performed in preparation for this new mission. Because if anyone was capable of leaving their door open all night in order to protect their only means of discovering who the Mastermind was…it was her and her Ultimate Soldier skills that would do it!

Before volunteering to leave her door open, Mukuro had considered using her ‘confinement’ to her advantage. After all, with ‘Junko’ unable to leave her room, it meant that ‘Mukuro’ could roam the halls at night. However, she no longer had the mask she’d used previously, having left it in the archive room on the second floor. Plus, she knew that her classmates would be on the lookout for anyone suspicious. And she didn’t want to even think about running into Taka during a nightly ‘patrol’. That’s why, in the end, she figured it was better just to be a lookout of sorts for Alter Ego.

“…I doubt that Junko predicted that Chihiro would recreate her AI program, and in only a few days,” she muttered to herself as she checked her wig in the mirror. As she made sure her disguise was perfect, she couldn’t help but sigh. “No doubt she heard our conversation in the bathhouse though…it’s only a matter of time before she tries to take Alter Ego from us…!”

And that was precisely why she’d offered to leave her door open, as a deterrent to whatever her sister might have planned. Even with Junko promising not to involve Monokuma until there was a class trial, it didn’t mean that she couldn’t influence someone else into doing her work for her. Hell, Taka had been her pawn for days now, and he didn’t even realize it!

As Mukuro finished putting away the last of her possessions left on her dresser, she looked up and angrily glared at her own disguised reflection in the large mirror of the dresser, her stomach twisting as her appearance reminded her of how much smarter Junko had always been than her! Mukuro was a soldier, able to accurately complete her mission without fail…but she was no tactician. She was, however, quick on her feet and able to make snap decisions to save her own life. And when it came
to sneaking or scouting missions, she was a pro. Unfortunately, whenever you presented her with a complex strategy that had little to do with combat, she froze up. Junko was well aware of that fact, and the Mastermind knew that her sister was capable of action and not strategy…which is why she found herself confined to her room right now!

“…I don’t know how, but I’m positive that Junko probably meant for this to happen,” she speculated aloud, glad her door was still closed so she could speak her thoughts without fear. “She must have manipulated events so that I’d be less of an obstacle…just like when she lost her memories…”

During her brief time as Ryoko Otonashi, the ever impressive Junko Enoshima had given Mukuro very specific instructions. And because the soldier followed them to the letter, Ryoko Otonashi only existed for a few months, just as Junko had planned. It was terrifying how her sister was able to accurately predict how people would act, even when there was no conceivable way for her to know how they would act while she was ‘away’. Then again, Junko’s true talent as an analyst was not to be underestimated…Mukuro had learned that the hard way.

Staring down her own reflection…Mukuro was forced to accept that, no matter how talented she was in her own right…she wasn’t anything like Junko. The soldier knew that she couldn’t predict how her classmates would act from now on…especially with Taka’s ever deteriorating mental state.

“If this keeps up…someone’s going to snap…and it may even be me…” she surmised, averting her view away from her reflection. Her gaze dropped down the ugly scar that had once been her beloved Fenrir tattoo, her hand balling into a fist, despite the pain. “It’s getting harder and harder to suppress my instincts. If I’m not careful…I may lash out by accident…and even if I don’t hurt anyone…I’ll definitely get found out…”

She was walking a fine line between death and survival, and the scales could still tip either way. Mukuro had no concept about how ‘normal’ people lived their lives, but she knew how horrific the world could truly be. On the battlefield, she’d seen soldiers slowly lose their minds, unable to cope with the stress and pressure of being a mercenary. Time and time again, once someone’s mental state regressed too much, they snapped and would often take a number of their comrades down with them. And unfortunately…Taka was quickly approaching that breaking point.

“I can’t let that happen!” Mukuro promised herself as she turned away from her mirror and headed toward her door to open it for the night. “No matter what it takes…I have to keep everyone safe!”

As much as she hated to admit it, Junko truly outclassed her at everything except for physical combat. But that’s where Mukuro was confident she could put a halt to her sister’s plans! If she could stop Alter Ego from being taken, the rest of the students just might be able to learn the truth. And if that happened, they could corner Junko and put an end to this game! Mukuro knew it was a long shot, but she really didn’t have any better alternative at this point.

As she reached her door and mentally prepared herself for several hours of quietly listening for disturbances, Mukuro felt a wave of confidence for the first time in several days. It had been a while since she’d done a stake-out…and her body trembled with anticipation as the rush of being back in her element washed over her.

She barely even recognized that she was grinning as she reached for the door handle…

“All right…time to open up the floodgates,” she said to herself as she unlocked her door and swung it open. When she opened it, however, she was greeted by a very startling sight.

There, to her shock and slight horror, stood Kyoko Kirigiri, her hand raised as if preparing to knock. The stoic amnesiac caught sight of her immediately and slowly lowered her hand, remaining
completely silent as she and Mukuro stared each other down. For probably the first time, Mukuro looked directly into Kyoko’s eyes…and was horrified that she couldn’t read the stoic girl’s visage in the slightest. Even if it was only a tiny bit, the soldier had always been able to sense someone’s intentions just by looking at them. Not even the ever changing Junko was completely unreadable…but somehow, Mukuro found herself unable to see anything of what the amnesiac detective was feeling. And that only intensified her fears.

Despite her best efforts, the soldier couldn’t keep the surprise from overtaking her visage, her eyes widening and her mouth slightly agape. So many questions flooded her mind, but she had no time to process them before Kyoko spoke to her.

“Good evening,” Kyoko abruptly greeted, her voice as calm and even as always. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

Snapping back to reality, Mukuro slightly shook her head and replied, “No, not really. I was just…getting ready to leave my door open for the night.”

“I see,” the amnesiac detective replied quickly, never averting her gaze.

As she finished, Mukuro couldn’t help but notice the way Kyoko was staring at her…as if analyzing each and every feature of her appearance. Mukuro was suddenly thankful she’d remembered to keep the pink wig perfectly in place before opening the door. Beyond that, she honestly didn’t know how to react, considering that she had had little personal contact with Kyoko outside of class during their time together in school. Sure, there were a few instances where they crossed paths, but during all of those times, the detective had never taken the time to investigate her personally…probably because, at the time, Mukuro wasn’t disguised as her sister and had nothing to hide. It was beyond horrifying, the way Kyoko looked right into her eyes, as if she could see into the soldier’s very soul…and catch glimpses of the many crimes that she’d committed.

Realizing that merely letting Kyoko undress her with her eyes could be disastrous in multiple ways, the soldier somehow managed to resume her usual persona and said, “So, uh, did you need something?”

Kyoko was silent for a moment before she slowly nodded. “…If you don’t mind, I’d like to discuss how we should handle leaving our doors open for the entire night.”

“Uh…sure. Come on in,” Mukuro invited, even more relieved that she’d completed cleaning up her room already.

“Thank you,” Kyoko said swiftly before briskly walking past the soldier without the slightest hint of hesitation.

The amnesiac detective’s bold actions instantly put Mukuro on guard. It was obvious that Kyoko held reservations toward her, but she couldn’t tell if that was a good or not. After all, it would behoove the soldier to have someone as intelligent as the Ultimate Detective on her side…but the opposite was also true. If somehow Kyoko found out about her true identity, Mukuro had no doubt that the detective would take the initiative and reveal her in front of the entire class.

“…”In fact, suddenly wanting to talk to me out of the blue like this is suspicious,” Mukuro realized, lowering her gaze as her mind became consumed with suspicion. “Is she on to me already? Even with her memory loss, she obviously hasn’t lost her touch at investigation…the class trials are evidence enough of that. But then…what does she want from—?”

“I apologize for not coming to see you sooner,” Kyoko abruptly spoke up, shattering the soldier’s
train of thought. Mukuro turned to see the detective leaning against the side wall, glancing at her with a neutral expression. “There was a commotion outside the bathhouse.”

Despite her best efforts, Mukuro couldn’t fight the shocked expression that overtook her features. However, she immediately hardened her visage and asked, “Is everyone alright?”

As her question rang out, the soldier noticed the tiniest bit of a change in Kyoko’s visage. It was incredibly subtle, so subtle that Mukuro momentarily questioned if she’d actually seen it. That change was how the detective was looking at her. Less than a moment ago, Kyoko’s expression had been completely stoic…but now, there was a hint of surprise behind her eyes…as though something Mukuro had done had surprised her. Vocally, however, the amnesiac detective showed no such change.

“It seems so,” Kyoko answered with a nod. “It appears that Genocide Jill snuck into the bathhouse while the men were bathing. Fortunately, she was apprehended peacefully and everything has calmed down…though I have my suspicions as to whether Jill acted alone…”

As Kyoko recounted the incident, Mukuro clenched her fists. The soldier had been completely unaware that something so disastrous had occurred, and only a short distance away from her room at that! What truly upset her though, was the fact that there was little she could have done regardless. There was no way that she could have left her door open, considering her need to hide all of the items that would have incriminated her. And even though she tried to tell herself that she had no choice…she couldn’t help but feel useless…

“What if someone had been seriously injured, and another bullying trial occurred?” Mukuro mentally seethed, unable to stop the outpour of negative thoughts from assaulting her mind. “None of them realize that unless they actually kill someone, they’ll be trapped here all alone forever! Or until Junko decides to kill them and win the game herself! Dammit, I’ve only been out of the game for a few hours and already I’m losing ground!”

Just as her own failures threatened to consume her, the Kyoko’s stern voice called out, “Anyway, I didn’t come here just to tell you that.”

Startled back into reality, Mukuro squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, attempting to reorganize her thoughts. Kyoko had quickly changed the subject, which Mukuro knew she had a talent for, and that meant that the detective had something more pressing she wanted to speak of…which may or may not bode well for Mukuro.

“…Right, you said there was something you wanted to talk about, didn’t you? What’s up?” Mukuro pleasantly asked, trying to resume at least a portion of her ‘Junko’ personality.

Again, Mukuro noticed the subtlest of changes in Kyoko’s visage, but still couldn’t make out exactly what it meant, which only amplified her fears more.

“I suggest we discuss how we’re going to handle the situation. Just in case something unexpected happens,” Kyoko proposed, pushing off the wall and taking a step toward her.

“Huh?” a genuinely confused Mukuro grunted with a raised brow. “I…uh…figured it was self-explanatory? I mean, we leave our doors open and listen in case we hear someone trying to sneak into the bathhouse and—”

“And how will we know if someone has snuck into the bathhouse?” Kyoko interjected, her words alone stressing her point.
Mukuro twitched as she felt herself being challenged. Furrowing her brows, the soldier replied, “I don’t know about you, but I plan to listen for anyone sneaking around after night time. And if I hear someone walking around—”.

“You might walk right into a trap.”

Kyoko’s stern words echoed in the small bedroom, taking a few moments to sink in. As they did, Mukuro again felt like the detective was challenging her. What made it more insulting was that the amnesiac detective wasn’t even looking at her! Instead, Kyoko was surveying the Fashionista’s bedroom, no doubt looking for anything suspicious to use against her! For someone as proud and meticulous as Mukuro, it was beyond insulting!

“And why do you say that?” she practically spat back, not bothering to hide her distain.

A momentary silence hung between the two young women before Kyoko turned her stoic gaze toward Mukuro and softly answered, “We all know that you will come running if someone’s in danger. And if two or more people decided to take advantage of that…then you might find yourself a victim.”

This time, instead of feeling challenged, a sense of dread welled up inside Mukuro. The idea that someone might attack and overpower her was something that didn’t even register in the soldier’s mind. Only Sakura, who she could handle quite easily given the right equipment, was the only viable threat to her, combat wise.

However, Kyoko wasn’t insinuating that her demise would be during combat…it would be when she let her guard down while trying to help her classmates.

As embarrassing as it was to admit, Mukuro had never considered that notion. If one of her classmate’s pretended to be injured or hurt, she would come to their aid immediately. And if another of her classmates attacked her, she’d be vulnerable while trying to protect her injured classmate. Not to mention the fact that the ‘injured’ classmate might not be ‘injured’ at all and turn on her as well. And while this normally wouldn’t be a problem for someone as highly trained as the Ultimate Soldier…the outcome could be far more lethal than she’d ever considered. For if she fought back and accidentally killed one of her attacking classmates…she’d become the game’s first blackened…and be executed…removing her from the scenario and leaving Junko to do whatever she pleased with whomever was left!

“I wonder...is that what Junko is up to? Is she trying to manipulate events so that I’m forced to kill one of my own classmates?!”

It was an idea that Mukuro never would have considered had Kyoko not voiced her concern. And while the soldier was certain that the detective had been worried that ‘Junko’ would be killed instead of accidentally killing another, it still terrified Mukuro to realize just how intuitive Kyoko Kirigiri still was, regardless of her memory loss.

“...So, what you’re saying is...if I just rush out there whenever I hear something suspicious…I may be playing right into someone else’s hands?” Mukuro decided to confirm, still feeling embarrassed for not seeing it herself.

Kyoko nodded solemnly and continued, “In order to prevent such an outcome from befalling either of us, I decided to take special precautions.”

“Special precautions?” the soldier quietly repeated.
“After the boys finished bathing, I returned to the bathhouse to check on Alter Ego,” Kyoko explained, averting her gaze from Mukuro and scanning the room once more. “I gave ‘her’ special instructions to shout if anyone unrecognizable tried to take ‘her’.”

“…I see,” Mukuro nodded along with the explanation.

“Also, this should go without saying but if you believe that someone might try to attack you, don’t hesitate to call out,” Kyoko advised, a serious expression marring her features. “Even if you think you can handle an attacker on your own, I insist that you call for assistance regardless.”

“…Okay, same to you,” the soldier concurred reflexively, as if being assigned orders.

“To reiterate, if we hear Alter Ego scream, we should head for the bathhouse together. If one of us calls for help, the other will arrive to support them. After all, there is safety in numbers,” the amnesiac detective suggested, adjusting her gaze back to stare at Mukuro. “I believe that will help us keep Alter Ego safe. Do you have any suggestions?”

Unwittingly, Mukuro froze as Kyoko asked for her opinion. Honestly, the soldier didn’t really have any suggestions or ideas on the matter. After all, it seemed that Kyoko had taken a great deal of time to plan out this strategy, and Mukuro had no issues with it. It actually felt weird for someone to ask her opinion in the first place. No one ever did that, Junko least of all! As far as everyone else was concerned, whether she was ‘Junko’ or Mukuro, she wasn’t an over-thinker. She was a woman of action, not words or tactics…

“Besides…it’s not like I have an eye for strategy or anything. Junko made it perfectly clear that I’m…that I’m…wait a minute, Junko!”

Mukuro’s eyes widened as she made a connection that Kyoko never would have considered.

“If Junko decided to come down here herself, no matter how risky that would be, then she could take Alter Ego without any problems! Alter Ego probably won’t be able to tell the difference between when she saw me in disguise and seeing the real Junko! And if that happens…we’ll lose our last hope!”

“We…we need to make a change,” Mukuro bravely spoke up, snapping her gaze up to meet Kyoko’s eyes. “If Alter Ego is going to scream, it needs to be when any of us try to take ‘her’ from the bathhouse.”

For the first time since having known Kyoko, the soldier saw her eyes widen, if only slightly. It seemed that the amnesiac detective instantly picked up on what she was insinuating and nodded firmly.

“You’re right, that is a better idea,” Kyoko conceded, much to Mukuro’s shock. But what shocked her even more was that she noticed the tiniest hint of embarrassment spreading over the detective’s features. “I admit that I’ve been more concerned with preventing the Mastermind from discovering Alter Ego, and didn’t consider that one of us might be tempted to use it for their own purposes. I’m glad that I came to ask for your opinion.”

As she finished, Mukuro again saw a sight that she never imagined she’d see; Kyoko smiling at her. It wasn’t a particularly big smile and it didn’t last long, in fact, if she’d have blinked, she might have missed it. However, in its place, that strange feeling that Mukuro had been unable to comprehend suddenly returned.

The way that Kyoko had smiled and praised her…it gave her the same feeling that bubbled up each
time Makoto smiled at her! The same feeling she’d gotten when Leon and Sayaka had befriended her! The same feeling she’d felt when Mondo had said she was attractive! A warmth from deep inside that made her feel...made her feel...oh, she didn’t even know what she was feeling! But whatever it was, it was clear that it wasn’t just adrenaline or some other bodily function messing with her.

“Once is a fluke, twice is happenstance...three times is a pattern,” Mukuro mentally quoted, remembering how Junko had used those words to describe how she discovered despair to be the only thing that enthralled her. Even so, it made it all more difficult for Mukuro to comprehend.

“I’ve felt this weird feeling too many times to call it foreign! But I still don’t know exactly what this is! Why do I feel it every time one of my classmates praises me? I should just feel happy or something! I shouldn’t feel like...like...like this!”

As Mukuro fought to regain control of her emotions, she barely noticed Kyoko turning and advancing toward her dresser. All at once, all of those positive feelings disappeared as the detective place a gloved hand on the dresser.

“Hey! Don’t go poking around someone else’s room! That’s rude, ya know!” Mukuro shouted, marching over to Kyoko, who calmly removed her hand.

“My apologies,” Kyoko sincerely replied, turning to face the soldier directly. “I was just a little surprised. I don’t have anything like this in my room.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean you don’t have anything like this in your room? Don’t all the girls have dressers to keep their make-up and junk in?” Mukuro questioned, doing her best to sound surprised.

Rubbing her chin with her gloved hand, Kyoko continued, “I can’t speak for the other girls, but at the very least, I can promise you that I don’t have any kind of furniture like that. In fact, beyond a table, a writing desk, and a bed, I have no furniture to speak of...”

Mukuro did her best to feign shock...considering that she was the one who helped strip Kyoko’s room bare before the school life of mutual killing began. Junko had ordered her to take anything that could help the detective regain her memory to the incinerator. Anything too large for the incinerator was dumped down the trash shoot...including a desk that Kyoko had kept many of her personal items inside.

At the time, Mukuro hadn’t questioned her sister’s orders at all...but now, she felt a twinge of regret. Even though there was no way for the soldier to realize that she’d be betrayed and would require Kyoko’s help to defeat her sister, it didn’t change the fact that Mukuro hadn’t felt much guilt over destroying things that must have been very precious to Kyoko...like a picture of her father that she’d kept hidden at the bottom of her desk...which Mukuro threw into the incinerator along with most of her belongings.

“Oh...sorry,” Mukuro apologized, for more reasons than one. Hoping the detective would mistake her guilt for sadness, she continued, “Did...did you need to borrow some make-up or something? I know that you don’t really seem the type but, every girl has at least a ‘little’ bit of make-up to spruce themselves up with.”

Shockingly, at the mention of this, Kyoko once again gave the tiniest of smiles before replying, “No, thank you. I’m afraid I have no need for that, at least not in this situation. Perhaps once we escape from this place...I will take you up on that offer.”
Even though it was an incredibly miniscule amount, Mukuro found comfort in the sincerity of Kyoko’s words. However, it didn’t do much to relieve the guilt, not only for destroying her personal belongings…but also for the part the soldier had played in murdering her classmate’s father.

Sadly…that was only one of many crimes that Mukuro had committed while serving her sister…most of which she knew there was no forgiveness for…

At the same time, Mukuro knew she couldn’t let herself get wrapped up in guilt, otherwise Kyoko would notice something was amiss. Instead, she smiled brightly and chuckled, “Totally! Once we get out of here, we’re gonna pretty ourselves up and hit the town! Just us girls! What do you say?!”

“…Why is your shirt hanging from the ceiling?”

Blinking rapidly, mostly out of confusion, Mukuro slowly followed her classmate’s gaze up to the shirt she’d hung to obscure the camera in the corner of her room.

“Oh, that? Yeah, I didn’t feel comfortable knowing the Mastermind could peep on me anytime they wanted! So I hung that up there to ensure my own privacy!” Mukuro proudly announced, actually feeling pleased with herself for that decision.

“…I’m surprised Monokuma didn’t make you take that down,” Kyoko admitted, a hint of suspicion in her voice.

A cocky smirk spread over Mukuro’s lips as she answered, “Well, the rules say we can’t destroy the camera’s. It never said anything about hanging my ‘laundry’ in front of it.”

A light smirk tugged at Kyoko’s lips. “I suppose that’s true,” she said quickly before turning and heading for the door. “Well, that should be enough for now. If you need something, feel free to call for me. Good night.”

Stunned by her sudden retreat, Mukuro couldn’t stop herself from calling out, “Whoa, hold on a sec!”

Just barely reaching the door, Kyoko glanced over her shoulder and asked, “What is it?”

Mukuro wanted to kick herself from stopping her, especially since she wasn’t sure what she wanted to say. She just felt like she needed to say something to Kyoko, but she just couldn’t put her finger on what. There was a burning desire to say something, anything that might ease her own pain over what she’d done to the amnesiac detective, but she just couldn’t find the words…mainly because it would reveal who she really was.

Instead, the soldier decided just to follow her gut and say whatever came to her first.

“I, uh, I just wanted to thank you…for believing in me!” Mukuro abruptly shouted, unsure of where those words came from but didn’t stop herself as she continued. “I know how hard it is to trust people right now, and I know that we’re not exactly the closest of friends or anything…but you obviously trusted me enough to come and tell me about Alter Ego and your special preparations…so I’m gonna put my faith in you too!”

A heavy silence hung between the two women as Mukuro completed her tirade with a deep bow. Once she finished, the full impact of her words sank in, and the soldier felt even more embarrassed than before!

It was then that she heard the clicking of heeled boots coming toward her. Carefully lifting her head, her eyes widened as she found Kyoko standing right in front of her, a stoic expression on her face.
Feeling slightly intimidated by her gaze, Mukuro fidgeted a bit before she saw the detective reach into her pocket and slowly pull out a strange cylinder-like object.

Before she could raise an eyebrow at it, Kyoko extended the strange object out to her.

“Hold onto this for me,” the detective said, waiting for Mukuro to take the object. “It might do you more good than it will for me.”

Eyeing the cylinder-like object suspiciously, and going against her instincts, the soldier carefully reached a hand out and took the object from Kyoko’s grasp. Only now able to get a good look at it, she cringed at the strange doll-like head at the top and didn’t even want to know why there was red button on the bottom.

Finally raising an eyebrow, she questioned, “What exactly…is this?!”

“It’s a good luck charm,” Kyoko instantly replied, a faint smirk on her lips.

“What?! Really?! This thing is a good luck charm?!” Mukuro protested, struggling to comprehend just how something so…phallic-looking could possibly be considered lucky!

“Of course. They’re actually quite common. I’m surprised you’ve never seen one like this before,” the detective told her, a bit of scrutiny in her eyes.

Cursing her lack of knowledge on what a proper good luck charm was supposed to look like, Mukuro was reluctantly forced to laugh and answer, “Oh right! I think I’ve seen these before! Like in shops and stuff! Uh…thanks! That was…really considerate…of you…”

“Don’t mention it,” Kyoko said swiftly before turning her back and heading for the door. “Well then, I’m off to reprogram Alter Ego to cry out if anyone tries to remove ‘her’. Goodnight.”

Just before she exited the room, Kyoko abruptly stopped, which drew the soldier’s attention. She had a calculated look on her face that for some reason sent a chill down Mukuro’s spine. An instantly later, she understood why.

Glancing back over her shoulder, the Ultimate Detective looked her straight in the eyes and said, “By the way…your hair looks perfect.”

No matter how hard she tried, there was no way that Mukuro could stop herself from noiselessly gasping as those words echoed in her ears. Her worst fears felt like they were being realized and she lost the will to breathe. However, the exact opposite of what she’d expected happened.

Instead of exposing her and possibly causing her execution, Kyoko Kirigiri said absolutely nothing, remaining utterly silent as she observed her. And then, much to her shock, the Ultimate Detective turned away from her and departed the room, leaving a still very confused Mukuro standing there with the Kokeshi Dynamo in hand.

“Well, that didn’t go entirely as expected…but still, I was able to discover more than I had first thought I would,” Kyoko thought to herself as she exited the bathhouse and headed for her room.

The amnesiac girl had just finished ‘talking’ with Alter Ego, requesting that ‘she’ scream if anyone tried to remove her from the bathhouse…something that Kyoko should have done in the first place.
“I can’t believe I misjudged this situation… if not for Junko’s suggestion, we might have had another bullying trial on our hands…”

Pondering that notion, Kyoko couldn’t help but wonder about all the things she’d learned while speaking with the Fashionista.

Initially, her objective in going to see Junko had been simple, to see if there was anything she could uncover about her suspicious yet earnest classmate. The instant that the Fashionista had volunteered to leave her door open, Kyoko had been beyond skeptical. Even with her tragic past of being homeless for a time, it still felt odd that Junko was confident enough to leave her door open and expose herself to such dangers. Because of that, Kyoko had felt the need to investigate her even more than before, and since she knew that she’d have at least minimal access to the Fashionista’s room, due to the door being left open all night, she figured the best time to approach her would be just before night time. Not to mention that she truly did wish to inform her classmate about the precaution she’d set up with Alter Ego.

However, she wasn’t prepared for the numerous discoveries she made during this investigation.

Firstly, she was mildly surprised that Junko had done exactly as she’d said and returned to her room without incident. When Kyoko had heard the commotion caused by Genocide Jack, and the subsequent fallout it brought, a part of her assumed that Junko might have been involved. However, that was mainly because she’d found the Kokeshi Dynamo on the floor, an object that might belong to a woman of Junko Enoshima’s standing. However, judging by the shock on the Fashionista’s face when she heard about the incident, it seemed unlikely that she was involved. Not to mention her complete lack of knowledge as to the Kokeshi Dynamo’s ‘true’ purpose. It was hard to believe that Junko would be that sheltered to believe the Dynamo to be a good luck charm… which further increased Kyoko suspicions.

Second, while she wasn’t shocked that Junko reacted defensively when she had informed her about the possibility of a trap lying in wait for them, she was surprised that Junko hadn’t even considered the possibility. For someone as careful and responsible as she was, it was odd that she overlooked something so simple. And then, instead of her usual abrasive attitude when being told how to handle their situation, Junko just stood there and agreed with everything Kyoko had proposed… like a soldier receiving their orders without questioning them. It was off-putting, to say the least, but perhaps Junko finally realized the danger she’d put herself in and changed her attitude accordingly.

Third, and one of the most important discoveries, Junko Enoshima was far smarter than she’d realized. Her proposal to have Alter Ego scream if anyone tried to remove ‘her’ was a stroke of genius that not even Kyoko had foreseen. But that also begged the question… why did Junko feel the need to point out that flaw in her strategy? Junko seemed to be almost as trusting of their classmates as Makoto was… so why did she act as though one of them was going betray the group and steal Alter Ego?

“That mystery has yet to be solved… but I suppose I should bless our good fortune for the advice regardless… especially after how she acted when I thanked her.”

That was the fourth discovery Kyoko had observed. When she’d taken a moment to praise Junko for her idea, the Fashionista looked genuinely surprised. Her face had turned a deep shade of pink and she didn’t seem able to respond… as if she was in the throes of something. In fact, she’d been so distracted that she actually let Kyoko wander into the deeper parts of her room and approach her dresser before she stopped her, which also seemed odd. Why was she so protective of that dresser? One could reason that it had her personal belongings in it but the way she’d lost her composure so quickly was troublesome.
“Now I want to know what was inside even more... not to mention why she has more furniture than I do...”

That was one discovery that Kyoko just couldn’t piece together. Her room was almost completely bare, as if someone had removed several large set pieces from it. Over the course of the last few weeks, Kyoko had managed to look in some of her other female classmates’ rooms and was shocked that almost all of them had numerous accessories suited to their tastes. Why was it that only she didn’t have extensive furniture or personal items in her own room?

“I’ll have to ask around and see if anyone else feels like their rooms are mysteriously barren. Perhaps I could talk with Makoto about it tomorrow. We never did get to spend together today...”

Even though it had been beyond her control, she still felt guilty for not being able to keep her word to him. Makoto had seemed really excited about hanging out with her and she hated to see him disappointed... though she wasn’t quite sure why.

“...Now isn’t the time to worry about that,” she told herself, shaking her head as she made her way back into her own room, leaving her door open and preparing to stay up all night if necessary. Plopping down onto her bed, she remained in a seated position as she continued to ponder. “I need to focus... was there anything else about Junko that stood out?”

Honestly... there was something that stood out the most but she just couldn’t quite figure it out.

Junko Enoshima was becoming a source of strength for quite a few of their classmates. Leon and Sayaka both relied on her, as did Mondo and Chihiro, though mainly for food at the moment. However, it wasn’t just moral support, she actively challenged both Monokuma and Taka when they tried to enforce unreasonable demands, which was odd because, given her brush with death, she should have been too mortified to protest. And yet, she showed little to no fear of punishment, despite how she’d reacted when her hand had been injured.

Not only that, as far as Kyoko could tell, she was being completely genuine about her desires to help everyone. Sure, there were times when she was obviously trying to hide her embarrassment, such as when she didn’t realize the potential trap that could have awaited her, but beyond that she was actually an easy read.

...But that didn’t explain why Kyoko felt that the Fashionista was hiding something from all of them. And most of all, it didn’t explain her reaction when the amnesiac girl had complimented her hair.

Kyoko wasn’t even sure what possessed her to say such a thing. More than anything, it was probably the fact that, no matter what happened to her, Junko Enoshima’s hair always seemed so flawless. It felt... wrong, and while she speculated it could be a wig or perhaps implants, something about the Fashionista’s mass of pink fluff bothered her. However, when Kyoko pointed that out, even as off-handedly as she did, she saw something horrifying in the Fashionista’s eyes:

Fear... pure, unadulterated fear.

Junko Enoshima looked positively terrified by that comment, and not only that... it was almost as if she had been silently begging for silence the moment that comment had been uttered. For a woman who had survived a brush with death, a simple comment like that shouldn’t have affect her... but it did.

“It was almost as if her entire existence hinged on whatever the secret of her hair is...” Kyoko whispered to herself as she sat down on her bed, still perplexed by the reaction she’d gotten from her seemingly innocent comment. “For now, I’ll avoid the subject, just to be safe. I wouldn’t want to
make myself a target…”

A deep frown settled on her face…realizing that, despite her claim to trust Junko, in the end, she couldn’t force herself to have complete faith in her. Honestly, it had nothing to do with the Fashionista and her perfect hair. No, the reason she didn’t trust Junko Enoshima entirely…was because she didn’t truly trust anyone here at the school.

“Any one of them might betray us at any moment…even Makoto.”

It stung for her to say that, but she knew that it was true. No matter how much she wanted to trust them…to trust Makoto and his purity, her better judgment always told her to be wary. Even earlier today when Makoto had asked to spend time with her, in the back of her mind, she couldn’t help but think; ‘Can I really trust him?’.

The feelings of distrust and suspicion had worn down on her lately, but there was cause for it. Twice now, her ‘innocent’ classmates had fallen to the motives the Mastermind presented for them. And unfortunately, she had no doubt that it would happen again. A large sum of money was an uninspired motive…but an affective one as well. And while she was fairly positive that someone like Makoto wouldn’t be motivated by such a simple trick, there was enough evidence to suggest that at least a few of her classmates might fall to the temptation.

“Celeste, Hiro, Hifumi…which one of them will take the bait?” she pondered to herself, already narrowing down her list of suspects. At the same time, another gnawing idea refused to leave her mind. “If there truly is…a traitor among us…then Alter Ego’s usefulness is practically forfeit.”

Groaning angrily in frustration, she fell back onto her bed and sighed deeply, feeling more than powerless in this situation. No matter how hard she searched the school, she’d yet to find anything that could unveil how or why their captor had trapped them. Not to mention that the Mastermind’s true identity continued to elude her, despite her talents—

“…My…talents…?”

Kyoko honestly had no idea why that thought crossed her mind, but she felt ashamed of herself nonetheless. Her amnesia had slightly receded, though not enough to give her a clear picture of who she was or why she’d come to Hope’s Peak in the first place. She knew it was to find someone, but who and for what purpose completely escaped her. However, a part of her took great pride in her investigations and being unable to solve the mystery infuriated her.

“…Maybe…I was…a detective?” she pondered before quickly dismissing the idea. “Under normal circumstances, at my age, that would be impossible. Unless I came from a long line of—”.

Intense pain suddenly shot through Kyoko’s head, burning the back of her eyes and forcing her to close them. Gripping her head with her gloved hands, she forced her eyes open and stared at the leather of her hand accessories. There was so much she didn’t know that she should...like how her hands became irrevocably scarred…why she had come to Hope’s Peak…and who was the old man that was featured in her DVD from the first motive?

Despite the agony it caused, she racked her brain, trying to come up with something, anything that could lead her to a clue that would tell her who she was! However, after a few moments of soul searching, the pain became too great and she let out an audible gasp as she forced herself to stop trying to remember, in spite of how much she wanted to know.

“…Dammit…how long do I have to keep living like this? Questioning everyone and everything…even myself…”
Feeling even more ashamed than before, she rolled onto her side before her eyes glanced up at the camera in the corner of her room. Despite the funk she’d been in only moments ago, the amnesiac girl felt her mood brighten as she recalled something else that she’d seen in Junko’s room. With no one around to see it, Kyoko let a wide smirk entertain her lips as she decided that there was one thing she could trust that would work.

“I think it’s time I got my privacy back,” she cheekily said to the camera.

Slowly pulling herself up from her bed and rising to her feet, Kyoko marched over to her closet, pulled out an old shirt and headed for the storage room to get some wall tacks.

Like an oversize shadow in the night, Hifumi Yamada silently made his way toward the bathhouse under the cover of…well the lights were always on but at least he felt as if it were under the cover of darkness!

“Soon, my precious…soon…” he whispered to himself as he slunk down the hallway.

The fanfic creator was thankful to the Elite Four Mangaka, whom he prayed to every night, that his room was at the far end of the dorm, around the corner and far removed from either Kyoko or Junko’s rooms. Because of that, slipping out of his room and pursuing his quest was made that much easier, considering he could travel down the adjacent hall without being noticed. He’d been plotting this expedition ever since the men had finished bathing and returned to their respective rooms. At first, it was simply a whim, a tiny desire to have a burning question answered:

Would Alter Ego…consider him to be her Master as well?

Of course, he didn’t mean to depose Miss Fujusaki from her place as the AI’s creator and caretaker…but the temptation was far too great for him not to at least try. After all, aside from various dating sims and other visual novels, Hifumi had never been called anything as glorifying as ‘Master’.

In fact, most pretty girls shied away from him entirely. He understood why…his overwhelming confidence and obvious talent were rather intimidating. And the rare girls that weren’t intimidated by him, such as Miss Ludenberg, couldn’t help but playfully tease and ‘torment’ him, a sign of affection that he had trouble responding to.

Indeed, girls like Celestia Ludenberg tended to keep their feelings bottled up, never revealing their true motive for their teasing. To him, however, it was obvious that Miss Ludenberg valued his skills highly. His tea making had significantly improved, and he wasn’t so much a fool as to believe she found his tea as distasteful as she claimed. And while he appreciated that she was willing to listen to him drone on about manga and anime, he could see deep in her crimson eyes that she cared little for the subject.

Not to mention that, no matter how much he fantasized about it, a woman of Celestia Ludenberg’s caliber would never deign to call him ‘Master’.

“Not that I don’t appreciate her abrasive affection, but being called a worthless slob or fat pig by a gothic tsundere can only take me so far…”

Because of that, even if he had to beg on his hands and knees for it, the fanfic creator was desperate for the AI program to call him thus. He knew it was a selfish thing to ask, but if he could hear the soft, angelic voice of Alter Ego calling him such a wonderful title…he could die a happy man.
Carefully making his way into the lobby area just outside the bathhouse, Hifumi glanced around mindfully before slinking under the bathhouse curtains.

Once inside, the steamy air of the bathhouse washed over him, opening his pores and causing sweat to trickle down his back. He ignored it, however, and proceeded to march straight toward the locker containing Alter Ego. Pulling open the door, he was unsurprised to see the screen completely black.

“Clearly, the princess awaits her knight to awaken her…” he whispered to himself, a confident smirk appearing on his face.

Reaching his dexterous fingers out, Hifumi tapped the ‘space’ key to test if the computer was on or just in sleep mode. Almost instantly, the laptop snapped to life, it’s bright light momentarily blinding the fanfic creator. As his vision adjusted, he was pleasantly surprised to see that the object of his desire was already there…as if she had truly been waiting for his arrival.

“…Oh, hello!” Alter Ego cheerfully greeted, smiling sweetly at him. “It’s nice to see you again, Hifumi!”

Lightly gasping from shock, the fanfic creator whispered, “…Ah, she remembers my name!”

Although he knew it shouldn’t be that shocking, considering she was a computer program, the fact that this vision of 2D perfection actually dared to remember him made his heart leap! Every other woman, all of whom were entirely too 3-dimensional, never seemed to pay him much mind when he came to visit. However, this was the first time a young lady had seemingly been pleased to see him!

He had always claimed that 2D was far superior to 3D, and this was the crowning achievement of such a statement!

“Why can’t all women be more like her?” Hifumi questioned, seething just a tiny bit. “Even a computer program can see just how amazing I am! Then again, it must understand that my love for 2D transcends time and space—!”

“Um…excuse me?” the soft voice of Alter Ego interrupted, bringing his attention back to her. “I’m afraid my external microphone is broken…I can’t tell what you’re saying…”

A flush of red invaded Hifumi’s cheeks as embarrassment coursed through him. How could he be so rude as to keep a lovely lady waiting! Not to mention that the way she had said that was almost apologetic, which was absolutely adorable but at the same time something she didn’t need to apologize for! After all, it was he who was being selfish, wanting to spend her valuable time conversing with him!

Taking to the keyboard, the fanfic creator quickly typed out his message to her:

[I apologize for disturbing you so late at night. I was just wondering if you would like to chat for a bit?]

As he entered that request, sudden indecision spread through him. He questioned if he was being too forward, asking a lady who was obviously working hard on decoding the files to spare some time for him…but it was too late now! The die had been cast and he waited to see what his roll would yield!

Gulping nervously as he watched Alter Ego glance down at the words he’d typed, the fanfic creator almost considered retracting his request before a soft giggle invaded his ears.

“Hehe…alright! What do you want to talk about?” the heavenly voice of Alter Ego asked him, a bright smile on her 2D face.
Almost against his will, Hifumi felt his heart swoon and he couldn’t stop himself from typing:

[What do you know about…manga?]

Breathing heavily as Alter Ego looked over the message, the fanfic creator sweated even more fervently until the AI kindly answered him.

“…Master Fujisaki has little information on…manga,” Alter Ego admitted, seemingly growing nervous for some reason. “…If you don’t mind…would you tell me more about this…manga?”

As ‘she’ said that, the AI program’s face visibly blushed, causing Hifumi’s eyes to widen. Could it be that…this heavenly creature wished to learn the ways of the otaku?

What had begun as a simple test to see if the AI program would be willing to call him ‘Master’ had suddenly taken a strange but enchanted turn! And while he still hoped to ask Alter Ego to fulfill his desire at some point, right now, there was a young mind in front of him that needed artistic molding!

“And who better to educate her than the upcoming fourth member of the Elite Four?”

With zero hesitation, Hifumi’s large hands rushed back to the keyboard and typed:

[Never fear, young one! The Ultimate Fanfic Creator is here to teach you all that needs to be known about not only manga…but anime and fanfiction as well!]

It was a bold declaration, he knew, but one that he had 100% confidence backing up! And unlike Miss Ludenberg, who only tolerated his unique hobbies, this beautiful maiden actually seemed invested in learning all he had to share about the amazing world of fandom!

Alter Ego barely had to scan his message before a brilliant smile overtook her features.

“…Really?! You’ll teach me all of that?! Thank you so much, Hifumi! You’re the best!”

The AI program’s sudden praise flowed into his very being, causing the fanfic creator to fall even harder for the 2D princess trapped in this steamy castle. It was beyond a fantasy…it was a dream come true! No…it was destiny! Fate brought them together and he would let nothing and no one tear them apart! If the Mastermind themselves stood in the way of their budding romance…he wouldn’t hesitate to kill them without mercy!

“Please tell me,” Alter Ego eagerly questioned, obviously as impatient as he was. “What are you going to teach me first?”

The AI program’s seemingly boundless curiosity lit a fire under Hifumi, stoking the fiery flames of his passion until it became a raging inferno of knowledge. With that vigor settling firmly into his heart, Hifumi set about educating the young AI program in the wonderful world of the otaku!

[Let me ask you this, young one…have you ever heard of Eroge?]

To Be Continued…
Greetings, my beautiful readers! Quite an interesting turn of events, wouldn’t you say? But what will happen now? Will Kyoko uncover ‘Junko’ dark secret? Will Kyoko be able to unravel her own secrets? Will anyone be able to stop Hifumi before he corrupts the young and impressionable Alter Ego? You will have to wait until next time to find out!

I want to make a quick note about this story, some of which involves the DR 3 anime:

I know that thanks to the new anime, we’ve seen a great deal more about Mukuro. We’ve seen her as herself and gotten a good read on her behavior. Some of you have asked if that will change how my story will go. The answer is: no. The Mukuro in my story is as faithful to cannon as it can be, with of course a few deviations due to circumstances that only happened in my story. If you have concerns, please be sure to let me know. I value all of my reader’s opinions.

Speaking of which, please leave a review/comment to let me know how you feel about this chapter or the story in general! In either case, feel free to let me know if you have any questions!

Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Mukuro discovers the despair of wigs. Junko reminisces about the despair of...everything. Later, Sayaka is given an unexpected opportunity to bond with some of her female classmates.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mukuro’s eyes snapped open at 6:30 AM, her mental alarm clock functioning perfectly. During her time in Fenrir, the Ultimate Soldier had learned how to control her body’s natural clock and ‘set’ herself to wake up at specific times, if she so desired. And while it was true that exhaustion could throw off this ability, she didn’t allow it to derail her plans for this morning.

Before settling in, sleeping with one eye open just in case Junko or anyone else went after Alter Ego, the soldier plotted out what she needed to do for the following morning:

Wake up early and go check on Alter Ego. Return to her room and pretend to awaken with everyone else, possibly letting someone view the inside of her room to see that she had nothing to hide. Make her way to the morning meeting. Return to her room but leave the door open to continue listening for intruders while serving her ‘house arrest’.

It was a simple strategy, but considering that strategy wasn’t her forte, she felt it was sufficient enough for now. After all, since she was confined to her room, what else was there for her to do other than guard their only means of fighting back against Junko?

Slowly picking herself up off her bed and yawning, Mukuro sputtered a bit as stray strands of her wig got into her mouth. It was odd to wake up still wearing the huge ball of pink fluff, but there was no way she could remove it for the time being…which also meant she need to keep it clean and presentable for the foreseeable future.

“Dammit…I never even considered that,” she seethed, pushing away more stray strands as she stood up and adjusted her wrinkled outfit. She’d opted to sleep in her clothes, just in case she needed to dash to Alter Ego’s rescue in the middle of the night. “Uhg…this is such a pain…how could anyone stand having this much hair?!”

The reason she always kept her own black hair short was because it was more manageable, requiring less action if she was suddenly awakened due to a night raid or something. Long, beautiful hair was a privilege that girls like Sayaka or even Junko had. Not to mention that Celeste’s hair extensions probably took a great deal of time to put in each day, which the gambler dutifully performed despite their horrific situation. Hell, even Kyoko managed to keep her hair tidy, even going so far as to tie a ribbon into it each morning! Honestly, it felt rather out of place considering that the Ultimate Detective seemed far more interested in ability than appearance.

“…I guess even she has a bit of a girly side,” Mukuro solemnly noted, suddenly aware of just how ‘un-girly’ her true self really was. Then again, for a soldier such as herself, it was more important to focus on her mission than her appearance. Grabbing a tuff of pink from her wig, marveling at how
realistic it felt as it glided through her hand, the soldier’s fingers got tangled in a knot that had formed overnight. “I have no clue how to even brush this thing. And I can’t ask the other girls about it…not unless I want to get executed.”

Pulling her hand out of the wig, she instead pulled open a drawer and picked up a hair brush that Junko had left for her. Staring at it, as though it was a hated enemy, the soldier slowly lifted it up to her wig and set the bristles onto the pink fibers. Her grip on the brush tightened, her entire arm shaking nervously as she prepared to attempt to brush away the knot she’d found. Taking in a huge breath, she pressed the brush into her wig and attempted to pull it down…only to have the fibers of the wig tangle in the brush’s bristles.

Unable to stop mid-motion, Mukuro’s head was jerked to the side as she unintentionally yanked on the wig’s tangled mess. Her scalp stung as the clips holding the wig in place tugged at her actual hair beneath the wig. Grunting angrily, more from frustration than pain, the soldier used both hands to try and dislodge the brush that was currently stuck in her wig’s fibers. She had to stop herself from pulling out her knife and just cutting the pink fluff away, which she would often do to her real hair if it became tangled in anything on the battlefield.

It reminded her of the time her real hair had gotten stuck on a tree branch while attending Hope’s Peak, and she’d simple cut it away without a second thought. Junko, however, didn’t waste the opportunity to point out how ugly her hair looked afterward, even suggesting that she cut the rest of it away so she could have the despair of being mistaken for a boy.

At the time, Mukuro hadn’t thought much of it…but everything was different now.

“…Junko did always say that I was too manly…and ugly…”

Shaking her head to push away her negative thoughts, Mukuro remembered that she was on a tight schedule and needed to act fast if she was going to maintain her strategy. Painstakingly untangling the brush from her ‘hair’, the soldier decided to leave the brush out and make a second attempt later.

Glancing at her reflection in the mirror once more, Mukuro scowled as she realized that all she’d accomplished is making herself look like a slob. And though it could be blamed on tiredness or the excuse that she didn’t get much sleep due to leaving her door open, she still hoped to be able to correct this mistake before the morning meeting.

“I’ll just check to see if Alter Ego’s alright and come right back…” she reasoned with herself, glaring down at the brush on her dresser. “When I come back, you and I will annihilate the enemy…”

Walking over to the mirror and checking to see that her wig was properly in place and that her clothes looked presentable, the soldier nodded to herself as she began the first step of her newfound strategy.

Tapping her chest, making sure her hidden combat knife was ready, just in case, Mukuro straightened up and headed out of her room and toward the bathhouse.

*Tap*Tap*Tap*Tap*

Lush red acrylic fingernails tapped on the desk in front of Junko Enoshima as she glared at the designer shirt obscuring the camera in her sister’s room.

“Well, I guess I have to cut the ‘Meanwhile, with Mukuro’ section of the broadcast,” Junko said to
herself, still capturing the audio from her sister’s room. Fortunately for her, even without the camera, she could infer what her sister was doing. “Long hair is despairingly difficult to take care of. Much more despairing than being bald…that has its own kind of despair but not as much as painstakingly having to brush and comb and condition and dye and style a massive amount of hair the grows so long you could use it as a fucking blanket!!”

Reaching into her pocket, she fished out an elaborately decorated cellphone with studs and miniature diamonds all over the case. Rummaging through the photos on her cellphone, which she only kept after the tragedy because it held many despair-filled pictures on it, her finger stopped as she came across a picture she’d almost forgot about.

It was a picture of her, butt naked, smiling and flashing a peace sign at the camera…with absolutely no hair on her entire body…

Two years before she called Mukuro home to enact her Ultimate Despair project, the famed Fashionista actually did shave her entire body completely bald. It had been exhilarating! She had only just begun her modeling career and if anyone at her agency had found out, she would have been kicked to the curb faster than a dime store whore on Christmas!

And what did she do with all the hair she’d shaved? Where do you think the wigs Mukuro was using came from?

At first, she’d used them herself, to keep her manager from finding out what she’d done. And when her hair would grow out again, she’d shave it again and make more wigs out of it. At the time, she didn’t have a specific use for the wigs, it was more about how she had planned to reveal herself bald on national television. The despair of having the entire nation realize that the ‘realistic’ and ‘honest’ supermodel they all idolized was a complete shame would have been mouthwatering! She would have done it too…but then she wouldn’t have been able to infiltrate Hope’s Peak Academy, where the potential for despair was even more ripe! Not to mention that she got bored of constantly cutting her hair and decided to let it grow out again, with it returning to its natural length only just before Mukuro arrived back in Japan.

It was a fond memory that made the despair-loving girl chuckle darkly.

“Everyone always said they liked my ‘honest’ and ‘natural’ charm! Magazines printed whole articles about how ‘real’ I was compared to other models! Ha! Bunch of dumbasses!” she shouted, her tone deepening and becoming unusually cruel. Upon recognizing this new voice, she immediately cataloged it alongside her ‘Sexy Teacher’ and ‘Cutesy’ personas, to be used when boredom struck…like right now. “Seriously, how fucking dumb were all those posers! They probably used my pictures as a spank bank! Fucktards!”

Rearing her head back, she let a malicious barrage of unruly laughs, ones that would have chilled even the most stoic of hard-asses to the bone. Her maniacal laughter echoed as she swiped her finger across the phone screen and came to another picture that made her fall silent.

It was a picture of her with long red hair, her natural color, and deep crimson eyes that were currently hidden beneath sky-blue contacts. She was flipping off the camera, with massive bloodstains all over her boots, and bits of splatter reaching up to her flushed cheeks.

“…Just afterward, huh?” she surmised, knowing that she had almost immediately reverted back to her Fashionista persona after that incident. “I don’t remember taking this…then again, my memory was a bit fuzzy.”

Honestly, even though it was one of the most despair-inducing moments in all her life, to this day,
Junko still had difficulty recalling the instant her memory had returned…and she killed both Yasuke and Ryoko Otonashi in one fell swoop! It had been a defining moment for her…and the fact that she barely remembered it was all the more despair-inducing!

“Sooooo glad I snapped this pic!” she said in her cutesy voice, giggling like a schoolgirl.

A bit curious as to what else might be on her phone, the Mastermind swiped her finger one last time and smiled at what she saw.

It was a group picture of her and all her classmates. They were sitting in their classroom, bright smiles on all their faces. Even Mukuro was there…which was kind of odd. Mukuro hated pictures…except when Makoto asked her to be in one. It was also ironic because, in this particular picture, Junko’s face couldn’t be seen at all. Her face was completely obscured by Taka saluting the camera, a fact that no one noticed until the picture had already been sent to their respect phones. However, the Fashionista had been utterly satisfied with it, having gotten to feel the despair of her beautiful visage being left out of what turned out to be their last class photo.

“The commemorative photo…” she reminded herself, recalling how Makoto had practically begged everyone to take a picture to commemorate completing their first year at Hope’s Peak Academy. But for Junko Enoshima, it was commemorative in a very different way. “It was the end…and the beginning…but still the end…of all things hope!”

The very next day…the Worst, Most Tragic, Most Despair-Inducing Event occurred…just as Junko had planned. The world ended, she and her classmates were asked to forever remain inside the school, and her plan to annihilate hope for the sake of her Ultimate Despair began.

Strangely enough, seeing all these old photos really put things into perspective for the despair-loving woman.

“If the killing game had gone as I’d predicted, and the body count was at least two or three people by now…how much despair would I be feeling right now?” she genuinely asked herself, seriously considering the idea. “I mean, my classmates only get to die once, and if it’s not satisfying…then what’s the point? Plus, I can’t deny that the suspense of not being able to predict something is despairingly fantastic!”

All her life, Junko could accurately predict what would come about based solely on observation and analysis. In fact, if she had to categorize herself, her original talent would have actually been as the Ultimate Analyst, the talent her mind-wiped self had possessed. The reason that skill had survived the mind-wipe was because it was her ‘true’ talent, though Junko loathed to admit it. Then again, the despair of knowing that her true talent wasn’t despair made her despair even more!

However, for the second time in her life, her analytical talent was absolutely useless.

The first had been when she’d first met Izuru Kamakura, not knowing if she was even going to survive the encounter. But this time was completely different. Unlike with Izuru, who she calculated the possibility of being killed by, there had been no room for error in her little killing game! She’d planned everything out perfectly, inserted a second mole in case her sister failed her, and even had the failsafe of suffocating everyone if she got to bored! It was supposed to be the perfect stage for breeding a despair greater than the time she’d murdered Yasuke Matsuda!

More importantly, she didn’t want this to go down like her original killing game involving Hope’s Peak’s student council. That had served other purposes…not to mention that it was over in a matter of minutes! She needed this game to last as long as possible! The tension, the anxiety, the palpable despair of watching her classmates slowly kill each other off was supposed to be the greatest
euphoria of her life!

And yet, the situation was continually spiraling out of her control.

No one was dead…She had to create a bullying trial just to keep things interesting…Alter Ego was completely unexpected…Her sister had turned completely against her…Did she mention no one was dead yet…?

All of these things should have upset or discouraged Junko…but instead, they made her wet!

To have all her plans dismantled like this…the despair of having worked so hard just to completely lose the game she had created! It could potentially create a despair even greater than she’d imagined! That was the reason she’d allowed her sister to leave that obstruction in front of her bedroom camera, because it created an element of the unknown, something Junko couldn’t completely predict! The despair of not-knowing what her sister was plotting contribute to the discovery of her true goal!

A despair that would transcend time and space! A despair that no one on this earth had ever experience before! A despair that would make her feel like a true human being!

“An Ultimate Despair that has no equal! That’s what I want! And that’s what they’ll give me!!” Junko shrieked as her hand trailed down toward her nether region, a euphoric grin stretching her lips to impossible degrees. “And it’ll be all mine! A despair that will rival no other will be mine! Mark my words, by the end of this…I’ll show the whole world the TRUE FACE OF DESPAIR!”

Cackling to herself as she reveled in her own madness, the Mastermind barely acknowledged the image of Kyoko on the lobby monitor, heading directly toward the bathhouse.

“…Well, that’s unsettling,” Kyoko whispered to herself as she stood in the bathhouse changing room.

To the untrained eye, nothing would seem out of the ordinary in the changing room. However, because the amnesiac girl had expected someone to come for Alter Ego during the night, she’d set up a specific precaution the night before.

A small piece of paper sat on the floor just beneath the locker housing the AI. Kyoko had placed it between the cracks of the locker door before closing it, keeping the paper stuck in place. Since the paper was now on the floor, it meant that someone had opened the locker door sometime during the night…and possibly accessed Alter Ego.

Raising a gloved hand to her chin, Kyoko audibly pondered, “If it were the Mastermind, they surely wouldn’t have left the device intact…which means—”.

The clicking of heeled boots interrupted her concentration and drew her attention over to the changing room entrance. Turing around swiftly, it was only a matter of seconds before Junko Enoshima entered, visibly startled by seeing Kyoko there ahead of her.

However, of the two of them, Kyoko certainly felt the most surprise as they stared each other down. The normally perfect hair that Junko was known for was disheveled and visible knotted, the bow tying up one of her pigtails was bent and the kitty hair clip on the opposite side was upside down. Also, her clothes were wrinkled and messy, completely out of character for the normally pristine looking Fashionista.
“Wh-Whoa, Kyoko! W-What are you doing here?” the Fashionista asked, more than a bit rattled.

Whether it was subconscious or not, Junko’s hand reached up and tried to adjust her hair, simultaneously pressing her other hand against the wrinkles in her outfit. It meant that either she was more self-conscious of her appearance than she had previously stated, considering she’d given up on make-up entirely, or…she was nervous about something.

Unfortunately, there was no way for Kyoko to know the answer, and so she decided to note this for future reference before answering, “I came to check on Alter Ego. I’m guessing you came to do the same?”

“Yes…” Junko replied with an audible yawn. “Barely slept a wink last night, too worried something might happen to me. How about you? Get any sleep?”

“Enough,” the amnesiac girl swiftly replied. “By the way, did you hear anything last night?”

Raising an eyebrow, the Fashionista answered, “…No, not a peep actually. Then again, if Alter Ego had screamed, we both would have heard it, wouldn’t we?”

Kyoko did her best to keep her gaze even, recognizing that Junko was potentially probing for information. It was cleverly disguised and her friendliness seemed genuine, which only raised Kyoko’s concern. However, she knew that neither of them had time for scrutiny…especially since both of them had failed in their objective.

“I suppose that’s true.” Kyoko turned away from Junko and instead focused her gaze on the locker housing the laptop. “However, what if Alter Ego didn’t have a reason to cry out for help?”

“…Do you think someone snuck in here last night?” the Fashionista suddenly asked, much to Kyoko’s surprise.

Although she couldn’t take of risk of looking back at her, Kyoko was positive that the Fashionista held the same determined visage she’d displayed yesterday. A visage that radiated not only confidence and power…but also forbidden knowledge. And while Kyoko felt confident that it wasn’t Junko herself that had snuck in, something about the way the Fashionista easily picked up on her insinuations bothered her.

“*High intelligence isn’t exactly out of character for her…but she doesn’t usually display it so readily. Is it a sign of respect or something else?”*

Again realizing they were short on time, Kyoko walked over to the locker, bent down, and picked up the small paper that had come loose when whoever had snuck in opened the locker door. Shifting on the balls of her feet, she turned around and held up the paper, earning a confused expression from Junko.

“Last night, I placed this between the edges of the lockers door. When I arrived moments ago, it was on the floor…” Kyoko explained, during which Junko’s eyes widened, obviously having figured it out already.

“Shit…” the Fashionista abruptly swore, her hands balling into fists. “Do you think the Mastermind found out about it? Or was it someone else?”

Reading the confusion in Junko’s eyes and hearing the worry in her voice, Kyoko concluded without a doubt that she wasn’t the one who had snuck in. However, the way she asked if it had been the Mastermind felt…off, as if she was expecting such an outcome. No…as if it were a guaranteed event rather than a conventional worry.
“Her words and actions continually makes her suspicious…but her genuine nature and earnest behavior make her difficult to read. I can see now why those fashion magazines were so enthralled with her…being able to be honest and yet keeping so much hidden.”

As Kyoko furthered her analysis, she almost forgot that she’d been asked a question and hastened to answer it.

“If it were the Mastermind, I doubt that Alter Ego would still be here—”.

“Which means that one of us snuck in here last night…” Junko somberly stated, unintentionally interrupting. Quickly realizing her mistake, the Fashionista continued, “Sorry, didn’t mean to cut you off like that! It’s all…just kind of a shock…”

“Indeed, it is…” Kyoko concurred with a small nod. “Speaking with Alter Ego would be the most direct way of finding out who was here. However, it seems that we’ve run out of time…”

Glancing up at the clock, and knowing that time was off the essence, Kyoko decided to quickly set up one last precaution before a familiar sound reverberated through the school.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

Good morning from Hawaii everyone! Where you all are, it is now 7AM! Time to rise and shine like the beautiful tropical sun that none of you get to experience yet again today! Be sure be on your best behavior while I’m goooooone!

Finishing her preparation, Kyoko listened as the announcement completed, making her shift her gaze back toward her classmate. To her surprise, she found Junko glaring up at the monitor, grimacing while listening to the end of the message…as if something important to her had been lost just by hearing that announcement. Even though she knew it was risky, Kyoko couldn’t stop herself from pursuing this new lead.

“You look upset. Did you have something you needed to do before the morning meeting?” she asked politely, trying to sound concerned but coming off far too inquisitive.

Shock overtook Junko’s face as her gaze shot over to the lavender haired girl. However, almost instantly, her expression shifted to one of embarrassment.

“Yes…I’m guessing you can already tell but…I’m kind of a mess.” She gestured to her hair and clothes before letting out a deep sigh. “You see, I ended up waking up early and thought it was better to check on Alter Ego first but—”.

“You wanted to clean up before the morning meeting but now there’s no time,” Kyoko cut her off this time, internal smirking at this small form of payback.

Rather than be upset, the Fashionista flashed one of her signature grins and said, “Boy, nothing gets by you, does it? But I guess that’s to be expected. Your talent is pretty frightening, after all. Anyway, we’d better get going before Taka declares us tardy. No sense in both of us getting confined to our room, huh?"

Turning around and heading straight for the exit, there was no way for the Fashionista to see the expression of pure shock that over took Kyoko. Lowering her head, letting her lavender hair obscure her vision for a moment, the amnesiac girl glanced up and stared obsessively at the back of Junko’s head…consumed by a single thought:

“My talent…is frightening? What talent is she referring to?”
“So, starting today, everyone will be required to follow through with this bathing schedule I’ve prepared for you all!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru proclaimed, his burning eyes and pure white hair an eternal sign of his authority. He had already passed around a sheet for everyone, detailing the times of the day the bath would be dedicated to men or women.

Glancing around the room, he shouted, “I expect each and every one of you to pick a time and bathe yourself each and every day! When you finish, sign off on the check-sheet I’ve posted in the changing room! If I find that someone has failed to bathe, I will personally see to their punishment myself! Now then, does anyone else have any pressing matters?”

As usual, everyone remained silent. No one had the gall to tell him that his bathing plan was flawed. Anyone could just sign off on his check-sheet without actually bathing, a fact that Toko was quick to mentally note. Then again, there was no point in arguing or discussing anything with Taka at this point. He would use his newfound authority to overrule any suggestions or ideas he disagreed with, which made conversing with him utterly pointless. It had been difficult at first, but soon the students had fallen into an uneasy rhythm.

Each morning meeting, the Disciplinary Chairman would ramble on for a while and then he’d ask if anyone had questions. When no one presented any, he’d excuse himself to wander the halls, ‘patrolling for delinquents’ he often called it. During that time, the students were afforded a brief moment of peace to eat their breakfast.

This morning probably wouldn’t be any different, any moment now the Disciplinary Committee Chairman would announce his intention to leave—

“Very well then! Dismissed!” Taka faithfully reply, standing up as if preparing to leave.

However, much to everyone’s shock, instead of heading directly for the door, the Moral Compass retreated to one of the back tables, taking a seat and silently observing the class.

It was unsettling, to say the least, considering he’d never acted that way before. However, it was easy to surmise why he was acting strangely. After yesterday’s incident with finding them all in the bathhouse, he was undoubtedly suspicious of absolutely everyone. For even though he seemed to believe the lie Celeste had concocted for him, it seemed that he still had his doubts.

Because of that, a wave of uneasiness spread through the class as they were forced to keep a close watch over what they said and did while in his presence.

“So…what’s everyone got planned for today?” Hina broke the silence, trying to make the situation just a bit less awkward.

“I’m not too sure,” Makoto answered, doing is best to smile despite his nervousness. The lucky student glanced over his shoulder and as his eyes made contact with Taka, the Moral Compass shifted his gaze to glare at him. Grimacing and sweating, Makoto laughed apprehensively and said, “ Probably just…hanging out and stuff!”

“Whose gonna bring Mondo his breakfast?” Junko suddenly asked, all eyes shifting over to her. “I mean, I’d do it myself…but I’m kind of under house arrest.”

Surprisingly, the Fashionista didn’t send a glare Taka’s way while she commented on her ‘imprisonment’. No doubt she wanted to, but she probably knew it would do far more harm than good. Instead, she continued to look from classmate to classmate, searching for a volunteer.
“I’ll do it,” Leon finally stepped up, having finished his breakfast consisting of bacon and eggs. “I’m not sure what to make him though…we’ve been out of bread for a while…for some reason.”

The baseball star seemed to almost seethe as he relayed that information, glaring at the camera and silently cursing their captor for only stocking specific food items for the past few days. In the midst of his sneering, the Fashionista called out to him.

“Pancakes,” Junko informed him, making him snap his head over to her. “He’s a big fan of pancakes.”

Sighing, the baseball star picked up his plate and stood up. When he did, he glanced down at Sayaka, who’d yet to finish her meal. She was eating a lot more slowly than before she’d been injured but at least she was able to keep food down without any issues, something that had worried Leon when she’d first regained her appetite.

“Did you wanna come with?” he asked the pop idol, being very patient and mindful of her condition.

Taking a moment to consider, Sayaka let a concerned expression mar her features.

“Actually…I was kind of hoping to get in a bath today,” she said carefully before looking up at him. Picking up the sheet of paper with the bath schedule on it, she pointed at the current time and continued, “Since it’s the girl’s time to bathe right now. I can get that out of the way while you’re taking care of Mondo.”

Despite the simple request, her eyes were fairly serious, and Leon almost instantly figured out why. Neither of them had gotten to meet Alter Ego yet. Mondo had told them about it when he’d returned from the bath, and mentioned that Makoto planned to take them there later. However, with Taka’s new bathing schedule, they most likely wouldn’t have the chance to meet the AI together. Thus, it seemed Sayaka was taking the initiative, which Leon both admired and feared about her.

Nevertheless, he trusted her judgment and replied, “Sounds good! I’ll meet up with you afterward then!”

“I’ll help you out,” Makoto offered to Leon, nervously scratching his head. “I don’t really have anything else planned today.”

With that settled, Sayaka beamed at them before smiling at her female classmates and saying, “Would any of you girls care to join me? It would be kind of awkward to be in there by myself.”

Her smile was genuine, but behind her eyes, there was a sense of apprehension. Whether her classmates noticed it or not, Sayaka was being incredibly brave. Of course, none of them had forgotten what she’d done…how could they? But despite that, instead of cowering and letting her mistake consume her, she was trying to move forward. The pop idol was trying to be friendly and prove that she had nothing to hide from them. She wanted to show them that people could change…even someone as despicable as she had once been.

More than anything else…she wanted to genuinely befriend them. She was tired of constantly being afraid every time one of her classmates glanced her way. She wanted to be able to laugh and smile with them…like she had been able to when this whole affair had started. And despite the fact that she had spent most of her with Makoto at the start, she couldn’t deny that she wanted to make some female friends…considering that, besides her bandmates, she didn’t really have many friends in general.

And so, even though she was slightly trembling, fearful of their potentially hateful responses, she still
extended the olive branch out to them…hoping there might be a chance for forgiveness.

Unfortunately, at the mention of the bath, both Hina and Celeste averted their gazes while Toko openly scoffed at her, biting her thumb and turning away.

“N-No way! I-I’m not going near the bath…I have a promise to keep!” the writing prodigy outright declined, causing a bit of confusion as to what promise she was talking about. And for some reason, her apprehension seemed to be shared with Hina and Celeste.

“Sorry,” the swimmer abruptly said, her voice low. “I’m not really up for bathing right now…”

“I’m afraid I must decline as well. I just applied my make-up and I do not wish to reapply it so early,” the gambler informed her, a sickly sweet smile on her porcelain face.

At the same time, Sakura looked to the pop idol apologetically and said, “I apologize, but I’m afraid I planned on exercising this morning. Perhaps we could make arrangements for later?”

Their subtle refusal stung Sayaka, but she kept a bright smile despite that. She shouldn’t have been surprised, bathing with a potential murderer would be nerve-wracking for anyone.

“No problem! I don’t want you to feel obligated or anything,” she said carefully, not wanting to sound disappointed. “I can go by myself if—”.

“I’ll go with you.”

Everyone was shocked as Kyoko volunteered herself. Her visage was as stoic as always, but she seemed serious about the offer. And although Sayaka knew that Kyoko wasn’t the type to do anything out of pity, that didn’t mean that she didn’t have an alternative motive for offering to bathe with her.

More than likely, Kyoko wanted to keep watch over Alter Ego, and this would be the most convenient way. It kind of stung Sayaka even more, with how obvious it was that her classmate had an ulterior motive, but she put on a pleasant face regardless.

“That sounds great! So, just the two of us then?” Sayaka said as cheerfully as possible, masking her mild disappoint as much as possible.

To this, Junko audibly sighed before dismissively waving her hand. “Honestly, I’d love to join you two, but I doubt His Highness would allow it,” she commented, tilting her head toward the Disciplinary Committee Chairman.

Sayaka’s heart sank, having hoped that Junko would have been able to bathe with them. In truth, she had secretly been hoping that Junko would come along with her. There hadn’t been much time for them to chat since the last trial and the pop idol had a lot she wanted to say to the Fashionista.

Just as she resigned herself to bathing only with Kyoko, an authoritative voice called out, “In light of the fact that the girls were unable to bathe yesterday due to…complications, I would be willing to allow a short bathing session.”

Nearly the entire class snapped their gazes over to Taka as he made that proclamation, but none were more surprised than Junko herself. But more than surprise, a hint of fear draped across her features…

“S-Seriously?! I-I wasn’t expected you to—”.

“Do not misunderstand me!” the Disciplinary Committee Chairman shouted, shooting to his feet and
pointing at her. “I am merely being generous because the girls were unable to bathe yesterday! Normally, I would relegate you to showering in your room but, in light of your compliance and willingness to cooperate with your punishment, this one time, I will allow you to bathe with them! However, after that point, I expect you to return to your room! And if you demonstrate good behavior, I would be willing to allow more trips to the bath, provided you show improvement in your attitude! I hope you appreciate my leniency!”

Thoroughly stunned, the Fashionista’s hand unconsciously reached up and patted her hair, a growing concern evident in her eyes. As she opened her mouth to reply, she was drowned out by an enthusiastic shout.

“That’s fantastic!” Sayaka jubilantly exclaimed, beaming as she looked at Junko. “I’m glad that we’ll be able to spend some girl time together!”

Even though Junko appeared slightly conflicted for a moment, it all vanished as Sayaka made that proclamation. Steeling herself, as if her life depended on it, the Fashionista returned the gesture, rose to her feet and fist pumped.

“Alright then! Let’s head for the bath!”

As slowly and carefully as she needed to, Sayaka joined her in standing, as did Kyoko, and together they headed for the cafeteria exit. Taka watched them like a hawk as walked together, and just before they pushed open the door, the Moral Compass slightly scoffed and said, “A proper show of gratitude for my acquiescence would be appreciated, Junko Enoshima!”

The girls grinded to a halt, with Junko snapping her face toward him. She must have realized how fragile of a chance this was, however, so she refrained from making a snarky comment in favor of smiling sweetly. Bowing deeply to him, she knew exactly the right words to respond with.

“Thank you so much, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru. I won’t waste this chance!”

Her voice oozed sweetness so thick you could swim in it. And while even Taka realized she was merely putting on airs, she had done exactly as he’d requested. In light of that, the Moral Compass nodded to her and replied, “Indeed. Enjoy the bath.”

Rising from her bow, she flashed him a genuine smirk before following Sayaka and Kyoko out into the hallway.

Not an instant passed since their departure that Hina let out an audible sigh, “Well… I guess I’ll head for the pool. I wanna get a few laps in.” She turned to Celeste with a hopeful expression and asked, “Do you wanna come with? It’d be great to spend more time together!”

Celeste smiled pleasantly at the invitation and replied, “That sounds delightful. Let us be off then.”

“I’ll accompany you as far as the locker rooms,” Sakura said to them, all three of them preparing to leave. “It is time for me to resume my weight training, anyway.”

Nodding to her, Celeste and Hina followed her out of the cafeteria and presumably toward the stairs leading to the second floor. Until they were out of sight, Taka kept his keen eyes trained on them, watching for anything suspicious. After they’d gone, he turned his gaze back to the rest of the class, observing them carefully.

Not long after Hina, Celeste and Sakura departed, everyone else stood up, preparing to go their separate ways.
Leon and Makoto headed for the kitchen in order to make Mondo his breakfast. Byakuya wordlessly left the cafeteria, glancing over his shoulder and scowling as he noticed Toko dutifully following after him. The instant he reached the hallway, he increased his speed but was careful not to run, as Taka was still within his field of view. Despite his faster pace, the writing prodigy eagerly stalked after him, a perverse grin on her face. Hifumi also departed, a bit of a sad expression on his face as he momentarily glanced toward the bathhouse. Hiro left as well, muttering about visiting the Rec Room.

Left completely alone in the cafeteria, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru pressed his knuckles to his lips in thought.

“…Perhaps they are not as deceitful as I had imagined.”

“So…where is this computer AI thing?” Sayaka asked immediately upon entering the changing room.

Beneath her guise, Mukuro felt a bit surprised. She figured that everyone must have seen Alter Ego by now, but realized that by the time the boys got out of the bath, there may not have been a good time to meet the AI without Taka discovering them.

“Oh, you haven’t seen it yet? I figured Makoto would have showed it to you by now,” Mukuro said with a smile, looping her arm around Sayaka’s shoulder and edging her toward the lockers. “Then again, you were on guard duty, so it’s not unexpected. Welp, not a big deal. It’s right—”.

“No.”

Both of them froze as Kyoko practically materialized in front of them, a deadly serious expression marring her features. She stood between them and the lockers, an immovable obstacle that neither of them had the power to conquer. Well, Mukuro could have easily forced the amnesiac detective to move, but that would defeat the purpose of keeping a low profile.

At the same time, the soldier didn’t appreciate the fact that Kyoko wasn’t willing to let Sayaka meet Alter Ego. The pop idol had just as much of a right to see the AI as anyone else, and just because the detective was being protective of the laptop didn’t mean—

“Wait…is that why she invited herself to come along? To keep Sayaka from trying to access Alter Ego?”

A hint of anger bubbled up inside Mukuro as she thought that. It made sense, unfortunately. Kyoko never did anything without reason and try as she might, the soldier just couldn’t imagine a reason as to why the amnesiac detective would suddenly want to bathe with Sayaka. Ever since the first trial, the two of them had hardly spoken a word to each other. In fact, Mukuro had half a mind to bet that Kyoko, while not wishing for any harm to come to Sayaka, held a bit of a grudge against the pop idol for almost starting the killing. And because she could be even more unreadable than Junko, the soldier had absolutely no idea what went on inside the lavender haired girl’s head.

Suddenly, Kyoko took a step toward both of them, standing only a few inches from them.

Both Sayaka and Mukuro were startled but quickly understood when the lavender haired girl whispered carefully, “I don’t have an issue with you wanting to meet Alter Ego. However, with the chance of certain individuals possibly listening in, I suggest you wait for a more opportune moment.”
Her lavender eyes flicked over to the entrance, and Mukuro instantly understood. There was no way to know if either Taka or the Mastermind could be listening in on them. They needed to be careful and make sure Alter Ego wasn’t discovered, at least until all of the files on the computer were analyzed and conveyed to all of them.

However, Sayaka probably wouldn’t understand that, considering that she wasn’t present when—

“Got it,” the pop idol abruptly nodded. “Taka aside, we shouldn’t let the Mastermind know what we’re up to.”

For the first time, both Mukuro and Kyoko shared an expression of surprise as Sayaka acquiesced. Of the two of them, the soldier felt the most shocked, never having expected the pop idol to understand so completely.

“W-Wait…how did you—?” she tried to ask before Sayaka turned to her with a fiercely serious visage.

“Didn’t you know? I’m psychic…” Again, shock was all Mukuro or Kyoko could register as she answered. However, less than a second later, the pop idol let out a bright smirk and said, “Kidding! I just have really good intuition.”

As her joke landed, Mukuro couldn’t stop the laughter that arose. It had been a long time since she’d heard Sayaka use that line, but this was the first time it had ever been used on her! The shock and awe of the pop idol’s intuition was almost frightening, but it also helped relieve some much needed tension.

“Jeez! You really had me going there for a second!” Mukuro said with a laugh, making Sayaka beam even more brightly.

“Ah…so that’s where he got it from,” Kyoko whispered to herself, drawing a bit of attention from the pop idol.

“Hmm? Did you say something?” she asked, clearly not hearing what she’d said.

“It’s nothing,” the lavender haired girl assured her, a ghost of a smile on her face. “Anyway, shall we change?”

“Sure! I’m really looking forward to getting into the bath,” Sayaka said cheerfully, already untying the bow from her outfit. Kyoko nodded and began to undress herself as well, grabbing a basket to deposit her clothes in.

As her two classmates began to disrobe, Mukuro felt a sense of foreboding, hesitating to undress. Even though their memories had been erased, there was no telling what small event might trigger some kind of recovery. Junko had warned her about that, because while the memory erasure process was thorough, it was far from perfect. If the despair-loving twin hadn’t of killed Matsuda when she did, he might have perfected it…but that wasn’t the issue right now. The issue gnawing at her mind was the fear that seeing her naked might make the other girls realize that she wasn’t what she appeared to be!

Despite how proud she was of her physique, no matter how you looked at her, she just didn’t have a typical ‘Fashionista’ type body. Her breasts were modest, and her hips weren’t very wide. Not to mention the freckles that littered her face. And then there was the matter of her wig! Sure, she could probably just wrap it in a towel but she had no idea how to properly do that! Never mind the fact that the tangled mess of pink was an utter mess right now, which would make it harder to explain why
Regardless, Mukuro’s hands slightly trembled as she reached up to unbutton her blouse, knowing that there was nothing she could do to deny her fate. She just had to pray that neither of them noticed —

“Junko? Are you alright?” Sayaka called out to her.

Snapping back to attention, the soldier turned her attention behind her and answered, “Uh, yeah! Just having a bit of…trouble…”

Mukuro lost the ability to respond as glanced behind her. Sayaka held a wad of unwrapped bandages, which had only moments ago been plastered over her stomach wound. She was completely nude, aside from the few bandages left on her abdomen, carefully working to unravel the slightly darkened strips. Bit of pink littered what should have been white on the strips, and Mukuro couldn’t stop herself from staring.

Sayaka, however, must have noticed the soldier’s gaze, smirking as she chided, “Trying to sneak a peek? I never would have considered you to be one of my stalkers.”

Flabbergasted, Mukuro sputtered, “W-What?! I wasn’t sneaking a peek! I was just surprised at how much you’ve recovered! Besides…your boobs aren’t that much bigger…”

“Yes?” the pop idol mischievously replied, pushing her chest out a bit. “Do you want to compare?”

Scoffing at the challenge, and knowing she’d lose, Mukuro waved her hand and said, “No thanks. Besides, I don’t need sweater puppies like those getting the way.”

“Oh yeah, turning on the catwalk must be so difficult for large breasted women,” Sayaka mockingly teased, continuing to slowly unwrap her bandages. At the same time, she smirked at the soldier and said, “You sure you’re not just jealous?”

Feeling her face flush, Mukuro abruptly averted her gaze. “O-Of course not! What do I have to be jealous of? I’m proud of my body…it’s not like I want the editors from my agency to alter my proportions for their magazines…”

There was a soft silence for a moment before Sayaka responded, “…I’m sorry. That was horrible of me to suggest…I was just teasing but I guess I was actually being pretty insensitive…sorry.”

Mukuro breathed a quick sigh of relief, knowing that her diversion from the subject had worked perfectly. Since she had already told everyone, aside from Sayaka now that she thought about it, that her appearance was supposedly altered for magazines, it was an easy lie to make use of. Plus, it was far better than any of them realizing that it was her sister on those magazines…

But, she also didn’t want to upset her classmate, so she turned back to her and added, “Hey, it’s no big deal. I overreacted, so—”

“My manager once forced me to lose ten pounds for a performance,” the saddened voice of Sayaka interrupting, a heartbreaking expression on her normally bright face. “I struggled, hardly ate anything for almost a month, but I lost the weight…and then collapsed just after the performance. The doctors said that I almost died from starvation…and my manager scolded me for having to take time off work to recover…”

Despite herself, Mukuro’s eyes became as big as saucers as she heard that story. And while she’d
certainly seen and heard far worse, considering everything Junko had made her do, it still shocked her that such a horrific thing had happened to such a sweet girl. Yeah, Sayaka was no angel, they all knew that, but she certainly wasn’t evil…that right belonged entirely to Junko…and a little to herself by association…

“That’s horrible! It was your manager’s fault in the first place!” the disguised girl said to her classmate, genuine anger in her voice. “How could they do something like that to you?! If my manager tried to pull shit like that with me, I’d have nailed him to a fucking wall!”

Sayaka abruptly looked up at her with surprise on her face. “Wait…you mean your manager has never asked you to lose weight? Not even for one of your fashion shows?”

Mukuro inwardly flinched, knowing she might have just blown her cover. Thinking quickly, especially because she wasn’t sure if Kyoko was listening in or not…she probably was…the soldier placed her hands on her hips and answered, “This may come as a shock to you, but I’ve actually got the perfect figure for modeling! Make-up and junk help hide some of the imperfections but beyond that, I’ve always been perfect for every event I’ve been in! Or did you forget that I’m the Ultimate Fashionista?!”

She heavily accented the title she pretended to have, praying that her enthusiasm would be enough to convince her classmates of her claim. A bit of quiet followed her statement before a snicker came from Sayaka’s direction.

“Wow, I’m totally jealous!” the pop idol sincerely told her, stifling a laugh. “But now I’m kinda curious as to what a perfect model’s body looks like. Care to give me a looksee?”

Knowing she was being teased this time, Mukuro rubbed her thumb and fingers together and said, “It’s gonna cost you…”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were in that kind of business.”

Mukuro and Sayaka were startled when Kyoko abruptly entered their conversation. They turned to see her, clad only in a large bath towel, the ribbon that was usually tied into her long, braided, lavender hair being used to tie all of her hair back in a ponytail. As she walked toward them, she held a completely stoic expression on her face. Honestly, Mukuro wasn’t sure if she had actually made a joke there, considering the amnesiac detective’s normally serious demeanor. It felt like a joke but she just couldn’t be sure…

“Is that your idea of a joke?” Mukuro teasingly asked, testing the waters a bit. When she didn’t respond, the soldier felt the need to mess with her a bit. “Or do you want to know for personal reasons?”

“Not really. I was just curious…” Kyoko answered, somehow sounding serious but joking at the same time. The mood in the room dampened by that exchange, with both Mukuro and Kyoko awkwardly averting their gazes. Pushing past her own joke, the lavender haired girl glanced between the two of them and said, “We should hurry, we have a limited amount of time to bathe.”

“Crap, that’s right! Taka’s schedule!” Mukuro said aloud, glancing at the clock. “Well, we’ve got another hour. That should be plenty of time.”

“Actually, why don’t you go on ahead, Kyoko?” Sayaka offered, obviously trying to be considerate. Kyoko gave her a sideways glance but said nothing as the pop idol pulled off more of her bandages and continued, “Because of these, it takes me a bit longer to get undressed.”
“It’s fine,” the lavender haired girl responded quickly, taking a seat on a bench. “I don’t mind waiting.”

“O-Oh…okay,” the pop idol answered, still working on getting out of her bandages. “Sorry for making you wait…”

Instantly feeling a bit embarrassed because she still hadn’t changed out of her clothes, the soldier shook her head and said, “N-No, take your time! I’m the one holding both of you up!”

As quickly but cautiously as she could, Mukuro began to undress, tossing her blouse and skirt into a nearby basket. After discarding her undergarments and wrapping a towel around herself, she took another towel and carefully wrapped it around her wig, doing her best to tie it up correctly so that it would stay. It took a few tries but eventually she managed to get it all wrapped up tightly before she turned to see Sayaka only just finishing unraveling all of her bandages.

No matter how hard she tried, Mukuro couldn’t stop herself from grimacing at the long jagged wound on Sayaka’s abdomen. It stretched from just below her breasts all the way down to her waist. Just the sight of it made the soldier’s body tingle uncomfortably, slowly glancing down at her own scarred hand.

It was then that Mukuro noticed that Kyoko had elected to leave her gloves on, despite going into the bath. And while she didn’t exactly blame the detective for wanting to keep such horrific burns a secret, she still felt it was a bit odd.

“Something wrong?”

Mukuro tensed as she heard Kyoko speak to her, realizing that she’d been staring at the detective’s hands, which she’d obviously noticed. Quickly regaining her composure, the disguised soldier said, “I was just wondering if you were going to take your gloves off. I mean, how are you supposed to clean them like that!”

It was an underhanded move to call her out on such a thing, Mukuro knew that. However, she couldn’t deny that any normal person who saw their classmate going into a bathhouse with gloves on their hands would have said the same. Perhaps that was why Kyoko didn’t seem as perturbed as she might have been, considering that she wanted to keep her charred hands a secret.

Glancing down at her own gloved hands, Kyoko seemed to wrestle with her own thoughts before answering, “…Is it any of your business?”

A bit startled by her harsh tone, Mukuro waved her hands and said, “No…I guess it isn’t.”

An awkward silence hung between the two of them for a moment before a cheerful voice said, “Alright! I’m ready! Sorry for making you both wait!” The girls turned to see Sayaka, dressed only in a bath towel, standing before them. Her smile widened as she finished, “Shall we?”

Without a word, Mukuro and Kyoko nodded and stood up before all three of them entered the bathhouse. Regretfully, none of them noticed the figure lurking just outside the changing room door…

To Be Continued…
Greetings, my beautiful readers! We got quite a bit more about a few different characters today, didn’t we? But who was the mysterious figure outside the bathhouse? And what are they after? Do we have another peeping session or has someone come to claim Alter Ego? Tune in to the next chapter to find out!

Now, I want to address something that many of you have already pointed out: Chapter 3 is dragging. I know that, and while it wasn’t intentional, the potential for the story as a whole made this chapter unusually long. However, I promise you, the climax of his Chapter is forthcoming. The next few ‘Acts’ will roll right into the conflict and I certainly hope you will enjoy the end of this Chapter.

As always, I appreciate each and every review/comment that I get! So if you have any questions, concerns, comments, fears, tears, traumas, phobias, or anything of the sort regarding this story, don’t be afraid to ask me! I will do my best to respond as quickly as possible! Thanks again!

Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Celeste underestimates Hina. Hifumi can't find what he's looking for. The bathhouse scene...redux!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The scent of chlorine hung in the air, making Celeste crinkle her nose as she perused a gothic style magazine taken from the Rec Room. Resting on a bench in the pool area, she was just getting into the article she was reading when an overly enthusiastic voice called out to her.

“Are you sure you’re okay over there?” Hina shouted, grabbing onto the edge of the pool to keep afloat. Wearing a skintight school swimsuit, the Ultimate Swimming Pro kicked her legs excitedly under the water. “You should come on in! The water feels great!”

An almost inaudible groan, which Hina fortunately didn’t hear, escaped Celeste as her concentration was disrupted. All she wanted was to momentarily take her mind off things, but it seemed that she was denied even that!

Despite the frustration she now felt, the gambler put on a smiling visage and replied, “I’m afraid that I am not fond of…swimming exercises…or anything having to do with water sports. It would ruin my make-up. Therefore, I am content to allow you the honor instead.”

Instantly, Hina’s mood sank and she lowered her gaze to the floor. “But…I feel kinda bad that I’m the only one having fun here…”

In almost any other situation, Celeste might have found the swimmer’s concern endearing, which she considered one of Hina’s only redeeming traits. However, being trapped in this hellish school had dulled her sense of kindness, and thus found Hina’s worrying to be more annoying than usual. But that didn’t mean she had to know that…

“I am fine, I assure you. We do not all have to be doing the same thing to enjoy each other’s company,” the gambler politely insisted, gesturing back toward the girl’s locker room. “After all, Sakura elected to lift weights, you decided to swim, and I have chosen to read more on subjects that pertain to me.”

“That’s true…” Hina replied, obviously still a bit concerned.

Holding in a sigh, Celeste continued to encourage her, “Just because we have different interests, does not mean we cannot get along. In fact, having companions with a variety of skills is more beneficial, since we can learn from and support one another much easier than if we all had the same talents or interests. Do you not agree?”

Despite her insistence, Hina still held an apprehensive expression, which was utterly infuriating.

“How can she not understand such a simple concept?! The more people you have in your pocket, the more options you have! If I was ever in a situation that required anime or manga knowledge, I
Obscuring her frustration behind her perfect mask, Celeste continued to smile pleasantly as she further elaborated, “Simply put, we do not all have to do the same activities together to enjoy our time spent with one another. I am fine reading while you and Sakura do what pleases you. There is no need for guilt or worry.”

“Well…yeah, I know that, but… I just figured we could, ya know…do stuff together? Get to know each other better and stuff…” the swimmer somberly stated, clearly feeling depressed about the subject.

At the same time, Celeste was at her wits end, having never experienced someone feeling guilty over such a trite thing! And even after multiple explanations, Hina still couldn’t grasp that she just wanted to be left alone to read in peace! It wasn’t rocket science! Nearly anyone else would have been able to read between the lines after the first explanation! But she just…God, this was getting tiring…

“If I’d have known hanging out with her would be so exhausting, I would have chosen someone else to manipulate…but she was the best choice, as her company includes Sakura, who I cannot afford to make an enemy of. I mean, I’m not asking her to put on a crap ton of make-up and look at clothes with me, so why…oh, now that’s a thought…”

Her pleasant smile widened into a knowing grin as the gambler asked, “If you feel so strongly about it, why not dry yourself off and come join me? Would it not be fun to apply each other’s make-up and discuss fashion or our interests in the opposite sex?”

“H-Huh?!” the swimmer stammered, confusion warping her features.

Celeste fought to keep from chuckling as each of her suggestions made Hina visibly flinch, though the swimmer tried her best to hide her obvious disinterest in the proposed subjects. However, despite her clear dislike of such activities, Hina forced a smile onto her face and reluctantly nodded.

“S-Sure! We can totally do that!” she insisted, slowly pulling herself out of the pool and heading for the girl’s locker room. “Just let me go get changed and—”

“That will not be necessary,” Celeste harshly cut her off, a serious expression decorating her visage. With a deep, convincing sigh, the gambler apologetically said, “You clearly have no interest in such activities and I do not wish to force you to do something you are not comfortable with. That would be wrong of me…”

Halting almost mid-step, Hina twitched as she heard those words and instantly whirled around to protest, “T-That’s not true! I totally want to do make-up and boy talk and stuff!”

An even deeper sigh escaped the gambler as she waved her hand dismissively. “No, no. I can tell that you are not interested. You see, no matter how skilled, every single person has a ‘tell’ that shows when they are lying. For you… that would be when your nose twitches, which coincidentally happened each time I suggested one of my favored activities. It is a tell-tale sign that you are not being honest.”

“W-What?! You can tell just from that?!” Hina shouted, hands flying up to her nose, somehow believing she could hide her intentions just by covering her face.

Shifting her expression into a light smile, Celeste shook her head and continued, “No… but your reaction just now proves that you do not, in fact, have any interest in such activities…”

“AH?!” the swimmer grunted, feeling tricked and a bit humiliated. However, now that her true
feelings had been unmasked, Hina slowly lowered her gaze and muttered, “Well…that’s not exactly…what I mean is…”

As she tried to verbalize her feelings, Celeste couldn’t help but smirk at how easy it had been to derail the swimmer.

And yes, Celeste knew her tactic was underhanded, and if it had been anyone other than Hina, they probably would have called her out on how deceptive she was being. However, if it would give her time to read her magazine in peace, and let her concentrate on putting the finishing touches on her plan to destroy Taka, then she didn’t care if she had to stomp all over the swimmer’s feelings…it’s not like she actually enjoyed hanging out with her anyway.

“I only came along so that I could build rapport with her and Sakura. I mean, me exercising? Fat chance! Besides…it’s not like I know how to—”.

“Well, that’s not fair!” Hina practically screamed, startling the gambler and breaking her train of thought.

“…Huh?” was all Celeste managed to retort, obviously confused by the sudden outburst.

“You heard me!” Hina continued, leaning forward and complaining, “It’s not fair for you to say that I’m not interested when you had no interest from the beginning!”

For a moment, Celeste sat there, staring wide eyed at the swimmer as she panted from having abruptly yelled. The gambler had barely noticed that Hina had gotten so close to her, their faces only a few inches apart. Usually, Celeste was the one to invade personal space, not the opposite, which made her feel all the more uncomfortable. Then, as she opened her mouth to question Hina’s statement, the swimmer beat her to the punch.

“When I asked if you wanted to come to the pool with me and Sakura, you said, ‘Yes, that sounds delightful!’ But the second we got here, you complained about not liking water and decided to just sit and read a magazine! I wanted us to do something together but ended up having to swim all on my own!”

A bit offended by her abrasive accusations, Celeste put on a neutral visage and replied, “As I recall, you never said that you wanted me to go swimming with you—”.

“Why else would I ask you to come to the pool with me?!” Hina interrupted, frustration and hurt clear in her eyes. Leaning back and away from Celeste, the swimmer groaned, “It’s common sense! Pool equals swimming! I didn’t think I needed to explain that!”

Almost against her will, a light gasp escaped Celeste as she absorbed Hina’s words. Then, much to her own shock, a genuine smile graced her lips. It was only for a moment, long enough for her to realize that it had happened, but she quickly tucked it away as she was reminded of her own complaints just a few moments ago.

“...Maybe she’s not as dense as I thought,” Celeste was forced to realize, feeling the tiniest amount of regret for her earlier assumption. “It’s ironic how hypocritical I am...thinking I needed to explain something to her when I didn’t understand her obvious intentions...I must be slipping...”

Whether she admitted it or not, her exhaustion was beginning to affect her judgement. If it persisted for too much longer, she might make a critical error and ruin everything she’d been planning. But with sleep itself becoming difficult to achieve, her options were limited.

“Perhaps I need to speed things up. I know that I’ll sleep better once Taka’s sleeping with the fishes!
But first I have to deal with this mess…”

In the silence that Celeste had allowed to follow, Hina took a deep breath, as if preparing herself for disappointment, and said, “Listen, if you don’t want to hang out with me, then I’d rather you just say it. I don’t want to force anyone to do anything they don’t want to—”.

“Allow me to apologize,” the gambler interrupted, bowing her head deeply. “That was a cruel trick I played on you…and I never meant to upset you. I’m afraid that I’m not too skilled at simply…”hanging out’ with someone.”

Slowly lifting her head, Celeste looked up and saw exactly what she’d expected. Hina’s expression dulled and guilt slowly overtook her face, making the swimmer stare down at the floor and fidget with her fingers nervously.

“…N-No…I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped like that,” Hina apologized, her voice soft and sorrowful.

Celeste smiled as she knew that victory was close at hand. It was rather easy to turn someone’s anger into guilt and force it back on them. It was one of her many talents as a gambler, along with word manipulation and suggestive propositions. Hina was an opponent that started out strong but their willpower fizzled out when confronted.

Which made it all the more easy to manipulate her…

“It is fine,” Celeste reassured her before visibly sighing. As expected, Hina instantly took note of the sigh and the gambler knew she had her full attention. “We are very different individuals, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, it does seem difficult for us to find common ground—”.

“I’ve got it!” Hina practically yelled, once again startling the gambler into silence. Celeste was truly stunned, having not expected the swimmer to rebound from her depression so quickly. Thus, she could only sit there as Hina beamed and suggested, “Just like you said, we can help each other because we’re so different!”

Getting an inkling of what she might be alluding to, Celeste tried to protest, “I’m not sure that you understand—”.

“Celeste!” the swimmer shouted, again getting right in her face, smiling brightly all the while. “You’re gonna teach me how to do girly stuff! And in exchange, I’ll teach you how to be more athletic! That way, we can learn all about each other while learning new stuff at the same time! Won’t that be great?!”

Celeste’s already pale skin whitened even more as Hina’s enthusiastic proposal hung in the air. Like a fish out of water, the gambler found herself systematically opening her mouth to speak before clamping it shut, unable to properly form the best words to right this situation.

Noticing her apparent dislike of the idea, Hina’s mood instantly soured. “You…don’t like that idea, huh?”

Realizing that her feelings were showing, Celeste quickly reapplied her perfect mask and smiled pleasantly at her classmate.

“I am not…directly opposed to the idea,” Celeste tried to put it politely, struggling to keep her disapproval from showing. “However, I must admit that I do not think that I am the best fit for…”girly’ activities. Sayaka or Junko would be much better suited to such a task.”
Seeing the flaw in her proposal, Hina flinched once more before dropping her gaze slightly.

“Well yeah, but…” she hesitated before gathering her courage and abruptly shooting her head up and gazing directly into Celeste’s crimson irises. “I want you to be the one to teach me Celeste!”

Startled and confused by such a proclamation, the gambler held her mask together as she questioned, “And…why is that? Surely you must realize that my tastes in fashion are quite different from the other girls in our class?”

Without taking her eyes away, Hina hardened her visage and replied, “Because I’m jealous of you, and not them!”

Without even realizing it, Celeste’s mask slipped…crashing to the floor and shattering as her eyes widened and her mouth hung open.

“J-Jealous?!” Celeste choked out, her shock so deep she forgot to use her trademark accent. Instantly recognizing her mistake, she cleared her throat in an attempt to clear suspicion and asked, “I-If I may, why exactly are you…jealous of me?”

The gambler wanted to smack herself for sounding so unsure of herself. Even if she was startled and confused by Hina’s sudden confession, she shouldn’t be showing this kind of weakness in front of anyone! The only saving grace was that Hina was a simpleton who would never question her change in attitude. And while that helped dull the embarrassment, she still felt unbearable shame at having let her perfect mask slip so completely, even if only for an instant.

Unlike her, Hina didn’t seem all that embarrassed or upset, keeping her gaze firm and determined.

“Because you’re completely confident in yourself!” Hina insisted, smiling nervously as she continued. “You always do whatever you think is right and don’t let anyone tell you differently. You have enough confidence in yourself to admit when you’re wrong. And you were brave enough to convince me to peep on the boys with you—!”

“Please don’t shout that!” Celeste warned, glancing around the swimmer’s side and watching the locker rooms. Fortunately, it seemed that no one heard that declaration, making both girls sigh in relief.

“Sorry about that…” Hina apologized before smiling again. “But seriously, I’m super jealous of how awesome you are! Plus…you’re a lot more feminine than I am…so that’s why I figured you’d be the best person to ask!”

For almost an entire minute, Celeste sat on the bench blankly staring at the swimming pro. Her brain was caught in a torrent of ideas and notions that she was having trouble sorting out.

Mainly, she struggled with the idea that Hina was jealous of her! For many reasons, it should have been the other way around! A girl with huge ‘proportions’ and an upbeat and cheerful personality was jealous of a manipulative schemer who was plotting the downfall of her classmates. The irony was almost palpable.

At the same time…Celeste couldn’t deny that she was incredibly flattered by Hina’s statement.

No one…absolutely no one had ever complimented her the way that the swimmer had. Her talents were often praised, yes. But it was entirely different for someone to praise her rather than her talents. She felt…something akin to happiness at being told that she was as talented as she claimed.

And if Hina hadn’t admitted that she was jealous of her…she may have never discovered that
feeling…or realized that she could use it to bend Hina to her whims.

“Perhaps I misjudged Hina’s usefulness…maybe her proposal will work out in my favor after all…”

Rising to her feet, Celeste brushed off her dress and adjusted her shirt before turning her determined
gaze toward Hina. At first, the swimmer tensed, but eased up a bit as the gambler spoke.

“So then, let me see if I’m understanding your proposal,” the gambler said politely, slowly resuming
her usual persona. “I would be teaching you how to act more like a proper lady. And you would be
educating me on improving my physical stature. Is that correct?”

Smiling nervously and rubbing the back of her head, Hina laughed as she answered, “Uh, yeah…I
guess that’s how it would go, huh?”

“Are you really sure you would like to learn from me? I am a harsh teacher,” Celeste asked one last
time, her voice and attitude completely serious.

Not fazed in the least, Hina held out her hand for the gambler to shake and replied, “I can take it.
Besides, I won’t be letting you off easy either!”

As Hina eagerly held out her hand, the gambler couldn’t help but feel that her luck was finally
changing for the better. All the pieces on her board were falling into place, it wouldn’t be long now.
Still, looking at the overeager expression on the swimmer’s face brought an almost unsettling
feeling…

“She’s so easy, believing everything I tell her…it almost feels wrong to manipulate her like this…
almost…”

However, Celeste knew that having more people on her side would benefit her later. She would need
a pure-hearted and naïve girl like Hina in her corner should her plan fall to ruin. And if it ever came
to it, she could always blackmail the swimmer with exposing their shared time of peeping in order to
get what she wanted. That had been the whole reason for peeping in the first place, something to
bind her and Hina together that would make them accomplices. She could hold that card over Hina
and use it whenever she saw fit.

“I never waste an opportunity…” she told herself as she prepared to once again manipulate the poor,
 naïve swimmer girl over to her side. “…I can’t waste this opportunity.”

Celeste needed to have the swimmer’s support, it was vital for her plan to succeed. She had chosen
Hina to be her pawn because her blissfully cheerful nature, which was matched only by her
stubbornness, made her a valuable ally against someone like Kyoko or Byakuya. After all, the
swimmer practically came packaged with Sakura, a major boost to her side, and with the two of them
protecting her, her victory was all but guaranteed!

It was tragic really…Hina would either end up an unwitting victim of Celeste’s ‘graduation’ or the
gambler would simply cut ties with her before having to fulfill her end of the bargain. No matter how
you looked at it, this arrangement would end with Hina being utterly disappointed…which was…
acceptable…

“She’s a means to an end, nothing more. A promise to her is like making a promise to a wall…
utterly pointless. I mean…once I graduate from this hell-hole, she’ll be executed along with everyone
else…and it will all be worth it to have my castle and the life I’ve…always dreamed of…”

Deep down inside, Celeste knew that a part of that thought was an utter lie. However, being the
Queen of Liars, it took little effort to convince herself that it was all true. She did want her castle, she
did want to get out of the school, and she didn’t care about who had to get hurt in order to make it happen…that is the truth she told herself to believe as she delicately took Hina’s hand and shook it.

“Very well, then. It is a deal.”

The instant Kyoko, Junko, and Sayaka headed into the bathhouse, Hifumi made his move.

Like a blubbering ninja, he sped into the changing room, quickly but silently. He tip-toed his way through the room, glancing toward the bathhouse doors that he’d been on the other side of only a day ago. And as much as he wanted to study the 3D female body…for model building purposes of course…he actually had another objective that needed to be fulfilled.

“I must reunite with her…she must be so lonely without company,” the manga artist insisted to himself, sneaking toward Alter Ego’s locker. “Just a few minutes to check and see if she’s doing alright…then I’ll come back tonight!”

Opening the locker door, all of his excitement fell as he realized that it was empty.

Gasping, the fanfic creator whisper shouted, “W-Where is she?! What’s become of my precious virtual maiden?!”

As quietly as he could manage, Hifumi began searching through the other lockers, tearing them open one by one…only to be disappointed again and again. With so many lockers to go through, he knew it would take some time to search them all.

Glancing at the bathhouse door, knowing he could be discovered at any moment, Hifumi steeled himself. “No matter what it takes…I will find her!”

“Ahhhhh, this feels so good!” Sayaka moaned as she sat in the large bath, the heavenly heat of the water lapping at her delicate skin as she let the water come up to her chin.

“Seriously…” Junko agreed with her, resting her arms on the rim of the bath while most of her body sunk beneath the soothing water’s surface. “I may just have to be a good little prisoner if it means getting more bath time,” the Fashionista joked as she sloshed some water onto her neck, moaning pleasantly.

Not far from them, Kyoko also sat chest deep in the bath, breathing calmly while keeping her eyes closed…as if concentrating on something.

For a time, none of them had the will to say anything, merely sitting in the large bath, letting themselves be refreshed from all of the horrors they had been through. It was a rare moment of peace, one that all of them desperately needed, whether they knew it or not. In the midst of that blissful rejuvenation, Sayaka stretched her arms over her head and pushed her chest out, inadvertently drawing the other two girls’ attention.

“No need to stare,” Sayaka jokingly said as she caught them staring. “It may not seem like it, but I work very hard to maintain my figure. Or are you two just jealous?”

Again, her playful attitude was more soothing than insulting, making Junko tease her back, “Oh
yeah, I’m *super* jealous that I don’t have to work out to maintain my figure. Metabolism is on my side! I can eat as much as I want and not gain an ounce of weight!”

Widening her eyes, Sayaka blinked at her in perplexion before stating, “…I think I might actually be jealous of you.” The pop idol turned toward her and began scanning every inch of Junko’s body, which made the Fashionista quite uncomfortable.

“W-What?! What are you staring at?!” she finally said, tired of being scrutinized.

In response, Sayaka sighed deeply, letting her mouth sink below the water’s surface and saying something that made bubbles rise up and pop. Of course, her voice was obscured by the water, so neither Junko nor Kyoko could understand a word. The Fashionista glanced to the lavender haired girl, who merely shrugged.

“Hey, if you’ve got something to say, say it so that we can hear it!” a sudden demand from Junko erupted, making Sayaka pop her mouth above the water.

Almost nervously, she averted her gaze and said, “I said…I wish my skin looked as beautiful as yours…”

Completely shocked by that statement, Junko’s mouth hung open as she tried to form words. When none came, their other classmate decided to chime in instead.

“I have to agree,” Kyoko surprisingly concurred, glancing down at her gloved hands for a brief instant. But just as quickly, her eyes moved back to examine Junko’s body, her lips curving into a tiny grin as she complimented, “Your skin truly is flawless.”

A rush of heat flooded the Fashionista’s face, burning her cheeks bright red. That is, until her eyes happened to glance at the back of her right hand, particularly the scar from where the spear had pierced her. All at once, her embarrassment fell away, leaving her staring sadly at the brutal scar on her hand. Noticing her gesture, both Kyoko and Sayaka fell eerily silent, no doubt feeling a bit ashamed for causing their classmate’s distress.

“…I *used* to be flawless,” Junko finally admitted, unable to tear her eyes away from her hand. “I was perfect…no one could hold a candle to me. I was the absolute best in my field. But now…now…now I’ve got nothing. This scar on my hand will forever serve as a sign of my own failure…and I have no one to blame for it but myself…”

A deep melancholy settled into her sky-blue irises as she closed her right hand into a fist, her arm shaking, or her perhaps trembling. At the same time, Kyoko’s gaze trailed down to her own gloved hands, a sympathetic expression on her face.

Just then, a swishing of water startled both of them and they lifted their gazes to see Sayaka standing upright in the bath. If they weren’t confused by that, they quickly became perplexed as the pop idol slowly pulled her towel open, giving them a view of her nude form. Both of them were startled for a moment before their eyes were drawn to the large jagged scar on her abdomen, which was still a bit red and obviously healing. Slowly, she dropped one side of the towel and allowed her now free hand to gently trace the length of her wound.

“Believe me when I say that I understand your pain,” Sayaka softly told them, her eyes threatening to well up with tears. “Because of my stupidity…I’ll never be allowed on stage again. Even if no one found out about what I did, my manager would never let me come back to the agency with this ugly thing. It hurts…it hurts to know that everything I worked for was for nothing. And…the feelings of acceptance and warmth from performing for my fans…is forever out of my reach. My career…my
dream...has come to an end...and it was all my fault.”

Hot tears spilled from her eyes, trailing down her cheeks until the droplets fell into the sweltering bath water.

“Sayaka…”

Junko’s voice died in her throat, unable to find the right words to comfort her classmate. Simultaneously, Kyoko’s gaze softened, knowing there was little that could be said or done to ease her suffering. However, much to both of their surprises, faint laughter began to echo. Strangely enough, it was coming from Sayaka, whose melancholy appearance suddenly shifted into a bright and warm smile.

“But you know...I’m actually kind of grateful for this scar,” she told them, tenderly tracing the length of it with her fingertips. A smile warmer than either of them had ever seen spread out of Sayaka’s lips. “At first...I hated it. But now...every time I see it, I’m reminded that I’m alive. That I survived. I made a horrible mistake that I can’t take back...but at least I’m alive. And as long as I’m alive, I can move forward. This scar reminds me that I can’t give up...because it’s a symbol of when I did give up...but it’s also a reminder that I can’t let myself give up...ever again.”

As she spoke, her voice grew stronger and more determined than ever before. Her smile practically lit up the room, and her melodic voice resonated all around them. In that moment, even if she never realized it, her talent as the Ultimate Pop Sensation grew stronger than she could have ever known.

“I’m not sure what I can or should be doing, but I know that we all have to do what we can to survive,” Sayaka continued, smiling and winking at Junko, making the Fashionista flush unexpectedly. Covering herself up again, she gently set herself back into the water and sighed. “That was...actually pretty embarrassing…”

“I don’t doubt that,” Junko replied with a smirk, letting her arms fall into the revitalizing water. A deep sigh escaped the Fashionista as she smiled back at her classmate, “But sometimes...you just have to say what you think you need to...before it’s too late.”

She glanced down at her own scarred hand, seeing the ridges of the scarred skin in a light that she had never imagined before. At the same time, not far away, Kyoko glanced at her gloved hands once more. A deep frown settled onto her features as she stared at those gloves, closing her hands into fists.

“Oh, and before I forget,” Sayaka announced before turning and facing Kyoko directly. Raising an eyebrow, the amnesiac girl was surprised when the pop idol bowed to her and said, “Thank you...for helping out Makoto.”

“What?” Kyoko questioned, genuinely confused.

Lifting her head, Sayaka smiled softly at her. “Makoto told me that you were the one who encouraged him to talk to me after...the first trial. I did something horrible to him...and I almost lost his friendship forever...but because he never gave up on trying to be my friend...I didn’t. And it was all because you were looking out for him. So...thank you.”

As expected, Kyoko showed no hint of emotion as those words were directed at her. Instead, she averted her gaze and said, “It was nothing.”

A heavy silence fell between the three of them. That is, until a low growl escaped from Junko’s throat.
“Are you for real?!” the Fashionista suddenly shouted, glaring angrily at Kyoko. In turn, the lavender haired girl effortlessly met her ferocious gaze as she continued, “Sayaka’s pouring her heart out to you and that’s all you can say! Jeez, the least you could do is say ‘You’re Welcome’ or something! I mean, you act like you don’t even care—!”

Before she knew what was happening, a light slash of water hit Junko’s face.

“H-H-Hey!” Junko sputtered, a hand flying up to make sure the towel around her hair hadn’t gotten wet. Slowly shifting her gaze, she glared at Sayaka, who playfully splashed at her again. “W-What the hell, Sayaka? K-Knock it off!”

“Oh, come on! A little water never hurt anyone!” the pop idol chided, obviously feeling more relaxed than before. “Besides, Kyoko’s just a bit shy, that’s all. No need to get upset over something so trivial.”

“T-Trivial?!” Junko shouted, only to be lightly splashed with water again. Sayaka giggled as she playfully splashed at both her and Kyoko, who cracked the tiniest of smiles at seeing the elated expression on the pop idol’s face. Unfortunately, the Fashionista was not so understanding, growing more and more frustrated until she finally exploded, “Would you stop that?! I don’t want my hair to get wet!”

A confused look crossed Sayaka’s face. “Why not?” she asked plainly, touching her own wet and matted hair. “Shouldn’t you wash your hair before getting into the bath anyway?”

Flinching a bit, the Fashionista aggressively replied, “I-I didn’t get the chance to fix my hair this morning! I wanted to use the special conditioners in my shower! Not the cheap crap they have in here!”

Again, a perplexed look crossed Sayaka’s visage as she asked, “Wait…you have your own conditioner?”

“…Yeah?” the Fashionista answered, wary of the look the pop idol was giving her.

“But…our rooms don’t come with anything but simple furniture, right?” Sayaka asked both her and Kyoko. “I mean, all I’ve got is a bed, a desk and a closet. Where did you get conditioner?”

Now it was time for a puzzled look to capture Junko’s features as she replied, “Well, I brought it with me to school. Well, actually, it was delivered before I got here. In fact, most of the stuff that I sent ahead was in my room after we all woke up here. Wasn’t it the same for you?”

Sayaka’s face became overcome with shock as she answered, “…No. I…I don’t have anything in my room! I sent my belongings ahead too but when I got here, none of it was waiting in my room! Why didn’t…my stuff arrive?”

Slowly, Sayaka’s hand rose up and she grasped her head, squinting as if in pain. She appeared to be trying to remember something…but it kept slipping from her grasp.

“Why…? Even my recording equipment is missing, and I know that I brought it with me. Not to mention all of my singles,” she told them, struggling to find an answer. Looking over to her other classmate, she asked, “Do you have any of your belongings, Kyoko?”

“No, my room was also empty when I got here…”

Her answer was short and swift, and it brought more questions than answers. At the same time, Junko placed a hand on her chin and thought aloud, “Weird…why did my stuff get delivered when
neither of yours did?"

“And Leon too!” Sayaka suddenly informed them, her voice growing louder. “Leon had his baseball equipment in his room! Not only that, he had posters and other stuff that he would have brought with him to school! He showed it all to me the other day!”

Despite the situation, Junko couldn’t stop herself from smirking. “Oh, so you’ve already gotten inside his room, huh? Did he help you change your bandages too?”

The abrupt implication made Sayaka’s face burned bright red as she answered, “What?! No! And that’s not the point anyway!” She took a deep breath to compose herself and said, “It just doesn’t make sense…why are some of us missing our belongings?”

“There’s a possibility…it has something to do with our captor,” Kyoko abruptly replied, her gaze downcast in deep thought. “I don’t have enough evidence yet…but it’s possible that—”.

Suddenly, an audible screeching sound echoed in the distance. It only lasted for a moment, but the second she heard it, Kyoko abruptly shot to her feet. Startled by her actions, Junko and Sayaka slowly got up as well, staring at her while she glared toward the bathhouse entrance, her eye narrowing angrily.

“…That fool!”

After almost thirty minutes of searching, Hifumi was beginning to lose hope. He’d torn open each locker and rummaged through most of the room, but he was still unable to find his missing princess.

“It can’t be…” he whispered angrily. “Could someone have…already taken her?!”

It wasn’t inconceivable. After all, there were very few people Hifumi could trust in this school and with the possibility of a mole amongst them, it looked more and more like someone had spirited away Alter Ego, in service to the Mastermind. Or perhaps the Mastermind kidnapped her themselves! Or, either Junko or Kyoko could have taken her, considering they were the ones who were supposed to be on guard and therefore would seem the least suspicious!

Anger began to course though Hifumi’s veins and he was just about to storm out and wait for the girls to finish bathing when he noticed something odd. One of the large lounging chairs that usually sat in a row had been moved. It was pressed up against the side of the locker cabinet…as if trying to obscure something!

Making a mad dash toward it, Hifumi gasped as finally caught a glimpse of his missing princess. The laptop housing her beautiful soul was wedged between the chair and the lockers, effectively hiding it from view! And since the chair had only been moved a short distance, not many would think to look there for it!

“Don’t fear, my love! I am here to save you!” Hifumi nobly whispered as he bent over and grabbed the chair.

Carefully, he began to move it, an audible screech echoing. Although he knew that noise had the potential to lead to his discovery, at the moment, he was too concerned with Alter Ego’s safety to care. Besides, the screech lasted for only half a second, and he swore he’d heard the girls splashing around. They would probably be none the wiser…
Giving one last shove, Hifumi moved the chair aside and freed the laptop from its imprisonment. Reaching a trembling hand down, the fanfic creator gently picked up the device that housed his love’s soul. As he ran his hand over the cool surface, a warm smile spread across his face.

“…At last, we are reunited. And this time, I swear that nothing shall tear us apart…”

Carefully lifting up the screen, it took less than a moment for the laptop to awaken, the adorable face of Alter Ego coming back into view. Hifumi felt a tear slip down his cheek as he saw her, never realizing just how much he could miss her. Being separated from her had been agonizing enough, but the thought of losing her entirely made his stomach churn and his knees feel weak.

He could not deny it any longer, even though he never denied it in the first place, but he was truly in love with Alter Ego…

As the AI became cognizant, she smiled up at him and said, “Oh, Hifumi! It’s great to see you again! Ah, and you brought friends this time! I’m so glad!”

At the mention of friends, Hifumi’s body stiffened. His breath caught in his throat and his head slowly turned to gaze behind him. To his utter horror, there stood Kyoko, Junko, and Sayaka, all of them dressed only in a towel…glaring angrily at him. Of the three of them, however, Kyoko’s infuriated gaze bore into his very soul as she seethed:

“…What do you think you’re doing?”

“Mondo seems to be getting better,” Leon commented as he and Makoto made their way back to the cafeteria, having just delivered breakfast to the biker. “He’s got his appetite back, which is better than nothing!”

“Yeah, and hopefully Chihiro will wake up soon,” Makoto optimistically concurred, a hopeful smile on his face. “That way, we can all put this behind us and—”.

“EEEEYAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

A feminine scream tore through the air, stunning both of the boys. They had just stepped inside the dorm area and could tell that the scream had originated from the bathhouse. Leon’s face blanched before he gritted his teeth, his features slowly turning a furious red.

“Sayaka!!”

Without warning he tore across the lobby area toward the bathhouse. He hardly noticed that Makoto was keeping pace with him, albeit just barely, a look of grave concern plastered over the lucky student’s face. Together, they stormed through the entrance to the changing room, dashing around the sides of the divider just inside the door. However, upon getting a clear view of the room, they suddenly felt as though they had made a horrible mistake.

Inside the changing room, they found Hifumi cowering against the wall, clutching Alter Ego’s laptop to his chest. What was truly surprising though, was that he was cornered by three beautiful girls dressed only in bath towels…all of whom turned to see who had burst in.

“L-Leon! What are you doing in here?!” Sayaka abruptly screamed, her face turning pink as her hands shot over her already covered chest.
“M-Makoto too! What the hell are you thinking, barging in here like this?!” Junko shouted alongside the pop idol, her face also flushing as she gripped her towel tightly, making sure it was in place.

Both of the boys blushed a deep crimson as they found themselves unable to tear their eyes away.

“S-S-Sayaka! I-It’s not what you think!” a flustered Leon shouted, trying and failing to avert his gaze. “It’s not—we didn’t mean—we heard a scream! Right, Makoto?!”

“Y-Y-Yeah!” the lucky student concurred, doing his best to look at each of the girl’s faces. “W-We heard a scream and thought one of you might be—”.

“As you can see, we’re all fine,” Kyoko cut in, her visage completely stoic…except for a hint of embarrassment buried deep within her eyes that only Makoto faintly noticed. “Actually, your timing is impeccable. Please keep watch while we deal with this one…”

Without acknowledging the disbelieving stares of the other two girls, or the shocked expressions on both of the boys’ faces, Kyoko turned her full attention over to Hifumi, who had tried to sneak away during the confusion. Yelping in distress, the fanfic creator pressed himself against the wall again, gripping Alter Ego tightly.

Kyoko’s lavender eyes narrowed at him as she said, “I believe I said that we should keep contact with Alter Ego to a minimum, didn’t I? And yet, this is the second time you’ve come and accessed the laptop without permission. Explain.”

Hifumi honestly tried to respond, but when he opened his mouth, only a light whimper came out. Displeased with his attitude, Kyoko’s eyes hardened as she glared.

“Alter Ego could be our only means of uncovering the truth. You have jeopardized our safety by acting so recklessly. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Shame spread over Hifumi’s features as she continued to berate him. His gaze traveled down to the laptop in his hands, Alter Ego’s ‘face’ pressed into his chest. The AI must have been thoroughly confused, but was choosing to remain silent, possibly understanding that speaking might make matters worse. Adding to it that Hifumi still couldn’t find the courage to form words, and this situation was quickly becoming disastrous.

“Hold on a second,” Makoto bravely voiced, making Kyoko glance over her shoulder at him. Her gaze brought a faint flush to his cheeks but the lucky student managed to ask, “What do you mean ‘the second time’? I thought that nothing happened last night.”

“Actually,” Junko spoke up, trying to get involved in the situation. “We never got the chance to mention it because Taka decided to stick around after the meeting, but we found evidence that someone accessed Alter Ego last night.”

Makoto, Leon and Sayaka gasped, their eyes widening and their gazes turning toward an even more distressed Hifumi. Now with everyone in the room staring at him, the fanfic creator suddenly broke his silence.

“I-I-I…I never meant to cause problems!” he insisted, hugging the laptop tighter. “It was…it was…I just wanted to talk to her a bit, that’s all! She listened to me…really listened! And…it felt so good to be acknowledged—”.

“So, you put our lives in jeopardy for your own selfish needs?” Kyoko harshly cut him off, her words cutting deep. “Alter Ego doesn’t belong to any one of us. Chihiro created her in order to help us survive. To monopolize her and distract her from her work decrypting those files puts us all at
Everyone in the room froze as Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru’s voice rumbled. Makoto and Leon spun around to see the white haired, blazing eyed chairman standing directly behind them, a fury unlike any other burning in his eyes. Sayaka fought to keep from trembling, while Junko gritted her teeth. Even Kyoko’s stoic visage shifted into an uncomfortable stare as her worst fears started to be realized. And Hifumi, who could only stare wide-eyed at the Disciplinary Chairman, couldn’t help but tighten his grip on the laptop.

“T-Taka! We can explain—!” Makoto instantly tried to reason, only to be shoved aside by the Disciplinary Chairman.

“There is no need to explain! I have been listening this entire time!” Taka roared, sending accusatory glares at everyone present. “When you found something crucial to our survival…you all decided to keep it a secret from me! That is why you were all in the bathhouse together yesterday! I put my faith in you all and how do you repay me? With lies and betrayal! Is that not so, Makoto Naegi?!”

The lucky student opened his mouth to protest, but couldn’t deny the truth. A pained look of guilt covered his face and at that moment, Taka knew he was correct.

“I would say that I cannot believe you would do such a thing…but clearly it was to be expected!” the Disciplinary Committee Chairman raged, making everyone flinch. “None of you have conformed to the rules that I have laid out for you! Time and time again, I find that you all not only distrust me, you go behind my back in order to benefit yourselves—!

“It has nothing to do with that,” Kyoko sternly refuted him, not even flinching as Taka turned his fiery gaze on her. “We chose not to tell you about Alter Ego because we feared you would react like this. We wanted to avoid any infighting as much as possible—!

“But it seems that infighting has occurred regardless! You are all fighting over who should retain ownership of Chihiro’s laptop, are you not?!” Taka insisted, making Kyoko scowl at him.

“It’s just a misunderstanding that we were trying to clear up—”, she tried to explain but was cut off again.

“A misunderstanding indeed!” Taka shouted, pointing from her to Sayaka and Junko. “You used the excuse of bathing in order to go behind my back! And after I graciously allowed Junko Enoshima to accompany you, this is how you repay my generosity!

“Hey, lay off!” Junko interjected, a fire rising in her as well. “We didn’t plan on accessing the laptop when we came in here! We just wanted a freaking bath! Don’t go forcing your opinions on—”.

“Be silent, traitor!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted at the top of his lungs. Stunned into silence by his comment, no one stopped him as he brazenly continued, “It doesn’t matter what your intentions were! You still went behind my back and lied to me! After all I’ve done to try and keep everyone safe, you all continue to undermine my efforts! But that ends now!”

Marching over to Hifumi before anyone could stop him, Taka grabbed the laptop with both hands and abruptly jerked it out of the fanfic creator’s sweaty grasp. Reaching his hands out in a futile attempt to stop him, the love-struck fanfic creator wept as the love of his life was taken from him.

“I am confiscating this laptop until further notice! If any of you wish to access it, you will come and speak with me directly! Good day!”
Everyone’s eyes widened as Taka spared no time, heading directly for the changing room exit.

Hifumi took a shaky step forward, trying to pursue the Disciplinary Chairman, but he stumbled and fell to his knees. Hot tears poured out of eyes and stained his glasses as he realized just how powerless he truly was. His heart ached and he felt a void forming deep in his chest as the only ‘person’ to ever take interest in him was stolen away. However, the worse torture began as Alter Ego, who could barely see her surroundings, noticed that she was exiting the changing room.

A high pitch scream enveloped the area…

The instant Taka made it out into the lobby area of the dorms, a high-pitched scream erupted from the laptop.

“HEEELP!!! SOMEONE’S TAKING ME!!! PLEASE!! ANYONE!!! HELP ME!!!”

As the voice that sounded like Chihiro continued to endlessly scream for help, Taka paused for a moment, completely startled by the AI’s shouting. For a moment, his aura flickered, the white in his hair momentarily shown black and his eye flames extinguished as that voice shook him to the core. However, his hesitation lasted for but a moment, his aura returning along with his whitened hair and blazing eyes. Steeling himself, he prepared to head directly toward his room when a voice called out to him.

“Taka! What is the meaning of this?!” a deep but feminine voice shouted over Alter Ego’s wails.

Glancing over his shoulder, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman saw Sakura standing only a few feet away from him, with Hina and Celeste standing beside her. All of them had guilty but perplexed expressions, proving to him that they also knew of the laptop’s existence.

This only strengthened his resolve as he fiercely shouted back, “I am confiscating this laptop due to its suspicious nature! It will remain in my care until further notice!”

“W-Wait! You don’t understand!” Hina tried to reason with him, but her pleas fell on deaf ears.

“Please, give us a chance to explain!” Sakura insisted, but even her voice failed to pierce him.

Completely ignoring their protests, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman turned and headed toward his room, not letting the anguished wails of Alter Ego deter him.

Unbeknownst to all of them, Celeste’s calculating eyes fixed on the laptop. And if only for an instant, a fiendish smile overtook her lips.

At the far end of the first floor hallway, Mondo heard the screams. At first, his eyes shot over to Chihiro, only to realize that she was still unconscious. Only then did it click that the screams were from Alter Ego, making the biker race to the door and slide it open. Even now, far off in the distance, the wails could easily be heard.

“HEEELP MEEE!!! I’M BEING TAKEN!!! SOMEONE!!! ANYONE!! HELP!!!”

Mondo clenched his fists and gritted his teeth before slamming his knuckles into the doorframe.
“I…I can’t help you…I can’t leave…I have to stay…and protect…Chihiro…I’m sorry…I’m sorry…” Mondo angrily whispered an apology, feeling utterly powerless.

As those wails of desperation echoed through the halls of the school, even if it was only a tiny bit… Chihiro Fujisaki began to stir.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Now the ball is certainly rolling, isn’t it?! How will the class react to Taka’s ‘theft’ of their only hope? And just what does the Disciplinary Chairman plan to do with Alter Ego anyway? Is this the beginning of the end for Chapter 3? All of these questions and more will be answered in the next few installments!

On that note, I have an important announcement to make… I will need to take a short break from posting for a bit. I know, I know, I’ve done this too many times now, but I assure you I have a good reason… I’ve run out of backlog on my chapters and need ample time to write more. I try to stay a few chapters ahead of posting but thanks to DR3 (and all the stress/anxiety/awesomeness it brought me) I fell behind on writing. Because of that, I’m going to take some time to get further ahead in my own writing on this story.

I know it’s annoying but I want to give all of you the best possible story I can create! And to do that, I need more time. My beta, Dixxy Mouri, has been very helpful and together we’ve got some absolutely amazing events planned for later in this story! I refuse to simply write faster just to get chapters out and not be satisfied with my own story. So again, I’m sorry but I’m going on another break. It shouldn’t be a terrible amount of time, but long enough for me to hammer out ideas and get everything down on paper.

Above all, I appreciate each and every one of you for sticking with my story! I never imagined it would get this big or this amazing! Seriously, thank all of you beautiful readers for being here for me and I will be back as soon as I possibly can!

Until then, please keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Ch 3 Act 15

Chapter Summary

Taka begins speaking with Alter Ego, and learns of his classmates 'deceptions'. The rest of the students ponder what needs to be done about Taka, with varied results. Mukuro takes a leap of faith. Later, Hifumi receives a sudden visit from Celeste.

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT MESSAGE IN AUTHOR NOTE
(NOTHING TOO SERIOUS THOUGH)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"HELP! SOMEONE! I HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED! THE MASTERMIND HAS STOLEN ME! CALL THE POLICE! OR SAKURA OGAMI!"

Kiyotaka Ishimaru continued to cover his ears as the incessant cries endlessly poured out of the small laptop. Fortunately, only he would be plagued by the screaming, as he had shut himself away in his room for the time being. Initially, he’d pulled up the screen of the laptop in order to turn it off, and end the infernal screams, but was stunned when he saw Chihiro’s face staring back at him.

And the instant the AI was able to take in his appearance, she immediately shouted a proclamation:

"AN UNKNOWN PERSON HAS TAKEN ME! THE MASTERMIND HAS ME! SOMEONE PLEASE SAVE ME!!"

For the last twenty minutes, Taka had struggled to try and calm the furious shouts from the laptop. However, no amount of harsh discipline or recitement of school regulations seemed to temper the Chihiro look-alike’s screams. Not only did the volume of the shouts irritate him, the fact that this...thing sounded so much like his comatose classmate deeply disturbed him. He needed silence if he was going to figure out how and why this ‘being’ existed, not to mention that he had a few pressing concerns to ask of it.

“For the last time, I am not the Mastermind!” Taka shouted at the computer screen, growing impatient from the AI’s constant shrills. “Listen well…I am Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru and—“.

“SOMEONE SAVE ME! RESCUE ME! PERVERT! THERE IS A PERVERT TRYING TO—!”

At the mention of ‘pervert’, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman felt something inside him snap, gritting his teeth so hard his jaw ached. Losing his temper, Taka slammed his hands down on keyboard and shouted, “I am not a pervert, either! I told you that I am Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishi—”.

“Your response was not understood, Mr. Mastermind,” Chihiro’s voice said in an acceptable vocal
As the sounds of constant shouting ceased, Taka breathed a quick sigh of relief before immediately searching for the reason why. Glancing at the screen, the Disciplinary Chairman saw a strange arrangement of numbers and letters in a text box beneath the Chihiro look-alike’s floating face:

[Pinf7owrD1]

Was that the response the look-alike was talking about? Was this how to communicate with it?

Deciding to at least test that theory, Taka took a seat in front of the keyboard. As he reached his hands up, he hesitated at he noticed the Chihiro look-alike staring at him expectantly. Inwardly flinching but keeping his composure, the Disciplinary Chairman cleared the text and wrote in another response.

[Who are you?]

A simple enough question but one that Taka desperately needed answered. After glancing over the text, a cheerful smile spread out over the look-alike’s face.

“Hello! My name is Alter Ego! I am an Artificial Intelligence created by Chihiro Fujisaki—HELP! SOMEONE PLEASE FIND ME! THE MASTERMIND IS ASKING QUESTIONS!”

“Eyahhh!”

As the AI belted loudly after answering the question, Taka let out a startled shout as he reared back, his chair going with him and together, they toppled to the floor. Picking himself up, enduring the AI’s screams once more, the Disciplinary Chairman swiftly returned his hands to the keyboard, typing furiously.

[WILL YOU PLEASE STOP SHOUTING?! I AM NOT THE MASTERMIND!]

He was sure to type in all caps, to ensure the AI knew he was furious. Taking a moment to register this new comment, Alter Ego suddenly let out an embarrassed laugh, stunning Taka.

“Oh! So you’re not the Mastermind? I’m sorry, I didn’t know that.” Alter Ego somehow managed to blush, obviously feeling a bit ashamed. “It’s just that…your physical appearance doesn’t match any of the descriptions of Master’s classmates. So, I had to assume that you were the Mastermind. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

Alter Ego bowed to him, thoroughly stunning the already confused Disciplinary Chairman. More than the fact that he was conversing with an AI program, Taka was impressed by how well-mannered and polite it was being! Apart from their initial misunderstand with all the screaming, it was obvious that this AI had respect for authority! A trait that Taka found quite refreshing considering his classmates’ recent deceitful tactics.

“If you don’t mind my asking…who are you?” Alter Ego politely asked, obviously very curious.

“I’d like to add you to my database, if you that’s alright with you…”

Taka smiled at the level of respect this machine was showing him, finally feeling as though someone truly acknowledged his authority. And since the AI was being so compliant and straightforward with him, it was only fair that he do the same. Reaching out, he typed his reply:

[I am Kiyotaka Ishimaru, Chairman of the Disciplinary Committee]
Registering the response, Alter Ego expressed a hint of shock, staring at Taka’s features for almost an entire minute before replying, “…You have altered your appearance. I apologize for not recognizing you sooner. Your speech patterns and attitude match the Kiyotaka Ishimaru in my database.”

Startled by the AI’s words, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman leaned in closer and typed out another question:

[How do you know so much about me and my appearance? We have only just met.]

Taking in that response, Alter Ego smiled and answered, “Master spoke in great detail about what is happening to you all. Not only that, Master also provided me with a great deal of information about you and the rest of the class before…” All at once, the AI quieted and a melancholy expression took over. “…Before Master fell unconscious.”

Just hearing those words made Taka grunt and grit his teeth, the memory of the class trial resurfacing to plague his mind. It was a reminder of his failure…a failure that had showed him just how weak he’d been until this point. Mondo’s betrayal opened his eyes to the truth, he could trust no one in this place. He needed absolute authority to prevent any casualties from occurring, but even with the high position granted to him by Monokuma, he was still struggling to gain control of the situation.

“If only I knew how best to approach this situation,” he said aloud, trying to sort out his own thoughts. “My classmates are keeping too many secrets from me. If only I knew what they had discussed when I wasn’t around, then I might be able to—”.

A swift gasp escaped him as he stared at Alter Ego, only now realizing that the means to uncover the truth had fallen into his lap. And while it was suspect to believe everything a talking computer had to tell him, the fact that the rule-abiding Chihiro had created it instilled enough trust to at least listen to what the AI could tell him.

At the same time, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman understood how unethical such actions would be. In a sense, he was being just as deceitful as they had been. Two wrongs did not make a right…but perhaps they could cancel each other out! If Alter Ego could tell him what his classmates had been up to while he was away, that would be enough for him to regain control of this situation and possibly find a peaceful solution! At the very least, he would know if they were plotting anything nefarious, which would more than justify this unethical behavior!

Quashing the small voice that insisted that he not sink to their level, and for the sake of ensuring everyone’s safety, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman typed out his question to Alter Ego:

[If you do not mind, would you consider sharing everything about what my classmates asked of you while I was absent?]

Absorbing the information, Alter Ego’s pleasant smile returned as it answered, “Of course! I’ll tell you anything you want to know!”

“This is a fine mess we’ve found ourselves in,” Kyoko seethed as she glared at everyone in the cafeteria. “We’ve lost our only lead…”

After Taka’s forceful confiscation of Alter Ego, the amnesiac girl advised that everyone meet in the dining hall to discuss how to proceed. No one objected, and after she, Sayaka and Junko had
finished changing, they all headed for the meeting. Almost everyone had gathered for the occasion:

Kyoko had taken a seat near the head of the table, a hand resting on her chin as she fought to keep her anger from showing. Across from her, Makoto hung his head, feeling defeated for not being able to stop Taka. Next to him, Junko tapped her fingers on the table, her furrowed brows and deep frown displaying her frustration. On the opposite side of her, Leon and Sayaka sat next to each other, with the Pop Idol feeling especially guilty, being the reason they had gone into the bath. Down at the end, Sakura, Hina, and Celeste sat in a group, trying to piece together everything the others had told them. Byakuya and Toko were absent, no one volunteering to fetch them. They decided to wait until they’d discussed everything to inform Mondo of exactly what had happened, though more than likely he heard Alter Ego’s screams from down the hall. Nevertheless, it seemed that he was playing his role accordingly, remaining by Chihiro’s side despite what he may have heard.

Far removed from the group, seated at an adjacent table, Hifumi sat alone…his expression unreadable.

A deep melancholy settled into the room, slowly making each and every student silently sigh in disappointment. Amidst all of that, one of them felt the need to express her concerns.

“It is a most unfortunate turn of events,” Celeste said swiftly, her voice clear and decisive. “Now that we have lost Alter Ego, we may not be able to uncover the secrets of the school.”

Momentary silence followed the gambler’s words, but it was shattered by a fervent apology.

“I’m so sorry…” Sayaka abruptly apologized, bowing to everyone. “If I hadn’t of asked to use the bathhouse—”

“Hey, hey! This isn’t your fault!” Leon insisted, unintentionally cutting her off. “You just wanted to take a bath! It’s not your fault that someone decided to go peeping!”

The baseball star shot a glare toward Hifumi, but the fanfic creator didn’t respond, continuing to hang his head and stare blankly at the table in front of him. Unbeknownst to anyone, Hina and Celeste exchanged a quick glance while Sakura remained as stoic as possible.

“But still…” Sayaka tried to protest, as if she wanted to be blamed for this.

“I’m just as much at fault too, you know!” Junko suddenly spoke up, her frustration breaking through. Sneering at Hifumi a bit, the Fashionista continued, “I should’ve been paying more attention! Actually, we all should have been more careful!”

“I agree. I shouldn’t have let my guard down,” Kyoko shamefully admitted, concurring with the Fashionista while reassuring Sayaka. At the same time, she sent a stern glare toward the fanfic creator, who barely flinched at her words. “And besides, I have no doubt that Hifumi would have gone in there regardless of whether or not we were bathing. Unfortunately, it seems this outcome was inevitable…”

From his seat at the adjacent table, Hifumi hung his head low, squeezing his eyes shut as shame began to overtake him. He clenched his fists and he sucked in staggered breaths. Whether or not he was trying to calm himself, no one could say.

“Well, what do we do now?” Makoto cautiously asked, glancing around hopefully.

“I say we go and talk to Taka right now!” Junko abrasively suggested, slapping her hands on the table. “He doesn’t know how important that laptop is! That thing is our only chance to—!”
“What…did you just say?!” a ferocious voice interrupted, startling everyone present.

One by one, everyone turned to see Hifumi, a furious rage burning in his eyes, glaring menacingly at Junko. Slightly pulling away from him, the Fashionista hesitantly answered, “Uh…that the laptop is our only chance to discover the truth? I mean, we’re definitely gonna need that thing to—”.

“You said it again! How DARE you refer to that beautiful 2D angel as a thing!” Hifumi cut her off, shouting at the top of his lungs. Pointing his finger at Junko, he continued, “Have you no respect for her?! She must be terrified right now! Captured by a malevolent monster who obviously wishes to do her harm! Your unfeeling attitude is appalling!”

Groaning at his tirade, and partially realizing he was correct, Junko let out a deep sigh before answering, “I didn’t mean it like that. I get that she is very important to you but she was working to help all of us. And we need to explain that to Taka before—”.

“Indeed! We need to mount a rescue and storm his stronghold post haste!” Hifumi suddenly concurred, earning an infuriated grumble from Junko. His momentum unstoppable, the fanfic creator proclaimed, “That…that…that…VIRGIN must be made to pay for his crimes!”

Although shocked by his sudden aggressive attitude, his wording surprised them even more!

“V-Virgin…!” Hina stammered, her face turning red. “W-What does that have to do with anything?”

“Hmph, that should be self-explanatory!” Hifumi refuted, almost snarling. Thankfully, he chose not to go into detail and instead continued, “Normally, I wouldn’t dare to approach such a monster, as I am not built for a raid! Not to mention that I wouldn’t want to catch his virginity!”

“That’s not how virginity works—” Leon tried to correct him, only to be silenced by the fanfic creator’s shouts.

“But for the sake of my beloved, I am willing to fight to the bitter end!” Rising to his feet, Hifumi dramatically pointed toward the door and said, “Follow after me, my loyal classmates! And we shall liberate the fair maiden from her confinement—!”

“No.”

Everyone froze as the stern voice of Kyoko effortlessly silenced Hifumi’s tirade. She hadn’t even raised her voice; her tone was enough to cease the fanfic creator’s shouting. And while Hifumi wanted to refute her, the instant he turned and saw her lavender irises bearing down on him, he flinched. A quiet rage fumed behind Kyoko’s eyes, the likes of which the fanfic creator had never experienced before. Her gaze was powerful enough to paralyze him, and there was nothing he could do to stop her as she elaborated.

“Approaching Taka now would only exacerbate the situation,” she explained, slowly glancing around at everyone. “I suggest that we wait until the morning meeting tomorrow. We can speak with Taka about Alter Ego at that time—”.

“BLASTPHAMY!” Hifumi abruptly raged, only barely able to shake off Kyoko’s stern gaze. “We cannot allow her to be kept in that monster’s untrustworthy clutches! What if he…what if he does something unwholesome to her!”

“Uh…she’s a computer. I’m not sure that’s something to worry about,” Hina reminded him, feeling rather creeped out by his ‘affection’. “And besides, even if he’s gone a little…crazy, I doubt that Taka would—”. 
“So you’re going to take the virgin’s side! Are you a deceitful virgin as well?!” Hifumi screamed, furiously pointing at the swimmer, who gasped and turned an even deeper shade of red.

“A-A-Again! What does the…virgin thing have to do with anything?!” Hina protested, trying not to sound too flustered.

“It has everything to do with this situation!” the fanfic creator insisted, clenching his fists. “You can’t trust virgins! They only care about themselves!”

 “…That’s not true,” Junko muttered, surprising everyone. Realizing they were staring, the Fashionista suddenly regained her usual fervor and continued, “And that’s not even the point right now! We need to decide what we should do now!”

“I-I think we should do like Kyoko suggested,” Makoto chimed in, shrinking a bit as everyone turned to him. “I-I mean, barging into his room won’t exactly make him see reason. It might be better to just wait for a better time to talk to him about it.”

“Eu tu, Mr. Naegi?!” Hifumi almost shrieked.

“W-Well, I mean…I just think…maybe we all need to calm down a little?” the lucky student suggested, unsure of how to proceed.

“We don’t have time for such cowardice!” Hifumi refuted, his blood boiling over. “Besides, if we take too much longer, I may not be able to muster the courage for such an assault!”

“I think that’s what Makoto was talking about when he said we need to calm down,” Sayaka countered, finally speaking up despite the furious glare Hifumi sent her. Then, much to everyone’s shock, a deep sadness formed in her eyes. “Acting on an emotional outburst will lead to someone getting hurt…even if you never intended for that to happen…”

More than her words, her tone startled Hifumi into silence. It was obvious that he was running off an emotional high right now, and that was fueling his relentless charge. However, with Sayaka’s distressful warning ringing in his ears, he finally thought about what he’d been suggesting. And although he still felt that he needed to do something, at the very least he began to understand the gravity of his actions.

“She’s right, ya know.”

Everyone was startled as Junko spoke up, agreeing with the pop idol. Much like Sayaka, her sky-blue irises radiated despondency, as well as a hint of self-loathing.

“If we all just rush in and try to take back Alter Ego by force…at least one of us could get seriously injured. And even if no one gets hurt, wouldn’t subduing Taka be counted as ‘bullying’?”

The wisdom of her words quickly sank in, forcing everyone to reevaluate how this situation should be handled. Leon, in particular, shivered at the thought of returning to the court room, painful memories from both of the previous class trials tormenting him.

“Yeah…plus, he’s got Monokuma’s authority. Just because he hasn’t ordered one of us to be ‘punished’ doesn’t mean that he won’t,” the baseball star added, a painful hue in his tone. “As much as I hate to say it, it’s probably best not to piss him off right—”.

“So then, do we just give up?!” Hifumi belted before hanging his head and seething. His confliction apparent, the fanfic creator struggled to find the right answer. “How…how can you all just let that bastard get away with kidnapping a defenseless maiden?! Have you taken her feelings into
account?!”

“…Well, she’s a computer, right?” Hina tried to think about this logically. “She probably won’t really be afraid because she probably doesn’t understand emotions like we do, so I’m sure that she’s fine—”.

“And how would you know anything about how she feels?!” Hifumi screamed, his fury suddenly returning. “Did you spend time getting to know her?! Understanding her?! Discovering all of the wonderful traits that make her special?! NO, you did not! Only I did! The rest of you abandoned her to her fate as a mere object while I tried to elevate her to a higher status!”

As his tirade raged, Hina lowered her gaze. “W-Well…you’re right that I didn’t talk to her much but—”

“Then how can you possible understand how she feels?!” the fanfic creator proclaimed, clenching his fists, his hands shaking angrily. “I am the only one who understands her! None of you even see her as a person, do you?! She’s just a ‘laptop’ or a ‘thing’ in your eyes! A tool to be used and thrown away!”

“Hifumi, you need to calm yourself,” the deep voice of Sakura called out, trying to be the voice of reason. “I know that you care deeply for Alter Ego, but this reckless behavior will not help her—”.

“It would be reckless to simple let her remain in that bastard’s custody! Do you not care what becomes of her?! Even if you’re only interested in the worthless files she’s decrypting, you should still have more respect for her well-being!” he countered, his head shooting up to glare at the martial artist.

Rather than arguing, Sakura quietly rose from her seat and approached the distressed Hifumi. He visibly flinched, seeing her tower over him with an unreadable expression. Then, unexpectedly, she slowly placed a hand on his shoulder, a gentle expression of concern on her face.

“I agree that this is a tragic turn of events, and needs to be dealt with swiftly. However, we cannot allow ourselves to get carried away by emotion. As Kyoko suggested, I recommend that we wait until morning to discuss the matter with Taka—”.

Suddenly, a loud slap echoed as Hifumi smacked her hand away from his shoulder. If Sakura was startled, she didn’t show it, staring down at her classmate as he began fuming.

“That virgin will never listen to anything we have to say! He’s drunk on his own position of authority!” Hifumi interjected, ignoring the various glares sent his way. Turning toward the door, the fanfic creator angrily began marching toward the exit. “Every moment we wait is another moment that filthy virgin has to torment my beloved! I refuse to let that continue! I will break down his door and have him drawn and quartered! And if none of you will assist me, then I will have to do it myself—”.

Before he could take more than a few steps, a large hand suddenly landed atop his, completely stopping his advance. Sudden fear paralyzed him, and the fanfic creator slowly turned his head to see Sakura’s furiously glowing eyes glaring down at him. Her grasp on his head tightened, sending waves of distress through Hifumi’s body.

“Let me make this very clear…” she said calmly, the power in her voice seeping into his very bones. “I will not tolerate any form of violence against another of our classmates. If you wish to continue this foolish venture…you will have to go through me!!!!”
As she finished, her fighting spirit flared, and everyone felt the hint of a shockwave as she shouted those final words. Unable to flee due to her hand gripping his skull, Hifumi was forced to take the full brunt of her aura, his entire body shaking and his pants becoming warm and damp.

Then, just as suddenly, Sakura released the grip on his head, and everyone discovered that her hand had been the only thing keeping him standing. Hifumi’s knees buckled and he collapsed onto his backside, flailing a bit as he sputtered, “Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Instantly, Sakura’s aura dissipated and she nodded firmly. “I am glad we could come to an understanding,” the martial artist said with genuine relief. “Turning against a friend, regardless of their actions… is disgraceful.”

As the Ultimate Martial Artist’s words echoed in the room, a deep melancholy settled in. Their situation was turning grim, and unfortunately, no one seemed to have the right answer about how best to resolve this debacle. And while Sakura’s intervention had averted disaster, there was no telling how long this fragile peace would last.

Thankfully, before the silence and misery could sink in too deep, a hopeful voice rose up.

“Maybe we ought to take it easy for the rest of the day, huh?” Makoto suggested, glancing up at the clock. “All this excitement and it’s barely past noon! We’ve still got most of the day ahead of us!”

A soft silence trailed his optimism and, at first, he thought his attempt to cheer everyone up failed. That is, until Hina abruptly agreed, “I suppose you’ve got a point. No use in moping around all day, right?”

Despite how dampened her mood was compared to usual, her bright smile didn’t falter. And her cheerful nature seemed to be infectious, as Sakura also found herself smiling pleasantly.

“If all we can do is wait for tomorrow, then we should at least find something productive to occupy ourselves with in the meantime,” the martial artist suggested, giving her friend an encouraging nod.

“Perhaps that is for the best,” Celeste concurred, her voice uncharacteristically solemn. “Emotions are running quite high right now. It’s best not to upset the delicate balance for the time being. That being said, shall we all go our separate ways for now? Spending some time alone might be beneficial.”

“…I agree, but there is something I’d like ask of all of you,” Kyoko swiftly announced, rising from her seat. “Can we all agree to wait until tomorrow before confronting Taka? It might complicate matters if one of us approaches him before then.”

Although she was asking this of the entire group, it was obvious this request was mainly directed at Hifumi, who stood shamefully quivering since his ‘encounter’ with Sakura. Knowing that all eyes were on him, the otaku knew that there was little more he could do than agree.

“…I-I… suppose…” the fanfic creator muttered, slowly slinking toward the door, utterly dejected.

As he passed through the open doors and made his way down the hall, he never noticed the pair of crimson eyes staring at him as he left.

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“So much for keeping Alter Ego a secret,” Mukuro mentally scoffed, positive that Junko had watched this entire scene from start to finish. ”Even if she keeps her promise and doesn’t use
Monokuma right now, there’s no way she’ll let any information about the Tragedy reach us. Even a scrap of information could jog everyone’s memories…that’s what I was banking on anyway…”

Beneath her disguise, the soldier felt incredibly weary. Absolutely nothing had gone right today. From trying to brush her hair, all the way up to Taka selfishly stealing away their last hope, it almost seemed that Mukuro was destined to have the worst day possible. And there was nothing she could do about it.

Then, only a few moments after Hifumi left the room, Hiro swaggered in, a pleasant smile on his face. Just by glancing at him, Mukuro somehow knew this day was going to get even worse…

“Hey guys, you’re not gonna believe this!” he practically shouted at everyone who remained. “Check out what I found on the third floor!”

Reaching into his coat, the clairvoyant pulled out a small pink camera. It was decorated with a cutesy anime character that Hifumi would undoubtedly recognize. However, due to his absence, it fell upon the one who discovered it to relay exactly what had been discovered.

“Awesome, right!” an elated Hiro explained, his enthusiasm lost on everyone. “I found this little guy in the air purifier room! It doesn’t have a lot of memory and can only take, like, ten pictures, and it doesn’t have a timer, but I figured we could use it when Alter Ego busts us out here! Ya know, commemorative photo and all that!”

Mukuro clenched her fists and seethed as the Ultimate Clairvoyant cheered happily, never noticing the furious glares of his classmates. If Taka hadn’t of stolen Alter Ego, then Hiro’s reckless behavior would have revealed the laptop’s existence to the Mastermind! And while it wasn’t a factor now, the very idea that he would have jeopardized their survival because of a camera was utterly infuriating!

“Honestly, have you no sense of tact?” the harsh voice of Celeste interrupted his laughter, forcing him to turn to her with a confused expression. “Then again, I suppose this is what we have come to expect from you…”

As much as she didn’t want to admit it, Celeste had a good point. By this point, Mukuro practically expected Hiro to make life-threatening mistakes, and his idiocy was proving to be more deadly than any scheme Junko had concocted for them.

“Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?!” Hiro refuted, obviously perturbed. “I just thought it would be nice to have some memories for when we escape! If you don’t want to be in the picture, then you don’t have to!”

Everyone groaned as Hiro completely misread the situation, which only confused the clairvoyant more. Fortunately, Makoto took it upon himself to stand up and approach Hiro.

“I’ll explain everything to him,” the lucky student informed everyone, to which no one objected. “After that, I’ll see about finding Toko and Byakuya and letting them know too…”

“That’s probably for the best…” Kyoko concurred, a hand resting on her chin. “Just be sure to tell them about our agreement. We need to wait for the morning meeting.”

Instantly understanding her intentions, Makoto nodded firmly before leading Hiro out into the hall. Less than minute passed before a horrified shriek echoed back into the cafeteria.

“TAKA DID WHAT?!?!?!”

Mukuro shared a collective sigh with everyone as Hiro’s voice reached them. Feeling that there was
little point in hanging around, the soldier decided it might be best to excuse herself. And she wasn’t
alone in that thought, everyone seemed to be preparing to head out. However, before anyone could
go anywhere, Hina’s voice perked up.

“Hey, so, what do we do with this camera?” she asked, picking it up and examining it. “It’s kind of
dirty and smudged but it looks like it still works.”

“Judging by its appearance, I would say it is something that might belong to Hifumi,” Celeste
answered her, peeking over her shoulder at the camera. “If you would like, I’d be happy to take it to
him later.”

“Really? That’s awfully nice of you!” Hina joyfully replied, handing the camera over to her. “But
what are you going to do if it isn’t his?”

Smiling sweetly, the gambler looked over the camera as she answered, “Then I would like to keep it
for myself. Unless there are any objections?” Unsurprisingly, no one raised any complaints. “Then it
is settled. I’ll be off then.”

And with that, Celeste excused herself from the room, in quite a hurry the soldier noted. The instant
she was gone, Kyoko rose from her seat and said, “I have a few things I’d like to look into as well,
so I’ll be going. Good-bye.”

As the lavender haired girl swiftly marched toward the exit, Mukuro couldn’t help but stare at her
back. Kyoko was always disappearing, no doubt putting her detective skills to good use, even if she
wasn’t aware of her own talent. At the same time, the soldier couldn’t help but wonder where she
was venturing off to. And if she hadn’t been placed under ‘house arrest’ by Taka, she would
certainly have followed after her. But as it stood, she would have to let Kyoko do her thing for now.

“Right, we’re gonna head out too!” Hina cheerfully told everyone, departing with Sakura in tow,
leaving only Sayaka and Leon in the room with Mukuro.

Feeling exhausted from this whole ordeal, Mukuro decided it was time to excuse herself as well.

“Well…unlike you guys, I’ve been grounded. So, I guess I’ll head back to my room for now,” the
disguised Mukuro half-heartedly proclaimed, standing up and solemnly waving good-bye, earning
guilty glances from the pair. “Besides, I wouldn’t want to make matters worse by going against the
dic-tator’s house arrest.”

Mukuro smirked as she’d been waiting to make that joke for a while now. Even so, it didn’t serve to
calm her nerves. Deep inside, the Ultimate Soldier could feel nothing but self-loathing for her
inability to stop Taka. She shouldn’t have let him leave the bathhouse, she should have stopped him
before he took away their only chance to discover the truth. But, due to her situation, she was forced
to stand down and watch as Junko gained the upper hand once more.

And now, relegated to being confined in her room, she wouldn’t even be of any help to her
classmates. Her talents were going to waste, and sooner or later she knew that she wouldn’t be able
to control herself. If she had to keep pretending to be a docile little fashionista for much longer…she
was going to go insane!

“Maybe some training will help…” she thought as she prepared to leave. “Yeah, once I get back, I’ll
start with a hundred push-ups and body-curls. After that, reflex training and close-quarters combat
practice should make the day fly by…”

As she turned and prepared to isolate herself in her living quarters, a sweet voice called out, “Would
you like some company?”

Halting mid-step, Mukuro’s gaze shot over to Sayaka, who smiled up at her pleasantly. Completely stunned by the offer, as it seemed to come out of left field, the soldier couldn’t stop her own knee jerk reaction.

“Well…I didn’t really plan on having anyone over so…”

The instant she finished, she immediately regretted her choice. The smile on the pop idol’s face vanished, a look of guilt replacing it. However, it only lingered for a moment before she replaced it with a flawless smile that must have taken years to perfect. Unfortunately, Mukuro knew that kind of expression well…one that was used to hide a person’s true feeling behind a pleasant visage.

“Oh no, that’s fine! Don’t worry about it! I know it was kind of sudden,” Sayaka cheerfully replied, not showing a hint of disappointment. “I was just kind of hoping we could continue our conversation from earlier…”

Mukuro knew this wasn’t the pop idol’s intention, but her words caused guilt to seep into the soldier’s mind. She didn’t really have objections to hanging out with Sayaka some more, but she had just pumped herself up for some relaxation via exercising and she really needed that stress relief. At the same time, she couldn’t help but recall the promise she’d made to an unconscious Sayaka while transporting her to the nurse’s office during the first case…

“In the end, that’s why I have to save you. Even if it’s only this one time, I have to do something…anything it takes to make this right. I swear…if we both survive this, I’m going to apologize to you properly…so you can’t die until then!”

...I owe her this. And now’s as good a time as any to get this over with…” Mukuro told herself, still a bit disappointed that she needed to give up her own form of stress relief.

“Besides, it’s not like it’s the end of the world…okay, bad choice of words but either way, I can just train later tonight. After all, with Alter Ego captured, I don’t need to keep my door open anymore. What a short-lived guard duty that was…”

“Well, hold on, let me finish!” Mukuro found herself hastily saying, unintentionally drawing attention. “I was just gonna say that my room’s a bit…messy from this morning. But if you wanna hang out…we can…do that.”

Even though most wouldn’t notice it, Sayaka’s smile shifted into a genuine expression of joy as she said, “I don’t mind a little mess. I can even help you clean up a bit if you want.”

“Uh, yeah…sure,” Mukuro replied, doing her best to smile pleasantly. “You ready to go?”

“Yup,” Sayaka answered, slowly rising from her seat before turning to Leon. “I’ll see you around dinner time, okay?”

“That’s cool. Someone’s gotta go and let Mondo know what’s going on anyway.” He smirked at her and playfully teased, “Have fun doing make-up and other girly things.”

Grinning back at him, Sayaka chided, “No need to be jealous. I’ll teach you the proper way to apply eyeshadow later, alright? Just be patient.”
“Yeah, yeah, get outta here!” the baseball star shooed her, a hint of embarrassment on his face.

With one more victorious smirk, Sayaka made her way around the table, with Mukuro meeting her halfway. Without much more fuss, the two of them exited the cafeteria and headed toward ‘Junko’s’ room.

Once out in the hall, Mukuro did her best to hide a deep sigh. This day certainly wasn’t go as she’d expected.

“It’ll be alright…We’ll just spend some time doing…whatever girls do when alone…which consists of…oh dear god, what do normal girls do when they’re alone?!?!??!

Panic overtook Mukuro as she realized all too late how fatal of a mistake she’d made. She had only a few seconds before she would arrive at her room with Sayaka in tow and only just realized she’d never actually spent time ‘hanging out’ with anyone ever before! She didn’t know what normal girls talked about or did when they were alone! Yeah, she figured they talked about boys and make-up and dresses and…and…other important stuff like…automatic weaponry?

“Shit! I don’t know what girls like to talk about! And I don’t have a fashion magazine as a reference either! And I certainly can’t go by what Junko liked because her tastes changed almost ever thirty seconds!”

Not to mention that whenever she was with Junko, the younger twin would usually have her murdering someone or busying her with other activities to further the goal of Ultimate Despair!

And while Junko knew how to act like a normal girl when the need arose, all Mukuro could fall back on was her impressive knowledge of weaponry, military training, and stealth techniques! And unless Sayaka was a closet sadist, those weren’t good conversation topics!

“Hey, Junko…are you okay?”

Mukuro gasped as Sayaka called out to her, making the disguised Fashionista jerk her head toward her. “Y-Yeah, t-totally cool! Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because…we’ve been staring at your door for almost a minute now,” Sayaka politely answered, pointing at the door which bore the Mastermind’s name. “Did you lose your key or something?”

Mukuro cheeks flushed as she realized the pop idol was right. Had they really been standing there for that long?! How did she not notice that?! Her concentration was slipping and if she continued like this, she was certain to make a life-threatening mistake sooner or later!

Staring at her own door in embarrassment, she attempted to laugh off her shame, but failed.

“Ahaha…I guess I’m just a bit scatterbrained today…” she replied, fumbling for her key and apprehensively inserting it into the lock. Turning the key until an audible click sounded the unlocking, Mukuro tried to compose herself as she opened the door and gestured for Sayaka to enter. “Sorry about that, guess I’ve got a lot on my mind lately…”

A soft giggle resounded from Sayaka as she concurred, “Yeah, we all have. And it doesn’t help that you’re having a bad hair day, right?”

Sayaka’s question froze Mukuro in place, her eyes widening as fear rippled through her body. She’d completely forgotten about how horrific her wig looked. And it was only natural that Sayaka would notice it. After all, she had long hair as well, so she must be attuned to that kind of dilemma.
Unfortunately, her concern only further backed Mukuro into a corner. This was her last chance to renege on spending time with Sayaka…her last chance to consider her options.

Sucking in a shaky breath, the soldier fought to regain her composure. Not only that, she shamefully had to fight off her instincts. Usually, in a situation like this, she would use force to intimidate whomever was ‘challenging’ her, making them yield. For obvious reasons, that course of action would be catastrophic.

Suppressing her instincts was becoming more and more difficult, as she briefly considered knocking Sayaka unconscious in order to escape this embarrassing situation. She hadn’t intended to play the part of the Fashionista for so long, and the stress was beginning to wear on her.

Was that all of part of Junko’s plan? Was it all just a new way of instilling despair in an already despair-filled situation?

In either case, Mukuro feared that if she didn’t find a way to cope with her situation…she might begin to break down.

At the same time, a bright smile overtook the pop idol’s face. “Don’t worry, it happens to the best of us. If you want, I’d be more than happy to help you fix it!”

What was supposed to be a kind gesture felt like a death sentence to Mukuro. If she accepted, and let Sayaka help correct the tangled ball of fluff, there was a good chance that her secret would be uncovered. Plus, how was she going to explain how she, the supposed ‘Ultimate Fashionista’ didn’t know how to style her own hair?

On the other hand…if she could come up with a convincing enough lie, she could learn how to deal with this wig in a more manageable capacity! In addition, Sayaka’s knowledge of girly thing would enrich her, and would make it easier to blend in with the others from this point on. If everything went well, not only would she be better equipped it handle her situation…she might be able to make amends with Sayaka at the same time.

Regardless of her choice, her life was going to be put in peril. And she had absolutely no control over it. Either she would survive this encounter and be better off for it…or she would be discovered and executed.

As she struggled to make her decision, her hand unexpectedly tapped her pocket and she felt a lump. Slipping that hand into her pocket, she felt the strange cylindrical object that Kyoko had given her.

“…The good luck charm…”

Mukuro had never believed in luck, at least not for herself. Makoto certainly had it, in a difficult to examine kind of way, but it was never a factor for her. For the Ultimate Soldier, everything came down to skill. There was no such thing as a ‘lucky shot’ or a ‘lucky break’. Every time she went into battle, she made sure to be 100% certain that her abilities would win the day. But at this moment, her skills could do nothing to save her, and she found that she really had only one option.

Grasping the ‘good luck charm’ Kyoko had graced her with, she put on a nervous smile and said, “Actually…that would great! I’ve always had trouble maintaining my hair. Honestly, if my manager didn’t think it suited me better, I’d have cut it short ages ago!”

Sayaka’s eyes widened as she replied, “Really?! I never would have guessed! You seemed so proud of it!”

Confident she’d taken the bait, Mukuro assertively continued, “Don’t get me wrong, I love it when it
cooperates…but it’s such a pain to get right! In fact, most of the time, I have some hairdresser friends of mine do it for me!”

“Whoa, seriously?” a shocked Sayaka questioned, glancing up at the messy pink fluff. “Then again, you do have a lot of it, huh? Oh, I know! I can teach you a simple way of curling or braiding it to make it more manageable!”

“T-That would be great!” Mukuro nervously but earnestly answered, still a bit fearful of her identity being discovered. After all, she had no idea if you could even curl a wig’s hair, much less braiding it! With that in mind, she decided to scale down that request. “But…why don’t we start with how to brush it properly? I don’t know why but, I’ve been having troubled just getting it brushed in the morning.”

With a dazzling smile and a fervent nod, Sayaka replied, “Alright then, let’s get to it! Afterward…I was wondering if you be willing to let me peruse your closet…and possible loan me a few outfits? For some reason…I’ve only got this one outfit to wear and it’d be nice to wear something different.”

Mukuro instantly recalled their conversation in the bathhouse, about Sayaka not having any of her personal items in the school. Unfortunately, this wasn’t a surprise. Just like with Kyoko, Sayaka had a few items that would have contradicted the mind wipe, including a number of outfits that she would have no memory of owning. The incinerator had made short work of all those garments…and it was Mukuro who had tossed them in.

Before she let the guilt creep in, the disguised soldier put on a warm smile and said, “Sure, go nuts! Maybe we could have a fashion show or something?”

“That…might be taking it a bit too far,” the pop idol subtly refused, even though it was obvious she appreciated the gesture. “I’ll settle for just a cute outfit or two…and if you don’t mind.”

Secretly pleased she didn’t pursue that suggestion, Mukuro grinned at her and said, “Too bad. But anyway, come on in! I’ve got a ton of cute outfits for you to try on!”

Sayaka’s eyes lit up and she beamed as she stepped inside the ‘Fashionista’s’ room. And even though she was still incredibly nervous, as Mukuro clutched her ‘good luck charm’ tightly, she found the courage to believe that everything would work out just fine. Just as she closed her door, Sayaka suddenly called back to her.

“So…Junko? Why is there a shirt hanging from your ceiling?”

“And then, Kyoko asked me to scream if anyone I didn’t recognize tried to take me away. Therefore, I shouted when you took me, as I didn’t have your current appearance in my database. Although, the way everyone’s been behaving suggests that they wished to keep my existence hidden from someone other than the Mastermind…”

Alter Ego finally finished elaborating everything that ‘she’ had seen while with the rest of the class. And the results nearly sent Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru into a rage.

“So it’s true…they chose to keep Alter Ego hidden from me on purpose! I knew they were plotting against me! After all I have done for them, this is how they treat me! Do they really think that I am as untrustworthy as the Mastermind?!” he said aloud to himself, seething from the lack of respect his classmates had displayed.
“…Pardon me, Mr. Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru,” Alter Ego cautiously spoke, obviously seeing how distraught he had become. “As I mentioned, I cannot hear you right now. And I was wondering if there was anything else you might need from me?”

Again, Taka was struck by the level of respect this machine gave him. If his classmates showed had half as much respect as this AI program, perhaps he wouldn’t have needed to resort to such extremes with them. But after multiple betrayals and obvious secret-keeping, he just couldn’t see any other way to control the situation. If he hadn’t taken the laptop, even more infighting would have broken out, and with his classmates increasing disloyalty, he wasn’t sure how much longer he could hold everyone together.

With that in mind, Taka decided to see if he could gather any more information that might help with forming an effective solution.

[Is there anything more you can tell me? Any information would be greatly appreciated.]

Alter Ego processed that sentence for a moment, ‘her face lit up…as if remembering something important.

“I’m not sure if this information will be helpful or not, but there was something out of the ordinary that was told to me.”

Taka’s features hardened as he prepared to listen, ready for any kind of revelation that the AI program would be able to relate to him. Taking another moment, as if preparing the best way to provide the answer, Alter Ego let a bright smile overtake ‘her’ face.

“Mondo apologized for attacking Chihiro.”

The instant the AI spoke those words, something inside Taka twisted violently. His chest ached whilst he gritted his teeth, fighting off a mixture of rage, guilt, and sadness. His hands balled into fists, sucking in ragged breaths. His aura flared and his eyes burned menacingly as he almost let his anger overrule his judgement, which kept him from furiously smashing the laptop with his fists.

Fortunately, after several deep breaths, he managed to lower his aggravation to an acceptable level. He unclenched his jaw and relaxed his hands, slowly putting them back on the keyboard to type a response.

[Despite what they may have told you, it is a lie. Mondo knowingly betrayed us. His act of covering up the attack is proof of that.]

Taking in that message, Alter Ego’s expression shifted to uncertainty. Slowly, ‘she’ replied, “I…I wasn’t aware of that. I’m afraid that I was provided little information about what happened between Master and Mondo. Even so…I believe that Mondo truly felt remorseful for his actions.”

Hearing a voice that sounded like Chihiro willingly defending his traitorous former friend enraged Taka. The AI’s naivety reminded him of his own ignorance, having blindly befriended the biker simply because they had both endured a past trauma. Alter Ego was acting just like he was back then, foolishly believing the good in people without trying to see the truth.

Not wanting Alter Ego to endure the same pain of having ‘her’ expectations betrayed, the Disciplinary Chairman decided to give the AI a lesson on the nature of reality. To that end, he swiftly typed:

[Regardless of that, he still betrayed us. He only felt remorseful because he was unable to
Taka watched as Alter Ego took in that message and to his pleasant surprise, the AI’s features hardened a bit. Perhaps his words had gotten through. After all, this was an AI created to be as life-like as possible. Through Chihiro’s programming skills, this incredible ‘person’ was surly able to recognize between right and wrong. It just needed to be educated, so that it could follow the path of justice toward—

“I believe you’re mistaken, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru,” Alter Ego abruptly replied, shattering Taka’s assessment from moments ago.

The harden visage the AI projected felt completely different now, as if the program somehow knew it needed this expression to unnerve the Disciplinary Chairman. Taka wanted to refute, to tell the AI that because it had only been ‘born’ a few days ago, that it couldn’t possibly understand the complexity of the human heart. At the same time, Taka had to admit that not even *he* understood those complexities…his failing to stop Mondo an eternal sign of his ineptitude.

As Taka considered trying to reason with the AI once more, Alter Ego spoke up again, ‘her’ voice stronger and more determined than ever before.

“Mondo…Mondo was crying and begging for forgiveness. And it didn’t seem like he truly forgave himself either. I just can’t believe that he would only be remorseful for failing to escape, especially when he clearly felt pained by the mistake he’d made. Perhaps if you talked with him about it, the two of you could—”

In the middle of Alter Ego’s speech, Taka furiously typed out another message:

[Out of the question! Even if I was to speak with him. It would not reverse Mondo’s betrayal! Besides, he would probably make excuses rather than own up to his mistakes!]

As he sent that message to the AI, he felt as though he may have made a mistake. Alter Ego practically beamed at him, which seemed very out of character, before replying, “In that case, let me help you prepare for your future conversation with him!”

Before Taka could ask what the AI program meant, Chihiro’s face suddenly disappeared. For a moment, the Disciplinary Chairman thought he may have pushed the wrong button or something. Had he accidentally reset the program somehow or was this something he needed to consult technical support for? Not that he could, considering they were trapped in the school and Chihiro was unconscious—

“Yo, Bro!”

Suddenly, Taka froze as the voice of Mondo Owada invaded his ears. He spun around, expecting to see the biker standing behind him but found the room just as empty as always. Glancing toward his door, he saw that it was firmly closed, so there was no way he could have called to him from outside, considering the rooms were soundproof. Just then, he heard that voice again.

“Over here, Bro! In front of you!”

Taka tensed as he realized that the voice actually was coming from in front of him…but the only thing that was there was—!

Snapping his head around, Taka gasped as he glanced at the laptop screen. There, in place of Alter Ego’s adorable face…was Mondo’s head! It was odd to see it without it being attached to Mondo’s
body, but that wasn’t the issue! The face of Mondo Owada had suddenly appeared on the screen, and it was staring directly at him!

“W-What is this…?” Taka said aloud, thoroughly startled. “Why do you have…Bro’s face?”

Before he remembered that the laptop couldn’t actually hear him, the face of Mondo said, “Yo, man…I know that you probably don’t wanna talk to me right now…and I don’t blame you. I messed up…seriously messed up.”

As the visage of Mondo began to apologize to him, the intense aura around Taka’s body completely vanished. His hair returned to an ebony shade and the flames in his eyes extinguished. Once more, Kiyotaka Ishimaru returned, as though he’d never been gone. At the same time, the Moral Compass found himself unable to turn away from the laptop as it continued to speak with him.

“I never meant for things to go down the way they did. And I’m sorry about…betraying you. Trust me when I say that I never meant for that to happen! I didn’t mean to attack Chihiro and I never meant to betray you! But I did…and I’m sorry for that.”

As the voice of Mondo penetrated his ears, Taka felt his soul being pulled in multiple directions. He knew this wasn’t the real Mondo, and should disregard all it was saying to him. At the same time, he was saying the words that Taka had longed to hear for the past few days…and it caused such feeling of relief!

That is…until the AI version of Mondo said:

“This whole thing is messed up, Bro…but I know that if we both work together, we can find a way to make it out of this school alive! I know it’s hard to trust anyone right now, Bro. But I didn’t betray you! I would never betray someone that I—”

*SLAM*

Taka wasn’t sure when it happened, but near the end of the fake Mondo’s speech, he’d raised his hands and slammed them onto the table, on both sides of the laptop, just barely missing it. In that instant, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman’s fearsome aura returned and his eyes reignited in a furious blaze. At that moment…all semblance of Kiyotaka Ishimaru was purged.

“You would never betray me…? You already have!!” seethed Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru, his hands clenching into fists.

As he struggled to regain his composure, Chairman Ishimaru was pleased that he’d managed to restrain himself, and didn’t unintentionally smash the laptop. After all, he would never wish harm against someone as innocent as Alter Ego. He rarely let his anger overrule him, but hearing such preposterous talk from a fake Mondo infuriated him.

Fortunately, even though the AI couldn’t hear him, it obviously noted his erratic behavior and silenced itself, perhaps startled by his sudden invocation of anger.

Unfortunately, Taka’s rage hadn’t subsided, in fact, it was steadily growing. It took all he had not to grab and throw the laptop away, which would undoubtedly harm the AI. At the same time, he needed to vent his frustrations, but right now yelling would do him little good, with a companion that was essentially deaf.

Instead, he took to the keyboard and chose to type in all caps:

[STOP PRETENDING TO KNOW WHAT HE WOULD SAY! MONDO WOULD NEVER
OWN UP TO HIS MISTAKES LIKE THAT! HE BETRAYED US! HE BETRAYED OUR
TRUST IN HIM! HE TRIED TO HAVE US ALL KILLED! MY ONLY FRIEND
BETRAYED ME!!]

Taka angrily sent that message before properly reading it, his eyes lingering on the last sentence. A deep, hollow pressure welled up in his chest as he re-read the words ‘only friend’ over and over again. After re-reading his message nearly ten times, he slowly lifted his gaze to see that Mondo’s face was gone, leaving a tearful Alter Ego staring back at him.

Having obviously read his furious message, the AI sniffled as it tried to compose the right response, “I-I… I didn’t mean to… upset you. I just thought that… if you talked with him… you could come to an understanding. I’m… I’m so sorry!!”

Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru flinched at the utter misery in Alter Ego’s voice. Only now did Taka realize how foolish he had been these last few minutes. He’d lost his temper and nearly destroyed something entirely innocent… all because he couldn’t contain his rage. His body trembled as he realized that, in that moment of unsuppressed fury… he was no better than Mondo had been… letting his emotions get the better of him and nearly costing everyone the valuable information that only Alter Ego could provide.

“I almost became… the very thing I’ve been fighting to protect everyone from.”

As that revelation dawned on him, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman realized that perhaps… just perhaps… his classmates had made a good point. His behavior was changing, and while most of it was obviously for the better, it seemed that he was allowing himself to let his emotions get the better of him.

However, rather than let himself become crestfallen by this revelation, he decided to use it as motivation instead! If having such dangerous emotions could lead to such dangerous activities, then he would need to suppress them! He would follow the rules of the school to the letter, without letting his own personal feelings get in the way! And if someone violated a school regulation… then he would need to have them punished for it!

And if he couldn’t bring himself to do that… perhaps he would need to call upon Monokuma for assistance. And while he knew that was an extremely unethical… if he couldn’t keep everyone from killing each other, then he would need to take extreme measures!

Staring down at a tearful Alter Ego, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman realized that without the AI’s involvement, he never would have realized what needed to be done to maintain order. And even though it was difficult, he realized that the AI had forced him to come to terms with something he never imagined he’d be able to do… punish his former friend.

Reaching his hands out, he softly typed:

[Apologies for my outburst. You did nothing wrong. In fact, you have helped me a great deal. Thanks to you, I know what I need to do now. And when I confront Mondo Owada, I know exactly what needs to be done about him.]

As ‘she’ registered that message, Alter Ego’s visage abruptly brightened. “R-Really? Then… I was useful?”

Seeing the bright visage of Alter Ego smiling at him gave Chairman Ishimaru courage. Even though he’d come close to unintentionally harming the laptop, in the end, this proved to be a good lesson for him. And now that he knew what needed to be done, he was ready to put his best foot forward… and
confront Mondo for his misdeeds!

A fearsome smile overtook the Disciplinary Chairman as he replied:

[Indeed! You have steeled my resolve! I am most grateful!]

Absorbing that message, the AI program beamed at him with a light giggle.

“I’m so glad that I could help you! Please let me know how your talk with him goes! And if it’s not too much trouble…please keep talking to me. I want to see if there is anything else I could do to help everyone!”

Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru was struck by the sincerity in the AI’s words. This fragile computer entity was willing to do all that it could to help them escape. At the very least, the Disciplinary Chairman now knew that he had at least one ally in his crusade to safeguard the peace and sanctity of this institution!

Filled with pride, he reached out and typed:

[I promise I will keep you up to date! In the meantime, focus on decoding those files! That is the best support you can give right now!]

Taking in that message, Alter Ego nodded firmly and replied, “Right! I’ll do my best, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru! I won’t let you down!”

With a fervent nod and an eerie smile, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru glanced back at the clock and realized that it was time for his nightly patrol. He was saddened to have to go now that he’d found an ally, but just as Alter Ego had a difficult duty to fulfill, so did he!

Once more, he reached his hands out and typed:

[Unfortunately, I must go! I need to patrol the halls before it gets too late in the evening!]

Registering that response, the AI smiled and said, “Alright then! I’ll see you later! Don’t forget to talk with Mondo! Good luck!”

Rising from his chair, with his aura flaring even more fearsomely than usual, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru headed for the door, preparing himself for the task that he knew he would need to complete. Just before he turned the handle, he glanced back at the laptop and smiled…or rather smirked.

“Don’t fear, my newfound ally…I will be sure to deal with Mondo Owada in due time.”

“My angel…my muse…my…Alter Ego…”

Hifumi wept, alone in his room. His wails muffled by his pillow, the distressed fanfic creator felt his entire world shattering. His chest ached, he wanted to scream, all energy faded from his body…the pain of loss ate at his very soul.

He had never known love…he had known fascination, obsession, perversion, and various other emotions that came with being a mangaka. However, ‘love’ was something he never imagined experiencing. After all, none of the great mangaka had never found true love. Sure, they married
sometimes but Hifumi doubted they found the kind of pure love that he had experienced. For he had found a 2-dimensional being that not only appreciated him…but understood how intelligent and special he was! His entire life had taken on a whole new meaning, simply because she existed!

But now…she was gone. Stolen away from him by a fiendish virgin! And what could he do about it? While his heart was stronger than any other, he lacked the physical or authoritative power necessary to reclaim his love. Even if he tried to force his way into Taka’s room, the bastard could use his authority to have him executed! Not that he would mind dying if it meant freeing the love of his life, but if he failed to liberate her, then his death would be for nothing!

And thus, he wept…alone in his room…praying for some kind of salvation to be visited upon him.

*KNOCK*KNOCK*

A sudden knock at his door startled the fanfic creator, and he nearly fell off his bed as he rolled over. Glancing toward his door, he heard the knocking once more. Slowly picking himself up, and wiping away his tears, Hifumi slovenly marched toward the door, his brain on autopilot. He didn’t even have a mind to question who might be visiting him, he would just shoo them away so that he may continue to wallow in his depravity.

Reaching the door and turning the handle, he opened the door just a crack and was shocked by who he saw outside.

“Good evening, Hifumi.”

Celestia Ludenberg stood just outside his door, as delicate and tsundere as always. She wore a convincing smile that would normally have enticed him, but considering his heart-broken state, he only felt crestfallen. Curious as to the nature of her visit, he politely inquired, “H-Hello, Miss Ludenberg. Do you need something?”

“Indeed,” she responded immediately, leaning in and speaking quietly. “I would like to speak with you privately, if that is alright?”

If not for the fact that he felt his heart had been torn from his chest over the loss of his love, he would have been very excited that a tsundere character like Miss Ludenberg wanted to see him ‘in private’. And while he knew that Miss Ludenberg was ultimate too shy to try and act out a typical doujinshi scene, at this moment, he wasn’t sure if he wanted anyone to see him in such a state.

“I…I’m not sure—” he began before being interrupted.

“Just open the door and let me in, would you?” Celeste seethed, keeping her voice low and even despite her menacing tone.

All at once, Hifumi was reminded of why he succumbed to Miss Ludenberg’s whims in the first place. Like a true tsundere, Celestia Ludenberg always hid her real feelings. Her true nature was kept hidden behind a mask that rarely cracked, but when it did, he found her to be one of the most interesting people he had the pleasure of knowing. And while her ferocity did truly frighten him, he was more drawn to her powerful spirit and independent personality!

At the same time, for reasons he could not understand, there was a desperation to her voice as well. It was as if some unknown force compelled her to appear before him, but for what purpose? In either case, he didn’t want to provoke her wrath any further, and decided to give in.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” he stammered as he flung open his door, allowing Miss Ludenberg to pass by him, a victorious smile gracing her lips.
Closing the door and turning to face her, the fanfic creator was unsurprised to see her glancing around his room, a hint of disgust on her face. Celestia Ludenberg was a woman who desired the finer things, he knew this by her outfit and her taste in tea. Thus, to her sophisticated eye, his room must have appeared rather messy. In truth, it was organized chaos, a concept that she undoubtedly would never have experienced before.

“Would it be alright if I sat here?” Miss Ludenberg politely asked, pointing to an unoccupied chair next to his table, the only one that didn’t have drawing materials or clothes draped across it.

“Uh…sure,” he answered swiftly, watching as she delicately took a seat. Moving over to an adjacent chair, he seated himself across from her, unsure of what to say next.

Fortunately for him, Miss Ludenberg did seem to have an agenda, reaching into her pocket and pulling out an old familiar object. “I might be mistaken, but does this belong to you?” she asked carefully, holding a camera out to him.

In her lithe hand was the Limited Edition Pudgy Princess Piggles Camera that had been lost since he arrived at this school! But now, it had found its way back to him! Practically snatching it from her grasp, Hifumi shouted, “Yes, yes! Oh, I can’t believe you found it! It’s been missing ever since—”.

Suddenly, his jubilation ceased as he thoroughly examined the camera. The screen had tiny scratches, dirt had been smudged onto the outer casing, and there was an audible noise of something rattling around when he shook it. The once pristine collector’s item had been reduced to nothing more than a child’s plaything!

It seemed that today was the day he was destined to have his heart torn asunder by many woes.

“W-What happened to it?! It wasn’t like this a few days ago!” His frustrated gaze shot over to Miss Ludenberg, who stared at him with slight bewilderment. “You! What did you do to my precious Limited Edition Pudgy Princess Piggles collector’s item!”

Despite the accusation that was hurled at her, Celestia Ludenberg barely batted an eye as she informed him, “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was not the one who found it. Hiro discovered it behind the air purifier on the third floor. Whether or not he had something to do with its current state, I cannot be sure. Though he did seem well versed in how to operate it…”

Fury spread through Hifumi as this revelation was made clear, and he couldn’t keep himself from leaping up from his chair and shouting, “That fool! He obviously doesn’t have any respect for other people’s property! The next time I see him, I’ll give him a piece of my mind! Perhaps more!”

Normally, the loss of such an item, while definitely infuriating, wouldn’t have upset the fanfic creator so much. However, coupling this loss with the separation from his true love, he couldn’t help but lash out in anger. It seemed that everything he loved was being taken away from him, piece by piece!

Just then, he realized how inhospitable he was being to Miss Ludenberg, who could only sit there while he raged. Not wanting his anger to instill fear in her, he forced himself to calm down, retaking his seat. Bowing slightly to her, he said, “Apologizes, Miss Ludenberg…I lost my head for a moment.”

Much to his surprise, a soft chuckle reached his ears. Lifting his gaze, he saw her with a hand over her lips, almost giggling at him. Her voice was oddly sweet, he noticed, as if her laughter was genuine. He’d never heard her laugh like that before. She had chuckled at his expense many times before, but never so light-heartedly. It drew him in, leaving him unable to turn away.
“That is quite alright, Hifumi. I’m just sorry to be the bearer of bad news, as far as your camera is concerned,” she softly apologized, a light smile on her lips. Just then, much to his shock, her expression abruptly darkened, and a deep frown settled across her face. “And…I’m afraid I must be the bearer of…even worse news.”

Completely drawn in, a startled Hifumi questioned, “What is it? What’s wrong, Miss Ludenberg?! Has Taka done something?!”

Even the distress fanfic creator didn’t truly think that Taka had done further damage, but in his frazzled state, it was the first thing that came to mind. After all, there was no way that pathetic *virgin* would be foolish enough to antagonize Miss Ludenberg of all people—

“Actually…yes.”

Hifumi gasped, not at her words, but her demeanor. Her shoulder sank into her body and she lowered her gaze, her hands grasping onto her own elbows with her black fingernails digging deep into the material of her dress. The very sight shocked the fanfic creator, as he never imagined seeing Miss Ludenberg in such a state of distress.

Her usual fierce persona was gone, replaced with apprehension and doubt. Was he catching a glimpse into her softer side? The side of her that she never showed to anyone? The part of her that was kept hidden away by the tsundere persona that she embodied in public? And if so…how was it that she was brought to this level of depravity?

The Celestia Ludenberg he’d always known was a strong and independent woman. A natural born leader who had the courage to stand up to people like Taka, always fighting for what she believed in! She was someone he could look up to, as someone who followed their own path regardless of the consequences!

And to see her somehow reduced to this piteous state…it ignited his chivalrous spirit in full force!

“W-What is it?! What has the *virgin* done now?!” Hifumi found himself shouting, slamming his fist onto the table. Miss Ludenberg flinched at the sudden sound, shaking her head as if gathering her thoughts.

“Before I tell you that…I need you to promise me that whatever I say next will never leave this room. Understood?”

Her request made him raise an eyebrow, as his own doubts crept in. “Um…I’m not so sure that I—”

“Please, Hifumi! You are one of the only people I can trust here,” Miss Ludenberg practically begged, desperation clear in her voice. “Please…promise me never to speak a word of this to anyone!”

Despite the little voice in his head that tried to tell him that her behavior was suspicious, Hifumi couldn’t turn a blind eye to a woman in need! After all, he was a gentleman as well as a mangaka! All of the great manga artists had great respect and admiration for chivalrous deeds, and Hifumi Yamada was no different! And so, even if he felt that something *might* be off about the way she suddenly revealed her true self, he had no choice but to trust his instincts and believe her!

“A-Alright then, I promise never to speak of this conversation to anyone!” he confidently swore to her, earning the tiniest of smiles from Miss Ludenberg.

Taking a deep breath, as if gathering her courage, Celestia Ludenberg hardened her features and said, “I believe that Taka is plotting to use Alter Ego in order to make his escape!”
Greetings, my beautiful readers! It seems that Celeste’s plot is finally getting into motion! But with new elements such as having more people to calculate into her plans, will she succeed? Keep on reading to find out!

So…it’s been quite some time, hasn’t it?

I’m so sorry for the delay but there are a number of issues that I’m still contending with. Mainly, I had to work through the entire holiday season with very little time off. I even had to work on the holidays (thanksgiving, new year’s), with Christmas Day the only exception. Because of that, writing time was scarce and it took time to write more of this story. Also, I’ve been sick lately and it’s been effecting a lot of my work, both personal and private.

Not to mention that I am balancing writing this story with another project that will be time consuming, so I can’t promise my updates for this story will be consistent. However, I PROMISE you, that I will finish this story eventually! It means too much to me for it to falter now!

As for that other project…

Do you all remember the dubbing project of Danganronpa IF that I mentioned to all of you? Well, the original producer of it had to cancel the project, for good reasons, I assure you. However, a number of the actors, including myself, wanted to continue the project. To that end, I kind of ended up becoming the one spearheading the project. So, we’re still working on it but with me doing a lot more work with it! But when it’s completed, it’ll be awesome! And I’ll let you all know when it goes up!

Well, that was a long note but I do hope you all understand the situation and I promise I will have another chapter out very soon! Please leave a comment/review if you’ve got questions about the story or the dubbing project, or if you want to give feedback!

Until then, have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Celeste persuades Hifumi to join her cause, and the two begin their plot to murder Taka. Meanwhile, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru blindly continues to enforce his 'justice'. Later, Mondo is given a chance at redemption...when Chihiro awakens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I believe that Taka is plotting to use Alter Ego in order to make his escape!”

The instant Celeste spoke those words; she knew she had won. Hifumi reacted just as anticipated, horrific shock overtaking his features as he struggled to process the ‘revelation’ she had bestowed upon him. And while the gambler knew that it would take more to convince him to believe her lie, her victory was already guaranteed.

“W-What?! But how can that be?! And how could you possible know this?!” Hifumi stammered, his emotional attachment to the situation giving her even more of an advantage. Celeste was ready for any rebuttal he could give. After all, this wasn’t her first gambling match.

In fact, Hifumi had be one of the easier target for manipulation, considering he was a man of passion, and passions were easily exploited. All she had to do was alter her demeanor to something that would register with his emotional state. And since he was ‘grieving’ over the loss of Alter Ego, if she appeared to be in distress, his protective instincts would take over and make him more susceptible to manipulation.

This was all part of her talent as a gambler. Being able to read people and alter their perception of a situation in order to turn the situation into her favor was child’s play. She could even lie to herself, convincing herself that even though she understood that her actions would bring about the death of her classmates, she was perfectly fine with it.

After all, it was all for her dream...a dream that Taka threatened to quash for his idiotic notions of law and order! And if there was anything she couldn’t stand more than a self-righteous moron...it was a self-righteous moron that couldn’t acknowledge someone of true talent such as herself!

“In the end...the talent he refused to acknowledge will be what brings about his undoing!”

Adjusting her features to be as sympathetic as possible, Celeste meekly replied, “I understand that it may be hard to believe...but it’s the truth!” She looked directly at him, her gaze softening, which ultimately softened Hifumi as well. When he didn’t interject, she continued, “You see, while on my way to return you camera...I ran into Taka in the main hallway.”

Celeste was baiting him, a tactic that proved effective when Hifumi gasped and his eyes widened in shock.

“Don’t tell me you tried to confront him about Alter Ego?!” he shouted, almost frantically. Instead of directly answering him, Celeste lowered her gaze and gave a swift nod. Just as she predicted, Hifumi
exploded, “Why would you do that?! Didn’t we all promise that we would confront him tomorrow at the morning meeting?!”

Intentionally gripping the sleeves of her dress, so that he would notice her ‘shame’, Celeste quietly answered, “I…I did not mean for it to happen. I planned on simply passing him by and waiting, just as we all agreed. However, the instant he saw me, he began shouting. He criticized my part in keeping Alter Ego a secret from him, having realized that I lied to him about that bathhouse yesterday…”

Beneath her perfect mask, Celeste felt great pride in herself. The whole interaction with Taka was nothing more than a fabrication, but given what she knew of him, if she had run into him by accident, there was no doubt he would done exactly as she claimed. Thus, all she needed to do was ‘believe’ that it really had happened, and therefore her lie became truth…at least for Hifumi.

Keeping up the act, she became slightly hysterical as she continued, “He said that I didn’t deserve to be here…that Hope’s Peak didn’t need someone as…dishonest as myself here…”

“T-That bastard!” Hifumi interrupted, slamming both hands onto the table before him. “You may have lied but it was for the benefit of our escape from this hellish place! How dare he! It is one thing to steal away the love of my life…but to ridicule of young woman for trying to protect her classmates is beyond cruel!”

Celeste successfully managed to suppress a smirk as Hifumi practically convinced himself of her lie. She had chosen her target well, and everything was proceeding just as she’d planned. And now…all she needed to do was drive the final nail into this proverbial coffin!

“Naturally, I tried to correct him, assure him that I never meant any harm. However, he refused to listen, calling me filthy traitor who deserved punishment!” Reach a hand up to her eyes, she wiped away a tear she’d forced herself to shed as she continued, “He told me that because he now possessed Alter Ego, he could find a way to escape! And when I tried to dissuade him…he…he…”

Purposefully pausing, Celeste inwardly smirked as Hifumi desperately shouted, “He what?! What did that virgin do to you?!”

Pushing away the perplexion she felt for Hifumi constantly bashing virginity, especially considering she was fairly certain he was one himself, the gambler put her face into her hands, and pretended to weep as she exclaimed, “He threatened…to have me executed!!”

A momentary silence followed that proclamation before a ferocious shout shook the room.

“COMPLETELY UNFORGIVEABLE!!! TAKA HAS TRULY GONE MAD WITH POWER!!” Hifumi screamed, shooting up from his seat, knocking back his chair unintentionally. “I SWEAR, I WILL NOT REST UNTIL HE HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO JUSTICE!!

As the fanfic creator’s declaration echoed in her ears, Celeste could practically see her castle on the horizon. And while the difficult part of the plan was far from over, so far, everything had gone exactly as she envisioned. Indeed, revenge was a dish best served cold…and when you least expected it!

“It won’t be long now…I’ll have my revenge on that rule obsessed fucktard!”

“Yes, let us bring him to justice together!” Celeste exclaimed, leaning toward him and grasping his hand.

A thoroughly shocked Hifumi fell into absolute silence as he stared at her bewilderedly. In truth, she
hadn’t expected him to be so shocked by her proposal. Or it could be the fact that she initiated physical contact with him, as he didn’t seem the type to get much of that. However, judging by his surprised visage, she presumed it was a combination of her hand touching his, and that he never expected her to say such a thing. Fortunately, this situation could be easily rectified.

Without loosing her grip on his sweaty hand, which was very difficult for her to endure, Celeste insisted, “I have formulated a plan that will help us be free of his tyranny. In fact, it would liberate us from this school entirely! However…I fear that I will not be able to enact it on my own. But, if you were willing to assist me…”

She intentionally left her sentence unfinished, giving him a sympathetic stare, one that begged him for assistance. She could already see in his eyes that he was considering it, but there was a reluctance there as well. More than likely, he understood that she was suggesting murder…

Her suspicions were confirmed when he nervously pulled his hand away and said, “I-I don’t understand…how will bringing Taka to justice serve to free us all from this school?”

Having expected this kind of reluctance, Celeste let her features sag as she answered, “Hifumi, I would like nothing more than to flee this place with the rest of our classmates. However, we both know it is impossible for all of us to escape here alive…”

A slight gasp escaped Hifumi, his reaction proving that on some level, he agreed with her. Because of that, Celeste knew that while it would be difficult to convince him to willingly sacrifice the rest of the class, it was far from impossible. And fortunately, she had just the leverage she needed.

“We must face reality, no matter how horrific it might be…” she continued, her features hardening as if she was coming to grips with this herself. “Monokuma will never allow us to leave. And it is obvious that sooner or later, Taka will turn on us, have us all executed one by one until only he remains. If we wish to survive, we must be cruel. To be honest…I am not sure I’m capable of committing such an atrocity. Taking another’s life…is not something I ever expected to be forced to do. But when faced with the prospect of execution…”

Again, she silenced herself, letting her words sink in. The gambler gauged Hifumi’s reactions and saw that deep inside his beady black eyes, he was considering her proposition. She just needed to push a bit more, give him a reason to trust her and follow through with her plot.

“No one wants to die, that is a sentiment we all share. However, when Alter Ego was taken from you…what did the others do?” As her question reached him, she saw him flinch, a realization floundering in his mind. “That’s right…they abandoned you. They chose to ‘wait’ instead of helping you rescue the one you love. Honestly, it was difficult not to voice my opposition at the time—”.

“Wait…you mean that you supported my decision to restrain Taka?!” Hifumi stammered, completely shocked. “Why didn’t you say anything at the time then?! If I recall, you stayed silent during the whole affair—”.

“Indeed…I did,” she interrupted, her voice purposefully filled with shame. “I know that proposing this plan cannot make up for my cowardice. And it may seem hypocritical of me to support you now, but I assure you, I want to see justice brought to Taka for all of the misdeeds he’s done!”

Near the end of her speech, she was no longer acting. She truly did want to see Taka punished for his crimes, just not the ones perpetrated against Hifumi. Even so, she knew her enthusiasm would drive him forward, possible convincing him to man up and get with the program!

There would be no happy ending for everyone here! If you want to escape, someone else has to
die…everyone else has to die. And while it was easy to push that thought aside at this moment, deep down inside, Celeste knew that once she reached the final stage of her plan…she would have to confront that conflicting notion as well…if she wanted to realize her dream.

“But…why me?” Hifumi abruptly asked, for once catching her off guard. “Out of everyone here, why would you come to me for this? Surely someone like Byakuya would be more inclined to assist you?”

Unfortunately, the fat otaku made a great point. Byakuya would have made better partner for murder…except that he was exceptionally smart. And while she could easily match wits with him, she would have to constantly be on guard. After all, there was no way someone like him would ever willingly work with others, especially if his life was on the line.

No, she needed someone who would never betray her. Someone that she could wrap around her little finger…and only Hifumi Yamada fit that bill. Teaming up with him presented the least amount of risk, improving her chances for escape.

“There are many reasons…but chief among them, is that I know that I can trust you,” Celeste falsely confided, which earned a shocked expression from him. “Byakuya would surely betray me, leave me for dead in this horrible place. You, however, have proven to be loyal and strong of heart, two things that we will both need if we are to make it out of here alive. But that’s…not the only reason…”

Celeste knew that her words would intrigue him, which was confirmed when the fanfic creator quietly asked, “Well…what other reason is there?”

Just as planned, Celeste let a delicate smile decorate her lips, a sad and yet earnest smile that would fool even the most perceptive of people. She locked eyes with Hifumi and let out a deep sigh.

“Call it…a jealous whim,” she began softly, averting her eyes as she continued. “I am jealous of the love you have earned, but at the same time…I am awe-struck. The love you have for Alter Ego…is by far the purest I’ve ever seen. Never in my life have I seen such devotion, and while others might find it odd that you feel so much for an AI program…I find it inspiring.”

“I-Inspiring?!” Hifumi stuttered, obviously unable to believe what he was hearing.

Keeping her pleasant guise in place, Celeste nodded as she continued, “Indeed. Love is not something others should be allowed to judge. As long as you both care for each other, that is more than enough. Yours is a love that I have never experienced…and I don’t believe I ever will. I am too…unfeeling. However, you, my dear Hifumi, have been blessed. To love and receive love in return is more precious than anything else in this world. And, at the very least, I would like to help you reunite with your love. And to ensure that you are never separated from her again…I will do all that I can to free you both from this horrible prison!”

Celeste hid a grin as she knew that her claws were sinking into Hifumi’s mind. Finally, she would achieve the first step of her plan. Hifumi had presented a little bit of a challenge, but in the end, she knew what his answer would be.

“M-Miss Ludenberg…” the fanfic creator softly replied, struggling to regain his composure after her awe-inspiring speech. However, less than a moment later, his voice boomed, “I completely misjudged you! You truly understand my feelings! And while I know it may be difficult for you…I appreciate all that you would do for me!”

Feigning shock, Celeste gasped and asked, “Then…does that mean…”
“Yes! Let us work together to free ourselves from this place! Let justice be served upon Taka’s head! Let love shine through and cut us a path out of this hellish prison!”

As Hifumi’s declaration rang out around her, a single thought consumed Celestia Ludenberg’s mind.

“Too easy…”

“I am honored you would trust me, Hifumi. Now, let us go over the plan to realize our freedom!”

“Holy crap…this is a lot easier than I thought!”

Mukuro practically screamed as she effortlessly ran a brush through her now straightened wig hairs. Beside her, Sayaka sat with a pleasant and somewhat triumphant expression, her hands carefully tying the ‘Fashionista’s’ hair up into pig tails.

They had spent hours fixing the knots in the wig and fortunately, at no time did Sayaka question anything. In fact, she was filled with all sorts of compliments about how ‘fine’ and ‘soft’ the fibers felt. Mukuro wondered what her reason would be if she found out it was all fake but knew that she would never be foolish enough let that situation occur.

Still it had been more fun to work on straightening her ‘hair’ than she’d imagined. Having never really cared about her appearance, Mukuro finally understood why some girl’s like to fuss over their hair. It was fun to chat with Sayaka about how to straighten and brush it properly, with both of them chiding and messing with each other. They both enjoyed it so much that Mukuro had almost forgotten the reason why she’d let Sayaka over in the first place.

Unfortunately, before she could act on that, the pop idol gave her a bright smile as she finished tying up the wig into ‘Junko’s’ usual pig tailed look.

“I told you it wouldn’t be that hard once you got used to it,” the pop idol reassured her, pulling a bright red ribbon tight. “There we go, your signature look. Are you sure you don’t want to try something different?”

The soldier successfully kept herself from tensing at that question, relieved enough that they had managed to untangle the mass of pink fluff and make it presentable. And while she did feel confident that she could probably experiment with the wig without worry that it would pop off, the risk of getting too comfortable with it stopped her.

After all, she didn’t want to be ‘Junko’ for the rest of her life…

“N-Nah, not right now. It took us forever just to get it back into my usual look, and I’m cool with that for now,” Mukuro sweetly replied, winking to herself in the mirror for added effect.

“Aww, but I wanted to teach you braiding…” Sayaka disappointedly mentioned, hanging her head slightly.

Feeling a hint of guilt, Mukuro immediately replied, “W-Well, we can cover that next time! I mean, I can’t always have the same hairstyle, right?”

As the soldier waited to see if her suggestion resolved the issue, a mischievous giggling enlightened Mukuro to the fact that she’s been tricked.
“I was just kidding,” Sayaka said with a smirk. “But since you offered, I’ll take you up on that offer another time. Besides, it’s getting kind of late.”

Surprised, Mukuro slowly turned to see that it was already past 8 PM. She was floored by the fact that it had taken so long to fix her hair, but then again, they had spent a great deal of time chatting. Unfortunately, during that entire time, the soldier hadn’t found the right moment to express herself to Sayaka. And she was quickly running out of time…

“I guess I’d better get going. I don’t want to make Leon wait any longer than I have,” Sayaka cheerfully told her, standing up to leave. “Maybe we could hang out again tomorrow? Assuming everything with Taka gets taken care of after the meeting…”

“Seriously,” Mukuro sighed, feeling unnerved just talking about it. “But no sense in worrying about it right now. We’ll just—”.

“—have to do what we can?”

Mukuro snapped her head over to see Sayaka smiling down at her. A light chuckle escaped the soldier as she didn’t need to question how her friend knew what she was thinking.

“I’m starting to think you really are psychic…” Mukuro chided before remembering that she needed to get something off her chest. “Hey, Sayaka?”

“Hm?”

The pop idol continued to smile warmly at her, which for some reason made that weird feeling resurface in Mukuro’s chest. It was happening so often now that the soldier should be getting used to it, but she just couldn’t! It felt so…wrong, and yet so right all at the same time! She reveled in the warmth this feeling brought her, but hated that she couldn’t understand where it came from!

And unfortunately, it made it all the more difficult for her to express herself.

“I—I’m not good at this stuff so…” Mukuro paused before groaning loudly. “Let’s just say that I’m sorry and leave it at that!”

Her sudden proclamation visibly startled Sayaka, letting her smile drop into a confused frown. As Mukuro watched her smile fade, that weird feeling dissipated…but she felt hollow and empty with it’s sudden disappearance. What was this weird feeling doing to her?!

“You’re…sorry?” Sayaka slowly questioned, her tone snapping Mukuro back to reality. Glancing over to the pop idol, the soldier found her features grown more and more concerned. “I don’t understand…what do you have to be sorry for?”

“Shit…” Mukuro cursed under her breath. She really hadn’t thought out how to apologize, and it was biting her in the ass! However, she’d come too far to back out now. “I—I’m…That is…I’m sorry I never really gave you a chance before!”

“You’re…sorry?” Sayaka slowly questioned, her tone snapping Mukuro back to reality. Glancing over to the pop idol, the soldier found her features grown more and more concerned. “I don’t understand…what do you have to be sorry for?”

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“Junko…what are you talking about?” a perplexed Sayaka reiterated.

Feeling the pressure that she’d forced upon herself, Mukuro let a stream of words fall out, “I thought you were a stuck-up princess that didn’t get how the real world worked…everyone liked you…hell, some of them wanted to be you! Meanwhile, everyone just looked at me like I was some kind of carnival attraction…a spectacle for everyone to stare at. I was jealous…and I don’t even know why…”
Unintentionally, Mukuro recalled memories of her time spent at Hope’s Peak. Whenever she wasn’t doing Junko’s bidding or spending time in class, she would just stand around, waiting for more orders from Junko. People would stare at her, some would comment on how odd she was, and none of them tried to approach her. Her title as the Ultimate Soldier brought her a great deal of pride…even if it meant that no one wanted to get close to her.

On the other hand, Sayaka was never alone. She always had someone by her side, either supporting her or befriending her. Even Makoto idolized her, which stung quite a bit Mukuro now realized. Sayaka had everything. She could get whatever she wanted without much effort. She was the exact opposite of Mukuro, who had to work for everything she’d attained. That notion created a resentment toward the pop idol that the soldier hadn’t realized existed.

But everything was different now…

Mukuro had thought that Sayaka had everything…when in fact she had so very little. Her dream was all she had, and now that had been taken away from her. In a way, she and Mukuro were the same…both of them had lost their reason for living. Sayaka’s dream was dead…and Junko considered Mukuro to be dead. And even though they both were slowly moving forward…it was difficult for both of them. It was an odd kind of companionship that Mukuro never imagined experiencing. And it’s what drove her to apologize to a girl that she had once considered murdering.

Taking a deep breath, she let out a great sigh as she continued, “But…I was just being stupid…I’m the one who was ignorant…I didn’t see that you suffered just as much as anyone else…and I’m sorry for not realizing you had problems of your own sooner…”

There…her apologize was complete. It was clumsy and awkward, but she had done it.

Surprisingly…she didn’t feel any better afterward. In fact, as she stared at the perplexed look on Sayaka’s face, she realized that it may have been better to have said nothing at all. Things had been going great between them, and the soldier truly valued the time they spent together. But now she may have destroyed all that with her inelegant apology!

Suddenly, Sayaka took a deep breath, the act startling Mukuro.

“As long as we’re being honest, I used to think you were just a dumb bimbo.” The pop idol’s brutal honesty stung, but also kept the soldier silent as Sayaka continued, “I remember reading interviews about you in those fashion magazines and used to think, ‘Wow, she must live a charmed life’…even though I knew from experience that the entertainment industry was cruel to absolutely everyone…”

Mukuro flinched at the mention of the magazines. Junko prided herself on being able to fool everyone into believing she was an honest and straightforward person, and the industry ate it up. It was no wonder that Sayaka would think she was a snarky bitch…because the real Junko kind of was!

“But all that changed when I actually met you,” Sayaka abruptly continued, a smile returning to her lips. “From the very first day, you were nothing like I imagined. You stood up for others, and while you were a bit self-centered, you weren’t anything like I thought you’d be!”

At that moment, the soldier was reminded that due to the memory wipe, Sayaka hadn’t ‘met’ Mukuro Ikusaba…which meant that the person she thought was her classmate was only a figment. And there was a great difference between the person she pretended to be…and the person she was.

“I’m not—”, she tried to interject, only to be cut off.
“And then you saved me…and I didn’t even have the courage to properly thank you for it,” Sayaka pushed forward, a determined expression hardening her features. “Because without you… I would have died all alone. But *thanks* to you…I know what’s important now. So…I just wanted to say… thank you.”

As those last two words echoed in her mind, Mukuro felt that strange feeling resurface in a surge that threatened to overwhelm her. Sayaka’s words resonated with her and made her genuinely believe that her actions were appreciated. And she felt great pride in knowing that she had saved her classmate’s life of her own volition.

Unfortunately, a great shame also invaded her heart at that thought, for she bore the responsibility of placing Sayaka and the rest of the class into this hellish situation in the first place. The mixture of pride and shame was difficult to bear, both sides making too much sense for her to dismiss. Her hands, stained with the blood of the innocent, had been used to save Sayaka’s life. It hadn’t been an act of redemption or at least she hadn’t thought that at the time. Mukuro had just found the pop idol clinging desperately to life…and saved her to repay Makoto. That’s right, it was just because she was indebted to Makoto for saving her own life…it had nothing to do with actually *wanting* to save Sayaka…or did it?

“I suppose I wouldn’t have felt the need to apologize if, on some level, I didn’t regret what I’ve done to her…”

With that in mind, Mukuro grunted as she replied, “I didn’t do all that much—”.

“You set up an IV and bandaged my injuries. How is that ‘not much’?” the pop idol instantly refuted, much to the soldier’s surprise. With a light sigh, Sayaka continued, “Listen, I don’t want this to be hanging over either of our heads, alright? It’s been fun just getting to know you and I don’t want this to get in the way of that.”

Instantly feeling a bit embarrassed for starting it, Mukuro replied, “I-I didn’t mean to kill the mood! I just wanted to—”.

“Tell you what,” Sayaka suddenly interrupted, startling the soldier back to alertness. “I’ll accept your apology if you accept my appreciation for saving me. How does that sound?”

With that, Sayaka held out her hand and smiled, and not her usual smile. It was light and delicate, maybe a bit nervous. It was a smile that showed she meant every word. It made Mukuro’s breath catch in her throat as that weird feeling spread warmth through her entire body. Staring at Sayaka’s hand, it felt like much more than a simple agreement was being offered. As if taking that hand would mean something entirely different—what it could mean was something Mukuro couldn’t fathom.

However, from deep within herself, Mukuro felt compelled to grasp that hand. She couldn’t logically understand why, and perhaps it had to do with that warm sensation filling her being, but for the first time in quite a while…the decision seemed obvious. And even though nothing about their situation would change because of this choice, Mukuro was somehow reassured that everything was going to be alright.

Slowly, she reached out and grasped Sayaka’s hand…nodding firmly.

“Yes… I accept.”

Sayaka squeezed her hand and reciprocated her smile. “No need to be so formal. We’re friends, after all.”
As the pop idol made the proclamation, Mukuro noiselessly gasped before letting a genuine smile spread over her lips.

“Friends, huh? I’ve never had one before…it feels…nice…”

“…Miss Ludenberg, are you sure this is going to work?”

“Do not worry, I have thought of every contingency. All you need to do is play your part accordingly and everything will be fine. If we both fulfill our roles adequately…then everything will work out just as planned.”

“But…how do you know that they’ll do what the notes say? I mean, there’s no way to be certain—”.

“Trust me, my dear Hifumi…there is no way they will be able to resist.”

Yasuhiro Hagakure paced back and forth in his room, his very existence being called into question.

“It just doesn’t make sense! I’m always at least 30% accurate! But lately, all of my predictions were wrong! Not even 10% accurate!” Ceasing his pacing, Hiro tilted his head upward and glared at the ceiling. “I can’t see the stars, so I don’t know if one of the planets is blocking my spiritual flow…or it could be aliens! Yeah…they’re the reason my predictions have been all over the place!”

Unfortunately, even after that definitive conclusion, Hiro was no closer to resolving his feelings on the matter. His psychic vibes had never been so out of sorts before. And the fact that Taka had stolen away their last hope, just as he’d predicted tragedy would be averted, threw his abilities further into question!

“What will everyone think if they find out that I’m…I’m…useless!” Hiro panicked, furiously running both hands through his massive locks of hair. “If they knew my talents was failing lately…someone might try to kill me!”

Unwillingly, his mind began to envision various horrible ends to his life. He might be bludgeoned over the head with a metal pipe! Drowned in the pool with cement boots! Stabbed while in the shower! Eaten alive by—

*Knock*Knock*

“Eyahhh! They’re here already!”

Hiro dove behind his bed, cowering as he peered over his sheets, staring at the door as if he expected someone to bash it open. However, much to his ‘surprise’, nothing happened. Only the initial knocking had echoed and none had followed. Which was odd, considering he imagined whomever was outside would be banging on his door repeatedly until he finally answered.

Rising up to his feet, the clairvoyant glanced at the door and spotted something protruding at the bottom. Cautiously walking over, he discovered that a small piece of paper had been shoved under his door. Carefully, he bent over and picked it up, unfolding it and reading its contents:

_-–
We’ve discovered a secret path that might lead out of the school. Taka can’t find out about this yet. Let’s meet in the Rec Room at 1 AM.

---

Hiro reread the note several times, and with each reread he grew more and more excited.

“Hell yeah! I was right after all!” he shouted, his loudness deafened by the soundproof walls. “It was a little late but now that we’ve found a way out of here, disaster will surely be averted!” Pointing up at the ceiling, he chided, “Take that ya stupid aliens! We’re getting out of here tonight!”

Glancing to the clock on his wall and noting that it was only around 9 PM, Hiro took out his deck of tarot cards and shuffled them.

“May as well make a few more predictions while I’m waiting,” he reasoned with himself, his confidence fully restored. “Now…who’s going to be the lucky lady to bear my child…”

“First, second, and third floors…clear!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted to himself as he headed for the stairwell, finishing his nightly rounds before curfew. “Now to check the dormitory before night time!”

It was getting late; it was already well past 9 PM and he would soon need to lock the dining hall doors. Well, to be honest, all he needed to do was close them and they would lock at 10PM. It surprised him at first, but considering that Monokuma was absent, it made sense that the whomever the Mastermind was could lock the doors from afar. How else would they be able to ensure that their rule of the cafeteria being unusable at ‘night time’ was upheld?

As the Chairman strode through the halls, he only mildly surprised to have not encountered any of his classmates. It was possible they were all avoiding him, and for good reason! Their betrayal surely stung and they shamefully hid from him to postpone their punishment! However, they could not elude the morning meeting and if he needed to wait to speak with them at that time, then so be it!

Descending the final set of stairs, Taka’s feet unconsciously stopped just in front of the nurse’s office. He could hear movement inside, undoubtedly Mondo was settling in for a long night of keeping watch over Chihiro. Staring at the door, the Disciplinary Chairman clenched his fists while his aura flared.

“Soon…” he whispered to himself, his flaming eyes practically searing the door. “I will make you pay for your crimes…Mondo Owada!”

Strutting away from the nurse’s office, the incensed Disciplinary Chairman briskly made his way around the final corner on his way to the dorms. However, not too far ahead of him, a piece of litter lay on the floor. Being the responsible young man that he was, Taka assumed the responsibility of keeping their environment clean.

With a swift movement, he snatched up the litter, which happened to be a small sheet of paper and prepared to head into a classroom to dispose of it. However, his eyes unintentionally saw a bit of writing on the note…particularly his former nickname!

Coming to a complete halt, his gaze shot to the note. Normally, he wouldn’t invade someone’s privacy and simply crumple and dispose of the note. However, since this particular notice had ‘Taka’
written on it, he couldn’t deny that he was now involved and therefore needed to ascertain the reason behind this note’s existence.

Without hesitation, he scanned the paper:

_-_

We’ve discovered a secret path that might lead out of the school. Taka can’t find out about this yet. Let’s meet in the Physics Lab Equipment Room at 6 AM.

_-_

As Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru finished reading, his rage boiled over.

“H-How DARE they!!” he shouted, crumpling the note in his hands as he clenched his fists. “Their betrayals know no bounds! Not only did they keep Alter Ego from me, but they also discovered a possible escape route! I will not stand for this!”

Furiously stomping toward the dorm, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman’s aura blazed. He had no idea that just a few feet away, hidden around the corner, two figures watched his departure. A few moments later, that fateful ringing echoed throughout the school.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

“Good evening from Hawaii! Where you all are, the time is now 10 PM...”

“Miss Ludenberg, I’ve completed preparations for Robo Justice and the Justice Hammers.”

“Well done, Hifumi. I am impressed you managed such a feat so quickly. It must have been difficult.”

“Never underestimate the knowledge and experience of a true otaku! With these sacred tools, we shall take back my beloved and finally rid ourselves of the tyranny plaguing our lives! Soon we shall be free!”

“...I could not agree more. And now that all the pieces are set, we only need to prepare ourselves.”

All was quiet on the third floor of the school as the night rolled on. It had been several hours since the ‘night time’ announcement and it seemed that everyone had settled in for the evening...well, almost everyone.

“Alright...almost there,” Hiro said to himself as he climbed the stairs leading to the third floor. “I still can’t believe that Makoto and I are going to have the same woman birth both our children! And on second thought, maybe I outta keep that prediction to myself for now. I can tell him after we get outta here, it’ll be easier for him to take the news once we’re breathing fresh air!”

Laughing to himself as he approached the Rec Room, the clairvoyant glanced at the hallway clock, nodding with a smile.
“1 AM on the dot! I wonder if I’m the first one here!” he said as he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Once inside, however, Hiro blinked rapidly as nothing but a dark room greeted him. Raising an eyebrow, he briefly wondered if he’d gotten the time wrong as he reached for the nearby light switch. Unfortunately, before his hand could reach the switch, a pair of arms materialized behind him. Before he could gasp, a damp cloth was slapped over his nose and mouth, a sickly-sweet scent invading his nostrils.

Instantly, the clairvoyant realized his folly as his consciousness rapidly faded. Just before the darkness claimed him, he heard a smug voice call out.

“Phase one…complete.”

---

Hiro fell like a sack of potatoes, and Hifumi struggled to keep him from crashing to the floor. Barely managing to lower the clairvoyant to the floor, the fanfic creator wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Well done, Hifumi.” Celeste congratulated as she flicked on the lights. Using her foot, she scooted a box of cosplay robot parts toward him. “Now, we need to hurry and move on to the next phase of the plan.”

“R-Right…” the fanfic creator replied, almost solemnly. For a moment, his eyes drifted down to the damp cloth he’d used to incapacitate Hiro. “Um, Miss Ludenberg?”

“Yes?” she answered immediately, an anxious expression hidden beneath her smile.

“I was wondering why you had a bottle of chloroform in your room. It’s not typically something a young lady such as yourself would possess—”.

“I ‘borrowed’ it from the nurse’s office some time ago, before it was closed off,” the gambler informed him, smiling sweetly. “It is embarrassing to admit, but I suffer from restlessness. Sometimes, it is necessary to use a small amount to help me fall asleep.”

“Oh, I see.” Hifumi replied with a nod. “I suppose that’s why you often arrive later to the morning meetings?”

“No.” Her tone firmed slightly for a moment before she smiled again. “I am a lady. It takes time for me to prepare myself in the morning. Now, if you don’t mind, we need to be quick. We could be discovered if we tarry.”

“R-Right!”

Without another word, Hifumi began pulling the costume pieces from the box and began fitting Hiro with the outfit. He chose to set the largest piece first, which happened to be the chest and abdomen section, as clairvoyant’s massive hair tendrils would be a challenge. Once that was finished, and the largest piece was secured with a clasp Hifumi had installed, it was a simple matter to apply the arms and legs of the robot cosplay.

As he worked, Celeste sat off to the side, crossing her legs and waiting for him to finish. She occasionally flashed him a pleasant smile if he glanced her way, but nothing more. As she continued to wait she found that, much to her surprise, the fanfic creator worked in complete silence. And while she had first assumed it was for concentration, something about his silence unnerved her. Even given
the grim nature of their task, it was uncommon for him to be so quiet.

Sensing his apprehension, Celeste put on a concerned expression and asked, “Is something the matter?”

Hifumi flinched, holding the last piece of costume, the elaborate headpiece, with shaky hands. Staring down at the unconscious Hiro, a line of drool dripping down the clairvoyant’s chin, the fanfic creator took in a deep breath.

“Are you sure we can’t shave his head to make it easier to fit?” Hifumi almost begged, glaring at the massive amount of fluff atop the clairvoyant’s head.

“I’m afraid that would not do,” Celeste refused him, shaking her head. “There might be evidence that he did not shave himself, which I’m sure some of the others might pick up on.”

It was obvious she was talking about Kyoko. The mysterious girl did have a habit of examining every inch of a person’s body, even if they weren’t a victim. It was a sound reasoning, one that Hifumi couldn’t argue with, no matter how much he wanted to.

“Anything else?” Celeste mindfully asked, her tone soft and concerned.

“Are you sure that there’s…no other way?”

There was no need for Celeste to question what he meant, his resolve was weakening and that was something she couldn’t allow. Her smile disappeared, replaced by a deep frown.

“I’m afraid that all other options have been exhausted, and we don’t have the time to plan a new strategy.” Her tone softened, becoming almost melancholy as she continued, “Even if we did, it is far too late to turn back now.”

Startled by her proclamation, Hifumi sputtered, “W-What? How is it too late? We haven’t…killed anyone yet.”

Hanging her head slightly, Celeste solemnly answered, “True, but we have already broken the rules and ‘attacked’ a fellow student. Even if we turn back now, just leave Hiro here, unconscious and unharmed…we would still face a class trial.”

Hifumi’s eyes widened as he realized the extent of his actions. Since Hiro wouldn’t know who attacked him, a bullying trial would be unavoidable. Even if the failed in killing Taka and rescuing Alter Ego, they would still face a trial…and he would be the culprit this time. Celeste, while having planned the event, didn’t actively participate, leaving the blame mostly on him.

Hifumi began to ponder if that was her intention from the beginning…

“That being said, the blame will be on both our heads, but only I need be punished.” Celeste abruptly told him, much to his surprise. “After all, I was the one who instigated this attack and if it comes to it…I will take responsibility. It is the least I can do after putting you into a difficult position such as this.”

Hifumi gasped, stunned by her sudden act of compassion. She was giving him a chance to back out, and he knew this was his only opportunity to take it. However, it would mean condemning Celeste to take the fall for what he’d just done. And no matter how loud a lingering voice of doubt shouted in the back of his mind, he couldn’t bring himself to force that fate upon her. It would be a betrayal of his chivalrous spirit…not to mention he might lose his one chance to rescue his beloved Alter Ego.
In the end, just as Celeste had said, it was too late to turn back. Instead, Hifumi steeled himself as he prepared to follow through with her plan...knowing that he would rest easy when Alter Ego was liberated from that virgin’s clutches!

“Y-You’re right...” he finally acquiesced, stuffing the tangled mess of a forest that was Hiro’s hair into the headpiece. Somehow managing to fit the robot head into its place, Hifumi took a step back, placing his hands on his hips as he nodded at his own work. “Robo Justice is finally complete!”

“Indeed, now we need to move on to the next phase;” Celeste reminded him, holding up her new acquired camera. “Hifumi, if you would please?”

Nodding to her, the fanfic creator hoisted the unconscious ‘Robo Justice’ up and slung his arms over his shoulders, giving the illusion that the robot was grabbing onto him. In true otaku fashion, Hifumi struck various terrified poses, gasping and shouting wildly as he got into character. All the while, Celeste snapped pictures, evaluating each one before eventually deciding on the best one to showcase Hifumi’s ‘abduction’ to the others.

“That is enough,” Celeste told him, making extra sure she deleted any duplicate pictures. “Now then, it is time we disposed of him.”

“About that...are you sure he won’t wake up before too long?” Hifumi questioned, preparing to transport the ‘robot man’. “I mean, if he wakes up before we finish establishing our alibis—”.

“Don’t worry...” Celeste reassured him, a somewhat wicked smile forming on her lips. “By the time he awakens, everything will be set in motion. Now, let’s hurry and get him to the pool. The locker near the back will serve as his ‘hiding place’.”

Although he was perturbed by the almost sadistic glint in his partner’s eyes, Hifumi decided it was best to move forward as planned, lugging Hiro toward the door. Just before reaching it, he stopped, his mind racing as he thought about what the next few phases of Celeste’s plan would entail.

“Miss Ludenberg...?” the fanfic creator hesitantly asked. “You’re certain that this is the only way? What if something goes wrong?”

Celeste’s eyes almost showed how much she wanted to sneer at him, but she managed to hold in her disappointment. After all, she was so close to having her vengeance...and she wouldn’t let his soft-hearted tendencies to rob her of the ‘justice’ she desired!

With a pleasant smile, she answered, “Fear not, Hifumi. As long as we work together, absolutely nothing will stop us. After all, with such detailed planning, what could go wrong?”

-Several Hours Later-

“Won’t you reconsider? It could be dangerous.”

Alter Ego voiced ‘her’ opinion as Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru laced up his boots, almost ready to head out for the meeting. With his aura flaring and his eyes burning, he glanced back at the laptop with utter confidence.

“As the Disciplinary Committee Chairman, I am responsible for disciplining those who would disrupt the peace of our fragile school society. I cannot abandon my duty simple because it might be dangerous!”
Staring at the laptop, awaiting its answer, Taka suddenly remembered Alter Ego’s hearing deficiency and scooted over next to the laptop. Typing word for word his previous response, he waited while the AI processed his answer.

“Oh, I see…” Alter Ego replied carefully, obviously hesitant to retort. Slowly, the AI appeared to gather its courage as it said, “Even so, you could simply wait and confront everyone during your ritualistic meeting in the morning. You planned on addressing them at that time anyway and I’m sure that everyone will tell you what they discovered about a possible means of escape—”.

A sudden flare startled Alter Ego into silence. The intense aura around Taka blazed, his eyes practically scorching the air as he gritted his teeth and wordlessly seethed. Staring wide-eyed at the Disciplinary Chairman, the AI feared that ‘her’ good intentions may have awakened something fierce within him.

Her suspicions were confirmed when Taka took to the keyboard and replayed:

[The time for leniency is over! I need to teach those who would disrupt our communal life the penalty for betrayal!]

Alter Ego gasped at that message, ‘her’ petite face almost shuddering as she understood his intentions. Rereading his own words, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman realized that he should have been more reassuring. And even if he meant every word he’d conveyed, that didn’t mean he had a right to frighten the AI entity.

Taking to the keys again, he continued:

[Fear not. I am only going there to reprimand them. No harm will come to either them or myself. Of that, I can guarantee you!]

Chairman Ishimaru nodded to himself, pleased with his own choice of wording. Unfortunately, his firm determination did nothing to ease the AI’s conscience, evident when ‘her’ face sank and a hint of tears welled up in ‘her’ eyes.

“B-But…Master…Master said something similar to me…and then never returned!” Tears slowly dripped of Alter Ego’s pixelated eyes as she reiterated, “And…I don’t want anyone to be put in harm’s way because of my existence!”

Taking in the AI’s distressed expression, the Disciplinary Chairman felt his anger grow. If his classmate had just listened to him, they would not be putting so much pressure on one as pure as Alter Ego. After all, even if the laptop contained useful information that might help free them, putting the AI into such a delicate position of having to keep secrets was undoubtedly traumatizing. However, Taka imagined that as long as they got the information stored inside, his classmates probably didn’t care for the well-being of the AI itself.

Even though it was a bit odd, Chairman Ishimaru considered Alter Ego a student, the same as everyone else. And as such, it was his duty to protect the fragile entity from those who would abuse ‘her’. And the first step toward that goal was confront those who continued to scheme behind his back!

More reassured of his decision, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman typed his final response:

[After I have disciplined those who are meeting in secret, I will return and bring you before everyone for the morning meeting. We will then discuss how best to survive this ordeal.]
Registering that message, Alter Ego gasped and a hopeful visage finally crossed ‘her’ face. A bright
smile spread out on ‘her’ lips and she joyfully replied, “R-Really?! Thank you so much, Disciplinary
Committee Chairman Ishimaru! I’ll be waiting, so please come back soon!”

Alter Ego’s hopeful expression combined with ‘her’ respectful words and tone strengthened Taka for
what he knew needed to be done. He would no longer hesitate to punish those who would bring
harm to his fellow classmates. And while a small part of him wondered if he was capable of
introducing such harsh discipline, all he needed to do was remind himself that they had brought it
upon themselves.

Standing up, he smiled down at Alter Ego before closing the laptop and turning away. Immediately,
his visage hardened and his aura intensified, the flames in his eyes hot enough to melt steel. With that
resolve, he proceeded out of his room and ventured into the hallways of the first floor.

The Disciplinary Chairman had no idea that, watching from the shadows, a figure in a gothic dressed
grinned as he departed.

…she wasn’t sure…when it started…probably after that voice…began calling out to her…
…such a warm…and familiar voice…it was so quiet…but she could…still hear it…calling out to
her…
…she remembered…another voice…a voice so much like her own…it called for…help…
…that was when…she began to hear…that first voice…so clearly…

“Chihiro…I’m sorry”

…there…it was…again…

Mondo paced around the nurse’s office unable to sleep since hearing Alter Ego’s cries for help
yesterday. Leon had come and told him the bad news, and the baseball star had suffered his fury as
he insisted that he had to be wrong. Even in his current form, the biker couldn’t see Taka as anything
less than his friend…his bro.

And when he’d been told that Taka had ‘stolen’ Alter Ego for himself, Mondo straight up refused to
believe it. Even if it was true, surely the Moral Compass had a good reason. He had to believe that…
because if he didn’t…he would have to acknowledge that all of Taka’s sins were his fault.

If he had just controlled himself, just explained everything to Taka back then, then none of this
would have happened. Everyone was freaking out because of Taka’s craziness, and now they may
have lost their only lead that would help them all escape! Not to mention that poor Chihiro had
poured her soul into making Alter Ego, and now the little laptop was being treated like some kind of
bargaining chip!

Mondo had never wanted to punch something more in his life than he did right now, but he managed
to hold himself back. There was no telling what unintentional damage he might cause, even if he just
punched a wall! He was…afraid. Afraid that he might hurt someone else because he couldn’t control
his rage. At the same time, he had so much pent up frustration and had nothing he could do to fix it!
Eventually, after stomping his feet as he paced, he somehow managed to feel a bit better. At least enough for him to be able to just sit down and try to relax. Taking a seat next to Chihiro’s bedside, he stared at the unconscious programmer, grimacing as images of his own crimes replayed in his mind.

“Chihiro…I’m sorry,” he apologized to the sleeping programmer, somehow hoping it might wake her this time. He’d lost count of how many times he’d apologized, feeling more and more hollow each time. “I know that no matter how much I say it…it won’t change a damn thing! But still…I’ll keep apologizing until you finally wake up! And then, I promise…it’ll be the first thing I say to you!”

...again…Chihiro heard that voice...

“Chihiro…I’m sorry.”

...there it…was again…that voice that was…so familiar and yet so distant...

...floating in a sea of darkness…that voice continued to call out…growing close and closer…with each passing moment...

...time was irrelevant…all that mattered…was that voice…for it brought peace...

...Chihiro…couldn’t understand…why the voice…kept apologizing...

...but she was grateful…without that voice…she would have…lost her way…in that ocean of blackness...

...she was close now…so very close…and yet…so far...

Following his apology, Mondo leaned back in his chair and sighed heavily…feeling utterly lost.

“Dammit, I just don’t know what to do anymore!” the biker vented, trying to keep his voice low. “It’s all my fault this happened to you…and it’s my fault that Taka’s become a pissed off Rule-Nazi! All because I was too weak…because I wanted to be strong like big bro…when I didn’t even know what it meant to be strong in the first place—!”

Suddenly, Mondo heard footsteps just outside the office door, or more accurately, he heard someone stop just outside the door. Immediately on guard, the biker stood up and walked toward the door, keeping a good distance in case someone tried to break in. A part of Mondo hoped it was the Mastermind behind that door, so that he could bash their teeth in and finally fulfill his need to punch something!

Unfortunately, after a few moments of silence, nothing happened. In fact, Mondo began to question if he’d heard anything at all.

“Just hearing things…” he muttered quietly and prepared to head back to his seat.

Just then, he heard an unmistakable voice...
Surprisingly, a yawn escaped Taka as he made his way toward the first-floor staircase.

He hadn’t slept since finding that note on the floor, his mind pouring over exactly whom that note had been meant for. He surmised that someone must have dropped it, and given Makoto’s string of unfortunate luck, the Ultimate Lucky Student seemed the most likely candidate. However, the real threat was whoever instigated this act of betrayal. And while all those who would choose to participate were just as guilty, those who chose to refrain should be granted clemency.

“However, for those who have decided to turn their backs on social order…I know the sort of punishment that will need to be enacted!”

As fate would have it, as that thought echoed in his mind, he came to a halt just outside the nurse’s office. He could hear Mondo shuffling around, and a faint whisper of the biker’s low voice. A part of him wanted to confront the biker now and be done with it, but given that he wasn’t allowed to enter the nurse’s office unless it was an emergency, he instead chose to continue with his current objective.

“We will settle this soon…Mondo Owada!” he seethed aloud, barely managing to keep his voice low. Unable to keep himself from stomping as he headed for the staircase only a few feet away.

Mondo could barely believe his ears, mostly because he wasn’t entirely sure he’d heard Taka muffled voice through the door! He’d spoken so low that it had been hard to hear but what he was certain about was his bro’s intention. It sounded as if he wanted to settle things between them, but the biker wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing!

Mondo also want to settle things between them but did that mean breaking off their friendship permanently or trying to talk things out? In Taka’s current state, he wasn’t even sure if the Moral Compass would be willing to listen to him, not that anything he could say would fix the damage he’d done. At the same time, Mondo knew that his friend spiraling out of control and since it was his fault, the biker felt he should be the one to set the Moral Compass straight…regardless of the potential consequences.

Before he had time to contemplate opening the door or not, the furious stomps of his former friend’s departure echoed, leaving Mondo alone with his thoughts.

He wanted to go after his friend, but knew there was no way he could leave Chihiro defenseless. And while it was true that no one had tried to harm either of them yet, there was no guarantee that someone wouldn’t snap…he knew that all too well. Not to mention that the motive this time was money, a universal tool for turning good people into worthless criminals. Because of that, he couldn’t leave Chihiro alone, but he also needed to apologize to Taka and try to set the record straight. However, do to one would abandon the other, and he just couldn’t bring himself to make that choice.

“Dammit…I should’ve just opened the door and talked to him!” he cursed aloud, pounding his fist into his hand. “Why the hell am I so weak?! I know I’ll never be as strong as Big Bro, but at least I need to be strong for everyone else!”

Instantly, he recalled his conversation with Junko the other day, specifically something she’d told him:
It has nothing to do with strength...I’m just doing what I can, that’s all. Besides, I’m not willing to let the bear have his way!

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Despite how stupid he felt, a smile slowly overtook Mondo’s lips. Junko Enoshima, a hot fashionista girl with so much to lose...could be strong in the face of despair. She fought with all she had in order to keep everyone alive, and she never gave up, not once...and she hadn’t given up on him either. Somehow, he felt as though he could draw strength from her example, a person who reminded him of what true strength was. And right now, Junko was trusting him to keep Chihiro safe, and regardless of how much he wanted to sort things out with Taka, it was obvious that his place was here.

“Yeah...yeah, that’s right! I just need to do what I can right now!” the biker psyched himself up, slapping his face with both hand before clenching his fists. “From now on, I'm not gonna hesitate! I'll to keep watch over Chihiro until she wakes up...and even after that! I swear, on my honor as a man, I will make sure nothing bad happens to her again!”

...it was so loud now...that voice that was...so familiar...

...it cut through...everything...

“I swear, on my honor as a man, I will make sure nothing bad happens to her again!”

...it was so close...to her now...as if...the voice was...right next to her...

...and there was light...for the first time since...she could remember...

...it was soft...and warm...and bright...it evaporated the darkness...

...and as that voice...that strong voice called out...she finally remember...

...Mondo...

As the biker listened to his own voice echo in the small room, for the first time since the incident...he felt his strength returning. And then, something startled him...

“M-Mondo...? Is that...you?”

Time stood still as a dainty voice called out. Mondo’s breath caught in his throat as he spun around staring at the only occupied bed. Tears welled up in his eyes as he saw Chihiro’s eyes flutter. And he almost gasped when, as she lay there, with her eyes half open, Chihiro called out to him.

“I...I can’t...see you...Mondo...” she said softly, her voice weak and frail. Despite how exhausted her must have been, somehow she found the strength to pull her hand from under the sheets and reach out. “Mondo...are you ...there...?”

It took Mondo less than a second to sprint to her side, kneeling at her bedside. Grasping her hand with both of his, the biker squeezed tightly. Slowly, Chihiro turned her head and stared at him. Mondo flinched, unsure of how she was going to react...fearful of her reaction. However, much to
his surprise, she instantly recognized him…and a small but bright smile spread over her lips.

With a heaving sob, the tears that Mondo had held in burst forth, streaming down his cheeks. Bringing her hand closer, he rested his forehead against their conjoined hands, openly sobbing. However, amidst his tears, Mondo somehow found the strength to keep the promise he’d made. Squeezing his eyes shut, Mondo shouted, “Chihiro! I’m…I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry, Chihiro!!”

…she had no idea…why Mondo kept…apologizing…
…she didn’t have the strength…to ask him…why…
…but she knew…no matter what he’d done…it wasn’t on purpose…
…he was…her friend…
…and she needed…to let him…know that…

Mondo’s apology rattled the room, undoubtedly carrying down the hallway as well, but he didn’t care. He’d waited for this moment for so long, and now that it was here, he couldn’t care less what happened to him. Chihiro had come back, and if she wanted to condemn him, have him executed, then he’d gladly take it.

All that mattered was that she was alive…

Suddenly, he became shocked as he felt dainty fingers patting his forehead. Snapping his eyes open, he glanced up to see Chihiro’s hand resting on his forehead. Utterly confused by her gesture, his eyes down slowly trailed down to her see still smiling warmly at him.

Then, much to his surprise, she spoke:

“…I forgive you…”

For nearly a full minute, Mondo couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t process anything other than the words she’d gifted him with. Not once since the incident had he expected Chihiro to forgive him. He didn’t deserve it…after everything he’d done. And yet…that’s what he was given…forgiveness. He had almost killed her, nearly destroyed such a pure and innocent life, and yet she still forgave him. She forgave him…a man who deserved no forgiveness…but sought it nonetheless.

As warmth spread through his entire body, Mondo finally felt himself slowly letting go of his own self-loathing.

…it took…all of her strength…to say those words to him…
…and now…she could feel…herself fading…
…she was afraid…afraid of being forced…back into that blackness…
Unfortunately, the biker didn’t have time to relish in that warmth, because almost without him knowing it, Chihiro’s hand slipped from his grasp. As her hand fell to her side, Chihiro’s eyes slowly began to close, much to Mondo horror. Her smile faded and her breathing slowed as she began to once again lose consciousness.

“No…NO! Chihiro! You gotta stay awake! You gotta—!”

In spite of his pleading, Chihiro’s eyes closed and her head rolled to the side as she fell back into uneasy slumber. Panic consumed Mondo as he shot to his feet, fists clenched and tears still rolling down his reddened cheeks. A guttural scream tore from Mondo’s throat as grief consumed him.

…as the darkness return…Chihiro refused to despair…

…and although she knew it would take time…she could…find her way back…

…and although she knew it would take time…she could…find her way back…

…after all…she needed to…ask him……………………

“God-dammit, NO!! CHIHIRO!!!” Mondo’s screams tore his throat as he smashed his fist into the wall. “Dammit, Chihiro…you can’t forgive me and then just…and then just—!”

Suddenly, before his anger overtook him, he remembered something! Leaning in close, he pressed his ear to Chihiro’s chest and breathed a quick sigh as he felt her breathing and heard her heart beating…if only faintly.

Understandably, his worry only intensified. He had no idea what needed to be done, if anything! He’d never dealt with people going into or out of coma’s before and he was already panicking just trying to figure out where to go from here! Luckily, he had one idea…

“Junko! She knows some medical stuff! Maybe she can—!” he stopped himself midsentence, as he recalled his situation. “Dammit, she’s not allow in here! No one’s allow in here! And Monokuma isn’t even here so there’s no way he’ll let anyone—”.

Mondo’s eyes widened as he realized that there was one person…a student of absolute authority, who had been given charge over the school while Monokuma was away. Without a second thought, Mondo tore out of the nurse’s office and desperately sped toward the first-floor stairwell.

“BRO!!!!”

“6 AM…and no one has arrived yet!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru said aloud as he waited in the equipment room. “The least they could have done was be on time for their own
meeting! Once they arrive, I will give them all a stern talking to!”

Tapping his foot impatiently, the white haired and blazing eyed Moral Compass was completely unaware of the figure hiding just behind the door…a large blue hammer grasped in their hand.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Quite a climax this chapter had, huh? But how will this all turn out? Is Taka going to be pummeled by Hifumi? Will Mondo arrive in time to help him? And how will Celeste’s plan go with this new development? You’ll have to keep reading to find out!

Again, sorry that update will be sporadic for a while. My associates and I are working on the DR: IF dubbing project and it’ll be at least another month or so before we finish. We’ll be making a new youtube channel for this video to air on, and I’ll tell you more about it as we get it up.

For now, I hope that you’re all still enjoying the story! Please leave a review/comment to tell me what you think of the story or if you have questions related to this story. Thanks again and have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
Celeste prepares the final phases of her plan. Hifumi goes in for the kill. Mondo races to find his Bro. Taka is utterly oblivious. Who will come out on top with all this madness?

Clutching her left arm, a pained expression disfiguring her face, Celeste stared at her disheveled appearance in the girl’s second floor bathroom mirror. Her usual pristine and elegant appearance was marred by wrinkles and bits of dirt, her hair was slightly ruffled, particularly in the front where it would be most visible. And finally, a slight bruise highlighted her left cheek, an image that was sure to draw much attention.

Despite her ‘wretched’ visage, very slowly, Celestia Ludenberg grinned maliciously at her own reflection.

“Perfect… Hifumi’s not the only one who can craft a masterpiece!” she affirmed for herself, admiring her handiwork. “Now, when whoever finds me, all they’ll see is a helpless victim. And if luck is on my side, that bleeding-heart Makoto will be the one to find me first.”

Her eyes trailed down to the sink, smirking as she reached out and grasped ‘Justice Hammer 1’. Her knuckled whitened as she tightly clutched the tiny blue mallet. With swift movement, she smacked the hammer down on the rim of the sink, an abrupt pop echoing.

“Oooooh, I wish I could be there when Hifumi caves in his thick skull!” Celeste seethed, smacking the hammer a second time, to get the frustration out of her system. And it worked, because an instant later, she felt her stress receding. Putting up her façade, in preparation for the next phase of her plan, she smiled sweetly at her reflection. “Oh well, I’ll settle for stomping on his corpse once this is all over. I only hope Monokuma will allow me such a pleasure.”

A bit of giddiness struck her as she knew that, only one floor above, Hifumi was achieving the vengeance she’d so desperately craved. However, she had little time to revel in such success, as preparation for the final phase needed to be completed…a task that Hifumi needed to be kept unaware of. Taking the mallet with her, Celeste backed away from the mirror and decided to head for the third floor.

“What an idiot!! Hifumi didn’t bother questioned why I had him leave one of largest hammers in the art supply room,” she swiftly said to herself as she exited the bathroom and proceeded toward the stairs. “Love truly is a frightening thing, blinding someone as talented as him into becoming a disposable—”.

Suddenly, she stopped, her own words echoing in her mind.

“Talented…? Since when have I ever considered that loser talented! I mean, sure, he can make orgasmic tea but beyond that, he’s just an otaku freak! He’s obsessive and prone to perversion and…able to make adjustments to his stupid robot cosplay in less than a few hours to fit a person
with a completely different physical appearance from himself…”

At the time, she hadn’t questioned it, but thinking about it now, even she had to admit it was rather spectacular. Robo Justice had initially been designed for his own personal use, and thus it had originally been much wider. However, once Celeste had acquired his services, he immediately reconfigured it to perfectly fit Hiro instead. And while it hadn’t been much of a spectacle to watch, there was no doubt that it was impressive.

“Not to mention that he takes loyalty to an absurd level! I mean, whatever I ask of him, he practically throws himself into it! Yeah, he complains sometimes but after a few words of encouragement, he’s right back at it without losing enthusiasm. And that tea he makes…it’s like the nectar of the gods! He’d make a perfect butler in my castle—”

A silent gasp escaped Celeste as an epiphany was cruelly visited upon her.

“But he’s going to die…I’m going to kill him. Yes, for the sake of my castle…sacrifices must be…but what if I modified the plan? I could do as I promised and kill someone besides him—No! I need to follow the plan. If I try to change it now…it could all fall apart! Besides, I never accounted for killing anyone but him! And now that he’s in place to dispatch Taka, there’s no turning back. Unfortunately, no amount of loyalty…or tea making skill…is enough to keep me from my castle!”

After that momentary lapse in judgement, Celeste forced herself to move forward, suppressing any regrets she may have had for her actions. At a swift pace, she ascended the stairs up to the third floor and quietly made her way toward the art supply room.

Reaching the large atrium just outside the art room, she glanced down the hallway leading to the equipment room. Her lips twisted into a sadistic smile, incredibly tempted to peek in and watch as Taka’s life ebbed away. But that would only hinder her plans, much to her chagrin. After all, Hifumi couldn’t know she was plotting his own demise behind his back, and only a short distance away. As such, she resigned herself to simply appreciate that revenge had been served and her master plan to escape the school was officially underway.

Even so, she decided to offer a last rites…of sorts.

“Rest in pieces…you rule-obsessed fuck-tard!”

With that curt comment, Celeste turned on a heel, marched into the art room and headed directly for the supply room beyond. Only a few moments after she’d departed, heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway.

“Just one strike…just one clean strike and Alter Ego will be freed from that virgin’s clutches!”

It was the moment Hifumi had been both dreaded and anticipated. From his spot, hidden behind the equipment room door, he could see the furious aura and white hair of the foul virgin that had stolen his beloved. Clutched in his sweaty hands…Justice Hammer 4 was ready to be used for its intended purpose.

In all honestly, Hifumi’s apprehension hadn’t lessened since his talk with Miss Ludenberg. And though he understood that not only his life was at stake with this venture, he also couldn’t deny that innocent victims would be created because of him. Kind souls like Mr. Naegi and Ms. Asahina didn’t deserve such a cruel fate…executed so that Miss Ludenberg, Alter Ego and himself may find happiness.
And while he would not miss the likes of Mr. Togami or Mr. Hagakure, he would still be executing those who had not personally wronged him. It was true that the virgin deserved death for his betrayal, but should everyone else be sacrificed to appease his own sense of justice?

While grappling with that apprehension, Taka’s thunderous voice abruptly erupted in the small room.

“6AM and no one has arrived yet! The least they could have done was be on time for their own meeting! Once they arrive, I will give them all a stern talking to!”

Hifumi froze, the Moral Compass’s words surprising him. He’d expected something more…nefarious? After all, the wretched virgin before him had committed such great atrocities! Stealing away his beloved Alter Ego, threatening Miss Ludenberg, dressing in all white! But…did he truly deserve death? He didn’t seem to be all that fearsome, simply waiting to discipline students who had gone behind his back.

“Perhaps…I let myself get carried away,” Hifumi thought, lowering the mallet in his hands. “Miss Ludenberg will undoubtedly be disappointed, but maybe it’s best if we wait—.”

“I wish they would hurry up and arrive!” Taka’s rambling interrupted his thoughts. “I have little time to waste on this venture! Once this is settled, all that remains will be to deal with Alter Ego!”

The instant his beloved’s name was uttered, a quiet rage suddenly overtook Hifumi. Taka was going to…‘deal with’ his beloved?! There could be no other interpretation for those words! Miss Ludenberg had been right all along! Somehow, the despicable virgin was plotting to use his one-true-love to facilitate an escape from this place! And then…once he had no more use for her—!

“How DARE he!” Hifumi mentally shouted, gripping Justice Hammer 4 tightly. “Death is too kind for him!”

Shoving the door aside and lifting Justice Hammer 4, Hifumi’s rage overtook him and he prepared to fulfill his role in Miss Ludenberg’s grand design.

“I won’t be satisfied until his entire body has been reduced to ashes! By the flaming moons of Hell, I SHALL BE HIS APOCOLYPSE—!”

“BROOOOOO!!!!”

*SLAM*

Hifumi had no time to react. The door he’d pushed aside suddenly flung back, avenging the harsh shove he’d used a moment ago, by bashing into his face. The force of the door’s vengeance sent the fanfic creator reeling backward, slamming the back of his head into the wall behind him. His vision blurred and he slumped to the floor, his large body obscured by the very door that had retaliated against him.

His consciousness slipping, Hifumi lost his grip on Justice Hammer 4. As darkness converged on him, all he could think about was Alter Ego…and how he’d failed her.

“Curse you…wretched door…”

Mondo was completely out of breath, panting heavily as he stood in equipment room, staring at the person he’d been searching for. Kiyotaka Ishimaru glared back at him, a fearsome scowl forming on
his face. The biker briefly wondered how he’d gotten here so fast, considering he’d followed him up
here at a break-neck pace!

Then again, he wasn’t actually sure who he’d been following…but it had to be Bro, right? He was
the only one here, after all!

While the biker had been on the second floor, he’d heard footsteps coming from the third floor
stairway and rushed up there, only to find that whoever it was had already moved down the hallway.
He followed after what he thought were footsteps until he’d reached the atrium in front of the art
room. The biker figured that Taka probably wasn’t in the art room, and was probably patrolling the
halls or some crap, like a real honor student.

Then, when he’d gotten to the room with the gigantic sci-fi looking machine, he’d heard Taka’s
voice from the equipment room and dashed to the door, slamming it open so hard he heard it smack
the something, probably the wall, so hard it sounded like a something fell over! But he didn’t really
care about that right now, he’d found his Bro and now…everything would be alright!

Now…he could save Chihiro!

“Bro!” he shouted, relief evident in his exhausted voice. “What the hell are you doin’ in—actually,
never mind! You gotta come with me! It’s Chihiro, she—!”

“MONDO OWADA!!”

The biker’s words died in his throat as Taka’s booming voice eclipsed his own. Startled that his Bro
could shout so much louder than himself, Mondo was stunned into silence as the Disciplinary
Committee Chairman furiously pointed at him.

“So, it was you! You arranged this meeting! I should have known that a traitor like you would be
behind this!”

Confused and insulted, Mondo couldn’t stop himself from retorting, “W-Who the hell are you callin’
a traitor?! And what’s all this meeting shit?! I was only following after you!”

“Don’t play coy with me, traitor!”

“I’m not! And besides, that’s not what’s important right now! I need your help because—”.

“SILENCE!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru commanded, taking a moment for the
silence to set in. “Regardless of whether or not you were responsible for this gathering, it is fortuitous
that you are here! I see that you are abandoning your duties once again! Proving that my judgement
is infallible!”

Mondo gritted his teeth angrily, knowing he didn’t have time to waste on Taka’s obscene rules right
now! Chihiro could slip away while he was spouting his stupid gibberish!

“Dammit, Taka—!”

“Language! And do not call me by that name! I am Disciplinary Committee Chair—!”

“God-dammit, Taka! Would you shut the fuck up for a sec—!”

“THAT IS THE LAST STRAW!!” A furious Chairman Ishimaru belted, his voice once again
overtaking Mondo’s. Striking a threatening pose and aiming his finger at the biker, Taka narrowed
his eyes and shouted, “You leave me no choice! I wanted to avoid having to do this…but if you
persist on violating the rules, I will need to consult the others about having you restrained!”

Clenching both fists, Mondo seethed through gritted teeth as Taka droned on. All the while, the biker’s mind was unable to stop from picturing Chihiro’s lithe form, remembering the faint heartbeat that seemed to be growing weaker with each passing moment. And as Taka wasted this precious time, the biker found himself consumed...consumed by the fury that he’d tried so hard to suppress since attacking Chihiro. A fury he’d feared to unleash out of sheer weakness...

However, unlike that time, his fury was not born out of jealousy. It was a righteous fury...one that he had experience every time someone tried to hurt one of his boys. In fact, it wasn’t so much fury as it was an impulse. A desperate need to protect what he cared for most. And right now, that happened to be Chihiro’s fragile life!

“And if that is not enough!” the insolent Chairman Ishimaru persisted. “Perhaps I will have to consider allowing Monokuma to punish—"

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!!!”

Stomping forward, Mondo reared back his fist and slammed it directly into the side of Taka’s cheek. The Moral Compasses face twisted to the side as the impact sent him flying, landing square on his back on the floor. Dazed from the sudden strike, Taka could only blink in surprise as Mondo abruptly stood over him. Reaching down and grabbing him by the collar, the biker pulled his face up, their eyes meeting.

“You’re acting like a god-damn idiot and it’s pissing me off! I don’t have time for your bullshit right now!” Mondo screamed, roughly jerking him around. “I need you to come with me and—!”

“W-What do you think you’re doing?!” the shaken Committee Chairman demanded, cutting the biker off with excessive loudness. “Do you understand that because of your foolish actions, we must now hold a Bullying Trial—?!”

“I don’t give a damn about that!! Just shut up and listen!!” Mondo screamed, shaking him harshly. “Chihiro woke up! She woke the fuck up, god-dammit!”

Shock overtook Taka’s features, his body tensing and his eyes widening. Then, abruptly, his fearsome aura dissipated. His whitened hair blackened and the fire in his eyes extinguished. Once again, Kiyotaka Ishimaru lay before him, this revelation so startling it left him speechless.

“But she was only awake for like a minute before she blacked out again!” Mondo persisted, his voice a little shaky as he continued. “I…I don’t know what the fuck to do! She’s breathin’ and shit but she seems really weak and I don’t know how to help her! I wanted to get Junko but she can’t get into the office because of the bear’s stupid fucking rule! But you’ve got authority and shit, so you can go in there, right?!”

Taka flinched at that question, as if he never even considered that notion. Unfortunately, it seemed that the Moral Compass was at a loss for words, infuriating the anxious Mondo.

“Are you listening?! We don’t have time to fuck around! I need your help, Bro! Chihiro needs help and I don’t know what the fuck else to do!” Shaking him, the biker practically begged, “So get off your ass and help me! You’re the only one who can—!”

“Lies...you’re lying!”

Mondo gasped as Taka reached his hands up and gripped the biker’s arms, squeezing so hard it was sure to leave a bruise. With a swift movement, the Moral Compass used Mondo’s arms to pull
himself up to his feet. Unable to remove Taka’s hand from his sleeves, the biker watched in horror as Taka’s eyes suddenly blazed and his hair turned starch white, accompanied by the return of his furious aura.

Holding him in place, so that he couldn’t escape, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman screamed, “Will your treachery know no end?! Now you think to use Chihiro to lure me into a trap!”

“W-What?! What the fuck are—?!” Mondo tried to interject but was interrupted.

“No doubt you plan to murder me while my guard is down! And now that you have attacked me, twice! There is no forestalling your punishment! I will have to call Monokuma and request a trial immediat—!”

“You fucking idiot!!”

Without warning, Mondo slammed his pompadoured head directly into Taka’s skull. Pain shot through both of them, a pair of grunts resounding. However, having such a hard head, the biker was able to recover quicker.

Dazed from the attack, Disciplinary Chairman Ishimaru’s grip on his sleeves loosened and Mondo could tighten his grip on Taka’s collar, lifting him up off the ground and shaking him as he shouted, “Why the fuck would I attack you in the nurse office if I could beat you to a blood pulp right now!!”

Struggling to breathe, the Disciplinary Chairman seethed, “H-How should I…know what…you’re thinking…?! It’s probably…all…a part…of your plan!”

Growing more furious, Mondo brought Taka closer, their faces only inches apart. “Do you really think I’m smart enough to plan something like this?! I just wanna help Chihiro! Get that through your thick head!”

“You’re…lying!” the Moral Compass insisted, unwilling to change his mind. “And if…you continue like this…I will…have you…executed—!”

“Fine then! Call the fucking bear and have me executed!”

Surprise suddenly spread over Taka’s features as Mondo’s words echoed, a hint of understanding mixed within all his confusion. Seeing this, Mondo released his grip, letting Taka topple to the floor in front of him. Coughing from lack of oxygen, the startled Moral Compass glanced up at him, frustration and perplexion clear in his gaze.

Glaring down at him, Mondo seethed, “I don’t give a fuck about what happens to me! If you wanna have me executed, go the fuck ahead! But at least help me save Chihiro first!”

Finally able to breathe, Taka managed to clear his throat and scoff, “I see you’re committed to your lie —!”

“Then I’ll fucking prove it to you!” Mondo shouted, cutting him off. Extending a hand out to him, the biker continued, “And once it’s all over, you can do whatever you want to me. But…until then, I need you to help me, dammit! So get off your ass and get a move on!”

For nearly a full minute, Taka stared at Mondo’s hand, a disgusted expression on his face. It was almost as if the very gesture wounded him. However, eventually, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman slowly reached out and grasped his wrist. Mondo reciprocated and pulled him to his feet. Then, before the biker could turn to leave, Taka jerked on his hand, forcing Mondo to continue to face him and keeping them both rooted in place.
Before Mondo had a chance to complain, the Disciplinary Chairman seethed, “If you’re lying…I swear…I will have you executed!”

Despite the Moral Compass’ ominous tone, Mondo found himself smirking. The fire of Taka’s soul, the one that had impressed the biker in the sauna so many days ago…it was still there. Deep down, buried under all that Rule-Nazi bullshit, Mondo knew that his Bro was still the same man he’d come to respect. It would take time, but this display proved that the real Taka could come back to them!

“Fine by me! Now stop wasting time and move your ass!” Mondo chided, tearing his arm away and speeding toward the exit.

“There is no running in the halls! And for the last time, mind your language!” Taka shouted as speed walked after his classmate.

Minding the door, the Moral Compass pulled it shut behind him…never seeing another of his classmates slumped against the wall just behind the door.

“There…that should do nicely,” Celeste complimented herself, covering up the largest mallet with a tarp.

It hadn’t been easy to get it down, considering her small stature, but it was necessary for her plan. There was no way for her to surreptitiously dismount the hammer with someone else in the room, as it required her to get up onto the counter just to lift it off. Not to mention that the mallet was incredibly heavy for a woman of her size. Underestimating its weight, had she accidentally dropped it while trying to get it down. However, now that it was down and hidden away in the corner of the room, the final piece of her plan was set.

The weight of the mallet was a bit of an issue but she needed it to be heavy enough to kill with a single blow. After all, there was no way a girl like her would be able to grapple with someone as large and physically intimidating as Hifumi. She had to ensure he wouldn’t be able to counter-attack, for if he did, there was no way she would survive. Having seen his murderous rage for herself, Celeste knew it was a bit of a gamble relying on him, especially since he could easily turn the tables on her if he so desired. Fortunately, she didn’t believe him intelligent enough to try and double-cross her, and even if he had a change of heart, the plot was already set in motion.

Nothing could stop it now…by the end of the day, she would be free of this shit hole!

“All that remains is to head to the Rec Room and wait…” she told herself, closing the Art Supply room door and heading toward the hallway.

Once there, she heard echoing footsteps coming from the stairwell leading down, a smirk appearing on her porcelain lips.

“There goes Hifumi. So, that means…” she concluded, glancing toward the physics lab maliciously. “He really did it…that rule-obsessed fucktard is finally dead!”

Unparalleled joy erupted from within and Celeste found her mask slipping as she cackled quietly. Oh, how she wanted to be there when it had happened! Seeing his pathetic face twisted in horror as he was clubbed to death! She briefly wondered if she had enough time to go spit on his corpse but decided against it. It was almost 7 AM and she needed to be in place soon just in case someone happened to be wandering around early.
“Besides, I wouldn’t want to leave unintentional evidence behind,” she reminded herself, knowing all too well how meticulous her classmates were when it came to investigation. “Best just to stick to the plan. I’ll get to see his mangled corpse later anyway.”

Although a bit disappointed that she couldn’t survey her handiwork, Celeste marched toward the Rec Room with a spring in her step, confidence overflowing as she prepared for the next phase of her plan.

“Whaddya mean you can’t go inside?!” Mondo complained as he and Taka stood outside the nurse’s office. “That was the whole point of finding you! Don’t you have authority and shit?!”

“It’s not as simple as just declaring that I am able to defy rules!” the Disciplinary Chairman shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at his classmate. “That would destroy the very fabric of our communal —!”

Stomping his foot, the biker retorted, “Chihiro’s life is on the fucking line! Can’t you make-up a rule or something?!”

“Monokuma made it very clear that we are only allowed to use the nurse’s office in a state of emergency! Unless someone is critically injured and requires medical treatment, we cannot—!”

Half-way through his explanation, Mondo turned and slammed his face into the wall. Taka’s eyes widened as Mondo repeatedly beat his head against the drywall. His grunts echoed down the hall for a moment before the biker whirled around, blood dripping from his forehead.

“There! I’m fucking bleeding! Get into the fucking office and help me!”

There were no words that Taka could use to express his shock. Watching as the blood rolled down Mondo’s face, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman found himself in a situation unlike any he’d ever imagined.

As Chairman of the Disciplinary Committee, he had encountered various kinds of misbehavior. And while he’d broken up many fights and witnessed classmates bleeding as a result, it was always due to their own choices. However, this was the first time blood had been drawn due to Taka’s own inability to act. Mondo had injured himself in order to force him to act, a shameful but effective tactic.

This action boggled the Disciplinary Chairman’s mind. He had little doubt that Mondo was trying to deceive him, but with so much evidence to the contrary…could it be that his classmate was…being truthful with him? And if that were the case, it would mean that Taka’s actions had potentially hindered Chihiro’s survival!

“No! That can’t be right! I would never do such a thing! As the Disciplinary Committee Chairman, it is my responsibility to prevent disaster! Not hasten it! I am trying to save lives! Not end them! It is Mondo who is being treasonous! And I will see him executed if…executed…if…if…”

Cruel realism suddenly crashed down on Taka’s head as that contradiction arose in his mind. His purpose was to keep everyone safe and protected! Why then…was he considering execution?! It should have been the furthest notion form his mind, and yet…he’d been all but ready to call for Monokuma to punish Mondo. The biker was on thin ice and knew that his actions could lead to his own death.
Despite that…all that Mondo seemed concerned with was Chihiro’s safety… which is what Taka realized should have been his primary concern! The very idea of Chihiro awakening should have thrilled him! Instead, he was skeptical and doubting… all because the news had been delivered... by his former friend. And now, that former friend had done personal harm to himself… just to find a means of protecting Chihiro’s fragile life.

“...Why... why did I not at least hear him out?! Why did I let my anger overrule my judgement?! At this very moment... Chihiro could be...?!”

Even though he never would have noticed it, for a brief moment, the white of his hair darkened and his aura flickered, the fire in his eyes ebbing slightly as he came to a decision.

“Errah, very well! I declare a state of emergency and will escort you into the office for treatment! While there... I will also see if any other students require medical attention!”

“'bout fucking time!” Mondo groaned, sliding open the office door and heading inside.

With a displeased visage, Taka followed after him, determined to discover if his methods truly were flawed in such a way.

“Ahhhhh, I know I should be more upset that Taka’s gray matter didn’t paint the floor but… OH THE DESPAIR HERE IS ORGASMIC!”

The Mastermind, Junko Enoshima, ran her hands down the length of her body as she shivered from ecstasy. A husky breath escaped her as the throes of despair ignited her body with passionate heat. Chills ran down her spine, tingling her entire body as ecstasy consumed her. There truly was nothing like despair… and it came in so many forms!

From Taka’s ‘heartfelt’ reunion with his former friend, all the way to Celeste’s pitiful confidence that she’ll win! There was almost too much despair gorge on!

Junko had been observing since yesterday, analyzing the many ways Celeste’s plan could go, and now the answer was clear to her. Celeste’s plan was headed for a devastating crash that would ignite the ripest of despairs! The Mastermind chuckled, having never imagined that watching a murder fail would be as despair inducing as having one be committed! It was obvious Hifumi’s failure to kill Taka was something Celeste hadn’t even considered, and with that crucial piece of her plan missing, the rest of her scheme was certain to crumble, entrapping the gambler with the very plot she’d placed all of her hope on!

“And of-fucking-course she doesn’t even realize it!” Junko screamed, switching to her most offensive persona. “That meticulous little bitch is about to crash and burn, emphasis on the burn when I get to execute her!! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA—!!”

“But what if she doesn’t gets to kills Otaku Nerd?” Junko said as she suddenly shifted personalities, becoming more cutesy. “I won’t gets to execute her and watch her burn to a little crisp while she screams for her fat cat to save her…”

“Perhaps not,” she continued talking to herself, donning her fake glasses and ponytail. “But the despair of watching her plan fail so spectacularly, seeing the despair of her own futility… that will be our prize—”.

“My prize… my prize…” Junko corrected herself, resuming her ‘normal’ persona. Leaning back in
her chair, the Mastermind sighed. Partly out of boredom. Partly out of depression. “It’s only me here…since I can’t talk to Muku anymore. And going schizo’s already boring me…plus, it’s been done already so…” A deep sigh escaped her. “It wouldn’t be despairing enough for me…”

Sadly enough, for her at least, the euphoria of the upcoming despair was already fading. And while it had been rhapsodic, it had also been fulminating. She was only getting bits of despair until now, so having such a tasty morsel had been absolutely euphoric! But it lasted for such a short time that…Junko had begun to wonder if something was amiss.

“Could I be…getting bored of despair?” she pondered, tilting her head to glance at a Monokuma doll she’d pinned to the wall with knives. “What do you think?”

“I think your logic is full of holes…just like me!” Junko replied to herself in her Monokuma voice. “You’ve been consuming so much despair since the world ended, that you’ve gotten used to it! You need a new kind of despair! One that no one but you can experience! The kind of despair that will make you drool with anticipation and wet yourself in a way that makes the internet love you! You need…the despair of masturbating to you dead lover—!”

“Been there, done that…” Junko retorted herself, feeling even more bored. “I guess I’ll just have to wait until the goth chick’s plan fails…at least that will soak the southern fields.”

“Alrighty then, just remember…” Junko’s Monokuma voice returned, her grip on sanity unclear. “The Ultimate Despair you dream of may be closer than you think…”

Silence fell over the room, a deafening quiet that made Junko’s ears ring. Even more surprising, her expression was completely neutral. What ‘Monokuma’ had said wasn’t exactly false. Despair wasn’t as palpable as it once was. At first, Junko assumed it was because she was confined to the school, and thus the variety of despair was limited. However, as more and more of her classmates survived what should have been fatal encounters, she began consider the nature of this ‘experiment’.

In the end, it was simple. Junko Enoshima wanted despair…but was the despair awaiting her at the end of this game be enough to satisfy her? Had her cravings grown too strong? Like a drug addict who had to switch drugs to get more stimulation? There was no way for her to know. Even with her analytical abilities…it was too early to tell. She craved the Ultimate Despair…the one true despair that a person could only experience once.

…Death.

She knew that would bring her despair…but only under the right circumstances. If she killed herself now, the only despair she would have is that her former classmates would eventually starve because she wouldn’t be replenishing food for them. And unfortunately, that despair would be a drop in the hat compared to the idea of her classmates somehow surviving and somehow defeating her. The very thought of all her hard work going to waste, all the planning and effort resulting in Hope winning the day…that would breed a Despair unlike any other!

…But…was that even possible?

No matter how much she analyzed the Mutual Killing Game, there was no doubt that someone would die before it all ended. Even if it was only one person…someone was going to die because of this game…she just didn’t know who or when…which actually…was kind of despairing in and of itself!

Momentarily, a flush of heat erupted from within Junko, temporarily sating her needs and making her grin maliciously. It seemed that despair had not abandoned her yet!
“Eh, what do you know, ya dumb bear? You just hang out all day…” Junko finally ‘retorted’, reaching into her desk before throwing another knife into the motionless Monokuma doll, sticking it between the eyes. Huffing amusedly, she switched back to the monitors and chuckled, “Let’s see if Muku’s having as much ‘fun’ as I am…”

7 AM…it was time for the morning meeting. The morning announcement had just concluded and Mukuro was preparing to depart for the cafeteria. Ensuring her wig was in place, the disguised soldier opened her door to find an unexpected visitor waiting for her.

“How, Junko!” Sayaka cheerfully greeted, smiling brightly as Mukuro stepped outside, closing and locking her door behind her.

“O-Oh, hey Sayaka!” she replied with a smile of her own, a bit startled to see her classmate waiting for her. “Were you waiting for me?”

“Yup! I figured we could walk to the meeting together,” the pop idol informed her, glancing down the hall. “Leon went on ahead. Something about wanting to see if the fridge got restocked…”

“Ahh. I was wondering why he wasn’t with you.” Mukuro replied, chuckling as they began to walk down the hall.

Sayaka, however, pouted a bit at that response. “We’re not attached at the hip, you know.”

“There’s evidence to the contrary,” the soldier found herself teasing, a smirk lighting up her face. “I mean, you’ve already seen his room—”

“One time!” a flushed Sayaka protested before a mischievous smirk spread on her lips. “By the way, your wig’s looking fantastic today…”

Mukuro froze. Time stood still as fear gripped her soul…her worst fear realized.

Then, instinctively, her hand flew up to her wig, her heart racing. Her eyes dilated and her breathing quickened, her other hand reaching toward the knife hidden under her shirt. Against her will, and out of sheer panic, Mukuro’s mind instinctively began running scenarios about where to hide Sayaka’s body—

“NO! Stop that!” she cursed herself, fighting her soldier’s instincts as much as possible. “I will not let my instincts take control! I won’t kill—”

“Junko…?! Are you alright?!”

Sayaka’s panicked voice startled the frantic soldier back to reality, her pale blue eyes shooting over to see the pop idol’s distraught expression. Taking in that visage, Mukuro gulped and took a breath, eventually falling into a steady rhythm of breathing. As she stood there, staring at her friend’s face, she was shocked when Sayaka’s features abruptly grew stern.

“I…I’m sorry,” she fervently apologized, bowing her head. Lifting her gaze up, she continued, “I shouldn’t have teased you about that. It’s a sensitive issue and I should have been more respectful.”

Still recovering from her own bout of panic, Mukuro took a deep breath before asking, “W-When did you…figure it out?”
“Yesterday,” the pop idol admitted, a hint of shame in her voice. “There’s a big difference between a wig and real hair, even if the wig is made from real hair.”

“T-Then…why didn’t you say anything yesterday?!” a dazed and confused Mukuro questioned, her fear refusing to subside. Her tone incited an apologetic visage from the pop idol.

“I’m not intimately familiar with the fashion industry, but I understand how strict and harsh it can be. I figured that the wig was a part of your image and you didn’t want people figuring it out. I mean…it could end your career if your clients found out your image was fabricated so…”

She paused, collecting her resolve before a determined expression overtook her.

“I’m sure you have your reasons for wearing that wig. And it’s not my business, anyway. I should have been more respectful of your private life. So again, I’m sorry.”

Sayaka bowed once more, leaving Mukuro utterly perplexed as a flood of emotions engulfed her. A part of her was glad that the pop idol hadn’t mentioned it yesterday. It would have been more difficult to stave off her urge to ‘eliminate threats’ in the confines of her private room…where no one would have been able to hear screaming…

Shaking her head, Mukuro felt guilty for having such dark thoughts. Even considering the soul crushing fear that had almost consumed her, it was still disconcerting that she had even thought of such a despicable solution.

And what’s worse…that unexplainable tightness in her chest had returned, further perplexing the already flustered soldier.

Despite the maelstrom of conflicting emotions, Mukuro somehow found the words to reply, “N-No, it’s not your fault. I should have mentioned it earlier. And about my reasons for wearing the wig…”

She hesitated, knowing what needed to be done. She had to lie. There was no other choice. She needed to lie to her classmate…her friend. If not, then both of their lives would be in danger. And she wasn’t willing to let—

“You don’t have to tell me…” Sayaka interjected, startling Mukuro into silence. “It’s your deal and I have no right to question you.”

“Thank you…” Mukuro squeezed out, secretly thrilled that she didn’t need to fabricate another excuse.

“And don’t worry, I haven’t mentioned it to anyone and I don’t plan to,” the pop idol assured, her features stern and determined. “I’ll keep it to myself. I promise.”

“…Thanks,” the disguised soldier said again, feeling relieved but awkward at the same time. “I appreciate it.”

“Just do me one tiny favor…” Sayaka quickly continued, surprising Mukuro by inching toward her. Without warning, she grasped the soldier’s hand and lifted it up, holding it with both hands. The pop idol stared her square in the eyes as she requested, “Keep the fact that I visited Leon’s room to yourself. Everyone’s suspicious enough as it is…”

Honestly, Mukuro had been expecting a much more diabolical request. Then again, considering that her sister’s ‘requests’ often involved someone else’s untimely death, it was probably just a knee-jerk reaction.
In either case, the disguised soldier smiled widely and nodded. “Deal!”

Giggling, Sayaka reciprocated her friend’s smile and gently shook her hand before letting it go, turning to head into the cafeteria. Mukuro followed after her, ignoring the foreboding feeling welling up in her chest.

The cafeteria was eerily silent as the students waited for their classmates to arrive. Sitting at her usual spot at the longest table, Kyoko glanced around the room, tallying attendance for the third time.

Makoto had arrived just after 7 AM, and had taken a seat beside her. Next to him, Sayaka and Leon sat together, the baseball star groaning at his bacon and eggs while the pop idol patted his back. Across from them, Junko played with her food, occasionally twiddling her fingers through her hair. Next to her sat Hina and Sakura, an apprehensive expression on both their faces. At an adjacent table, Byakuya sat alone, taking an occasional glance at the clock before huffing angrily. Hiding behind a nearby chair, Toko peered out at her ‘Master’, a lewd expression twisting her features. And with Mondo taking care of Chihiro, their absence was to be expected.

Overall, four people were unaccounted for…a startlingly large number considering their situation.

“Well…something feels…wrong…”

It was fifteen after 7 AM and while most of the class had arrived, key figures were missing.

Most notably, Taka was absent. He should have been there first but was abnormally late. And while the silence his absence provided was soothing, his lack of presence was disconcerting. Kyoko almost didn’t notice that Hiro was absent as well, if not for the fact that he wasn’t there to be excessively loud as well.

Even more unnerving, Celeste and Hifumi were remarkably late. Even considering their laxed notion of punctuality, it was odd that neither of them were present. Hifumi especially, considering his passionate feelings about their current situation. And with Celeste absent as well…

“Well…something’s wrong…” Kyoko said aloud, drawing everyone’s attention. “With so many of us missing, it’s possible that someone has been attacked. Or worse. We need to investigate immediately. We may already be too late.”

“H-Hey, Kyoko!” Makoto stammered, a bit stunned by her bluntness. “I’m sure everyone’s just running late! Five more minutes! We can at least wait that long!”

A part of Kyoko wanted to comply with his request, mostly out of admiration for his unwavering optimism. Unfortunately, it was obvious that his comment was meant to reassure not only their classmates, but Makoto himself. And there was no doubt in Kyoko’s mind that foul play was afoot. There was no time to waste on sentiment or good will. Her instincts told her so…and she couldn’t ignore them.

“We can’t afford to wait any longer, not with so many unusual circumstances,” she countered, making the lucky student grimace.

“I…I get that but—!”

“Think about it. Taka’s never been late. And after yesterday’s events, I doubt he would miss the opportunity to scold us. And with Monokuma’s motive in play, I believe it would be more
appropriate to assume the worst rather than hope for the best,” Kyoko refuted, watching as her logic crushed his optimism.

It was almost painful to watch his expression fall, but it was necessary. Only when the situation turned grave did Makoto somehow find the strength to persevere, even through the harshest of truths. He’d done so twice now, and Kyoko was confident he would do so again.

…It was something she whole-heartedly admired about him.

Just as she anticipated, Makoto’s expression hardened, but deep concern almost immediately overtook him. “You’re…You’re right, Kyoko. We should go and look for everyone, just in case!”

And there it was, his unbreakable spirit, just as she’d anticipated. With his agreement, it would be easy to convince the others, a fact that she made shameful use of. At the same time, it was necessary. The tension was palpable and it showed on everyone’s face. They all feared the worst, and for good reason. Each time someone failed to arrive for the morning meeting, tragedy had struck. And it seemed this time was no exception…although they all prayed that wasn’t the case.

Well, most of them anyway…

“It seems the game is afoot once again,” Byakuya said almost gleefully, earning many furrowed brows and vicious glares. The Affluent Progeny paid them no mind, effortlessly continuing, “As Kyoko said, we’ve no time to waste. Let’s split up and search the school.”

The group of students silently seethed at his order, his attitude and ‘authority’ wearing on all their nerves. Kyoko, in particular, sent him a sideways glance, her grievances almost visible. However, he was being somewhat cooperative, an unusual change that was welcome in this time of uncertainty.

“Alright then, but we should start by checking on Mondo and Chihiro,” Kyoko proposed, knowing that no one would oppose her suggestion.

“Yeah. I’m kinda worried about them actually,” Junko voiced, already standing up.

“But shouldn’t someone stay here?” a concerned Hina pondered. “I mean, what if someone shows up while we’re all out searching?”

“It would be highly unlikely—”, Byakuya began, only to be cut off.

“I’ll stay here and keep an eye out,” Sayaka bravely offered, talking over Byakuya with a hint of satisfaction in her voice. “I’m still recovering and can’t move as fast as the rest of you. So it’s best if I stay here—”.

“By yourself?! Are you crazy?!” Leon interjected, worry clear in his tone. “Nu-uh! No way! Don’t you know that splitting up is the best way to get yourself killed?!”

Sayaka frowned at his pessimism and let out a deep sigh, “I never said I would be here by myself. I planned to ask if someone wanted to wait with me.”

“Oh—Oh…well…” Leon stammered, at a loss for words.

Almost immediately, Sayaka let a mischievous smirk spread on her lips. “Well, since you’ve made such a fuss, I suppose it’ll have to be you. You’d better take responsibility.”

Embarrassed by his overprotective nature, the baseball star nervously answered, “T-That works for me…besides, safety in numbers and all that, right?”
“He brings up a good point,” Junko said, a fierce determination in her eyes. “If we do split up to search, it should be in pairs. That way, there’s less of a chance any of us will be attacked…”

“It will also establish alibis for everyone here,” Byakuya pointed out, a malicious grin spreading over his face. “It will narrow down the list of suspects. And once we find a body, it will be easier to establish where everyone was.”

The Togami Heir’s cruel logic irritated the rest of the class, but no one refuted him. After two incidents happening so close to each other, all of them were subconsciously preparing for the worst. Not even Makoto, whose reckless optimism appeared boundless, could find the words to counter his claim.

Due to the newly renewed tension, Junko grimaced at Byakuya’s comment and sneered at him, “That’s not what I meant—!”

“Regardless, we need to exercise caution. After all, we know that we aren’t the only ones here in the school,” Kyoko reminded everyone, earning a few confused glances.

“Oh, right! That masked weirdo is still out there!” Hina suddenly realized, looking a bit ashamed. “I almost forgot about him…”

At the mention of the mysterious 16th individual, everyone tensed. The incident had occurred so many days ago that it had almost faded from memory. And while Kyoko had been secretly investigating that lead, she had uncovered very little. Apart from the hidden room she discovered in the second floor boy’s restroom, there was no hint of the masked figure to be found. And while it was possible that the masked attacker was the Mastermind, Kyoko’s intuition told her it couldn’t be that simple.

Regardless, with this information now fresh in everyone’s minds, the class’ worries only increased.

“We’ve been letting our guard down,” Sakura shamefully admitted, voicing what the entire group was thinking. “It’s quite possible that one of our classmates were attacked by the masked figure!”

“Then we need to hurry up and get to searching!” Makoto earnestly shouted, almost everyone rising to their feet in response. Seeing prepared to help, he smiled confidently. “Okay, so we need to decide where everyone’s gonna search.”

“Sayaka and I got the cafeteria covered!” Leon insisted, triumphantly smirking at the pop idol. “I have to take responsibility, after all!”

For a moment, Sayaka frowned at having her words thrown back at her. However, she obviously understood the gravity of their situation and knew that stubbornness would be pointless. Just then, a snide grin overtook her lips as she acquiesced, “Fine, but that means we’re gonna be cleaning up the kitchen.”

“…W-Wait, what?!?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? After all, I believe you made quite a mess while making breakfast. Plus, it’ll give us something to do while we wait,” the pop idol insisted…or more accurately subtly demanded.

Realizing he’d been duped once again, the baseball star begrudgingly accepted his fate. “…Alright, fine!”

“In that case, why don’t I stay and investigate the dorms?” Sakura proposed, glancing at Leon and
Sayaka. “Afterwards, I will meet up with the two of you and we can check on Mondo and Chihiro together.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Leon concurred, smiling confidently.

“Alright…but don’t take any risks,” Sayaka practically demanded, her visage hardening. Despite the brave face, the concern in her eyes was impossible to overlook. “And if you all happen to find someone, come and let us know right away.”

“Fine, then I will investigate the first floor, beginning with the gym,” Byakuya cut in, folding his arms and averting his gaze. “And unlike the rest of you, I won’t require an escort—”.

“T-That’s b-because I’ll be going w-with him!” Toko practically shouted, lustfully grinning at the Affluent Progeny. Instantly, he shot her a furious glare, making her flinch…but then shiver euphorically. “A-After all, we need to st-stay together to establish an a-alibi!”

Despite a disgusted expression, Byakuya was forced to acknowledge this arrangement. “Let me be perfectly clear. You are only coming along to provide an alibi for me. And you will stay out of my sight as much as possible. Understood?”

“Y-YES!” Toko emphatically shouted, a bit of drool running down her chin.

“Okaaay…now that that’s been decided, I think we should talk about the elephant in the room,” Junko spoke up, a worried but determined expression on her face. “If you encounter the masked weirdo, don’t try to fight them! Call for help and we’ll deal with them together!”

“Indeed,” Sakura concurred, unfolding her massive arms and clenching both fists. “If you find someone, friend or foe, be sure to call for the rest of us immediately.”

As everyone nodded in agreement, Kyoko found herself surreptitiously glancing at Junko. For some reason, the way the Fashionista had addressed the masked figure perturbed her. Until this point, almost everyone had been using male pronouns when speaking of the masked figure, but Junko chose to use a gender neutral pronoun. Perhaps it was nothing, but combined with her already suspicious behavior, Junko was unintentionally drawing attention to herself more and more with each passing day.

In the middle of her thoughts, said Fashionista abruptly offered, “Okay then, I’ll take the second floor!”

Sensing an opportunity, Kyoko quickly chimed in, “I’ll join you.”

Surprisingly, Junko seemed almost appreciative of her choice. It wasn’t that unexpected, considering they had worked together to guard Alter Ego the other night, but it still felt a bit awkward. Kyoko had noticed that Junko simultaneously trusted and distrusted her classmates, which only put the amnesiac girl further on guard. At the same time, her resourcefulness couldn’t be argued, so it made trusting the Fashionista a sensitive matter.

Regardless, this arrangement worked in Kyoko’s favor. She had planned to search the second floor anyway, considering only she knew of the hidden room and it would certainly need to be investigated again. And while she found Junko to be mildly trustworthy, the amnesiac girl didn’t feel comfortable telling her of the secret room…at least not yet.

“Cool, that covers the first two floors,” the Fashionista continued, glancing around at everyone else. “So, that leaves Makoto and Hina to check the third floor.”
“Right! Leave the third floor to us!” Hina shouted, wrapped her arm around Makoto’s shoulders and pulling him close.

“Y-Yeah!” Makoto concurred, fighting off a blush from the sudden physical contact. Quickly, the flush in his cheeks faded and he confidently proclaimed, “Be careful out there everybody! And be sure to watch each other’s backs!”

Collectively, the group of students nodded…except for one.

“Can we please more forward with this group therapy meeting? I would prefer to find the bodies before they grow cold,” Byakuya chastised, tapping his foot impatiently. Ignoring the furious glares of his classmates, he turned on a heel and headed for the door. “I suggest you all hurry as well.”

Without another word, the Togami Heir departed, with Toko eagerly nipping at his heels.

“Prick…” Junko muttered under her breath as he left. “But he’s got a point. We should all head out!”

“Very well,” Kyoko affirmed, moving to stand next to Junko. “We have our objectives. Let’s go.”

“Where the hell are they?” Celeste groaned as she lay flat on the floor. “That stupid meeting was supposed to have started an hour ago! They should have begun investigating already!”

As she whispered into the floor tiles, she fought back her seething anger. Anxiety wasn’t something she usually felt, but with so much riding on her plan going smoothly, even the Ultimate Gambler was feeling uneasy.

“There’s no need to be nervous,” she reaffirmed for herself, speaking in her usual accent to instill confidence. “I am sure they’re just running late. Everything is going according to plan. And by the end of the day… I will be free of this place.”

Her ability to ‘lie’ to herself truly was astounding. Even now, as anxiety and fear threatened to creep into her mind, her own words dispelled her doubts. It was a frightening talent, and one that would allow her achieve her dream… no matter the cost.

After all, any moment now those poor fools would come bursting in and see her in a state of ‘distress’. Then, she could initiate the second phase of her plan, building her own alibi while simultaneously ‘helping’ to solve the mystery of Taka’s, and later Hifumi’s, demise.

…But she couldn’t do that until someone came and ‘found’ her—!

As if on cue, Celeste heard the Rec Room door open. Despite the excitement that rose up in her, she maintained her perfect mask and pretended to be unconscious on the floor. For any moment now, whomever had entered would notice her, and their shock would be her cue to ‘awaken’. Footsteps approached her and given that they sounded close, she was fairly certain whomever was there had already seen her. More than likely it was Byakuya or Kyoko, as they would be some of the only students who could keep calm after finding a ‘body’.

Suddenly, the footsteps ceased. Celeste was instantly puzzled but dared not move. Too much was riding on her establishing an alibi here, and she wouldn’t let mere curiosity disrupt her plans to—

“M-Miss… Ludenberg…”
In an instant, Celeste’s perfect mask cracked as a familiar voice called out to her. Shooting her gaze up, she saw the very picture of horror.

Standing above her, fresh blood oozing down his face, stood Hifumi.

His eyes were dilated and he was struggling to breath, a hand resting on his blood-smeared head. Very slowly, he pulled that hand away, droplets of pink fluid dripping to the floor as he reached out to Celeste. Frozen in horror, the gambler’s eyes stared at the blood-stained hand growing close and closer to her face.

“H-Help…me…”

As the bloody appendage hung over her, a single drop of pink blood slipped from his fingertips… and collided with Celeste’s pale cheek. All at once, her perfect mask shattered, and a piercing scream echoed throughout the entire school.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Well, now that Celeste’s plan has begun to go awry, how will that effect the rest of her scheme? Will she be able to go through with her plot? Will she be discovered and by whom? Stay tuned for the next chapter to find out!

I am so sorry for the delay. I meant to get this chapter out MONTHS ago, but due to an unforeseen tragedy in my family, everything in my life was put on hold. Now, months later, I’m back to writing and I wanted to get this edited and posted as soon as I could. That being said, there may be typos or mistakes here and there, because editing was kind of rushed.

By the way, I wanted to say thank you to everyone who has reviewed or favorited recently. I’m happy to know that people are still enjoying my story, even with the inconsistent uploads. Also, to the Guest who left the most recent review: I’m glad you gave this fic a try and I assure you that you will get the sweet satisfaction you’re looking for! ;)

Beyond that, I wanted to let you know the DR: IF dubbing project is going smoothly! We’re in the process of getting all the lines recorded and I can’t wait to show you all the final product! By the way, for anyone interested in watching let’s plays, I’m doing a blind playthrough of “999”, another SpikeChunsoft game, on my youtube channel - hunterofcomedy.

Please leave a review/comment if you’re still enjoying the story or if you have any questions! Comments make my day, so don't be shy if you feel like saying anything! Until next time, keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Ch 3 Act 18

Chapter Summary

The rest of the class begins to search for their missing classmates. Later, Kyoko makes an interesting discovery... involving Junko.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I’m tellin’ ya! She was awake!” Mondo shouted as Taka stood over Chihiro’s sleeping form.

As he shouted, he wrapped a white bandage strip tightly around his forehead, the bleeding already beginning to subside. He seemed completely uninterested in his self-inflicted injury, focusing only on Chihiro’s condition.

“She was talkin’ to me and everything! Check her and see for yourself!”

“Volume!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted back, pointing an accusatory finger at the biker. “Must you be so loud! How is Chihiro supposed to rest with you screaming like that?!”

“You’re screaming too, asshat!” a desperate Mondo retorted before shaking his head and lowering his voice. “Whatever! Just make sure she’s okay!”

Being the Disciplinary Committee Chairman, he had minimal first aid training and didn’t know exactly what he should do, but he figured that checking a pulse and listening for breathing would be a good place to start. He pressed his ear to her chest and closed his eyes.

“…She breathing normally. And her heartbeat seems adequate,” he concluded, pulling away and staring at the peaceful expression on her face.

It was then he noticed something... something off about her expression. Perhaps he was just imagining it, but it almost seemed as though Chihiro was... smiling. From what he could remember, ever since she had lost consciousness, her face had remained neutral. She had remained unmoving... almost like a doll. But now, even if it was slight, Chairman Ishimaru could see a change in her condition.

“That... That doesn’t mean she’s awoken...” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru told himself, still struggling to believe his former friend’s claim. “However... there is also no proof that Mondo is lying. So... for now at least...”

Turning to face his classmate, Chairman Ishimaru narrowed his gaze and said, “She appears to be in a stable condition. I can’t be certain, but it seems that her condition has improved slightly...”

Hearing this, Mondo visibly breathed a sigh of relief, a light smile etching on his lips. Seeing that, something within Taka churned. Somehow, he felt angered by the biker’s relief, though even he couldn’t explain why. Because of that, he cleared his throat to get Mondo’s full attention.

“However, there is no proof that she has awoken. Therefore, it cannot be determined whether or not you were lying about her awakening. And until we have sufficient proof—”.
“Proof?! Why the fuck am I supposed to prove that she woke up?!” Mondo retorted, getting right in Taka’s face. “You said she was getting better and that means she should wake up soon, right?! So we’ll just wait here and ask her when she gets up!”

“Y-You fool!” a flabbergasted Taka sputtered. “We can’t simply sit around here waiting for her to awaken! She’s been unconscious for several days! And she could remain unconscious for several more—!”

“Oh yeah! Ya wanna bet!” the biker shouted, his pompadour pressing into Taka’s forehead. “We’ll do it like we did with the sauna! Just like old times! We’ll wait and see who leaves here first! And whoever does, loses!”

As the biker’s challenge echoed in his ears, every fiber of Taka’s being wanted to refute him.

He wanted to shout how unethical and pointless such a challenge was. He wanted to reprimand Mondo for even suggesting such a foolhardy thing. He wanted to uphold the school regulations and punish his friend for defying them. He wanted to keep his emotions under control and not give in to petty intimidation. He wanted to be a shining example of what following the rules and committing to excellence could be!

…but he did none of those things.

“Very well then! I accept your challenge!” he found himself shouting before he even knew what was happening. A look of shock enveloped his face as he registered his own words, as if an internal struggle was taking place. However, he pushed it away and finished, “However, in case of emergencies—”.

“EYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Before Taka could clarify the details of their challenge, an ear shattering scream echoed throughout the school. Both of the boys tensed as that unsettling voice rang out. Taka was the first to act, speeding toward the door and charging into the hallway. He quickly glanced around but saw no one. An instant later, Mondo joined him.

“W-What the hell was that?! Shouldn’t everyone be at the meeting?!” Mondo proclaimed, obviously having lost track of time. Just then, he noticed something immeasurably important. “Ha! You left the office first! I win!”

Taka’s head tilted to the side, shocked and slightly appalled by Mondo’s behavior. At the same time, he refused to let the biker’s comment slide!

“As I was trying to mention before the screaming! All bets are void in cases of emergencies, like the one we’re facing now!”

“…Whatever, man. I still won.”

Grunting in frustration, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman knew it was pointless to argue, especially considering the potential gravity of the situation. Glancing up at the clock, Chairman Ishimaru scowled as he noticed that it was well past 7AM. He’d been so distracted dealing with Mondo that he’d neglected to inform everyone he’d need to postpone the morning meeting. And though a bit of his soul died at that thought, even he had to admit that there were more pressing matters.
“No one should be outside of the cafeteria right now! After all, the morning meeting is vital to everyone’s survival!” Chairman Ishimaru scoffed, again perturbed that someone was violating school regulations. However, he quickly pushed that thought away and continued, “And if they are not at the meeting, something horrific may have befallen them!”

Mondo paled and clenched his fists as he said, “Dammit! Why did it have to be now?! Everything was just getting back to normal.”

Taka flinched at those words but said nothing, at least until he came to an important decision.

“Judging by how muffled the sound was, I believe the scream came from one of the upper floors!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru insisted, clenching his fists as the fire in his eyes grew more intense. “There is no time to waste! We must investigate—!”

“Taka!”

From behind him, a cacophony of footsteps accompanied a worried shout. Spinning around, he was relieved to see some of his classmate racing toward him, with Makoto leading the charge. Running next to him were Kyoko and Junko, followed swiftly by Hina.

“Is everything alright?! What happened?!” the lucky student asked as they approached, startled to see that the Disciplinary Chairman was accompanied by the biker.

Without thinking, Mondo abruptly shouted, “Chihiro woke up!”

A mixture of shock and relieve crossed all of their faces, with Makoto in particular sporting an incredibly hopeful visage. However, before any of them could revel in this announcement, Taka brazenly stepped forward.

“We don’t know that for sure!” he countered, earning disappointed stares from everyone. However, the white haired, blazing eyed Chairman paid them no heed as he continued, “She is resting now and there is no proof that she has awoken!”

Instantly, a look of fury overtook Mondo’s face. Clenching his jaw, the biker stomped toward the group until he stood before an entirely confused Junko. Then, without warning, his hand shot out and grasped her own, earning a startled gasp from the Fashionista.

“Junko! You know medical stuff, right?! Come check out Chihiro and prove that she woke up!”

Before he could utter a word, Mondo abruptly tugged her toward the Nurse’s Office. Junko stumbled as he forcefully pulled her, and she fumbled her words as she tried to comprehend his intention.

“W-Wait! Mondo! I can’t—!!”

Unfortunately, the biker paid her no mind as he marched toward the open office door. Just as Mondo crossed the threshold and took his first step into the office, he suddenly realized that something was missing. Before he could figure out what it was, a heavy force smashed into his back. He let out a startled shout as he flew forward, slamming face first into the floor with tremendous force.

Grunting from his now reddened face, Mondo spun around while still on the ground and glared up at…Junko?

Standing just outside the Nurse’s Office, her palm extended outward with her fingers slightly curled, Junko Enoshima took several deep breaths. A mixture of fear and anger marred her features as she slowly lowered her hand, clenching both hands into fists.
“What the hell were you thinking?!” she furiously shouted, her face flushed. “Are you trying to get me executed?!"

Confusion spread through Mondo for a moment before his eyes widened in realization.

“Oh fuck! That’s right! Shit, I’m…”

As he trailed off, he felt nothing but disgust for himself, having nearly gotten her killed. Then again, it would have been par for the course. First Daiya…then Chihiro…and now her. All of the people he respected…weren’t safe around him. Without thinking, he pounded his fist into the floor.

“Dammit, why do I always hurt the people I admire…?”

“W-What was that?”

A light gasp escaped Mondo as his gaze shot up to see Junko staring down at him, utter confusion visible on her face. Mondo’s face burned as he realized he’d said that last part out loud! Practically shooting up from the floor, the biker nervously readjusted his coat as he fought to regain composure.

“I-I didn’t say shit!” he immediately blurted, his voice far louder than before. “A-Anyway! Sorry I almost killed you—err, I mean! Sorry about grabbing your hand and jerking ya—gha…I’m just sorry alright?! Get off my back!”

Junko reared back a bit, startled by his sudden outburst. However, she still seemed pretty furious, considering her face was still noticeably red. Then, unexpectedly, she fired back, “I’ll get off your back when you chill the fuck out! Everybody’s counting on you to keep Chihiro safe and if you lose your cool then we’re all screwed! So, man the fuck up and stop apologizing!”

As the Fashionista shouted back at him, at a volume that rivaled his own, Mondo was stunned into silence. Not because of her loudness, but because, for the last few years, no one had ever dared to scream back at him. No one in his gang, and certainly not his classmates here. Hell, even back in juvie none of the guards had the stones to reprimand him.

And yet, this skinny little fashionista girl brazenly pushed back against him, with absolutely no fear in her eyes. It was almost like she thought…she could beat the crap of out him herself! You’d have to be completely nuts to think that a girl like her could take down a biker like him!

However, Mondo couldn’t deny that her tone…her strength…truly surprised him.

Not only that, without even knowing it, Junko had said exactly what he’d needed and wanted to hear. Her show of confidence in him, even after almost getting her unintentionally executed, was something he’d longed for, but would never admit. Not to mention that she wasn’t treating him like a child or insulting him by pitying his situation. Telling him to ‘man the fuck up’ was something he imagined Daiya would tell him. The only thing Junko didn’t do was clock him in the face the way Daiya used to when he screwed up…and he wasn’t sure if he wanted her to do that.

Regardless, before he’d even realized it, he’d hardened his features, doing exactly as Junko had told him. And she must have known it, because she was smirking at him almost triumphantly.

“I hate to interrupt this train-wreck of a scene,” a smugly familiar voice startled everyone, compelling them to turn and see Byakuya standing in front of the nearby stairwell, with Toko cowering just around the corner. “But there is a corpse to be found. Presumably where that bloodcurdling scream originated from.”

Without waiting for anyone to respond, the Togami Heir calmly turned and headed up the stairs,
Toko eagerly nipping at his heels.

“C-Corpse?!” Taka shouted in utter horror, his aura wavering for an instant. Whirling around and glaring at everyone, he shouted, “I demand to know what has transpired in my absence!”

“We don’t have time to explain!” Hina impatiently fired back. “Our friends are missing and we can’t—”

“If you don’t explain it all to me now, how am I expected to lead you all in our search?!” the Disciplinary Chairman angrily retorted. “As you said, time is of the essence, so explain it swiftly!”

Hina gritted her teeth and was about to shout something everyone would regret when Makoto stepped up. “Why don’t we explain on the way? That way, we can search and get you caught up at the same time?”

Anger radiated off Taka as he tried to retort, “But then I won’t be able to—!”

“I agree with Makoto, but we can at least give a brief summary,” Kyoko affirmed, barely acknowledging Taka before turning to stoically stare at him. “Three of our classmates are still missing. And we need to investigate that scream immediate—”.

“Wait, three?!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted in disbelief. “Who are we missing?! I note that many of our classmates are currently unaccounted for!”

Without missing a beat, Kyoko answered, “Hifumi, Celeste and Hiro. Only they failed to arrive for the morning meeting. Currently, we’ve split up to investigate, leaving Sayaka, Leon, and Sakura to secure the first floor while we search the others.”

His face twisting in disgust, Chairman Ishimaru angrily asked, “Are you saying that, without my presence, the morning meeting has fallen apart and we now may have a murder on our hands?!”

Kyoko’s calculating eyes glanced over to him before she gave an exasperated sigh and began walking toward the stairwell “There is no evidence to suggest that, even if you hadn’t missed the meeting, those three would have joined us. Besides, that’s not important right now.”

She was barely within earshot by the time she finished, already halfway up the stairs. Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru tensed at the severity in her voice, feeling as though he was begin challenged, which unsettled him. At the same time, however, he completely agreed with her.

“…Indeed! We must find our classmates and discover who was calling for help! Quickly everyone! To the upper floors!”

His blazing aura intensifying, the Disciplinary Chairman turned on a heel and speed walked toward the stairway. Makoto nervously laughed that, even in this time of crisis, Taka refused to run in the halls. It was something the lucky student admired about him, but simultaneously made him worry. After all, it would suck if you could only walk through the halls when an emergency occurred.

“I-I’ll stay here and keep watch over Chihiro,” Mondo almost apprehensively told everyone, before looking at Junko. “Do what we can and all that…right?”

A smirk appeared on Junko’s lips as she answered, “Right! Leave finding them to us! But if Chihiro wakes up, come and get us, alright?”

A momentary flush stained Mondo’s cheeks as he answered, “Deal.”
Not wasting any more time, Mondo watched as Makoto, Hina, and Junko headed for the upper floors. As the biker watched them go, he turned around and walked back into the Nurse’s Office. Closing the door, he took his usual seat beside Chihiro. However, unlike all the times before, instead of guilt plaguing his features, a warm smile decorated his lips.

“Chill the fuck out’…huh?” he quietly repeated Junko’s words to himself. “Been a long time since someone had the ball to tell me that…right, Big Bro Daiya?”

“EYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

Celeste’s delicate voice was torn asunder as her ear-piercing scream resounded through the halls of Hope’s Peak Academy. She could already tell her voice would be hoarse but at the moment, all that registered was unparalleled fear. Hifumi’s bloody hand was still reaching for her, the droplet of his blood on her cheek rolling down and passing over her lips. To her horror, she reflexively licked her lips, the copper taste of her classmate’s blood invading her mouth.

Instantly, she gagged and almost vomited, coughing furiously before her fearful eyes shot up to see Hifumi still reaching for her. Visibly trembling, she began to shake her head as his bloody appendage drew closer and closer. Scooting backwards to get away from him, she tensed when her back hit the wall, leaving her with nowhere to flee.

“N-NO! STAY BACK!” she screamed, true terror seeping in for the first time in her life.

Just then, her hand slid over something with a handle and she instinctively grasped it. Swiftly lifting it up, her eyes widened when she realized it was ‘Justice Hammer 1’, the mallet she’d left as ‘evidence’ for her classmates. Immediately feeling empowered, she grasped the handle with both hands and raised it high, gritting her teeth angrily as she prepared to strike.

“S-STAY AWAY! YOU FAT BASTARD!!”

Suddenly, Hifumi stopped, a bewildered look on his face. His bloody hand dropped to his side and his stubby legs wobbled as he stared at her, a look of betrayal in his dilated eyes.

“M-Miss L-Luden…berg…? W-Why…are you…?” he tried to say, struggling to keep upright.

Almost instantly, Celeste realized what she was doing, and the consequences of her rash actions dawned on her. If Hifumi hadn’t stopped himself, she would have clobbered him with the hammer…probably killing him. And in that situation, there would have been no way to convince the others that Hiro had been the one to kill the fanfic creator. Not with Hifumi’s blood on her face…and presumably her hands if she’d have actually struck him.

That would mean death…the death of her dream…and of herself…she couldn’t let that happen…not after all she’d done!

Forcing down all of her fears and doubts, Celeste managed to slowly lower the hammer, letting it slip from her grasp as she tried to calm her breathing. She was hyperventilating, sucking in ragged breaths as her heart beat faster than she’d ever thought possible. Celeste honestly couldn’t remember if she’d ever been as terrified as she’d been a moment ago. And it was that moment of weakness that almost cost her everything.

However, as she began to calm herself, she knew it was best to work on damage control as soon as possible. She needed Hifumi for her plan to succeed, and since something had obviously gone awry,
she needed to understand exactly how to rectify it. And that started with regaining any lost trust between her and Hifumi.

“I… I… apologize… Hifumi…” she barely managed to say, her accent slipping slightly. “I was… startled… and I…”

Before she could finish, Hifumi slouched forward. Celeste’s eyes widen as she saw his kneel buckle, his oversized body tumbling… directly toward her! Gasping fearfully, the gambler tried to scampers away but it was too late. Before she even moved an inch, Hifumi’s massive body collapsed right on top of her, his bleeding head landing directly next to her face.

His excessive weight smashed into Celeste’s lithe body, knocking the air from her lungs. Gasping for breath, she struggled to breathe as her co-conspirator’s large form practically crushed her. With so much weight pressing onto her chest, and by extension her lungs, no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn’t take a full breath. Both of her legs and one arm were pinned beneath Hifumi’s girthy body, prompting Celeste to try and claw her way out from under him with her free arm. Unfortunately, even with all her strength, she couldn’t budge an inch. Her vision started to blur from the lack of oxygen, her strength slowly giving out as she grew weaker.

“N-No… not like this…! I can’t… breathe! I don’t… want to… die… not like…!”

Suddenly, the door to the rec room burst open and a familiar voice resounded in her ears.

“Hifumi!” the voice called out, with a slight pause before shouting again, “And Celeste!”

Even in her dire state, Celeste recognized the voice of Makoto and, gathering the last of her strength, she frantically called out, “H-Help… me…!”

Makoto didn’t waste any time, calling out to someone still outside before rushing to her side and attempting to lift Hifumi off her. However, with his puny arms, he seemed incapable of even rolling the unconscious fanfic creator to the side, let alone get her out from under him. Fortunately, a few moments later, another familiar voice rang out.

“Celeste! Don’t worry! We’re here for you!” Hina shouted, rushing over and assisting Makoto with trying to free the pinned gambler. “Hrruh! Just… gah… hold on… ugh… a bit longer…!”

Through their combined efforts, they managed to lift Hifumi enough to allow Celeste to at least take a deep breath, her lungs burning from the lack of oxygen. And while she was still effectively pinned beneath the fanfic creator’s massive form, she could at least breathe easily. That is, until a voice she never anticipated echoed throughout the room.

“Hifumi! Cease this blatant sexual harassment this instant! If you do not, I will be forced to take authoritative action!”

An expression of pure horror overtook Celeste’s face as she turned to see Taka standing over her, very much alive.

Upon reaching the second floor, Taka volunteered to help search the third floor with Makoto and Hina. Once they were gone, Kyoko had offered to search the classrooms, since they noticed Byakuya and Toko were already investigating the library, which left the pool for Mukuro to search.

“Dammit… what the hell is wrong with me?”
Mukuro’s mind raced as she walked along the edge of the pool, glancing at the water as she made her way down to the far end. It was a long walk, which suited her just fine, because she needed time alone to think. Despite several minutes passing, Mukuro’s heart continued to beat furiously, and she could feel that her face was slightly flushed.

“Adrenaline…it has to be. I’m still frazzled from countering Mondo…that’s all.”

When Mondo had suddenly grabbed her hand, and dragged her toward the Nurse’s Office, she’d panicked. And while she’d made sure to hold back, she still sent Mondo flying like a rag doll. Sad thing was, that was just a love tap, something meant just to push back an attacker. She never realized just how much force she’d been putting behind what she’d considered a light hit. Honestly, she’d worried she may have injured Mondo, but was relieved when he’d stood up so quickly.

But then…what he said caught her completely off-guard.

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“Dammit, why do I always hurt the people I admire…?”

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For some reason, Mondo’s words made her adrenaline pump and her body tingle with heat. She’d felt a hint of it when he’d grabbed her hand…which she noticed was rather gentle for such a strong biker like Mondo. And to top it all off, that weird pressure in her chest had returned! It only happened when someone like Makoto, Sayaka, or Mondo said or did something nice for her.

Reaching the opposite end of the pool, she leaned against the sole locker that occupied the area at the far end of the room. She took a deep breath to try and steady herself, but her heart continued to pound furiously in her chest.

“What…the hell is this?!” she said aloud, gripping her chest as she struggled to understand this feeling. “Why can’t I…just figure out what’s causing it?!”

Shaking her head, she retracted her hand from her chest and stared at it, remembering the warmth of Mondo’s hand as he’d tugged her along. Why was that…such a pleasant memory? It should have been horrifying! He’d almost gotten her killed! And yet…all she could feel was that weird chest pressure that she desperately wanted to understand!

“Dammit…I don’t have time for this!” she reminded herself as did her best to suppress that weird pressure. “Three people are missing! I should be more concerned about them!”

Balling her hand into a fist, she slammed it into the locker with tremendous force, enough to leave a noticeable dent. Strangely, at the same instant her fist indented the metal, a loud and terrified shriek came from within the locker.

“GHAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

Instantly on guard, Mukuro leapt back and readied herself, but almost immediately, the scream turned into a furious flurry of pleas.

“H-Hey! Is someone there?! I’m stuck in here and I can’t see!” a familiar voice called out.

Raising an eyebrow, Mukuro carefully answered, “…Hiro? Is that you?”

“T-That sounds like…Junko?! Are you there, Junko?! What are you doing here?! Scratch that, what
Still cautious that it could be a trap, Mukuro carefully made her way around to the front of the locker. She glanced around the area, noting of any hiding places someone might be waited to ambush her from, but found none. It was a very open area and the locker would have been the only place to stage a surprise attack from. Well, there was always the possibility that someone might descend from the room, and even though that was unlikely, the soldier still found herself glancing up and checking the crossbeams far above her head.

Once convinced that an ambush from anywhere other than the locker was impossible, the soldier prepared herself just in case Hiro tried to attack her the moment she opened the locker door. Clenching both hands into fists so tight her knuckles popped, Mukuro carefully gripped the locker door handle and swung open the locker…only to be utterly confused by what she found.

Stuffed into the locker was a blue, red, and golden gundam-looking robot suit. It was so tall and bulky that it was conceivable that Hiro might be hidden beneath the strange cosplay. Just to be sure, Mukuro raised an eyebrow and called out, “…Hiro? That you?”

“Well of course it’s me!” a perturbed Hiro insisted, wiggling a bit and proving that he truly was trapped inside. Not only was he stuck in the suit, it seemed that he was unable to pull himself out of the locker.

“Yeah…it’s not that apparent where I’m standing,” Mukuro condescendingly replied, but believed him either way. “How the hell did you end up in there?”

“No idea! I went to meet everyone in the Rec Room like that message said, and the next thing I know, I’m trapped in here!”

“Wait…message? What message?” Mukuro asked, her voice deadly serious. She had a bad feeling, and considering her instincts had never failed her before, she knew it was wise to be worried. “I never got any kind of message…”

“You didn’t? That weird…I figured that everyone must have gotten them. Maybe you just lost yours? After all, it was an important message telling us that someone found…a…way out…of the…school…” Hiro trailed off, only now realizing how foolish he sounded. With an aggravated groan, he protested, “Oh crap! Someone tricked me! How could they do this to me?!”

“Easily by the sound of it…” Mukuro whispered under her breath before a sudden realization dawned on her. “Wait…so someone attacked and stuffed you in this locker?”

“Yeah! They must have! I didn’t stuff myself in here, that’s for sure!”

Mukuro’s face darkened as she asked, “And you have no idea who did it?”

“…Nope.”

“…Shit,” Mukuro cursed, gritting her teeth as pieced together what was really going on. “Hiro, stay in here and keep quiet! I’m going to get everyone!”

“Wait, what—?!”

Hiro’s protests were cut off when Mukuro slammed the locker door shut and took off running. She didn’t care who saw her, or if they questioned how she was able to run so competently in heeled boots. All that matter now was she finding her classmates and warning them…but then again…
“It may already be too late!” Mukuro seethed as she sped through the locker room and out into the hallway.

“All alone in the hidden room located in the 2nd floor boy’s restroom, the amnesiac girl had spent hours poring over all the files left there. Unfortunately, even after reading each and every book and file, she still didn’t have enough information to conclude how or why the Mastermind had put the killing game together. And while the Mastermind had been upfront about their desired outcome, it was hard to believe that someone intelligent enough to put this all together would be after something as abstract as despair. There had to be a deeper reason for the Mastermind to organize the deaths of Hope’s Peak’s newest class.

“I’ll need to investigate further,” Kyoko told herself as she headed for the exit. “For now, I should get back to the search.”

Initially, she hadn’t intended to spend any time in the hidden room. However, she considered that another of her classmates might have unintentionally discovered the room, and possibly utilized it to cover their tracks. After all, it was a great place to hide evidence...or a body. Luckily for everyone, the room was just as she’d left it last time, and she decided to finish her investigation of the room now. And considering that the Mastermind had more than likely noticed her coming and going from a bathroom of the opposite gender, she knew it was a matter of time before they took action.

As she closed the hidden entrance, she resolved not to let her classmates know of its existence. The less of them who knew, the better. A hidden room would only inspire the more ambitious of her classmates if they ever chose to play by Monokuma’s rules. After all, there were various uses for a hidden room that was completely off camera. And she didn’t know or trust her classmates enough to let them know of its existence.

“Perhaps...one of these days...I may feel comfortable to inform the others. But at the moment, there are very few I can trust with this discovery...”

Strangely, as she thought that, Makoto’s face flashed in her mind. She paused as she briefly considered if Makoto was trustworthy enough to share this secret with. It was true that she found his naïve optimism a tad bit inspiring. However, she could not discount the fact that he was too optimistic. He believed that everything was going to work out in the end, and if their occasional interactions had taught her anything, it was that he truly believed in all of his classmates.

Honestly, she admired him for that...because it was something she just wasn’t capable of doing. However, Makoto was too open...too easy to read. And sharing such valuable information with someone so...vulnerable, was too disconcerting for her to approve of.

After all, she had been raised not to—

“Argh!” she groaned as intense pain gnawed at her skull. “Dammit...every time I get close...”

Like many times over the past couple of weeks, whenever she got close to remembering something, anything about her past, a nearly unbearable agony would befall her. Sometimes, if she tried too hard to recall something, no matter how insignificant, she would be left with a migraine for several hours.
Oddly enough, it was times like these that Makoto often appeared before her, asking if she wanted to chat or simply hang around her in silence. Most of the time, they ended up staying quiet around each other. But sometimes…she found herself chatting with him about silly things. She almost smiled when she remembered how she’d tricked him into believing he’d embarrassed her that time he’d called her cute. She completely turned the tables on him, earning a blush that she only believed existed in manga. Not to mention…she wasn’t offended if he truly did find her to be…cute.

However, she was warry of opening herself up to him too much. She didn’t want to go through the pain of being hurt by someone she trusted…not ever again. And that was exactly why she’d chosen not to tell even Makoto about the hidden room. Trust was something to be earned and while Makoto certainly had earned her respect…her trust was something far more difficult to obtain.

With those lingering thoughts in her mind, she emerged from the boy’s restroom and prepared to continue her search for her classmates when she turned, just in time for Junko to come barreling into her.

“Deep breaths, Celeste! Deep breaths!” Hina instructed her friend the instant they managed to pry her from underneath their overweight classmate.

“Quickly, Makoto! Go and fetch everyone! This matter needs to be addressed as swiftly as possible!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru ordered, not giving the lucky student the luxury of refusing.

Fortunately, Makoto seemed pleased with that task and immediately answered, “Right! I’ll go get everyone! Be right back!”

He quickly sped out of the room, leaving Hina, Celeste, and Taka alone with an unconscious Hifumi.

Despite being out from under the landwhale that was Hifumi, Celeste was still panting heavily, her lungs greedily taking in as much air as the school’s purifier could create. Plus, Hina incessant shouting was doing her no favors.

“Celeste! What happened to you?! Why were you up here?! And why was Hifumi on top of you?! And all bloody?!” Hina practically screamed, desperate for information.

In almost any other situation, the swimmer’s concerns would have been encouraging. However, because of her now precarious position, all Celeste could feel was panic. And that was the least of her worries!

“How the fuck is he still alive?! Everything should have been settled HOURS ago! Hifumi royally screwed the pooch on this one! He was supposed to smash this bastard’s brains in! Not get his
Slowly, Celeste’s eyes panned over to the unconscious Hifumi next to her. Taking a good look at him for the first time since he’d stumbled in front of her, the gambler struggled to keep her perfect mask from shattering.

“If…If Hifumi didn’t attack Taka…it means that…someone else attacked Hifumi! Shit! Someone besides me was planning a murder?! But who the hell would it be?! Hell, it could be anyone! Dammit! This ruined EVERYTHING!”

Her carefully laid plan, her perfect alibi, the most opportune targets…everything she’d worked so hard for was slipping from her grasp right in front of her! No! This couldn’t be happening! She couldn’t let this happen! Even if there was another ambitious bastard out there messing with her plan, she couldn’t afford to give up yet!

“You have to play out your gamble to the very end! Because until it’s all over, you never know what might happen!” she mentally shouted, having to remind herself of the most basic rule of gambling.

Clearing her mind as much as possible, Celeste mentally checked off all that needed to accomplish:

She needed to establish an alibi, somehow convince Hifumi or some other unfortunate soul to meet her in the Repository, strike a killing blow, and then slip back into the crowd without being noticed. Simple…well, actually, it wasn’t so simple…Hell, nothing was simple anymore!

Her illustrious plan was in shambles! Especially with another potential murder in her midst! Honestly, how could she have predicted that someone would attack Hifumi before he could murder Taka?! No way the Mastermind would interfere with her plans, right? So it had to be another student…but who the hell could it be?! No one should have known about their plan! Not to mention that it was too much of a coincidence for Hifumi to be attacked at such a critical time! Had someone overheard them and was using her plan to stage their own murder?!

Dammit, she’d need to sort that out later! Right now, she needed to focus on securing her alibi more than anything…but how the fuck was she supposed to do that?!

“Think dammit! Think! There has to be a way to salvage this! I’ve come too far…done too much for this opportunity to be taken from me! I’ll never get another chance at this! It’s now or never! But…what the hell am I supposed to do?! How am I supposed to explain all of this?! I don’t even have a way to set up a proper alibi—!”

As if answering her desperate plea, an unexpected ally appeared to give Celeste the second chance she desired.

“A-Are you serious?!” Hina questioningly asked, obviously not believing the crazy Taka was spouting. “It looks more like someone attacked both of them! Why else would Celeste be so beat up and Hifumi so bloody?! They’re obviously the victims here!”

Even in her frantic state of mind, Celeste could recognize an opportunity. If such an honest and trustworthy individual such as Hina vouched for her, it would lend credence to her alibi. And since there was no one who could truly refute her claims, Celeste’s claims about being attacked by a mysterious stranger in an odd costume would become the truth that all of her classmates would have to believe! Hina had unwittingly aided her in her time of greatest need! And thanks to that…there was still a chance…a chance for her to use this newfound chaos to her advantage and execute a modified version of her original scheme.
Before she could interject, however, Chairman Ishimaru scoffed loudly, silencing everyone.

“Obviously, someone cannot see the forest through the trees!” the white haired, blazing eyed Hall Monitor countered, as if they were in a class trial. “The scoundrel, Hifumi, was attempting to sexually assault Miss Ludenberg and she was forced to retaliate with the weapon that Hifumi brought with him! However, he overpowered her and was in the midst of assaulting her when—!”

“T-That is not what happened!” Celeste abruptly spoke up, desperately trying to salvage her shattered plan. “Hifumi and I…we were attacked by a strange individual!”

“A strange individual, you say?” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru skeptically repeated, narrowing his burning eyes at her. “And what proof do you have that such an individual exists?! Surely you don’t believe we can just take your word for it! Not after you’ve clearly violated the nighttime regulation that you yourself put into effect!”

“Hey! Are you calling her a liar?!” Hina immediately countered, a determined visage settling on her face.

Seeing such dedication made Celeste feel the tiniest bit guilty for using Hina this way, but it wasn’t enough for her to reconsider her plan. Not with such a perfect setup…

“It is fine…Hina,” Celeste calculatedly answered, shaking her head dramatically. “I know…it would have been hard for me to believe too…if I had not seen it with my own eyes. But…I do have proof…”

“You do?!” a surprised Hina shouted.

“You do?” a skeptical Taka questioned.

Her confidence finally returning, Celeste reached into her pocket and pulled out the small digital camera she’d gotten from Hifumi.

“I took a picture of the culprit as he attacked Hifumi,” she explained, earning the desired level of shock from both of them. “Here, let me…show…”

As she spoke, she pressed the power button, but nothing happened. Pressing her thumb down again and again on the power button, she was horrified when it refused to turn on. Growing frustrated, and a bit fearful, she held the power button in a desperate attempt to power on the camera. Just as her breath hitched in her throat and panic began to set in…a little red light came on.

Breathing a heavy sigh of relief, she resumed her confident visage and said, “Here, allow me to show you the mysterious stranger that attacked Hifumi and myself.”

Turning the camera around, so that Taka could see the screen, she pushed the playback button and heard the camera click, obviously bringing up the photo of Hifumi being ‘attacked’ by Hiro in the Robo Justice suit. She watched as Taka narrowed his eyes at the screen, and she fought to keep herself from smirking.

“You see? This is proof that—”

“I don’t see anything…” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru cut her off, raising an eyebrow at the camera. “Did you forget to take the lens cap off or something? It’s pitch black.”

As his words hit her, Celeste flinched and retracted the camera, turning it around to see the screen herself. To her utter horror, just as Taka had claimed, only blackness encompassed the screen.
Leaning closer to it, the gambler gasped as she noticed a deep crack in the screen.

"N-No!" she couldn’t stop herself from proclaiming, momentarily losing her accent. “It was here! It was right fucking here!”

She double checked that the power was on, and that she’d pressed the right button to bring up the photo. However, just as she’d feared, the crack on the screen completely obscured the picture. And without the camera to back up her claims…

“Nothing…I’ve got fucking nothing!” she mentally screamed, panic settling back into her mind. “Everything hinged on that god-damn picture! How could this happen?! How did this piece of crap get broken—Oh fuck!”

Immediately, she figured it all out. Useless, stupid, worthless Hifumi’s massive weight must have cracked the camera when he fell on her! She hadn’t felt it when she’d been pinned under him, so she never imagined that it might have been damaged!

“Dammit! Is there nothing that fat piece of lard can do right?!” she inwardly flared, trying to find a solution to a problem she’d never anticipated. “Lie. That’s all I can do now. Lie and pray they fucking believe me!”

“I-It must have broken when Hifumi collapsed onto me!” she immediately insisted, earning a skeptical glare from Taka. “It’s the truth! After I was attacked by a strange man in a robot costume —!”

“Enough! Stop spouting nonsense!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru silenced her, infuriating and terrifying her at the same time. “I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing but it’s obvious you’re up to no good! How are we to know that you didn’t attack Hifumi yourself and that you’re not just playing the victim?!”

Celeste flinched, gritting her teeth as she realized she had no way to ‘prove’ her innocence. Not to mention that Taka was slowly catching onto how suspicious she actually was. Sure, he hadn’t pieced together the fact that he was her intended victim, but it was only a matter of time before she was interrogated by everyone! And with the likes of Kyoko and Makoto investigating, there was no way her failed plan wouldn’t be exposed!

“I’ve lost…I have nothing. It’s literally my word against everyone else’s. Do I…Do I have no other choice than to…fold—?”

“How DARE you!”

As that furious shout echoed in the small room, both Celeste and Taka slowly turned to see an infuriated Hina glaring furiously at the Disciplinary Chairman. With a fiery determination unlike anything either of them had seen, the swimmer stomped over to Taka and instantly began shouting.

“You heartless jerk! How could you accuse her of such a thing when she’s obviously the victim?! She injured for heaven’s sake! And all you can think about is how guilty she must be?! Your warped sense of justice is so infuriating! You can’t just go around accusing people of attacking someone else! Especially when there’s NO proof that Celeste did ANYTHING!”

Celeste’s jaw practically dropped as Hina came to her defense, having never seen the swimmer get so furious about anything ever before. It was like watching a tame house cat transform into a ferocious lion! And Celeste wasn’t the only one startled by her sudden ferocity. Taka was also stunned into silence by Hina’s fervent shouts. The Disciplinary Committee Chairman was completely
helpless as she continued to lay into him.

“If Celeste says that she was attacked by a weirdo in a robot costume, then I believe her! She’s been a lot more helpful to everyone than you have the last few days and I won’t let you badmouth her like that for no reason! So instead of blaming her for your lack of integrity, why don’t you focus on trying to find who it was that attacked her and Hifumi, MR. DISCIPLINARY CHAIRMAN?!”

A heavy silence enveloped the room as Hina made her point crystal clear. Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru was speechless by her sudden shift in attitude, even his intimidating aura weakened in response to the swimmer’s resolve. Huffing angrily at him, Hina turned her attention back to Celeste, flashing her a friendly smile.

“We need to get you two cleaned up,” she said sweetly, extending her hand out toward the gambler. “Here, let me help you.”

No matter how hard she tried, Celeste couldn’t remove the surprised expression from her face. Never in a million years did she expect someone to have such faith in her, especially considering her usual persona. People were always skeptical of her, and for good reason. The gambler often exuded an air of superiority and even she knew that some of her lies were too fantastical to believe. Honestly, who would buy into the idea of Russian Roulette Mahjong? Or that she never lost a single match her entire life! Sure, it sounded plausible, given her talent, but most intelligent people could see that her claims were sometimes exaggerated. Not all of them…but some of them.

And that’s why, as Hina smiled down at her, blindly believing the lie that would eventually lead to her own demise, for the first time in years…Celeste felt a twinge of guilt creeping into her soul. However, true to her deceptive nature, she easily convinced herself it didn’t exist…

“She…she believes me? Even though I’m obviously the most suspicious here? Even though I could be lying to her? That’s…unexpected, but it works out well for me! Her blind faith should be enough to convince the others of my innocence. Maybe not all of them, but certainly the majority. And that’s all I need.”

Almost instantly, Celeste’s calculative mind reorganized and began configuring how to acclimate to this new information.

“Stupid girl…she’s leading herself to her own death! How can she be so trusting? I always knew she was a naïve idiot…but I never imagined…she’d have such faith in me of all people!”

Despite the disruption to her meticulously thought-out plan, Celeste easily recognized that her situation was changing, and for the better. Things were finally turning back into her favor, and with such a devoted friend like Hina—”.

“F-Friend? Why the hell would I consider a pawn like her a friend?! I don’t! She’s just a tool…a tool to be thrown away once I’m finished with it! Just like everyone else here! Besides…I don’t have any need for friends! All I need is my castle!”

As Celeste mentally shouted at herself, clearing away her own doubts, she put on a pleasant smile and gently took Hina’s hand.

“Thank you, Hina. But we must see to Hifumi immediately. He is badly injured,” she suddenly shifted the conversation, which in turn helped draw suspicion away from herself.

Almost like she’d planned it, Makoto abruptly returned, with Sakura as reinforcements.

“H-Hey guys! I brought Sakura!” he frantically announced, obviously hoping he’d recruited the right
“Celeste! What has happened to you?!” the Ultimate Fighter exclaimed, worry spreading over her features. As she spied her friend’s ruffled appearance and tired visage, her expression shifted to protective anger. “Who did this to you?! Tell me, who was it that attacked you?!”

“W-We do not know as of yet!” Taka abruptly reentered the conversation, finally snapping out of the daze Hina had forced him into. “All we can say is that someone has betrayed us! And I guarantee you, when we find them…they will be severely punished!!”

It was only for a split second, but as he finished his speech, his eyes flicked toward Celeste. Pretending not to notice, the gambler slowly approached Sakura and answered her.

“I am fine, Sakura. Thank you for your concern,” she swiftly answered before glancing down at Hifumi again. “But I fear that Hifumi is still in danger. We need to get him to the Nurse’s Office as quickly as possible.”

A frustrated grunt escaped Sakura as she realized she would be required to carry Hifumi massive form. However, it seemed that having to transport her classmate wasn’t the only thing that displeased her.

“Very well, but please answer me this. Do you know the identity of your attacker?” Sakura said, wasted no time in pursuing the truth. “Was it the masked attacker Hina and I encountered a few days ago?”

Celeste inwardly grimaced as she suddenly remembered that a mysterious individual was among them. Perhaps that was even the person who’d attacked Hifumi and disrupted her plans. Either way, it was another element she hadn’t accounted for…but she could use to her advantage.

“I…I am not sure,” she hesitated on purpose, playing the victim as much as possible. “All I can say is that, whomever it was had to be a suspicious character indeed.”

“Suspicious character? What do you mean by that?” Sakura pursued, still trying to wrap her head around what was happening.

As everyone hung on her ever word, and waited for her to explain, Celeste felt overwhelming confidence overtake her. And with that newfound determination, she decided it was best to direct everyone in a way that would benefit her the most.

“I shall explain, but I suggest we do it while transporting Hifumi to the Nurse’s Office. We can also gather everyone and explain the situation to them at the same time,” she instructed, knowing that no one had a reason to object at this point.

“B-But…” Makoto abruptly interjected, much to her fury and surprise. “Only Mondo’s allow into the Nurse’s Office right now! How are we going to treat Hifumi without being able to go inside?!”

Celeste slightly tensed as she realized she’d forgotten that tid bit of information. Fortunately, he luck hadn’t run out quite yet…

“That’s a good point…” Hina concurred, pondering the best course of action. “We could always carry the supplies out of the office and into the hall—”.

“Out of the question! We cannot block the hallway just because we have an injured student!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru immediately intervened, his frightful aura returning in full force. His disconcerting attitude toward their classmate’s plight sparked several glares,
particularly from Sakura and Hina.

However, before anyone could refute him, he continued, “Therefore, I declare a state of emergency! As such, anyone shall be allowed in and out of the Nurse’s Office for the time being! Once everything has been resolved we can discuss reinstating the ban on the Nurse’s Office if necessary! Now then, let us find our classmates and reconvene in the Nurse’s Office post haste!”

A collective look of shock overtook everyone’s face as Taka made that declaration. And out of all of them, only Makoto, driven by hopeful excitement, found his voice.

“A-Are you serious?! That’s great, Taka! Thanks—!”

“I told you before, do not call me Taka!” the Ultimate Moral Compass interjected, instantly reducing Makoto’s sunny disposition. “You will address me as Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru! Now hurry and find the others! I want to have this matter settled before then of the day!”

And with that, Chairman Ishimaru stormed out, presumably heading for the Nurse’s Office. As he left, Celeste barely managed to hold in a low growl.

“Bastard! I lost my chance to kill him and now everything gotta be adjusted! Why couldn’t whoever attacked Hifumi have done it after Taka was bludgeoned!”

Completely oblivious to Celeste’s internal seething, Makoto’s cheery disposition returned and he nervously said, “Well…at least we can all go into the Nurse’s Office again. Even if its only for a little while…”

“We should check in on Chihiro while we’re taking care of Hifumi!” Hina added, a bright smile returning to her face. “Won’t that be great, Celeste?”

Snapping out of her anger fueled trance, the gambler only barely registered what Hina had said, and so she eagerly smiled and said, “O-Of course…that will be…grand.”

“I don’t mean to push you,” Sakura softly chimed in, having already lifted Hifumi and slung him over her shoulder. “But would you mind explaining how you came to be attacked? I’m eager to see if we can find the culprit.”

That question reminded Celeste that she still had quite a bit of work ahead of her, and so she nodded softly and began explaining as they all left the Rec Room.

“You see…I awoke early and could not sleep this morning, so I decided to come here to read a magazine. And that is when I encountered…the suspicious individual…”

Kyoko was caught almost completely off-guard when Junko appeared out of nowhere and crashed into her.

The Fashionista had been looking the other way, and obviously hadn’t seen Kyoko appear in front of her. Even as they collided, Kyoko noted that Junko must have been running quite fast, because the force of their bodies colliding sent her reeling back, to the point that she lost her balance. Just as she mentally prepared herself to fall backward onto the floor, a firm grip tugged at her sleeve.

To Kyoko’s shock, she stopped falling and was even pulled back into an upright position. Her sharp eyes shot to her sleeve, seeing a feminine hand gripping her arm. Following it back to its owner, the
amnesiac girl held in a startled gasp as she saw Junko holding onto her. However, it wasn’t merely the fact that the Fashionista had prevented her fall that shocked Kyoko…

“Sorry about that, Kyoko…” she immediately apologized, carefully retracting her hand, and brushing off the other girl’s sleeve. “I was in too much of a hurry. You okay?”

“In a manner of speaking…” was all Kyoko could answer as numerous red flags danced in her mind. Instinctively, her brain took in all of the evidence in front of her…

“She’s not phased at all, even after colliding head on. She managed not only to keep her own balance, but to hold me upright as well. She not out of breath, even though she was running at a high speed for presumably a good distance. And…that expression…”

It took all Kyoko had not to react to the expression on Junko’s face…it was completely neutral. Not a hint of emotion, nor even the slightest bit of personality was visible. It was like looking at a wall; an immovable, impenetrable surface—one that wouldn’t crack even if you struck it with a sledgehammer. And her eyes…the sky-blue irises that usually shone brightly…had turned steely gray…as if nothing existed behind them.

As she took in her classmate’s visage, Kyoko felt an odd sensation welling up inside her.

Fear…

In this moment, Kyoko Kirigiri was absolutely terrified. And even more horrific…was that she couldn’t comprehend why. She knew that something about Junko’s expression frightened her, but she honestly couldn’t understand why. More to the point, how did she know to be fearful of such an expression? It was like an instinct, something buried deep down in her subconscious was telling her to be afraid. And even though she often acted as though she was emotionless, in truth, Kyoko was simply skilled at maintaining her composure.

She had felt fear many times since arriving at this school, and she hadn’t minded that. After all, fear was proof that one’s imagination was still functioning. Feeling fear wasn’t a sign of weakness, it was a sign that you were still alive, and able to comprehend the dangers surrounding you.

However…this fear, the slight trembling in her arms, the staggered breath she quietly breathed, it was unlike any other she’d experienced before. All of her senses were on high alert, and it was all due to that expression Junko was wearing.

More than likely, the Fashionista wasn’t even aware she was broadcasting such a visage. If she had been, there was no way she’d let anyone see it. Because it was an expression that most people would instantly recognize…

“The face…of a murderer…” Kyoko found herself thinking, not caring why she knew that information. “I’ve seen it before…I don’t know where…or when…but I know I’ve seen this expression before—!”

Suddenly, without any warning or provocation, Junko expression abruptly brightened. It was so swift that Kyoko barely had time to react, let alone draw more conclusions.

“Jeez, I’m such an idiot! I got so focused that I didn’t bother see where I was going!” Junko explained, obviously embarrassed about what had transpired.

Her eyes shone brilliantly, and a troubled but recognizable expression settled onto her face. It was like a switch had flipped, transforming Junko back into the person Kyoko had believed her to be. And even more unsettling…was that Kyoko’s fear dissipated with that neutral expression.
All of the fear and anxiety she’d held a moment ago…completely vanished. Almost like it had never been there. More than anything, *that* unsettled the amnesiac girl. Reverting back to her usual expression *shouldn’t* have clear Kyoko of her fears. After all, she still vividly recalled the horrifying visage Junko had only moments ago been broadcasting. By all accounts, she should still be fearful, having finally seen a glimpse of Junko’s true face and now *knowing* that the Fashionista was hiding something.

However, she felt absolutely no fear of the Fashionista. Even as she graphically remembered those eyes that brought unparalleled fear to her being, now that Junko’s expression had softened, Kyoko couldn’t feel even a hint of those frightened emotions…and she didn’t like that one bit.

“*Just who in the world are you, Junko Enoshima?* Kyoko mentally asked. “*No…the more appropriate question is…What are you?*”

Despite her uneasiness, Kyoko managed to reign in her emotions, practically forcing herself to think clearly.

“I *know* that searching for our missing classmates is important. However, unraveling this mystery has to come first,” she told herself, fighting back her apprehension as she continued to calculate.

As unsettling as this encounter had been, Kyoko also realized how fruitful it was. Her suspicions had been semi-confirmed, and she now knew that Junko was hiding something potentially dangerous from everyone. And even if it wasn’t directly connected back to their situation, there was no way Kyoko could turn a blind eye to what she’d seen.

“I *can’t* ignore my suspicions any more. Junko is absolutely hiding something. Whether it’s connected to our being here or not, remains unclear. Either way, I *need* to confront her. The question is…what’s the best way to do that?”

As she pondered, Junko took that chance to speak up. “So, I’m really sorry about running into you but forget that for a second!” she practically shouted, her voice showcasing a hint of anxiety.

In the midst of Junko’s fervently apologized, Kyoko surreptitiously glanced around until her eyes focused on the boy’s restroom.

Immediately, a plan formed in Kyoko’s mind. A dangerous plan…one that could cost her life if she wasn’t careful. However, if she didn’t take this risk…she might lose the only lead she’d come across since she began investigating the school. And so…even though it was risky…even though she was fearful of the outcome…Kyoko decided followed her instincts and said:

“Junko, there’s something you need to see…”

“*Dammit…I really need to watch where I’m going!*” Mukuro scolded herself as she apologized to Kyoko for nearly knocking her over. “*Well, whatever. I found someone. Now I can tell her about Hiro!*”

“So, I’m really sorry about running into you but forget that for a second!” she insisted, her earlier determination returning. “*Listen, when I was—!*”

“Junko,” the amnesiac detective cut her off, much to her surprise. “…There’s something you need to see…”
A hint of perplexion decorated Mukuro’s face as she absorbed her classmate’s words. “Something I need me to see?” she repeated Kyoko’s words carefully. “Did you find the others?”

Shaking her head, the amnesiac detective answered, “No…but I uncovered something incredibly interesting during my search.”

Kyoko’s stern tone immediately silenced the disguised soldier. Mukuro knew that, even with her memories erased, there was no way to wipe away her classmate’s detective instincts. And if Kyoko had found something she considered to be vital, then there was no way she could ignore it.

“...Hiro’s fine in the locker. I’ll tell Kyoko about it once she’s finished telling me what she’s found,” Mukuro reasoned with herself, putting on a startled visage to avoid rousing suspicion.

“R-Really?! What is it?!” she fervently asked, her enthusiasm surprisingly genuine.

“Follow me…” Kyoko said swiftly, before turning and heading directly toward the boy’s restroom! Mukuro couldn’t stop the look of genuine excitement that overtook her.

“No way...She found it! I don’t know how but she managed to find the archive room! Yes! This is exactly what we need right now!”

Despite the overwhelming surge of positive emotions, Mukuro somehow managed to hold it all in as she let Kyoko lead her into the restroom. Once inside, she knew she needed to keep up appearances, plastering on a confused expression.

“Uh…you know that we’re not allowed in here, right?” she sarcastically chided, hoping she was keeping her true thoughts from showing. “Although it kinds feels nice to break the rules like this. Imagine what Taka would say if he could see us now—”.

“Back here...” Kyoko swiftly announced, already at the storage closet in the back.

“You don’t waste any time…” Mukuro muttered as she joined Kyoko by the storage closet. Still needing to feign ignorance, the soldier raised an eyebrow and asked, “So…you found a storage closet? Are you suggesting we need to clean the—?”

Before she could finish, Kyoko stepped forward and pushed on the back wall, revealing the hidden room beyond. Mukuro let her jaw drop as she pretended to be shocked.

“W-Whoa! T-There’s a hidden room!” she said convincingly, or at least she thought so. “H-How did you—?! I mean, when did you—?!”

“Come on,” Kyoko sternly ordered, advancing into the room without waiting for her.

“H-Hey! Hold up!” Mukuro called out, slipping past various cleaning supplies as she made her way inside the archive room.

The room was as dark and dismal as it had always been. However, unlike all of her previous visits, this time Mukuro wasn’t alone. Kyoko had obviously been her before, several times by the way she so quickly navigated the darkened room. Slowly following her into the deeper part of the room, the soldier quickly advanced toward the bookcase in the back, laying a hand on the shelf.

“Whoa…is this some kind of archive room or something?” she pretended to ask as she thumbed through a few books on the shelf. “It’s all dusty and gross but…maybe we can find something that could help us figure out who the Mastermind is in here!”
“…Perhaps,” Kyoko calmly answered, as if she had just come to a conclusion.

Although a bit perturbed by her classmate’s tone, Mukuro knew she couldn’t let this chance slip away. She needed Kyoko’s help in order to help save everyone, that brilliant mind that had already saved their classmates lives several times now.

Honestly, there wasn’t much dust on the books, indicating that someone had been reading them recently. Mukuro surmised that Kyoko had more than likely read through most, if not all of them already, concluding that this was where the amnesiac detective must have disappeared to during everyone’s free-time. She’d noticed the detective’s odd behavior some time ago but never had the chance to act upon it, at least until now.

Her hand slid over the book she’d been surreptitiously searching for and she pretended to grab it at random. Just as she pulled out that book, which happened to contain their class’ enrollment papers, a stern voice startled her.

“Junko, please have a look at this…”

Recognizing Kyoko’s distant voice, the disguised soldier turned around…and froze. Standing by the open doorway, which was their only source of light, Kyoko Kirigiri held a stern expression as she held something in her hand. It was a piece of paper, but that alone wasn’t what shocked Mukuro.

No…it was the words Kyoko had written on it that truly sent chills down the hardened soldier’s spine:

[I know you’ve been lying to us. Tell me who you really are.]

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Did any of you expect such a shocking turn of events?! What will happen now? Has Mukuro truly been found out? How will Kyoko’s discovery affect their situation? And will Celeste’s plan come to any sort of fruition? You’ll have to keep reading to find out!

So yeah, sporadic updates are sporadic. I’m writing when I find time, but between work, the DR IF project and so many other distractions, I’m doing the best I can to get delicious content out to you whenever I can.

That said, as I mentioned before, I have an important update concerning the DR IF project:

Recently, we lost a few of our actors, Kyoko Kirigiri, Celestia Ludenberg, and Kiyotaka Ishimaru. We are currently looking for new actors to replace them and I want to invite all of you reading to audition. Bear in mind, you will NEED to have a good recording microphone (no phone recordings please). Acting experience is not required but encouraged. For more information, you can ask in the comments or you can email me at
- hunterofcomedy @ hotmail . com. In the subject, please mention which character you want to audition for. I hope to hear from some of you soon!

Please leave a comment or review to tell me what you think will happen, ask questions, or just comment on the story in general! I appreciate each and every review I get and they do inspire me to get more writing done faster, so keep them coming!

Thanks again, and have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
Ch 3 Act 19

Chapter Summary

As the class discusses what to do about their mysterious attacker, Junko and Kyoko seemingly disappear, prompting another frantic search. All the while, Celeste continues to piece her murder plot back together...until Chihiro reawakens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“You can’t honestly expect us to believe such an absurd story, can you?” Byakuya sneered as Celeste finished recounting her ‘encounter’ with her robot clad attacker.

“Believe it or not, it is the truth,” the gambler calmly refuted, a deadly serious expression on her face.

Most of the students had gathered in the now open Nurse’s Office, a fact that Mondo certainly appreciated. After all, he’d been forcibly separated from the rest of the group for so long, it was nice to see other people around, especially since most of them believed him that Chihiro had awoken. It gave everyone the tiniest bit of hope, and they were willing to grasp it, no matter how slim that hope might be.

Hina tended to Celeste’s ‘injuries’ while Sakura stood nearby, watching them protectively. Leon and Sayaka had joined the group, now knowing that there was no point in waiting in the cafeteria. Byakuya was his usual ‘cheerful’ self, skeptical of everything anyone told him. Just beyond him, peering out from behind a curtain, Toko stared at his backside, breathing heavily.

Makoto and Taka were absent at the moment, fetching Junko and Kyoko who were on the second floor.

Not to mention that Hiro was still missing…

Hifumi had been tended to immediately upon arriving at the office, his head bandaged securely as he rested in one of the spare beds. He was still unconscious and because of that, they would need to wait for him to confirm Celeste’s story, a fact that perturbed the gambler to no end. Making matters worse, with the digital camera destroyed, there was absolutely no ‘proof’ she could offer them, putting her in a precarious position. She only hoped that once the oversized nerd awoke, he’d have the good sense to back up her claims!

As if mocking her internal struggle, Byakuya huffed and said, “The truth is subjective. I only deal with facts. And since you can provide no evidence of your innocence, you can’t expect us to believe such a ridiculous story, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, you don’t have any proof that she’s involved either, right?” Hina abruptly countered, glaring daggers at the Togami Heir. “And until you’ve got hard evidence, I choose to believe her!”

As Hina’s declaration echoed in the small room, Celeste pursed her lips slightly. A tiny fraction of guilt rose up in her again, knowing that Hina was actively contributing to her own death. Such a sweet and innocent girl…had no idea she was colluding with a potential murderer. It was almost
tragic—No…it was tragic…practically worthy of being called Shakespearian. And by the end of this little play…Hina’s blood would forever stain her hands—

“Stop thinking like that!” the gambler mentally scolded, unable to rid herself of those uncomfortable thoughts. “I’m just doing what I have to in order to achieve my dream! Why should I care if a D-Rank like Hina dies?! A few days ago, I barely acknowledged that she existed! Besides…once I have my castle…everything will be fine…I can put this little ‘episode’ behind me…and live the rest of my life…in luxury…all alone…just like I’ve always wanted…”

Despite some evidence to the contrary…Celeste forced herself to believe that claim. She pushed away the guilt that fought to be acknowledged, deeming it a determent to her cause. After all, once all of her classmates were six feet under, she’d finally have the castle of her dreams. And that’s all that mattered…right?

Putting on a pleasant smile, she nodded to Hina, “Your confidence is most appreciated.”

A bit embarrassed by those words, the Ultimate Swimming Pro’s cheeks flushed as she smiled sweetly, patting her friend’s shoulder affectionately. However, as Celeste took in that radiant smile, she internally grimaced, knowing that it would soon be taken from this world forever…

Folding his arms, Byakuya scoffed as he answered, “I will withhold judgement for now. But mark my words, before this day is done, I swear that I will find the real culprit in all this…and I will see them punished.”

A heavy silence stung the room as the Affluent Progeny made his position clear. And while it was obvious that everyone wanted to refute him, they also understood the danger they were in. If the attacker wasn’t the masked weirdo from the other night…then it had to be one of them. And the real culprit knew that all too well…

“But if everything Celeste said is true,” Sayaka bravely spoke up, getting a full picture of the situation. “That means that we have another masked attacker running around.”

“I’m not so sure…” Leon posed, earning a raised brow from Sayaka. “I mean, yeah, it could be another masked weirdo but doesn’t it make more sense that the person in the mask that attacked Sakura and Hina would be the same guy in the robot costume?”

“That’s a good point,” Sakura concurred, weighing the situation carefully. “We really don’t know who the original masked attacker was. And without that information, it would be wise not jump to any conclusions.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” Byakuya agreed, only slightly enthused. “Actually, this could work out in my favor. After all, if the masked attacker and the attacker in the robot costume are the same individual, it would mean they have a connection to the Mastermind. If we play our cards right, we may discover who the traitor among us truly is…”

A malicious smirk spread over his lips, sending a wave of nausea through the rest of the students. Before he had a chance to elaborate on his theory, furious footsteps echoed in the hall just outside the office. An instant later, the door to the Nurse’s Office flung open, clattering loudly.

“Guys! We’ve got trouble!” Makoto frantically yelled from the doorway, a look of horror on his face. The expression sent chills down everyone’s spines, for if Makoto was losing face, the situation must be grave indeed.
“Mr. Naegi! I told you no running in the halls!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted, only now catching up with the lucky student.

“But it’s an emergency!” Makoto insisted, his expression turning grim.

“Regardless of the severity, the school regulations must be upheld! How else are we to keep from descending into chaos?! Besides...” Taka refuted, his fiery eyes flickering, as if doubting his own words. “We need to approach this calmly and rationally. Take a moment to compose yourself!”

“B-But—!”

“Would one of you please elaborate for the rest of us?” Byakuya sternly cut in, annoyance clear in his voice. “Tell me now; is there or is there not an emergency?”

“Yes, there is!” Makoto asserted, his eyes full of fear. Taking just a moment catch his breath, the lucky student fervently shouted, “Kyoko and Junko are missing! We can’t find them anywhere!”

A collective gasp resounded through the room before all hell broke loose.

“J-Junko’s missing?!?” Mondo shouted, fear evident in his voice. Everyone suddenly looked to him, only then did he realize he’d only been concerned for one of the missing parties. “S-She was supposed to be with Kyoko, right?! How can they both be missing?!”

“Seriously, we find two missing people but lose two more?! What the hell’s going on?!” Leon worriedly complained, clenching his fists.

“You mean, they weren’t on the second floor?” Sayaka carefully asked, trying not to let her worry show.

“No...we couldn’t find them anywhere!” the lucky student informed them. “We even double checked the third floor! They weren’t anywhere to be found!”

“Could they possibly be on this floor?” Sakura hopefully asked.

“We searched the gym before coming here, but sadly, they weren’t there either,” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru told them, the tiniest hint of concern in his voice. “I was hoping one of you may have seen them?”

“No...they haven’t been back to the dorms,” Sayaka confirmed, her voice shaky. “Leon and I left the cafeteria doors open to see if anyone came back...but no one did.”

As a sense of foreboding spread throughout the room, a deep, menacing chuckle slowly resounded.

“Now this is a surprise...” Byakuya maliciously snickered, earning vicious glares from everyone. “I never imagined those two being involved. And even if they’re not the traitors, it’s interesting to contemplate just what might have happened to them...”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!” Mondo immediately shouted, his voice louder than ever before. “There’s no way that Jun—err, I mean, there’s no way either of them would get taken out so easily!”

“Dude, Mondo! Just calm down, man...” Leon said, trying to calm his friend. At the same time, he stole a glance at Sayaka, obviously trying to comfort her as well. The pop idol’s face began to pale upon learning of Junko’s disappearance, and it was more than Leon could bear. “I’m sure they’re around here somewhere. We just need to keep calm and—”.
“How the fuck am I supposed to be calm about this?!” the biker shouted at the top of his lungs. “We’ve got a freak in a robot costume and that masked weirdo from before running around! And if they’re working together—!"

“Hold on!” Makoto interrupted, braving Mondo’s death glare. “We don’t know if there are two attackers or just one yet! And we don’t know if anything actually happened to Kyoko and Junko! Who knows? Maybe they’ve found Hiro and are trying to help him or something?”

“Indeed. As I said before, let’s not jump to conclusions just yet,” Sakura concurred, her features hardening. “Our first priority needs to be searching for our missing friends. We should split up and search the entire school.”

“I can agree with that,” Byakuya condescendingly interjected, a snarky smirk on his lips. “And who knows? Perhaps Makoto is correct and they’ve already found Hiro…or his corpse at least.”

“That FUCKING does it!”

Without warning, Mondo dashed toward Byakuya, reached out his right hand and grabbed the Heir by the collar before lifting him completely off the ground. Looks of shock and horror spread over everyone’s faces…except for Byakuya, who merely smirked down at the biker.

“I’m tired of your fucking bullshit!” The biker reared back left his fist and prepared to strike. “I’m feeding you your teeth!”

“ACHOO!”

As that fateful sneeze resounded, the Togami Heir’s grin widened. “It would be wise to release me… unless you want to lose your hand.”

For an instant, a look of confusion crossed Mondo’s face before he jerked his head to see a flash of scissors aimed at his wrist. He had no time to react, barely able to gasp as he watched the razor sharp cutting tool close in on his hand. Then, just as the sharp edge was about to pierce his flesh, another flash appeared before him…and before he knew what was happening, a large, muscular hand gripped the scissors in an iron grasp.

Their lightning fast movements sent a shockwave through the room, startling everyone. And once the dust had settled, a terrifying scene lay before them.

Genocide Jill, her long tongue flapping as she brandished her Genoscissors, was glaring at Sakura, who held the aforementioned scissors tightly in one hand…inches away from Mondo’s wrist. Meanwhile, the martial artists other hand held a firm grip on the serial killer’s wrist, keeping her from attacking or retreating. The biker flinched as he took in the scene, realizing he’d come incredibly close to becoming left handed.

And throughout all of this, Byakuya continued to smirk, amused by the unfolding events.

“Outta the way, Roid-Rage!” Genocide Jill warned, her crimson eyes narrowing with a menacing glint. “If anyone’s gonna string up Master Byakuya, it’s gonna be me!”

Byakuya’s grin abruptly fell as he realized how close Jill’s scissors were to his person. Sakura, however, tightened her grip in response to the serial killer’s threat.

“I cannot allow that. I will not stand for any unnecessary bloodshed,” the martial artist quietly seethed before sharply turning her glare toward Mondo. “From any of you.”
Even though she hadn’t raised her voice, the warning was clear, and Mondo flinched as he slowly lowered Byakuya back to the ground. Brushing the biker’s hands away, the Togami Heir adjusted his suit before folding his arms, putting on an air of indifference despite his obvious concern that Jill was only a few inches away.

Meanwhile, seeing that her Master was no longer in danger, Genocide Jill visibly relaxed, putting away one of her scissors. Seeing that, Sakura very slowly released her grip on the serial killer’s arm. For a moment, Jill glared at the martial artist as she rubbed her wrist. However, with a quick flick of her wrist and a lift of her skirt, she put away the other pair of murder cutters and sighed.

“Geez…Miss Morose sure picked an awkward time to tap out,” she complained before raising an eyebrow at everyone. “Did someone die or something? Oh! Or! Or! Did the adorable little Cherry finally bite the big one—?!?”

“Be silent!” Byakuya harshly ordered, glaring at her with a perturbed expression. “Unless you know the whereabouts of our missing classmates, keep your filthy mouth clos—!”

“THAT IS ENOUGH!!!”

The entire room shook as a fearsome aura engulfed the area. Everyone’s head snapped over just in time to see the firestorm of Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru’s aura raging near the doorway.

Shame…that’s all Chairman Ishimaru could feel as he watched his classmates fall into chaos and disorder. No…it wasn’t just shame. Humiliation was there as well…along with jealousy, hesitation, self-loathing, and utter uselessness.

When Byakuya spoke such horrific words, for the first time in so long, instead of taking the immediate action required of his position…Ishimaru hesitated.

When Mondo foolishly…but bravely stood up to the injustice spewing from the Togami Heir, going so far as to put his own life at risk…Ishimaru felt jealous of the biker’s courage.

When Genocide Jill appeared, and prepared to sever Mondo’s hand at the wrist, Ishimaru could only feel utter uselessness as he watched Sakura intervene instead of himself.

And he was filled with self-loathing as he was made painfully aware that the situation had quickly escalated beyond anything he could hope to control.

Because of all this…total, undeniable, rage inducing shame consumed his being.

“I…I am…the…Disciplinary…Committee…Chairman! And yet…I can’t even keep myself together when my classmates need me the most! When they need someone of action, who will do whatever is necessary to keep them safe…they should look to me…but…”

As that irrefutable shame grew within his heart, his aura flared wildly in response. He didn’t want to acknowledge it…that nagging notion that resided deep within his soul…which he knew as truth…

“I…I can’t…protect them…No matter how stern my regulations…no matter how much I discipline them…no matter how much I try to be the leader that everyone needs! I CONTINUE TO FALL SHORT!!!”
As his fragile mind was assaulted with *hesitation, jealousy, uselessness, self-loathing*…and *shame*…Kiyotaka Ishimaru fell back on his instincts, unleashing a furious scream as he fought the onslaught of despair that plagued his soul.

“THAT IS ENOUGH!!”

The room shook as Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted his command, one that everyone heeded. His blazing eyes and ferocious aura raged as per usual…but something was definitely wrong. Instead of a righteous fury that his visage once held, what stood in front of them almost seemed more like a cornered animal rather than a dedicated man of authority.

His ferocity was gone…replaced with an eerie feeling of desperation. And honestly, the students couldn’t tell which one was more unnerving at the moment.

“Our FIRST priority is to find our missing classmates! Talk of punishment and personal squabbles WILL wait until then!” Chairman Ishimaru commanded, his aura strengthening as he announced each word. “We will split up into groups of two or three and search absolutely everywhere! Is that UNDERSTOOD?!?”

Bleak silence followed his decree, with most of the students stunned by his increasingly aggressive shouts. Among them, Celeste’s crimson eyes surreptitiously glared at him, her white teeth chewing her bottom lip. Meanwhile, Genocide Jill was quickly growing bored with all the yelling…scratching her nose as she pondered when to interrupt.

Growling with impatience, the Committee Chairman screeched, “I said…is that understood?!”

“Y-Yeah!”

“R-Right!”

Makoto and Leon shakenly answered, with many nods and compliant murmurs from the rest of the class. And although Byakuya remained utterly silent, he seemed to accept that it was in his best interest not to object. Almost immediately, Sakura took a few steps toward the door, separating herself from everyone else before turning to address them.

“So then…where shall we begin our search?”

Deep within the confines of the surveillance room, Junko Enoshima’s sat with a pair of amplified headphones constricting her head. She wasn’t even paying attention to the monitors, she didn’t care what was happening with the students in the Nurse’s Office. No…all she cared about was the entirely boring conversation echoing in her headset.

“…no…find anything…”

“…damn…just…useful…”

“…mastermind…room…punished…”

“…tell anyone…”
“…agree but…like Byakuya…trust…”

“…even Makoto…risky”

“…found…lockers…go…”

As the despair loving woman listened intently, a wide smirk spread on her lips. Before long, it elongated into a wicked grin…before expanding into a despair ridden simper.

When the voices in the headphones ceased, her well-manicured hands reached up and slowly removed the constricting listening device. Tossing it onto the desk in front of her, the despair loving woman shuddered euphorically, her red fingernails raking along the goosebumps on her arms. With a staggered, ecstatic moan…Junko Enoshima tasted a despair she hadn’t reveled in for years!

“Well, this is fun-fucking-tastic! How the hell am I supposed to carry out my plan like this?!”

Celeste inwardly groaned as she sat on a bed in the Nurse’s Office. Seated on a stool only a few feet away, Hina kicked her feet from side to side, obviously trying to keep herself entertained while they waited. The swimming pro turned and noticed that the gambler was staring at her, prompting Celeste to offer a quick smile. Practically beaming in response, Hina stood up and walked over to seat in a chair next to the gambler.

“I hope that Hifumi and Chihiro wake up soon…and that the others find Kyoko and Junko before too long.” Hina offered, trying to strike up a conversation.

“As do I…” Celeste replied, a polite smile barely hiding her intentions.

The rest of the class had split up to search for Kyoko and Junko…and Hiro too she supposed.

Sayaka and Leon were searching the first floor, since stairs were still a bit of a challenge for the pop idol. Sakura and Mondo were searching the second floor, with the biker acting especially frantic, the gambler noticed. It was almost as if he was…no, there’s no way he was that worried about Junko. Byakuya elected himself to search the third floor, which initially frightened Celeste, given his intellectual prowess. With Kyoko missing, only he would be smart enough to uncover her plot…However, upon realizing that Genocide Jill would be accompanying him the entire way, she relaxed a bit. And finally, poor, stupid, unlucky Makoto was being forced to party up with that bastard Taka as they roamed the hallways, calling out for their missing classmates.

This, of course, meant that she was trapped in the Nurse’s Office, with Hina as her unsuspecting warden. Not content to simply sit and do nothing, Celeste began compiling her thoughts as she worked to overcome this unforeseen mishap.

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“Okay, so Kyoko and Junko are currently MIA. Whether it was the masked attacker or not…I have no fucking idea! Plus, I need to figure out what happened that prevented Hifumi from caving in Taka’s skull! If only that fat moron would wake up and just tell me what happened! I know that Mondo went to get Taka and found him in the Equipment Room. Did Hifumi get attacked before or
“Hey, Celeste?”

The gambler froze as Hina’s voice invaded her ears. Snapping her head up, she glanced at the swimmer, noting her concerned visage.

“W-What is it?” Celeste politely inquired, doing her best not to rouse suspicion.

For a moment, Hina fidgeted with her hands as she hesitated. “You…uh…you looked like something was bothering you. So I just wanted to ask if everything was alright…”

Celeste bit back a scathing comment, desperately trying to piece her perfect mask back together. Unfortunately, in the deepest recesses of her mind, she knew such a feat was impossible now. Having nearly been crushed by Hifumi, her plan completely thrown into chaos, and the unknown element of a third party attacking everyone made her want to scream her frustrations until her throat gave out—!

“!”

An idea suddenly popped into her mind, a stroke of pure genius if she did say so herself.

“Actually, I was just thinking about the fact that I’ve yet to have any tea today,” she said in an aloof manner, tapping a finger to her chin. “It can be so hard to concentrate without it…and its already well past tea time…”

Letting out a heavy sigh, Celeste lowered her gaze to the floor, a melancholy expression spread out over her features. All she needed to do now…was be patient. She’d laid out the bait, and it was only a matter of time before—

“Oh! Well that’s a relief! I thought it was something…a little more serious!” Hina answered with her typical bubbly smile. “And if that’s the case, why don’t I go and make us some tea?”

Hidden from Hina’s view, Celeste let a malicious smirk spread onto her lips.

Applying her perfect mask as best she could, the gambler feigned surprise and said, “No…that is alright. I would not want to put you out over something so trivial…”

Just as she predicted, in true Hina fashion, the Ultimate Swimming Pro puffed out her chest and confident answered, “Well, I don’t think it’s trivial! You’ve been through a lot this today and if a hot cup of royal milk tea will help, then I’m happy to make you some!”

“Well…if you insist,” Celeste falsely conceded, having desired this outcome from the start. “It would be most appreciated…”

“Mhm! I do insist!” Hina cheerfully replied, rising to her feet and preparing to depart. Before she took a single step though, she winked at Celeste and said, “And don’t worry! I’ll be sure to include the milk as part of the brewing, just the way you like it!”

For a moment, Celeste flinched…Hina’s comment echoing in her mind.

“You…recall that particular detail?” the gambler questioned, genuinely shocked that the swimmer bothered to remember her little tiff with Hifumi during his botched first tea making attempt.

“Of course I do!” Hina proudly proclaimed, placing her hands on her hips triumphantly. “You’re my
friend! And I always make sure to remember my friend’s likes and dislikes! Even if they happen to be a bit more demanding than others!”

There was no mistaking the playful tone that resonated from Hina’s voice. And the cheeky grin on her face only further proved she was merely poking fun at Celeste’s unique tastes. However, underneath that playful persona, it was obvious that Hina was quite serious about preparing the tea… an undeniably sweet gesture.

“How sweet of you…”

The words floated from Celeste’s mouth so swiftly that even *she* barely noticed them. No trace of her usual accent clouded the words, and her tone was so genuine that even *she* found herself startled. As her brain registered those words, she immediately put on a false smile and folded her hands beneath her chin.

“Well then, I will be relying on you.”

With a passionate nod, Hina headed for the door, leaving Celeste alone in the Nurse’s Office. Carefully listening as the swimmer’s footsteps faded into the distance, the gambler finally felt her heart begin to settle after her slip up moments ago.

“What the hell is wrong with me…?” she whispered to herself, wiping a bit of sweat from her brow. “So what if she remembers how I like my tea? Hifumi does that too… though it took him several attempts to perfect it. And I doubt that her tea will be as orgasmic as Hifumi’s anyway. Besides, I’m not even going to drink it! I need to use this time to…”

Against her will, as soon as she imagined refusing Hina’s tea, she couldn’t stop herself from envisioning the swimming pro, hand’s shakily holding a tea tray, bawling her sweet little eyes out in grief.

“Y-You mean… you won’t even try it?”

Imaginary Hina’s words rattled in her brain and Celeste groaned as she shook her head, trying to regain her focus. However, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t force the image away, continuing to imagine her friend’s displeasure when—

“F-Friend?!?” Celeste’s own thought startled her, finally beginning to realize her folly. “She is NOT my friend! I don’t HAVE friends! I don’t NEED friends! What I NEED are pawns! And Hina is nothing more than… nothing more than… she’s just… she’s just a—!”

A friend… Hina… that stupid, bubbly, overly-positive, slightly intelligent, sweet, kind-hearted, swimmer girl… was her friend. No matter how much she tried to reason it away, her disposition was set and there was no changing it. After so many years of being utterly alone, Celeste finally had someone she actually considered a friend—

*SLAP*

Celeste’s palm ached almost as much as the cheek she’d slapped, the pain shocking her enough to quit thinking, even if just for a moment. Then, slowly… she began to rebuild herself.

“I am Celestia Ludenberg. I am… the Ultimate Gambler… and I will do anything to achieve my goals.”

She spoke with conviction, using her talent to convincer herself of the lies she insisted were true. Despite what her heart… what Taeko Yasuhiro might have believed, she made the choice to believe
the lies that Celestia Ludenberg wove for her. And slowly, she began to force her mind to acknowledge those lies…as the truth.

“Other people’s lives are mere stepping stones to achieve my dream of living in my castle. And once I get out of here, and Monokuma’s reward money is mine…I will finally achieve all that I’ve ever wanted! And I won’t let any naïve fools get in the way of that! Because I…am Celestia Ludenberg!”

And with that, Celeste managed to completely close off all feelings of hesitation, fear, or even disgust. Her perfect mask had reformed, and it concealed everything…just as it had before.

Celestia Ludenberg had officially returned, and she wasted no time in preparation for her miraculous escape. Heels clicked as she gracefully walked to her co-conspirator’s bedside, straightening her hand to “assist” in awakening him.

“Hifumi…Hiifuuuuumiii…Time to wake up…”

*SLAP*SLAP*

…It was like floating…

Hifumi was floating in a sea of light, peacefully ebbing with the flow of time. He was so relaxed and calm, and for a moment, he realizing he was dreaming. Dreaming of…classes…students…friends…a school without metal plates and a campus without maniacal teddy bears. Teachers…smiles…sunshine…hope…it was so life-like, as if he’d truly lived through it all. And for a moment, he truly believed it…believed that this dream was reality, that the time he spent with all of his classmates in the ‘real’ Hope’s Peak Academy was authentic…and the hellish nightmare he knew as reality was nothing but a horrid illusion.

And in that moment of utter bliss…an almost heavenly voice called out to him.

“…Hifumi…Hiifuuuuumiii…” the voice was graceful…and familiar…as if he’d known it for years.

“…Time to wake up…”

Just as he began to place where he knew that voice from, pain shot through his left cheek. An instant later, an identical pain struck his right cheek, the agony pulling him out of his peaceful dreamlike state and forcing him back into the cruel reality he’d almost believed was fake.

Gasping for breath, the Ultimate Fanfic Creator shot up in bed, gently caressing his reddened cheeks.

“Eyaugh!” he cried as he rubbed his face tenderly. “W-What’s going on?!”

“That is precisely what I’d like to know…” a frightfully familiar voice invaded his ringing ears, making his eyes widen.

Turning his gaze slowly, Hifumi’s jaw dropped as he saw none other than Celestia Ludenberg beside his bed, an eerie smile draped over her lips. In a flash, the fanfic creator recalled all of the events leading up to his awakening…particularly how he’d fainted on top of her.

“M-M-M-Miss Ludenberg!!” He shot up in bed, rolling onto his knees as he bowed apologetically. “I never meant to collapse like that! Please you have to believe—”.

“It is fine…”
“Huh?”

The fanfic creator’s gaze snapped forward, shocked by her outright forgiveness. In fact, he wasn’t quite sure, but something seemed…different about Miss Ludenberg. She was smiling her usual pleasant smile, which he knew concealed her tsundere tendencies, but for some reason…it seemed more…authentic? As if she discarded something within to embrace her outer shell. And while it wasn’t uncommon for characters with Miss Ludenberg’s persona to do such thing, something…important seemed to be missing.

“I am glad that you are awake, Hifumi.” Celeste’s voice startled him back to their conversation, her words seeming genuine. “I feared that whomever attacked you may have left you in an unresponsive state, and I would be forced to re-evaluate our partnership.”

“Oh, well, thanks for worrying about me…”, was all Hifumi could muster, still shaken by his sudden reawakening and subsequent confusion of his situation.

Almost as if ignoring him, Celeste’s smile widened as she asked, “Speaking of which…would you mind explaining what occurred this morning? You may not be aware, but Taka is still very much alive and continuing with his secret agenda.”

As that information was absorbed into Hifumi’s brain, multiple feelings suddenly arose. Fear, for having been attacked by that blasted door. Anger, for having missed his chance to stop Taka’s reign of evil. Confusion, for how he was not discovered and how he ended up here. And lastly…regret. Regret…regret for…almost taking a human life.

Now that he was far removed from Miss Ludenberg’s plan and his rage had subsided, the full weight of his actions made his shoulders shrink. Emboldened by anger and justice, he had almost allowed himself to murder his classmate. And despite having a justifiable reason for it, now that he had time to think about it, he once again struggled with the notion that Taka’s life would not be the only one he’d be taking.

Everyone…all of the people who had cared for him…brought him to the nurse’s office to assist with his recovery…the people who trusted him and believed that he was a victim…rather than a dishonest fool who was only concerned with his own selfish desires. And while he still desired that Alter Ego be saved…he had begun to question whether or not he was worthy to hold his beloved digital princess after innocent blood stained his hands.

“I do not mean to rush you but…I’m afraid we have little time,” Celeste’s silky voice interrupted his thoughts, his attention once again focused on her. “I will be frank; do you remember who attacked you?”

Hifumi’s mind was still scrambled and conflicted, but even so, he did his best recall what had transpired only a few hours ago.

“A-As per your orders, I waited for Mr. Ishimaru in the equipment room. And once he arrived I prepared to strike…but as soon as I made my move, I was suddenly attacked—!”

“Was it the mysterious individual in the mask? The one that Hina and Sakura mentioned?” Celeste questioned, derailing him for a moment.

“Uhh…no…at least I don’t think so…” the fanfic creator struggled to remember. “All I remember is that blasted door smashing into face…and someone shouting ‘Bro’…”

An awkward silence existed between them for a moment before Celeste let out a low chuckle.
“Ah…I see now…” she said with a smirk, as if talking to herself. “So, Mondo was the one who interfered…that connects all the dots, I suppose.”

“M-Mr. Owada?! What does he have to do with the door’s surprise attack?” a confused Hifumi questioned.

With a condescending smirk, Celeste took a seat on a nearby stool and crossed her legs. “While you were unconscious, I learned that Mondo decided to confront Taka early this morning. It seems that he noticed Taka ascending the stairs and followed after him, and thus he eventually found him just as you were about to strike. An unfortunate coincidence that resulted in you being unable to enact vengeance.”

Enact vengeance…that phrase seemed so…harsh to Hifumi’s ears. Ironically, only a few hours ago, those words would have inspired such a rush of feelings from him…but not now. In fact, he wasn’t even sure if he *desired* vengeance at this point. All he wanted to be make sure that Alter Ego was safe…so why had his thoughts been so consumed by vengeance? Those angry emotions refused to resurface, replaced by a deep…concern…. He was concerned about the repercussions of his actions…not for himself but for everyone else.

Perhaps he should have sought council with someone besides just Miss Ludenberg. And while he understood her situation, having been threatened to be punished under Taka’s oppressive regime, he still believed that they should have brought the matter to everyone’s attention…rather than plotting a murder.

“Is something the matter, Hifumi?”

Celeste’s voice once again disrupted his thoughts, making him shake his head before refocusing.

“N-No…I was just…wondering what we’re going to do now…?” he genuinely asked, uncertainly beginning to shine through.

Almost as if to spite his uncertain disposition, Celeste allowed a wide smile to grace her lips as she answered, “Do not fear, I have already developed a contingency plan. One that will ensure Taka’s demise.”

“O-Oh…” Hifumi disappointedly replied, a part of him having foolishly hoped she’d reconsider.

“We have little time, so I’ll be brief,” Celeste continued, furrowing her brows seriously. “I need you to make your way up to the art supply room, as we previously planned. Once you leave here, hid in the second floor restroom until you hear me scream. I will make it distinctive, so do not fear.”

Raising an eyebrow, Hifumi couldn’t help but ask, “A…distinctive scream? Like what?”

Pondering for a moment, Celeste replied, “How about something like…Ha-aaaaah!”

“T-That…should be fine…” he confirmed, hanging his head slightly.

That kind of scream certainly didn’t sound natural, at least not to Hifumi, and he supposed it would work well as a signal…but discussing their plot like this…felt wrong somehow. Ever since he’d had that strange dream…of living peacefully in school with all his classmates…even considering the idea of harming any of them, even a filthy *virgin* like Taka…it felt like…a betrayal. And while he’d known all along that that’s exactly what he’d be doing…only now did he actually see it as a true betrayal…a betrayal of the trust that all of them had placed in him—

“Hifumi…” Celeste’s voice interrupting his thinking again, her voice much harsher this time. “I
know you must be exhausted from your altercation with Mondo, but you need to focus. We have very little time after all.”

“Err…right…” he almost forced himself to comply, growing increasingly more uncomfortable by the moment.

“Now then, as I was saying, after you hear the signal, make your way to the art supply room. Once there, lay on the floor and pretended to be unconscious. In the meantime, I will lure Taka there under the pretext that you have been attacked again. When that happens, I will lock the door and we will enact our vengeance on him together!”

As she finished explaining her plot, Hifumi was suddenly struck with inspiration.

“H-However…if we do it as you say, then only one of us will become blackened,” he pointed out.

In truth, he planned to use that hole in her plan to convince her to forget the whole affair. After all, things were getting rather risky and he’d much rather back out while they both had—

“Not a problem,” Celeste almost cheerfully replied, a fact that terrified the fanfic creator. “You shall deliver the final blow to Taka and then remain in the room afterward. I will inform the others that we found him together and while everyone is concentrating on that issue, I will murder someone else.”

Again, seeing the hole in her scheme, Hifumi tried once more to surreptitiously dissuade her.

“S-Someone else? Who might that be? Won’t everyone want to see…Taka’s corpse?” he asked, doing his best not to show his true feelings.

“I will ask one of them to come with me to check on Chihiro. As for who, perhaps I could ask… Hina.”

The instant Celeste mentioned Hina, Hifumi noticed a change in her demeanor. It was subtle, so incredibly subtle that he almost wasn’t sure he’d really seen it. However, given his trained eyes for character development, there was no mistaking that something twisted inside Miss Ludenberg as she’d made that suggestion…almost as if she was repressing her true nature.

Before he could question it, however, Miss Ludenberg returned to her usual demeanor and continued, “She believes that the two of us have grown close lately. I will use that trust to lure her into the nurse’s office and use one of the unused Justice Hammer’s to secure my position as a blackened. That being said, would you mind handing over Hammer Number 3? I will hide it here in preparation.”

Hifumi gulped as he recalled that the other Justice Hammers were tucked into his backpack. He was lucky no one had searched it, but then again, he’d been lying on top of it when he woke up. With shaky hands, he automatically pulled the pack from his back, unzipped it and reached for the Number 3 Hammer. As he grasped the handle, he froze, images of his failed attempt on Taka’s life flashing before his eyes.

“Hifumi, I believe I mentioned that we are short on time,” Celeste sweetly but harshly reminded, holding out dainty hand in emphasis.

As if possessed by her voice, Hifumi pulled the hammer out and handed it to her, feeling guilty the moment it left his grasp. Without a word, Celeste ventured to the far corner of the room and hid the blue killing tool behind a cabinet. With a hum of accomplishment, Celeste turned back and aimed a confused stare at the fanfic creator.
“You are still here? Shouldn’t you be on your way? Time is of the essence, after all,” she quipped, her voice light but deadly serious at the same time.

It was the first time Hifumi had noticed the duality of her voice. Normally, he only heard the gentle tones and delicate quips she threw his way. But now…each sentence was filled with a combination of sweetness and malice, mixing together into a frightening cocktail that somehow seemed natural and fake all at the same time. And for an instant, Hifumi wondered if that duality had always been there…but he’d only now been able to hear it…

“Hifumi…” Celeste called to him, her voice still delicate and yet dangerous. “If we are to succeed, you need to leave now. I will handle matters here, so go wait for my signal. Remember, the second floor boy’s restroom is where you need to hide.”

She slowly walked toward him, obviously intending to pass by, but stopped when she was at his side. Then, with a glare so fearsome he almost wet himself, she added, “Oh, and be sure not to let anyone see you along the way. That would ruin…everything.”

Hifumi had no words to respond with, his voice caught in his throat at the unparalleled fear that gripped him. With those last few words, Celeste had shown him a side of her that truly terrified him. And, whether she’d planned it or not, she’d given him a glimpse of the murderous intent that she’d kept hidden from him this entire time.

Too fearful to reproach her, the fanfic creator was left with only one option…to do as instructed.

Without so much as a word, Hifumi slung his backpack over his shoulders, spun himself around, and made a rapid but quiet dash out the door before practically sprinting toward the second floor stairs, his fear motivating him just long enough to reach the second floor boys restroom and slam the door behind him.

As sweat soaked his tired body, all the fanfic creator could focus on was the horrifyingly malicious glint that he’d seen in Celeste’s eyes. And at the same time…he feared what might happen if he actually went along with her murderous plot.

“…Is there…really no other way…?”

…voices…familiar but…distant voices…

…Chihiro could hear them…so much clearer…than ever before…

…they weren’t…as soothing…as Mondo’s…but hearing anything…was better…than nothing…

…Chihiro wanted…to see…who those voices…belonged to…

…it hurt…everything hurt…but despite that…Chihiro…

Celeste’s expression didn’t shift, even after Hifumi dashed out of the room. Her perfect mask had been replaced, and this time, she knew it wouldn’t be so easily broken.

And now that she had a firmer grasp on the situation, she was becoming more and more confident.
that she’d succeed once she became blackened. Of course, what she told Hifumi was an utter lie. She planned to stay as far away from Taka as possible. And once she arrived at the art supply room, she would find Hifumi playing dead and be able to smash his skull in with the hammer she’d hidden earlier. His death alone would suffice. After all, she wasn’t stupid enough to try and kill both him and Taka, at least not at this point. That would only leave behind more evidence that could lead back to her.

…and, of course, she had lied about possibly attacking Hina too. The Ultimate Swimming Pro was too important as a confidant to simply dispose of. She was a person who would stand up for Celeste at the trial if such a need arose. That was the only reason she kept Hina around…as a useful pawn…and nothing more.

And while Mondo’s unexpected intervention had saved Taka for the moment, none of that would matter once she murdered Hifumi—which was proving to be even more crucial than before, especially since he was being much more uncooperative.

“I had imagined that news of Taka’s survival would have emboldened him…but it seems that his resolve is weakening. I need to settle this matter quickly. And once Hifumi is out of the picture, I can blame his death on our mysterious masked assailant and finally be free of—”

“…uhah…ugha…ah…”

Celeste couldn’t stop her eyes from widening as a soft sound invaded her ears. It was gentle, almost like the cooing of a dove. And it didn’t take a genius to figure out where it was coming from. Slowly, the gambler turned to face the only occupied bed in the room, holding in a gasp as Chihiro Fujisaki very slowly sat up, rubbing her eyes wearily.

Against her will, Celeste’s eyes dilated, and immense panic began to set in beneath her perfect mask.

“Shit…Shit. SHIT! Why now of all times?! Did she hear anything?! How long was she lying there, possibly listening in on our conversation?! How much does she know? How much does she fucking know?!”

As calmly as she was able to, the gambler moved to Chihiro’s bedside and put on an expression of relieved shock.

“O-Oh, Chihiro. You’ve finally awoken. This is quite a pleasant surprise, I must say…”

Despite her inner turmoil, Celeste managed to keep up her masterful façade. Fortunately, it seemed that Chihiro was still quite disoriented, the programmer’s head glancing around the room at a snail’s pace. However, the instant the petite programmer laid eyes on Celeste, a bright smile erupted onto her face.

“H-Hey…” was all she managed to say, her eyes still half closed. She then slowly looked around the room, the smile on her face deteriorating as confusion set in. “W-Where…am I? This doesn’t…look like my room…”

Celeste hid a much-deserved sigh of relief, realizing that Chihiro was still far too disoriented to comprehend what was going on around her. It also meant that, more than likely, the programmer hadn’t heard anything she and Hifumi had been discussing…although…

“It’s possible Chihiro may recall it later, having heard our conversation while she was slowly waking from her coma. And if she just so happens to remember that conversation during the class trial…it will make my escape from this retched place that much more difficult…”
Leaning in close and smiling gently, Celeste politely answered, “You are in the Nurse’s Office. We brought you here after we found you in the locker room.”

Celeste easily concluded that trying to relay the entire event of Mondo’s attempted murder would not only be time consuming, it wouldn’t matter once she completed her own murder scheme and the petite programmer was executed along…with…the…rest…of…them.

“How undeniably tragic…Chihiro awakens from her coma only to be executed due to my actions. Her struggle to survive and reawaken will be utterly fruitless in the end. All so that I can have the castle of my dreams…but such is her fate. It’s not my fault that she…was attacked by Mondo…and forced to fight for her life while in a coma. No…that doesn’t involve me…in the slightest.”

Even though she would never realize it, a hairline crack formed in her perfect mask, so tiny and insignificant that she didn’t bother taking note of it. Instead, she watched as Chihiro desperately tried to put together what she’d been told into coherent thoughts.

“I was…in the locker…room? Why…? I don’t…remember…but I know…I was going…somewhere? Was it…the locker…room?”

It was obvious that her mind was still quite disoriented, due to the head trauma she’d received. It would likely take several days before her mind could properly mend itself…and by that time, she and the rest of her class would be dead—

“Yes…she’ll be dead…” Celeste quickly reminded herself, pushing away any lingering feelings of guilt. “There’s no sense in wondering how long it would take for her memories to return. She’s just another pawn. In fact, now that she’s awoken…it presents a great opportunity that I hadn’t even considered…”

Clearing her throat, which earned Chihiro’s attention, the gambler smiled pleasantly once more before saying, “Now that you are awake, I will go and gather the others. They will certainly want to know that you’ve awakened.”

She quickly turned to leave, now prepared to use Chihiro’s awakening to gather everyone and give Hifumi an opportunity to reach the art supply room without being discovered. However, before she could take even a single step, something gripped her sleeve and tugged. Startled, she turned her head and held in a gasp as she saw Chihiro staring up at her, the programmer’s dainty fingers clutching the material of her sleeve tighter than the gambler thought possible.

“B-Before you go…could you do me a favor?” Chihiro abruptly asked, her voice suddenly a lot stronger than before.

Although startled, Celeste didn’t let a hint of it show as she inquired, “As long as it is not too excruciating, I believe I can manage.”

The gambler felt smug as Chihiro smiled once more, completely buying into her false act of kindness.

“I-If it’s not…too much trouble…could you get me another pillow?” Chihiro slowly asked, nervous and embarrassed at the same time. “It would…make…sitting up a lot easier…”

Celeste had no reason to refuse. After all, it was a simple request, one that would only take a moment before she gathered everyone and furthered her scheme. It would be a…last request, of sorts.

Without hesitation, she turned around and nodded. “Of course. Give me just a moment.”
Chihiro slowly released her grip, allowing the gambler to walk toward the other two beds in the room. However, much to her shock…there were no pillows on the other beds. In fact…there were no extra pillows anywhere to be seen…as if someone had hidden them.

“It’s possible that Mondo is responsible for this, considering he was the only one permitted inside until only a short time ago…but that’s ludicrous. For what reason would he want to hide all of the pillows? He would be in the room at all times so no one would be able to use them to suffocate Chihiro. And if so, where would he hide—?”

Celeste found her answer the moment she faced the storage closet near the back of the Nurse’s Office. As her feet carried her to the door, a look of utter shock consumed Celeste’s features. There, standing between her and honoring Chihiro’s request…was a door completely duct taped shut! And not just with one or two strips mind you! It was as if someone used an entire roll to ensure that no one would ever open that door again!

“Who in their right mind would use THAT MUCH duct tape to seal a door?! It’s just pillows for fuck sake!”

Anger slowly started to show on her face as she moved to the nearby cabinet to get a pair of scissors or some other kind of sharp object to cut the tape with…only to find that all of the sharp objects had also mysteriously vanished. It took Celeste less than a second to figure out where they had gone.

“Are you F***ING kidding me?! Did he seriously put EVERYTHING that could potentially be used to hurt someone in that fucking closet…AND THEN DUCT TAPE IT SHUT!?!?!?”

Celeste barely managed to control her rage as she realized that twice now, by complete coincidence, Mondo had interrupted her plans to escape the school! After all, even if he’d somehow found out about her scheme to kill Taka and raced to his rescue, there was no way he could have known she’d need to get a pillow for Chihiro, which was delaying her from going through with her plan to murder Hifumi!

“Calm down…calm the fuck down…it’s just a coincidence…a god-damn, motherfucking, shit-taking, son of a bitch coincidence! Besides…I can just tell Chihiro that I can’t find a pillow and be done with it. I don’t have time for last requests anyway…not when I’m so short on time!”

Making sure that her perfect mask was once again in place, Celeste slowly walked over to the barely awake Chihiro, causing the programmer to look up at her and smile. The gambler internally flinched at the joyful expression on the programmer’s face, her brain reminding her that soon she would take the smile away from Chihiro…permanently.

However, as she continued to remind herself, it wasn’t any of her concern, and she smiled pleasantly as she reluctantly said, “I apologize, Chihiro…but there do not seem to be any pillows available at the moment—”.

The instant those words left her mouth, Chihiro’s warm smile faded and sadness welled up in her half open eyes. Internally, Celeste grunted at a sharp pain that stung her chest. It wasn’t like she had told Chihiro that a puppy had died or something! So, why did the programmer look so heart-broken! And why did she care! This whole event was a detour keeping her from—oh shit, was Chihiro starting to cry!

Despite how much she didn’t want to acknowledge it, Celeste couldn’t help but notice the tears stinging the corners of Chihiro’s eyes. Instantly, the sharp pain in the gambler chest intensified and she was only just able to keep herself from growling in self-loathing.
“—H-However…I have not yet checked the storage closet. Give me a moment and I will see what I can find…” Celeste forced herself to say with a pleasant smile, not willing to compromise her composure because of a missing pillow.

Immediately, the tears in Chihiro’s eyes dried up and a happy smile was replaced on her lips.

“I-I’m sorry to ask this much of you…but…I really appreciate it…” the programmer earnestly replied.

Celeste wanted to comment about the fact that Chihiro’s teary-eyed visage could probably convince Monokuma to let them all go, but she kept that to herself. Instead, she merely nodded to her classmate, quickly turned on a heel, and prepared to once again try the duct taped door. It was then, before she even had time to consider how she’d open said door…that Chihiro said something neither of them expected.

“Thank you…Taeko.”

Celeste froze. Chihiro fell silent. The entire world came to a stand-still as that one word echoed in the small recovery room. And before she knew it, the hairline crack in Celeste’s perfect mask spread, encompassing her entire face. However, it didn’t quite shatter. It was barely kept in place, hanging on by thread as Celeste turned and glanced down at Chihiro.

“What…did you call me?” she asked quietly, keeping her voice low. She smiled pleasantly, as always, but this time, there was something more…malicious to it. However, Chihiro didn’t seem to notice, struggling to answer the question.

“I…I don’t know…” Chihiro honestly answered, confused herself. “You’re name…isn’t Taeko. So…why did I call you that?”

The programmer squinted her eyes shut, obviously trying to figure out why she’d called her friend by another name…but Celeste was more concerned with the ‘how’ rather than the ‘why’.

“It’s not possible…not fucking possible! How THE FUCK could she even know about my real name! I NEVER met Chihiro before coming to this school! Not to mention that she wasn’t around when that son of a whore TAKA revealed my secret in front of everyone! And she couldn’t have heard it from Mondo because he wasn’t there either! So how the flying FUCK does Chihiro know that name!!”

Amidst all of her panicking, she curled her fingers inward and inadvertently stabbed her palm with her finger claw. Although she winced at the pain, the momentary distraction seemed to snap her out of her frenzied state. Very slowly, she took deep, cleansing breaths…allowing herself a moment to regain her composure and collect her thoughts. Once she was back to a reasonable state of mind, she quickly got herself back on task…

“There’s not time to figure out how she knew that name. If I don’t get a move on, I’ll miss my last opportunity to get out of this shit hole! But…that doesn’t mean I can simply ignore this either…”

Fortunately for her, Chihiro still had her eyes closed as she tried to figure out why she’d called her friend by the ‘wrong’ name. Seeing an opportunity, Celeste let a momentary grin spread on her lips before she quickly hid it behind a sweet smile.

“Do not trouble yourself over such a minor detail. I am sure you simply had a strange dream or something to that effect,” the gambler said gently, resting a hand on Chihiro’s shoulder. The contact caused the programmer to snap her head up and stare into the soothing visage of her classmate.
Feeling confident, Celeste continued, “You must still be very weary. Lie back down and rest…”

With great ease, Celeste gently lay Chihiro onto her back before patting her shoulder. The petite programmer didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. In fact, she seemed to be having an even more difficult time keeping her eyes open. Even so, she was able to look up at the gambler and present her with the warmest smile anyone had ever seen.

“Thanks…Celeste. You’re…such a good…person…” she quietly complimented, keeping her smile bright the entire time.

If Chihiro’s words affected Celeste, she didn’t show it as she stood up and turned back toward the duct taped door, a desperate desire to have it opened burning in her eyes.

“Don’t worry, Chihiro…I’ll get you that pillow…”

“Almost done…there!” Hina cheerfully said to herself as she finished pouring freshly brewed milk tea into two teacups.

It had taken her longer than expected, but after a little trial and error, she was certain she’d been able to brew a fantastic cup of tea to share with Celeste. Grabbing the tray that the teacups sat on, the swimming pro carefully but joyfully began moving toward the kitchen exit.

“I can’t wait to see the look on her face when she tastes it! I bet it’s even better than Hifumi’s!”

That idea put a spring in her step as she cautiously moved out into the cafeteria and headed slowly toward the door.

“I was completely wrong about her,” Hina confided in herself as she continued onward. “Celeste may come off as a bit harsh and rude, but deep down, she’s actually a sweet and genuine person who —”.

“H-Hina! Hina, where are you?!”

The swimmer’s eyes snapped open as she heard the voice of Celeste shouting from the hallway. Before she even had time to contemplate putting the tray down, the door to the cafeteria burst open and there, out of breath and paler than usual, stood Celeste.

“C-Celeste! What’s wrong?!” Hina shouted, almost dropping the tea in doing so.

Through staggered pants, Celeste lifted her head and said, “You…must…come with me. Quickly!”

“W-What happened?! Tell me!” the swimmer found herself shouting, barely balancing the tray of teacups.

Biting her lower lip, Celeste hung her head for a moment before meeting Hina’s gaze and replying, “It’s…It’s Chihiro! She’s…she’s…”

Hina didn’t wait for her friend to finish. Without any regard for the mess, she let the tray of teacups slip from her grasp, the delicate porcelain smashing into tiny pieces as she ran toward the exit.
Greetings, my beautiful readers! It’s been quite some time hasn’t it! But what’s going to happen now?! What did Celeste do to Chihiro? Will Hifumi go along with the murder plot? How long before consistent updates are a thing again?! You’ll have to keep reading to find out!

Actually, I can answer about updates right now. Sorry once again for the long wait, but after running into various issues (including spraining my foot), it took longer than I wanted to update. However, I do want to at least attempt to update this story once a month from now on. I can’t promise that will happen but that’s what I’ll be shooting for!

Oh, and for those following my youtube channel: hunterofcomedy, I’ve started a playthrough of “Virtue’s Last Reward” to go along with my “999” playthrough.

Also, thank you to everyone who followed/favorited my story! And I encourage any questions or thoughts you may have regarding the story! That being said, as always, if you enjoyed the chapter, leave a comment/review to tell me what you think!

Thanks again everyone and I hope you have a great day, my beautiful readers!
Ch 3 Act 20

Chapter Summary

Hifumi begins to question himself as a noise from the 2nd floor bathroom catches his attention. Later, Celeste tries to follow through with her plan...only to have it backfire in a way she never expected.

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT IN AUTHOR’S NOTE

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hidden in the bowels of the second-floor bathroom, Hifumi waited for his chance to ascend to the third floor, just as Miss Ludenberg had requested. He’d taken to one of the stalls and patiently waited…a little too patiently actually.

Hifumi’s regrets had only intensified since departing the Nurse’s Office, feeling increasingly ashamed for what he had already done…and still planned to do.

“I know that Miss Ludenberg is acting out of fear and self-preservation, but even so...this entire situation is getting out of hand. Not to mention that we’ll be executed if we fail...perhaps it’s time we cut our losses and—”.

Suddenly, he heard loud voices echoing just outside the bathroom door…

“Dammit! Where the hell have they gone?!” a gruff voice that Hifumi recognized as Mondo shouted from hallway.

“I understand your concern but don’t lose heart. We haven’t finished searching this floor yet, after all,” a dignified but deep feminine voice that could only be Sakura answered him. “We must search everywhere, even the bathrooms need thorough inspection.”

Rather than fear for being discovered, a large part of Hifumi felt relieved when he heard them pass. If they happened to investigate the restroom and found him, he’d be ‘forced’ to admit defeat. Miss Ludenberg would certainly be displeased but at least since no one had been killed or assaulted, there would be no need for a class trial of any kind! And this way, he could pass it off as simple being unlucky, and hopefully avoid Miss Ludenberg’s wrath later.

As he heard the door to the restroom creaking open, all his hopes were dashed when a loud voice shouted, “Hey! Mondo! Sakura! Come quick!”

With his exceptional voice recognition skills, honed through years of identifying anime voice actors by voice alone, the fanfic creator realized that Leon was shouting to them. And judging by the sounds of his footsteps, he was in quite the hurry.
“What has happened?!” he heard Sakura press as the echoing footsteps ceased.

“It’s…It’s…” the voice of Leon sputtered, more than likely panting from being out of breath.

Then, before he could catch his breath, an authoritative voice that previously made Hifumi’s blood boil echoed throughout the hallway.

“Mr. Kuwata! What is the meaning of this?! Not only have I witnessed you running frantically, but I also heard your excessive shouting echoing up on the third floor!” the stern voice of that virgin Taka rang throughout the area.

“Leon? Did you run all the way up here?” the ever-concerned voice of Makoto suddenly appeared, more than likely because he was accompanying Taka. With a light gasp, the lucky student continued, “Does that mean you found them?! Is that why you came up here?!”

“Mr. Naegi! Don’t encourage his negative behavior by asking so many—”, the moral compass tried to reprimand before Hifumi overhead him being cut off.

“Would you all just shut up for a second?!” the infuriated voice of Leon shouted, undoubtedly earning him another pink slip from Taka. Regardless, the baseball star continued, “It’s Chihiro… She’s awake!”

Hifumi barely held back a gasp as that message penetrated his ears, and to his shock, relief flooded him. A part of him had feared that Celeste might have snuffed out Chihiro to secure her own position as a blackened, but it seemed that she truly did plan to manipulate Hina after he…killed…Taka…

Almost immediately he noticed his hands becoming clammy, nervous sweat rolling down his back as his part in Celeste’s plot came back to haunt him. He suddenly felt nauseous, his legs shaking, barely managing to keep himself upright as he heard collective gasps from his classmates.

With little discussion, he heard them dash toward the descending staircase, but one voice he heard clearer than all the rest…

“I said NO RUNNING! What if you were to fall and break your necks on the stairs?! All of you will serve detention for this! Are you all even listening?!” the voice of Taka fervently berated them, his boots slowly clacking on the floor as he slowly walked down the stairs.

He didn’t know what it was, but something about the way Taka was acting surprised Hifumi. It was the first time he’d really listened to what Taka had been saying, instead of just assuming he had a filthy, virgin-like agenda. Had he always been so concerned for his classmates’ wellbeing? Was this something new? And if it wasn’t…who was the real virgin between the two of them?

Left utterly alone in the bathroom, on what he assumed was an evacuated second floor, Hifumi couldn’t help but ponder…

“What…what have I been doing all this time?” he kept his voice low, barely above a whisper. “Miss Ludenberg…her plan…it…it kills everyone…everyone aside from ourselves…why…why did I…want that?”

Love…he’d told himself it was for true love. His genuine affection for Alter Ego, and his desire to see her safe return, that is what nearly drove him to murder. However, having been graced with time to really think on the matter, removed from Miss Ludenberg’s tsundere tendencies and fearful actions…he began to see just how twisted his love had become—

*CLATTER*
Just then, the sound of wood smacking against linoleum invaded Hifumi’s ears, startling him. A high pitched ‘eep’ escaped his throat and he jumped away from the noise…which came from the supply closet at the end of the far end of the restroom. For a moment, he stared toward the closed closet door, his heart racing and his imagination running wild.

What if someone was there with him? What if it was the masked individual the others had warned him about? Should he run? Should he stay and check it out? Was there even anyone there at all?

“I-Is someone…there?” he almost shouted, trying and failing to suppress the fear in his voice. “Sh-Show yourself, fiend! I won’t be intimidated by thugs!”

He waited a moment but there was no answer, increasing his paranoia tenfold. With careful, heavy steps, the fanfic creator inched his way toward the supply closet, gulping down the lump in his throat. As he reached the door, he felt his courage fading…but knew there was no turning back now. Whatever awaited him on the other side of the door…it was time to face it!

With a sharp tug, Hifumi threw open the door and shouted, “Have at thee, cur!!”

Not a moment after his taunt was bellowed out something nimble swiftly flew toward his face…

“…Um…why is everyone staring at me?”

Chihiro Fujisaki, the Ultimate Programmer, sat upright in bed, face flushed as everyone gathered around to make sure she was alright. She was obviously disoriented from having just awoken and having numerous people staring at her only amplified her confusion. At the same time, she could feel a sort of…dread coming from her classmates, making her more nervous as well.

Well, most of her classmates anyway, as Byakuya Togami glared at her as if he’d just lost half his fortune…which Chihiro was pretty sure, even if he did lose that much, he would still be classified as “too rich to be seen with you commoners”. Nevertheless, his angry gaze bore into her, making her feel more than a little uncomfortable.

“You called us all back for such a trivial matter?” Byakuya abruptly complained, directing his distain toward Celeste. “When you said it was an emergency, I had assumed that someone had found a corpse, but all I see is a disappointment.”

“It is a shame that Chihiro’s miraculous recovery does not interest you, considering you were partially involved with the incident in question…” Celeste countered, as if pleased with the Togami Heir’s frustration.

Byakuya scoffed but said nothing, choosing to remain silent. An instant later, the last of the students arrived, with Mondo pushing his way through

“Is this…really happening?” Mondo stammered, falling to his knees in front of Chihiro’s bed. “It’s…a dream. It’s gotta be…”

“No, it’s not a dream…it’s really happening,” Makoto told him, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

The class had gathered in the Nurse’s Office once more, after Hina and Leon ran off to fetch everyone. And even though no one had found Hiro, Kyoko, or Junko yet, the other students felt it was prudent to head to the Nurse’s Office and at least check in on their newly awakened classmate.
As if in response to Chihiro’s confusion, Sakura stepped forward and gently answered, “Apologies for being so rude. Allow me to explain. You have been unconscious for several days. We are relieved to see you have awoken after being…attacked.”

Chihiro’s eyes widened, her mouth hanging open as she registered those words. At the same time, Mondo clenched his teeth and hung his head in shame, unable to even look at her. An awkward silence engulfed the room until…

“Wait, I…I was attacked?” Chihiro abruptly questioned, as if in disbelief. She lowered her gaze, as if trying to recall the memory, but eventually shook her head. “I don’t…I don’t remember being attacked…”

Murmurs of surprise spread through the students, though most of them weren’t too shocked considering Chihiro had suffered a blow to the head. Memory loss was typical in this sort of situation.

“So…you don’t remember anything about what happened?” Sayaka inquired in an oddly envious tone, obviously wishing she could forget her own tragedy.

Chihiro shook her head and groaned, “No…but…I think I was going to meet with someone…but…who was it?”

“It was me…you were planning to meet up with me…” Mondo slowly answered, still unable to meet the programmer’s gaze.

Like a ray of sunshine, Chihiro’s expression blossomed into a bright smile as she recalled that fact. “T-That’s right! I wanted to hang out and exercise! But…I must have been attacked along the way —”.

“No…that’s not…what happened, Chihiro…”

“Oh…” the programmer answered, confused and pondering. “So then…I’m guess that we must have been working out, but then I was attacked on the way back to my—”.

“It…It was me…I’m the one…who attacked you…”

Only Chihiro was stunned when Mondo suddenly confessed to his crime, fresh tears rolling down his cheeks and dripping off his chin. Without warning, he slammed his fist into the linoleum floor, cracking a few tiles and bruising his knuckles.

“You…You told me your secret…because you trusted me! But I…I…I…so…so I…”

As words began to fail him, a cheerful voice cut through the room.

“What? No way,” Chihiro answered with a warm smile, complete disbelief in her voice. Slowly, she reached out and patted his head, making the biker flinch. “You’d never attack anyone Mondo—”.

“But I did!” the biker interjected, smashing his knuckles in the floor again. “I hit you over the head with a dumbbell! I…I almost…killed you! You didn’t…deserve to…go through that! There…there’s no way I could ask for forgiveness after what I’ve done!”

Bowing his head deeply, tears erupted from his eyes, spilling down his cheeks, and splattering to the floor. He didn’t care that he was making a fool of himself in front of everyone, he needed Chihiro to know the absolute truth…no matter how painful it was. All he could offer was an apology…even
though he knew it would never be enough.

In the midst of his agony, the biker felt a soft hand pat his pompadour, a startled gasp ripping from his throat.

“You didn’t do it on purpose, right?” Chihiro slowly asked, a warm smile on her face. “It was just an accident. Accidents happen. And besides, I’m doing alright now, so everything’s okay!”

As those words echoed in Mondo’s ears, he fervently shook his head, tears flying every which way. “No! It’s not okay! I almost killed you! I don’t…deserve…!”

“It’s okay, Mondo!” Chihiro abruptly exclaimed, making the biker’s gaze shoot up to meet hers. Then, with a bright smile on her face, Chihiro said the one thing Mondo desperately needed to hear. “I know you must be feeling horrible right now, but I know you didn’t do it on purpose. And even if you can’t forgive yourself…I forgive you.”

Mondo couldn’t believe what he was hearing, and yet, even now those words kept echoing in his mind.

…I forgive you...

The words he’d longed to hear, and from the person he wanted to hear them from…he never imagined it would happen. He’d been prepared to live the rest of his life atoning for his crime, prepared to suffer the punishment for harming such an innocent life. But now, as Chihiro smiled at him, forgave him for being weak, he felt something inside him break as fresh tears flowed from his eyes.

“ERRRRRAAAAAHHHHH!”

He wailed as he buried his face in the sheets of Chihiro’s bed, letting out all of the pent-up emotions he’d kept buried for so long. All the self-loathing he felt for his brother’s death, the frustration of having to pretend to be strong, the agony of having to lie to his gang for so many years. After years of suffering for his own weakness…he finally found the strength to let it all out. And as he did, Chihiro patted his head gently, letting him know everything truly was alright.

As Mondo’s muffled cries echoed in the nurse’s office, one onlooker found himself at an utter loss…

“Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru stared in awe at the scene before him, his mind wrapped in confusion. This was certainly not the outcome he’d expected when Mondo confessed his crimes to the programmer! And while he’d expected Chihiro to be lenient, he certainly hadn’t expected her to outright forgive such a horrific act!

It was…It was…It was…completely understandable…

Why, even for a moment, did he think that Chihiro wouldn’t forgive him? Chihiro was a pure and innocent person who always sought to do the right thing. And obviously, in this case, the right thing was to forgiv—

“No! The rules must be upheld! Mondo committed treason against us and must be punished for it! I’m…I’m not…wrong about that…I can’t be…I can’t be…”
As those thoughts plagued him, the white of his hair flicked black and the fire in his eyes began to
dwindle. Gritting his teeth, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman reminded himself of his duty.

“I am…Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru! My duty…is to protect the students and the
school from chaos! It is the path I chose! And I cannot abandon it now! If I did…then it would mean
that everything I’ve done…all the pink slips, the verbal warnings…relegating Junko to confinement
in her room…all of that would be pointless!”

All at once, the fire was rekindled in his eyes and his hair regained its white sheen. As he stared
down at the floor, fighting to keep peace within his own mind, a single thought consumed him.

“I’m not wrong…I’m not wrong…I’m not wrong…I’m not wrong…I’m not wrong…”

It took several minutes, but eventually Mondo had settled down. Slowly picking himself up, the biker
took a seat on the bed next to Chihiro, unable to keep himself from reciprocating her smile.

Around them, a few others were teary eyed…namely Sayaka, Hina, and surprisingly Leon, with the
baseball star making the traditional excuse that there was something in his eye. Makoto smiled
brightly at the scene, feeling renewed hope nestling into his heart. Sakura nodded approvingly but
with a hint of sadness, as if she envied Mondo a bit. Byakuya scowled at this display of
affection, but said nothing. Genocide Jill flicked her tongue and chose to be quiet, not fully
understanding the situation. Taka was eerily silent as well, averting his gaze down toward the floor.
And finally, Celeste stood near the back of the room closest to the door, a neutral expression
obscuring her features.

“So…I guess everyone knows my secret, huh?” Chihiro nervously asked, not entirely sure how to
resolve the awkward silence that permeated the room. She glanced around to everyone and saw no
confusion in their eyes. “I’m guessing Monokuma was the one who revealed it, right?”

“S-Something like that, yeah…” Hina nervously answered, deciding it was best not to overload
Chihiro’s brain with Taka’s abrupt transformation into a Rule-Nazi—err, Disciplinary Committee
Chairman.

At the same time, said Disciplinary Committee Chairman grew increasingly quiet…much to the
surprise of everyone around him.

Everyone expected Chihiro to be horrified by this revelation, some of them bracing themselves for an
emotional outburst…but it never came. Instead, the weary programmer hung her head and asked, “…
I’m guessing, you all have some questions for me…?”

Her tone was timid but strangely enough, she seemed almost ready for the onslaught of inquiries
she’d undoubtedly face. Perhaps is was the fact that her secret was out in the open, or maybe the fact
that she had head trauma…but whatever the case, it seemed as though she wanted to be done with
the subject as quickly as possible.

“Oh! Oh! I have one!” Genocide Jill abruptly shouted, reminding everyone of her presence. “Are
you into guys or chicks or do you go both ways? I’ve wanted to ask that for ages!”

The temperature in the room suddenly dropped as the serial killer asked that very personal question.
Having not expected such an embarrassing question, Chihiro’s face flushed and her mouth hung
open as she struggled to find any semblance of words to answer that question. All the while
Genocide Jill glared at her expectantly, almost desperate for her inquiry to be addressed.
Unfortunately for Jill, that wish was swiftly dashed as Byakuya cleared his throat and scoffed.

“As much as I’d like to debate Chihiro’s…personal tastes, we have more pressing matters to deal attend to…such as the whereabouts of our missing classmates.”

Chihiro’s complexion paled and her eyes widened as fear once more returned to her expression.

“M-M-Missing?! Wh-Who’s missing?!” the programmer stammered, only now realizing that not everyone was present.

With a sunken expression, Makoto slowly replied, “…Kyoko, Junko, and Hiro. We haven’t been able to find any of them for quite a while now—”.

“And thanks to your excellent timing,” Byakuya sarcastically quipped, glaring down at Chihiro, “Their trail has gone completely cold. Much like their corpses’ will be once they’re discov—”.

“Shut up.”

Firm conviction resonated through those words, startling everyone into silence. As one, the group turned to see Sayaka, standing on her own without Leon’s assistance, glaring furiously at the Togami Heir. Then, without a hint of hesitation, she slowly walked up to him, her shimmering blue eyes glaring up at him with ferocious determination. And even though he towered over her, Byakuya almost seemed to shrink as his own merciless gaze did nothing to stifle her advance.

Getting almost uncomfortably close to him, the pop idol furrowed her brows and said, “No one forced you to come here. If you find this to be such a waste of time, then get out. No one here will object.”

Without missing a beat, Byakuya scoffed and countered, “You plebeians can’t be trusted to handle such delicate matters on your own. If anything, I’m doing you a favor by—”.

“Like the ‘favor’ you pulled when you crucified Chihiro while she was unconscious?” Sayaka snapped, making Byakuya unconsciously flinch.

“C-Crucified?” Everyone turned to see a shocked Chihiro staring at the two of them, her complexion paling more than usual. “W-What do you mean…crucified?”

Keeping her furious gaze locked onto Byakuya, the pop idol practically sneered as she answered, “When we found you, someone had strung you up with an extension cord, putting your already injured body through more unnecessary trauma. And that ‘someone’ turned out to be the esteemed Byakuya Togami.”

The dripping sarcasm fused with the passionate fury in Sayaka’s voice was enough to make even Genocide Jill shiver. And while most of the class were shocked by her brutal comments, Leon, who was leaning against a nearby wall, grinned with satisfaction as she tore the rich bastard a new one!

At the same time, Byakuya’s scowl deepened as the pop idol exposed his dirty deed. Clenching his jaw, he was about to protest when a soft voice interrupted.

“Did…Did he…” Chihiro struggled to form words, looking to Mondo for support as this revelation was made clear to her. “Did he…really do that…to me?”

Mondo’s face twisted in anger but before he could properly answer the question, a sudden shriek erupted from out in the hallway…
Celeste knew the instant she screamed, everything would be set in motion. She’d snuck away into the hall, luckily without being seen, and was currently the only one present. No one could refute what she was about to tell them she’d seen. And since no one had noticed Hifumi was gone, since she’d drawn the curtain around his bed, once they fell for her ploy, it would be too late to stop what she’d planned.

…Unless Hifumi double-crossed her. No…there was no way that would happen! Hifumi’s emphatic love for that computer would keep him on her side! All she’d need to do is remind him of that, and he’d be putty in her hands…just like always. And as long as he played his role accordingly, she’d be out of here before the end of the day!

All she needed to do was kill Hifumi…and then she’d be free! The trial would play out just as she planned, with everyone unable to find the killer…Hiro would be her scapegoat and she’d finally be free of this place! Everyone would be…executed…but she’d be free…and rich enough to buy her castle! Where she’d live the rest of her days in peace…alone…without any guests…or anyone…forever.

“Just like…I’d always dreamed…” she told herself, using her talent to deceive herself one last time before she took a large breath and screamed her unusual signal cry.

With a sharp tug, Hifumi threw open the door and shouted, “Have at thee, cur!!”

Not a moment after his taunt was bellowed out, something nimble swiftly flew toward his face…and bonked him square in the nose. A bit startled, the fanfic creator stepped back as a broom handle clattered to the floor next to him. Raising an eyebrow, Hifumi pulled his head up and gazed into the bathroom closet to find…nothing.

A collection of cleaning supplies; a bucket, a mop, and a broom that was currently lying on the floor, were the only things there. There was no hidden assassin, or secret passage, or even a tied-up damsel waiting for him to rescue her! It was just an ordinary supply closet! Glaring down at the broom, he pieced the puzzle together.

“So, you are the culprit,” he said incredulously, as if the broom had committed a grave offense. “You slipped and tapped the door, making me believe someone was there, only for me to be attacked by you upon thrusting said door open! But! Unable to withstand my powerful physique, you now lay defeated on the floor! And that’s the truth of this case!”

Putting his hands on his hips, Hifumi briefly wondered if this was what Mr. Naegi felt like after solving a puzzle in their class trials…

“Class trials…right…!”

And just like that, his mind wandered back to his current predicament. Only this time, he wasn’t
merely concerned for himself. He thought of everyone that would be sacrificed at the end of the trial…

Imagining their faces twisted in agony as Monokuma executed each one…it sent chills down his spine. They were innocent…far more innocent than himself, who had only a few hours ago been eager to bloody his hands rather than try to find a peaceful solution.

“Mmmph…what would Mr. Naegi do?” he pondered before immediately feeling foolish. “Of course he’d find a way to resolve this peacefully! It’s…what he’s always done…”

Mr. Naegi had always done his best to keep everyone together, almost single handedly solving the first trial. Someone like that…a person who thought only of helping everyone survive…would die, just so he could escape with Miss Ludenberg and Alter Ego. It wasn’t fair…to him or anyone else that would have to die!

“If only there was a way to speak with Miss Ludenberg before—”.

Suddenly, a familiar shout rang through the halls of the school, one that Hifumi instantly recognized…

“Ha-Aaaaah!”

Hifumi stiffened, sweat trickling down his neck. “Crap! The signal!”

The fanfic creator recognized Miss Ludenberg’s distinctive screech instantly, remembering that this was the signal meant to give clearance to his ascent to the third floor and hide in the art supply room. However, despite knowing how little time he had…Hifumi hesitated. He couldn’t help but believe that following along with Miss Ludenberg’s plans was wrong…and yet, if he didn’t, there was still a good chance she’d commit murder on her own…he couldn’t allow that.

Even though Miss Ludenberg was crass and foul-mouthed at times, like a true tsundere it was all to cover up the crippling anxiety and self-doubt she obviously hid behind her façade. In a way, Miss Ludenberg needed saving just as much as Alter Ego did…the question was…how?

“What would Mr. Naegi do…?” Hifumi whispered to himself, desperately trying to come up with something. Then, out of nowhere, it suddenly came to him, just like Mr. Naegi during all of the trials! “Of course! Why didn’t I see it before?! I’ll approach this just like Mr. Naegi would!”

Knowing that haste would be needed to finalize his new plan, Hifumi sped out of the boys second floor restroom, running at top speed toward the third-floor staircase.

“Ha-Aaaaah!”

For a single instance, no one in the nurse’s office moved. The shock of hearing someone scream just outside the door brought everyone back to the reality of their situation. Anxiety began to set in as the students all felt themselves harden a bit in response. And then, chaos erupted…

“That was Celeste!” Hina shouted, speeding toward the door even faster than Byakuya, who was only a few steps behind.

They were immediately followed by Sakura and Taka, with Makoto, Sayaka, and Leon trailing just behind them. Just behind them, Genocide Jill skipped pleasantly, giggling to herself as her
excitement began to rise.

As everyone sped into the hall, Mondo briefly glanced at Chihiro, who took up a determined expression and nodded to him. Seeing that acknowledgement, the biker leapt up from his seat on her bed and ran after his classmates, leaving a worried but understanding Chihiro behind.

Once everyone was outside, they all crowded around Celeste, whose usual complexion seemed even more pale than usual.

“Celeste! What happened?!” Hina inquired, gently placing a supportive hand on her friend’s shoulder.

With a shaky hand, Celeste pointed toward the first-floor stairway and said, “I… I saw a figure at the top of the stairs!”

“What?!” Sakura shouted and spun to face the stairway. Then, glancing over her shoulder, she asked, “What did they look like? Was it your attacker from before?!”

Shaking her head, Celeste answered, “It was not the man in the robot suit. They wore a strange mask, so I could not see their face—”.

“Was the mask really creepy? With, like, a huge disturbing grin on it?!” Hina jumped in, piecing together whom the attacker was.

“I… believe it was,” Celeste confirmed with a nod. “However, I did not get a good look at it, the perpetrator fled as soon as they saw me—”.

“Then we have no time to waste!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru interrupted, as if taking command of the situation. With a flourished hand wave, he turned all attention toward himself as he addressed everyone. “Two of us will remain here while the rest pursue the masked man! Who would like to volunteer—?”

“I don’t have time for this frivolity.”

None of the students were surprised when Byakuya spoke up, and they were even less surprised when he suddenly ran ahead on his own… with Genocide Jill keeping pace just behind him.

“Kyaahahahahaha! I’m really feeling it now! Never figured I’d be the one chasing down a criminal!” they heard Genocide Jill gleefully shout as she followed Byakuya up the first-floor staircase.

An eerie silence filled the area as they departed, but it didn’t last long.

“As much as it pains me to admit, Byakuya has a point,” Sakura reluctantly concurred, turning to face the stairway. “We have little time, and I’m afraid that my skills will be needed to subdue this villain. I must be off!”

She didn’t wait for approval, instead choosing to follow her instincts, and sped off toward the stairway. As the others watched her go, it became clear that swift action was needed.

“Wait for me, Sakura!” Hina shouted as she prepared to follow, but hesitated as she glanced toward Celeste. “Sorry, but I’m going too!”

“Then I shall accompany you,” the gambler swiftly replied, smiling brightly at her companion. “It won’t be a problem as long as we are together, yes?”
As one would expect, Celeste’s gesture caused a smile to erupt onto Hina’s face as she instantly concurred, “Right! Let’s go, Celeste!”

The two of them took off after Sakura, not even sparing a word for Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru. He held out a hand in a vain attempt to stop them, but didn’t have time to shout before someone else volunteered for the chase.

“I’m going with them!” Mondo abruptly shouted, his voice full of righteous fury. “If the masked freak was tough enough to give Sakura trouble, she’s gonna need all the help she can get!”

Before he took a single step, a white haired, blazing eyed Committee Chairman leapt in front of him, blocking his path.

“You fool!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru immediately reprimanded, narrowing his gaze at the biker. “Your responsibility is to guard Chihiro! That is what we decided as a group to be your punishment! We cannot have you abandoning your post—”.

“Sayaka and I will stay here and watch over Chihiro and Hifumi,” Leon suddenly announced, lightly pounding his chest with one fist. Glancing at Mondo, the baseball star grinned and finished, “You just promise to catch the bastard, alright?!”

As Leon’s words of confidence rang in his ears, Mondo could practically feel the baseball star’s trust. Not wanting to betray that trust, the biker’s visage hardened as he sidestepped Taka and dashed toward the stairs.

Meanwhile, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru was so stunned by everyone’s disobedience that he failed to act as Mondo passed him, leaving him feeling dumbstruck and frustrated. Gritting his teeth, he turned his ferocious aura back toward the baseball star.

“T-This is preposterous!” A furious Taka shouted at Leon, taking a decisive step toward him. “The two of you won’t be able to fend off anyone who—!”

“Don’t underestimate us.” Almost effortlessly, Sayaka stepped between the two, aiming a determined glare directly at Taka. “We’re not as weak as you seem to think we are…none of us are.”

Taka flinched as her voice penetrated his ears, her words like dagger stabbing into all corners of his mind. Standing there, unable to retort, all he could do was watch as Sayaka took Leon by the hand and led him back into the nurse’s office, throwing one last determined look over her shoulder before slamming the door.

For several moments after they’d gone, Taka stood in silence, trying to contemplate how he’d so quickly lost control of the situation. Only Makoto was there with him now, and for a moment, the Disciplinary Chairman thought it was because the lucky student truly desired guidance from him.

However, that hope was quickly dashed when Makoto placed a hand on his shoulder and said, “We should keep looking for the others. With all this commotion, I’m sure they’ll come to investigate. We need to make sure they’re all right.”

Makoto’s unintentional rejection sent waves of uncertainty through Taka’s mind…but he couldn’t deny that the lucky student had a valid point. Three people were still missing, and if everyone else was busy fulfilling other duties…it fell to him to continue the search!

“…Indeed. Let’s keep searching then,” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru agreed, slowly trudging off in search of their missing classmates.
From up on high, Junko watched the chase and search through the monitors...her eyes moving independently as she analyzed every aspect of the chaos. All the while, a despair-induced grin settled onto her face, which slowly widened into a sadistic smirk as her rolling eyeball suddenly focused on one particular camera:

The Art Supply Room...where Hifumi waited for his 'tsundere' companion to arrive.

“Here’s where the magic’s gonna happen!” Junko giggled to herself as she glanced down at the monitor Celeste was on, watching her meticulously make her way to her destination. “Which is more palpable, I wonder? The despair of having your plans utterly ruined? Or the despair of desperation and betrayal? Either way...Momma’s gonna get her despair on tonight!”

Junko’s hand subconsciously began roaming her own body as she watched with glee at the unfolding chaos. Beside her, an entire stack of Hawaiian flower leis sat...ready to be implemented.

“Dammit! I’m so close and yet so far!” Celeste mentally cursed as she ‘investigated’ the art room along with Hina. “Why did I agree to search with her?! I could have elected to go on my own!”

Even as she thought that, she knew this was the best option. Besides, this would be the last time she and Hina would hang out before the swimmer was executed along...with...everyone...

“God-dammit! Stop thinking about that! Hina means nothing to Celestia Ludenberg! She’s a detriment to my dream and I don’t need someone like her slowing me down!”

While the swimmer kept searching for anything that might lead her to finding her classmates or the masked freak, the gambler continued to eye the supply room door...which was currently locked. She’d secretly tested it without Hina’s knowledge but knew she couldn’t signal Hifumi to let her in while the swimmer was present...leading to her current predicament.

“I’m not losing this now! I’m so close! Just on the other side of the door is my ticket to freedom!”

With that driving thought, she carefully removed one of her earrings and hid it near the supply room door. Standing up, she turned to face Hina and said, “I believe we’ve searched this room long enough. We should investigate elsewhere, don’t you agree?”

Peeking around one of the marble statues in the room, Hina reluctantly sighed and nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. We should probably find Sakura and search with her. It’ll be safer that way anyway.”

“I agree...” Celeste concurred, making her way out of the art room with Hina close behind. As they exited the room, the gambler purposefully played with her bangs closest to her ear that was missing the earring and said, “Where should we go form here? We’ve already searched the Rec Room and the classrooms...”

“Hmm, I’m not sure...” the swimmer replied, a puzzled look crossing her face. All the while, Celeste continued to twirl her hair, watching for Hina’s reaction.

“Take the bait...take the bait...take...bait...God-dammit!”

Suddenly, Hina gave a little gasp as she leaned in toward Celeste. “Hey, Celeste...I think you’re missing an earring.”
“Checkmate!!”

“Oh, dear me…you are correct,” she feigned ignorance, fiddling with her naked ear. “It must have come loose in the art room. I am positive I had it when we went inside.”

“Really? Do you think it might still be in there?” Hina asked, as if prepared to go and search for it.

Celeste held back a smirk as she continued, “Do not worry, I believe I know exactly where I misplaced it. If you’d be so kind as to wait here, I’ll retrieve it and be back momentarily.”

To this, Hina raised an eyebrow and said, “You sure you don’t need any help? Two pairs of eyes are better than one, you know!”

Again, Celeste’s chest grew tight at Hina’s kind-hearted offer. She had no idea that she was being completely manipulated…poor girl had probably never told a lie in her entire life. That should have made things easier but, instead, it just intensified the guilt that Celestia Ludenberg had conceived. She just needed a little more time…just a few minutes to kill Hifumi and then let this tragedy unfold around her.

“Just a little more…I just need to get through this! I’m on the home stretch…just need to push it a little further and then…everything with work out…it has too…”

With a perfect smile, she pleasantly replied, “Thank you, but it will only take a moment. Besides, with you keeping watch out here, there is no way anyone could get past you. Perhaps Sakura will come by while you wait? Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

“Oh…yeah, I guess it would,” Hina answered, obviously a bit surprised by that answer. “Okay then, I’ll wait for you out here. But don’t take too long, okay?”

“No need to worry,” Celeste said as walked past the swimmer, a devious smile revealed once she was out of sight. “This will only take a minute…”

With no more obstacles in her way, she rushed toward the art supply room as fast as her legs would carry her.

KNOCK * KNOCK * KNOCK

“Hifumi…it’s me. Unlock the door,” Celeste called out in a low voice, glancing over her shoulder to be sure she wasn’t overheard.

A few moments later, a heavy clack, signaling the unlocking of the door, echoed. She waited a moment, giving him time to take up his ‘injured’ position. Taking a deep breath, Celeste forced away all pity, compassion, and emotion from her being, in preparation for the horrific deed she was about to commit. Turning the handle and slowly pushing the door open, the gambler had expected to find Hifumi playing dead on the floor, as she’d instructed. Unfortunately, to her shock, and horror, as she stepped inside, she saw him standing completely upright in front of her, an unreadable expression on his face.

Instantly, the resolve she’d built up dissipated, replaced with uncontrollable fear and anxiety. Without a word, she slammed the door shut, frantically locking it before turning to face her co-conspirator.
“H-Hifumi, dear!” she forced herself to stay ‘in-character’, maintaining her accent despite the great shock she’d just received. Recalling her own plot, she purposefully glanced back at the doorway before saying, “W-Why aren’t you…following the plan? You were supposed to be ‘unconscious’ when I arrived…”

The fanfic creator’s face twitched slightly, growing increasingly nervous as she spoke. “I…I know that but…wait a second…where is Mr. Ishimaru? I thought you were going to bring him with you?”

“Shit!” the gambler mentally cursed, frustrated that her bluff had unintentionally been called. “I have to think fast! I just need him to turn around for a few seconds!”

“Taka is just outside, in the art room,” she skillfully lied, praying Hifumi wouldn’t notice that ‘Taka’ was being uncharacteristically quiet. “Once you assume your intended position, I will ‘discover’ you and bring him here. Then, we can enact vengeance on him together.”

“Oh…I see…” a visibly hesitant Hifumi answered, his resolve all but gone by this point. It was making him entirely uncooperative, something she’d noticed back in the nurse’s office.

However, in spite of this setback, Celeste was confident she could overcome this last obstacle and finally free herself of this wretched place! The hammer she’d hidden was only a few feet away. All she needed to do was get him to turn his back, then she’d cave in his otaku skull and complete her master pla—

“Miss Ludenberg…I’ve been thinking. Perhaps we should turn ourselves in…”

CRACK

She heard it, clear as day…even though it was only in her head. Her perfect mask, the one she’d spent years crafting and honing…had just crumbled into pieces. Those words…Hifumi’s decision to back out now…at the most critical point…had completely shattered the one thing holding her mind together.

And now that it was gone…all hell would break loose.

Celeste’s face twisted violently, pure rage surging forth as she let out a furious scream, “ARE YOU F**KING KIDNING ME?!”

Hifumi reeled back, absolute terror engulfing him as she stomped over and grabbed him by the collar with hands, pulling him down to meet her rage-infused gaze.

“DON’T YOU F**KING GET IT YET!” she howled in his face, all traces of her accent completely gone. “IF WE DON’T FOLLOW THE F**KING PLAN, THEY’LL HAVE US EXECUTED!! KILLED! DEAD! IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT, FATSO?!”

She was shaking him now, her emotions overruling her judgement as her fragile mind struggled to comprehend just how f**ked they now were. Everything she’d planned, all the work she’d put into making her escape…gone! Her plan had practically burst into flames around her at every turn, proving the Murphy’s Law did in fact exist and that the universe hated her!

The fanfic creator desperately tried to form words but all he could manage was to hang his mouth open and sputter, “Uhhh…ummm…ahhh…”

“I AM NOT GETTING EXECUTED! YOU HEAR ME!” she continued yelling, her nails digging into his skin beneath his shirt. “I’VE COME TOO FAR TO LET THAT HAPPEN! I’M NOT DYING IN A FILTHY SHITHOLE LIKE THIS! DO YOU HEAR ME?!”
Shaking him even more violently than before, Celeste couldn’t even begin to wonder how she’d fix this problem. Her mind was too frantic. Panic had set in and there was no way to dispel it, and it was seeping deeper and deeper into her soul with each passing moment.

Suddenly, two large hands gripped her own, a sensation that startled her so completely that she immediately stopped shaking him. Dazed for a moment, she blinked rapidly in confusion as Hifumi grasped her hands tightly...almost reassuringly.

“T-There is no need to fear, Miss Ludenberg! I know what we must do!” the fanfic creator shouted, deepening his voice dramatically. “We must appeal to Mr. Naegi for aid! Once we explain ourselves, I’m sure that he can convince the others to stand down!”

The power behind his words hit Celeste like a freight train, her jaw dropping from the sheer shock of his suggestion. Loosening her grip, her hands slipped downward out of his grasp, falling to her side, and swaying back and forth for a moment. Her gaze lowered but her shocked expression didn’t dissipate. Instead, it slowly began to morph...

“...Appeal to Makoto? That’s your great idea...?” she questioned aloud, as if expecting a response. However, she didn’t give him enough time before her face twisted in anger as she shouted, “IF YOU THINK I’M PUTTING MY LIFE IN THE HANDS OF THAT NAÏVE DIPSHIT, YOU’VE GOT ANOTHER THING COMING! HE’LL PROBABLY JUST EXECUTE US ANYWAY, ONCE HE FINDS OUT WHAT WE ALMOST DID—!”

Despite her brutal rage, Hifumi didn’t back down, pointing a finger at her accusingly. “No, that’s wrong!”

Gasping in surprise, a startled Celeste took a step back as Hifumi used their classmate’s catchphrase to silence her. All at once, she felt as though she was in a class trial, staring down the opposition that wished to destroy all of her hopes and dreams. Before she could collect her wits, the fanfic creator began shouting.

“Since there has been no killing thus far, we cannot be put on trial! And once we speak with Mr. Naegi, he will help smooth things over with Mr. Ishimaru! No one will need to die and we can all work out our issues in peace!”

As he shouted, he took several steps forward, unintentionally forcing Celeste to back away from him. From deep inside, Celeste felt a twinge of fear as he towered over her, his large body suddenly becoming immeasurably intimidating as he closed the gap between them. Her rage was immediately replaced with fearful anxiety as she felt all of her power and control slip away.

“B-B-But! What about your revenge?!?” she tried to reason, slightly recovering her accent. “Do you not seek vengeance for Taka stealing away your beloved Alter Ego?!”

She expected that to at least slow him down and give her time to formulate another strategy. However, the fanfic creator’s advance didn’t lessen. In fact, it seemed to increase in speed, further pushing her toward the corner of the art supply room.

“Once we admit to our wrong-doings, I’m certain that Mr. Ishimaru will come to his senses and release my beautiful digital angel!” Hifumi proclaimed, shaking his fist emphatically, which sent waves of terror down Celeste’s spine.

“That’s ludicrous! There’s no way someone as stubborn as—!”

As she spoke, Celeste’s back suddenly hit the far back wall, preventing her from retreating further.
At the same time, Hifumi invaded her personal space, his stomach unintentionally rubbing up against her. Panic soon enveloped her as she realized there was nowhere to run…and she was completely at his mercy.

“For the sake of our continued survival, we must turn ourselves in!” Hifumi bellowed as he stared down into Celeste’s terrified visage. “I know you said you’d take responsibility if we were caught, but I bear much of the blame as well! Therefore, we need to admit to our wrong-doings together!”

As he spoke, she avoided meeting his gaze, her eyes frantically searching for some way to escape. And that’s when she noticed exactly where she was…the far corner with a large dresser…the place where she’d hidden the mallet she planned to bludgeon Hifumi with. She could see the handle clearly…and it was within reach.

And apparently, Hifumi hadn’t noticed it’s presence yet…

“Miss Ludenberg!” His loud voice shot her attention back to him, only to watch him drop to his knees before he, bowing his head deeply. “I implore you to reconsider your plan and turn yourself in with me! Please, Miss Ludenberg! We have no other choice!”

As he groveled at her feet, Celeste’s breathing became ragged as panic flooded her being. Her heart was pounding, adrenaline was rushing in her veins, and her mind was foggy. She couldn’t think straight, even if she wanted to. The nearby mallet handle was calling to her, begging to be used, providing her a way out of this horrifying situation.

Subconsciously, she must have realized this was the perfect chance to strike. Hifumi was practically asking to be bludgeoned, and in her frazzled state, she could think of no other way to survive this ordeal.

If he turned them in, she knew...knew they’d never forgive her. There was no doubt in her mind. She would be executed, probably by having her lying tongue cut out! Unintentional images flooded her mind...horrific visions of Monokuma holding her tongue out with pliers as a blade slowly descended—

“NO! I WON’T LET IT HAPPEN! I WILL LIVE! I WILL HAVE MY CASTLE! I’LL FINALLY HAVE THE LIFE I’VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF! I’LL FIND HAPPINESS! I WON’T LET YOU KILL ME!”

Almost instinctively, she reached for the mallet, her slender hand gripping the handle tightly as she pulled it from it’s hiding place. With a great struggle, she managed to lift the mallet over her head, preparing to crush Hifumi’s bowing head. Closing her eyes, she prepared to swing the mallet...

However, even if it was only for a moment, she hesitated. At first, she wasn’t sure why…but suddenly, the image of Hina flew into her mind...cruelly reminding her that by killing Hifumi...she was killing Hina as well. Despite that, Celeste’s fragile mind also told her that if she didn’t take this opportunity...she’d be executed anyway. That paralyzing fear of death seized her…and a single tear slipped from her eye.

As this merciless reality came crashing down on her, she was forced to realize that...in the end...she truly...

“I HAVE NO CHOICE!”

Snapping her eye open, she prepared to swing...when she noticed a pair of beady black eyes staring up at her in shock and alarm. Celeste drew in a sharp gasp, her entire body frozen as she stared
directly into her intended victim’s eyes. And in that moment…she saw everything he was feeling: 
surprise, anger, hurt, sadness, confusion…and more of all…betrayal.

She had seen this before, in the eyes of her gambling victims…but never so intensely. There was 
always anger at being tricked or cheated in a gambling match…but the immense hurt and shock of 
possibly losing their life? That was not something she’d ever experienced before…or had planned to 
experience. Her entire being trembled as she finally felt the full weight of her decisions collapse 
reality around her…feeling the utter despair that came with taking a human life…

The onslaught brought about by this direct eye contact caused Celeste to shudder, her grip on the 
hammer weakening. As it began to slip, her arms fell forward, bringing the hammer down directly 
toward Hifumi. Even if she wanted to stop it, she couldn’t. The weight of the hammer was too much 
for her and, whether she meant to or not, it was on a collision course with the fanfic creator’s face.

But then…the momentum stopped, and it took Celeste a few moments to realize why. Her crimson 
eyes widened as she discovered that, without her even realizing it, Hifumi had shot up to his feet and 
grasped the falling hammer by the handle, keeping it from descending. Towering over her once 
more, holding a firm grasp on the only means she had to defend herself, Hifumi’s emotion-filled eyes 
glared down into her very soul.

“Miss…Ludenberg…You…You tried to kill me…” he said slowly, his grip tightening around 
hammer handle. Through gritted teeth, he proclaimed, “You actually…meant…to kill me!”

All at once, intense fear took hold of Celeste, and she frantically began try to tug the mallet from his 
iron grasp. Unfortunately, in her frantic and frazzled state, she could barely hold a firm grasp, let 
alone try and tear it away from him. And then, with a sudden jerk, Hifumi ripped the mallet from her 
slender hands, leaving her entirely at her intended victim’s mercy.

“Mercy? No…there won’t be any mercy…”

Hifumi, now armed with the mallet she’d intended to murder him with, glared down at her with 
intense rage. She’d seen that visage before, when he’d talked about murdering Taka in cold blood. 
Only now, the object of his destructive ire would be her…a thought that caused her legs to buckle as 
her face twisted in terror.

Her back pressed against the back wall, her legs pushing away from Hifumi despite knowing there 
was nowhere to escape. She began to hyperventilate as the fanfic creator readjusted his grip on the 
hammer, obviously intending to smash her into tiny, bloody bits. She was going to be killed… 
murdered by the very person she’d intended to kill in order to achieve freedom.

As that realization dawned on her, she let everything slip away. Her pride, her dignity, her honor… 
all of it melted away. In that moment, Celestia Ludenberg vanished, and in her place sat Taeko 
Yasuhiro, a frightened young woman whose only desire…was to live.

Suddenly, she let out an ear shattering scream pierced the air of Hope’s Peak Academy.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
Greetings, my beautiful readers! Sorry this took so long to get out, but I assure there are reasons. But what will happen now?! Will Hifumi exact his revenge on Celeste? Will anyone arrive to help her? And if so, who? You’ll have to tune in next time to find out!

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT:

As you may have noticed, this chapter took longer than I anticipated to release. The reason for that is simple…my beta and I are having issues getting our schedules to synchronize. To that effect, we’ve decided to ask if any of you would be interested in being a second beta for this story!

Now, this would only be for spelling and grammar mistakes, as that is what holds us up most of the time. Benefits would be getting to read the story ahead of time, and being a part of our team…also virtual cookies, fresh from the oven! But seriously, if anyone would be able to help us, we’d appreciate it.

Bear in mind that we need someone who’d be able to look over each chapter very quickly and efficiently. If you think you can do that, then please leave a comment to let me know you’re interested. Thank you!

Aside from that, I wanted to thank all of you for being patient with me. I know productivity has been slow, but honestly, things have been hard lately. I lost three grandparents all at once at the beginning of this year and it’s been affecting everything, writing especially. So, I apologize for the delays but I promise that soon (with the help of a new beta) I’ll be able to get more chapters out more quickly!

As always, reviews are very much appreciated, as they truly make my day! Thanks again and have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Hifumi and Celeste’s confrontation continues...leading to a brand new bullying trial!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“AAAIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEE!!”

The instant that ear-splitting scream reached her ears, Hina jerked her head toward the art room, her face contorting with unfathomable dread. Like a bullet, she shot off toward the origin of her friend’s scream. Once inside, she quickly surveyed the room, and when Celeste was nowhere to be seen, her blue irises locked onto the art supply room door. Dashing over, she unintentionally collided with the door, trying to twist the handle but to no avail. Realizing it was locked, Hina began pounding on the door with her fist.

“Celeste! Are you in there?! Answer me!” she shouted, bashing her shoulder into the door in a futile attempt to open it.

“AHAHHHH! AHHHHHHH!”

Hina froze as her friend’s scream reverberated in her ears, her blood running cold as she flashed back to the moment she’d seen Sayaka…lying lifeless in Makoto’s bathroom. Almost instantly, her imagination conjured the same image, but in the art supply room…with Celeste lying there instead…her body bleeding and broken as the life drained from her eyes—

“CELESTE!” Hina found herself screaming, shaking that horrific image from her mind. “HANG ON! I’M COMING!”

Without hesitation, the swimmer ran back to the entrance of the art room, steeling herself as she took a runner stance that Sakura had taught her. Kicking off, she ran at full speed and she slammed her body into the art supply room door, a powerful cracking noise echoing. However, as she collided with the wooden obstruction, her body was bounced back, causing her to topple to the floor. A painful grunt escaped her throat and her entire body ached but she ignored it, lifting her gaze only to have her eyes widen. A tiny crack had formed in the door, but it still seemed stuck in place.

At that moment, the door slightly shook as someone on the other side pounded on it. And then…Celeste’s voice rang out:

“H-HELP! HE’S GOING TO KILL ME!”

The instant those words reach her, Hina felt a powerful rush of adrenaline. Leaping to her feet, Hina pounded on the door again, hoping to bash it open. Unfortunately, it refused to budge, but the swimmer didn’t relent, banging her fist repeatedly into the unrelenting wood.

“Open! Open, you stupid door!” she shouted, tears of desperation brimming in her eyes as she threw her shoulder against the door. “Celeste…Celeste needs me! I have to—!”
“H-Hina! What the hell’s goin’ on?! Where’d that screamin’ come from?!” a gruff voice suddenly shouted from behind her. Her blue eyes widening, Hina spun around to see Mondo charging toward her, a frantic look on his face.

Sniffling a bit, the Ultimate Swimmer turned back to the door and continued to pound on it as she answered, “I-I heard Celeste scream from inside here! But…But I can’t…I can’t…get it…!”

“Get outta the way!” the biker suddenly shouted, grabbing her by the shoulder and pushing her aside.

Hina would have complained about how rough he was with her…if she hadn’t have seen his expression. His face was twisted with anger, but not the usual kind. It was…like a kind of righteous fury was pouring out of his eyes, his teeth gritted tightly as he lifted his boot and angled it toward the door handle.

“No one’s dyin’ on my watch!” Hina heard him whisper as he steeled himself. Then, without warning, he viciously shouted, “No one’s dyin’ on my watch!”

Mondo’s boot crashed into the door, the sounds of wood and metal cracking as it was forced open.

Hifumi glared down at Celeste, his eyes bubbling with righteous fury at the very sight of her. Not only had she manipulated him into attempting to kill their classmate, he now had doubts that Taka had even threatened her! In retrospect, he had always been skeptical of Miss Ludenberg’s words…but she was a tsundere, so he figured she just wasn’t good at being honest with her feelings. But now…it seems he’d been mistaken.

“This little…bitch! She tried to kill me! Tried to make a murderer out of me!” Unconsciously, he clenched his fist, his anger slowly building. “How dare she…how dare she think that she can—!”

“AAAIIIIIIIEEEEEEEE!!”

“W-Why is she the one screaming?!” a confused Hifumi frantically thought as Celeste’s scream deafened him. “She’s not the one who nearly got her brain smashed in with a—oh…right.”

Suddenly, Hifumi realized he was still holding the large mallet Celeste had planned to bludgeon him with. Turning his gaze back to his would-be attacker, his eyes widened in shock. The usually smug and fearsome Celestia Ludenberg was nowhere to be found…in her place sat a frightened, frantic young woman with her back pressed firmly against the wall.

Her face was warped with fear and her eyes dilated as she stared at the hammer in his hands. Her fingernails digging into the floor as she visibly trembled, genuine terror radiating off her as he towered over her. At that moment, all of Hifumi’s anger dissipated…replaced with acute understanding.

“She…She’s terrified…” the fanfic creator suddenly recognized, his grip on the mallet loosening. “She...she thinks...I’m going to kill her...doesn’t she—?”

Before he could act on that information, a furious pounding came from the locked door only a few feet away.

“Celeste! Are you in there?! Answer me!”
Startled by the sudden shouting, Hifumi suddenly gripped the mallet tightly with both hands. A sudden gasp grabbed his attention and without thinking he turned his entire body toward Celeste. Her crimson eyes were as wide as saucers, staring at his imposing figure who now appeared ready to bash her skull in. Realizing his precarious position, the fanfic creator shifted his weight in preparation to back away. However, before he had a chance to move, another set of screams ripped from Celeste’s throat!

“AHAHHHH! AHHHHHNNH!”

Taken aback by the sudden screams, Hifumi lost his balance and was forced to take a few steps back to catch himself. Steadying himself, the fanfic creator turned back to see Celeste eyeing the door before her gaze shot back to him. Instantly, he knew what she would try and do.

“No! If she unlocks that door, she’ll tell everyone I’m the culprit! And then…she’ll survive the bullying trial and get to leave while the rest of us are executed! I can’t let that happen!”

Just then, without warning, Celeste shot to her feet, obviously preparing to dash for the door. Unfortunately, she underestimated how quickly the fanfic creator could move while under duress. On instinct, Hifumi leapt in front of her, brandishing the hammer and blocking her path. A weak yelp escaping her as her back hit the wall again, her eyes widening in sheer panic as he glared down at her.

“CELESTE! HANG ON! I’M COMING!”

“I can’t just let Hina in here! Everyone will think I’m the one who planned everything! But if I do, Miss Ludenberg will just come up with another lie to protect herself—!”

Distracted by Hina’s sudden shout from beyond the door, Hifumi barely noticed that Celeste had leapt back up to her feet and was running toward the other end of the room…directly toward the wall with the other wooden mallets! Panic coursed through the fanfic creator as he took off after her, catching up to her just as she began to reach for another mallet. His sweaty hand shot out, grasping the collar of her dress, and with a fierce tug and forceful shout, he yanked her back.

An uncharacteristic yell tore out of Celeste’s throat as she lost her balance and fell backward, crashing into Hifumi’s chest. Unprepared for this, the fanfic creator yelped and toppled onto his backside, grunting in anguish as Celeste landed on top of him, knocking the air from his lungs.

Just then, a loud bash echoed from the door, accompanied by a groan from who Hifumi could only assume was Hina. Hifumi jerked his head toward the door, indecision clouding his judgement as he tried to reason out the best course of action. Unfortunately, he didn’t have time to come up with a plan as Celeste quickly regained her wits, pushing against his girth, and rolling off him before clumsily rising to her feet. On shaky legs, she ran for the door, stumbling multiple times as a winded Hifumi slowly picked himself back up.

Slowly regaining his composure, Hifumi’s beady eyes widened as he witnessed Celeste reaching the door, practically slamming into it as she reached for the handle.

“No! She’s going to deceive everyone! She’ll get us all killed!” he frantically thought, unconsciously gripping the mallet he’d stolen from her. “I can’t let that happen! I won’t let that happen!”

Gritting his teeth, the fanfic creator grasped the hammer tightly in both hand before slowly advancing toward the unsuspecting Celeste…

“Miss Ludenberg… I won’t let you get away!”
“I can’t…I won’t die like this!” Celeste mentally panicked as she ran at full speed toward the door.

She lost her balance, stumbling and barely catching herself, tripping over her own bright red heels as she ran toward safety. Unfortunately, in her haste, she stumbled once more, but this time she twisted her ankle as she fell. She barely felt the pain, the adrenaline coursing through her no doubt suppressing it. Ignoring the stinging sensation that pulsed with each step, she raced toward the door faster than a mouse fleeing a cat.

“…Just need to get there! I just need to reach the door!”

She didn’t even bother to slow down, her lithe body colliding into the door with an unsavory thunk. She’d been lucky so far, acting on pure instinct as she evaded Hifumi’s murderous advances. Her adrenaline was racing and that was probably the only thing that had saved her, allowing her to react quicker than she normally would. And now, with Hina just on the other side of the door, her escape from Hifumi’s unforgiving rage was all but assured!

Glancing over her shoulder for an instant, she saw that Hifumi was already getting back up, but she still had time to unlock the—

The instant her hands touched the doorknob, she gasped. Her crimson eyes shot down to see the knob twisted and bent, the deadbolt jammed into the wooden frame of the door, preventing it from opening. Panic coursed through her veins once more as she grasped the doorknob with both hand and violently jerked it, twisting it every which way trying to dislodge it. Tears stung her eyes as her only means of fleeing to safety was quickly dashed.

“Dammit! How the fuck did this happen?!” She thought back to a moment ago, when someone she could assume was Hina, had tried to bash the door down. “Fucking fuck! This can’t be happening! Why is everything so fucked up?! It wasn’t supposed to be like this! This wasn’t what was supposed to—f”

“Miss Ludenberg…”

Celeste felt her blood run cold as that harsh tone reached her, seeping into the depths of her already unstable psyche. With slow, jerky movements, Celeste turned her head to glance behind her, her breathing uneven and ragged. Her crimson eyes widened as she saw Hifumi standing right behind her, the glint of his glasses completely obscuring what she knew had to be murderous eyes.

“…I won’t let you get away!”

In that moment, an all-consuming thought invaded Celeste’s mind…a truth that even she couldn’t lie about, “He’s…going to kill me. I’m…going to die…”

Her life suddenly flashed before her eyes, seeing every joyful, peaceful, sorrowful, and tragic choice she’d made that had led her to this fate. And, even if it was only for an instant, she wished she could take it all back. She didn’t care about money, fame, or…even her castle. All she wanted in that moment…was to live…to survive this horrific encounter and see another day. Even if it meant having to stay trapped in this school until the end of her days, she’d gladly accept that fate if she could be saved from the gruesome death that Hifumi obviously planned for her.

Sheer terror enveloped her very soul as she sharply turned back to the door, pounding her fist frantically against it.
“H-HELP! HE’S GOING TO KILL ME!”

She had no idea if anyone would hear her…and she honestly didn’t expect anyone to come to her rescue. After all, with all the negative karma she’d built up over the years, lying and swindling so many people…it was almost appropriate that this would be her end, her own machinations becoming the foundation upon which her fate was sealed.

Even so…

“I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to—!

A sudden hand grasping the collar on the back of her dress disrupted her thoughts, as she was yanked away from the door and tossed back toward the center of the room. An undignified groan escaped her as she hit the floor, pain shooting through her injured ankle as the aching of her body vaguely reminded her of the horrific dream she’d been having recently…the one in which she was battered and executed.

Shaking her head in a vain attempt to dispel the memory of the dream, her attention immediately shot back to her attacker as his massive footsteps echoed right next to her. Craning her neck up, her eyes dilated as she witnessed Hifumi standing over her, both hands clasping the wooden mallet she’d intended to take his life with…but would now be used to end hers instead.

All of her strength vanished as she stared up at him…her body trembling as she waited for the hammer to be brought down.

“Well…that went well,” the fanfic creator congratulated himself, glancing between the door and Celeste. “Now that Miss Ludenberg is no longer near the door, the others will be able to knock it down without hurting her!”

Considering she wasn’t actually injured yet, any injuries she sustained would have been blamed on him. And since he knew she was smart enough convince the others of almost anything, he didn’t want to add to her testimony. But now that he’d gotten Celeste into the center of the room and away from the misshapen door, which seemed to have been jammed due to Hina trying to break it down, Hifumi was now prepared to set his new plan in motion. And as long as nothing unexpected happened, everything would turn out alright.

“Oh, okay, so as soon as everyone else gets here, I’ll toss the hammer away and calmly explain to them that I was simply subduing her. I’m sure that they’ll understa—”.

In the midst of his thoughts, a thunderous cracking noise echoed from the door. With a nervous glance, Hifumi watched as someone’s boot bashed down the door, tearing it off the hinges. Then, like a raging bull, Mondo burst through the door way, his eyes narrowed and furious.

“Oh no…Mondo’s looking for trouble!”

Startled by the sudden intrusion, Hifumi completely forgot to discard the large mallet in his hands…a mistake that became apparent the instant Mondo’s mad eyes locked onto him.

The biker glanced down at Celeste for only an instant before gritting his teeth and clenching his fists.
“You son of a bitch!” he screamed before charging directly at an unprepared Hifumi.

In the midst of this new crisis, there was only one idea Hifumi found himself able to shout, “No, Mondo! No! Don’t loot the room—egargh!”

With almost no concern for his own safety, Mondo dove at Hifumi and tackled him to the floor, the large wooden mallet flying out of the fanfic creator’s hands. Pinned down with his face being pressed into the ground by Mondo’s hand, Hifumi squirmed and tried to get free.

“Y-You donhu understann!” the fanfic creator tried to shout, his words muffled by the hand gripping his face. “She wassh, tryhing too—!”

“Shut it, you bastard!” the biker interrupted, his grip on Hifumi’s face tightening, making the fanfic creator writhe beneath him. “I saw what you were trying to do! And I won’t let you try to talk your way out of it!”

Unable to free himself from Mondo’s grappling, Hifumi watched in horror as the biker raised his other fist high into the air. The fanfic creator squealed and struggled, trying to escape the rage-filled fist aimed directly for his face. However, Mondo held him tight and it seemed there was no way to escape. Even so, Hifumi flailed around useless, knowing that this would be over with a single punch.

“Haff mercy!” the fanfic creator screamed, his eyes begging. “Pleass don’t usesh a serious punsh on me!”

Unfortunately, that plea fell on deaf ears as Mondo’s eyes narrowed and he reared his hand even further back. An almost inhuman squeal escaped Hifumi as he squinted his eyes shut and prepared his face for the oncoming fist of doom.

Only…it never came. A few moments passed but nothing happened. However, Hifumi wasn’t a fool. He knew that the instant he opened his eyes, the fist would descend and embed his glasses permanently into his face. It was a common element in fighting manga but he didn’t want to experience it in real life! And so, he kept his eyes firmly shut as he continually prayed for Princess Piggles to swoop down and rescue him from this horrific—

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” the gruff voice of Mondo accusatory echoed in his ears, inciting further panic in the fanfic creator.

Was Mondo seriously asking why he was averting his gaze from the fist that threatened to make his face one with his glasses? Did no one ever flinch when getting punched by the biker in the past or was he really that stupid—

“Preventing you from making another mistake…” a deep but feminine voice answered, followed by an angry growl from Mondo.

Suddenly realizing that Mondo hadn’t been speaking to him, Hifumi tempted fate and opened a single eye. As his vision adjusted, he nearly gasped at the scene before him. Sakura stood over Mondo, her massive hand holding back the biker’s fist in what could only be assumed was an iron grip. Meanwhile, Mondo visibly glared up at her but strangely said nothing, a profound expression of confliction etched into his visage.

The scene itself was moving in ways that Hifumi couldn’t describe, and not just because it seemed he wasn’t going to get one-punched today. From his pinned down position, he was at the perfect angle to view this encounter…and he was suddenly overcome by the desire capture this moment in the frames of a manga panel. If only he’d brought his drawing utensils with him…then he could have—
“Wait, wait! That’s not important right now! I need to tell them of the danger that Miss Ludenberg poses—!”

“CELESTE!”

Before he could utter a word, Hina dashed over to the gambler and threw her arms around her, an act that normally would be reassuring but in this instance…brought a sense of foreboding to Hifumi. As the swimmer held her distressed friend close, Celeste shifted and angled her head toward the rest of them. Then, without any hesitation, Celeste opened a single crimson eye and glanced toward Hifumi. A silent gasp escaped the fanfic creator as he bore witness to the intense bloodlust hidden behind that single crimson iris.

“…You know not the horror you have unleashed!”

“Celeste! Thank goodness you’re safe!” Hina practically shouted in her ear as she was pulled into the tightest embrace she’d ever had.

However, the gambler was still shell-shocked by everything that had occurred. It had all happened so fast; her mind was still racing and she couldn’t get a handle on her emotions. That’s why, as Hina’s grip tightened, Celeste found herself easing into the embrace, laying her head on Hina’s shoulder and letting her arms wrap around her friend in return. She took deep, slow breaths, letting the panic fade from her being as she gradually returned to a rational state of mind.

“I’m alive…I’m…still alive…” she pressed her face into Hina’s shoulder, smudging her make-up as her tears soaked the swimmer’s red sports jacket. “I…survived…but…everything…is ruined. Everything…that I planned…it was all…”

Very slowly, she adjusted her head on Hina’s shoulder, angling it so that she could see out of her right eye. As that crimson iris opened, it just so happened to fall upon her accomplice…Hifumi, the betrayer…being held down by both Mondo and Sakura.

“Hifumi…he…he…he tried to kill me!” Instantly, the anguish and terror she’d experienced was wiped away, replaced with a maddening rage and thirst for vengeance. “How dare he double-cross me! Because of him, I’ve lost everything! I’ll never see the outside world again! If only he’d shut up and stuck to the plan, then I could have…framed…him…for…”

Almost on instinct, the gears in her mind started turning, a new solution to her predicament already half formed before she even realized it. Her gaze narrowed as her only visible eye swirled with desire…with motivation! Faster than she thought possible, she rebuilt her perfect mask, fractured though it may be, and prepared to execute a final strategy that would enable her to achieve her dream!

“I haven’t lost yet! Thanks to Hifumi’s screw up…there’s still one more trump card I can play!”

As malicious intent clouded her visible eye, only Hifumi managed to catch a glimpse of it, a horrified expression taking over as he surely realized his fatal error. At the same time, Celeste let a maniacal grin overtake her lips, hidden in the fabric of Hina’s jacket, knowing that her former accomplice had realized that his fate was sealed!

“That’s right! Lament your fate, fatso! It’s time for Celestia Ludenberg to finally achieve victory!”
Celeste’s loud wails pierced the room, turning heads as she openly sobbed into Hina’s shoulder. Her petite body trembled, barely being held together by the swimmer’s tender embrace. Holding onto her fearful friend, Hina’s brows furrowed as she glared at Hifumi, righteous fury rising to the surface!

“Murderer!” she shouted at him, leaving him visibly stunned. “You tried to kill her! How could you!”

“N-N-No! That’s not it!” sputtered Hifumi, desperately trying to explain his side. “You’ve got this all —!”

“Shut the hell up, you bastard!” Mondo quickly jumped in, grabbing the fanfic creator by the collar and shaking a fist at him. “You say another word and I swear to Christ, I’ll smash your teeth in!”

“EEEIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIEEE!” a shriek erupted from Hifumi, one even more piercing than Celeste’s sobs.

However, just like before, Sakura put a hand on Mondo, a silent warning that he needed to control his temper. Fortunately for the biker, he wasn’t lost to rage and managed to lower his fist once more. Just as it finally seemed that things had begun settled down, a familiar furious voice shook the room.

“FOR THE LOVE OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE, WHAT IS GOING ON IN HERE?!”

There could be only one person who would shout those words. Even though they didn’t need to, everyone turned their gazes toward the door to see Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru, accompanied by Makoto, standing next to the destroyed door. As usual, the Disciplinary Chairman’s aura flared as he glanced around the room. He took in everyone’s condition before abruptly pointing an angry finger at the demolished pile of broken wood and metal hinges.

“Who is responsible for the destruction of school property?!” he demanded, his gaze alternating between Mondo and Sakura, obviously suspecting them.

Before anyone could say or do anything, Sakura turned and approached him. Even as she towered over him, his fury didn’t dissipate, glaring up at her accusingly.

“Allow me to explain,” the martial artist offered, her voice calm and clear. “After we split up to search, I came to the third floor to investigate. During that time, a loud scream echoed from the art room. I ran as fast as I could, but when I arrived, I saw that the door to the supply room was already broken down, and Hina was standing just outside. I shouted for her to stay back while I investigated, and when I entered the room, I saw Mondo holding down Hifumi—”.

“So then, if it wasn’t you or Hina that broke down the door, then who was it?!” Chairman Ishimaru unexpectedly interrupted, completely fixated on that one aspect of the story.

“For the love of—I’m the one who busted it down!” Mondo admitted, wanted to move thing along. “Celeste was howling like a banshee on the other side, so I—”.

“Aha! Just as I suspected! It was you, Mondo Owada! Destruction of school property is a clear rule violation—!”

“Now’s not the time for that!” Everyone was shocked when Hina’s usually peppy voice interrupted him, her frustration completely overpowering his righteous fury. Still cradling a hysterical Celeste, “Hifumi attacked Celeste! He almost killed her!”
Chairman Ishimaru froze, his eyes widening in shock as he took a closer look at the situation. As he compiled this new information, Makoto sped past him and ran over to Hina and Celeste. Looking them over, he quickly glanced at Hifumi before letting out a relieved sigh.

“Well, at the very least, it looks like neither of them were injured. That’s a relief—”.

“H-How exactly…is that…a relief!”

Everyone gasped as Celeste finally spoke, her face shooting up from Hina’s shoulder, allowing them to take in her runny mascara stained face. She choked back sobs, obviously trying her best to compose herself, but failing. Even so, she didn’t back down, sending an accusatory glare toward Hifumi.

“He…He tried…to kill me!”

“Lies! Lies and slander!” Hifumi immediately interjected, waving his arms emphatically. “She was the one who attacked me! I merely took the hammer to defend myself!”

“Bullshit!” Mondo refuted, pointing at the nearby hammer. “I saw him holding it over her head when I came in—”.

“When you destroyed school property, you mean!” Chairman Ishimaru immediately added, seemingly unable to stop himself.

Grumbling at the interruption, Mondo pushed past it and continued, “Look, the point is that I saw him with the hammer, ready to bash Celeste’s brains in! He’s lying through his god-damned teeth!”

“That’s right! It’s obvious that Hifumi’s lying!” Hina agreed, leaving no room for error. “He’s a monster and he needs to be restrained!”

“I agree,” the deep tones of Sakura concurred. “Let’s fetch some rope and—”.

“W-Wait a second! We should at least hear him out!” Makoto suggested, shocking most of his classmates. However, out of all of them, Celeste was the one who appeared the most distraught by his suggestion.

“I can’t…believe…you…” the hysterical gambler said quietly, turning her gaze toward Makoto, her eyes full of confusion and hurt. “You think…I would lie…about something like…this?! How…how could…!”

“Yeah! How could you, Makoto?!” Hina abruptly concurred, narrowing her eyes at the Lucky Student. “Celeste is obviously the victim here!

All at once, most of the students turned and glared at Makoto, who shrunk back as he nervously tried to explain himself.

“N-No! I didn’t mean—I-I mean, I was just trying to—”.

“Trying to what?! Defend a murderer?!” Mondo scolded, narrowing his gaze. “This is different from what happened to me or Leon! We caught him in the act! He’s obviously the attacker!”

Backing down even more, Makoto was about to renege on his suggestion when a cold and calculated voice echoed:

“I think you’ve misinterpreted Makoto’s suggestion…”
A tense silence filled the room as everyone’s gaze shot to the doorway. Standing there, observing the entire situation, was Kyoko Kirigiri. And, much to everyone’s relief, beside her stood Junko Enoshima, who stared at the scene with a determined expression.

Before anyone had the chance to comment, Kyoko continued, “As we don’t know exactly what transpired here, we should get both of their testimonies before deciding anything—”.

“K-Kyoko!” Makoto eagerly shouted, unable to hide the happiness and relief in his voice. “I’m glad that—whoa!”

Makoto let out a shout as he was practically shoved aside by none other than Mondo, who practically ran full speed toward the reappearing pair of ladies. Both of the girls tensed as the biker suddenly halted in front of them, and only Junko flinched as an intrusive pompadour abruptly slapped into her forehead.

“Where the hell were you?!” he frantically shouted, bits of spittle peppering her face. Completely unaware of how uncomfortable this was, the biker proceeded to lean in closer, his pressing into Junko’s hair as he yelled, “We’ve spent half the damn morning looking for—ghuu!”

In the midst of his shouting, Junko’s palm suddenly shot forward, slamming into his chest, and sending the biker flying onto his back. Time stood still as everyone in the room stared at Junko, who wore an expression of utter shock herself. Even Mondo, whose head was ringing from colliding with the floor, stared wide-eyed up at her, completely astonished.

Feeling everyone’s eyes on her, Junko slightly shook her head before shouting, “Do the words ‘personal space’ mean anything to you?! Geez! You scared the crap out of me!”

All at once, Mondo’s face burned brightly as he realized just how close he’d been to the Fashionista’s face. And, as per usual, once he felt the growing embarrassment surrounding his actions, he defaulted to his usual way of responding…by shouting.

“I scared…w-what the hell is that supposed to mean?!” Mondo almost immediately fired back, leaping to his feet but making sure he didn’t needlessly approach her. “You’re the one who scared the shit out of me! Disappearing for so fucking long!”

A puzzled look crossed Junko’s face, momentarily glancing at Kyoko, who also seemed confused.

“‘Disappearing’? What are you talking about? Kyoko and I have been investigating all morn—”.

“None of that matters right now!” a furious Hina interrupted, earning everyone’s attention. “We need to focus on what really matters—”.

“Agreed!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru concurred, enthusiastically clenching his fists. “The issue of the destruction of school property should be the foremost topic of discussion!”

A collective groan sounded and only Mondo found the words to retort, “That’s not remotely important right now!”

“For once, I’d have to agree. I’m far more interested in how Junko sent you flying like a ragdoll,” a familiar and slightly unwelcome voice echoed from the doorway.

A moment later, Byakuya stepped inside, a merciless glare aimed at the Fashionista. Just behind him, cowering behind the mangled doorframe, Toko poked out, lustfully eyeing the Affluent Progeny, as per usual. Considering she’d reverted back to her anti-social persona, everyone assumed Genocide Jill must have sneezed, giving them all a moment of temporary relief. However, that relief shattered.
as Byakuya advanced toward Junko, a malicious grin forming on his smug face.

“That was an impressive hit,” the Togami Heir falsely praised before a snide chuckle escaped him. “Did your time as a homeless beggar teach you martial arts as well as medical knowhow?”

Junko furrowed her brow and seethed, “It could teach you some humility—”.

“Now isn’t the time for pointless argument,” Kyoko suddenly intervened, turning Byakuya’s harsh gaze onto her. However, she didn’t so much as flinch, matching his gaze effortlessly. “Or are you suggesting that Junko should have continued to let Mondo spit on her face?”

“If it revealed where the two of you have been hiding all this time, I’d gladly let the brute salivate like a raging mutt,” Byakuya condescendingly retorted, his threat clear as day.

“You son of a bitch!” Mondo seethed, his face reddening from pure rage. “Why don’t you say that shit to my face?!?”

With a sharp glare, Byakuya repeated, “I said that I’d gladly let a raging mutt like you—”.

“ENOUGH!”

The entire room shook as Sakura bellowed over everyone’s voices, her ferocious fighting aura immediately silencing even the strong-willed Byakuya. Utter silence filled the room as the students watched the martial artist’s aura gradually recede, until she was more stood among them as a ‘normal’ student. Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Sakura calmly addressed the group.

“Now isn’t the time for pointless arguments,” Sakura instructed, echoing Kyoko’s words from only a few moments ago. “Our time would be better spent working together to figure out exactly what happened this morning.”

A soft silence permeated the room, making everyone hesitant to answer. After a few moments of this uncomfortable atmosphere, Makoto slowly stepped forward.

“She’s right. There’s a lot we don’t know…” the lucky student concurred, glancing between Kyoko and Junko, then back to Hifumi and Celeste. Finally, he turned toward Kyoko and asked, “Would you mind telling us where you two were this morning? It might help us figure out what happened between Celeste and—”.

“You still don’t get it, Makoto!” an infuriated Hina cut in, her normally bright and cheery persona completely replaced. “Celeste is obviously the victim! Hifumi attacked her after faking his injuries this morning!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, back up there!” Junko chimed in, confusion marring her features. “What do you mean fake injuries? And why was Celeste in the art room with Hifumi in the first place?”

“That doesn’t matter!” Hina abruptly replied, tightly holding onto her traumatized friend. “All we need to know is that Hifumi tried to kill her—!”

“I think it’s too early to jump to conclusions,” Kyoko interrupted, her calm voice piercing the room with absolute certainty. “We should investigate and hear both of their testimonies before—”.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

Each and every student tensed as that terrifyingly familiar tone resounded through the halls of the academy. As one, they turned to view the monitor in the upper corner of the room. After a few
moments, the screen roared to life with static, until the image cleared and the students beheld their hated captor…Monokuma!

===

Emergency! Emergency! It seems we have a victim of bullying!

In an effort to find the perpetrator, you will be given a certain amount of time to investigate.

Please use this time wisely, the class trial will begin very soon!!

===

Just as quickly as it came, the message ended and the monitor went black, a cold chill running down everyone’s spine. And then, less than a moment after the announcement ended, the speakers next to the TV roared with the sounds of a plan flying overhead…then crashing! Suddenly, the art supply room was filled with the lovely voice of the half-and-half bear…singing!

“Oh the bear, oh the bear, oh the bear is back! Stone cold sober as a matter of fact!”

Dancing across the floor, miraculously tossing origami flower leighs around the necks of each student it passed, came Monokuma. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and carrying a large burlap sack, the headmaster of Hope’s Peak made a triumphant return, much to the horror of the students. With a final twirl, Monokuma struck a dynamic pose and laughed heartily.

“Aahahahaha! I. Have. Returned! And I brought souvenirs!”

Reaching into the sack, the demented bear smiled as it’s hand pulled out…nothing. Even so, Monokuma extended his paw out toward them and began to chuckle.

“Puhuhuhuhu…I hope you enjoy it!”

As confusion began to set in, a recognizable beeping echoed from all of their e-handbooks. Retrieving them from their pockets, the students’ expressions turned grim as they silently read the bright words on the screen.

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Monokuma (Incident) File

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As the students stared at the incoming message, the dread and tension from the previous trials came rushing back in. And once again, suspicious glances and frightful visages overwhelmed the room.

“What’s taking everyone so long?” Leon groaned as he leaned against the back wall of the nurse’s office. “Maybe I should go and check…”

From her seat next to Chihiro, Sayaka sent Leon a stern look. “Let’s just wait a bit longer,” she told him, holding in all of her worry as well. “I’m sure that any second now, someone’ll—”.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*
All at once, the three of them tensed, and as one they turned toward the monitor in the corner of the room. Just as they suspected, it immediately roared to life…and the image of Monokuma suddenly appeared.

===

*Emergency! Emergency! It seems we have a victim of bullying!*

*In an effort to find the perpetrator, you will be given a certain amount of time to investigate.*

*Please use this time wisely, the class trial will begin very soon!!*

===

Before they could react, the sounds of a plane crashing echoed through the speakers. The terrifying sounds of explosions and crunching metal froze them in place, keeping them horrifically entranced until the speakers cut away to silence. That is, until a beeping resounded from Leon and Sayaka’s pockets. Pulling out their e-handbooks, they gasped as they read the words of the message sent to them.

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**Monokuma (Incident) File**

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A few terrifying moments passed before Leon finally found the will to speak.

“Wh-What the hell was that?!” he shouted while pointing at the screen, before glaring down at his e-handbook. “And…why the hell did we get another ‘incident file’?!”

“…I-Incident…file?” Chihiro squeaked, looking over Sayaka’s shoulder as she opened it.

“Oh, that’s right…you weren’t awake when we got these last time,” Sayaka reminded herself as she turned to show it to Chihiro. “Basically, it’s like a Monokuma file…but not for finding a body.”

“Oh, what a relief!” Chihiro prematurely answered before seeing the distressed looks on her friend’s faces. “Wh-What? Is it worse than finding a body?”

A grim expression overtook Sayaka’s features as she answered, “No…not exactly. We only get this file when…one of us attacks another student but don’t know who the attacker is…”

Chihiro’s eyes widened like saucers as tears welled up in the corners. “N-No…that can’t be true! It must be some kind of mistake—”.

“Sorry…but it’s true,” Sayaka cut in, gently placing a hand on Chihiro’s shoulder. “We…We had to investigate when…you were attacked by Mondo.”

Everything suddenly clicked in Chihiro’s mind. The reason why Mondo had felt so terrible wasn’t just because he’d nearly killed her…it was also because he nearly got everyone else killed as well. Even so, Chihiro didn’t fault him. She truly believed that it was just an accident…and maybe…

“M-Maybe it’s all an accident!” a hopeful Chihiro offered, trying to be optimistic. “Like what happened with Mondo! I know he didn’t do it on purpose, so maybe this time—”.

“It doesn’t matter either way…” Leon begrudgingly informed her, his hands balling into fists. “Just
like the announcement said, we still have to do another class trial! We have to suspect our friends and try to find out who betrayed…again! Dammit!”

Suddenly, Leon lifted his foot and mercilessly kicked the large cabinet in the back of the room. It lurched to the side and just as the baseball star prepared to kick it again, a hand firmly gripped his arm. His gaze shot over to see Sayaka, her eyes filled with determination, holding him back.

“I know how you feel, Leon. But getting upset and throwing a tantrum isn’t going…to…help…?” She paused for a moment as she saw something behind the cabinet. “Do you see that?”

Curious, Leon followed her gaze until he saw a blue handle sticking out of from behind the moved cabinet. “What the hell is it?” he questioned, reaching down and grasping the handle.

Pulling it out from its hiding place, Leon and Sayaka gasped as a blue mallet with the words ‘Justice Hammer 3’ was revealed. All the while, Chihiro looked on in confusion, not knowing the significance of this discovery.

Without a single word, everyone in the art supply room opened up the Monokuma (Incident) File.

Just like before, the file contained information related to the ‘incident’ in question. It made note of Kyoko and Junko’s disappearance, the fact that Hifumi had vanished from the nurse’s office and suddenly reappeared in the art supply room, and that there had been a confrontation between him and Celeste…though that portion was intentionally vague.

“‘An altercation occurred between two students in the art supply room.’” Junko read aloud, her voice seething with frustration. Snapping her head up, she scowled at Monokuma and said, “You haven’t told us anything we don’t already know! What’s the point of sending out this file if it’s utterly useless?!”

Tilting his head in confusion, Monokuma answered, “Useless? You mean like a certain someone who missed all the action this morning?!”

Junko clicked her teeth in annoyance before answering, “If you’re not going to give us more information about the incident, then is why bother giving them to us at all?”

The demented bear let out a deep, disappointed sigh. “Oh boy…I figured you were just a little slow, not completely incompetent.” As expected, the Fashionista gritted her teeth and was prepared to retort when Monokuma suddenly continued, “The purpose of that file…is so that the class trial can be conducted fairly!”

“W-What?!” the Fashionista fired back, genuinely shocked.

“Class trials are all about fairness. And if one student is left out of the loop, then they wouldn’t be able to contribute to the trial! For example, if someone happened to be unconscious because someone hit them over the head with a dumbbell.” Mondo flinched at the bear’s words but said nothing. Unopposed, Monokuma continued, “This way, even someone who missed all the action, *cough* Junko *cough*, can be brought up to speed quickly and efficiently!”

The demented bear hadn’t actually coughed, he literally said the word in the most mocking manner possible. And it worked, because Junko’s hands balled so tight her knuckles turned white.

Even so, she managed to keep her voice even as she replied, “What I meant was…why doesn’t the
file give us information about what time Hifumi disappeared from the nurse’s office? If this file is supposed to be in the spirit of fairness, why is certain information omitted?"

There was a slight pause as Monokuma tilted its head and gave her a confused expression. “…Shouldn’t that be obvious?”

Instantly, Junko’s her eyes widened as understanding flooded her mind. Furrowing her brows, she answered, “It makes the trial fair…for us and the blackened.”

“Exactamundo!” Monokuma concurred, an evil glint in his glowing red eye. “Can’t have the odds stacked against either side! That would ruin the fun! Like never eating dessert before dinner! For some people, that’s their only solace in life—”.

“This still doesn’t change anything!”

Hina’s voice shook the room, her righteous fury evident as she helped Celeste to her feet. For her part, the gambler appeared to have calmed down considerably, even though she looked utterly despondent. Her mascara had run lines down her face, as if someone had splashed a bucket of water on her face, and her usual spirited visage was replaced with a worried expression. Despite that, a fierce flame burned in her eyes, the likes of which none of the students had seen before.

“Celeste is obviously still the victim and Hifumi is obviously still the culprit!” Hina roared, sending a menacing glare toward the fanfic creator. “I won’t let you get away with what you’ve done to my friend! You better be ready for that class trial!”

No one had ever seen Hina act so hostile before. It was jarring to say the least. Hifumi practically reared back away from the swimmer, almost fearful for his life. Beside him, with an equally confused expression marring her face, Sakura stared at her best friend in utter shock. No one, not even Sakura had thought Hina capable of radiating such venom toward another human being. It was out of character…almost as if she was being manipulated into feeling this way.

“Now that’s what I like to hear!” Monokuma shouted, reminding everyone of his presence. With a gleeful laugh, he proclaimed, “Ahahahaha! You’d best get to investigating! You don’t have much time this go around!”

Just as quickly as he’d dropped that bomb on them, the floor beneath him opened and he disappeared into the darkness below, leaving the remaining students to uncover the truth.

“A-Another…class…trial?” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru trembled as he collected his thoughts. “How…How did this happen?! I’ve spent so much time trying to prevent another trial! How could I have failed—”

He stopped himself, or rather, something deep inside him forced him to stop thinking those thoughts. He hadn’t failed yet…he couldn’t be allowed to fail. Failure meant that someone else could die, an outcome that he wished to avoid more than any other. No, he hadn’t failed…not yet!

And so, Taka held onto that sliver of hope with everything that he had.

“…I-It will be fine! All I need to do is solve this mystery and ensure the culprit is punished! Yes…Yes, I need to determine the source of the conflict between us! Once I find the one responsible for igniting this conflict…I will make certain they won’t be able to do so…ever again!”
Unbeknownst to everyone, including himself, for just a few seconds, the sheen of his hair flickered back and forth from white to black. And the flames in his eyes ebbed as he denied the doubt that slowly began to settle in his heart.

“Dammit! She’s backing us into a corner!” Mukuro internally seethed, easily seeing through her sister’s intentions. “Kyoko and I weren’t even around for half of what happened! And it seems like no one has a clear grasp of the situation either! At this rate, someone’s going to be left alone in this school…after the rest of us are executed!”

This horrific truth, which only she knew, that was the purpose of the ‘bullying trial’. Since the attacker wasn’t a blackened, even if they won the trial and everyone else was executed, they’d be forced to remain inside the school…an easy target for her sister to pick off when she wanted the game to come to an end.

“Even worse is that she doesn’t plan to give us long to investigate! She never stated a time limit for each investigation so that she could control exactly how much we could uncover!”

The disguised soldier gritted her teeth and glared down at the floor, barely able to control her rage at being outmaneuvered. She’d spent too much time with Kyoko, too much time taking a huge risk. And now, all of her efforts would be meaningless because she wasn’t able to prevent—

“Makoto, I need to talk to you.”

Kyoko’s voice from beside her was startling, for multiple reasons. The detective’s voice was calm and collected, just as it always was, not showing even a hint of fear. Almost as if she wasn’t bothered by the handicap they’d unwittingly forced upon themselves. Then again, it wasn’t in Kyoko’s nature to give in, so it made sense that she’d stay strong, despite the odds that were stacked against them.

In addition, the fact that she instantly sought out Makoto slightly worried Mukuro. Had she forgotten about the promise she’d made? Or was there some other reason she needed to speak to him? The soldier’s mind was frazzled from all this new information, and considering she used to only follow orders, it was difficult for her to have to discern the truth for herself. Regardless, she waited patiently as the lucky student approached them, his concerned expression speaking volumes.

“W-What’s up?” he said nervously, but with a good deal of relief as well.

“I need you to tell me exactly what happened since we split up this morning,” Kyoko requested without hesitation. “There’s a lot that Junko and I missed. And I’d appreciate a summary of events thus far.”

Mukuro surreptitiously let out a sigh, feeling relieved that Kyoko was apparently keeping her word. Then again, Mukuro wasn’t sure why she’d expected anything less from the detective. She’d proven herself trustworthy, in more ways than one, and the idea that she’d break their promise almost immediately after making it was completely illogical.

“Is that…just how my brain’s wired?” she pondered to herself. “Have I spent so much time distrusting others that…I can’t really trust them?”

Quickly shaking her head, the disguised soldier forced out those negative thoughts and chose to focus on what she could do now. With renewed vigor, she nodded alongside Kyoko and said, “That’d be a huge help! Lay it on us, Makoto!”
“Oh, uh…okay,” the lucky student agreed, not expecting that request. Even so, he wasn’t going to deny it. “Alright then, after we split up this morn—”.

“Hold on,” the authoritative voice of Byakuya cut him off, drawing all of their attention toward him. With a thick scowl, the Affluent Progeny huffed as he said, “Before we divulge information on our findings, shouldn’t the two of you tell us exactly where you’ve been all morning?”

“Indeed!” the annoying voice of Chairman Ishimaru concurred, marching up to them and pointing an accusatory finger. “We searched the entire school for the two of you, but were unable to find you! Where were you hiding all this time?! Explain yourselves!”

The tension in the air grew thick as the girls were questioned. However, neither of them flinched as they were interrogated. Finally, Kyoko spoke.

“We don’t have time for that right now.” Her voice was full of conviction, her words carrying more weight than usual. “Monokuma has made it clear that we don’t have much time to investigate. We need to spend this time as efficiently as possible.”

“That’s right!” Junko immediately concurred, putting her hand on her hips. “I don’t know why you think we were missing but we can discuss that at that trial. Right now, we need to get to the pool and help Hiro.”

A wave of surprise washed over the room as everyone’s eyes widened.

“Y-You found Hiro?!” Mondo immediately shouted. “Where the hell was he?!”

“He’s waiting for us in the pool room,” Junko answered, a hint of a smile on her lips. “He’s not going anywhere for the time being.”

“That’s great!” Makoto joyfully shouted, astonished but also relieved “So that’s where you two were! That’s a relief—”

“It sounds far too convenient if you ask me…” Byakuya said doubtfully, a hand pressed to his chin. “We’ve been looking all morning and couldn’t find a trace of him or you for that matter. How did you manage to find him when none of us could find you?”

With a raised eyebrow, Junko answered, “Look, I still don’t get the whole, ‘we couldn’t find you guys’ thing. We found Hiro stuffed into a locker on the far end of the pool. But he’s stuck in there. Kyoko and I have spent a long time trying to get him out, but he just won’t budge! All because of that weird robot suit he’s wearing—”.

“Robot suit?!” Hina interrupted, as if piecing something together. “Then he must have been the one who attacked Celeste this morning! Remember, she told us about being attacked by someone in a strange robot suit—!”

“Lies! Lies and slander!” Hina found herself silenced as Hifumi suddenly started raving. “It was supposed to be Miss Ludenberg’s false alibi! She and I worked together to put Hiro in—”.

“How dare you…mock me…like this…” the quiet but fierce voice of Celeste pierced through, immediately silencing Hifumi. Her destitute appearance lent credence to her words, and she scowled as she continued, “First you attack me, and now you create vicious lies to try and place blame on me. Only a monster blames his victims for his own crimes. Have you no soul?”
For a moment, Hifumi was flustered, unsure of how to respond. However, he quickly regained his moxie and took a brave step forward.

“I am not the monster here, you are! You tricked me into trying to commit murder!” His words resonated through the entire room, but only Kyoko and Junko reacted to them. Each of them narrowed their gazes, glancing between the two suspects. Emboldened by the silence, Hifumi brashly continued, “And now you’re still trying to place the blame on me! You’re trying to kill us all and leave by yourself, you soulless yandere! If anyone is a victim here, it’s—!”

A loud slap echoed as a gigantic hand softly landed atop Hifumi’s head, the fanfic creator’s words catching in his throat as he slowly turned his head. His bespectacled eyes widened as he recognized Sakura’s hand resting atop his skull, a fearsome aura emanating from her.

“That is enough,” she said quietly, obviously trying to control her emotions. “We will hear your testimony at the trial. Until then, I advise you to remain silent.”

Hifumi flinched as if he tried to retort but whatever he wanted to say died in his throat. Realizing his precarious situation, the fanfic creator hung his head and mumbled, “…Alright.”

Nodding firmly, Sakura turned to the rest of the group and said, “I’ll take Hifumi to the red door. He and I will wait for the trial to begin. Obviously, I will be unable to assist with the investigation because of this.”

“That’s fine,” the smug voice of Byakuya affirmed. “It’s not as though we were expecting much from you anyway. You’re better suited to the role of a guard dog.”

“Prick. We’re not exactly expecting anything from someone who alters crime scenes either,” Junko openly criticized, staving off Byakuya’s harsh glare before meeting Sakura’s gaze. “No worries, Sakura. We’ve got this! We’ll handle the investigation!”

With a warm smile, the martial artist replied, “Well then, it’s time we were off, right Hifumi?” She patted his back, forcing him to take a step forward, like a prisoner being escorted to his execution.

“R-Right…” the fanfic creator defeatedly agreed, stealing a hateful glare at Celeste before being escorted out of the room.

Once they were gone, Hina took the opportunity to speak up, “I’m gonna take Celeste back to her room. I wanna help her clean up before the trial.”

At this, a genuine look of shock crossed Celeste’s face, even if it was only for an instant. “T-That is fine. I…appreciate your assistance.”

Finally, after so much tension, the happy, bubbly smile that Hina was known for resurfaced. No one had noticed how much they missed it, until it was hidden away by the rage that had contorted the swimmer’s visage. Assisted by her friend, Celeste slowly limped out of the room, but not before glancing back toward the discarded mallet. However, she only paused for an instant before allowing Hina to take most of her weight and departed toward the descending staircase.

“I’m, uh…I’m gonna go and check on Chihiro,” Mondo awkwardly announced, unable to look Junko in the eye for some reason. “L-Let me know if, uh, there’s anything I can do—”

“Actually, there is!” the Fashionista suddenly interjected, smiling wide at him. “We need someone strong to help us get Hiro out of the locker. Think you could lend a hand before going to see Chihiro?”
As she finished, she winked at him, something that wasn’t atypical for her. However, for a few moments after her request, Mondo stood there in complete silence. And for a second, Junko could have sworn she saw a hint of pink run across his cheeks.

Then, much to everyone’s shock, the biker suddenly answered, “W-Well, y-yeah! I’ll, uh, I’ll pull him out for ya! I’d pull anything out for you, Junko!”

As total confusion warped the room, Junko tilted her head to the side and replied, “Okaaaay… thanks, I guess?”

“R-Right! Now let’s get moving!” Mondo shouted and walked past her, beelining for the doorway. “H-Hiro’s not gonna unstuck himself!”

Before anyone could protest, the biker disappeared through the doorway, presumably heading for the pool.

“Well, that was…interesting,” Junko awkwardly assessed before glancing toward Kyoko. “Go ahead and get the details from Makoto. I’ll talk to Mondo and let him bring me up to speed.”

The lavender haired girl nodded and said, “Let us know if you find anything.”

“Got it!” the Fashionista replied.

“I think I’ll accompany you as well,” Byakuya suddenly offered, his intention becoming instantly clear. “We wouldn’t want you disappearing on us again.”

A deep sigh escaped Junko as she headed for the door. “Fine. Whatever. Let’s get this done, and quickly!”

Junko’s boots clicked along the floor as she left, with Byakuya trailing just behind her. As they left, the shadow of Toko followed, making the Affluent Progeny’s request to travel together more understandable. After they were gone, only Makoto, Kyoko, and Taka were left at the scene.

“Makoto,” the amnesiac girl quickly said. “If you would, I’d appreciate a summary of all the events I missed while Junko and I were trying to free Hiro.”

“O-Oh, right!” the lucky student eagerly answered, probably a little too eager. “Well, after we—”.

“Just a moment, Mr. Naegi!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru suddenly interrupted, earning strange looks from the other two students. “Allow me to recall the events! I must do my best to solve this mystery and I will admit that Miss Kirigiri’s input will be invaluable!”

Kyoko immediately shot Makoto a subtle look, wordlessly pleading for him not to let Taka take over. Unfortunately, due to his peaceful nature, the lucky student didn’t have the will to deny Chairman Ishimaru…and sent an apologetic look toward Kyoko in shame.

“S-Sure…go ahead, Taka.”

Behind her lavender eyes, Kyoko suppressed the urge to groan, knowing it would only exacerbate the situation. Knowing that time was of the essence, however, she turned to Taka and said, “Please go over everything as quickly as possible. We don’t have much time to spare.”

With a frightening smile she assumed was meant to be reassuring, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru began, “Of course! Now, let’s begin with this morning! I awoke in my room, ready to take on the day and deal with any students who may disrupt the peace of our community!”
The tiniest of groans escaped Kyoko’s throat as she listened to him explain how he dressed, brushed his teeth, and chose not to relieve himself. All the while, she miraculously held back a scathing comment about how he was wasting more of time…and that’s when she heard it.

“—after bidding Alter Ego farewell, I headed to this very floor to interrupt a meeting that was to take place at 6AM! I found a note dropped by a perpetrator last night and because of that I—”

“Wait a second,” she immediately cut him off, holding up her hand to ensure his silence. “You came here at 6AM? To this room?”

With a hearty laugh, Chairman Ishimaru answered, “No, no, not this room. It was the equipment room in which the perpetrators were supposed to meet and—Hey! Where are you going?!”

In the middle of his speech, Kyoko turned on a heel and headed for the doorway.

“To the equipment room,” she said quickly, not even bothering to glance back. “I’ll begin my investigation there. I’d appreciate it if you came with me and finished your summary…”

Before either Makoto or Taka could protest, Kyoko passed through the door, leaving both of them in shock. However, it took only a moment for the Disciplinary Chairman to shake off his confusion and speed-walk after her.

“Miss Kirigiri! It is not only rude but a violation of school regulation to ignore the Chairman when he is speaking with you!” Taka shouted as he proceeded to follow her, Makoto nipping at his heels.

“The nerve of those guys! Acting like you’re a suspect!”

Hina ranted for the tenth time, her voice echoing down the hall as she helped Celeste hobble toward her room. They had made it all the way back to the dark red halls of the dormitory, and all the while, the swimmer continued to vent her frustrations.

“I mean, it’s so obvious that Hifumi’s the one who attacked you! Ugh…I guess being trapped here for so long is messing with our heads, huh?”

“Yes…I would agree,” the gambler concurred, doing her best to block out Hina’s ramblings.

Celeste’s mind was still racing, unable to stop the traumatic events from replaying over and over again in her mind. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Hifumi towering over her, mallet raised and prepared to crush her fragile form. She grunted quietly continually forcing the event from her mind, trying to completely regain her focus. She would need to be at the top of her game during the trial—

“Alright! We’re here!” Hina said cheerfully, unintentionally interrupting her thoughts.

“Thank you, Hina.” Celeste said politely, taking out her key and unlocking the door.

Together, they pushed open the door and stepped into the gambler’s room, with Hina gazing at all the trinkets and gothic memorabilia surrounding her. Still limping due to her injured ankle, Celeste allowed Hina to assist her until she reached her desk, where she kept all of her make-up and accessories.

“I should be fine from here,” she told the swimmer, gently sitting down and reaching for her make-
up kit. “I apologize for not being the most gracious of hosts, but would you mind stepping out now? I would like to reapply everything before—”.

“A-Actually,” Hina surprisingly interrupted, drawing Celeste’s attention. “I don’t suppose you’d like some help with reapplying your make-up?”

Genuine shock filled Celeste as she registered Hina’s request. “I…don’t suppose I would mind, but are you sure? Should you not be investigating along with the others?”

At this, Hina almost seemed to take offense, furrowing her brows as she replied, “There’s no need for me to investigate! I know that you’re innocent! They can search all they want, it won’t change the fact that Hifumi was the one who attacked you!”

Despite herself, a tiny smile formed on Celeste’s lips. If Hina was this adamant during the trial, it would be hard for anyone to refute her. Besides, it wasn’t as though there was anything in her room that would incriminate her for the crime. In that regard, allowing Hina to remain would only strengthen their ‘friendship’, which the gambler knew was key to keeping Hina as an asset.

“Very well, if you wish to stay, I have no reason to deny your company,” Celeste answered, turning back to her desk and sorting out all the make-up she would need.

“Great!” an overjoyed Hina shouted as she sat on the bed next to the desk. “This means we can start working on our promise!”

Puzzled, Celeste glanced back to her and questioned, “Our…promise?”

All at once, Hina’s mood dampened. “You…don’t remember our promise?” she inquired, obviously a bit hurt. However, she quickly rebounded and said, “You know! The one where you show me how to be more girly and I help you to work out more!”

Celeste froze as she realized that she had completely forgotten that promise, until now. It hadn’t even been an afterthought, considering she planned to let her entire class, including Hina, be executed when she graduated. She never imagined actually having to fulfill her promise, and she was totally unprepared for it as well.

“Ah, yes, I remember now,” she half-lied, turning to face the swimmer directly. “I do apologize but do not think we will have sufficient time to work on that promise today. Perhaps after the trial?”

A twinge of uncomfortableness settled into her breast, knowing that Hina was not going to survive the upcoming trial. It was a cruel thing to offer her, like promising a dying man the chance for freedom just before executing him…

Even so, Celeste didn’t think much of it, until Hina smiled brightly and replied, “Sure! That sounds great! I can’t wait to try some make-up! It’ll, uh, be the first time I’ve ever tried it so…”

“Well then, I shall do my utmost to make sure it is a memorable experience…” Celeste said politely, turning away from Hina quickly but carefully.

Resuming her task of applying make-up, she wiped away the mess of runny mascara and caked foundation. She could feel Hina’s eyes on her, watching her every move with anticipation, obviously excited for the false promise Celeste had just agreed to.

“It’s a shame,” Celeste found herself thinking. “It might have been fun to doll Hina up. There’s so much I could have done with her tanned skin tone. Perhaps I could—no! Stop thinking like that! She’s going to die…just accept it.”
Accept it…Strange how she had to keep telling herself that. Almost as if she didn’t really want to go through with her convoluted murder plot. What a stupid thought. Insane really. It wasn’t like she could just go and confess to her classmates. Not after lying to their faces for so long, not after placing all the blame on Hifumi, and certainly not after resolving herself to survive alone even if that meant killing one of the only friends she’s ever—

“Dammit, stop thinking like that!” she scolded herself as she applied foundation, letting the process hide her frustration. “I don’t want to die! If I get found out, there’s no way they’ll let me off the hook! I know I wouldn’t…”

Unintentionally, she reminded herself of how she’d voted in the two previous class trials. Execution. She always chose execution. It was as a matter of survival, believing it was best to be rid of obvious threats rather than risk them coming back in ruining her plan…just like Mondo had! If he had only been executed, her plot to kill Taka would have succeeded and she’d be in the clear by now…probably.

There was no way to know how things would have gone, even if Mondo hadn’t interfered. Hifumi could have made a different mistake or even betrayed her like he had now. In the end, there was only one thing she could be sure of…if her crimes were exposed, her classmates would execute her. Of that, she had absolutely no doubt.

And even though there was a chance she might not be executed, her life would be a living hell of her own making!

“No…they would definitely execute me,” she convinced herself, taking in a deep breath. “Unlike the first two class trials, it’ll be obvious that my crime was premeditated. That alone will convince them to be rid of me…”

She knew that would be the case. If she was caught, she’d be the first execution their class saw through until the end. There was no doubt in her mind that her classmates would be completely unforgiving…especially—

“Oh, that reminds me,” Hina said cheerfully, her warm smile triumphantly returning. “Did you ever find your earring? The one you lost in the art room?”

Snapping out of her frantic thoughts, Celeste hesitated for a moment as she ensured her cracked façade was in place. Minding her accent, the gambler faked a weak smile.

“No, I’m afraid I did not. I saw the door to the art supply room was open and foolishly decided to investigate that first,” she lied, quickly conceiving that believable excuse. “But do not worry, I have an identical pair, just for such occasions.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Hina replied, unintentionally drawing Celeste’s attention due to her hesitation. “That’s too bad. It’s a very nice set of earrings…”

Celeste almost groaned as she instantly recognized the swimmer’s sudden change in attitude. The gambler could see that, somewhere deep down inside, even Hina doubted her, questioning the lie she’d told her and their other classmates. She couldn’t allow those feelings to seep in any more than they already had, otherwise it could be disastrous later. After all, Hina was her trump card, an ally that would be willing to fight for her innocence no matter the cost. If the swimmer wavered before the trial even began, it would only endanger her chances later on.

Not only that, Celeste had the added difficulty of trying to ensure that no one discovered her part in the attempted murder. At this point, it was completely her word against Hifumi’s, and his was
already susceptible to scrutiny. His aggressive behavior over the last few days tipped the scales in her favor, if only by a small margin.

With no evidence to support either of them being the attacker, it was obvious she had the advantage. As despicable as it was to admit, being a petite young woman earned her sympathy points that Hifumi would never be able to garner. Simply being a woman gave her an advantage in this situation…loathsome as it was to admit. She hated it but…she’d use any advantage she could to ensure her victory.

“I won’t let myself get executed. I still need to fulfill my dream!” she reminded herself, glancing at Hina with wavering determination. “I’ll do anything…use anyone to achieve my goal! Even if I have to break a sweet girl like Hina…I won’t let that stop me!”

Biting back the guilt that tried to fight its way to the surface, Celeste pushed herself away from her desk. Startled, Hina looked over only to be caught in Celeste’s determined stare, paralyzing the donut loving girl.

“There’s something you’d like to ask me…isn’t here?” the gambler suddenly asked, already devising a way to win Hina back over to her side completely.

Hina flinched, and for good reason. For all her sweetness and generosity, it was obvious that the distrust of their environment had just as much warped her perspective as it had their classmates. Because of that, even though she obviously wanted to believe in her friend, she found herself giving in to temptation.

“Why…Why didn’t you call for me?” she asked slowly, almost frightened to voice the question. “I was right outside. You didn’t even bother to tell me the art supply room was open. Why didn’t you at least let me know what you were up to?”

It was slight, but Celeste could see the faintest glint of tears in the corners of Hina’s eyes…and it almost broke her. Her mask was cracking again, barely held in place by the gambler’s frantic need to survive, her paralyzing fear that execution was all that awaited her if she failed. And because of that, she managed to hold herself together, albeit barely.

Scowling and averting her gaze, Celeste finally answered, “I…I’m not sure. I saw the door was open and decided to investigate.” She surreptitiously watched as Hina’s expression darkened before continuing, “But, if I had to give a reason…I would say that I didn’t want to put you in danger.”

“Huh?”

A shocked expression warped Hina’s face, just as Celeste had expected. Using that to her advantage, the gambler let a small smile creep over her lips before she continued, “I am…not used to relying on others. And even though you were so close, I did not think it was wise to involve you. After all, if you had been injured because of my carelessness, then—”.

“B-But’s that’s why you should have called for me!” Hina cut her off, just as the gambler had predicted. Feigning surprise, Celeste remained silent as the swimmer protested, “If I had been there, you wouldn’t have had to go through all of that horrible stuff! And because I wasn’t there…you almost…you…could have…”

Celeste flinched as Hina was suddenly on the verge of tears, something she hadn’t expected. And even worse, she felt a dull ache in her chest as she watched her ‘friend’ blame herself for not being there to help.
“I am terribly sorry,” Celeste outright lied, ignoring the dull ache. “I never meant to upset you. I promise that, next time, I will be sure to call for your assistance if I feel it is necessary.”

As those words left her mouth, the dull ache in her chest suddenly increased, and this time she knew why.

“‘Next time’, ha!” she mocked herself for her own wording, lowering her gaze to the floor. “There won’t be a ‘next time’. Everyone but me is going to die soon—”.

“Promise…?”

The firm voice of Hina interrupted her thoughts. Lifting her gaze up, she peered into the swimmer’s shimmering blue irises, feeling the determination and hesitation Hina must have been feeling this entire time. Normally, Celeste would have admired that kind of strength, but considering it was leading the swimmer to her own death…

“Promise me that next time you need me, you’ll let me help you. I’m your friend after all!”

Celeste opened her mouth to answer, but nothing came out. Her own eyes widened as she found herself unable to utter a single word. All she had to do was say, ‘I promise’, and the deed was done. Hina would return to her usual bubbly self and be a great asset in the coming trial. Then, when her part was over, Celeste would discard her, like the rest of classmates, and finally be free!

She just needed to say those two words…so why the hell couldn’t she do it?!

“What the flying fuck?! Why is lying to Hina so hard now?!” Celeste mentally shouted, fighting back that uncomfortable aching sensation once again. “It used to be so easy! She’d believe anything I said, do whatever I wanted! It’s so stupid! I don’t feel guilty for deceiving her! I have no reason to feel guilty! She’s not my friend! I don’t need friends! All I need is my castle! So…why the FUCK do I feel so horrible?!”

Almost unconsciously, Celeste bit down hard on her bottom lip, enough to sting but not to draw blood. As the pain registered, she took a deep breath and used it to force all other thoughts from her mind. She found herself doing the same thing she always did before a risky gambling tournament…pushing away all thoughts of guilt, or sympathy, or humanity in general…until only cold, cruel logic remained.

“I have no choice. This is a death game. To live, others have to die. There’s no shame in surviving. No shame whatsoever…”

Plastering on her cracked mask, Celeste gave Hina a wide smile as she answered, “You have my word…”

Just as she had expected, those few words were enough to rejuvenate Hina’s warm personality, a bubbly smile spreading across her face as her feelings were finally settled.

“Thanks, Celeste. I mean it.” Hina words carried far more weight than she imagined, which only intensified as she finished, “And don’t worry, I won’t let anyone accuse you anymore! I promise that I’ll be there for you this time! Just wait and see!”

Celeste inwardly flinched at those words, never imagining that such an innocent phrase could cut her so deeply. Before those words could haunt her even more, a dreaded sound reverberated through the halls of Hope’s Peak Academy…

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*
Greetings, my beautiful readers! We’re finally heading into the class trial! Will the others uncover Celeste’s plot? Can Hifumi convince the others that he is innocent? And what exactly happened between Kyoko and Mukuro during their absence? You’ll have to keep read to find out!

I want to thank everyone who offered to be a beta for this story! I am so appreciative of all of you, and I wanted to thank you all for it! I have selected a new beta and with their help, I plan to get more chapters out very soon!

Please leave a review/comment to let me know what you’re thinking or to ask any questions if you have any. Thanks again and until next time, have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
“H-Hey! Be careful, will ya?!” Hiro groaned as Mondo roughly tore the top half of the robot suit off him, completely freeing the clairvoyant from the cumbersome cosplay. With a relieved grunt, Hiro sat on the floor and scowled up at Junko. “What took you so long?! It felt like I was stuck in there for days!”

At the far end of the pool, next to the now opened locker, stood the newly freed Hiro. Surrounding him were Mondo, who’d helped remove the suit. Junko, who was currently glaring at the clairvoyant for his comment. And finally, standing behind her were the figures of Byakuya and Toko, with the latter nervously fidgeting near the pool’s edge.

“We were gone like five minutes…” Junko corrected him, folding her arms over her chest. “I told you that Kyoko and I would come back with reinforcements and we did! You should be thanking me, not complaining!”

“That’s right!” Mondo abruptly joined in, looking more frustrated than he should have been. “The only reason we found you is because of Junko here! Show her a bit more respect!”

After the verbal tongue lashing, Hiro shuddered but seemed to calm down enough to say, “Yeah… that’s true. My bad.”

“I’m more concerned about how you got into the suit rather than how long it took to get you out,” the cold voice of Byakuya pierced the pool’s echoing atmosphere. “Do you really not remember putting it on? Or are you simply putting on an act for us?”

“What?! You think I shoved myself into that freaky robot suit?!” Hiro retorted leaping to his feet with renewed enthusiasm.

“You claim to have no memory of putting it on, nor do you have any evidence that this supposed ‘attack’ in the rec room took place, including the note used to call you there,” the Affluent Progeny continued, as if not even hearing the clairvoyant. “Quite suspicious…and considering you’ve been ‘missing’ all morning, that makes you a more likely suspect—”.

“I’m telling you! It’s all true! Now will someone please tell me why we’re having another class trial?!” the clairvoyant shouted, frustrated but nervous at the same time.

“M-M-Master was g-getting to that, you oaf!” Toko abruptly spoke up, making her presence known for the first time since they’d arrived. “H-How dare you in-interrupt, Master Byakuya! We should h-have just left y-you in—!”

“When I want your opinion, I’ll tell it to you,” the Togami Heir quickly snapped, silencing the flustered writer, and making her stare down at the floor, a lewd expression overtaking her features.
Scowling at the fact that his reprimand only increased her infatuation, Byakuya decided to ignore her and turned back to Hiro. “I don’t have time to waste briefing you on every minor detail. Perhaps you should make yourself useful and find that note you claim instructed you to meet in the rec room so late at night.”

Seeing that he wasn’t going to provide even a modicum of information related to the trial, Junko stepped up and said, “All you need to know is that something happened between Hifumi and Celeste in the art supply room, and we need to investigate it.”

Instantly, Hiro’s face became hot and his mouth hung open as he stammered, “Y-You mean…they were ‘going at it’ in the art supply room?! And Monokuma wants to punish them for it?!”

As Hiro stupidly misinterpreted the situation, Junko’s own face flushed as she obviously realized she should have worded her explanation better. However, before she could correct herself, Mondo openly scoffed, “Yeah, but’s its fucking obvious what happened! I saw it with my own eyes!”

“R-Really?!” the clairvoyant shouted, unable to contain his shock.

“Damn straight!” the biker continued before anyone could stop him. “I busted down the door and saw Hifumi about to pound Celeste into the floor! Doesn’t get much clearer than that!”

At that moment, Junko, Byakuya and Toko realized that Mondo hadn’t quite understood what Hiro had meant by ‘going at it’. And it was only going to get worse…

“I saw that and kinda lost it,” the biker continued, hanging his head in what could have interpreted as bashful, “I couldn’t stand to just watch, so I—”.

“W-Wait! So Hifumi was going after Celeste?!” Hiro yelled in surprise before briefly pondering. “I-I mean, I guess that makes sense, but I never figured he’d be so aggressive!”

Mondo shook with anger but managed to control himself. “Exactly! I couldn’t believe my fucking eyes, man. Then again, I’ve seen some crazy shit before…personal experience an’ shit…”

Hiro’s eyes bulged, almost out of their sockets, his brain seemingly ready to implode from the terrifying information that he was misinterpreting. All the while, Junko looked on with a horrified expression, trying to find a place to cut in and expose the truth. At the same time, Byakuya seemed to be enjoying the misunderstanding, a cocky smirk accenting his features. Finally, Toko looked between Hiro and Mondo, almost with a hint of confusion, as if she wasn’t sure which of them were dumber.

“Anyway,” Mondo started up again, hunching his shoulders, getting seriously. “I tackled Hifumi off of Celeste and held him down. I was gonna pound him myself when—”.

“Wh-What?! You were gonna…?!” the clairvoyant shouted again, coming to another ‘realization’. He took a tiny step back and said, “Dude, I, uh…didn’t know you swung that way?!”

With more confidence than was necessary, Mondo promptly retorted, “Dude, I’ll swing any way I need to ta get the job done!”

A look of abject horror spread over Hiro’s face as he paled, completely dumbfounded.

Undeterred by his classmate’s expression, Mondo immediately continued, “But anyway, before I could pound Hifumi, Sakura came in and—”.

“Sakura joined in too?!” an increasingly frantic Hiro screamed, the mental image in his head scarring
him for life.

A spark of anger rose in Mondo as he shouted, “Would ya stop interrupting me?! I’m almost finished —!”

“You didn’t finish?!"

As Hiro’s horrified shrieking rang out, another sound, one even more terrifying, resounded all around them.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

The nearby monitor suddenly roared to life as the image of Monokuma slowly came into view on it.

Well, well, well, I never figured we’d be needing to go through this kind of trial again. But, I’m not the one who breaks the rule! That’s all on you, guys!

Anyway, let’s get this class trial of mutual bullying underway! Please go through the red door on the first floor of the school!

As the monitor returned to its usual blackened screen, the five students all felt themselves tense…but not for the same reasons.

“Dude! Do we seriously have to figure all this out at the trial?! It seems like we already know too much about it already!” Hiro practically screamed, desperately trying to bleach his brain after absorbing the info from Mondo.

“It’s so fuckin’ stupid,” the biker concurred, or at least thought he did. “We know Hifumi’s the guilty one, but we still have to have this bullshit trial!”

At that, Hiro finally looked confused. “Wait…how is it Hifumi’s fault? Didn’t they both want to—?”

“You sayin’ she wanted it be like that?!” Mondo abruptly cut in, his rage returning. “Are you one of those bastards that think women are easy targets?! Huh?!”

Hiro began to shudder and stammered, “W-W-What?! That’s not what I—!”

“Alright, that’s enough!” Junko finally found the strength to interrupt, her face almost completely flushed by this point. From frustration or flusterments…not even she was certain. She opened her mouth to continue but found herself cut off.

“We can discuss this fully at the trial,” Byakuya told them, earning shocked expressions from everyone. And it only took a moment for Junko’s expression to shift angrily. Unfortunately for her, the Togami Heir didn’t give her time to interrupt. “For now, I suggest that both of you prepare yourselves. Even if this is an open and shut case, it’s still a class trial after all.”

His words took a moment to sink in, but eventually both Hiro and Mondo seemed to understand.

“Fine!” the biker grunted.

“R-Right…” the clairvoyant agreed.
With slow, heavy footsteps, the two of them began heading toward the exit on the opposite end of
the pool, leaving a furious Junko standing there, glaring daggers at Byakuya.

“You are an evil man,” she said plainly, easily seeing through his intentions.

For his part, the Togami Heir merely scoffed, seemingly amused. “It will bring at least a modicum of
entertainment to the trial…especially considering it’s such a simple case.”

He turned and began toward the exit, Toko nipping at his heels while sending a chilling glared back
toward Junko as she followed her prince. Left alone near the locker, Junko took a moment and rolled
over the robot suit that Hiro had been confined to. Her eyes widened as she noticed a small clasp in
the back, a feature that Mondo had innocently neglected to mention when removing the suit from
Hiro’s person.

“A simple case, huh?” she muttered, standing upright, and shifting her gaze between the locker and
the robot costume. “I wonder…”

“No concrete evidence pointing to either party. Only circumstantial findings and opposing
testimonies…”

Kyoko stood in front of the red door leading to the trial room. Most of the other students had already
arrived. Leon, Sayaka, and Chihiro stood together on one side of the room. Being the closest to the
red door when it went off, it made sense they were already there. Chihiro was having trouble with
balance but managed to hold herself up, while the baseball star and pop sensation stood on either
side, just in case.

Sakura was still guarding Hifumi, and had been there when she’d arrived with Makoto and Taka.
Not that she wasn’t expecting that, considering the martial artist wasn’t one to go back on her word.
At the same time, Hifumi fidgeted nervously, but not in the way she’d expected. Criminals often try
to disguise their nerves before being convicted…but Hifumi showed a worry that seemed aimed at
everyone else. That worried Kyoko, as she waited for everyone else to arrive.

Junko, Byakuya, Toko, and Mondo had gone to get Hiro, but hadn’t arrived yet. The same went for
Celeste and Hina, who were supposed to be visiting the gambler’s room to clean her up after her
‘ordeal’. Despite evidence to the contrary, the amnesiac girl couldn’t completely write off Celeste as
a suspect. The gambler had been acting out recently, but Kyoko wasn’t sure if anyone else had
noticed. Well, maybe Junko had…but she couldn’t be absolutely sure of that.

For the moment, all she could do was wait, so she decided to at least be semi-productive and run
through all she knew so far.

Kyoko’s eyes closed as she concentrated on her minimal findings. She examined the equipment
room and found a small, mostly dried blood stain on the back of the door, much to Makoto and
Taka’s surprise and horror. Taka insisted that it wasn’t there when he’d arrived, but admitted that he
hadn’t checked it upon arrival…meaning he didn’t have any clue when it occurred who whose blood
it belonged to. After that, the Disciplinary Chairman recalled his encounter with Mondo, but she
would need to speak with the biker in question in order to be absolutely sure if that testimony was
accurate.

Unfortunately, after that, the school bell rang, signifying the end of the investigation, leaving her with
only a scrap of evidence and a lot of unanswered questions.
“Something’s missing…” Kyoko couldn’t help but think, slowly opening her lavender eyes. “Even with Makoto’s information, we still can’t be sure who attacked whom in the art supply room. Both of them are suspicious, but for different reasons. And then there’s the matter of Junko…or should I say —”.

“Hey, Kyoko?”

A concerned voice next to her snapped her out of her thoughts, turning her head to glance at Makoto. She hadn’t realized he was standing next to her, something she mentally reprimanded herself for, before calmly answering him.

“What is it?”

He paused for a moment, a bit uncertain but still brave enough to ask, “Where were you and Junko this morning?”

Even though she didn’t show it, Kyoko felt herself tense. “Investigating,” she said plainly, as if answering a simple question. She hoped that would be enough to satisfy him, but deep down she knew it wouldn’t.

And just as she predicted, he nervously asked, “But…where? Taka and I looked all over but…we couldn’t find you…”

Kyoko felt something inside her sink as he questioned her, an almost guilty feeling, even though she wasn’t lying to him. It was obvious that Makoto was simply worried about the two of them, but he was asking a very delicate question, and he must have sensed that it was a more difficult question than he’d realized. At the same time, the amnesiac girl couldn’t keep herself from feeling a bit warm inside. The fact that he actually cared about their well-being, even in this kind of situation, was admirable, to say the least. He wasn’t accusing either of them of being involved…he just wanted to make sure they were alright. It was…very Makoto-like.

Almost unintentionally, the tiniest of smiles graced her lips. A reassuring smile, one that she hadn’t expected to use, but came out anyway.

“Once the trial starts, we’ll clear up any confusion about where the two of us were,” she told him, her voice firm but gentle. “I promise.”

Kyoko suppressed her own shock as she spoke. She hadn’t meant to add that last bit. ‘I promise’, was not something she said often and certainly not the kind of thing she’d normally say. At the same time, she’d said it, and it bound her to that promise. After all, Kyoko Kirigiri was a lot of things, but she never made a promise she didn’t intend to keep. And that also meant…she needed to keep her promise to ‘Junko’ too…

“Ohayou, it looks like a few students are running late!”

Tension suddenly gripped the room as Monokuma slunk in from some unknown corner, glancing around the room with his contrasting eyes. It seemed to be doing an internal head count, and sighed...
deeply upon finishing.

“So many tardy students,” the bear said almost gleefully. “Don’t you think they need to be punished, Mr. Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru?”

Upon hearing his name, or rather his title, Taka stood at attention. However, something seemed off. Kyoko noticed that he’d been rather quiet in the last few minutes, something decidedly uncharacteristic about him, especially lately. Not only that, she could have sworn she’d seen the stark white of his hair flicker black from time to time...perhaps he was internally conflicted?

Whatever the case, his hair was pure white again as he announced, “Tardy students need to be disciplined, that I agree with! I will go and search for them myself—”.

Just as he said that, the red doors swung open slowly, revealing all of the missing students. One by one, they filed in.

Byakuya scoffed at everyone, as usual, and walked directly in front of the elevator leading to the trial ground, as if eager for it to open. Like a shadow, Toko slunk behind him, her gaze fixated on him the entire time. Mondo immediately went to Chihiro’s side, thanking Leon and Sayaka for watching over her while he was away. Hiro glanced at Hifumi, and then to Sakura before twisting his face, turning away and looking kind of sick. Behind him, Celeste and Hina came in together, each of them angrily glaring at Hifumi for a moment before standing on the opposite side of the room, as far away from the fanfic creator as possible. Finally, Junko came in last and moved to stand next to Kyoko and Makoto, nodding firmly to the amnesiac girl, who nodded in kind.

Kyoko wanted to ask the Fashionista what she’d found but knew this wasn’t the time for questions, especially when Monokuma began shouting.

“Aww, now don’t that just beat all!” the bear said, slightly amused but slightly annoyed. “Just as I get ready to give Mr. Chairman here the power to punish the tardy students, they show up! Talk about coincidences, huh?”

Instantly, something about the bear’s words echoed in Kyoko’s mind. He spoke of coincidences, a factor that was largely related in this case. After all, there were far too many coincidences surrounding Celeste and Hifumi’s incident that hadn’t come to light yet. Such as how Celeste always saw something that no one else claimed to have seen...which always led them to discovering Hifumi.

At the same time, she noticed a few angry glares were focused on Taka, who didn’t seem to register them as he replied, “I would never punish a student for simple tardiness! After all, detention is not a punishment! It is a time to reflect on past wrong in order to right one’s behavior!”

“Textbook definition of punishment...” Leon muttered, only to be elbowed by Sayaka.

Luckily, neither Monokuma nor Taka acknowledged this comment. Instead, the half and half bear laughed heartily and said, “Alright then! Let’s get things rolling!”

As it spoke, the doors to the elevator opened, showing them the path they needed to take.

“Step inside and confront your destinies!” Monokuma roared before disappearing once again, leaving the students alone.

“As if we really need a trial,” Mondo openly complained glaring furiously at Hifumi. “Unlike the last few times, we already know what happened! I’m not going to let you get away with what you’ve done!”
Hifumi flinched and tried to speak up but his voice died in his throat. In his place, seemingly from out of nowhere, Junko spoke up, “We’ll know the truth soon enough.”

“We already know the truth!” Hina protested, narrowing her gaze at the Fashionista. “Celeste is obviously the victim! I was there, and I know what I saw—!”

“Perhaps we should save this discussion for the trial itself?” Byakuya interrupted, already heading into the elevator. Turning back to face everyone, he sneered, “Stop wasting time and get in. Some of us would prefer not to spend the entire day listening to the ramblings of plebeians.”

“Th-That’s right!” Toko immediately concurred, practically dashing into the elevator, and standing behind Byakuya. She glared at everyone else and shouted, “C-Come on! You heard Master! L-Let’s just g-get this over with!”

Everyone, including Byakuya, groaned at her demand, but slowly, everyone started shuffling into the elevator. Once everyone was in, the doors closed, and a buzzing noise echoed as the metal case began to descend into the depths.

Kyoko stood next to Makoto and Junko, and eyed them closely. Both of them held concerned expressions. Makoto’s was obvious, his worry for everyone’s safety apparent. And for the first time since they’d met, Kyoko could see beneath Junko’s hardened visage.

“If everything she told me is true…” she quietly thought to herself before hardening her features. “…The class trials will only get more difficult from here on out.”

As the metal cage descended into the bottomless darkness, Celeste ran through her story one last time.

“Hifumi was the one who attacked me in the rec room. He pretended to be grappling with Hiro in order to disguise his intentions. He hid the number 3 hammer in the nurse’s office when I left to find Hina. Finally, he lured me into the art supply room to—”

In the middle of her thoughts, something warm grabbed her hand that hung loosely at her side. Startled, she snapped her head over and was shocked to see Hina clasping her tanned hands over her own pale palms. The warmth was unexpected, as was the strange feeling that bubbled up from deep within. She lifted her gaze up to see Hina staring directly into her eyes.

The swimmer leaned closer and whispered, “Don’t you worry. I’m on your side. I won’t let anyone call you a liar.”

Somewhere, deep inside, Celeste felt something break. She wasn’t sure what it was, but something inside her soul definitely shattered. However, she pushed that feeling away, kept it buried deep down where no one, not even she herself, could find it. After all, it was far too late to turn back now…

Celeste gave Hina’s hands a little squeeze, keeping up her act and pretending to let the swimmer’s confidence influence her. At the same time, the swimmer smiled brightly, like always, and held onto her friend’s hands firmly.

As Hina turned her face away, Celeste was all but certain that her plan was going to succeed. With Hina’s unwavering determination, and the lack of physical evidence, her escape was practically guaranteed…along with the execution that would befall Hina and the rest of her classmates.
Hina’s faith in her was like signing her own death warrant…and it was Celeste who had handed her pen. No…it wasn’t Hina’s fault. It was her own. She was responsible for manipulating such a trusting girl—No, that wasn’t right either! It was Hina’s own fault for being so easily manipulated! Hina should have been more suspicious of her from the start! She should have known that Celeste was only going to manipulate and hurt her! She should have known that…she should…have known that…from the very beginning…

“You idiot…” Celeste whispered so silently, not even she could hear it.

For the first time in her life, Celestia Ludenberg wasn’t sure if those words were genuine or not.

The trial room looked vastly different from the last time they’d been there. Blue and teal wallpaper, crescent moon cutouts, and ugly gray curtains replaced the once red and orange walls of the room. Was the mastermind changing the room each time for added effect? Or were there multiple floors with different designs to each trial room? Either way, it didn’t really matter. Not with Monokuma rattling off the bullying trial rules to the room of nervous and anxious teenagers.

“—then I’ll punish everyone besides the attacker! Wouldn’t that be great?!”

As Monokuma finished the explanation of the class bullying trial, only a single person seemed confused about the proceeding.

“Uhh, excuse me?” Chihiro nervously asked, holding her hand up like a good student. As everyone turned to her, she flinched and slightly hung her head as she asked, “I…I’m not quite sure what’s going on here. Sayaka and Leon told me we need to have a ‘bullying’ trial but…what exactly is a ‘bullying’ trial?”

“It’s a way for Monokuma to try and execute us without anyone actually dying!” Leon shouted, disgust blanketing his words. “He came up with it after Mondo attacked you to try and get us all killed—”.

“Now hold on a second!”

The room shook as Monokuma interrupted the baseball star, it’s mechanical face somehow reddening with rage. Leon shrunk back a bit, fighting the intense fear the bear had instilled in him. Even so, he didn’t back down, staring accusatorily at the demented teddy bear. Completely undeterred, Monokuma cleared its throat and paused for dramatic effect.

“I can’t let a comment like that slide,” the bear explained, its voice almost too calm. “I implemented these rule in order to maintain order in the school. Without order, you’d never get your pizza! And everyone would get hungry, and die! From starvation! Oh, and it’s also a way to ensure you never forget one tiny…little…factor.”

“And that would be?” Byakuya chimed in, his curiosity piqued.

Chuckling to itself, Monokuma slowly answered, “I may be the headmaster, but I’m not directly involved in your daily lives. If you want to attack or murder each other, it’s all up to you. I gave you all a choice to live here peacefully, but as you can see, someone among you doesn’t feel that way! Rather than endlessly doubting your friends I’ve given you all a way to identify the one disrupting the peace of this academy—!”

“In the hopes that we’ll turn on them?” Junko cut in, her voice harsh and eye narrowed.
Monokuma shrugged and replied in a sing-song kind of tone, “If that’s what you waaaant, then I won’t stop you. After all, without rules and regulations, society as we know it would fall apart! Isn’t that right, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru?”

All eyes suddenly fell upon Taka, who wasn’t expecting to be brought into the spotlight. However, he only hesitated for an instant before shouting, “O-Of course! Without rules and regulations, order could not be achieved!”

Even as the words left his lips, everyone could sense the hint of frustration in his voice. Despite all his recent faults, it was clear that Taka did not truly align himself with Monokuma. And even if his tactics had been questionable, it was obvious that he didn’t wish to side with the venomous snake of a teddy bear. And yet, because of his stance on upholding the rules, he was forced to agree with their captor…and it obviously left a sick taste in his mouth.

“Does that answer your question, Chihiro?” Sayaka abruptly asked, her voice soft and tender. The petite programmer nodded, probably not completely understanding everything, but knowing enough to get on with the trial. With that cleared up, the pop idol’s expression darkened as she continued, “Okay then…where do we start?”

“Good question,” Sakura commented, her deep voice rumbling in uncertainty. “We don’t exactly have a clear grasp of the sequence of events. Perhaps we should begin there?”

“Good thinking,” Makoto concurred, glancing around at everyone. “Alright then, why don’t we start with where everyone was this morning and work our way—?”

“There’s no point in that!” a determined Hina abruptly shouted. “We know that Hifumi’s the culprit! He lured Celeste into the art supply room—!”

“And seduced her into having an orgy!”

Dead silence haunted the room as Hiro yelled those words, immediately earning various kinds of stares and glares. Only two students weren’t in shock over the clairvoyant’s words; Junko and Byakuya. The Fashionista heaved a heavy sigh, a part of her pleased this was getting taken care of right off the bat, rather than later on in the trial. Meanwhile, the Affluent Progeny slowly let a snide grin widen on his cheeks as he waited for the chaos to unfold.

Unable to conjure words quickly enough, the students listened in horror as Hiro continued, “Hifumi probably used an anime pick-up line or something and totally seduced Celeste! He was pounding her into the floor when Mondo walked in on them! But then, for some reason, he joined them, but went after Hifumi instead of Celeste! At least until Sakura decided to—!”

“WH-WHAT THE FUCK?!”

Hiro shut up as those words hit him, like a punch to the gut. He glanced over to Leon, who had shouted, and saw an expression of pure shock and horror. Only then did the clairvoyant begin looking around at his classmates, seeing their wide-eyed and mortified visages.

Most of the girls, such as Hina, Sayaka, and Sakura, appallingly glared at Hiro, though they still seemed to be shocked. Chihiro was looking around at everyone frantically, struggling to piece together if what she’d heard was true or not. Kyoko and Junko seemed almost unfazed, as if they were used to his illogical antics, their cold exteriors hiding the utter disappointment they must have held for Hiro. Mondo’s jaw hung open in utter shock, desperately trying to understand how Hiro had come to that entirely insane conclusion. Meanwhile, Taka’s face twisted in rage, his aura beginning to surge as he felt his disciplinary rage building. A lewd smirk spread of Toko’s lips as she mentally
pictured the scene, stealing a glance at Byakuya and silently wishing the roles were switched to her and Byakuya in the art supply room. And even though the Togami Heir noticed the writer’s perverse gaze, he managed to completely ignore it and simply revel in the madness he’d allowed to take place.

The worst of them was undoubtedly Celeste and Hifumi, both of them having vastly different reactions.

Celeste’s expression was a mixture of furious anger and nauseating disgust. Her pale face almost seemed to turn green and she bit back the bile that rose in the back of her mouth, a slight gagging noise coming from her throat.

Hifumi’s face burned, his glasses fogging as he mentally conjured what Hiro had talked about. And although he seemed rather embarrassed, there was also a hint of disappointment, as if he wished that’s what they’d been doing, instead of what truly happened.

“H-H-Hiro!” Makoto abruptly shouted, his cheeks a bright shade of pink. “Th-That’s not what happened! Who told you that they were…they were…?!”

“Fornicating?” Byakuya offered, knowingly adding more fuel to the fire.

“That!” the lucky student latched onto, fighting off the blush that scorched his cheeks.

All eyes turned to Hiro and he suddenly felt completely unsure of his assertion. Sweat poured down his back and matted his wild hair as he struggled to understand what he’d gotten wrong.

“M-Mondo told me that he found ‘Hifumi pounding Celeste into the floor’ in the arts supply room!” the clairvoyant defended, throwing the biker under the proverbial bus. A look of horrified realization came over Mondo as Hiro continued, “What else was I supposed to think?! I even asked him to make sure!”

“N-No, you didn’t!” the biker growled back at him, his face burning with embarrassment. “You as if they were ‘going at it’! Ya know! Fightin’ and shit!”

Hiro’s face suddenly twisted in realization before shifting into frustration as he shouted, “That’s not what ‘going at it’ means! It means ‘having sex’! I should know! My mom reads enough trashy romance novels for the both us—!”

“WILL YOU BOTH SHUT UP!”

The entire room shook as Aoi Asahina roared at the top of her lungs. Slowly, the class turned to see her, red face and panting heavily. It wasn’t clear if she was flushed from second-hand embarrassment or from raw anger, but in either case, she wasn’t to be trifled with at the moment.

Bearing her teeth at the clairvoyant, the swimmer shouted, “First you accuse Celeste of being an attempted murderer, and now you think she’s some kind of loose woman! What’s wrong with you?! What did she ever do to you, Hiro?!”

“W-When did I accuse her of being a murderer?!” he stammered, now completely lost as to what was going on.

“Perhaps we should take this time to explain exactly why we’ve been called here? As it seems that some of us are not entirely sure…” Sakura offered, mostly glaring at Hiro but also taking in the confused visage of Chihiro.

“Story time? Really?” Monokuma chimed in, fidgeting in the judge’s chair. “Are you sure you have
time for that? After all, we can’t spend all day discussing what type of pounding the goth gambler was getting in the steamy supply room.”

The implication was vulgar but it’s meaning was not lost on most of the students. Monokuma wanted them to realize that, while there wasn’t a ‘time limit’ per se, most likely they would only be allowed a certain amount of time to debate before having to vote. For a few moments, no one said a word, the implication from Monokuma dominating their thoughts.

“In the interest of fairness,” Junko suddenly pipped up, her firm tone drawing everyone’s attention. “I think we should be allowed time to explain the situation to everyone…for various reasons.”

Slowly, Monokuma tilted its head, like a dog that was trying to contemplate the complexity of human behavior. Strangely though, the bear was silent, as if considering the notion seriously. Just as the silence began to buzz in everyone’s ears, the demented bear roared!

“Roaaaaar! Very well! I’ll allow it! For…fairness!”

Although a bit shocked by their captor’s sudden show of understanding, Sakura wasted no time in moving forward with her explanation.

“It began this morning, after the morning announcement had sounded…”

“Junko agreed to that way to easily” Mukuro pondered as Sakura explained the events of this morning. “I expected to have to fight for the time we’ll need but Junko gave it to us without any complaints…and that worries me more than anything else.”

Junko had been increasingly quiet lately. Leaving authoritative matters to Taka, having Monokuma go on ‘vacation’, allowing them to keep Alter Ego as long as they have…it all had to be part of some grand scheme her sister was concocting. Unfortunately, the soldier had no idea what it could be. It was almost as if she was letting them try and gain the upper hand…which didn’t make sense! If Junko wanted to win the game, she shouldn’t have given them any kind of advantage…unless

“Is Junko…not trying to win the game?” Mukuro scolded herself, watching the chaos slowly subside as Sakura finished explaining the events she and Mondo had seen in the art supply room. “But that doesn’t make sense. Wouldn’t she get the most despair if—”.

“And that is why we must have this class trial, to determine which of them tried to kill the other,” Sakura’s explanation came to an end, meaning the soldier no longer had time to contemplate her sister’s motives.

“Focus on the trial for now,” Mukuro told herself, lightly shaking her head. “There’ll be time to figure out what my sister’s up to later…especially now that I’m not exactly working alone.”

The soldier’s eyes flicked over to Kyoko for an instant, feeling at least a tiny bit more assured.

“Now that that’s been settled,” Byakuya finally came into the conversation, sounding satisfied with its conclusion. “There is something we need to confirm before we begin our discussion in earnest.”

“And that would be?” Junko practically snarled, not bothering to hide her disgust, obviously a bit
miffed that he allowed the Hiro scandal to occurring the first place.

Barely acknowledging her, the Togami Heir let out a little scoff before asking, “Where exactly did you and Kyoko disappear to this morning?”

Narrowing her gaze, Junko’s lips pursed into a frown, more than likely having expected this topic to rear its ugly head eventually. Even so, she seemed nervous, apprehension clearly visible on her face.

“I did promise that I would reveal that information at the trial,” Kyoko suddenly answered, stealing a glance at Makoto, who smiled softly. Taking a deep breath, the amnesiac girl began, “After we split up to search for our missing classmates this morning, Junko and I went to the second floor. I decided to check the classrooms while she searched the pool area.”

“You mean to say that you split up?” Byakuya questioned, pushing up his glasses to stare down his nose at her. “Didn’t we agree to travel in groups to avoid suspicion? How odd that the two of you seemed to forget that so easily…”

Junko scowled while Kyoko remained stoic, neither of them responding to his taunts.

“We agreed to meet at the pool lobby afterwards, to discuss our findings,” Kyoko continued, ignoring the Togami Heir’s crass comments. “But when I arrived, Junko was nowhere to be seen.”

“That’s because I found Hiro stuck in the locker at the far side of the pool,” Junko confirmed, stepping in to fill the gaps. “I couldn’t get him out on my own, so I went to get help and found Kyoko—”.

“Approximately what time was that?!” the obnoxious loud voice of Taka rang out, his hair still a white sheen with flames burning in his eyes.

Caught off-guard by the question, Junko’s jaw hung slack as she tried to answer. “I… I’m not really sure… sometime around 11am… maybe?”

“Preposterous!” the Disciplinary Committee Chairman shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at both girls. “Makoto and I were already searching the second floor around that time! We searched the pool area and did not see a trace of you!”

Neither of the girls let their expression betray them. Besides a hint of confusion for his statement, both Kyoko and Junko simple glanced at one another and shrugged, turning back to Taka with perplexed gazes.

“We were in the pool area this whole morning,” Junko reaffirmed, tilting her head in confusion. “How could you have missed us?”

“Not to mention that Hiro remembers seeing us there,” Kyoko said patiently, glancing at Hiro expectantly.

“Uh… yeah, I remember both of them trying to get me out for a while. I have no idea what time it was though, since I was poorly packaged sardine at the time…” the clairvoyant vouched, still trying to comprehend the entire situation.

“But that is impossible!” Taka shouted again, his voice stinging everyone’s ears. “I made periodic checks using my wristwatch! And I can guarantee that Makoto and I never saw either of you until this afternoon! Isn’t that right, Makoto?!”

Startled from being put on the spot, the lucky student stammered, “Uh… I don’t really know about
the time or anything, since I wasn’t really paying attention to it…but I agree that we didn’t see either of you the entire time.”

As he finished, he gave an almost apologetic look. Makoto obviously didn’t believe they had anything to do with the attempted murder, but he still felt guilty for having to call them out on their disappearance.

With that testimony fresh in everyone’s mind, Chairman Ishimaru slammed his fist onto his podium and shouted, “The only explanation is that the two of you were hiding somewhere while the attacks took place! Even if you weren’t involved with that attack itself, it is suspicious that you would be absent for so long!”

As he hurled those accusations, murmurs from the other students started to file in:

“They were missing for an awfully long time…” Sayaka regretfully mentioned, aiming a worried expression toward the Fashionista. “We were really worried about the two of you.”

Junko hung her head a bit, but said nothing…as if she couldn’t for some reason.

“And it’s odd that both Makoto and Taka couldn’t find them…” Leon added, curious but a bit worried himself.

“But they don’t have any reason to lie to us,” Sakura pointed out. “They weren’t involved with the incident involving Hifumi and Celeste, after all.”

“That we know of,” Byakuya insisted, a smug grin spreading over his lips. “Until we know exactly where the two of them were, we cannot rule out that they somehow had a hand in—”.

“We were in the pool area, I can assure you of that.” Kyoko’s stern voice cut through everyone’s ramblings, her stoic features unexpectedly hardening.

Unfortunately, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru was not deterred, growling angrily as he shouted, “Cease with your lies this instant! I demand to know where you were hidden! If you cannot explain your absence this instance, I will be forced to take disciplinary measures—”.

“Did you check the girl’s locker room?”

A slew of gasps rang out as Junko asked that question. Even the accusatory Taka and the brazen Byakuya held shocked expressions as this new idea came to light. However, it took the Disciplinary Chairman only a few seconds to recover.

“Are you suggesting that we simply missed each other during our search?! That’s inconceivable!”

His words were met with a cold gaze from Kyoko, who only slightly narrowed her eyes at him.

“Do you have another explanation?” she inquired, her voice almost ruthless. Taka flinched but said nothing, although it was obvious he was struggling to come up with another idea. Seizing that opportunity, the amnesiac girl averted her gaze from him and said, “No matter how unlikely it must seem, considering that Hiro can testify to our presence, and the fact that we did spend a short amount of time traversing through the girl’s locker room, the only conclusion is that we somehow missed each other by pure coincidence.”

Kyoko’s words carried a certainty with them that no one could argue. Not even Taka could muster the words to refute her after that display, a fact that obviously infuriated him, given that he was gritting his teeth so tightly they threatened to crack. On the opposite side, Makoto let out a relieved
sigh as he let a small smile grace his lips, a silent ‘thank you’ etched into his face.

Just as the matter was just about settled, a certain Affluent Progeny had to add his opinion.

“Pure coincidence? Isn’t that a funny thing…” Byakuya mocked, folding his arms and letting out a deep sigh. “However, given that we have no evidence to the contrary, not to mention the fact that your ‘absence’ doesn’t really have an effect on this case, I’m willing to let the matter slide.”

“Nice to know we have your pardon,” Junko groaned, glaring daggers at the Togami Heir. “Just don’t expect either of us to thank—”.

“Can we please get to the actual purpose of the trial?!”

Everyone’s eyes widened as Hina’s normally cheery voice was replaced with an angry shout that racked through their ears like nails on a chalkboard. Her bubbly expression had been exchanged for a frustrated glare, one that she slowly drug around the room until it fixated on the entire class.

“We all know that Hifumi’s the culprit who tried to attack Celeste! Let’s just vote and get this over with!”

The fire and intensity of her words bore into the students, creating a silence so palpable that it threatened to consume all of creation. Even Sakura was taken aback by the swimmer’s abrupt show of frustration, staring at her friend in a mixture of disbelief and horror. However, Hina didn’t waver in the slightest, a hard expression set into her face that none could hope to circumvent. And with that, she once again called her classmates to action.

“It’s voting time! Everyone cast your votes!”

Perhaps for the first time in her life, Celeste was utterly speechless. She hadn’t said a word since the trial began, refrained from commenting on Junko and Kyoko’s bizarre disappearance, observed the class as they began to draw conclusions…and already victory was within her grasp.

Hina’s reckless insistence was working completely in her favor. The swimmer had become more than a useful Pawn, she’d taken on the role of her Knight in this metaphorical game of chess. And even though Celeste was certain that someone would refute her, it boded well that Hina was so willing and dedicated to assisting her. She was already three steps ahead of the rest of the class, and gaining further momentum.

Her dream…her castle…was suddenly within reach!

That’s why, she was shocked when her own voice called out, “Perhaps we should discuss the matter further before proceeding to a vote.”

In truth, Celeste herself had no idea why she’d spoken up. Everything was proceeding even better than she had planned. All she had needed to do was stay silent, and let everyone come to a false conclusion. And while she was certain it wouldn’t go quite as easily as she envisioned, she had been in a far more advantageous position before she’d spoken.

And yet…she’d said those words, those words that, deep down inside, she knew would come back to haunt her…

As if they’d suddenly been struck by lightning, unparalleled bewilderment spread through the entire
class. Hina, in particular, openly gasped as the friend she was trying to defend refuted her, her deep blue eye meeting Celeste’s crimson orbs, desperately searching for understanding.

“C-Celeste…” she murmured, as if unsure of what she’d heard. “…W-Why? Why should we wait?! We both know that you’re innocent!”

_Innocent…Innocent…Innocent…Innocent…Innocent…_

The word stung Celeste to the core. She _wasn’t_ innocent, she hadn’t been for a long time. Her innocence had been lost years ago, gambled away along with the rest of her previous existence. Taeko Yasuhiro had been innocent...but Celestia Ludenberg came into this world devoid of such a thing. Ironically, that had been a source of pride for her at one time, believing innocence to be a form of weakness she needed to expunge from her being.

But...to be called such a thing—No, to have _someone else_ truly believe her to be innocent...it hurt. Because she knew the truth, the horrible truth about not only this situation, but about herself as well. She had always heard that the truth hurt...but she never imagined it could be so literal.

Despite that, she managed to persevere, almost immediately thinking of a way to twist her own words to her favor.

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“Because,” Celeste began slowly, letting all the attention fall back onto her. “If I am to prove my innocence, then we need to discuss it until everyone is satisfied.”

“Agreed,” Kyoko abruptly concurred, glancing toward Hina. “Until we hear both side of the argument, I believe we should abstain from voting. Only when we all of us are truly convinced of who the true offender is should we follow through on voting.”

“B-But!” the swimmer frantically countered, her voice strained with worry. “If we let Hifumi try to weasel his way out of this, we’ll all be killed! We shouldn’t give him the chance to—!”

“It is alright, Hina.” Celeste spoke softly and calmly, drawing the swimmer’s eyes to hers again. “We must do whatever is necessary to convince everyone of my innocence. Only then will I be truly absolved of my—”.

“OBJECTION!!!!”

A voice of conviction echoed through the room, and everyone’s head turned to see Hifumi, his chest puffed out, arm outstretched, and an accusatory finger pointed directly at Celeste.

“I won’t let everyone be taken in by your lies!” the fanfic creator shouted, his vocal tone lowering as he spoke in dramatic fashion. “I will reveal the truth to everyone! For the sake of our futures…I will cut through your deception and reveal—”.

“You see?! He’s already trying to deceive us!” Hina brazenly interrupted him, stomping on his self-confidence until he was completely silent. With almost malicious fury, the swimmer roared, “He can’t be trusted! We should vote now and save ourselves the trouble—!”

“…Hina!” a stern voice cut her off, shocking the swimmer into silence as she turned to face Sakura, the martial artist’s expression grim. “I know how you feel, but you need to calm yourself.”

Taken aback, Hina immediately shot back, “W-What are you saying, Sakura?! _I am_ calm!”
“No, you’re not.” As Sakura spoke, a strange mixture of anger and worry dominated her features. Her face hardened and her arms were folded tightly over her chest. She looked Hina up and down for a moment before giving a tiny scoff. “You’re letting your concern for your friend obscure your judgement. I understand how you feel, but we must approach this situation calmly.”

Hurt crossed Hina’s face as she took in Sakura’s words, tears stinging the corners of her eyes as she shouted back, “Do you doubt her too?! Do you think that Hifumi’s the one who’s actually innocent —?!”

“Of course not!” the martial artist suddenly shouted, her voice making everyone, especially Hifumi, tremble. Realizing her outburst had frightened everyone, Sakura took a deep breath before continuing, “I also believe that Celeste is innocent, given what I witnessed in the art supply room.”

She sent a fearsome glare toward Hifumi, who shuddered and fought to keep his bowels from emptying.

“However, I also believe that we must discuss it with everyone. So that we can work together and prevent any further distrust that may occur,” Sakura said carefully, turning her head to smile warmly at Hina. “I know this may be difficult, but please, have faith in our classmates…”

Hina flinched at those words, hanging her head as shame overtook her. “You’re—you’re right, Sakura.” Lifting her head, glancing around the courtroom and said, “Sorry about that, guys. I just—I didn’t want…”

“It is fine, Hina.” Celeste’s smooth, soothing voice answered her apology. The gambler smiled at her, just as she always did, hands folded together with her head tilted to the side. “I am truly blessed to have such a great friend willing to stick up for me.”

Pink flushed Hina’s cheeks as embarrassment flooded her. “No, no! I’m just doing what any good friend should do!” she insisted before her blush faded, and her expression turned stern. “Alright then! Let’s get the trial underway! I’m gonna prove that Celeste is innocent!”

Not a moment after her bold declaration, a deep chuckle echoed across from her, its origin none other than Byakuya Togami.

“Well, for once I can admit that I was mistaken,” he smugly claimed, staring down his nose at his classmates. “This trial had been anything but boring. Perhaps there is merit to be found in this kind of tediousness.”

His words brought back most of the tension that had dissolved over the last few minutes, earning him more than a few angry glares. However, like water off a duck’s back, he paid them no mind, grinning maliciously as he waited for the trial to continue.

As the consensus to resume the trial was reached, Kyoko cleared her throat and said, “Now that we’re ready to proceed, I suggest that we hear both parties’ testimonies.”

“Agreed,” Byakuya concurred, his smug grin still in place. “Finding holes in their testimonies will lead us to the culprit. Now the only question is…who wants to go first?”

Celeste opened her mouth to speak but was outbid when Hifumi shouted, “I’ll go first!” He whipped his head around and glared at Celeste angrily. “I won’t let anyone be deceived by your lies any longer!”

Rather than becoming upset, Celeste chose to say, “If you wish. I have nothing to hide. Go ahead, tell them your little story…”
Her crimson eyes shimmered with confidence, as if nothing he could possibly say would change his fate. Gritting his teeth, the fanfic creator furiously shot his gaze out toward the entire class.

“What I am about to tell you is the truth! The whole truth! Nothing but the truth! I swear on the honor of the Four Great Mangaka!”

“I must convince them of my innocence! Or else we’re all going to get executed!” Hifumi reaffirmed for himself, gathering up his courage as he began his tale.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! What a crazy trial so far! Who will manage to convince the students of their innocence? Will Hifumi’s truth outweigh Celeste’s lies? Will Hiro ever stop being an utter idiot?! (Spoiler Alert: No, he won’t) You’ll just have to wait for the next update to find out!

I have good news for you all! There will be another update very soon! Exactly one week from today! I wrote out a great deal of the trial but decided to have two separate updates rather than one incredibly long chapter. After that, unfortunately, my schedule will be sporadic again. I’m slowly working on getting this trial done, and I hope that you’re all enjoying it!

As always, comments/reviews are most appreciated! Tell me what your feelings on the story are, now that I’ve begun to diverge greatly from the game’s usual trials. Also, on my youtube channel, I’ll be posting a review of DRV3 sometime soon! I hope you’ll all enjoy that!

Until next time, have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

As the class trial to decided Hifumi and Celeste's fates continues...Monokuma gives a startling suggestion!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It all began yesterday,” Hifumi spoke with utter confidence, and a hint of flourish. “I was heartbroken after my precious Alter Ego was taken from me—”.

“P-P-Precious Alter Ego?! Taken?!” Chihiro frantically shouted, righteous fury burning in her eyes as she glared at Monokuma. “W-What do you mean Alter Ego was taken?! Where is she?! What have you done to her??!”

Rearing back and leaping to hide behind the judge’s chair, Monokuma sputtered, “W-W-What are you yelling at me for?! I’ve never even met this Alter Ego you speak of!?”

The entire class tensed as Chihiro unknowingly alerted Monokuma to the AI’s existence. Even though they had no proof that Monokuma wasn’t already aware of ‘her’ existence, outright shouting at the bear over it would only lead to misfortune! Especially considering that Alter Ego was currently unguarded and could be taken by the Mastermind while they were trapped in the trial room.

Thinking quickly, Junko shouted, “D-Don’t worry, Chihiro! Everything’s fine!”

“It’s not fine!” the programmer spat, angling her furious gaze toward the Fashionista. “My baby… where is my baby?!”

Hot tears began to spill out of Chihiro’s eyes as she demanded an answer, the sight paining any who looked at her. Particularly, Sayaka and Leon felt responsible for this whole affair. They hadn’t taken the time to explain everything about finding Alter Ego to her. Even though they were distracted by some of their classmates being missing at the time, they still felt guilty for not reassuring Chihiro that her ‘creation’ was currently in Taka’s possession.

Judging by Junko’s guilty expression, she also felt the same, but obviously knew this wasn’t the time to discuss the matter.

“I promise that everything’s alright,” she reiterated, trying her best to keep the programmer from panicking further. “Your computer is safe. We’ll show you after the trial, okay? It’s that right, Taka?”

The white haired, blazing eyed Committee Chairman flinched at her informal address but did not correct her. Instead, his gaze fell upon the distress Chihiro as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Then, much to everyone’s shock, his intense aura dissipated as the flame in his eyes extinguished, and his hair returned to jet black as he spoke, “Don’t worry, Chihiro! I’ve been keeping an eye on Alter Ego! I promise that ‘she’ is safe and I’ll show you to ‘her’ once we finish the trial!”
Choking back sobs, the petite programmer swallowed and said, “Do you promise? You’ll…really give her back to me?”

For the first time in many days, a genuine smile formed on Taka’s lips as he nodded, “I swear on my pride and honor as the Ultimate Moral Compass!”

As Chihiro registered those words, she furiously wiped away the tears from her eyes and whispered, “T-Thank you…thank you, Taka…”

Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru opened his mouth, fully intending to correct her and tell her to call him by his title…but stopped. Instead, he resumed his pleasant smile and said, “You’re quite welcome, Chihiro!”

This sudden change in disposition didn’t go unnoticed by the rest of the class.

Mondo let out a deep sigh he hadn’t known he’d been holding, relieved that Taka was slowly turning back into his usual persona. Kyoko regarded this change silently, but she seemed a bit relieved as well. Makoto, on the other hand, was visibly pleased with this development, smiling hopefully at the scene. Junko wiped a bit of sweat from her brow but then smiled, pleased that Taka had made the right decision and helped to calm Chihiro.

Sayaka and Leon exchanged a relieved look, still feeling a bit guilty for not explaining everything sooner. Sakura merely smiled and nodded, with Hina matching her with a good-natured smile. Byakuya stared at Taka for a bit but said nothing, no feeling any need to vocalize his thoughts. Toko wasn’t really paying attention, she was too busy stealing peeks at Byakuya. Hiro smiled and laughed heartily…still completely unsure of what was going on. Celeste held her usual smirk in place, although there was a bit of apprehensiveness behind her crimson eyes.

Finally, Hifumi felt a stab of guilt overtake him, ashamed by the fact that he’d been manipulated into almost smashing in Taka’s skull. But that was all the more reason for him to expose the truth and help everyone survive—

“Hey, hey!” Monokuma cut in unexpectedly, turning all attention toward itself. “I’ve been wondering…what is this ‘Alter Ego’ you keep mentioning? Are you keeping secrets from your Headmaster?”

Almost as one, the students’ positive energy darkened as the demented bear asked the question they all feared most. Monokuma tilted its head, as if expecting an answer, but none came. Cold sweat began to form on the students as they collectively realized that the Mastermind was on to their scheme. And if he took away Alter Ego, that might be the end of their pursuit of the truth—

“Don’t we have a trial to get back to?” Junko spoke up, glare up at Monokuma on the judge’s chair. “You were the one who said we didn’t have time to waste.”

“I agree with that,” Kyoko chimed in, coming to the Fashionista’s aid. “We can discuss other matters after the case has been resolved. Until then, we need to focus on unmasking the culprit.”

“We are in agreement then,” Celeste surprisingly concurred, smiling daintily as always. “I would like to resolve the issue of my innocence as quickly as possible. We have little time for distractions.”

“Yes, bit players should be silent while the star is on stage,” the smug tone of Byakuya added, obviously referring to himself as he smirked at Monokuma, letting his insult sink in.

“Bit player, huh?” Monokuma said with a light chuckle that soon turned into horrid laughter that make the Togami Heir scowl. As the laughter died down, the bear’s blackened side seemed to smirk
wider than usual. “Alright then! This ‘bit player’ will wait for his cue! Until then, break a leg (hopefully literally)! Debate to your hearts’ content!”

“Nice to see you’re learning your place,” Byakuya smirked victoriously before turning to Hifumi. “Well then, get on with it. Unlike you all, my time is valuable, and I’d rather not waste it.”

At this point, scowling at Byakuya every time he spoke was almost becoming a custom, one that practically everyone did, and something he personally enjoyed. And they knew it too, they knew he enjoyed watching them squirm under him, glaring down at them as if they were nothing but ants.

However, they also knew it was pointless to argue with him and simple turned toward Hifumi and waited for him to continue his testimony.

“O-Oh, okay then…” Hifumi stumbled a bit before slowly regaining his fervor. “A-As I said, after Alter Ego was…taken,” he tried to say delicately, stealing a glance at Chihiro before continuing, “I was drowning my sorrows in potato chips when Miss Ludenberg came to see me.”

He paused, half expecting her to refute him. To his surprise, she remained silent, probably waiting for him to present his side of the story before telling her own. Regardless, Hifumi was undeterred, gathering his courage as he told his classmates the ugly truth.

“She told me that she had a plan to get the both of us out of the school.” Glaring at her furiously, he seethed, “She used her silver tongue to manipulate me! Promising me that if anything should happen, she’d take the blame for our actions—!”

“And you believed her without question?” Byakuya interrupted, his tone making it unclear if he truly believed the story or not.

Shrinking a bit, Hifumi answered, “W-Well, no, not exactly. She…She said that we had a common enemy, and that we could work together to—”.

“A common enemy?! You must be referring to Monokuma!” Taka shouted, closing his hands into fists. Somehow, his original appearance didn’t falter, his jet-black hair and flameless eyes on full display as he questioned further. “But why would you consider such a thing? Especially when Monokuma was on ‘vacation’ at the time—”.

“I believe he was actually referring to you.”

Byakuya’s cold, harsh tone tore through the room like a razor, cutting Taka deeper than even he thought possible.

“W-What…?” the Ultimate Moral Compass stammered, his face wrapped in confusion.

After that comment, the Togami Heir confidently smirked, his silence forcing Hifumi to confirm what had been revealed.

“…It’s…It’s true,” the fanfic creator affirmed, hanging his head. “Miss Ludenberg told me that you threatened to have her executed, and that you were planning your own escape—”.

“Preposterous!!”

A loud smack echoed as Taka slammed both fists down onto his podium. Gritting his teeth, his furious aura abruptly returned, engulfing his entire body. His hair flashed starch white and flames once more spewed from his eyes. Shooting up to straighten his back, his imposing appearance returned in full force, frightening most of the students.
“The very idea that I, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru, would deign to allow such a thing is beyond absurd!” His voice shook the room, making everyone flinch at his ‘return’. “My duty is to protect the students and enforce order in this chaos! I have no need to threaten anyone! Especially with such a horrific punishment as execution!”

Finishing his tirade, clarity suddenly revisited him. Yes…it was his duty to protect everyone! And someone here had violated the sanctity of his school! He needed to be more assertive! He needed to discover the culprit of this debacle and visit sweet justice upon their—

“T-Taka…?”

The Disciplinary Committee Chairman snapped his head toward Chihiro, who had almost absent-mindedly called his name. Staring at him, she quivered like a rabbit before a predator, too afraid to say anymore. As his gaze fell upon her, she flinched, creating an uncomfortable silence between them.

“What is it, Chihiro?!” he screamed at her, not realizing the ferocity in his voice. “Do you also wish to complain about this injustice?! I will permit you to speak up on my behalf!”

Instead of defending him, however, Chihiro abruptly broke out into tears. They spilled from her eyes unendingly, as if a dam had been broken. Confused by that reaction, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru raised an eyebrow at her.

“Are you not feeling well?! he screamed, more than asked. “Do not fear, once this trial is over, we can return you to the nurse’s—”

“Hey! Stop yelling at her!”

Taka froze as Mondo effortlessly shouted over him. Shifting his gaze toward the biker, fulling intending to reprimand him, Chairman Ishimaru gasped once his gaze met Mondo’s. The Ultimate Bike Gang Leader bore his teeth at him, his eyes narrowed dangerously, piercing through into Taka’s very soul. Never before had Taka witness such righteous fury on the biker’s face, a kind of ferocity that send chills even down his hardened Committee Chairman spine.

“Yell at me all ya want! But leave Chihiro out of this!” Mondo insisted, grabbing his podium with both hands. “She just woke up! Give her some god-damn space, dammit!”

Still reeling from his vicious glare, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru slowly found his fire again, doing his best to match the biker’s fury.

“I am not yelling!” he yelled louder. “This is merely a rise in my voice! If you wish to hear yelling, then I—”

“Both of you, cut it out!”

The two men froze as Sayaka’s harsh tone cut through their argument. She hadn’t particularly raised her voice, but the intensity of it pierced them both to the core. As one, they turned to see her giving them a vicious glare, her blue irises practically radiating power.

Having acquired their attention, she narrowed her gaze at them and said, “Not only are you getting us off topic, you’re scaring Chihiro!”

Shock overtook both of them, slowly turning their gazes and shuddering as they took in Chihiro’s trembling form. She was obviously struggling with everything that was going on, still disoriented from having just awoken only a few hours ago. Not only that, it was clear she was worried about her
‘baby’, Alter Ego. Frankly, it was amazing that she was able to keep herself upright at the moment, considering the weight that had been thrust onto her tiny shoulders since she’d awakened.

Seeing that they understood, Sayaka gave a minor scoff before finishing, “You can have your pissing contest after the trial. For now, just be quiet and let Hifumi finish.”

A brief silence stifled the room, but only for a few moments.

“…Y-You’re…right,” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru acquiesced.

“…Yeah…my bad,” Mondo echoed, hanging his head shamefully.

A bit triumphantly, Sayaka angled her gaze toward Hifumi and said, “Please continue.”

“R-Right…” the fanfic creator stuttered, shocked by Sayaka’s sudden shift in assertiveness. “A-Anyway, Miss Ludenberg ‘informed’ me that Taka was planning to commit murder to try and escape. And so, she…recommended that we take action against him.”

“And you agreed to it? Just like that?” Byakuya questioned him again, making the fanfic creator feel even more ashamed.

“N-No…not immediately. In fact, I questioned what we were doing multiple times.” He paused, tilting his head, and glaring at Celeste. “But each time I voiced my concern, Miss Ludenberg had just the right words to ‘motivate’ me! She even promised that, if our plan failed, she’d take responsibility for everything and confess!”

“Did she now…” the Affluent Progeny said, deviously. “Not that I believe your little story, but hypothetically, if you were telling the truth…” He felt Hina’s furious glare as he uttered those words, but continued on. “Why would you believe a word she’d said? Did you not think she may have been using you to fulfill her own desire to escape?”

Hifumi’s shoulders shrank. “…I…I didn’t. I thought that…she was just being…her usual tsundere self.”

“I see,” Kyoko replied, matter-of-factly. Her face didn’t betray even a hint of emotion as she asked, “So, she coerced you into trying to kill Taka then?”

Regaining a bit of composure, the fanfic creator continued, “…Yeah. We lured Taka to the equipment room with a note—”.

“So, it was you!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru screamed again. “You were the ones trying to keep a hidden exit secret from me—”.

“There was no exit, obviously.” Junko’s harsh tone interrupted him, earning a menacing glare from the Committee Chairman. “They just wanted to get you alone…to try and kill you.”

Beyond the point of being shocked, the Disciplinary Chairman seethed, “You would…go so far to perpetuate chaos! Have the two of you no sense of order or struct—”.

“STOP SAYING THAT!”

The room shook as Hina finally spoke up, her voice almost raw from her shouting. Angrily, she glared around the room, just like before.

“All of you…saying it was ‘both’ of them that planned this!” Her gaze settled on Kyoko and Junko,
who had been among those to implicate both of them. “It’s obvious that Hifumi is just trying to drag Celeste down with him! You’re believing his lies so easily! Why can’t you see—?!”

“Hina…please calm down.”

After so long of being silent, Celeste finally spoke up. Her tone was soft and gentle, her usual smile plastered onto her lips…almost triumphantly. Again, the swimmer was shocked by how composed her friend was, but remained silent.

“Let them say what they want,” Celeste told her sweetly. “It won’t change the truth.”

“Well…yeah, but—!”

“It is fine,” the gambler reassured her, folding her hands beneath her chin and smiling wider. “Once the fat oaf has finished, I shall explain what truly happened. You have my word.”

Although still apprehensive, Hina managed to calm down enough to reply, “…Alright.” Snapping her gaze to Hifumi, she snarled, “So…what happened next, traitor?”

Still reeling from being so harshly accused, Hifumi took a moment to compose himself.

“Well, Miss Ludenberg and I also laid a trap for Hiro as well…”

As Hina snapped at Hifumi, Kyoko closed her eyes and began to connect dots no one else had seen yet. The swimmer’s harsh demeanor was becoming increasingly unsettling, and the reason why was obvious to Kyoko.

Surreptitiously, she stole a glance at Celeste, analyzing her with scrutiny. Confidence, the gambler was utterly confident, as though she’d just won a large bet. That kind of confidence was…disturbing. And the way she led Hina around was more than unsettling. It put Kyoko on guard. And since she and Junko hadn’t been around to witness any of the events Hifumi had described, it made this case all the more difficult. At the same time, there was something ominous about Celeste’s behavior.

Unfortunately, without listening to both testimonies, Kyoko could only make speculations. And speculations, while important, would do them no good if there was no evidence to back them up. After all, they couldn’t afford to vote incorrectly, not with their lives on the line.

Stealing a glance to her right, Kyoko saw that Junko was having a similar reaction, her sky-blue irises darting from Hifumi to Celeste, trying to discern which of them could be lying. Unmistakably, there were only two choices. Hifumi or Celeste. One of them was trying to use this class trial to escape…but only time would tell which of them it was.

With that in mind, Kyoko refocused on Hifumi’s statements, taking in every last detail of his testimony.

“So, you’re the reason I was stuffed into that uncomfortable robot suit!” Hiro shouted as Hifumi finished explaining how he and Celeste had captured the clairvoyant.

Hifumi nodded solemnly. “After that, Miss Ludenberg remained in the Rec Room while I went to…”
dispatch Taka in the equipment room. However—”.

“Mondo burst in while you were behind the door, knocking you unconscious and preventing you from carrying out the deed. Am I correct?”

Everyone’s eyes widened as Kyoko cut in, vocalizing exactly what Hifumi had been about to say. Startled, the fanfic creator stammered, “Y-Yes but…how…did you…?”

“Yeah! How could you have known about that?!” Hiro abruptly accused, pointing a shaky finger at her. “Almost like you were there—!”

“There was a small blood stain on the wall behind the door,” Kyoko informed the class. “Makoto and Taka can verify that, as the three of us investigated the equipment room before being summoned to the trial.”

“Indeed! There was that blood stain behind the door!” Taka roared, pleased to be part of the trial again.

“That’s right!” Makoto almost shouted, only now realizing what she was after. “It looked as if someone was pressed into the wall with considerable force…”

“Exactly,” Kyoko concurred, nodding affirmatively at him. “And given Mondo’s earlier testimony about going there to seek help from Taka, the only conclusion is that when Mondo burst into the room, he accidentally hit Hifumi with the door.”

“Holy shit…” Mondo whispered before glancing at Hifumi, a look of triumph gleaming in his eyes. “So… you were trying to kill Taka, but I ended up stopin’ you, huh?! Serves you right, ya bastard!”

“You see! Hifumi is guilty!” Hina immediately pounced on that opportunity. “We even have proof —!”

“It’s only proof that he tried to kill Taka,” Kyoko corrected her, enduring a monstrous glare from the swimmer. “We still don’t know what happened in the art supply room.”

“Seriously…we’ve been talking in circles for, like, forever!” Leon complained before turning to Hifumi. “Why don’t you just tell us what happened in art supply room next?”

“Hold on there, cowboy!” Junko piped up, a scold to her tone. “I’d like to know how Hifumi got from the nurse’s office up to the art supply room first. I mean, no one saw him leave the nurse’s office, did they?”

“C-Cowboy?” a confused Leon stammered, but didn’t disagree with her.

Aside from that comment, no one spoke up. Prompting the Fashionista to look between Celeste and Hina.

“Weren’t you and Hina supposed to be in the nurse’s office, Celeste?” she questioned without implying anything. “How did he manage to get past you?”

“I can tell you how!” Hina chimed in, her tone almost too confident. “I went to make us some tea, since we missed tea time that morning and—”.

“Wait.” Byakuya’s cold voice filled with anger. “You mean to say that you left Celeste alone with Hifumi and Chihiro in the nurse’s office?”
Taken back, the swimmer slowly replied, “Uh…yes?”

As this new information came to light, Byakuya narrowed his gaze at her, making her flinch.

“I didn’t believe it was possible, but it appears you’ve surpassed even Hiro’s level of idiocy,” the Affluent Progeny harshly scolded, pushing up his glasses in annoyance.

“Hey! I take offense to—”, Hiro tried to say but was quickly cut off.

“Although you couldn’t have known it at the time, you left the two prime suspects alone for an extended period,” Byakuya reiterated for everyone, before scoffing loudly. “That means, regardless of their testimonies, we have no way to validate either of their statements. And all because of your selfish action, Hina.”

Hina’s blue eyes widened as the truth of his statement registered. She glanced over to Celeste, silently begging for help. “B-But…I wasn’t trying to…I mean…”

“H-Hold on! That’s going too far, Byakuya!” Makoto leapt to the swimmer’s defense.

“Indeed, it is.” Everyone turned as Celeste spoke up. “After all, it was my fault that Hina left in the first place. Even if I did go after her later, I was the one who requested the tea in the first place. In addition, I did not attempt to dissuade her from leaving. The blame falls squarely on my shoulders…”

“Indeed, it does,” Byakuya concurred, the frustration in his voice seeping out. “After we specifically decided to work in pairs, to maintain alibis, you sent her away. I hope you can explain that.”

With a light chuckle, Celeste nodded. “But of course. However, should we not finish listening to Hifumi’s little story? We wouldn’t want to mix up our testimonies, now would we?”

As her suggestion echoed in the room, she stole a glance at Hina. The swimmer noticed and gave her an ashamed expression, guilty for having to put Celeste in that position. However, the gambler only smiled at her, an act that left Hina feeling slightly reassured.

“Hmph, I suppose you have a point,” the Togami Heir granted, but kept his eyes trained on Celeste. “However, I will not tolerate excuses. Once he finishes, I expect a detailed explanation—”.

“We’ll all be expecting it,” Junko chimed in, her voice harsher than usual. “At this point, we don’t know which of you is telling the truth. So, you’d better be prepared.”

The Fashionista’s sky-blue irises met with the gambler’s crimson orbs, a kind of tension growing between them that hadn’t been there previously. Distrust was beginning to form between the students, and they found this case a lot more difficult than it had originally seemed.

“Very well, then.” Celeste answered, breaking eye contact with Junko and turning toward Hifumi, smiling almost gleefully. “Carry on, Hifumi. Tell us your side of the incident.”

Celeste’s suggestion seemed to satisfy most of the students…except for Hifumi. He glared at the gambler with accusatory rage but knew speaking up would only make matters worse. Besides, he’d been unconscious at the time, and therefore couldn’t verify anything that had been said. However, that didn’t mean he could fight back against Miss Ludenberg’s lies!

“After getting hit by the door,” Hifumi continued, not missing the smile on Mondo’s face as that part
was reiterated. “I blacked out and wake up a little bit later. I stumbled back to the Rec Room, to inform Miss Ludenberg of my failure, but passed out when I got there. The next thing I knew, I was in the nurse’s office. Miss Ludenberg was the one who awakened me.”

His gaze snapped over to her, but she held her smile firmly, which only further infuriated him.

“Once I was up, she told me she had a new plan. I handed over one of my justice hammers to Miss Ludenberg and she—”.


“I think he means this,” Sayaka answered, lifting up ‘Justice Hammer 3’ that she and Leon had found. “Leon and I found it behind the medicine cabinet in the nurse’s office.”

“If it was hidden in the nurse’s office, there could only be one target it was meant for,” Byakuya concluded, shifting his gaze to Chihiro, who stood to his right. As one, everyone turned to her, making Chihiro’s eyes widened in realization.

“W-What…?” the programmer shivered, staring at the large hammer in horror. “Someone was going to…”

“J-Just because we found it there doesn’t mean Hifumi’s not the one who hid it there!” Hina interjected, feeling more than sympathetic toward Chihiro. “Besides, only a monster like him would think to attack an unconscious person!”

“But then…why didn’t he?” Kyoko pondered aloud, her question turning heads. “If what Celeste said is true, and she left to go and meet Hina once Chihiro woke up, then it would have been a simple matter for him to dispatch Chihiro.”

“Obviously, because we’d know it was him!” Hina countered, regaining her fire. “If Celeste and I had returned…and found Chihiro’s body, then it would have been obvious that it was his fault—!”

“I’m not so sure…” Everyone was shocked as Makoto interrupted, a hand resting on his chin, as if contemplating. “I don’t think either of them would have tried to kill Chihiro. After all, everyone besides the three of you had alibis for that time. It would have narrowed down the suspects too much…”

For a moment, everyone was silent, but not because of Makoto’s words. They all agreed with him, and more to the point, they understood his reason—which was truly frightening. Before they’d known it, they’d all grown accustomed to doubting and suspecting each other. The shock of someone being attacked didn’t have the horrific impact it once did…many days ago when they’d found Sayaka’s ‘body’ in his shower. They were all hardening…whether or not they wanted to…

Realizing this, Hifumi thought it was best to continue on before he lost his chance to explain himself.

“A-Anyway, Miss Ludenberg instructed me to go to the art supply room and wait for her to arrive with Taka. There, we would exact our revenge and while everyone was distracted by his murder, whomever didn’t kill Taka was going to murder someone else…”

“Someone else?” Makoto asked. “But who?”

Ashamed, Hifumi hung his head and answered, “Miss Ludenberg mentioned…luring Hina into a secluded place—”.

“How much more obvious can you get?!” Hina practically shouted. “I won’t believe any more of
your lies! Celeste is my friend! She’d never say such a thing! Isn’t that right, Celeste?”

It was only for a split second, but in that tiny instance, Celeste flinched. However, she hid it behind a shifting of her hands, lacing her fingers together.

“…Indeed. Such a preposterous suggestion,” the gambler finally spoke out against Hifumi, after letting him speak for so long. “Perhaps I should not have been so generous as to allow you to speak. If I had known you were going to be so vulgar—”.

“Silence, witch!” Hifumi shouted over her, the gambler falling silent but glaring intensely. “I won’t let you poison everyone with your vicious lies! You’ve corrupted them too much already!”

The courtroom seemed ready to descend into chaos, but the fanfic creator knew this was his time. He would expose the lies Miss Ludenberg had sewn amongst them, and save his classmates from a gruesome fate!

“This is what occurred in the art supply room!”

As he made that announcement, his voice becoming deeper and more regal for no apparent reason. His bold declaration silenced everyone, giving him the opportunity to speak the truth!

“After leaving Miss Ludenberg alone in the nurse’s office, I headed for the second-floor men’s restroom! Once there, I began to have second thoughts about our murder plan. My rage had subsided, and I realized it was probably better not to murder Taka! I heard the signal that Miss Ludenberg shouted from the first floor and headed for the art supply room!”

“A signal from the first floor, eh? That would explain the strange shout Celeste gave outside the nurse’s office,” Byakuya abruptly commented before falling silent.

“Ridiculous…” Celeste commented, anger in her voice. It seemed she’d finally grown weary of letting the fanfic creator spout anything he’d wanted. “I shouted because of the masked individual that I saw. Nothing more.”

“Wait a second…you saw the masked weirdo?” Junko abruptly asked, her voice unusually desperate. “Where? When?!”

Celeste frowned at the Fashionista’s insistence, but complied with her inquiry. “After Chihiro woke up, I stepped out of the nurse’s office for a bit. It was getting stuffy in that room, you see. And when I did, I happened to see the masked individual heading up the first-floor staircase.”

“…Really,” the Fashionista said quietly, staring down at the floor in contemplation.

“And that’s why, collectively, we decided to go and search for this masked individual. All because Celeste ‘just so happened’, to spot them,” the Togami Heir humored before turning back to Hifumi. “And what happened then?”

Seizing that opportunity, Hifumi continued, “Once there, I waited for Miss Ludenberg to arrive. I locked the door from the inside and only opened it when she told me she was there. However, she didn’t bring Taka with her, which surprised me! I had planned to confess everything to him and turn us both in! And when I explained that to Miss Ludenberg…she grabbed a hammer she must have hidden away and tried to kill me with it—!”

“Hold up a sec!” Mondo interrupted, his voice beyond skeptical. “If Celeste was the one attacking you, how the hell can you explain how I saw you holding the hammer, ready to bash her brains in!”
“Hifumi’s a lot larger than Celeste is,” Junko offered, her voice contemplative. “It’s certainly possible he could have overpowered her and taken the hammer away.”

“Exactly right, Miss Enoshima!” the fanfic creator praised, feeling a hint of triumph. “I was able to relieve Miss Ludenberg of the hammer, but I feared she would simply lie about our involvement! So, I used the hammer as a threat in order to get her to stay still until everyone arrived…a poor decision on my part…”

“Poor decision, my ass!” Mondo countered, still skeptical. “I know what I saw! You were definitely about to crack her skull open! That’s why I had to tackle you!”

Scoffing, Hifumi replied, “I tried to tell you it was a misunderstanding, but you didn’t listen! I specifically told you not to loot the—”.

“Be silent! Both of you!”

Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru’s voice pierced everyone’s ears, drawing attention back to him as his glare shifted between Mondo and Hifumi.

“How are we to discern the truth with the two of you bickering like children?!” he shouted, his fiery eyes and menacing aura flaring. “You both need to settle down and cease with this shouting!”

“…You’re one to talk…” Junko muttered under her breath, which he luckily didn’t hear.

As the ruckus came to a steady end, no one was surprised when Hina abruptly spoke up.

“Alright then! It’s time for Celeste’s side of the story!” she demanded, glancing over to her friend, and giving her an encouraging smile. “Go on, Celeste! Tell them all what really happened!”

With a firm nod, the gambler replied, “Very well, I shall tell you all everything I saw from this morning, up until the incident in question.”

“Alright, I’ve gotten this far. I just need to tell everyone ‘the truth’, and secure my victory!”

Celeste was utterly confident in her task. Most of the class was already on her side anyway. She just needed to ‘fill in the gaps’ in order to bring the rest of her classmates over to her side. And with Hina’s undying support, it would be easy.

“This morning, just before the morning announcement sounded, I left my room and decided to venture off to the Rec room,” she began, completely calm as everyone fixated their gaze onto her.

“How very strange…” Byakuya uttered, giving her a sideways glance. “After imposing your ‘night time rule’ on everyone, it seems you decided to break it.”

“Not at all,” she countered with a smile. “I waited until just before 8AM. Perhaps it was only a minute or two, but it was so close to the appointed time that I thought I would have enough time to return to the dining hall before long.”

“Then, why did you decide to go to the Rec room in the first place?” Junko asked with a raised eyebrow. “

Celeste purposefully dampened her features, looking as ashamed as possible.
“To be frank, I was going there to play a game of Shogi…against myself.” Her explanation was met with shocked expressions, just as she’d intended. “After the previous day’s events, I was feeling…a bit anxious. I had trouble sleeping, and so, I decided to play a game in order to calm my—”.

“LIES! ALL LIES!” Hifumi, who had remained silent the entire time, suddenly began shouting in earnest. “I already told everyone the real reason why you were there! You see how she’s trying to twist my own story to her—”.

“Just shut up, traitor!” Hina’s powerful voice silenced him instantly. “Celeste is a person just like the rest of us! It makes sense that she’d do something out of the ordinary when she’s feeling depressed! After what happened with Taka and Alter Ego, we were all a bit out of it, ya know!” The swimmer glared menacingly at Hifumi and seethed, “Not to mention that Celeste had the decency to let you tell your absurd story! The least you can do is let her tell us what really happened!”

Under her terrifying gaze, the fanfic creator shrunk back behind his podium, peeking out from behind the wooden frame.

“But…But…I already—”

Hina slapped her hands down onto her own podium, the sound startling the fanfic creator until he hid completely beneath the rail of his podium.

“I don’t wanna hear another word out of you until Celeste is finished! Got that!” the swimmer demanded, her blue eyes burning with righteous fury.

Celeste suppressed a shudder as she watched Hifumi emphatically nod at Hina. The swimmer was pulling out all the stops for her. And even though she was being a lot more aggressive than usual, it was definitely working in the gambler’s favor…regretfully.

“No…not regretfully!” Celeste immediately corrected herself. “She’s being a useful pawn! I should be proud I was able to get her to act this way… I should…be proud…”

But she wasn’t…and she knew it. Celeste had unintentionally transformed Hina into an accomplice. The poor girl was furthering her own demise, but wouldn’t know it until it was too late. The kind, sweet, tender-hearted girl that everyone adored…was being replaced with the cruel and cold person that continually defended her.

“But…that’s what I need,” Celeste convinced herself, using her talent on herself. “I need Hina to be this way. It’s the only way to achieve my dream. And once I have my castle…nothing else will matter.”

Believing her own lie, Celeste smiled warmly and said, “Thank you, Hina. Shall I continue?”

Suddenly, Hina’s cold demeanor vanished and her bright, bubbly smile made a surprise return. “Yup! You go for it, Celeste! Tell ‘em all what really happened!”

Once more, Celeste fought off a shudder as Hina’s personality rubbed off on her. However, she couldn’t let her moment slip away, and decided to clear her throat to regain everyone’s attention.

“Not long after I arrived, I heard the door open. However, before I could turn around, I was struck with a hammer on the side of my head.” Celeste lifted a hand to her head and tenderly rubbed it. “I fell to the ground and as my consciousness faded, I saw what appeared to be Hifumi, being dragged away by someone in a robot suit—”.

“T-That was me! She’s talking about me!” Hiro chimed in, rudely interrupting her. However, a swift
glare from Hina silenced him. “Sorry…”

Ignoring his interruption, Celeste continued, “Thinking quickly, I took a picture of the incident with the camera I obtained from our investigation.”

“And where is this picture?” Kyoko stoically asked, her neutral expression giving nothing away.

Slumping her shoulders, the gambler let out a deep sigh. “Regrettably, I am unable to provide that… and I can explain why.”

She added the last bit because it appeared that Junko was about to protest, her mouth half open in preparation to speak. However, as the Fashionista head those words, she closed her mouth and stayed silent…just as planned.

“When I next awoke, it was to the sound of moaning, and I looked up to see Hifumi standing over me, blood dripping down his face. Then, he suddenly collapsed on top of me…breaking the camera as he fell.”

“That must have been after Mondo hit him with the door,” Makoto concluded, earning a nod from Celeste. “And that’s when Hina and I found you in the Rec room?”

“Exactly so,” the gambler agreed, letting out a breath of relief. “I am truly fortunate that the two of you were there. Otherwise, I may have suffocated—”.

“You see! Even when he wasn’t trying to, Hifumi almost killed Celeste! That should have brought a bullying trial anyway!” Hina roared, pointing angrily at the fanfic creator, who looked more than a little embarrassed by the story. “This whole trial is pointless! We know that—

“Okay, that’s enough of that!” Junko’s voice sharply cut her off, startling the swimmer. “If you keep interrupting every two seconds, we’re never gonna hear the whole story! We get it, you trust Celeste, but it’s getting annoying listening to you constantly say the same thing! So just be quiet and let her finish telling her side of the story! Geez!”

Celeste watched as Hina’s eyes widened, only now realizing how rude she was being…to everyone. Slowly, she took a step back and almost seemed to shrink as she whispered, “R-Right…sorry.”

Almost without noticing it, Celeste’s eye twitched. How dare that bitch treat Hina like that! What right did the Fashionista have to tell anyone else to be quiet, when she interrupted other people all the time! And to do it to Hina of all people! Sweet, bubbly, lovable Hina didn’t deserve to be talked to like that! Besides, she hadn’t done anything wrong…or so Celeste wished she could say. In reality, she was contributing to the class’ collective downfall…she just didn’t know it.

That’s when a strange thought came to Celeste’s mind.

“Why am I getting so upset about it anyway? Hina’s not gonna survive the trial…so why should I care if she gets bitched out? I mean, yeah, it’s annoying that she won’t defend me as often but… yeah, that’s it! I’m just upset because I don’t like my pawn being silenced! That…must be it!”

With that resolution firmly in her head, she smiled gently at Hina and said, “Do not let the words of a simple fashion model trouble you. I will tell everyone the truth, just be patient.”

Junko furrowed her brows at the comment but said nothing. At the same time, Hina let a nervous smile decorate her lips. “T-Thanks, Celeste.”

Nodding back affirmatively, the gambler cleared her throat again and resumed her explanation.
“As you just heard, thanks to Makoto and Hina, I was saved from suffocation. Afterward, as you all know, Sakura arrived, and she carried Hifumi to the nurse’s office, where we all gathered.” She paused, letting her words sink in before continuing. “Then, after we all split up, Hina offered to make the two of us tea. I should have refused…but I allowed her to leave. I believed it would only take a few minutes, and with both Hifumi and Chihiro unconscious, I figured it would be a simple task to merely wait for her return. However, that was when—”

“—When I woke up…?” Chihiro finally spoke, a nervous expression on her face.

“Indeed,” Celeste confirmed.

“Why don’t you tell us what you saw, Chihiro?” Sayaka abruptly asked, earning a surprised ‘eep’ from the programmer. Seeing she’d scared her, the pop idol smiled warmly, which instantly relived Chihiro. “It may help us confirm which of them is telling the truth.”

Hina visibly flinched at those words but said nothing, Junko’s earlier words obviously having an impression on her. Meanwhile, Chihiro hesitated for a moment before she eventually spoke.

“It’s…still kind of hazy but…I remember…seeing Celeste there. She was…really nice.” Chihiro finally smiled, glancing toward Celeste. Instantly, the gambler felt a pang of guilt but forced it back down before it could grow stronger. At the same time, Chihiro finished, “I…asked her if she could get me a pillow. And when she did—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on there!” Mondo rudely cut in, startling Chihiro into silence. “How the hell did she get you a pillow?! I made sure to lock all of them in the closet!”

From deep inside, rage boiled within Celeste. So, Mondo was responsible for sealing away all the pillowed behind a door that was duct taped shut! He even put all the sharp tools like scissors in there too! She had to set her plans back a few minutes because of that bullshit! Hiding her anger beneath a smile, she couldn’t keep herself from pressing the issue.

“Yes…and why exactly did you feel the need to do that?” she said politely, hoping no one would see the fury burning behind her crimson eyes.

Suddenly very self-conscious, the biker stammered, “W-Well, I-I figured that if I fell asleep or something, I should get rid of anything that could hurt Chihiro! That included the pillows because someone could have smothered her! And I wasn’t about to let that happen!”

The rest of the class collectively groaned at his explanation…except for one.

“You…did that for me?” the programmer suddenly called out, a thankful smile spreading over her lips. “Thank you, Mondo!”

“I-It was nothin’…” Fighting off the blush that crept onto his face, Mondo shook his head before glancing toward Celeste. “A-Anyway, how the hell did you get the door open?!

Wordlessly, Celeste lifted her right hand and extended out her index finger, showing off the metallic claw that decorated it.

“Well that makes sense,” Hiro concluded for everyone.

“Do you remember anything else Chihiro?” Kyoko asked, patiently waiting for the programmer to reply.

Chihiro squeezed her eyes shut, as if trying to remember, but eventually sighed. “No…I remember
“Alright then, thank you.” Kyoko’s usually cold voice held a bit of warmth, but that quickly changed when she turned to face Celeste. “Please continue.”

Celeste fought not to grit her teeth. This one was pretty rude too! She was usually so quiet, but during the class trials, she was practically a chatterbox! Luckily, that didn’t matter. Celeste knew that her victory was almost guaranteed. So, she decided to finish ‘recalling’ her side of the story.

“As I was saying, after Chihiro awoke, I went to fetch Hina. And together, we called you all to the nurse’s office. Then, as I explained earlier, I left the room for a moment to catch my breath…when I saw a masked figure heading up the stairs.”

“The masked figure…” Junko repeated slowly, as if chewing on the words.

Her features hardened and not even Celeste could tell what she was thinking. The Fashionista had been difficult but not impossible to read, at least until now. The expression Junko wore was completely foreign to the gambler, and it made it all the more shocking when she suddenly dropped it and stared directly into the gambler’s eyes.

“What happened next?” the Fashionista asked, her voice deeper than usual.

“We decided to pursue the masked individual,” Byakuya suddenly intruded on the conversation. “We went in pairs, so as not to forsake alibis should the need arise. Which leads me to another important question.”

Shifting his gaze, he stared down at Celeste, as she stood next to him, and she could easily see where he was taking this inquiry.

“Why exactly did you split up from Hina…a second time?” His tone was cold and cruel, as if challenging her. She did not appreciate that. Even from someone as ‘high ranking’ as him, it was insulting.

“I’ll tell you why!” Hina abruptly spoke up again, mindful of her tone this time. “When Celeste and I went to the third floor to investigate, she lost an earring in the art room and went to get it!”

“I see,” the Togami Heir replied, shifting his gaze over to the swimmer. “And you just let her go off on her own…again? You didn’t question her leaving you alone…again?”

Again, Celeste suppressed her frustration at seeing someone verbally abuse Hina. It wasn’t Hina’s fault that she’d been manipulated! She was just too trusting! She believed everything Celeste had told her without question! If anything, it was Celeste’s fault that—

“No! Not my fault!” she corrected herself, that strange feeling in her stomach returning. “It’s Hina’s fault for being such an idiot! She should have questioned me! I’m not at fault…I’m not…”

“Yeah, I did! So, what?!”

Hina’s abrupt answer to Byakuya’s taunt shocked the gambler to the core, slowly lifting her head to see the swimmer matching gazes with the Togami Heir.

“Celeste is my friend! She wouldn’t lie to me! And she really was missing an earring! Plus, she was only gone for a minute or so before I heard her screaming for help!” Hina’s gaze hardened, and she refused to back down from Byakuya’s inquiry. “And when I saw her next, she still didn’t have it on her! She must have been lured by Hifumi before she found her earring! He may have even lured her
With that earring for all we know!

As if triumphant smirk, Byakuya replied, “Oh really? Then why is it that said earring has been replaced? It seems a bit too convenient—”.

“Uhrg! Obviously, we went to her room and got a spare!” Hina retorted before glancing toward Celeste. “Isn’t that right?”

“Ideed,” she answered almost automatically. “After the…incident, I wanted time to reapply my make-up…it had…became quite messy…”

Purposefully making her voice more downtrodden, she let out a sigh while making her body shuddered.

“As Hina said, after we split up to search each floor, I went to search for my lost earring…but found the Art Supply Room door open.”

She paused, but made it appear as though she’d hesitated.

“Peeking inside, I saw Hifumi there. Seeing no danger at the time…I approached. He seemed…startled by my presence, as if he was nervous about something. He told me that he’d found something in the corner of the room…but when I turned toward where he was pointing, I heard him move. Turning around…I saw him raising up a hammer to strike me!”

Her voice trembled, and she threw her hands into her face, falsely sobbing. Through tiny gaps in her fingers, she focused her gaze on Hifumi, who seemed absolutely livid by her falsehood. However, he wisely remained silent, knowing that he would be quieted again, especially at such a critical point. Taking in an intentionally shaky breath, Celeste pretended to compose herself slightly.

“He…swung…but he missed…because I stepped backward and tripped, falling to the floor. I screamed…I screamed for help and ran toward the door…but he grabbed me.” She visibly shuddered, pulling her hands away from her face and glaring at Hifumi. “He pulled me back and tried to hit me, but I kicked at him and broke free! I ran for the door but when I reached it, it was wouldn’t open…it seemed to be jammed.”

Strangely, Celeste noticed a guilty look cross Hina’s face for a moment, though she didn’t understand why. Deciding it was best not to question it, the gambler returned to her story.

“I screamed for help again, and I heard Hina just beyond the door. However, I was abruptly yanked back by the collar of my dress and thrown onto the floor…and there, I looked up to see Hifumi standing over me with the hammer…I thought…I was going to die…but then…”

She paused intentionally, allowing for another individual to support her ‘story’.

“That’s when I kicked down the door and saw Hifumi about to crack her skull open!” Mondo interjected, just as she’d foreseen. “So, I tackled him and—”.

“Yes, yes, we know the story from there, thank you.” Byakuya sighed, clearly annoyed, not wanting to hear the entire story again. “So now we have both of their testimonies…but where does that lead us?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Leon chimed in, seething. “Obviously it’s easy to tell which of them is telling the truth—”.

“No…unfortunately, it’s not.”
Everyone turned to see Makoto, a hand resting on his chin, deep in thought. He’d been silent for a while, which worried Celeste a great deal. The Ultimate Lucky Student had proven himself to be far more intuitive and intelligent than he appeared. Solving the first case, almost completely on his own, had raised some flags for the gambler. And while she knew he was often vulnerable to sympathy, he’d proven he was hardened enough to convict his friends of wrongdoing, if it meant ensuring the safety of the rest of the group.

Even so, Celeste wasn’t all that concerned. She’d been careful, and made sure not to leave any evidence that might incriminate her. More than likely, he’d realized that. And her suspicions were confirmed when Makoto resumed speaking.

“There isn’t any evidence that leads to their Hifumi or Celeste being the attacker.” Makoto frowned and let out a depressing sigh. “Even with both their testimonies, it’s virtually impossible to know which of them is lying. At this point…it’s all a matter of who we believe to be telling the truth.”

And there it was, the final strategy that Celeste had employed in this debate. By letting Hifumi tell everyone his side of the story, and consequently having to provide an ‘alternative’ story herself, she had found a way to make this case completely unsolvable! Not even Kyoko’s sharp reasoning could find out the truth, evident by how silent the lavender haired girl was being right now.

Celeste knew her victory was close at hand, she just needed to solidify it.

“This truly is unfortunate,” Celeste said to everyone, her voice filled with apparent worry. “I have no other means of proving my innocence other than my testimony. And…if you chose not to believe me, then we shall all perish while Hifumi stands as the only survivor.”

“Is there…truly no way for us to identify who is lying?” Sakura asked, grasping at straws. “Perhaps if we go over their testimonies again—”.

“And waste valuable time hearing the same inconsistent stories? I think not.” Byakuya’s harsh tone cut through the area, seeping into their ears, almost offensively. “At this point, all we can do is decide whom we think is guilty…and vote.”

A deafening silence was ushered at those words, though Hifumi chose to seethe rather than become melancholy like his classmates.

“I-I have confessed to everything! I swear that everything I said is true!” the fanfic creator shouted to them, his frantic cries growing more and more desperate. “Please don’t make the wrong choice now! If you vote for me, all of us will die!”

“Liar!” Hina countered, her vigor returning. “Once we vote for Hifumi, all of this will come to an end! Come on, guys! We all know he’s the culprit. Right?”

“…I’m not so sure.”

Hina’s head snapped over to see Kyoko, a hand resting on her chin, her eyes closed, taking a deep breath. After exhaling, the stoic girl’s eyes opened slowly, before hardening.

“Given that neither of the testimonies can be proven, it’s entirely possible that one or both of them are lying.” Her statement was cold…but firm, and everyone knew she spoke the truth. “That being the case, there’s no way we can vote right now. We need to continue this discussion until we’re able to discern—”.
“Debating the matter further won’t solve anything!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru challenged, earning a heated glare from Kyoko. Taking note of her gaze, Chairman Ishimaru continued, “However, I agree that voting prematurely could be deadly. Therefore, before we proceed with that, I would like to know where everyone stands on this matter.”

Shifting his eyes around the room, glaring at each of the students, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman shouted, “Whom do you side with? Celeste or Hifumi? Which of them do you all believe is the culprit?”

“Obviously it’s Hifumi!” Hina practically shouted, which surprised no one.

“I know what I saw! It’s gotta be Hifumi!” Mondo joined in, nodding firmly toward the swimmer, who smiled and nodded back.

“I’m…I’m not sure,” Sayaka spoke next, flinching as Mondo and Hina’s eyes glared at her. However, her features instantly hardened and she resisted their gazes. “But…I don’t think we should vote until we’re sure of who the culprit it.”

“I agree with Sayaka!” Leon, unsurprisingly, chimed in. “I…uh, can’t really trust either of them, to be honest.”

“Miraculously, we are in agreement,” Byakuya almost begrudgingly concurred, which earned a scowl from Leon that was ignored. “I have no faith in either of them. They could both be lying, for all we know. And I will not vote until I am convinced of someone’s guilt.”

“I-I agree w-with Master! A-After all, M-Master’s the o-only one I can t-trust!” Toko chimed in, but immediately fell silent after receiving a glare from Byakuya…panting like a dog in heat.

“Hifumi already admitted he was the one who attacked me!” Hiro fired off next, pointing angrily at the fanfic creator. “But…I don’t know if he did it because of Celeste or not so…I don’t really know either…But I guess if I had to choose…I’d vote for Hifumi!”

The entire class glared at Hiro, even Hina, who should have been thrilled he supported Celeste. His fickle nature was as unpredictable as always, which made him all the more annoying…

“I cannot deny that I am…uncertain about Celeste’s innocence,” Sakura confessed, looking away from Hina as shock overtook the swimmer’s face. Then, a moment later, she found her resolve and turned to stare at her friend. “However, I am willing to put my faith in Hina. And if she truly believes that Celeste is innocent, then I will believe in her innocence as well.”

Tears stung the corners of Hina’s eyes, which she quickly wiped away.

“T-Thanks…Sakura.”

The martial artist smiled at her friend, placing her faith in the hands of someone she knew could be trusted. Before their cause could gain momentum, however, a harsh voice disturbed the silence.

“I refuse to vote.” Kyoko’s comment was swift and stern, her arms folded across her chest, almost in defiance. “There’s a hidden truth here…and we need to uncover it.”

“Yeah, I think so too!” Makoto chorused, his resolve firmly set in place. “There’s definitely more to this case…I can feel it.”

Nearby, Junko was completely silent, though she did appear to be deep in thought, as if she wasn’t really paying attention to the conversation.
“I see…then we are at odds then!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru called out, gathering everyone’s attention. “Most of us are undecided, and we cannot risk not voting at all! The rules state that everyone must vote, or they will be punished! At the same time, if our opinions remain split on this issue—”.

“Split…opinions? Did I hear someone say…your opinions were…split?!”

For the first time in quite some time, Monokuma’s voice interrupted the students. As one, they turned to see the bear, standing up in its seat, its paws thrown up into the air, excitedly.

“Puhuhuhuhu! I just thought of a new way for you all to debate the innocence of your classmates!”

The bear’s words sent chills down the class’ spine, but they continued to listen.

“All of you who don’t want to vote right now, get to the left side of the courtroom,” Monokuma ordered, a sadistic glint in its eyes. “And those of you wanting to go ahead and vote the hentai artist as guilty, head over to the right side of the courtroom!”

Celeste had no idea what Monokuma was up to, but it didn’t really matter either way.

“There’s absolutely no way for anyone to contradict me! Plus, I’ve already got the sympathy vote! Everyone just loves a damsel in distress, and considering my normal attitude, a lot more of these idiots will feel sympathetic to my ‘suffering’! Just like Hina—”.

Celeste froze mid-thought. Her imagination conjured Hina, sweet and trusting Hina, her head beneath a guillotine…struggling and screaming for help as the blade came down and…ended her. A sinking feeling of disgust welling up in Celeste’s stomach. And almost made the mistake of looking over at the very alive swimmer girl. However, she refrained from that and immediately frowned, beating that feeling back down into the depths of her soul.

“Stop that! I don’t feel guilty for doing this to her! She’s just a pawn! Her sacrifice is needed for Celestia Ludenberg to have her castle—I mean, for me to have my castle! I AM Celestia Ludenberg! Taeko Yasuhiro doesn’t need to exist anymore! And once this trial is over, I’ll be free to live in my dream castle for the rest of my days!”

“Once all of you are in position, we’ll officially begin what I’ve chosen, preemptively, to call…A SCRUM DEBA—!”

“We don’t need to do that.”

Junko’s voice practically screeched in Celeste’s ears, sending waves of nausea through her system. Glancing over, the gambler’s crimson eyes widened as she took in the Fashionista’s visage.

Junko Enoshima stood there with a fearsome scowl on her face, arms at her sides, hands clasped into fists, the very image of determination and confidence. And as much as Celeste hated to admit it…that
expression terrified her. She had seen that expression on Junko’s face only once before…after she’d burst in to save Leon during his execution. The Fashionista radiated power…a kind of strength that Celeste knew…she was no match against.

As if responding to her fears, Junko flicked her eyes over to Celeste for a moment before glaring menacingly at Monokuma.

“I know how to identify the culprit.”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! What a dastardly development! Does Junko (Mukuro) truly know how to identify the culprit? Will Celeste be able to convince the other’s of her ‘innocence’? Why did the author tease a Scrum Debate only to take it away? (… because it was fun…) Find out the answers in the next thrilling chapter!

About the Scrum Debate, someone commented that it would be fun to see here, and I agreed. However, I absolutely HATE when DR fanfics try to write out the minigames from the trials. In my opinion, they feel clunky and destroy all semblance of narrative flow, which is why I don’t use them in my stories. Sorry to any of you who really wanted it, but trust me, I’ve got something else pretty awesome planned for the next few chapters!

As always, leave a comment/review to tell me what you think of the story! Thanks again, and have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
The class trial proceeds, but the truth continues to evade the students. Gambles are made, friendships are tested...and bonds are broken.

Mukuro knew she was taking a huge gamble. She was putting her very life on the line in order to reveal the truth. And even if it worked, there was a chance it could reveal her identity...which would lead to her own execution.

“No time to worry about that now...” she told herself, her eyes momentarily shifting down a few podiums to her left. “...And if that happens...I’m leaving everything to you, Kyoko...”

Unexpectedly, at that instance, Kyoko’s lavender eyes shifted over and met Mukuro’s sky-blue irises. Though usually unreadable, the soldier was able to sense a feeling of concern deep within her companion’s eyes. Before any feelings of regret could take over, Mukuro tore her gaze away, hardening her visage as she prepared mentally and physically for her task.

“Once all of you are in position, we’ll officially begin what I’ve chosen, preemptively, to call...A SCRUM DEBA—!”

“We don’t need to do that...I know how to identify the culprit.”

A deep silence, harsher than any that had previously befallen the courtroom, echoed in the students’ minds as Junko’s words buzzed in their ears. Even Monokuma, who only a moment ago had been 200% psyched up for the new debate, was eerily quiet as the Fashionista interrupted. It was as if time stood still for a moment, with no one brave enough to break that silence.

Without betraying a hint of emotion, Kyoko continued to stare at Junko. Even she was confused at how the Fashionista planned to turn this around. In her mind, it was clear that Celeste was far more suspicious than Hifumi. However, she couldn’t deny that the lack of evidence could be damning... and she had no intention of dying today. Which meant...all she could do was put her faith in her newfound partner, since only she was privy to the delicate information the ‘Ultimate Fashionista’ had entrusted her with.

“Please explain then,” Kyoko said sternly, a bit harsher than she’d intended. “I’d rather avoid any new ‘ideas’ from Monokuma. And if you’ve found a way to settle this debate, then it’s worth listening to.”
For a moment, the imposter who called herself ‘Junko Enoshima’ met her gaze. There was apprehension—no, it was fear that permeated the ‘fashionista’s eyes. A gruesome, horrific fear that Kyoko only now realized ‘Junko’ had been enduring for so long. She was placing her very life on the line with this assertion…and the ramifications of what she was planning obviously terrified her. And yet, she was still going through with it, for it was too late to turn back now. Kyoko respected that…and earning her respect was something she never imagined possible, until only a few days ago.

In spite of her own fears, it seemed that Kyoko’s words somehow motivated the ‘Fashionista’, because a moment later, she spoke, “First, I have a question for Monokuma.”

‘Junko’ shifted her gaze toward the bear atop the throne, smiling as its face became consumed with red fury. It wasn’t something that happened every day, and the imposter known of ‘Junko’ reveled in it. In fact, it made Kyoko the slightest bit jealous, wanting to upend the increasingly annoying bear herself.

“Do…you…now…?” the demented bear seethed, obviously not pleased at having its fun thwarted. “I was just about to get to the good part when you came in and eviscerated my joy! What can be so important that it requires me to abandon such a heart-throbbing—?!”

“The masked figure that we’ve seen roaming around the school…is that you?”

Kyoko’s eyes widened as understanding flooded her mind. And even though she immediately reverted back to her usual stoic visage, deep inside, she felt her heart tremble.

“…So…you’ll go that far in order to keep us from turning on each other…”

Hidden within the heights of the Monokuma control room, the real Junko’s eyes widened…before a malicious smirk decorated her lips. Turning off the microphone that allowed her to speak with the students, a deep cackle escaped her throat.

“Eyahahahahaha! Holy shit…she’s actually asked that!” Junko’s tongue darted out of her mouth, wetting her lips as she could practically taste the oncoming despair. “Ohhhh, there are so many ways this could go! I don’t even want to analyze what Muku is thinking! Too bad I already have…”

Before she even realized it, she’d already plotted out 37 different ways her sister’s gamble could potentially go. However, of that 37, only 19 were possible if she, the Mastermind, decided to remain silent and not answer her sister’s question. Having 18 less routes available didn’t sit right with her, considering any of them could hold such lovely and enthralling despair!

“Realistically,” Junko switched to her ‘sexy teacher’ persona, instantly putting her hair up in a ponytail while pushing up fake glasses. “The greatest amount of despair will be achieved if I allow her to do as she pleases…”

More than likely, Mukuro knew that too, though she probably only thought there were two or three paths her decision could take her down. It was almost shameful really…but even so, Junko decided it was in her best interest to allow her sister to make such a foolish mistake.

“Buts I also don’t wanna let her think she can just gets away with anything!” Cute Junko suddenly appeared, waving her arms in a moe fashion. “So…I’ll just have ta spoil something for everyone!”

At once, Junko let a toothy grin overtake her entire face, stretching her cheeks so much it hurt. There was one way to get back at her sister without violating the rules of the game…just like Mukuro had
just done! Plus, it would have the added despair of causing a great deal of unrest, which they didn’t need during the class trial! And it would be all Mukuro’s fault! No one would realize it…probably. But it would still make the game much more despair-inducing!

“If our dear sister wants to dig her own grave…then we must be the one handing her the shovel!” Royal Junko shouted, tapping the tiny crown she placed on her head.

Quickly finalizing exactly how she planned to proceed, Junko felt her body growing hotter and hotter as the oncoming despair preemptively hit her.

“Don’t think you can bend me over and fuck me without buying dinner first!” Junko maneuvered to a new persona, angrily shouting and cursing as she panted, the thought of a perfect way to make this game more interesting appearing in her mind. “I’ll play your game, you fucking rogue! But remember…this is my game we’re playing! And I don’t abide by unfair advantages!”

Clicking the button that allowed her to speak through Monokuma, the Mastermind let out her signature laugh…

“Upupupupupu! Ahahahahaha!”

The bear’s cackling sent waves of nausea through each student, sensing that the bear was plotting something.

“And why should I tell you tha-t?” Monokuma asked in a sing-song tone. “Especially after you decided to ruin my glorious new debate strategy! It was gonna be awesome! With intense arguments and a full group counter!”

Furrowing her brows, Junko seethed, “In the interest of fairness, I demand to know if the masked figure is you; the Mastermind!”

“…Fairness…” Monokuma chewed on that word for a moment before he spat it back out. “Fairness? Are you sure you want fairness? You might not like how fair I can make this trial!”

Junko visibly flinched, hesitating for an instant before scoffing loudly. “Like I care!” she insisted, slamming her palms down onto her podium. “Just tell us the truth! Were you the masked freak that Celeste saw on the first floor of the school?!”

Silence enveloped the courtroom, Junko’s words still ringing in everyone’s ears. For his part, Monokuma remained silent…as if contemplating, though its face was utterly blank. Was the Mastermind contemplating something then? Or was the bear just pausing for dramatic effect?

“Alrighty then! If that’s how you want it! Then I guess, in the interests of fairness, I have no choice but to answer your question!”

“Wait, just a moment, if you please.” Celeste suddenly spoke up, a bead of sweat trickling down the side of her cheek. Junko’s gaze shot over to the gambler, scowling as she saw that Celeste’s perfect mask obscured any trance of emotion that would reveal her true intentions. “Why is it so important to know who it was I saw on the first floor? Even if it was the Mastermind, that does not have any bearing on our discussion—”

“Actually…” Junko sharply interrupted, narrowing her eyes at the gambler. “It’s what’s going to prove which of you two are lying!”
As murmurs of surprise and excitement began billowing through the courtroom, the Fashionista hardened her gaze, never taking her eyes off Celeste. Their eyes locked, burning crimson eyes clashing with vibrant sky-blue irises, a tension that had never been addressed growing immeasurably palpable between them.

All at once, the gambler’s visage changed. Her usual calm persona was replaced with subtle fury, one so discreet that only a few of the students noticed the change. Among them were Kyoko and Byakuya, who surreptitiously leveled their gazes toward Celeste. However, the gambler didn’t seem aware of their stares, focusing all of her internal strife toward Junko.

“What nonsense,” Celeste scoffed, folding her arms, and grasping her own elbows. A deep, frustrated frown settled onto her face, the first genuine expression she’d made during the entire trial. “How would knowing if the Mastermind was behind the mask matter in the least? It will not prove Hifumi’s guilt, nor will it—”.

“The Masked Individual…is one of you!”

Monokuma’s abrupt declaration hit them all like a spark of electricity. Suddenly, a tension so thick and despair-inducing engulfed the courtroom as each of the students began glancing at each other, internally questioning who might be the one who had betrayed their trust. Silence reigned as they all found themselves lost in deep contemplation.

After all, if it was true, and the Masked Individual was one of them, then whoever it was had lied the morning after they’d been spotted. No one came forward, so it was easy to conclude that the Mastermind was responsible…but if they weren’t, it meant that they had someone in their midst with unknown intentions…and that revelation sowed deep seeds of doubt amongst the students.

“No…that can’t be…” Sayaka said aloud, breaking the deafening silence. Slowly, she glanced around at her classmates, one by one. “One of us…is…”

“It’s bullshit! I won’t believe it!” Leon asserted, shaking the confusion from his head. “There’s no way one of us would—”.

“It’s all clear now…” Byakuya interrupted, a smug grin on his face as he pushed up his glasses. “I told you all that there was a spy for the Mastermind among us. And it seems that I was correct.”

“We don’t know that!” Makoto insisted, staving off a vicious glare from Byakuya. “Even if it’s true, and the Masked Individual is one of us…that doesn’t mean they’re working for the Mastermind!

“Unfortunately, we can’t deny the possibility that the Masked Individual could be a spy for the Mastermind,” Kyoko’s stoic voice entered the fray. Makoto was initially shocked by her suggestion, until she continued, “However, there’s no way to prove that they are, in fact, one and the same.”

Hearing that, Makoto let out a relieved sigh and smiled at Kyoko. She nodded to him and quickly turned back to address the other students.

“Regardless, this new information can shed light onto this case—”.

“Unless, of course, Monokuma is lying to us…”

All eyes turned toward Celeste, who seemed a bit more frazzled than usual. At the same time, Monokuma’s face grew a fiery red as it turned and glared at the gambler.

“How rude!” an offended Monokuma shouted at her, bearing its claws. “Bears don’t lie!”
“And why would Monokuma do that anyway?” Junko suddenly asked, oddly coming to Monokuma’s defense. “Monokuma has no reason to lie to us. In fact, whoever the Mastermind is, I don’t think they’ve lied to us once since we got here!”

As much as they wanted to, Junko’s assertion was also hard to deny. Sure, Monokuma, and by extent the Mastermind, had been unusually cruel and malevolent toward them. However, they’d never actually lied to them.

They always kept their promises, no matter how silly they seemed, just like when Monokuma went on ‘vacation’ and left authority to Taka. It put more gravity into the revelation that Monokuma had bestowed upon them. Although some of the students seemed unconvincing...

“Perhaps Monokuma is trying to lead us astray?” Celeste replied, unwilling to back down. “After all, even with this new information, I cannot see how it relates to the case.”

“Yeah! And besides, it just doesn’t make any sense!” Mondo shouted, slamming his fist onto his podium! “The bear’s just a goddamn liar! I won’t believe any of this bullshit!”

“Oh? And why is that?” Monokuma asked him, a sly grin somehow spreading on the bear’s face.

“Because it doesn’t make sense!” Mondo repeated before audibly groaning at being questioned. “Think about it, Hina and Sakura chased the masked freak around a few nights ago, right? And I know that no one got past me after they went after ‘em! If they were one of us, there would have been no way to get back to the dorms—”.

“They probably just used the hidden archive room in the men’s restroom on the second floor of the academy.”

Monokuma’s answer was so nonchalant, bored even...as if he hadn’t just revealed a huge secret to the entire class. And just as expected, chaos burst forth...

“H-Hidden archive room?! We have a hidden archive room?!” Hiro shouted, feeling increasingly lost as this revelation hit him. “I know this place is a school, but do they even have to make us study in the bathroom! That’s just torture!”

“That is not the issue! Even though I would find that extremely productive!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru yelled over him, clenching his fists tightly. Ignoring the exasperated groans of his classmates, he continued, “If there is a hidden room in the men’s restroom, it is possible one of us found it and has been using it for their own needs!”

“Y-Yeah! A-And its g-gotta be one o-of the boys!” Toko chimed in, pointing offensively at all the boys until she lovely gazed at Byakuya. “But...if it w-was Master, then it w-would be fine...because he n-needs a place for a s-secret rendezvous—”

“Shut up.”

Toko immediately followed Byakuya’s order, slapping her hands over her mouth to keep from letting even a syllable fall out.

“T-There’s a...hidden room in the men’s restroom...” Makoto quietly said to himself, closing his eyes and falling silent. It wasn’t odd for him to go into such deep contemplation, but something about his silence was troubling...

“Um, I’m getting confused,” Hifumi finally spoke up, looking around at everyone. “How does this happen to prove my innocence?”
“No one ever said it would!” Hina countered, glaring menacingly at the fanfic creator. “There you go! Trying to twist the facts in your favor again! Forget about that room! It’s just a trick by Monokuma to try and get us to vote incorrectly!”

“Shouldn’t… we discuss that hidden room some more?” Chihiro pondered, trying to comprehend this new information. Even though it was unintentional, Hina abruptly sent a sharp glare toward the programmer. And while Chihiro flinched, she still managed to say, “M-Maybe that’s what will lead us to discover who’s responsible?”

“A hidden room will not reveal who was attacked!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted, unintentionally frightening the programmer. Feeling guilty, he then moved to say, “But Chihiro has a point! We should discuss that hidden room more so that—!”

“We can deal with that later!” Junko spoke over his shouting, quieting everyone else. “Monokuma already told us what we need to know. The Masked Individual is one of us. Right now, we need to concentrate on what that means for this class trial! Everything else can wait until our lives aren’t on the line!”

“Agreed, we will have ample time to discuss whom might have used the hidden room later” Byakuya concurred, glancing between Junko and Kyoko with a sly grin. They noticed but said nothing, knowing the trial took precedence. With a victorious huff, the Togami Heir continued, “Well then, tell us, Junko. What does knowing that one of us is the Masked Individual mean for this case?”

Junko groaned, obviously not enjoying being the Togami Heir’s mouthpiece, but she knew it was important to get on with the trial, so she endured his asshole-ish nature.

“I just want to reaffirm this…we all have alibis for when everyone went to visit Chihiro after she woke up, right?”

Her question hung in the air for a moment as everyone thought about it.

“That appears to be the case,” Kyoko answered, glancing around at her classmates. “Most of you were in the nurse’s office, while Junko, Hiro and I were in the pool area.”

“Which means we all have solid alibis!” Hina immediately joined in, feeling more confident. “That means that Monokuma has to be lying to us! Because there’s no way Celeste could have seen the masked weirdo if they were one of us!”

“…Exactly.”

For a moment, Hina thought she’d done well defending her friend…until another possibility formed in her mind. Her eyes widened and shot over to Celeste, a startled gasp escaping her. Junko lowered her head slightly, having not intended for Hina to unwittingly reveal what she’d been trying to convey. However, now that it had been said, there was no going back.

“If Monokuma is telling us the truth, and the masked freak really is one of us…” Glaring defiantly at the gambler, the Fashionista practically seethed, “It means that Celeste lied to us.”

…A crack…miniscule in size…began to form…her perfect mask…was beginning…to crumble…

“What the fuck is going on?! A second ago, I was in the clear! Why are they all suspicious of me
Celeste mentally screamed, barely managing to keep all traces of external panic hidden behind her rapidly cracking perfect mask. The entire class was staring at her now, and she could feel their gazes fixate on her, noiseless gasping as sweat trickled down her back. Abruptly, her lower lip quivered uncontrollably, and she had to bit it to cease its movement, praying no one happened to see such a disgraceful display.

“No…no, no, no, no! No fucking way! How the fuck did that bitch think of that?! She wasn’t even there at the time! God-damn fashion slut! And why the fuck did Monokuma have to tell them that?!
The fucking bear is supposed to stay out of our business! This game…isn’t fair at all!”

Celeste found herself unable to speak, fearing she would unintentionally slip something in her current state of abject horror! Instead, she was subjected to more of Junko’s ‘theories’…

“And if Celeste lied about seeing the masked freak on the first-floor stairway, then she could be lying about everything else as well.”

It took every fiber of Celeste’s being not to scream at the top of her lungs how fucking bullshit everything had gone! If she refuted Junko now, she’d look guilty. But if she stayed silent, she’d look even more guilty! Either way, there was absolutely nothing she could say that—

“B-But we don’t know that Monokuma isn’t lying!” A ray of hope in Hina’s voice rang out, making the frazzled Celeste shoot her gaze toward the swimmer. “It could all be a lie in order to get us to make the wrong decision! So that we’ll all be executed! We all know how desperate for us to die Monokuma is!”

Yes…Yes! This was it! This was exactly what Celeste needed right now! Hina had come to her rescue without even knowing it! There was still a chance! A chance to turn this around! Gather up all of her dignity and grace, Celeste gently folded her hands together and smiled sweetly.

“You all have such vivid imaginations, you know that?” she said politely, almost nonchalantly. When everyone’s attention was once again on her, she glanced at Junko and said, “You believe, that I am lying when I said that I saw the masked individual on the first floor? But, is there any way to prove this?”

At this, Junko’s expression sank, and she regretfully admitted, “No, but there’s still reasonable doubt that—!”

“Monokuma’s testimony merely states that one of us was the masked individual,” Celeste swiftly interrupted, causing the fashionista to frown. “However, it is also possible, as you mentioned earlier, that the masked individual could have been Mastermind as well. After all, Monokuma never said there was only one masked individual.”

“That’s true!” Hina bolstered her friend’s comment with a smile. “Like I said, this is just a trap to try and—!”

“Monokuma…” the Fashionista addressed the bear with hard eyes. A resolution shone in her eyes, and it made Celeste shiver involuntarily. “Is there really more than one masked individual?”

Everyone, Celeste included, glanced to the bear with expectation. This was her final gamble, and if it paid off, she’d still be able to achieve her dream. Yes…this was the final moment she could confess, and perhaps be spared her classmates wrath…and in return, spare everyone from the fate that she so cruelly planned for—
“No! I won’t confess. I have no reason to confess. This is what I want! I want them all to die so that I can have my castle! That is the truth! Stop second guessing it!”

As she firmly ordered her mind to stop contemplating such foolish things, Monokuma spoke.

“Well now…this is a predicament,” the bear sighed deeply before lounging back on the judge’s chair.

Nearby, Mukuro felt her pulse quicken. She hadn’t expected Celeste to be able to turn that around. The gambler was a lot craftier than she’d realized, an oversight on Mukuro’s part. In hindsight, she shouldn’t have been so shocked, considering Celeste’s high intelligence and considerable word manipulation. Still, this was leaving her with fewer and fewer options…and the soldier could only think of one way to spin this debate back into her favor…but at a great cost.

And to make matters worse, everyone’s fate relied on her sister’s whims…which never benefitted anyone!

“Ya see, I can’t directly interfere with the trial’s proceedings. I answered that one question because it technically doesn’t involve this case,” Monokuma explained before letting out another heavy sigh and sinking further into the chair. “But if I go into too much detail, you kids might start relying on me too much. And like a spoiled child who never moves out of their parent’s basement and/or attic, you kids wouldn’t be able to function in society without me if I just—”.

“So, you’re not going to answer then?” Kyoko interrupted, her swift response the only show of annoyance in her visage.

Pondering for a moment, Monokuma abruptly pushed itself up into it’s normal seated position.

“It’s out of my hands now. If I give any more info, that would be considered favoritism and as I said, I’m all about the spirit of fairness!” the bear cackled lightly, its gaze meeting Mukuro’s for half a second before addressing the entire class again. “If only there was a way to identify who the masked assailant was! That way, you could ask the masked freak about everything themselves!”

And there it was…the suggestion that Mukuro feared would come to pass. Revealing herself as the masked attacker would solve this issue, but it would do irreparable damage to her reputation. She could try and convince everyone that she was simply roaming the halls to protect them, which was true, but then she’d need to explain her incredible talents of combat, good enough to outmaneuver Sakura. And if it came to that, she’d easily be discovered as an imposter…and executed.

“Execution…my own…‘Punishment Time’…”

Dark thoughts clouded her mind as she recalled her sister’s past ‘punishments’. At the time, she’d never imagined having one of them visited upon her…but that seemed like a lifetime ago. Now, with the prospect nearly a reality…her entire being shivered.

“In either scenario, I’m going to get executed. If I reveal myself, I’ll be violating Junko’s rules and be killed. But if I say nothing…everyone else will die!”

…Despair. This was what her sister wanted her to feel…and it was working. She hadn’t been consumed by it, but she could feel it’s icy grip seeping into her very bones. It wasn’t exactly an impossible choice, but one that she had always feared would present itself.
Inadvertently, Mukuro lifted her gaze, unintentionally staring at her friend’s faces. She saw the fear in Sayaka’s eyes, the confusion on Leon’s face, the bottled-up fury in Mondo’s furrowed brow, the fragility of Chihiro’s visage, finally settling onto Makoto’s frantic expression… it was then that she made her decision. For all the people who she had chosen to protect… she would do what was necessary for their continued survival!

“I… I don’t want to die… but… in order to save everyone, I’m willing to—”

While I can’t prove that there was only one masked individual, I can provide some evidence that may lead us an answer.”

Shock tore through Mukuro’s mind as Kyoko suddenly spoke up. The soldier’s sky-blue irises shot over to her companion, widening as she watched the detective reach into her pocket. Slowly, almost agonizingly so, Mukuro gawked as a gloved hand pulled out the frightening mask that she had worn only a few days ago. Her breath caught in her throat as Kyoko held it up for everyone to see.

“I found this on the second floor during my initial search for everyone this morning. I had planned to bring it up after the trial, but it seems now is the time to discuss it.”

Mukuro struggled to catch her breath as she listened to Kyoko’s half-lie. Only the soldier knew the full extent of her words. More than likely, she’d found it in the archive room that morning, after the two of them had split up before their eventual confrontation in the hidden room. The detective girl must have pocketed the mask before the two of them visited the hidden room together, because Mukuro hadn’t seen it when they ‘investigated’ the room.

A wave of anxiety overtook Mukuro as she realized that Kyoko was covering for her. It was a huge risk, one that would make the rest of the students far more suspicious of her than ‘Junko’. The guilt hit her almost immediately, and Mukuro wished there was a way to reverse what she’d done… but they both knew it was too late.

At the same time… that strange feeling of warmth radiated in her chest, though she forced it back down in order to focus on the trial. And as expected, the courtroom erupted into a flurry of questions.

Makoto stared, almost blankly as Kyoko produced the freakish mask from her pocket. Instantly, his mind told him to be suspicious… not of Kyoko, but of something else… something unseen. Somewhere, deep inside, even though he knew the most logical notion was to suspect Kyoko of wrongdoing… he just couldn’t.

It wasn’t merely because he’d grown closer to her lately, it was deeper than that. Something deep within him told him there was more to this mystery than any of them could see. He trusted Kyoko. He wasn’t sure why exactly, but after spending some time with her, he’d gotten a sense of her personality, though only vaguely. But within those scattered moments, he’d come to realize that, if she chose to reveal this information now, it had a far greater meaning than he could understand, at least at this very moment.

Unfortunately, before he could speak up, a certain excitable swimmer beat him to the punch.

“T-That’s it! That’s the mask!” Hina shouted, pointing frantically at the item in Kyoko’s hands.

“Are you sure about that?” Byakuya harshly questioned, though his tone was genuine.

“Positive.” Sakura grimaced as she took in the horrific image of the mask. “That is what the masked
individual was wearing when we did battle. There’s no mistaking it.”

An almost awkward silence replaced the shouting as another revelation came to all of them.

“Well then, it seems we’ve found our masked friend far sooner than anticipated,” the Togami Heir smugly commented, pushing up his glasses with a grin. “To think that you’d reveal yourself so readily, I’m almost shocked.”

He’d said what everyone else was thinking. There was no evidence to refute that statement, and therefore, it was an easy conclusion to make. At the same time, Makoto couldn’t help but feel that something was off, and it appeared that someone else did as well.

“H-Hold on! We don’t know if she’s really the masked freak or not? You’re just making that assumption!” Junko’s voice fired back at Byakuya, who scowled at being addressed. To this, the Fashionista smirked and finished, “You know what they say, ‘when you assume, you make an ASS out of you and me! Well, in this case, I’d say you’ve only made an ass of yourself but that’s not unusual.”

Byakuya’s face twisted into a deep frown, glaring menacingly at the Fashionista. “Producing the mask now only further proves that she is the masked individual. And with no proof to the contrary —”.

“There’s no proof that it is her either! Besides, that’s not what this trial is about!” Junko reiterated, trying to get everyone back on track. “We can figure out the masked freak’s agenda later. Right now, we need to focus on the case!”

The Togami Heir’s scowl deepened, silently acknowledging that she was correct. Even though he obviously wanted to pursue this discussion, his better judgement forced him back onto the proper path.

“Very well,” he scathingly agreed. Then, suddenly, he shot his gaze over to Kyoko and seethed, “Rest assured, this discussion isn’t over. I will have the truth out of you, one way or another.”

“Noted,” the lavender haired girl didn’t seem distressed by his aggressive tone, opting instead to refocus her efforts. “With this new evidence, we can proceed—”.

“Kyoko…” Makoto found himself cutting her off, almost before he’d realized it. And just like before, the words just fell out of his mouth before he could stop himself. “Where exactly did you find the mask?”

“In one of the classrooms,” the lavender haired girl answered stoically, finally meeting his gaze. “As I said, I found it this morning and an opportunity to show it to everyone didn’t present itself until now.”

As she spoke, Makoto unintentionally became entranced, almost losing himself in the majesty of her lavender irises. There was something there, a yearning that he immediately recognized. Kyoko was seeking out the truth, just as she’d always done. Whether in a class trial or when she was investigating various areas of the school, Makoto had seen her fierce determination and, in a strange way, understood it now. Perhaps it was the necessity of the class trials, or the desperation of having to unmask a culprit to survive. Regardless, he was now able to comprehend Kyoko’s desire to seek out the unknown and reveal it to the world…even to a lesser extent.

That’s why, even though he should have been suspicious, should have questioned her statement, he didn’t. Even if she wasn’t being completely honest, which he couldn’t know either way, he trusted
her intentions. She wanted all of them to survive, she wanted to keep them safe, she wanted to defeat the Mastermind and end this killing game! That’s what he put his faith in, and he knew he would never regret it!

“Okay…thank you.”

Those few words conveyed more than he thought possible. For a moment, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, because he swore he saw a brief smile decorate Kyoko’s lips for half a second. However, when he blinked it was gone. Perhaps he’d been imagining it…but he hoped that he hadn’t.

Regardless, now wasn’t the time to get distracted. Makoto decided to follow Kyoko’s lead and pressed on with the class trial.

“So, we have the mask used by the masked attacker, but what exactly does that prove?” Makoto asked, directing the question mainly toward Kyoko. Before the amnesiac girl could answer, however, a light chuckle enveloped the room.

“How…suspicious,” Celeste suddenly chimed in, narrowing her gaze at Kyoko as she chuckled a moment longer. “Kyoko just so happened to find that mask and just so happened to remember it at this time? It begs the question how honest her statement truly is—”.

“Didn’t we just agree to move past that argument until later?” Junko unsurprisingly interrupted, sending a heated glare toward the gambler. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were trying to divert our attention, Celeste.”

A single twitch above her right eye, that was the only indication that the Fashionista’s words perturbed the gambler. And even though most of the students didn’t notice it, the more observant students, such as Junko, Kyoko, and Byakuya, began to see the faintest of hairline cracks in the gambler’s perfect mask. Even so, Celeste’s demeanor did not betray her, smiling pleasantly as she conceded.

“Very well then, if you wish to waste our valuable time with nonsense, then far be it from me to reprimand you.” Celeste’s crimson eyes burned with unspoken frustration. “Even if what you say is true, and I did not see the masked individual at that time, it does not resolve the matter of whom was attacked in the art supply room.”

“Perhaps not,” the Togami Heir entered the fray, giving the gambler next to him a sideways glance. “However, if it is true, and you are lying about seeing the masked figure, then it calls your entire testimony into question.”

Not missing a beat, Celeste angled her sickly-sweet smile up at him, as if mocking his assertion.

“Perhaps, but, if I am not mistaken, there is still no way to truly verify whether or not I saw the masked individual—”.

“That’s correct,” Kyoko replied calmly, setting the mask down on the rail of her podium and giving the gambler as passive gaze. “Even with the addition of the mask, there is no way to prove what Celeste did or did not see. At the same time, this is the only mask we’ve seen, and unless there are multiple spares, it means there can only be one masked individual. However, there is no way to verify if only one mask exists either—.”
“Urgh! We’re just going around in circles again!” Leon shouted in frustration, hanging his head with a deep sigh. “At this rate, we’re never gonna find out which of them—!”

“On the contrary,” Kyoko cut in, just as she’d been interrupted. “Our culprit did leave a clue behind, although not a physical one.”

As if hit by electricity, all of the students reeled at Kyoko’s statement, eyes flying to her in desperate fashion. Among them, Celeste’s crimson eyes glared skeptically, but also confidently. A smug smile stretched onto the gambler’s lips as she let a light chuckle escape her.

“Oh? And what, may I ask, would that be?” Celeste brazenly asked, averting her gaze in a mocking gesture.

Unaffected by this, Kyoko steeled her gaze. “First, I want to clarify something Celeste told us earlier.” Hearing her name, the gambler returned her gaze to the amnesic girl. “Would you mind repeating what you claimed to do after you woke up this morning? As I recall, you left your room before the morning announcement and headed for the Rec Room, is that right?”

Celeste raised an eyebrow at her. “…Yes. As I said before, I was restless the night before and decided to challenge myself to a game of Shogi. I realize that, in a way, I violated the rule that I, myself, proposed, and I apologize.”

“After leaving your room, you went straight to the Rec Room? You didn’t go anywhere else beforehand?” Kyoko questioned, her inquiry becoming fierce.

With a hint of a scowl, the gambler answered, “No, I did not. I went straight to there, without delay.”

“…I see,” the lavender haired girl said quietly, but fiercely. There was a strange determination to her tone that, by this point in time, wasn’t uncommon for the rest of the students to hear. After a moment of pondering, Kyoko took a deep breath and said, “In that case, how did you pass through the hallway without being seen?”

Genuine shock overtook Celeste’s face as confusion radiated from her voice. “I…beg your pardon? What do you mean, ‘pass through the hallway without being seen’?”

At once, Kyoko narrowed her gaze, her lavender irises focusing intently on the gambler.

“That is impossible. I most certainly did return to my room last night and left early this morning. To that point, I do not recall your door being left open, especially after yesterday’s ‘incident’.”

At the very least, Celeste was being careful not to mention Alter Ego, which normally would boast sincerity. However, given the gambler’s uncharacteristic responded a moment ago, coupled with her subtle but increasingly defensive behavior, it was becoming more and more apparent that she could...
be hiding something. A fact that Kyoko capitalized on immediately.

“Junko and I agreed to leave our doors open, as a matter of caution.” She glanced toward the Fashionista. “Isn’t that right, Junko?”

Mukuro almost couldn’t believe what was happening. Kyoko…was twisting the truth in order to put pressure on Celeste! She’d never done something like that before. Even when she manipulated Mondo in the previous trial, she’d never outright lied…like she’d done with Makoto only moments ago.

Of course, the soldier knew the reason why…it was to save her.

In order to keep Mukuro safe, Kyoko was actively deceiving her classmates. And now, she was asking the soldier to back up her statement, even though Mukuro herself had no idea if she was telling the truth. It was entirely possible that Kyoko was telling the truth right now, and had left her door open all night. However, saying that she and ‘Junko’ had jointly decided to leave their doors open was a lie.

The detective hadn’t even mentioned it to her! And they both knew it! Making this gamble even more dangerous than it appeared to be!

“Kyoko…what kind of dangerous game are you playing?” Mukuro pondered, feeling the pressure build as her classmates turned to her for an answer. Strangely, she already knew exactly what to say. In fact, she didn’t have to debate with herself in the slightest. “She covered for me…so I’ll cover for her! I owe her that much at least!”

Without a hint of hesitation, the false fashionista replied…

“Totally! We were worried that someone might try and do something desperate because of what happened yesterday,” she shot a glance at Hifumi, who shrunk under her gaze. “So, Kyoko and I decided to leave our doors open. And although I can’t say I watched all night, I definitely didn’t see Celeste go by this morning, and I was up early fixing my hair!”

Junko patted her hair gently, seemingly proud of how brilliant it looked, which wasn’t out of the ordinary. Even if she’d abandoned make-up, for the most part, her hair always looked absolutely perfect, and any of the girls knew how long that could take.

Sayaka remained silent, knowing that her friend’s troubles stemmed from wig issues and not actual bed head. Even so, she had no reason not to believe Junko, considering how much faith they had placed in each other recently. Mondo also nodded his pompadour, silently understanding the need for proper time to maintain a hairstyle…though he’d never admit it aloud. Even Celeste was forced to remain silent…experience with her own hair drills making it almost impossible for her to refute that notion.

And that made it all the worse when Kyoko added, “And I awoke at 6AM, keeping watch until the morning announcement. That being the case, isn’t it odd that neither of us saw Celeste pass by our rooms?”

The lavender haired girl aimed her gaze at the gambler, practically seeing the frustration waiting to
bubble out from beneath Celeste’s perfect mask. However, through what could only be called an extreme force of will, the gambler’s anger didn’t show itself. Celeste somehow managed to keep it hidden beneath her perfect mask, even smiling sweetly at the accusation.

“Just because you did not see me, does not mean I did not pass through the hallway,” she calmly asserted, keeping her tone level. “Even if you were watching the entire time, I could have gone around the other way and avoided your rooms altogether—”.

“No! That’s wrong!”

It had been so long since anyone had heard those words that they almost felt nostalgic. However, as Makoto’s voice echoed in the courtroom, drowning out Celeste’s suggestion, everyone knew where this was heading. As if defying what might happen, the gambler turned her crimson irises to Makoto, as if daring him to speak.

“Celeste…just a few minutes ago, Kyoko asked if you went straight to the Rec Room this morning,” the lucky student said, unfazed by Celeste’s gaze. In fact, he shifted his eyes over and met her stare without hesitation, hardening his visage. “What did you tell her? Would you mind repeating yourself?”

Panic momentarily crossed Celeste’s features. “I…do not recall exactly. Besides, what does—?”

“Well…that’s very interesting. Not to mention…convenient,” Byakuya sharply cut in, earning a fiery gaze from the gambler. Smugly smirking, the Togami Heir prepared to continue when he was interrupted.

“W-What’s wrong with all of you!” the frantic voice of Hina shouted, her rage overtaking her. “So what if she doesn’t remember what she said a few minutes ago! Stop treating her like a criminal!”

Hina was on the verge of tears, an internal struggle she wanted to keep hidden beginning to show through. She had been listening to everyone’s argument…but rejected them all. Celeste was her friend, and it was clear that, no matter what anyone said, she’d never allow herself to turn on the gambler. Even if it meant pursuing the wrong choice, she’d believe in her friend until the very end!

Meanwhile, Celeste had turned her surprised gaze toward the swimmer, staring at her in what appeared to be utter confusion. There was a hint of...something in the gambler’s eyes, but her perfect mask obscured it. Whatever it was…it seemed that Celeste considered it to be foreign, because an instant later it vanished, as if it had never been there.

Instead of addressing Hina’s complaint, the Togami Heir merely scoffed and turned his attention back toward the gambler. Feeling triumphant, Byakuya furrowed his brows and said, “As I recall, Celeste, you said, ‘No…I went straight to there, without delay’. Those were your exact words, correct?”

Celeste flinched as her own words were thrown back at her, both of her hands gripping the fabric of her sleeves tightly. Her knuckles whitened, and she grit her teeth as she listened to Byakuya’s argument. She said nothing…which only worsened her situation.

“Now, why would you make such an obvious contradiction?” the Togami Heir’s tone held a terrifying mixture of revelation and confidence, a deadly combination during a class trial. “If you’ve been telling the ‘truth’ this entire time, then there should be no reason to refute these claims. Unfortunately, for you, it seems that we can now poke more holes in your testimony, than we can Hifumi’s. Does anyone else find that…suspicious?”
Celeste’s breathing hitched and despite her best efforts, everyone was beginning to see beyond the perfect mask she’d presented to everyone. One by one, all of the students glanced her way.

Sayaka felt a pang of guilt as she looked on, recalling her own desperation that fateful night she’d turned on Leon. Likewise, the baseball star couldn’t help but feel sympathy for Celeste. Even if she hadn’t been ‘proven’ as the culprit, he could see where this was going. When he was cornered as ‘the blackened’, he’d had the same look in his eyes that the gambler now wore. It was painful to see from the outside, so much so that he had to avert his gaze, unable to withstand the agony it brought on. Mondo still wasn’t entirely convinced, but he couldn’t deny that he also felt a kinship of sorts with Celeste. If she was guilty…he knew exactly how devastating it was to be found out…and all the terror it brought with it.

Chihiro, however, wasn’t convinced in the slightest. She’d seen how good-natured Celeste could be, and she had already decided to support her. Even if she was a bit suspicious, she’d wait until there was actual evidence to prove whether or not the gambler was guilty. At the same time, Hifumi looked downright triumphant! Everyone was finally seeing the truth behind Miss Ludenberg’s deception and he was thankful for it. Hina gritted her teeth as she caught sight of the fanfic creator’s apparent victory, feeling more convinced than ever that he was the one actually manipulating everyone!

Meanwhile, Toko raised an eyebrow at everyone, feeling very confused on how the trial had progressed to this stage.

Across the room, Sakura felt her heart waver. She had the utmost faith in Celeste…because Hina had vouched for her. However, with this new development, it was becoming clear that both she and the swimmer were possibly being manipulated…a feeling that was all too familiar, given her role as the mastermind’s mole. Obviously, Kyoko and Junko were pleased that Byakuya had ceased being his usual asshole self and decided to work with them, even if they disapproved of his cruel actions in cornering Celeste. Hiro was utterly lost, but it seemed that most people were turning against Celeste, so he figured he probably should too. He was sure that Makoto would explain everything later anyway…

Speak of which, Makoto now had no doubts as to who was truly guilty in this case. And he made that clear when he addressed Celeste directly.

“Sorry, Celeste…but it looks like this is checkmate.”

...Checkmate...Checkmate...Checkmate...Checkmate...Checkmate...Checkmate...

A deep chill ran through her body as Makoto’s words echoed in her mind…plaguing her more than he had ever meant to. The majority of the students were against her now. Even if she tried to spin this another way, there was no longer a guarantee that she’d be able to regain her classmates’ favor. Almost uncontrollably, Celeste began to laugh. However, it wasn’t out of confidence or happiness…but undeniable, genuine terror. All of her fears visited her at once, and her perfect mask began to rupture as her mind began to slip into the depths…of despair.

“Ha…ha-ha…ha-ha…haha, haha, haha—!”
“DON’T MAKE ME LAUGH, YOU IDIOT! WHAT DO YOU MEAN, CHECKMATE?!”

Everything about Celeste vanished. Her accent, her polite posture, her soft tone. All of it completely disappeared as Taeko Yasuhiro took the stage, her true self erupting to the surface.

“Clearly, you all want to cram me into your little guilty box! But there’s one little problem!” she screamed at them before somehow finding the will to lower her voice. “You have absolutely NO PROOF that any of this bullshit actually happened!”

“C-Celeste…?”

In the back of her mind, the gambler must have heard Hina’s concerned cries, but in her current, infuriated state, she barely recognized the swimmer’s voice. Instead, she resumed her shouting with reckless abandon.

“There’s NO PROOF that the Mastermind wasn’t the masked person I saw! There’s NO PROOF that those two bitches aren’t lying about keeping watch! And there’s NO FUCKING PROOF that I attacked Hifumi! And since there’s no way to contradict me, that’s the only TRUTH that’s possible!”

She panted heavily, desperate for air as she finished her tirade. Just then, a voice called out, and the mere sound of it infuriated her!

“C-Celeste…!”

“What?!”

The gambler shot her gaze over and froze. Staring back at her, completely shell shocked, was Hina, tears glistening in the corners of her bright blue eyes.

All of the rage that had filled Celeste evaporated as she took in the swimmer’s tearful visage. Celeste felt herself shiver, as if ice water had been poured over her. Her entire being was frazzled, still ready to lash out, but at the same time…terrified of what she’d just done. As her mind caught up with her actions, she instinctively tried to piece together the perfect mask that she’d obliterated with her rage.

In the end, she found it was impossible. Her perfect mask…was gone. She could pick up the pieces, but it would never be whole again. The horrified expression on Hina’s face made that all to clear to her. However, she still had enough pieces of it to at least try and reassemble herself.

Putting on her false accent, she cleared her throat, dry and aching as it was, in a vain attempt to soothe her friend’s worries.

“I-I think…I’ve earned the right…to be a little on edge…” she said, slowly regaining composure and imitating how she usually spoke to everyone.

Her words didn’t have the desired effect, as Hina continued to stare at her with utmost concern. In fact, she seemed even more shocked than before. Perhaps trying to switch back to how she usually spoke wasn’t the best option, but it was too late to take that back now. What she needed to do now was come up with a plan that would reinstate her innocence.

“Calm…down…I haven’t…lost yet…” she told herself, forcing her racing thoughts slow so that she could process them properly. Slowly but surely, she felt her pulse returning to normal, something she hadn’t figured would be so comforting. “That’s…it…breathe…just…breathe…”
No one seemed eager to pounce on her right now, her violent tirade shocking a good deal of her classmates.

Chihiro, Leon, Mondo, Hiro, and Sakura seemed to share Hina’s shell shocked condition, staring at her with utter perplexion. The only exceptions were Taka, who seemed to be teeming with unspoken confusion, and Hifumi, who was currently glaring daggers at her. But since he knew the truth, but she barely even acknowledged him by this point. After all, his vote wouldn’t change no matter what she did. Even if she confessed, he’d undoubtedly vote to have her executed.

Which was all the more reason not to confess, why was she even considering that right now!

As expected, Kyoko, Junko, Makoto, and Byakuya were still entirely suspicious of her, but that was to be expected. She’d practically proven their assertions with her vengeful counter, which meant, at the very least, there was no turning them back to her side…if they ever were on her side to begin with. Not to mention that Toko was…strangely silent, a notion that somehow seemed odd and comforting all at the same time. At least little miss bookworm was keeping her murderous persona in check for right now, provided she didn’t sneeze again.

The one person who shocked her the most…was Sayaka. The pop idol was staring—no, glaring directly at her. Celeste always knew there was a deeper layer Sayaka, given what they'd seen and heard during the first trial. However, it seemed that she was far more intelligent than the gambler had given her credit for. She knew…Sayaka could see through her now…even if she had managed to put her perfect mask back in place, the pop idol would never see her the same way again. Probably because…in a strange way, they were very similar. Both of them had planned murders, and tried to act on them. However, whereas Sayaka was remorseful for her moment of weakness…Celeste was…Celeste was…

Grunting, forcing any lingering thoughts from her mind, Celeste almost mechanically began devising her next strategy.

While she’d refuted her accusers’ claims, the manner in which she’d done it was ultimately suspect. Again, she knew there was no way to reverse it, and instead focused on what she could do now.

“I need to stick with the ‘no proof’ logic for now. It may have been forceful, but given the stress I’m under, I can explain it away as fear that everyone would be executed. No sense in trying to maintain the act for much longer either, I can tell everyone that it’s a coping mechanism and try to leave it at that. Then, when everyone’s not so fucking frazzled, I can—”

“Celeste is right.”

Those words shocked the gambler, or at least, the person they came from startled her. None other than Makoto had said those words. A hand rested on his chin, and he was deep in thought, but it was clear that he had been the one to come to her defense! Frankly…it was startling! Perhaps he’d been drawn to her show of frustration and chosen to see it as a cry for help? He was naively stupid like that—

“Instead of focusing on our lack of evidence, we need to focus on what motives Celeste had for targeting Taka and Hifumi in the first place.”

…

…

…
“What the hell are you talking about?! I’ll burn you alive!”

The words slipped out of her before she even realized what was happening. Because her initial perception, thinking Makoto was defending her, had been completely disproven, she’d unintentionally flown back into her rage-induced state. She could only imagine how everyone was looking at her, but she kept her eyes focused on the floor for a moment, seeming as apologetic as she could muster.

Quick to cover up her mistake, she kindly bowed to everyone and said, “M-My apologies…It seems that I forgot myself for a—”.

“Let’s start with a potential motive,” Kyoko abruptly said, not letting Celeste finish. “She may have been motivated by the secrets that Taka revealed to all of us.”

Again, Celeste felt her rage ignite, though she tried to keep it under control. Snapping her head up, she glared at Kyoko and said, “E-Excuse me?! Why are we suddenly discussing what my motive would have been?!”

“We should also consider the motive Monokuma gave us,” Junko said to everyone, making everyone remember the large stash of money that Taka currently had for ‘safe keeping’. “If you look at it like that, it makes sense that Celeste would target Taka in order to get the money.”

“I-I already explained that I don’t need that money!” Celeste shouted, abandoning her accent altogether as her head snapped toward the Fashionista. “I make plenty of money through gambling!”

“If that’s the case, why bother involving Hifumi?” Byakuya pointed out, momentarily glancing at the fanfic creator. “As a scapegoat, he would be useful, but as we’ve seen, there are obvious drawbacks to securing his services.”

Getting infuriated, Celeste screamed, “The very idea, that I would choose to spend more than a few moments with that…shit for brains, worthless, god-damn idiot—!”

She paused, realizing that she was backing herself into a corner again, and immediately forced her fake accent to return.

“Ahem…um…Pardon moi—”.

“It has to be one of those two motives,” Makoto surmised for the group, his classmates hinging on every word. “But the question is, which one? I guess it could be both, but one of them must have had more weight to it…”

Opening scoffing at him, she seethed, “To think, you’d take your false accusations so far—I DON’T KNOW WHETHER TO LAUGH OR SPIT!!”

Completely by accident, she happened to brush her hand against her cheek, a startled gasp escaping her. Almost without realizing it, Celeste’s hands had grown unimaginably cold. So cold, in fact, that they ached. So much so, that she was forced to acknowledge them—which unfortunately led her to a far more frightening discover. She was shivering…not just her hands, but her entire body had gone abruptly cold. Her legs wobbled, her cold hands shooting out and grasping the wooden rail just to keep her upright. She was…trembling, uncontrollably so. No matter how hard she fought to stop it, her body refused to listen to her commands.

And it didn’t take her long to realize why…
“Her motive was that she hated Taka!” Hifumi proclaimed, finally able to speak up again.

“That’s not exactly uncommon by this point,” the Togami Heir countered, glaring down his nose at the fanfic creator. “We were all pushed to our breaking point by his inane actions—”

“W-What is the meaning of this?!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru refuted, his voice at full volume. “If there were such complaints, I would know of them! Did I not urge everyone to speak with me if they had any pressing concerns?! I even contemplated setting up a complaint box just for such an occasion! Perhaps I should have implemented it sooner, but regardless, no one truly despises the office of Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishi—!”

“Urgh, would you quit with all the yelling?!” Junko interrupted him, making him fall silent. “We can discuss how annoying you’ve been later! For now, you’re scaring Chihiro! So stop it!”

“I-I’m fine…” Chihiro whispered, not sure if anyone actually heard her.

“Regardless, we need to figure out which of those motives provoked Celeste into action,” Kyoko reiterated, a gloved hand resting on her chin. “Perhaps we should consider revealing our secrets here and now? That would be the quickest way to discern which is hers and how it may have influenced her…”

…

Celeste…was astonished. No…more like mortified.

“They’re…they’re ignoring me…”

The realization hit her so hard she nearly lost her balance. Her use of words had been her greatest skill. Bluffing, lying, coercing, manipulating…it all came so naturally to her. When she spoke, people listened…it had been that way for so long that…she’d completely forgotten there was a time when her words were unable to reach anyone.

“They’re…not even bothering to counter my arguments anymore. They’re just…continuing the conversation…without me…”

In that moment, more than any other, she truly felt like she had returned…returned to being Taeko Yasuhiro…the little girl that no one ever listened to…the little girl…who barely existed.

“NO! I won’t go back to that! I WON’T! I’m NOT Taeko Yasuhiro! Not anymore! My name is CELESTIA LUDENBERG, god-dammit! And you WILL listen to me!”

Without thinking, Celeste bit her own tongue, hard enough to draw the faintest taste of blood. The pain brought her back, cleared away all those distressing thoughts, and finally brought her back to the mindset she wanted to be in…her mindset as Celestia Ludenberg.

“Let’s see them ignore this!”

—

Mukuro could see it. Celeste was breaking down. It hadn’t been intentional, but when everyone collectively began to discuss her possible motives, they’d stopped reacting to her arguments. They were listening, certainly, but every time she ‘broke character’, they knew they were getting closer to the truth. And it certainly was having an effect!
While she didn’t look distraught, Mukuro could see that Celeste was growing more and more
desperate which each new suggestion from their classmates. And while she still had that rebellious
anger in her eyes, it was clear that they were getting her closer and closer to confessing.

“If we keep going like this, we should be able to wrap this up pretty soon—”.

“You want to know what my secret was? Fine! I’ll tell you!”

Celeste’s voice rang out, echoing around the courtroom as a deafening silence followed after it.
Everyone was stunned, but no one more so than Mukuro. The soldier’s shock didn’t last long, as she
was already contemplating what the gambler was attempting to do.

“She wouldn’t…that’s one thing that…she’d never actually let slip…right?”

Before she could question her, Byakuya beat the soldier to the punch.

“How very strange that you chose now to reveal that information…”

His smug tone was infuriating but Mukuro couldn’t deny the effect it was having. Celeste looked…
hesitant, if only slightly, which was a vast improvement from a moment ago! And better yet, the
Togami Heir pressed her further.

“What good will revealing your secret do for us? Is this merely a ploy in order to distract us from
your true motives? Well…is it?”

“No…it’s not.”

For the first time in so long, there wasn’t a trace of deception in Celeste’s voice. Her accent was
gone. Her high-society posture had been discarded. Her previously angry demeanor had seemingly
vanished. All that remained…was a pure and honest girl, making a pure and honest request…or so it
seemed.

“It’s because…because…because…because…because, because, because, because…” She trailed
off for a moment, lost in what appeared to be a mixture of grief and frustration. However, she
suddenly took a deep breath and proclaimed, “If it’ll prove my innocence, then I’ll gladly tell you all
my deepest secrets and regrets!”

Mukuro couldn’t deny…it was one hell of an answer.

Moreover, it felt incredibly…genuine. Celeste appeared to be genuinely pouring her heart out to
everyone. Granted, more than likely it was just a convenient lie that she was using to garner
sympathy and avoid being voted as the culprit, but that didn’t unmind how infectious her hopeful
words were…and that’s why Mukuro didn’t trust her.

She’d seen this before, time and time again with Junko. She’d watched as her sister would change
her personality daily, shifting between kind and caring to dark and sadistic. She’d seen that kind of
behavior so long…she could easily see through it. She’d always been able to see through Celeste’s
‘perfect mask’, and the eventual confrontation when she would have to reveal that to the gambler had
been something she’d nervously anticipated for quite a while now.

Suffice it to say, no matter how talented an actress Celeste was right now…she had nothing on
Junko’s acting prowess. And that spelled tragedy for her classmates.

Slowly, Mukuro watched as her classmates bought her act. Even Makoto, as sure as he’d been a
moment ago, seemed to doubt her intentions. Only Kyoko, with her perceptive nature as a detective,
seemed wary of the gambler’s act. And while that was reassuring, the fact that the rest of the class seemed entranced by her ‘sudden devotion’, absolutely terrified her.

After all, Celeste had been playing this con for so long…it had almost become first nature to her.

Her name…her true name…Taeko Yasuhiro…had just become a powerful weapon.

The soldier knew exactly how much the gambler hated that name. To her, it had always symbolized everything she was not. Plain, boring, typical. That’s why her persona as Celestia Ludenberg had meant so much to her. Even after she’d revealed her true name to everyone, several months after they’d sealed themselves inside Hope’s Peak, no one had called her by that name.

Out of respect, she and her fellow students continued to call her ‘Celeste’, as it helped the gambler cope with the despair that was running rampant outside. Even the real Junko had, more or less, stayed true to that during their shared time in the shelter…with the occasional ‘slip’ happening, so that Junko could get a tiny taste of the gambler’s despair prematurely. However…this ‘Celeste’ had no memory of that…and if they’d inadvertently pushed her too hard, it could undo all that she and Kyoko had done to convince her classmates that the gambler was guilty.

“If she’s willing to go that far just to fool us, it means she’s getting desperate! I can’t let this happen I have to say something to—!”

“Great idea, Celeste!” Hina abruptly shouted, her voice lighter and happier than ever before. Mukuro cursed the fact that she hadn’t spoken up sooner, gritting her teeth as the swimmer continued, “In fact, why don’t we all reveal our secrets now! We already know what they are, we just need to acknowledge them, right? It might help us figure out who the culprit is!”

Everyone knew that Hina was kind of grasping at straws, but the second the idea of everyone revealing their secrets was announced, all hell broke loose.

“I am at odds with this idea!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru shouted to everyone, sweating profusely for some reason. “Truly we only need for Celeste to reveal her secret for this case!”

“Hey! That’s not fair!” Hina countered, her face reddening as she continued. “I mean…yeah, it’s super embarrassing to tell everyone our secrets, but it’s not fair to have Celeste be the only one to do it!”

“Just wanted to say that I don’t think it’s a good idea either!” Leon abruptly shouted, his face turning red for some reason. “I mean, what if someone…isn’t ready for that kind of information to be out there.”

If she hadn’t known better, she could have sworn that Leon momentarily glanced toward Sayaka…which had the soldier all the more worried when she checked the pop idol’s face. Sayaka’s complexion had paled and she was breathing heavily, anxiety practically radiating off of her.

And it wasn’t only her…many of her classmates seemed hesitant at this idea.

Byakuya, hadn’t said anything, which was the clearest indication that he wanted nothing to do with the idea. Chihiro, Mondo, and Toko didn’t really have anything to say either, considering their secrets were out in the open. Makoto seemed very nervous, but not completely unopposed to the idea. Hifumi looked downright terrified, and Taka appeared to be having a kind of mini-heart attack.

And Celeste…seemed elated.
Mukuro’s eyes widened as she realized that this had been the gambler’s goal all along! She must have figured that Hina or something else would suggest sharing all their secrets! It was causing chaos and diverting attention away from her! In fact, it was making her seem less and less suspicious with each passing moment!

“At this rate, we’ll never get this back on track! Dammit, how the hell could I have let it come to this?!”

The soldier scrambled to try and find a way to get this away from the secrets and back to the trial itself. And it was then that she received some unexpected assistance.

“W-W-What’s the p-point of discussing o-our secrets now?” Toko Fukawa, the Ultimate Writing Prodigy, swiftly ceased any and all chatter as she spoke. “B-Besides! Even if s-she tells us what her st-stupid secret is, it still w-wouldn’t make sense f-for her to be the c-culprit!”

This assertion sent a wave of shock throughout the entire courtroom. Everyone, including Mukuro, couldn’t believe the words coming out of Toko’s mouth. Everyone had figured she’d be on her beloved Byakuya’s side, as per usual, but this time, she took an opposite stance. It was so… unexpected. So much so, that even Byakuya felt he needed to address her directly.

“And what, exactly, do you mean by that? Speak quickly and efficiently, I don’t want to be exposed to your foul breath more than I need to be.”

His tone harsh and cruel…just the way Toko liked it. Mukuro shuddered as she watched the writing prodigy practically convulse with ecstasy at merely being talking to like that.

“Y-Y-Yes…Master!” she stammered, riding out a wave of sickening pleasure. Wiping the drool from her chin, she did as commanded. “W-Well, it doesn’t make sense that e-either of them would w-want to h-have a class trial right n-now!”

Again, her words confused the rest of the students, but Mukuro felt that she was onto something. And if she was right…

“And why’s that?” the disguised soldier found herself asking. “Why wouldn’t either Celeste or Hifumi want a class trial?!”

Snapping her gaze over, Toko sneered at her, “D-Don’t talk to me l-like that!”

“Answer the question, you vile piece of filth!” Byakuya abruptly seethed, growing impatient.

Immediately, Toko responded, “B-Because neither of them are b-b-blackened! Th-That’s why it d-doesn’t make s-sense!”

…”

…”

…”

“This can’t be real…I must be dreaming.”

That was all Mukuro could think as Toko pointed out something she’d been forbidden to tell her classmates. Ever since Junko had told her the truth about the bullying trials, that even if they succeeded and everyone else was executed, the culprit wasn’t a blackened…and would remain behind in the school…alone.
Mukuro had gone to great extremes to try and suggest that to everyone, but in the end, she feared her classmates may never learn the truth. And now…the beautiful, yet disgusting, woman known as Toko Fukawa had just delivered that information to them on a silver platter!

And it didn’t take long for other people to catch onto what she meant either.

Toko’s words echoed in the courtroom for some time, a foreboding silence quickly following. All of the students were in thought, but only some of them seemed to grasp the true meaning behind this revelation.

Makoto, in particular, paled as he began to understand just how sick and twisted the Mastermind truly was. Not far away, Kyoko clenched her gloved fists as regretted not piecing that information together sooner. In a similar vein, Byakuya also felt a great deal of shame as that truth became known to him…and from a person he’d written off as mostly useless.

Like it or not, many people’s perspective of Toko Fukawa changed that day.

“Why does that matter?” Leon abruptly asked, feeling completely out of the loop. “So what if they’re not really ‘blackened’? What does that mean for this case?”

It wasn’t until Sayaka spoke up that the baseball star, and by extension everyone else, began to understand.

“Think about it…” she said slowly, her own complexion paling. “Someone only becomes a ‘blackened’ when they successfully kill someone. And only a ‘blackened’…can graduate.”

Almost as one, the students that hadn’t realized this truth suddenly became aware.

“Hold on!” Hiro yelled, still unsure if what he’d figured out was right. “Since this trial doesn’t have a ‘blackened’, that means that, no matter which of them is guilty…they won’t get out of the school once we’re executed?!”

“O-Obviously!” Toko berated him, feeling superior for the first time in ages. “That’s why it doesn’t make sense for either of them to be the culprit! E-Especially Celeste! Since she’s adapted to living here already! She wouldn’t want to be alone by herself, right?”

Throughout all of this, Celeste was eerily silent. She was obviously listening, but she wasn’t responding. In fact, her face took on a completely stoic expression as she stared down at the floor.

“Holy shit!” Mondo abruptly shouted, lurching forward as his legs wobbled. “That means…even if I had gotten away with what I did to Chihiro, I would’ve been stuck here for the rest of my life! Alone!”

“Not alone…” Junko seethed, glaring at Monokuma with renewed ire. “You’d be trapped in here…with no one but the Mastermind!”

As one, all of the students turned their collective frustration toward Monokuma, who merely blushed. “Aww, you figured it out! And here I was hoping it would be a wonderful…surprise! Ahahahahahahahahaha!”

As the bear’s cackling echoed in their ears, all of the students felt a great sense of shame. None of them had figured out the hidden meaning of the bullying trials, aside from Toko that is. Aside from
her, they had all figured the class trial was just another cruel twist in the Mastermind’s game…but this realization showed them that the Mastermind had far more devious designs than any of them dared to imagine.

“You sick fuck!” Mondo screamed, finding strength in his legs once again. “You knew this would happen! You did this on purpose!”

“And if that’s the case,” Kyoko spoke up, a hint of anger showing on her face. “It’s all to drive us further into despair, am I correct?”

“…Obviously…and that means…this trial is pointless now…”

A voice, almost unrecognizable, suddenly spoke up. It took everyone a moment to realize…it was Celeste. She’d lifted her gaze, and to everyone’s shock…her eyes were completely lifeless. As if someone had snuck in and removed her soul, she let out a deep sigh. Slowly, she looked around to everyone and said the unthinkable.

“I…Celestia Ludenberg…actually, no…” She hesitated…as if a part of herself was being torn away…but finally, she managed to say, “Taeko Yasuhiro is fine.”

“T-Taeko?” the Ultimate Lucky Student repeated, as if in awe, before understanding flooded him. “Wait, does this mean—?”

“You know…I’m the type of person that…once I’ve lost, I don’t like to drag things out,” Celeste, or rather Taeko, interrupted, much to everyone’s shock.

“L-Lost…?” Hina’s voice trembled as she spoke, as if she was rejecting the truth she’d already pieced together…a truth that everyone had pieced together. Even so, it seemed that the swimmer still rejected that truth, because a moment later, she screamed, “What do you mean…‘lost’?!”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” Byakuya said with a scoff, averting his gaze from both of them, still seething over his inability to see through Monokuma’s trick. Without looking her way, he spoke to Celeste. “So, you finally admit it then?”

“No! You’re wrong! It’s a lie! I won’t believe this!” Hina shouted, tears streaming down her cheeks. She lurched forward, practically throwing herself in Celeste’s direction, screaming, “Tell them it’s not true! Don’t give up, Celeste! I believe in—”.

“Just shut up…I’m done with this whole thing.”

Hina choked on a sob as her ‘friend’ refuted her, those cruel words like a million daggers stabbing into the swimmer’s chest. As the truth was finally laid bare, the girl who they had known as Celestia Ludenberg faded away…leaving only Taeko Yasuhiro behind.

“This is it…I’ve lost…I’m the culprit.”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
Greetings, my beautiful readers! How about that for a twist?! Now that Celeste has confessed, will her classmates show her mercy? How will the vote for Celeste proceed? Will she be spared or condemned for her crimes? You’ll have to wait until next time to find out!

Now, I want to give a big shout out to my editing beta! Without their help, I never would have gotten this chapter out as quickly as I did! Thank you so much for all the heard work!

This is a chapter that I’ve been anxious to write for years! Ever since I first played Danganronpa, I envisioned a way to save Celeste from her fate…and next time, you’ll find out how I plan to do just that! Celeste was best girl for me, and this story came about, at first, mainly due to my desire to see everyone, especially her, survive! I’ve got some interesting ideas planned and I hope you all stick around and enjoy them!

As always, I appreciate comments/reviews to tell me how the story is going, or if you have questions, comments, concerns, fears, tears, traumas, phobias, or anything of the sort you want to discuss with me! So send them my way anytime!

Until next time, have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

As the students debate on how to decide Celeste’s fate, Monokuma reveals a new, sadistic form of voting. Meanwhile, Mukuro ponders if her sister might be up to something more sinister...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“This is it…I’ve lost…I’m the culprit.”

Those bitter words hung heavy around Celeste’s neck. How long…? How long had it been since she’d been forced to utter such a disgraceful sentence? She couldn’t even remember…or, more accurately, she didn’t want to remember. She wanted to remember her victories, the disgruntled faces of her opponents, the confidence she felt whenever placing a winning bet, and the pride of using her skills to prove to the world…that she deserved to exist.

But sadly, she was forced to recognize that her time as Celestia Ludenberg…was coming to an end…just as her life soon would.

There was no escaping her fate, not after everything she’d done. Her classmates would vote her guilty, and hers would be the first ‘true’ execution their class witnessed. A part of her was still screaming, frantically trying to convince her not to give up, to struggle to live, but she effortlessly locked it away.

All of her plans, all of her determination, all of her resolve to sacrifice her classmates in order to attain her castle…it had all been utterly pointless. With Toko’s revelation fresh in her mind, cruelly reminding her of how fruitless her efforts had been, she prepared herself mentally as she waited for Monokuma to announce voting time.

However, instead of the calculated and annoyingly sweet tone of the evil teddy bear, a gruff voice disrupted the silence.

“H-Hold on a god-damn second!”

Celeste’s eye twitched as Mondo’s infuriating comment reached her ears, making her scowl and angle her gaze toward him. The biker seemed confused…but also quite angry. However, Celeste didn’t really care to ponder why. He was an idiot. Always had been, always would be. Wasting the effort to analyze his motivations wasn’t how she wanted to spend her final moment, so she merely stood there, glaring at him for momentarily postponing her fate.

“This doesn’t make any god-damn sense! I…I saw Celeste being attacked by Hifumi—!”

“You saw him standing over me with a hammer in hand, that’s it.” Celeste cruelly interrupted him, her face showing a twinge of frustration. Taking in her gaze, the biker found himself silenced as she let out a sigh. “You jumped to your own dumb-ass conclusions without even taking a second to ask why the fuck I was there in the first place!”
Offended, and slightly embarrassed by his own lack of forethought, Mondo stammered, “W-What the hell else was I supposed to think?! When I see some bastard trying to hurt a girl, I beat his fucking face in! That’s all there is to it!”

Celeste felt her jaw ache as her teeth ground tightly. She fought to keep herself from exploding. After all, these were her final moments…she didn’t want them to be marred by an uncivilized display. With a scoff of superiority, she smirked at him incredulously.

“Coming from the dipshit who ruined my plans, that’s an insult.”

“W-Wha?!” a perplexed Mondo stammered. “The fuck are you—?”

With a calm tone, she interrupted him, “If you hadn’t gone after Taka earlier this morning, he’d be dead, and my plan wouldn’t have gotten derailed. And let’s not forget the utter insanity of taping the closet in the nurse’s office shut. It slowed me down and—”.

“So then, you truly did plan to smother Chihiro, didn’t you?”

The gambler couldn’t help the lengthy grunt of frustration as Byakuya interjected. The arrogant prick thought he had everything figured out, she could tell just by his tone. She didn’t even bother with glancing his way, even though he stood right next to her. He wasn’t worth it. She may have been an attempted murderer, but at least she wasn’t an utter ass-face with little to no redeeming qualities!

“No, actually, I never planned to smother Chihiro. That would’ve been pointless.”

A few gasps echoed, and Celeste found a tiny hint of a smile gracing her lips. It was actually kind of amusing to expose her own crime…if only to put that asshole Byakuya in his place!

“Like you all reasoned earlier, it would have been obvious that either Hifumi or I were at fault, and I didn’t want to narrow the suspicion down to just the two of us…even though that happened anyway.”

She shot a mean glance in Mondo’s direction but chose not to chastise him further, concentrating on refuting ass-face (Byakuya’s) claim.

“If I had smothered Chihiro, there would have been evidence I would have left behind. I don’t like taking unnecessary risks and given that my plan was royally fucked by that point, it was too dangerous to take a gamble on. Though I admit that I did consider it for a moment or two.”

As she informed them of this, she noticed, out of the corner of her eyes, the petite programmer shuddering. Celeste couldn’t blame her, considering Chihiro’s brushes with death, on two separate occasions now. Nevertheless, the gambler decided it wasn’t worth it trying to lie, and on a whim, chose to divulge everything.

“It’s exactly like Junko said. I didn’t see anyone in the hallway. I just needed an excuse to go and meet up with Hifumi in the art supply room. I should have come up with a better strategy, but because I wasted so much time un-tapping a fucking door, I was feeling a bit pressured.”

She expected to see a look of triumph on Mondo’s face. He’d somehow managed to foil her plot twice, though unintentionally. He should be proud of himself, in some respects at least. So…why the hell was he scowling and looking constipated? It was like he was struggling internally…which confused the hell out of Celeste.

“He saved two lives by accident and he’s fucking sulking? Why do dumb people make no fucking sense…?”
Not letting the biker’s surprising reactions deter her further, Celeste continued her explanation.

“Hindsight’s 20/20, as they say. I shouldn’t have said it was the masked figure I saw. I had no idea Kyoko had the mask the whole time, I’ll let you all deal with the fallout of that on your own.”

A hint of superiority crossed her face as she watched the uncomfortable expressions form on her classmates’ faces. She had no idea who the masked figure really was, and once she was executed, it wouldn’t matter anyway. Kyoko probably did just find the mask and planned to share it with everyone later.

After all, Kyoko was investigating the school, and didn’t hide that fact from anyone. She wouldn’t need to run around in a mask at night, considering how distant she already was from everyone else. Besides, as talented as the mysterious girl had proven herself to be, the gambler doubted she could go toe-to-toe with Sakura, at least if the story of her encounter with the masked figure was accurate. Because of that, it wasn’t likely that Kyoko was the masked figured everyone was now desperate to uncover.

No, if she ventured a guess…Celeste would have put her money on Junko.

On multiple occasions, the Fashionista had proven herself to be far more capable than any of them could have realized. Her dramatic entrance when coming to Leon’s rescue, coupled with her little story about being homeless for a time, suggested that she wasn’t as naïve or powerless as she presented herself. And even though she’d heard it second hand, from Hina, the fact that she managed to knock Mondo on his ass when he tried to drag her into the nurse’s office proved that.

“If I were a betting woman, which I am, I’d place all my bets on her…especially after that little stunt with Monokuma.”

No one should have even thought to question if Celeste had really seen the masked figure or not. But Junko did…meaning one of two things. Either she was hyper suspicious of the gambler from the start, which she didn’t have a need to be. Or, the more likely reason, because Junko Enoshima was the masked figured and was taking a risk in order to expose the truth.

Then again, was it a huge risk? True, the trust she’d been building with everyone would be destroyed if she was unmasked, if Celeste was correct, of course. But even then, it’s not like her life was at stake or anything. Perhaps that’s why Junko decided to take that gamble, and it certainly paid off…unlike her own gamble.

“I hate to say it…but I was outbid. Well played, you manipulative fashion bitch.”

Almost lazily, Celeste’s crimson eyes shifted and caught the Fashionista’s gaze. Their eyes clashed, sky-blue hues battling with deep crimson irises, much as they’d done in the class trial. This time, however, the gambler was able to think surprisingly clearly…which gave her new insight into the Fashionista’s person. There was no hesitation in Junko’s eyes…only a fierce determination that, until now, Celeste had written off as naïve optimism. Those sky-blue eyes penetrated her…and it became clear exactly why Celeste was outmatched.

“…She never saw my mask. She only saw me. Ironic…I put so much effort into becoming Celestia Ludenberg…but all she saw was Taeko Yasuhiro…that pisses me the fuck off…”

Despite that thought, Celeste chose to remain stoic. Even if she was right, and Junko was the masked figure, she didn’t want her final moments to be overtaken by someone else’s deeds. These were her final moments, and she wanted them to go her own way. She wouldn’t let anyone else determine how she lived her final moments. Not anyone.
Tearing her eyes away from Junko’s piercing gaze, she addressed everyone.

“From there, you all know what happened. I pretended to lose my earring in order to separate from Hina, met with Hifumi in the art supply room, and tried to kill him. It just didn’t go anything like I planned…fuck my life.”

A number of the students were shocked by her abrupt shift in attitude and tone. No surprise really, considering they’d only been exposed to Celeste and not Taeko. The two were almost polar opposites, just as she’d intended, and she’d be lying if she didn’t find it amusing to see them cringe at her vulgar behavior.

However, much to her chagrin, there was one student who wasn’t surprised in the least.

“Do you all see now! I told you she was a heartless beast! She tried to place all the blame on me and turn me into the villain!” Hifumi suddenly shouted, pointing at her, and wagging his finger furiously…almost like a dog’s tail.

“If only he’d wagged his tail and been a good disposable pet like I’d planned…” Celeste mused as she endured his tirade.

“You all doubted me…and for good reason, but still! I knew you all would be able to see the truth eventually!” Placing his hands on his hips, the fat otaku openly scoffed at her. “Despite your best efforts, your true nature has been exposed! I had thought you a Tsundere but in reality…” he abruptly changed his tone to sound more eloquent…for some reason. “You were truly a Yandere, all along!”

By this point, many of the other students had grown accustomed to Hifumi’s ramblings; partially because they didn’t understand half of what he was trying to say, and partially because they were used to him being completely random sometimes. However…

“I can’t be a Yandere, moron. I’m not madly in love with anyone enough to kill for them.” Celeste let out a deep sigh, unsure of why she bothered arguing at this point.

Absolutely everyone, from Kyoko to Junko, all the way over to Byakuya and Monokuma, collectively stared at her, pure and complete shock covering their expressions. It took a moment for the gambler to notice them, to which she raised an eyebrow and mockingly replied:

“What? I’ve read manga.”

The complete contrast between everything she appeared to be, and the person she truly was, continued to grow wider and wider with each passing moment. Strangely, it seemed that her classmates found this new side of herself even more mysterious than the persona she usually asserted. She wasn’t sure that she liked that, considering her Celeste persona was who she truly wanted to be. There was nothing eloquent about Taeko, nothing interesting. A boring, plain girl with absolutely no redeeming qualities…that’s who she truly was. It was no wonder her classmates found her true persona so strange. It was like meeting two different people.

Chalked it up to shock from the trial going so bizarrely and she turned to face Hifumi.

“Oh, and I was never a Tsundere, either. That would imply that I had some kind of attraction to you in any way shape or form…which I don’t…and personally, the very idea makes me want to vomit, so…tough luck fatass.”

She expected him to be devastated, taking down a peg or two by her brilliant retort…she was horribly mistaken.
“I reject that statement! Well, the first one anyway!” the fanfic creator shouted, pushing up his glasses and matching her gaze with his beady black eyes. “You are, undoubtedly…a Yandere!”

“No, no I’m not,” Celeste exhaustedly replied, already tired of this argument. This was not how she wanted to spend her last moments on this earth, and his dipshit insistences were making it unbearable! “There’s absolutely no one here I love enough to kill for, in order to help them surviv—”

“Not true, Miss Yasuhiro!” the fanfic creator spat, using her real name, she presumed just to be a dick. “You are, in fact…in love with yourself!”

That caught her off-guard for a moment, because she kind of wanted to agree with him. However, after everything that had happened in the last few hours, unfortunately she’d come to an exact opposite conclusion.

With a frustrated groan, she replied, “No, I kind of hate myself right now…”

“…You should.”

Crimson eyes widened as a familiar voice reached her ears. Slowly, the gambler turned and came face to face with the one person she’d wanted to avoid speaking with. Aoi Asahina, her usual friendly smile completely torn asunder by the furious expression twisting her face. A sharp pain dug into Celeste’s chest, but she ignored it, taking all of the swimmer’s wrath without faltering.

“You should hate yourself…after everything you’ve done!” Hina screamed, her voice raw. Tears spilled from the swimmer’s eyes, but she made no move to wipe them away, letting them trail down her cheeks as she shouted, “How could you…how could you do such a horrible thing?! I…I trusted you! You and I…we were…we were…”

“We were never friends.”

The words came out of Celeste almost automatically, mechanically even. At the same time, the gambler took note of the painful expression that warped Hina’s face. The swimmer was struggling…her own feelings tearing her apart. And…it was all her fault…

“She shouldn’t have trusted me…she was so…”

She wanted to berate Hina for her stupidity…but found herself unable to. Because, in the end, Hina wasn’t stupid…she was pure-hearted. And while most people confused that for idiocy…Celeste recognized it as something entirely different. It was a rare trait that very few people possessed…one that was invaluable to people like Celeste. Pure-hearted individuals, such as Hina, were easier to manipulate…because they always wanted to see the good in everyone—even a diabolical liar like Celeste. And in the end, that honest nature almost destroyed everything the swimmer cared for.

It was a cruel thing to do…to such a good-natured girl like Hina…but what’s done is done. Celeste chose to use Hina like a tool…that’s all she’d been to Celeste…a tool…nothing more.

Hina’s trusting nature…she’d taken advantage of it. And now, when everything was said and done…a part of her regretted it. If she’d had known this was going to happen, she probably would have avoided Hina altogether. However, she had chosen to drag Hina down into the depths of despair along with her…another sin to bear as her time came close to its end.

And in the end, it wasn’t Hina’s fault that the plan had failed…the only person to blame for that was Mondo…and Taka…and also Hifumi…but in most respects it was her own fault as well. Still, there was no point in lying to Hina now…or so she told herself…conjuring one final lie to comfort herself.
“You were nothing but a disposable pawn. A sacrifice for my castle. That’s all our ‘friendship’ amounted to in the end. Honestly…it’s kind of shocking how easy you were to manipulate!”

The gambler forced a malicious smirk to overtake her lips. It was the only thing keeping her together as she decided it was best to deal with Hina now…and perhaps help the poor fool understand her own shortcomings. Not letting her cruel expression falter, she met Hina’s teary gaze.

“But I have to admit, you were the best god-damn pawn I’ve put to use. Always defending me, no matter how obvious it was that I was the culprit. I really have to thank you for that. Seriously, without your ridiculously strong sense of ‘friendship’, I wouldn’t have had a snowball’s chance in hell!”

Celeste watched as Hina’s sadness deepened, the poor girl sobbing, her body trembling as she was finally told how the gambler truly felt about her. And even though that stupid pain in her chest refused to subside, Celeste pressed forward, not letting this little setback diminish the fact that these were her final moments…and she’d spend them acknowledging how much Hina’s support had moved her.

“But you just kept at it! You didn’t let anyone talk down to me! You, Hina, were the reason I almost got away with murder! But…it doesn’t matter, because even if I’d won, I would have ultimately lost. So, as thanks for all your hard work, allow me to offer you one last piece of advice before my punishment…”

Through tears, Hina stared at her, bright blue eyes wide and desperate for understanding. Knowing that she was truly listening, Celeste decided to impart one final bit of wisdom.

“From here on…don’t trust anyone. Throughout history, people have shown themselves to be nothing but deceitful, selfish creatures…willing to stab anyone in the back as long as it benefits them. Don’t make the same mistake twice…”

Hina choked back sobs, a disgusting mixture of anger and betrayal radiating from her expression. A sharp pain pricked Celeste’s chest, but she ignored it, knowing she had to finish strong.

“Oh, and if you do try to kill someone…don’t fuck up like I did. Kill the smart ones, that’ll give you a better chance.”

And with that, she fell silent, watching as her words sank deep into Hina’s very soul. It was selfish of her to do such a thing, but these were her final moments, after all. Besides…it was all she could do for Hina now…the only advice she could think of…for the one true friend she’d ever made.

Once she was certain that the swimmer wasn’t going to respond, Celeste turned toward Monokuma with a solemn expression.

“Alright, Monokuma…I’m ready to begin,” she said quietly, knowing how eager the demented bear was for a real execution. “No…I guess…this is the end…isn’t it?”

She could practically see the malice radiating off the bear as she finished, but she ignored it. Whatever happened next, she deserved it. This was her punishment…and she wouldn’t let—

“Hold on a fuckin’ second!” Mondo suddenly shouted, his eyes frantic with confusion and frustration. “Are you saying that just because she planned everything, Hifumi gets off scot-free?! After all the shit he tried to pull?! That’s bullshit!”

Letting out a low growl of frustration, Celeste battled to keep up her calm visage.
“Why do idiots have to talk so fucking much? I’m guilty and I admitted it. Deal with it. I don’t want or need your pity. Then again…”

One last dark impulse took over Celeste as she spared a glance in Hifumi’s direction. The fanfic creator’s head hung low, his shame, and possible fear of being lumped into an execution with her, was no doubt causing him quite a bit of grief. His vigor from before was gone, replaced with an understandable trepidation.

Honestly, Celeste couldn’t deny that she wouldn’t mind seeing him go down with her. After all, his sudden growth of a conscience had been the final thread that unraveled the fabric of her master plan.

“A double execution…coupled with being the first ‘real’ execution…that would be a memorable way to out…”

That thought, as twisted as it was, sort of comforted Celeste. If she was going to die anyway, she wanted it to be a spectacle. One that she could revel in as she shuffled off this mortal coil.

Unfortunately, even that hope was dashed…

“As much as I would love the opportunity to have a double execution…” Monokuma announced, the hint of disappointment in those words informing Celeste of the bear’s decision before the automaton finished speaking. “I’m afraid it goes against the rules of the bullying trial. As per the rules, only the ‘bully’ will be punished! And, since Little Miss Taeko has admitted to being the instigator of this little scuffle, that means the blame falls squarely on her shoulders!”

Celeste cringed as the mastermind used her real name. The mastermind probably knew her real name before she even arrived at the school. Hell, they may have even planned for this kind of situation long before the game even began! It made sense, what with the money motive and the fact that her true name had been revealed by Taka, probably due to the mastermind’s scheming.

Celeste clicked her teeth as she realized that, whoever the mastermind was, they’d stacked the deck against her from the start. The house always has the advantage, after all.

“I figured as much…” the guilty gambler said with a sigh. “So, how are we going to do this? Will I be forced to play some kind of gambling game where I have no chance of winning? Oh, wait…that already happened.”

Her voice was seething, and everyone in the room stared at her as she aimed a venomous glare at Monokuma. In response, the bear only chuckled slightly before reaching behind it’s back and producing a medium sized metal box labeled – Taeko Yasuhiro Punishment Time Ideas.

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“Don’t you worry, Little Miss Taeko! I’ve already got this all planned out! Presenting…”

Snapping its finger…somehow…a large banner fluttered down from the ceiling that read:

Versailles Style Witch Burning!

Everyone, Celeste included, flinched as they read the banner. Then, very slowly, all eyes turned and focused solely on the demented bear atop the judge’s chair. Flipping the lid of the box open, the bear reached deep inside, fumbling around for a moment.

“You see, to have a good witch burning you need three things: the first is the accused witch!”

With a swift yank, Monokuma pulled out a very impressive little doll that looked almost exactly like Celeste, complete with realistic hair styled into her famous drills. Setting the metal lid down, the
demented bear used it as a staging area for the punishment demonstration.

“Second, you need a pile of burning wood surrounding the witch, who will be tied to a pole!” From the box, the bear produced a small pile of matches and arranged them around the Celeste doll, which the bear tied to a small wooden ‘pole’, courtesy of the metal box. “Then, you get a fire going!”

Pulling out a bottle of lighter fluid, the bear doused the matches at the doll’s feet. With a single flick of a wrist, Monokuma lit one of the matches and set the entire stack aflame. The flames didn’t spread outside the box’s lid, thanks to its metal framework, but it did cause an eerie reflection to wash over the poor unfortunate doll.

Almost without noticing, Celeste discovered that her breathing had quickened, unable to tear her eyes away as the tiny replica of herself was quickly surrounded by tiny flames. She felt sweat trickle down her neck as she imagined herself in that position…her entire body slightly trembling as she anticipated the agonizing level of pain burning alive would cause.

Just as the flames began to consume everything around the Celeste doll, Monokuma abruptly shouted, “And finally, you need a fire-truck!!”

Inexplicably from behind its back, rather than the metal box, the bear pulled out a bright red toy fire-truck. Making whooshing and airplane noises, the bear reared the truck back before smashing it into the Celeste doll, much to everyone’s shock and horror. But it didn’t stop there, Monokuma continued to bash the fire-truck against the tiny Celeste doll…until it was almost completely unrecognizable.

Finally, after one last horrific bashing, which caused the doll’s head to crack open, the bear seemed to be finished and let the red toy truck rest atop the pile of burning matches…the remains of the Celeste doll slowly consumed by the fire.

“Was the fire truck really necessary?”

Celeste scowled deeply, her annoyed tone surprising a few of the students. However, no matter how much she tried to hide it, everyone could see the deep-rooted terror that settled into her visage. She was trying to save face…one last time.

“Wait for it…” Monokuma replied, pulling out a remote control and pushing a large red button.

Before anyone had time to react, the model fire-truck suddenly exploded, completely demolishing the ‘execution’ stage and even singeing Monokuma’s face a bit. Celeste drew in a shaky breath as she saw that nothing of the doll remained…aside from torn bits of fabric.

With a sadistic grin that torture enthusiasts would find delightful, Monokuma playfully asked, “I’m still debating on if the fire truck should explode or not. Your thoughts?”

Swallowing a lump in her throat, Celeste produced the most believable scoff she could manage and answered, “I’ll be dead by that time…do whatever the hell you want.”

“Well, actually, there’s no guarantee that being crushed by the fire truck would kill you…and I’d hate to let you suffer like that. Hence the exploding truck! Swift but painful! I’ll see how I’m feeling when it all goes down…how about that?”

The bear’s glowing red eye bore into her and, but Celeste didn’t waver, keeping her visage stoic as she met the bear’s cruel gaze.

On the other hand, internally, she was screaming. That was beyond a horrific way to go. And while it was possible that Monokuma had some other form of ‘punishment’ prepared for her, with this as
just a means of increasing her despair, it didn’t change the fact that the bear’s goal had been accomplished. As much as she detested admitting it, despair had officially seeped into her soul. Hell, an even worse execution may be waiting for her! That thought alone made her knees grow weak, threatening to destroy what little grace she had remaining.

But regardless of whether or not this demonstration was how her life would come to an end, none of that truly mattered anymore…

“I bet everything on that one gamble…and I lost. I’d rather it just end here…it’s not like I’ve got anything else to live for anyway…”

Her dream was all she had…aside from Grand Boise Cheri Ludenberg, of course. However, with her cat’s current status unknown, given how cryptic her first motive video was, it was entirely possible that even her beloved feline companion was no longer in this world. Both her castle and her cat…the mastermind stole both of them away from her. And now that she’d fallen so far…there was no hope of—

“But that’s only if we vote for execution, right?”

A familiar, yet infuriating voice called out. Lifting her head, Celeste glared at Makoto Naegi, the hopeless idiot who had helped undo all her plans. Strangely, she didn’t feel any anger toward him…not anymore. She was having trouble feeling anything right now, aside from the crippling despair that threatened to overtake her. Because of that, she wasn’t prepared for his next statement.

“Before we get to voting, I think we need to discuss if we should really have a vote at all.”

At this point, no one was surprised that Makoto had spoken up. Although normally a bit soft-spoken, whenever they entered the trial grounds, he completely changed. Ever since his initial struggle to prove his innocence in the first case, he’d slowly been growing more and more competent with each passing day.

And when someone’s life was on the line, regardless of their innocence, he chose to stand up for them…a truly hard life he’d chosen, but one he would never regret.

“What do you mean ‘discuss voting at all’?” Byakuya scoffed at the very idea. “This is a class trial. Like it or not, we are required to vote. So, regardless of your bleeding heart, we will be voting, it’s as simple as that.”

“I’m not saying we won’t have a vote,” Makoto challenged, flinching a bit as he met the Affluent Progeny’s gaze. “A-All I’m trying to say is, we need to think about this carefully—”.

“Why? What’s there to think about?” the Togami Heir interjected, a scowl forming. “Unlike the previous two cases, the crime in question was premeditated. So, unlike Leon or Mondo, Celeste truly did plan to murder us all in order to escape. If you ask me, that’s all the more reason we need to vote to put her down—”.

“The first crime was premeditated.”

Everyone turned to see Sayaka glaring at Byakuya, an apprehensive but determined expression on her face. She struggled to speak…like a knife was twisting in her gut, but somehow, she found the words.
“My crime…was premeditated. All I could think was ‘I need to get out’, and eventually, it pushed me over the edge…and unless you been in that dark place, you could never hope to understand the agony of making that choice.” She paused, glancing toward Celeste with a great deal of sympathy. “So…before we go any further…I need to ask…why? Why did you do it, Celeste? What motivated you to try and kill us all in order to escape?”

It was a poignant question, one that no one had bothered to ask until now. Sure, they knew the gambler wanted to escape this hell hole, who didn’t? But they still didn’t understand why. What was it that drove her to such extremes? What motivated her to attempt such a convoluted plot?

The students had been so wrapped up in the case, they’d forgotten to question the ‘why’ along with the ‘how’. As one, the students turned toward the gambler, who seemed amused by the attention suddenly coming back to her.

“My reason for wanting to escape?” Celeste mused, a knowing smirk erupting on her lips. “It was for my dream…a dream that none of you could comprehend—”.

“Try us.”

Junko challenged, her tone firm and confident. By this point, everyone was curious, even Kyoko seemed the tiniest bit anxious to hear the gambler’s motivations. And perhaps, it would shed some light on why the girl who had called herself ‘Celestia Ludenberg’, had deceived them all.

With a tired shrug, Celeste offered no more resistance, her eyes lighting up as she spoke.

“My dream…was to live in a beautiful European castle, where I would be waited on, hand and foot, by a personally selected group of butlers/bodyguards…all dressed in eloquent vampire-esque apparel. There, I would spend the remainder of my life in the lap of luxury, a world of my own making…a place where Celestia Ludenberg…would be the center of the universe.”

…

…

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“You tried to kill me for that?!” Hifumi screeched as he took in Celeste’s words, which brought an almost victorious smile to her lips. The fanfic creator’s fury intensified as he witnessed her smug visage. “Witch! Burn her! She tried to kill me for a big fancy house—!”

“Shut your fat face, asshole!”

Celeste voice abruptly snapped, her brows furrowed as rage suddenly coursed through her. In response, Hifumi stiffened and shrank down, fear gripping his senses. Once he was sufficiently silenced, the gambler cleared her throat. And when she spoke again…her accent inexplicably returned.

“A castle is a construct of absolute beauty. A paragon of stability and grace. A place where dreams become reality, and the world’s problems seem almost…nonexistent. It represents…everything I’ve always wanted to be…but could never hope to achieve…”

Her voice was soft…and calm. And those listening could tell the desire for such a ‘frivolous thing’ wasn’t out of greed…but pure, unadulterated wonder. Like a little girl, who dreamt of living in a magical place where all their dreams would come true…that is what having a castle meant to Celestia Ludenberg. No, more accurately, that’s what Taeko Yasuhiro had always dreamed of… a place
where happiness was guaranteed…the exact opposite of what this hellish school represented. And, even if only a tiny bit, the students slowly began to understand Celeste’s twisted desire.

To her, obtaining that castle was the only thread keeping her sanity intact. Without that goal to strive for, the girl who’d called herself Celestia Ludenberg, would have gone mad. And now that the students had taken that away from her…all that was left was a dreary girl whose dreams would never come to fruition. It was…almost pitiable—

“It’s much more than ‘just a big fancy house’, you bloated otaku nerd!” Celeste’s voice aggressively returned to her ‘true’ persona, her voice filled with rage and regret. “I would have gladly killed all of you just to have a single day inside a castle made explicitly for me!”

Glancing around the room, Celeste only stopped to stare at Mondo, Sayaka, and Leon for brief moments before chuckling and addressing everyone.

“That’s the difference between you and me. Even though I failed, I made my choice and I won’t back down from it. You’re all hypocrites, so willing to forgive people just because they feel sorry for what they’ve done. Well, even if I did feel any semblance of guilt for what I tried to do, I’m not going to try and weasel my way out of it.”

Hardening her features, the gambler scoffed at all of them as she calmly said, “This is my life. And no one’s going to tell me how to live it. Like the great Queen Marie Antoinette, I’ll take responsibility for my actions, even if it leads to my death. So, go on, have me executed if that’s what you really want. At least I won’t make excuses for my actions.”

As her voice echoed around the circular room, the empathy the students had moments ago severely lessened. It wasn’t completely gone, but her abrupt shift in tone had certainly strengthened Byakuya’s case.

“Are you still going to try and convince me we shouldn’t vote?” the Togami Heir practically spat in Makoto’s direction. The lucky student opened his mouth to protest, but Byakuya gave him no such quarter. “She’s a danger to us all. The best course of action is to have her eliminated before she—”

“But do you want Monokuma to win?!”

By this point, no one was really surprised that Junko decided to speak up. In fact, most of the students thought it was odd she’d been so quiet the last few minutes. However, now that she’d officially thrown in her two cents, everyone knew it would impossible to ignore. Byakuya, especially, seemed perturbed by her sudden assertion.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” Byakuya challenged, glaring down his nose at her.

With a deep scowl, the Fashionista replied, “If we have an execution now, after two class trials without one…the Mastermind wins.” She paused, letting that idea sink in before continuing. “Once the killing truly starts…there’s no turning back. The game will truly begin, and there will be no stopping it. A single misstep is all it’ll take to spark a chain-reaction, and eventually…the killing game will overtake all of us…”

Her warning pulsed in everyone’s ears, a sickening truth they all recognized…but wanted to ignore. However, that didn’t stop some of the students from voicing their opinions.

“T-Then what?! Are we just supposed to f-forgive her for e-everything?!” Toko spoke up, having been silent since her revelation. “E-Even if what y-your saying is true, s-someone like her is a d-danger to us all!”
“Pot…Kettle…Black…” Leon said loud enough for everyone to hear, earning a vicious glare from the writing prodigy, which made the baseball flinch, if only slightly. At the same time, however, a few of the students nodded in silent agreement, while others whispered under their breath.

“As I said before,” Byakuya cut through the murmuring, trying to establish order. “This case is different than the previous two. If we don’t do something about this now, I guarantee it will come back to bite us later—”.

“Even so, I must agree with Junko’s assertion.” Everyone was a bit shocked as Sakura added her voice to the opposition, the burly woman folding her arms in contemplation. “For now, I believe it would be best not to have an execution. There are other ways we can deal with this…betrayal.”

The pain in her voice was deep, and she averted her gaze from everyone. It was obvious that Celeste’s actions had deeply affected the martial artist, though she seemed a bit…ashamed as well. Probably due to supporting the gambler earlier in the trial, though it seemed obvious that was mainly for Hina’s sake.

“I agree,” Kyoko concurred, narrowing her gaze at the gambler. “What Celeste has done is deplorable but having an execution will only further the Mastermind’s objectives. As with previous cases, I believe we can find suitable punishment without Monokuma’s aid.”

“I…I don’t want her to be executed…” Chihiro’s meek voice sounded from beside Byakuya, who snapped his gaze down at her with a monstrous glare. However, even though she flinched, and squeezed her eyes shut, she managed to speak up. “S-She…was kind to me in the nurse’s office. She didn’t have to be, it wouldn’t have affected her plans if she’d refused to get me a pillow…so…I won’t vote for execution…”

“If Chihiro’s against it…then I’m against it too!” Mondo’s gruff tone made the petite programmer lift her head, an appreciative smile adorning her lips. Seeing that, the biker flushed, but quickly shook his head. “Besides, we agreed after the last trial that my life would be tied to Chihiro’s so…if she doesn’t wanna have her executed, then I’ll go along with that!”

Hearing this, Chihiro’s face reddened. “W-What?! When did that happen? I don’t remember agreeing to that!”

“It was Mondo’s punishment for trying to kill you,” Hiro lent his voice to the conversation. “We all agreed that if something happened to you, he’d take responsibility for it! So, like, if someone kills you, he automatically will get executed for it.”

Shock overtook the programmer as she absorbed that information, her body trembling. “N-No…I don’t want that! It’s not fair! Mondo doesn’t need to—”.

“It’s fine, Chihiro…”

For the first time since he’d attacked Chihiro, a confident smile overtook the biker’s face. His entire visage radiated confidence, as if he was gearing up for a massive brawl with another gang. Turning around, he exposed everyone to the massive ‘Crazy Diamond’ symbol on the back of his coat.

“Don’t forget!” He shouted, pointing to the insignia on his back. “You’ve got the leader of the baddest biker gang in the world looking out for you! I’ll be sure to keep us both safe, so…” He hesitated for a moment, as if struggling to find the right words to say. Then, for just a moment, he glanced toward Junko before smirking almost defiantly and turning back to Chihiro. “Let me do this, for ya. This is all I can do now…I’m just doing what I can to help. So please…let me do this…”
Hearing him, Chihiro lowered her gaze, staring at the ground with deep contemplation. Then, very quietly, she replied, “…Okay. If that’s what you really want Mondo. I’ll put my life in your hands… and I promise that…I’ll do what I can too!”

Lifting her head up, the petite programmer’s eyes shone with a confidence never before seen from her. And when Mondo caught a glimpse of it, his smile widened, and he thrust his fist out toward her. Chihiro did the same, a long-distance air fist bump shared between them. Both of them smiled at each other, the wounds from their experience healing faster than anyone thought possible.

“That’s great and all, guys, but we should probably get back to deciding whether or not we’re having a witch burning in a few minutes.”

Although his tone was sarcastic, Hiro’s offensive comment brought back all the tension that had dissipated. Taking the silence as an invitation to continue, the clairvoyant said, “I mean, yeah, she didn’t try to kill me either, but she still tried to use me a scapegoat! That’s even worse if you ask me! Trying to make me the fall guy just because she thinks I’m stupid! What kind of reason is that?!”

“A damn good one…” Celeste muttered, though the clairvoyant didn’t happen to hear her.

“I won’t vote for execution either.”

Sayaka abruptly stated, drawing attention toward her. Everyone stared at her expectedly, as if waiting for her to continue…but she didn’t. Instead, the firm expression of determination on her face, coupled with a hint of empathy toward Celeste, spoke volumes more than any words she could have mustered.

“Me neither!” Leon proudly proclaimed, smiling reassuringly in Sayaka’s direction before addressing everyone else. “We can always lock her in a room somewhere. That’ll be enough right? As long as she can’t get to us, we won’t have to worry about her going all axe murder later on!”

After listening to the mounting opposition to his side of the argument, the Togami Heir released a sigh of utter disappointment.

“I’m surrounded by a group of the most suicidal people ever to exist.” His jeer only strengthened their resolve, a fact he was assuredly aware of. “By allowing such a dangerous individual to remain among us, you invite destruction. And I, for one, have no desire to let such a danger continue to fester—”.

“Remind me again who it was that strung up Chihiro like a rag doll?” Leon cut in, a hint of satisfaction in his voice. The Togami Heir regarded him with a glance, and the baseball star leapt on that chance. “If you ask me, the most dangerous individual allowed to be among us is you! Always trying to get us to turn on each other and insisting one of us is a spy! If anything, we should be considering executing you!”

Much to everyone’s chagrin, a smug grin overtook Byakuya’s features. “Perhaps, one day, you’ll be given that opportunity. And if it comes, I wish you the best of luck.” His implications were beyond disturbing, and just as he planned, everyone glared at him with obvious disdain. As if reveling in their disapproval of him, he continued, “However, for the time being, my actions are not what need to be examined. We should instead focus on what needs to be done about this class trial, not possible future trials.”

“Exactly!” Makoto happily agreed, matching Byakuya’s gaze with great effort. Having not expected the lucky student to agree with him, the Togami Heir chose to let the boy finish. “If we give in to temptation now, it will come back to bite us even worse than if we let her be executed—!”
“Fucking morons…”

Everyone in the room fell silent as Celeste interrupted, a calm but stern expression decorating her visage. Taking a moment, she glanced at each and every one of them before scoffing.

“You’ve been going back and forth for too damn long. Make up your fucking minds already, I don’t have all day.” The annoyance in her voice radiated around the room as she continued, “Just to let you know, I’ll never give up on my dream…I’ll keep pursuing it until the day I die. Whether that’s today or not.”

Even though her words were menacing and fearsome…there was no passion behind them. Usually, when Celeste spoke of her dream, she commanded the room, almost demanding attention with the sheer power of her desire. But now, after her fall from grace, it was like she struggled just to keep pace with everyone else. The presence she’d maintained with her façade had crumbled…it was almost hard to watch.

Her words held no weight to them. Her proclamation, meant to appear terrifying, rang hollow. She was not unlike a death row inmate, hurrying up an executioner almost out of pure spite. However, there was still venom in her words, and that was enough to provoke a certain Affluent Progeny to action.

“Why are we still having this debate?” Byakuya openly scoffed as he folded his arms. “We all know that she’s dangerous. Allowing her to continue to live will only jeopardize our chances for survival.”

“Maybe so,” Kyoko conceded, but not without hardening her gaze. “However, if we allow her to be executed, Monokuma gains an advantage. Once the killing truly starts, there will be no turning back.”

“Yeah, and besides,” Makoto concurred, taking a moment to process his argument. “Since no one was killed or seriously injured, we should be more lenient—”.

“Just get on with it already.”

The lucky student was silenced as Celeste interjected, any trace of her accent had been dispelled. Her tone, accompanied by a vicious glare, easily overpowered Makoto, giving the disgraced gambler room to speak her mind.

“I can’t take this anymore! All this waiting…prolonging the moment of my death…I’d rather it all just end right now!”

Celeste gripped her dress, pushing away the nausea bubbling up inside. Each time she pictured her own death…burning alive as a ‘witch’, her breath hitched, and she struggled to keep calm. However, her talent was exceptional…because she was able to convince herself that death…that painful, excruciatingly horrific execution…was more honorable than the shame she felt.

The shame of having lost the gamble, the humiliation of being exposed as a hateful liar, the agony of being treated like a criminal despite being a victim herself! She never wanted this! None of it! If she’d never been kidnapped and forced into this killing game, she never would have even considered murdering anyone! She would have lived her life gambling, making money, and eventually achieving her dream!

She’d been desperate, but whose fault was that! Not hers! She hadn’t wanted this! None of this was
truly her fault! And though she wouldn’t deny the heinous crimes she’d committed, it didn’t mean that she was solely to blame for her actions!

“My only regret now...is that I won’t get to beat the crap out of the Mastermind myself? Putting me through this bullshit...I hope they die in a fucking ditch!”

That was kind of a pleasant thought, imagining the Mastermind being executed themselves. Oh, what she wouldn’t give just to have one minute alone with the Mastermind...she’d teach that bastard the true meaning of pain for destroying her dream!

But...none of that mattered...not anymore. The sad fact was, she was going to die in this hellhole of a school. Even if she wasn’t executed...she’d become a victim soon enough. She wasn’t exactly built for self-defense, like Hina or Sakura. And while she wasn’t exactly petite, she didn’t have much in the way of muscle either. Hell, she almost died when Hifumi fell on top of her earlier this morning! Suffice it to say...she was incredibly vulnerable, especially now.

Almost anyone here could overpower her...except for Chihiro...maybe. And after everything she’d done, she’d practically painted a target on her back, virtually begging for someone to backstab her. Faced with the idea of being stabbed in the back or executed...she’d take execution any day!

“Either have me executed or don’t. It doesn’t matter to me.”

Silence greeted her proclamation, unsettling her. The vote was too close as it was...she needed to drive them over the edge and force them to end her humiliation. Her lips upturned into a malicious smirk, wetting them with a flick of her tongue.

“You people make me sick. There’s no point in denying the obvious. I know that none of you will ever forgive me for what I tried to do. Not that I want your half-ass forgiveness anyway—.”

“No, that’s wrong!” Makoto cut in with his trademark retort. Having anticipated his reaction, Celeste stared him down effortlessly, matching the determination in his gaze. But like always, the lucky student powered through. “It doesn’t matter if we forgive you or not. There’s more at stake than whether or not we punish you for your actions. This is your life we’re talking about! You should have more respect for—”.

“Respect? For life? Ha!” she cruelly interrupted, not giving him time to respond. “Have you been listening to a god-damn word I’ve been saying? ‘Respect’ doesn’t mean shit to me! My dream...my castle was the only thing that mattered! And if you all think that I’m gonna suddenly feel guilty for trying to murder two of useless dumbasses—”.

“Hey!”

“Language!”

“—then you’re even denser than you look! Especially you, Mr. Positivity!”

She aimed her remarks directly at Makoto, seething. For his part, the lucky student met her gaze earnestly, as if trying to understand her feelings...a notion that she completely reviled!

“All your talk about staying united and fighting the Mastermind...it makes me want to puke! Face reality, you god-damn loser! We’re never getting out of here! Either we’re all going to kill each other until there’s no one left, or someone will pull off an upset and actually get away with murder! Or, worse yet, we’ll be trapped in here in this god-forsaken shithole until we shrivel up and die from old age! That is not how I’m going to let my legacy end! Even if it’s painful, I’d rather be burned alive than quietly accept such a bullshit fate! So stop being such a pansy and execute me already! At least
then I’ll finally be free of this place!”

It was strange… and somewhat horrifying to ask for her own death. And while some might have considered it reverse psychology, it was obviously the opposite. Celeste wasn’t trying to convince them to spare her through some grand scheme…she genuinely wanted them to vote for execution. And with almost half the class seeming opposed to the notion, she was beginning to fear her humiliation would continue.

Taking a deep breath, she managed to compose herself. What little sanity she had left was slipping. She didn’t want to have this debate, she didn’t want to deal with the futility of her situation… all she wanted… was for her suffering to end… one way or another.

“Just hurry up and make your choice already… I’m getting tired of waiting,” she said almost absent-mindedly, as if the decision didn’t affect her in the least. “If I were you, I’d definitely go for the death penalty—”

“Yeah, well, you’re not us. So just shut up and stop trying to influence our vote,” Junko’s words sliced through the air, focusing all attention on her. “More than half of us have already said we don’t plan to vote for you to be executed, so there’s no point in continuing this discussion.”

The Fashionista’s sky-blue irises met the gambler’s crimson orbs… a fury shared between them that was almost palpable. However, much to Celeste’s surprise, Junko’s eyes somehow softened… and yet remained hardened and fixed.

“You’re gonna live…” the Fashionista told her, as if there was no room for error. “And you’ll have to face your crimes in this world rather than the next. So deal with it.”

Celeste almost smiled at how sharp Junko’s tongue could be… almost. Once again, the Fashionista had seen through her intentions… it was getting so god-damn annoying!

“Then fucking vote already…” the gambler answered wearily, truly exhausted from the proceedings. “Let’s see just how forgiving all of you truly are.”

Even though she said that, doubt had crept into the corners of her mind. With both Makoto and Junko backing the trend of sparing her life, her chances for a glorious execution were fading fast. At this rate… she would be forced to take responsibility for her actions and have to accept the consequences.

Almost unconsciously, she stole a glance at the person across from her… a hint of true regret seeping into her heart.

“…Hina…”

“Alrighty then! Since the culprit herself is asking for it, let’s move on to Voting Time!” Monokuma gleefully pounced on that opportunity, leaping to a standing position, obviously eager for the voting to begin.

Despite herself, Mukuro let out a quiet sigh of relief. Unlike previous voting times, the outcome was already set in stone… unless someone changed their vote last minute, but she couldn’t imagine that happening. Counting herself, eight of the students already pledged to vote for Celeste to be spared.

“Makoto, Kyoko, Leon, Sayaka, Sakura, Mondo, Chihiro, and myself. That’s over half of us.”
Even in the unlikely event that everyone else voted execution, which she doubted, her side still wouldn’t lose; eight to seven. And since Junko was committed to following her own rules, there was no way she’d overturn a majority vote—

“Oh, that’s right! I almost forgot to mention something important! Something that should interest you, Miss Enoshima…”

Monokuma’s voice brought her back to reality, especially when the bear called out her name. Mukuro snapped her head toward the demented bear, furrowing her brow as it continued.

“You said before that we should respect ‘the interest of fairness’, did you?”

A sinking feeling in the disguised soldier’s stomach turned her expression sour. “Yeah? What about it?”

The soldier fought to keep calm, not willing to show weakness to her sister. However, she couldn’t help but become increasingly aware of the sweat trickling down her brow. As if noticing that minor detail, Monokuma chuckled slowly, the tone sending icy chills down Mukuro’s spine.

“Well, using your logic, I’d say this Vote Time isn’t acclimating to ‘the interest of fairness’, you’ve been prattling on about…especially considering how you’ve stacked the vote in your favor this time.”

Against her will, Mukuro broke out into a cold sweat. “Where’s Junko going with this?! She…she would break her own rules…would she?”

As if responding to her frantic thoughts, Monokuma stretched it’s arms wide and laughed manically, very sound sending chills downs the soldier’s spine.

“That’s why…” the bear mercilessly continued, “I’ve decided we’re going to do things a little…different for this Voting Time!”

Mukuro was about to demand an explanation when a cord suddenly dropped down next to Monokuma. The bear’s sickening grin widened as it’s paw reached up and tugged the cord. With her excellent hearing, the soldier heard something like a panel opening up high above them. Craning her neck up, her eyes widened as she witnessed a large machine of some sort plummeting down…right above Celeste.

“LOOK OUT!”

No one expected Junko to scream at the top of her lungs, much less as a warning. Celeste, in particular, was a bit startled and unconsciously took a step backward…until she noticed the Fashionista’s words were directed…right at her. Like an idiot, she tilted her head back, and gasped.

A machine, easily large enough to crush her, descended toward her at rapid speed. Her instincts took over immediately, spinning around to face the falling mass of metal and lurching as close to her podium as possible…and not a moment too soon.

*CRASH*

A thunderous crashing and scrapping of metal echoed as the large machine slammed into the floor, somehow remaining upright despite the long distance it had fallen. A deafening silence could be
heard…save for the panicked hyperventilation of a certain gambler.

Celeste’s crimson eyes, wide with fear, stared frantically as the machine as her lungs furiously sucking in breath after breath, the maddening pace of her racing heart threatening to burst from her chest. She could only stare at the massive machine in front of her…her mind too rattled to even attempt to rational thought.

The large machine had fallen just behind her podium, blocking any means of leaving her assigned position. She barely had room to stand…her feet literally millimeters away from the bottom of the machine. If it had been even an inch closer to her…her entire body would have become nothing more than crumpled bloody mess under the weighty machine.

As she struggled to process this new development, a furious voice shook the courtroom.

“You son of a bitch! What the fuck was that?!” Junko’s rage filled words echoed around the room, the Fashionista gripping the rail of her podium so hard some of the students could have sworn they heard the wood creak. “We haven’t even voted yet and you’re already trying to execute her?! What happened to your precious rules, you hypocritical bit—?!”

*HOOOOOOOOOONK!!*

An air horn, somehow appearing in Monokuma’s hands, drowned out Junko’s protests, though she kept screaming for a few moments until she recognized she couldn’t be heard. Gritting her teeth, the Fashionista waited for the bear to cease honking, which it did a moment later. Everyone’s ears rang, the after effect of the horn further intensifying Junko’s rage.

“Don’t think that—!”

*HONK*

Again, she was interrupted by the air horn, silencing her. However, she instantly tried to cut in as the noise receded…but to no avail.

“Explain why—!”

*HONK*

“You can’t just—!”

*HONK*

“You fucking—!”

*HONK*

“STOP THAT!”

As softly as possible, Monokuma replied, “Not until you calm down…”

“FOR FUCK SAKE—!”

*HONK*

Junko’s entire face was red as her words were muted by the air horn, reduced to grumbling angrily as Monokuma waved the loud noise device in her direction. Grinding her teeth so furiously one might
think they’d crack, Junko somehow managed to keep herself from shouting after being blasted time and time again.

Slowly, Junko managed to rein in her rage enough to keep herself from lashing out. Seeing the ‘improvement’ in her attitude, Monokuma lowered the air horn, but kept it in hand.

“There now…everything’s fine. Breathe in…Breathe out.” The half and half bear follow its own advice, taking a large inhale before quietly releasing it. “You see…nothing to worry about. No one got hurt…and no one would have been in danger if you hadn’t yelled like that anyway—”.

“What?!”

*HONK*

Another honk silenced the Fashionista, who seethed angrily but wisely chose to remain silent.

“You see…” Monokuma replied, it’s voice barely above a whisper. “If you had not shouted, Miss Enoshima, the slot machine would have landed directly behind Miss Yasuhiro without incident. However, because of your violent outcry, she stepped back, placing herself in harm’s way.”

Unfortunately, the claim seemed feasible. Celeste had only recoiled because of Junko’s shouting, but at the same time, there was no way to prove her previous position had been any safer. With no way to argue, the Fashionista could only furrow her brows as the bear continued.

“Oh, and I should mention, if she had died because of that, it would have been your fault and you would’ve become blackened—”.

“You son of a bitch!” Mondo abruptly entered the conversation, shaking a furious fist at the bear. “She was only tryin’ to keep the bitch from getting smashed into paste! How the fuck does—!”

*HOOOOOOOONK*

Mondo continued to rank, trying to shout over the air horn and be heard, regardless of that impossibility. The battle of noises lasted nearly a minute with the biker refusing to submit until he finally ran out of air, marking a decisive victory for Monokuma’s noise making device. Red faced and seething, Mondo took another breath, obviously planning to continue the battle, but was silenced by a new voice.

“It’s pointless to argue about that now,” the calm and rational voice of Kyoko chimed in, although a hint of annoyance could be heard, likely due to the air horn after effect. She glanced toward Junko, who was still seething but somehow seemed to be regaining her composure, taking note when the mysterious girl nodded to her. “What’s done is done. I’m more concerned with—”.

“Don’t fuck with me!” Mondo frantically retorted, earning a glare from the lavender haired girl. “The bear’s breaking its own fucking rules! We can’t just let—”.

“Mondo, drop it.”

The biker reared back as Junko spoke over him, her sky-blue eyes locking with his. Mondo flinched as he saw the frustration locked away behind the Fashionista’s eyes, her pent-up rage barely contained by cruel logic. Shame overtook the biker as he realized she was once again putting the well being of the entire class ahead of herself.

Of course she was angry. Of course she thought Monokuma’s claims were bullshit. Of course she wanted to light that bear on fire and piss on it’s ashes. But she couldn’t do that…and Mondo knew
why. Even though it was subtle, the biker’s keen eyes witness Junko gently rubbing the scar on her left hand, a permanent reminder of her foolish defiance.

Defying the bear…would lead to death. That was an irrefutable fact. They’d both experienced that before, though Junko unabashedly had it much worse. Each time Mondo caught a glimpse of that scar, he felt an unreasonable sense of shame. If he could have switched places with her, taken that spear through his own hand instead of hers…he would have done it in a heartbeat. But that wasn’t the issue right now.

“Like that damn bear said, no one was injured, and there will be no punishment,” Junko said calmly, taking deep, cleansing breaths. “Besides, the bear just gave us an unexpected clue.”

Puzzled, and feeling entirely demotivated to argue with her, the biker asked, “Clue? W-What kind of clue?”

“Slot Machine.”

As Kyoko’s voice answered, the entire class turned to stare at the large machine sealing Celeste into her podium.

Having been given time to compose herself, thanks to Monokuma’s air horn antics, Celeste finally found the courage to examine the device that had nearly crushed her. Just as Monokuma and Kyoko had pointed out, it was indeed…a slot machine.

A large handle loomed only inches above her head. Strangely, unlike normal slot machines, there was only one row and two slots. The gambler in her instinctively wanted to pull the lever, but the rational part of her mind screamed ‘don’t fucking touch it’, and it was quite compelling.

“Part of my execution, maybe?” she pondered as she gave it another once over. “Maybe it displays a weapon, then a body part…and that body part is dismembered using that weapon? Fuck…why am I thinking like that?!”

It wasn’t all that surprising, really. Murder had been on her mind for the last few days, and with her own death so close, it seemed reasonable that dark thoughts dominated her mind. Either way, she didn’t have to wait long for an answer.

“As you’ve all so eloquently deduced, this ‘slot machine’ is going to assist us in our Voting Time!” Monokuma shouted, dancing a jig as another cord dropped from the ceiling, this time on the opposite side. “And since some of you have issues with surprises…EVERYONE WATCH YOUR FEET!”

Without warning, the bear pulled the cord…and the entire room began to shake. As one, the students grabbed their podium rails, glancing downward. To their collective shock, the floor in the center of the classroom, the unoccupied circle in front of all of them, slowly began to ascend. Not only that, somehow, the patter on the floor seemed to morph until it resembled a complete circular baccarat table.

Everyone, except for Celeste, took an immediate step back. The gambler pressed herself against the slot machine, fighting a hint of panic as the floor ascended and finally stopped at the same level as their podiums.

Now, instead of an empty space in the center of the ring of podiums, the round gambling table loomed ominously. Before any of the students could question the sudden redecoration, Monokuma
leapt high into the air, spinning rapidly…almost cartoonishly!

“This is what class trials are all about! The unexpected twists! The sense of betrayal! The heart-pounding excitement as the guilty and the innocent face off!” the bear shouted from inside a whirlwind of its own making. “Now…let’s get our gamble freak on!”

Abruptly descending, the whirlwind around Monokuma’s body dissipated and the bear dramatically landed…with a new wardrobe. Dressed in a royal blue gambling hakama, with one arm out of its sleeve and tattooed with a dragon for some reason, Monokuma held a stone cylinder in one hand…and a pair of dice in the other.

A sense of foreboding descended upon the class as the bear made an announcement.

“For this particular voting session, we’re going to have a special set of rules!”

A screen lifted itself out from a slot in the table, with a clear display for tally marks. Under one column was an 8bit sprite of Celeste, on fire. The other, was a 8bit sprite of Celeste crying.

“Since we’re going with the idea of fairness,” the bear stole a victorious glance at Junko, smirking. “It’s unfair that most of you already decided how to vote! So, instead of the traditional way, one at a time that is, we’re going to play a fun little game!”

Throwing the dice into the cylinder, Monokuma slammed it down on the table and shouted, “We’re gonna be playing the traditional gambling pastime known as Cho-Han! Or simply ‘Odds or Evens’ for those of you who don’t understand simple concepts…”

It was only for a moment, but for split second, Celeste could have sworn she saw the bear steal a glance at Hiro…earning a dark smirk from the gambler. However, it was instantly replaced with a scowl as the bear continued explaining.

“The slot machine behind Miss Yasuhiro will determine the players in each match! Once they’ve been selected, I, the illustrious Game Master Monokuma, will roll the dice! Then, each of the players will call out what they think the dice will total out! That is, an even number or an odd number! Psst, my bets on evens for this round…and when we reveal the dice—!”

“Get to the point already!” Junko snapped, retaking her position at her podium, and glaring at the bear.

“Fine, fine…” Monokuma scoffed, lifting the cylinder, and revealing snake eyes. “Evens! That means I would have won this round…and only I would get to vote!”

As the bear spoke, a tally mark appeared on the ‘Burn Celeste’ side…and the 8bit sprite wailed…piercing everyone’s ears with an 8bit soundbite. A moment later, the tally mark disappeared and the 8bit shrieking ceased.

“As you can see, I would’ve voted for execution! So that’s where the tally would go! Whoever wins each round must verbally announce their vote to the rest of the class! If you want to state a reason, go for it, as long as you do it in under 40 seconds.”

The last bit of the bear’s instructions were strange, but everyone had come to understand that most of Monokuma’s actions weren’t worth dissecting. Instead, they chose to stay quiet and listen.

“In other words, the winner of each Cho-Han match must vote for either witch burning,” Celeste’s 8bit on fire wailed as it was pointed to. “Or you vote against Miss Yasuhiro’s wishes and force her to live among the people she hates most.” The 8bit Celeste on the opposite side audibly wept, the noise
searing everyone’s ears.

“This will continue until there are three votes on one side or the other! Once one side has three votes, that choice will be locked in and Miss Yasuhiro’s fate will be irreversible!”

As her 8bit counterparts flailed on the screen, Celeste gulped but kept her composure. Monokuma was just prodding her now. Either outcome would be excruciating, but for different reasons. Burned alive literally or scorched by her classmates rage. Those were her only options…and sadly, she’d already chosen the former.

Execution was the lesser of two evils…that’s what she believed.

To be executed and be free of this maddening place, that was the only salvation left for her. There was no reason to be afraid…she was going to hold onto the shattered remains of her pride and end herself with dignity. That’s what she wanted…she told herself that…lied to herself…forced her talent to circumvent the paralyzing dread that made her legs shake even at this very moment.

“I’m not shaking…I’m trembling with excitement! Such a glorious death is fitting of Celestia Ludenberg! I’m not scared! I’m not! This is what I want! Stop…shaking…dammit!”

Gripping the rail in front of her, the gambler managed to keep up her calm façade as the other students began to understand Monokuma’s new terms.

“Basically, we’ll be voting in pairs but only one of us actually gets to vote?” Sayaka asked, trying to clarify how this strange system worked.

“Exactly,” Byakuya answered her, pushing up his glasses and scoffing. “I assume the slots that select the players will be randomized, and no one will get a second vote. So, whoever loses the Cho-Han match…doesn’t get to vote at all.”

“That’s the only way it’ll be fair!” Monokuma cheekily replied. “A game of chance with no second chances! This Voting Time is shaping up to be the most exciting one ever! Extreme!”

“Interesting…quite an intriguing setup,” the Togami Heir surprisingly praised. “With this, it’s completely up to chance. Either the right number of people who wish to spare Celeste her fate will win their matches, or the opposite will occur. It’s truly become a game of chance…doesn’t that excite you, Celeste?”

The gambler scoffed at Byakuya’s crude attempt to get under her skin. “It’s mediocre at best. But, I guess it’s fair. I’ll be the one pulling the lever on the slot machine then?”

She asked her question casually, burying any hint of fear beneath a cold façade. In response, Monokuma gave her a wink and a thumbs-up.

“You’ll be selecting the people who decide your fate! A fitting role, wouldn’t you agree? “The bear answered before swerving it’s vision toward a certain fuming Fashionista. “Miss Enoshima, I certainly hope you appreciate all the effort I put in to make this Voting Time conform to your ‘interests of fairness’. I know how much the concept means to you…”

“Fairness…yeah, right.”

Junko’s seething tone made the bear grin wider, obviously enjoying its entrapment. The Mastermind
had successfully turned the Fashionista’s good intentions against her…as if they had planned it all along. And while it would normally be seen as petty, given everything they knew about their captor, it made a strange amount of sense, considering that the Mastermind had obviously developed a vendetta against the resident Fashionista.

“You could easily rig the game with loaded dice! Or you could switch out the dice once you’ve slammed them down!” Junko fired back, angrily gesturing toward the bright red dice. “There’s no way we can trust—”.

“Have a little more faith in your Headmaster,” Monokuma effortlessly interrupted, the bear’s voice deadly serious. It’s usual playful tone was gone, replaced with a deep, growling rasp. It was such a huge contrast that most of the students were caught off-guard, including Junko. “I won’t be rigging the dice rolls. I want this to be a true game of chance, one that no one can interfere with. That way —”.

“If Celeste is executed, there will be even more despair,” Makoto interjected, his expression hardening. “That’s what you want, right? The chance that this will end in despair…and there won’t be anything but bad luck to blame.”

Monokuma’s grin widened to almost impossible standards, it’s playful attitude returning. “Give the boy a prize! Nice work, Makoto! You’ve completely maxed out my friendship card! You and I are gonna be best buddies from now on! I’ll even tell you my bust size—”.

“Enough!” Junko seethed, red-faced and furious. Lowering her voice, the Fashionista stared Monokuma down, as if trying to match it. “You can’t expect us to trust you after everything you’ve done. You’ve kept the truth from us before, like with how the bullying trial really work.”

Tilting it’s head, Monokuma calmly asked, “Oh, how hurt I am that you don’t have more faith in your Headmaster. I’ve failed you as an educator…but still, these are the rules, deal with it!”

“At least give us proof that you’re going to be fair about this!” Junko demanded, trying to gain an advantage. “If you can’t, then there’s no reason for us to go along with your little game!”

“Ehh? Prove myself? Why should I?” Monokuma baited her, making the Fashionista seethe. “I already gave you my word that I wouldn’t be rigging the dice rolls! What more do you want—”.

“Let me examine the dice, then.” Kyoko suddenly offered, much to everyone’s surprise. “I have experience determining such things. I can guarantee I’ll be able to tell if they’re loaded.”

“And where did you pick up that little talent?” Byakuya mockingly questioned.

“Does that matter right now?” she instantly, but calmly, fired back.

The Togami Heir folded his arms and scoffed, “…No, I suppose not. Very well, get on with it then.”

Kyoko nodded and stretched her hand out toward Monokuma, only to have her wrist caught by a slender hand. Junko, who had leaned over and reached in front of Sakura, held her wrist firmly.

“H-Hold on a sec! You can’t be serious!” Junko questioned her, a hint of betrayal in her voice. “You’re just gonna go along with the bear’s crazy scheme?! That’s insane!”

If Junko’s grip bothered Kyoko, it didn’t show. The stoic girl slowly turned her gaze and met the Fashionista’s, not flinching in the least.

“At this point, we don’t have a choice.” Kyoko’s tone was…softer than usual, but still firm…almost
reassuring. “Rather than going into this blindly, all we can do is determine if the dice are loaded… and leave it up to chance.”

Junko clicked her teeth and released her classmate’s wrist. “Even so…you can’t deny that this is an extremely suspicious way to vote! We should at least talk this out a little more!”

“Yeah, she’s got a point!” Leon chimed in after remaining silent for so long. “I say we just vote like we usually do! That way, Monokuma can’t—”.

All at once, everyone’s pockets made an electronic beeping noise. As one, the students pulled out their e-handbooks and switched them on, only to be greeted by a new rule:

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 Proceedings for Voting Time, be it during a class trial or bully trial, will be determined solely by Headmaster Monokuma. Excessive arguing will be viewed as non-participation Those who do not participate will face Punishment.

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“The fuck…” Leon disbelievingly whispered, as he and everyone else absorbed the new rule. “We can’t even argue about the voting proceedings anymore! This is—”.

“A fine solution!” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru cut him off, strangely overconfident. “Now that this rule is in place, Monokuma has to follow it! We can all rest assured that the game will be fair—”.

“That’s not what the rule means!” Sayaka interrupted, her tone surprisingly louder than usual. “We should at least have Kyoko examine the dice, just in case. I…trust her judgement.”

Even though she didn’t show it, Kyoko must have been surprised, because she turned and met Sayaka’s gaze. The pop idol stared at her, deep blue eyes meeting light lavender orbs. A sense of trust and understanding silently shared between them. Then, Sayaka smiled at her. A confident, trusting smile, the likes of which most of the students had never seen before.

“I trust her too!” Makoto unsurprisingly concurred, drawing the attention of the two young women over to him. Flushing a bit at the sudden attention, the lucky student cleared his throat and composed himself. “This isn’t an ideal situation, but at the least, I think Kyoko’s got the right idea and at least being as sure as possible that Monokuma’s being honest with us.”

“Is there no one here who trusts me?” a ‘heartbroken’ Monokuma asked aloud, false tears dripping from it’s beady black eye.

Ignoring the bear, Kyoko turned to face the true opposition to her proposal - Junko. As the two of them locked gazes, a wordless battle erupted. Junko’s overwhelming concern was evident, but so too was Kyoko’s firm resolve. And just when it seemed neither of them would win out…Kyoko spoke.

“I’ll determine whether or not the dice loaded. I promise.”

Those simple words carried more weight than any of the other students could have realized. Junko’s face twisted in frustration, obviously torn between trusting her classmate or following her instincts. After a few moments of tense silence, she regretfully relented.

“Fine…let’s get this over with.”
“Ironic…” Celeste called out, a half-smirk on her face. “That’s what I’ve been asking for quite a while now. My, how the tables have turned.”

Junko gritted her teeth but remained silent as Monokuma waddled over to Kyoko and plopped the dice in her hand. For the next few minutes, the stoic young woman examined each die, rolled them together, then separately, and even bit one of them.

“Hey! Be careful with those!” The bear chided, waving a paw at her. “I’ll have you know those dice were a gift from my dearly departed grandmother…they were made from her ashes, you know.”

Finally, after much trial and error, Kyoko held the dice back out toward Monokuma.

“They’re not loaded. I guarantee it.”

Gleefully retrieving the dice, Monokuma assumed it’s previous position in the center of the baccarat table, the arm outside his hakama holding the dice tightly, ready to begin the first match.

“Well then, let’s get things rolling! Miss Yasuhiro, if you would kindly pull the lever, we’ll get your super special, amazingly fantastic, despairingly suspenseful Voting Time underway!”

Internally groaning as Monokuma continued to use her real name, Celeste quickly answered, “About damn time…”

However, as she turned to grasp the handle…she stopped. No, more like, she hesitated. In a twist of true irony, Celeste finally understood why Monokuma had decided to switch up the voting. Sure, the real reason was to have the possibility that she’d get executed become viable, but there was something even more sinister than that weaved into this plot.

Gambling…had been Celeste’s only solace for many years. It was the only thing that kept her going…when the world turned against her. It gave her hope…filled her with fulfillment and joy. It was the one thing that could never betray her…until now.

This gamble, which she was forced to be a part of, held no victory for her. No matter the outcome, this gamble would see her suffering. And despite how many times she lied to herself in order to suppress her terror…as she looked up at that ominous choosing device, she felt true fear grip her soul.

In that moment, the single, most despair inducing thought that overtook her mind.

“I have nothing…I’ve been betrayed by everything…even my own talent…”

She couldn’t lie to herself…not anymore. Facing down death in this way forced her to realize that, no matter how good of a liar she was…you can only lie to yourself for so long.

Celestia Ludenberg would have been excited…but Taeko Yasuhiro…was afraid.

With a shaky hand, she reached up and grasped the lever. Lowering her head, as if offering it, she pulled the stiff lever. And, as if releasing the blade of a guillotine, the reels of the slot machine roared to life…selecting the first two ‘players’ for Monokuma’s twisted gamble.

[MAKOTO vs BYAKUYA]
Greetings, my beautiful readers! So, the voting for Celeste is about to begin! Who will get to vote? Who won’t be able to? How will the voting proceed?! You’ll have to tune in to the next chapter to find out!

So, as you all noticed, there was a large amount of time between my last post and this one. Well, unfortunately, I lost a family member recently. Back in January, we found out a relative had cancer and it was terminal. They passed weeks after being diagnosed. It was a difficult time and, suffice it to say, I wasn’t in the mood to write. I know that you all will understand, and I thank you for your understanding.

Now, to address some concerns. As I’ve said many times now, this story will continue until I finish it. It may take me another year or so, but I will get through it eventually. So, if I don’t update for a while, know that it’s because I have a full-time job I work at every day and don’t get much time to write. And on my days off, I don’t usually want to write all day, because I need a respite myself sometimes. Don’t get me wrong, I love this story! I think about it constantly, but that can make it hard to put onto paper. Please bear with me as I do my best to craft the best story I can for you all!

Lastly, I want to thank each and every one of you for enjoying the story! To this day, people favorite and follow my story on two different websites and that honestly gives me the courage to continue the story. Thank you all for being such great readers!

As always, leave a comment/review to tell me what you think of the story, or if you have general questions! I try to answer all questions that are given to me. Anyway, until next time, have yourselves a beautiful day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

As the voting to decide Celeste's fate begins, some of the students are forced to make unexpected choices...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[MAKOTO vs BYAKUYA]

“Hell yeah! That’s the way!” Leon shouted as he saw the first pairing results. Smiling confidently at the lucky student, he threw out a thumbs-up. “You got this, Makoto! Now, hurry up and do ‘the thing’ again! You’re unstoppable when you do ‘the thing’!”

“Uh…’the thing’?” Chihiro inquisitively asked, having been left out of the loop due to her absence during the last trial. “Does Makoto have some secret talent or something?”

“Come on, you know what I’m talking about! ‘The thing’ Makoto always does!” the baseball star insisted, but the blank look on the programmer’s face was evidence to the contrary. Fortunately, Leon realized his mistake, laughing nervously as he said, “Oh, right, you weren’t here last time. Okay, I’ll bring you up to speed! Makoto has the power to make people guilty!”

“W-What?!” a now terrified Chihiro stammered, her gaze shooting over to the lucky student. “I-Is…that true?”

Makoto’s embarrassment reached new heights as the situation escalated without him being a part of it. Sure, his luck didn’t turn against him completely sometimes, but the more Leon looked at him with that hopeful expression, the more pressured he felt to develop this ‘thing’ the baseball star claimed he had! Not that it was possible…probably. Resisting the urge to face-palm, he instead chose to address the notion directly.

“No, Chihiro, I can’t do that…and Leon, I told you before, that’s not—”

“Naw, man, I’m with Leon on this one!” The lucky student was flabbergasted as Mondo suddenly backed the baseball star’s claim. And with a grin just as determined as Leon’s, the biker made his opinion known. “Whenever you do ‘the thing’, we always make it out okay! So, stop being such a pussy and do ‘the thing’ already! Lives are at stake, man!”

Struggling for words, Makoto stammered, “B-But…but…t-that’s not how it works—!”

“No, Chihiro, I can’t do that…and Leon, I told you before, that’s not—”

“Don’t worry, man! We’ve got your back!” Leon interrupted, derailing the lucky student’s rational counter.

“Ain’t nobody gonna get in your way as long as I’m here!” Mondo ‘reassured’ him, pounding his fists together. “You just concentrate on doing ‘the thing’ and leave the rest to us!”

Makoto’s jaw dropped, and he couldn’t form a full sentence, instead stammering, “But…I don’t…I can’t…why do you…”
Leon and Mondo chorused together, their ‘encouragement’ only making the lucky student’s anxiety over being in the first match that much more horrifying! He wasn’t exactly sure how this was supposed to go anyway! Was he the one to decide if it was odds or evens? Or was it Byakuya? Would Monokuma select one of them or was he supposed to just shout it out randomly?

His head pounded as the stress mounted, further intensified as his two friends chanted louder and louder. At this rate, his skull was going to burst open from the sheer pressure of having to make such a—

“And, here we go!”

Makoto’s internal anxiety suddenly skyrocketed as Monokuma shouted that announcement, silencing the biker and the ballplayer. With a wave of its arms, the demented bear threw the dice into the stone cylinder and slammed it down on the table.

“Time to decide!” the bear shouted, a strange circular dial appearing on the tally board, with those same words stamped into the center. Accompanying the image was a loud ticking noise, as if the dial was counting down, the ominous rhythm matching the furious heartbeats in Makoto’s chest.

Still frazzled from the unexpected ‘encouragement’, the lucky student waited patiently for instructions…a fatal error.

“Cho!”

From the other side of the room, Byakuya made his decision. He chose Cho, or evens, with no reservation. Glancing his way, the Togami Heir smugly grinned at the lucky student, having been quicker on the draw. Makoto felt not only embarrassed, but ashamed as well. His indecision may cost them a vote…and if Celeste was executed, he’d never forgive himself for letting it happen.

“…Han.”

It was mostly a formality, calling out his decision. Whoever spoke first had the upper hand, kind of. Makoto wasn’t quite sure if there was a way to gain an advantage, other than speaking faster than your opponent, and that seemed kind of difficult in its own right. As far as he could tell, Monokuma was right…this truly was a game of chance, one that no one could rig, even if they wanted to.

“Your choice has been made! “Monokuma gleefully shouted, it’s grin widening. The dial on the monitor vanished, replaced with the tally board again. “Now then…for the results! What’s it gonna be? What’s. It. Gonna. Be?!”

Very slowly, the bear tilted the cylinder up slightly, getting a sneak peek at the results. Immediately, the grin worn by the mechanical bear sagged into a frown.

“Dammit…”

Almost inexplicably, a tally mark formed on the ‘Spare Celeste’ side. Everyone immediately understood the meaning, and none were shocked when the bear lifted the cylinder to reveal a five and a two – odds.

Half of the class rejoiced. Byakuya scowled deeply but didn’t seem that perturbed, instead choosing to scoff in Makoto’s direction. For his part, the lucky student let out a deep sigh of relief…that didn’t last long.
“Alright! Great work, Makoto!” Leon shouted from his podium. “I knew your ‘thing’ would win in the end!”

“Hell yeah! That’s the way you do it!” Mondo concurred, fist-pumping. “As long as we have Makoto’s ‘thing’, we’re unstoppable!”

“W-Would you please stop calling it that?!” a flushed lucky student shouted.

Embarrassment times ten flooded Makoto as they continued to refer to his luck as a ‘thing’…not to mention how out of context that could be taken! Just as he was about to reprimand them further, an unexpected congratulation reached his ears.

“Well, well, it seems that your luck has saved you once again,” the smug tone of Byakuya forced the lucky student to turn his way. Despite having lost, the Togami Heir didn’t seem perturbed, a fact that perplexed Makoto. Seeing his confusion, Byakuya chose to enlighten him. “I had a feeling your ‘luck’ would win this match. It is your ‘talent’, after all.”

The mocking tone he used to emphasize Makoto’s ‘ability’ made the lucky student furrow his brows. Taking note of this, the Affluent Progeny smirked condescendingly.

“Let’s just see if that luck of yours can hold out. This game is far from over.”

His cold words were amplified by his elated expression. A sickening wave of disgust washed over most of the class. Byakuya was enjoying this ‘game’ far too much. And he obviously wouldn’t feel any remorse for Celeste if she was executed. It was disgusting…watching him revel in the sheer anxiety they faced as they danced like puppets in the Mastermind’s hands.

“Wow…what a shocking development,” Celeste sarcastically, and abruptly, spoke up, seeming incredibly bored by the outcome. Glaring at Makoto, she seethed, “You gonna give another ‘inspiring’ speech about hope and friendship? Or are you gonna leave that to tv shows about magical ponies?”

Makoto flinched. He really was getting predictable, wasn’t he? Even so, that didn’t mean that his words were meaningless. He’d prove that to Celeste…one way or another. That is, if Monokuma actually let him speak this time!

As if on cue, Monokuma let out a deep, and audible, sigh.

“As you all can see…it’s Han…this round…is over…” Monokuma quietly announced, as if all the energy had been drained from its body. “Let’s…move on…to the next…”

“No! Not this time!” Makoto abruptly interjected, still feeling snubbed from the last two voting sessions. Barely waiting for Monokuma to, slowly, glance his way, the lucky student went on a tirade. “You said we get 40 seconds to say our piece. Well, I have something to—”.

*BRRRRRRRRRRR*

A buzzer cut him off, stunning him and everyone else into silence. It only lasted for a few moments but when it was done, Monokuma abruptly regained its vigor.

“Time’s up!” the bear announced, grinning at the lucky student. “It’s been exactly 40 seconds since I marked the tally. If you wanted to say something, you really should have spoken up earlier—”.

“I would have if I knew that’s how it worked!” Makoto instantly retorted, feeling genuine frustration as he was snubbed…for the third time. “This isn’t fair! How come I never get to—?!?”
As the buzzer rang again, Makoto’s anger began to subside, realizing he had no chance of winning this argument…even if he used ‘the thing’. He briefly wondered if he would ‘ever’ get the chance to say his piece after a voting session…but instantly realized how horrific that thought was. He didn’t want more voting sessions…he just wanted his friends to live…was that so wrong?

To add to his dismay, Monokuma let out its signature laugh, stealing away any retort he could have mustered.

“Puhuhuhu! Ahahahaha!” the bear cackled as it completely reverted to its usual sadistic self. “Ahhhhh, I needed that! A little taste of despair is quite a pick me up. Now then, let’s move on to the next round! Taeko, pull the lever!”

Begrudgingly, Celeste complied, jerking the lever downward and watching as the reels selected the next ‘players’.

[SAYAKA vs LEON]

A deep, relieved sigh escaped Sayaka as her name came up next to Leon’s. A quick glance his way showed him smiling, almost cheekily, directly at her. She returned the gesture, a light giggle escaping as her nerves settled.

Initially, she’d been terrified. Even after everything Celeste had done, she couldn’t stomach the idea of watching her be executed. And if her name had come up next to someone like Toko or Hifumi, who undoubtedly planned to vote for execution, she would have been devastated if she chose wrong. But that wasn’t a concern anymore. Regardless of who won this round, it was a victory.

“Another point for our side,” Sayaka reassured herself, any pressure from before evaporating. “After this, we’ll just need one more.”

“Allrighty then! It’s time for Round 2!” Monokuma announced, pulling up its sleeve slightly before tossing the dice into the cylinder and slamming it down. “Time to decide!”

Once again, the dial with those ominous words overtook the tally screen, the gut wrenching ticking returning. Sayaka glanced toward Leon, who stared back at her. Each of them waited, seemingly for the other to respond…and it was becoming a bit awkward…just staring into Leon’s vibrant blue eyes —

“Would one of you pick already?! My arm’s getting tired!” the demented bear shouted, wiggling its arm in emphasis.

Realizing it truly didn’t matter, Sayaka called out, “Han.”

“Cho,” Leon responded almost immediately.

“Your choice has been made!” Monokuma said with a nod, lifting the cylinder slightly to see the outcome…before sighing deeply. “…If I knew this match-up was going to happen I would have just marked on the board already. There’s no heart-pounding excitement under here…”

Lifting the cylinder revealed a three and a four – odds. Sayaka was the victor. Feeling slightly emboldened, the pop idol let out an exaggerated sigh before smirking at Leon.
“You almost had me there,” she joked, a warm sensation spreading through her chest as the baseball star chuckled and returned her smile.

“Damn, I guess you were just too good for me!” He laughed and Sayaka thought it was one of the most pleasant sounds to reach her ears.

“Next time, be a little more assertive,” she playfully chided, winking at him. “Girls like it when a boy takes—”.

“Just fuck already…”

Celeste’s harsh ‘advice’ ripped through the room, drawing stares and glares from the entire class. Sayaka felt her face flush but managed to keep her expression neutral as she unconsciously glanced toward Leon…whose face was bright red, his jaw practically hitting the floor. Unlike the pop idol, however, he was staring, wide-eyed, at the person responsible for his flustered state.

Following his gaze, Sayaka became aware that Celeste was staring her down, a frustrated expression carved into her face. Strangely, even though she could practically feel the anger radiating off the gambler…she could detect something else there as well…a feeling she knew all too well.

“Seriously, watching the two of you ‘flirt’ hurts almost as much as getting executed,” Celeste snapped, clicking her teeth. “Hell, I’d take the witch roasting over the slow burn of watching you two fucktards dance around the issue! So, hurry up and vote before I vomit.”

The gambler’s harsh commentary stung a bit, but it wasn’t anything Sayaka couldn’t handle. She’d been through much worse verbal abuse during her time as an idol, from rival idols and their fans. Not to mention that the shame from her crime against Leon and Makoto had been far more debilitating. Suffice it to say, nothing Celeste could say would rattle her…but that didn’t apply to her friends.

“Trying to influence the vote, are you?” Junko abruptly spoke up, a firm frown marring her features. “Did you think we wouldn’t notice? I’m not gonna let you get away with—!”

“Actually…” Monokuma interjected, not even glancing toward the Fashionista, which seemed to ruffle her more than being glared at. “I never said she couldn’t try to influence the vote. Only that the voter only gets 40 seconds after the vote to speak. So, technically, she can say whatever she wants!”

Junko opened her mouth to protest…but it died in her throat, falling silent while gritting her teeth. Sayaka frowned as she understood why. If Junko argued, Monokuma could take that as arguing against the voting system…and twist it into a punishment for the Fashionista. The demented bear was being beyond cruel again…and almost specifically targeting Junko.

It made sense. Besides Makoto, the Fashionista had been the most vocal about opposing the bear. In all honesty, Sayaka was kind of surprised it had taken the Mastermind this long to start scheming against them. After all…Sayaka hadn’t hesitated when she blackmailed or destroyed the careers of her peers in order to climb to the top of the charts.

“I’ll need to be more vigilant from now on.” Sayaka told herself, hands balling into fists. “Junko…doesn’t deserve this. I need to do what I can to help her…just like she’s helped me—!”

“Hey, life-destroyer, I have a question for you.”

Sayaka’s thoughts were forced back to reality as Celeste jeered toward her. A twinge of guilt throbbed in her chest at being called a ‘life-destroyer’, memories of her cruel tactics in the music industry flashing through her mind. However, she kept her composure as she turned her attention back toward the gambler, her face completely neutral.
Seeing that her tactic was as debilitating as it should have been, Celeste huffed and folded her arms, glaring at the pop idol with scathing fury...before smirking maliciously. When she saw that, Sayaka saw something she never expected behind the gambler’s façade...but didn’t have time to call it out.

“Tell me, Sayaka, how does it feel to fall in love with your attacker?” Celeste chuckled, and her smirk twisted into an even more insidious grin. “Wishing he would’ve penetrated you with a different kind of six-inch rod, huh? Never figured I’d see a genuine case of Stockholm syndrome with my own eyes!”

Celeste’s bright crimson eyes focused on the shimmering blues that Sayaka stared her down with. A wheezing noise echoed, and the pop idol chanced a glance over to see Leon, his face somehow redder than before, trying to force words out but failing miserably. His emotions were running wild and she could tell he would need to be comforted later. For all his bluster and bravado, Leon could be incredibly sensitive when it came to his own feelings. In that moment, Sayaka was immeasurably thankful she’d won the Cho-Han match.

“There’s no way Leon would’ve been able to handle her taunts,” she regretfully admitted, feeling more than a little sympathy for the baseball star. “But that doesn’t matter right now. I know what I need to do.”

Sayaka didn’t like the fact that Celeste was forcing them to acknowledge their difficult feelings in front of everyone...although she was pretty sure it wasn’t exactly a secret to anyone...maybe Hiro, he wasn’t all that bright. Having their ‘dirty laundry’ aired out in front of everyone was a bit unsettling, to say the least.

However, Sayaka wasn’t as naïve as she pretended to be. And Celeste was underestimating her if she thought this would be enough to change her vote. At the same time, she couldn’t take this offense lying down either...

“Nothing to say to that, huh?” Celeste prodded further, obviously confident in her manipulation skills. “Then why don’t the two of you can go fornicate in the corner like the rabid rabbits you are! You’re already licking each other’s wounds, so you may as well shove your tongues down each other’s throats—”.

“You’re afraid...aren’t you, Celeste.”

The look of absolute shock that overtook the gambler’s features made a swell of pride overtake the pop idol and gave her the leverage she needed to push back. With a soft giggle, she regarded Celeste with soft words.

“You don’t want to die, but you don’t want to live with your guilt and regrets. So, death was the more viable option...even though it terrifies you. No matter what you choose, you lose...and it has you positively frightened...right?”

Everything about Celeste’s posture and expression screamed ‘how the fuck does she know that?!’. Sayaka had to suppress another giggle as the gambler opened her mouth to retort, but quickly snapped it back shut, completely at a loss for words.

As an idol, Sayaka knew that the better you are at reading people, the more you can appeal to their interests. Her intuition was so sharp, she kind of frightened herself sometimes...or at least she used to. Now, instead of using her intuition to harm others, she was using it to help save someone...just like her friends had once done for her.

“Makoto...Junko...Leon...You all helped me when I needed it the most. And because of that, I want
Right now…Celeste was going through the most painful experience of her life. Sayaka truly did understand that. And, even if she denied it, even if the gambler outright rejected her help, she would still offer it to her. After all, everyone deserves a second chance…don’t they?

“Celeste…you’re in that same dark pit I once thought I’d never be able to climb out of. And maybe…you never will. But that won’t stop me from lowering a rope down to you.”

As that thought crossed her mind, Celeste finally collected herself enough to retort, “Y-you…you goddamn bitch! You don’t know me! Like hell I’m afraid! I want to be executed—!”

“You can’t lie to me…” Sayaka almost joyfully cut her off, stunning the gambler into silence. Morphing her features into a gravely seriously expression, the pop idol declared, “After all, I’m psychic.”

Celeste’s eyes widened, and she instinctively took a step back, bumping into the slot machine trapping her at her podium. Sayaka struggled to hold in a laughing fit. For all her deceptive talk, Celeste was just as vulnerable to manipulation when the cards were stacked against her. The pop idol knew that normally, the gambler would have brushed off her comment and thought nothing of it. Sadly, due to the extreme stress and fear, the normally intellectual gambler was actually considering if Sayaka was, in fact, a mind reader. It honestly made Sayaka feel a bit like a bully…but it didn’t bother her all that much.

“Let’s just call it a bit of payback for embarrassing me and Leon in front of everyone.”

Suddenly, smiling as bright and bubbly as always, the pop idol tilted her head playfully and proclaimed, “Just kidding! I’ve just got really good intuition…that being said…I know I’m right.”

Celeste, too flabbergasted to make a retort, could only stand there as Sayaka turned to face Monokuma, her warm smile never faltering.

“I vote for her to live,” she effortlessly declared before turning that soft expression back toward the gambler. “I know what it’s like…the fear of being killed…the despair of having everything you care for taken away…I know it all too well.”

A tally was marked on the side of crying Celeste sprite, giving two votes for her to live and zero votes for execution. However, Sayaka didn’t spare the monitor a glance, keeping her gaze focused on Celeste.

“Someday…I hope that you can find something to live for again. It’s not easy…but it’s possible.”

“…Stupid bitch,” Celeste instantly responded, a fiery glared aimed directly at her. “You don’t know anything about me. So, stop pretending like we’re friends—”.

“We may not be friends, but we are kindred spirits,” the pop idol interrupted, earning an even more infuriated stare from the gambler. Undeterred, Sayaka met her gaze as she finished. “You and I…we both tried to kill someone for our dream. We didn’t want to, but we did it anyway. And even if you don’t regret it now…someday you might realize—”.

*BRRRRRRRRRRR*

“Time’s up! No more chatting!” Monokuma announced as the buzzer subsided, pulling up it’s sleeve and preparing for the next match. “Time’s a wastin’! Pull the lever, Taeko-baby!”
As the bear’s antics silenced her, Sayaka let a gentle smile overtake her lips.

“I did all I could. It’s up to her now…to see if she wants to change…or stay the same.”

Lifting her gaze, she averted her eyes away from the gambler and instead focused on the boy staring at her. She chuckled as Leon flushed when he met her gaze, feeling a hint of pink redden her own cheeks.

“Things might be…a little awkward from now on. But…I’ve already decided. I’m not going back to the person I was before. Even if it’s crazy, even if it gets me killed…I won’t regret putting my faith in my friends…not ever again.”

“Who the FUCK does she think she is?!” Celeste fumed as she reached for the slot machine lever.

“We’re not ‘kindred spirits’ at all! I conspired to kill for a castle! She killed for her friends! It’s completely different!”

Yanking hard on the lever, the slot machine began to spin, and as it did, Celeste felt sweat drip down her neck. Two votes to live…those bastards wanted to keep her trapped in this hellhole of a school forever! Perhaps that was how they planned to ‘punish’ her, but she wouldn’t accept it! Sayaka was wrong! She wasn’t afraid of dying! Dying was the only thing that could free from this hell! If anything, the stupid idol bitch was just trying to make her suffer more!

And because of that, Celeste really needed the next pairing to be in her favor. Of the remaining students, only a handful of them would vote for her execution. Hifumi certainly would, Toko probably would as well, considering Byakuya chose that earlier. One of them needed to be selected next! However, if it was both, then while it would guarantee a vote for execution, it would rob her of an extra vote in another round.

And since the whole Cho-Han game/selection process was based on luck…she could only pray some semblance of her luck remained intact after the massive unlucky streak from this morning.

“Come on…come on…just give me a chance…all I need is a chance to—!”

In the midst of her silent prayer, the reels stopped…and a wide grin overtook the gambler’s face. It wasn’t perfect, but at least she now had a fighting chance for execution. After all, she’d almost completely forgotten about the other person who’d undoubtedly vote for her execution…

“Looks like…Lady Luck hasn’t given up on me yet!”

[Hiro vs Junko]

“Good…this is good.”

Mukuro breathed a bit of a sigh as ‘her’ name finally came up. And given her opponent, there was a good chance she’d be able to win. Sure, the game was luck based, but there was no way she’d let Hiro get the first words in. And besides, she’d been watching Monokuma closely during the last few matches and had noticed a few things.

“Junko’s control over Monokuma is superb, as expected. However, the precise handling of the dice
isn’t as random as it should be.”

The soldier had spent a great deal of time analyzing the bear’s movement’s trying to be sure that her sister truly wasn’t rigging the game. To her disappointment, it appeared that her sister had been honest with them.

“Junko definitely isn’t cheating, but she’s definitely imitating the actions from that gambling anime she was watching before the killing game started. If she keeps that up, she’ll keep throwing down odds…so I just need to place my bet on Han.”

Sparing a moment to look Hiro’s way, she found him in the midst of panicking. He nervously bit his thumbnail, an obvious internal debate going on. Perhaps it wouldn’t matter if she lost to Hiro. Even though he was upset with Celeste, when push came to shove, the man was a coward. Cowards often had trouble becoming murderer’s or even conspiring to nefarious actions. They went with the majority. And since there were already two votes for her to live, there was a good chance Hiro would vote that way purely because most of the class was in favor of her survival.

“Okey dokey! Let’s get to it! Time to decide!” The monitor next to Monokuma shifted back to the dial with those oppressive words once again. The dial turned, and the nerve-wracking ticking sounded once more. “And…here…we…go!”

Monokuma shouted, tossing the dice into the cylinder exactly the same way as before, much to Mukuro’s relief. A wave of confidence rushed through her, and the instant cylinder slammed into the table, she shouted:

“Han!”

A startled yelp sounded from Hiro. Mukuro honestly felt a bit of sympathy for him…but only a bit. He was a coward, after all…and an idiot. After a few moments of silence, the clairvoyant nervously called out his choice.

“Ch-Cho…”

“Your choice has been made!” the bear jubilantly cried, the monitor returning to the tally board. Slightly tilting the cylinder to see the result before setting it back down, Monokuma let out another sigh. “Well, I guess you can’t win ‘em all…”

Instantly, a smirk broke out on Mukuro’s face and she was about claim victory when the bear suddenly laughed manically.

“Puhuhuhuhuhuhu! It’s time for a shift in gears! This rounds results are…” Lifting the cylinder, Monokuma revealed a pair of snake eyes – evens. “Cho! That means, this vote goes to Mr. 30% Accuracy!”

“W-Wait a minute…I won?!” the clairvoyant shouted, somehow more surprised than anyone.

Mukuro’s enthusiasm shriveled as she stared, almost bewildered, at the dice. Her careful calculations had been wrong…and it had cost them the winning vote!

“Dammit! I could have ended this all right here!” she internally seethed, before another clever strategy formed in her mind. “Alright, time to fight fire…with fire!”

Yasuhiro Hagakure was in disbelief. He’d actually won! The vote was his! He held Celeste’s fate in the palm of his hand…kinda? At the very least, his vote would determine if she was immediately spared…or her persecution continued.
Honestly, he really wanted to vote for execution. And given what she’d put him through, who wouldn’t?! Targeting him solely because she viewed herself as smarter than him! Which was wrong on so many levels! First off, he’s older than her! Making him smarter by default due to having more life experience! Secondly, wanting to kill someone for a castle was beyond disturbing!

“She could have at least tried to kill me because I was a threat to her or something! And for a castle of all things! Doesn’t she realize how hard it is to sell a castle on the black market?! I have a difficult enough time with 00parts!”

“Mr. Hagakure…”

The clairvoyant’s thoughts were disrupted as Monokuma stared at him…surprisingly patiently. None of the bear’s usual malice or intimidation was visible. It was unnerving, seeing the bear appear to actually give a damn…and about him no less! No one had shown him such respect since the moment they’d been trapped in this damnable school…but now Monokuma was addressing him formally and politely.

It was obviously a trap…maybe? Regardless, Hiro lowered his guard and let the bear calmly continue.

“The floor is yours. Will you vote to ally yourself with the popular opinion? Or choose to betray everyone’s expectations and lead Miss Taeko down the path to execution? The choice…is yours.”

…No pressure or anything!

As if he wasn’t conflicted enough as it was! Sure, Celeste was a Grade A bitch but…not even he thought she deserved to be burned alive. After all, she may have framed him, but she didn’t actually try to kill him. And everyone was still alive so that was a plus! Not to mention that he really…really didn’t want to be the first one to start voting for execution!

At the same time…Byakuya did make a good point that she was dangerous. And since Monokuma changed the rules regularly, there was no guarantee that someone as crafty as Celeste would find a way to try and target him again! The thought of her…sneaking up behind him…plunging a knife into his back…wasn’t really realistic in this situation, considering it would leave considerable evidence behind, but that imagery flashed through his mind anyway!

“What am I supposed to do?! I came to Hope’s Peak to escape from the mafia! To avoid death and danger! Not get myself thrown into the middle of it!”

By this time, everyone was staring at him, eagerly waiting for his vote. Makoto stared at him with worried anticipation, obviously hoping he’d choose to spare the gambler. Meanwhile, Byakuya’s piercing gaze dug into him, even if the clairvoyant didn’t have the courage to meet his gaze. Everyone was waiting for him to make a decisive choice…but he just couldn’t—

“Hiro…you have the power to end all of this…right here, right now.”

The clairvoyant gasped as Junko’s voice reached him, his gaze slowly shifting over to her. He nearly froze when he saw her. She was staring directly into his eyes, an unexplainable power radiating off of her. And as it washed over him, he began to fill with a strange kind of confidence…the likes of which he’d never experienced before.

“If you vote for Celeste to live, we’ll beat the Mastermind at their own game!” the Fashionista continued, pushing her will further onto him. “I know she tried to frame you for murder, but that doesn’t mean—“

Junko wasted no time, smiling as she answered, “Trying to convince Hiro not to vote execution, I thought that was obvious. After all, you said that Celeste could influence the voters, but you never said we couldn’t do the same. Isn’t that right?”

Her smile widened, and it brimmed with the kind of confidence Hiro had always wished he had. The way she stood up to Monokuma, fought back against anyone who dared to deny her, and always stood up for people who couldn’t do it themselves…she never hesitated. Meanwhile, he continued to struggle with what should have been a simple decision…

“…I did say that, didn’t I?” Monokuma quietly acquiesced, only a hint of anger showing on it’s face. “Very well, as a matter of course, I’ll state it plainly. I don’t mind if anyone tries to influence the vote, but I won’t allow for any more delays! Once you’ve said your piece, kindly STFU and let the voter make their choice!”

…Did Monokuma actually just pronounce STFU instead of actually telling her to shut the fu—

“Alright then,” Junko continued, her fervor seemingly undamaged. Shifting her gaze back to Hiro, who flinched a bit as a result, she steeled her gaze and laid out her case. “Hiro, we can’t let the Mastermind win. You have the power to stop the Mastermind’s scheme right here and now.”

The way Junko spoke to him…was like nothing he’d heard before. She showed so much confidence and trust…for him of all people! Sure, until this point, she’d been kind of indifferent toward him, but now she was treating him with the respect and integrity that someone his age deserved!

“Huh…maybe I was wrong about her. I don’t really want to kill Celeste…well maybe to harvest her organs and sell them to pay off my debt. But if I play my cards rights, maybe Junko will donate her organs instead! That way, my debt goes away and no one dies! Everybody wins!”

As if reading his thoughts, Junko smiled warmly and said, “Don’t let this chance slip through your fingers. We need you to be strong…for all of us! Be the better man and vote for her to live—!”

“—That’s right, loser. Follow instructions obediently, just like the drooling mutt you are. It’s all you’re good for, anyway.”

Hiro’s breath caught in his throat as Celeste’s jeer interrupted the Fashionista. His head snapped over to her, her words still ringing in his ears. As their gazes met, the gambler scoffed and turned away, as if disgusted to even look at him.

“Always doing whatever anyone tells you, following the popular opinion, doing exactly what a note slipped under your door said without even thinking it could be a trap!” Celeste chastised, not even glancing his way. “I mean, you’re falling into another trap right now, and you can’t even see it! How pathetic!”

At that, Hiro’s eyes widened. “W-What do you mean ‘another trap’?!”

Finally, Celeste glanced his way and sneered, “Junko doesn’t give a shit about you. Think about it, she’s never cared about your opinion until now, right? Why would that suddenly change? Oh, that’s right, she’s trying to get your vote so she can feel all important and have the ‘honor’ of outwitting the Mastermind—”.

“And you’re so different?!” Junko abruptly shouted, startling the clairvoyant. “You’re just trying to get him to vote for execution because you can’t deal with the shame of owning up to your crimes!”
Celeste chuckled and replied, “Yeah, that’s about right. But at least I’m being upfront about it—”.

“Upfront my ass! You’re always pulling underhanded tricks like this!”

“And manipulating a dog into siding with you isn’t underhanded at all, now is it?”

Hiro could only shrink back as he realized he’d lost his place in the conversation. He tried to speak up, but always found himself drowned out by their abrasive tones. And soon enough, he was relegated to being a background character…like usual. As the two women continued to argue back and forth…something Celeste said replayed in his mind.

“Think about it, she’s never cared about your opinion until now, right? Why would that suddenly change?”

…That couldn’t…be true, right? Junko always had everyone’s best interests at heart, even he could see that! She always stood up for everyone…well, mostly. Come to think of it…when was the last time she stood up for him in particular? Hiro racked his brain, trying to remember…only to realize, it had never happened. In fact, all he could remember…were the times she told him to shut up. Yeah, he knew he could be a little dense sometimes…but to always be put down by everyone…despite being the oldest student here…what was up with that?!

“Why doesn’t anyone here get that I’m older and therefore wiser than anyone else? Sure, people like Kyoko are good at investigating and stuff, but I should at least be given proper respect!”

That’s when something else Celeste mentioned echoed in his mind.

“Follow instructions obediently, just like the drooling mutt you are. It’s all you’re good for, anyway.”

Why hadn’t Junko tried to refute that? Why hadn’t she told Celeste that he was far more than an obedient dog? Why didn’t she stand up for him like she’d done for Sayaka, or Leon, or Mondo? Why…didn’t she seem to care about his opinion? The person she said…she needed the most right now…

Sadly…he already knew the answer. Celeste was right. Junko—no, all of his classmates didn’t truly respect or even thought of him as reliable. Time and time again, he was tricked into following the crowd…despite what his inner voice told him was the right thing to do!

He’d been pushing down his own feelings, fearful of everyone else’s reactions. But dammit, he had needs too! More importantly, he had a debt that needed to be repaid! And he couldn’t let little things like morality get in the way of that!

“My inner voice…I’ve ignored you for too long! But not anymore! I’m gonna do what I should have done in the first place!”

Steeling his nerves, prepared for the onslaught of criticism he knew he’d receive, Yasuhiro Hagakure made his choice…the choice that was best for him!

“Once the execution is over…I’m coming for your organs Celeste!”

“I’ve made my decision!” Hiro abrupt shouted over the two arguing women. Junko and Celeste, stunned into silence, shot their gazes toward him expectantly. With a grim expression, the clairvoyant shouted, “I vote for execution!”

Much of the rooms enthusiasm died as a tally mark appeared on the ‘Execute Celeste’ side, it’s
presence sending a sickening wave of dread through most of the students. However, that didn’t stop Junko from slamming her hands onto her podium and shouting, “Hiro, why?! We were so close to putting this all behind us! Why would you—?!”

“I’m nobody’s lapdog! That’s why!” he interrupted, folding his arms angrily. “I won’t be influenced by anyone anymore! From now on, I’m gonna do whatever I think is right! I’m getting outta here, one way or another! And no one’s gonna stop me!”

It was shocking, to say the least. Hiro was acting…almost like Byakuya, just no where near as intimidating. At the same time, his words were beyond disconcerting. Hiro had always been an odd duck, but completely predictable. But this new attitude was…dangerous. The desperation of their situation was affecting all of them, but it seemed that it was having an even more devastating effect on someone as easily influenced as Hiro.

Even worse, was that their chance for a swift end to this tragedy was delayed…or perhaps slipping from their grasp. With Hiro’s vote, the opposition had taken the first step toward despair, which is what most of the students were trying to avoid. They could only hope that the next few rounds would go in their favor…

A deep, disappointed sigh escaped Junko and she couldn’t stop herself from saying, “Hiro…you’re a god-damn idiot. You let Celeste influence you right now…don’t you get that?”

A startled gasp completely disrupted the angry visage Hiro had put on, returning him to his usual confused state. His arms dropped to his sides and although it took him a moment, he realized she was right.

“W-Well…that’ll be the last time it happens!” he said earnestly, trying to regain some of the intimidation he’d had a moment ago…but failed. As if sensing their doubts, he fervently shouted, “I-I mean it! From now on, I’m my own man! So take that Celeste! I bet you’re regretting stuffing me into that locker now!”

“My only regret is that it too so long for you vote,” she proudly proclaimed, earning a shocked look from the clairvoyant. With a dastardly smile, she quipped, “Speed it up next time. I don’t have all day.”

“H-Hey! I voted for what you wanted! The least you could do is thank—!”

*BRRRRRRRRRR*

“Your 40 seconds have passed! No more talking! You’ve been doing enough of that already!” Monokuma announced as the buzzer died down, leaving a frustrated, and slightly disappointed, Hiro to stew over his recent decisions. “Now then, time’s a wasting, just like Miss Taeko said! So stop complaining and start jerking…the lever that is.”

Despite the lewd comment, Celeste could only smile as she reached up and pulled the lever. As she did, everyone watched with bated breath as the reels spun…and eventually clacked to a halt.

[TOKO vs HINA]

“Hina…I wonder what you’ll do if you win?” Celeste honestly pondered as the reels stopped.

The gambler had been avoiding eye contact with the swimmer for quite a while now. Well, more
accurately, she’d been doing all she could to purge any thoughts relating to Hina from her mind entirely. After all, she’d said her piece to the swimmer earlier…her farewell, as it was. Fortunately, Hina had averted her gaze ever since that conversation, mostly hanging her head with a look of hurt betrayal on her face. Even that was almost too much for her, and Celeste didn’t want lingering feelings clouding her mind when she was burned at the stake.

It would be…difficult to bear. Speaking of bears…

“The next match is set! If the two of you are ready, let’s get this show on the road!” Monokuma exuberantly shouted, glancing between the two girls.

Hina, for her part, said nothing. She merely nodded her head somberly, almost as if she wasn’t paying attention. A twinge of sharp pain gripped Celeste’s chest but she forced it away, focusing on the other player instead.

“R-R-Ready…” Toko said eagerly, before fixating her gaze on Byakuya. “M-M-Master! This is for you!”

“Hmph!”

Even though that was the only response the Togami Heir gave, it was enough to further motivate the writing prodigy.

“I promise! I won’t fail you! I’ll beat that cow-titted sow and earn your—!”

“Enough.”

“…Yes, Master.”

“Setting herself up for failure…again,” Celeste mentally noted before turning her attention toward Monokuma. “If that stupid bear truly hasn’t rigged the game, then this comeback is nothing short of a miracle. Hiro was easy to manipulate, as always. Toko will undoubtedly vote for execution, because that’s what her ‘Master’ would want. And Hina…”

…Honestly, she had no idea how Hina would vote. That was the only unpredictable element in this match. Either the swimmer would be able to bounce back from heart-wrenching betrayal…or she would succumb to hatred and vote for execution. Sadly, part of Celeste wanted Hina to spare her…solely because she didn’t want to see someone as pure-hearted as Hina become twisted…like she was now. But at the same time…she wanted to be executed…to be free of the agony of her repressed feelings once and for all. Even so…

“Will death…really make these feelings go away?”

Before she could contemplate further…it began.

“Alrighty then!” Monokuma shouted as the monitor next to him changing back into the ticking dial as it displayed his next words. “Time to decide!”

With lightning speed, the bear tossed the dice into the cylinder and slammed it down, waiting patiently for one of the players to—

“H-Han!”

“Han!”
Everyone was shocked as both Hina and Toko called out the same bet simultaneously. Toko instantly seethed, and it seemed she was about to call out when the swimmer abruptly changed her choice.

“Cho then…”

Hina’s voice was even… and Celeste couldn’t tell if there was malice there or not. The gambler grimaced as she realized it was getting harder and harder to read the swimmer. Not because it was difficult…but because she wasn’t sure if she wanted to know what her former friend was thinking.

Toko, almost triumphantly, replied, “D-D-Don’t think being p-polite gets you off th-the hook! You t- tried to steal m-my answer—”.

“Shut up and let’s hear the results,” Byakuya impatiently commanded, to which the writing prodigy instantly acquiesced.

“Y-Yeah! Hurry up and sh-show us who won!” Toko demanded of the bear, who lifted the cylinder slightly to see the outcome.

Even though Celeste was watching the bear intensely, trying to see even the faintest hint of a reaction that would indicate if the outcome pleased the demented bear… Monokuma’s face didn’t betray even a hint of emotion.

“Your choice has been made!” the bear cackled in his usual tone, making the situation even more tense. “What’s it gonna be? WHAT’S IT GONNA BE?!”

Lifting the cylinder… Celeste’s heart sank. A two and four… Cho. Hina was the victor.

“Cho again! That means that our resident tanned swimmer is the winner this time!” Monokuma announced on principal, a bit more jovial than was expected.

A few students, such as Makoto and Junko, breathed sighs of relief, while Toko herself hung her head in utter shame. Slowly, she turned to in Byakuya’s direction and bowed deeply.

“M-Master Byakuya…I am so s-s-sorry…I have failed y-you…”

“Yes, yes you have.” Byakuya’s cruel words, rather than demoralize the poor girl, seemed to brighten her day.

Straightening up swiftly, Toko practically beamed as she shouted, “B-But next time…I s-swear I won’t let that c-cow-titted hussy—!”

“Be quiet.”

“Yes, M-Master.”

Despite the comedy show going on next to her, Celeste couldn’t tear her eyes away from Hina. The swimmer’s head hung low, and her expression was unreadable. From deep within her soul, Celeste felt the urge to call out to her… to try and soothe her somehow… but she knew that was impossible. That bridge had been burnt by her own hand… and there was no way to repair it.

“This is it! We’ve done it!” Makoto abruptly shouted, startling the gambler, and refocusing her attention on him. “With Hina’s vote, we’ll be able to save Celeste from execu—”.

“I vote for execution.”
Those were the first words Aoi Asahina had spoken since her conversation with Celeste. They were laced with venom…and hurt. And like a dam bursting, a rush of painful emotions flooded Celeste’s conscience.

All the guilt…the frustration…the anguish she’d kept buried deep inside…it overwhelmed her. And then, just as quickly as it came…Celeste shut it all away. She sealed off a part of herself she knew she couldn’t function without…but she locked it away regardless. Because…if she gave in now…if she let those emotions overtake her…then she would be nothing more than that sad pathetic little girl she’d spent years rejecting.

So…no matter how difficult it was, the only reaction that Celeste permitted herself to show…was a victorious smile.

“Hmph, looks like you took my lesson to heart,” Celeste said, only moments after Hina’s surprise heel-turn. “Killing me off first was the smart way to go. I’m glad I could—”

“Shut up…JUST SHUT UP!”

Celeste’s mouth snapped shut as Hina’s fury washed over the entire courtroom. The swimmer breathed heavily, teeth gritted tightly as she somehow managed to keep from exploding again. For a few moment, silence reigned in the courtroom. Everyone had expected Hina to go on a rage-induced tirade…but she fell silent instead, the only sound echoing was her labored pants.

“…Why? Hina, why did you…?” Makoto hesitantly asked, his voice shaky, with a hint of fear seeped into his words…as if he didn’t want to know the answer. Unfortunately, because he asked, Hina chose to answer.

“I won’t…let her hurt my friends,” Hina said swiftly, turning to face the lucky student directly. Her face was hardened, and she showed no hint of remorse. “She betrayed all of us…She tried to kill us all…I won’t…let her get away with that!”

Her unforgiving words, combined with her fiercely determined visage, displayed a side to Hina that no one knew existed. Or perhaps, a side of her that hadn’t existed…until just now.

“Hina…” Sakura said slowly reaching a hand toward her friend.

“I’m fine…” Hina insisted, meeting her friend’s gaze effortlessly. “Let’s just get this over with. The next round will decide everything…”

Sakura unintentionally flinched, her hand slowly falling to her side as she stared, eyes filled with empathy and sadness, at her distressed friend. She wanted nothing more than to comfort her best friend…but no kind words or reassuring hugs would repair the swimmer’s fractured heart.

“Righto! It certainly will! With the votes evenly stacked like they are, the next round will be…the ultimate climax!” Monokuma cheered before nodding in the swimmer’s direction. “Also, thanks for not going over 40 seconds! At least someone gets how to properly convey their emotion without rambling on like a manga protagonist!”

Hina scowled deeply at his words but said nothing. After all, she had said all she wanted to say…and she had made her choice. Only time would tell if she could ever come to regret it.

“Now for the final push! Crank that yank, Taeko-baby! Let’s get this final match underway!”
Following Monokuma’s order, Celeste reached up and grasped the lever again…hesitating for a brief moment before pulling it down one last time. As the reels spun round and round, everyone pondered who the final match-up would be. A lot of people hadn’t voted, more than half the class actually.

However, as the slot machine finally clacked the last two player’s names into place…everyone felt that the universe must have preordained this match-up…

[HIFUMI vs TAKA]

“The final vote…”

Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru stared at his name on the second reel of the slot machine…the nickname he’d allowed everyone to use in order to encourage friendship…but had revoked once he assumed his current position. Taka…how long had it been since anyone had called him that? He missed it…strangely. His position held more value than a silly nickname, and yet…

“Finally! My time has come!” Hifumi abruptly shouted, almost triumphantly. His expression was one of righteous fury, as if he was about to correct a vicious injustice…which was probably true from his perspective. “Miss Ludenbe—Ahem…Miss Yasuhiro…Justice has come for you!”

Celeste scowled and glared at him as he emphasized her true name. Chairman Ishimaru almost expected her to lash out, as she’d done several times since the voting began. However, instead of her usual jeers, she remained oddly silent…much in the same way he had.

Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru hadn’t been himself recently. Ever since Chihiro had awakened, his views of discipline and order…had become skewed. He still believed that justice could only come from order…but at what cost? He had frightened Chihiro earlier, when he’d meant to be encouraging. Not only that, he had begun to question his behavior toward Mondo.

When Chihiro effortlessly forgave the man who nearly killed her…it felt so natural, and it made his actions feel…not ‘wrong’ per se, but…he wasn’t quite sure how to describe it! And now, in the midst of his swirling emotions…he needed to pass judgement upon Celeste…someone in a vastly different, yet somehow similar position…to Mondo.

“At last! We’re in the final round of the voting!” Monokuma excitedly announced, twirling a bit as the despair began to set in. “And what a final match-up it is! The two intended victims, dead-locked into a battle to see which will condemn Miss Taeko to her gruesome fate—!”

“I knew it! You rigged the game, didn’t you?!” Junko abruptly cut in, as loud and disruptive as ever. Though Taka couldn’t deny…he was wondering that notion himself. Even though he wanted to refute the Fashionista for daring to question the rules, it felt beyond coincidental that he and Hifumi had been selected for the final vote. And it didn’t feel like fate or destiny either. It felt…orchestrated.

“How rude!” A hurt expression of shock overtook the bear’s face, but it was instantly replaced with a malicious grin. “But you’re in the ballpark! Ya see, I didn’t ‘rig the game’, as you so eloquently put it. Each throw of the dice has been genuine, like I promised. And I didn’t tamper with whatever pairing the slot machine choose…but I did choose the order in which we saw the pairings—”.

“How is that not rigging the game?!” the Fashionista furiously questioned. “You set it up so that this round would have the two people most likely to vote for her execution—!”
Something snapped inside Chairman Ishimaru as Junko rudely assumed what his vote would be, prompting him to interrupt, “That is quite enough, Miss Enoshima!”

As expected, the Fashionista snapped her head over to glare at him. Weathering the fury in her sky-blue irises, the Disciplinary Committee Chairman cleared his throat and explained, “Allow Monokuma to explain without disruption! We will never get anywhere with all of your useless shouting!”

Junko’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, but only for a moment. An instant later, her brows furrowed, and she seethed, “So you’re fine with the fact that Monokuma rigged the game? Going against your precious rules of law and order?”

“I agree with Junko,” the firm voice of Kyoko suddenly penetrated the room. The mysterious girl had been silent for so long, and it seemed there was a reason for it. “To begin with, the format of this vote is quite illogical. Since the total number of votes to spare or execute Celeste is three, that means that almost have of class won’t be participating in the voting at all.”

As much has it pained him to admit, Kyoko made a solid point. This entire voting session had been plagued with chaos and inconsistency. Even Committee Chairman Ishimaru had to agree that it was quite strange…and seemed more intentional than it should have been.

“Alternatively, if the number of total votes had been five, rather than three, everyone would have gotten the opportunity to vote,” the lavender haired girl continued, a gloved hand resting on her chin. “It certainly seems peculiar. And the fact that—”.

“Ahem…is that the sound of someone arguing with how the voting works?” Monokuma interrupted, holding up a sign with the newly minted ‘No Arguing The Voting’ Rule printed on it.

“Not at all,” Kyoko effortlessly replied, the tiniest hint of a confident smile tugging at her lips. “I was merely pointing out an alternative. I am in no way questioning the vote and will accept the results…even if I disapprove of the outcome.”

“I see…” the bear said solemnly, nodding as if in understanding. “A suggestion isn’t exactly an argument…I can agree to that…even if I disapprove of the outcome.”

As the bear threw her words back at her, Kyoko’s features hardened, obviously understanding that it was best to drop the subject immediately. Then, almost too suddenly, she snapped her gaze toward Taka. The Disciplinary Chairman almost flinched but managed to hold himself together. After all, what kind of leader would he be to allow himself to be intimidated so easily?

“That being said, it doesn’t mean the ends justify the means…” Kyoko continued, her words as resolute as always. “If you truly value the principles of law and order, you must concede the fact that they have led you astray before. Sadly, if you always play by the rules, you will never be able to see the larger picture.”

As her harsh words echoed in his ears, Chairman Ishimaru’s fists clenched tightly. His eyes blazed, and his hair shimmered white as the proud Disciplinary Chairman refused to give in.

“We will see whether or not the voting has been altered once we heard Monokuma’s testimony!” the Disciplinary Chairman shouted, his powerful aura blazing. Then, to the shock of the bear itself, Taka turned all of his fury onto the scheming Headmaster. “Now, explain yourself Monokuma! If you have truly manipulated the voting, then this entire trial is a farce and we will be forced to revoke the current votes in favor of a recount!”
Monokuma blinked for a moment, then tilted its head. The action surprised Taka, considering he’d just levied a heavy accusation against the Headmaster. Finally, the bear spoke, “I’d like to avoid a recount…as recalibrating the slot machine would take a few minutes and I don’t wanna miss my soaps!”

The bear’s joke fell flat, as expected. Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru was about to lose his temper when Monokuma abruptly continued.

“As I promised, the slow machine did pick the pairing randomly…but I never said ‘when’ it picked them!” A feeling of dread spread through the room as the bear chuckled. “Hehehe…you see, all the pairing were chosen at the start of the voting! And while I didn’t initially choose the order in which they would appear…I did decide that this tie-breaker round would be decided by the ‘victims’ of Miss Taeko Yasuhiro! After all, I never said I wouldn’t eventually choose the order in which the pairing faced off! Puhuhuhuhuhuhuhu!”

As expected, the courtroom quickly descended into madness as a flurry of furious shouting shook the room.

“You son of a bitch!” Mondo exclaimed.

“Cheating bastard!” Leon concurred.

“I should have known…” Sayaka quietly joined in.

“This isn’t fair at all!” Makoto shouted, showing genuine anger.

“I’m fine with it,” Celeste tossed her opinion in, knowing it wouldn’t make much of a difference.

“What happened to always following the rules?!” Jun’ko practically spat, her voice louder than all the others. “The entire trial has been rigged! We don’t have any obligation to continue it!”

As their furious resentments resounding through the room, Monokuma slowly raised its paw. After a few more furious shouts, and a curse or two courtesy of Mondo, the cacophony of voices slowly subsided. Once silence reigned in the courtroom once more, the bear softly answered.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite hear you. Was that all of you violating the rule of questioning how the voting works? Because if so…”

Suddenly, large square holes abruptly appeared in the baccarat table, in front of each and every student. Before anyone could react, a series of clanking noises erupted as miniature gatling-guns shot out of each hole, the barrels point directly at every single student in the courtroom. As one, the barrels of the guns began to rotate, seemingly prepared to riddle them with holes at a moment’s notice.

“…This trial’s about to get a lot more interesting! Ahahahaha!”

Frozen in place, most of the students stared, horrified, at the firearms. Chihiro trembled and began to hyperventilate, drawing Mondo’s attention and causing him to grit his teeth furiously. Sakura stared at the weapon, appalled that the Mastermind would take things this far. Hina glared at the gun, then over to Celeste, silently blaming her for this misfortune. For her part, the gambler appeared almost smug, seemingly pleased that the outcome for the final vote wouldn’t be overwritten. Sayaka found her head snapping in Leon’s direction, almost shocked when she found the baseball star staring back at her, concern shared in both their eyes. Hiro and Hifumi yelped loudly, ducking below their podiums, and shivering in terror. Even students who hadn’t voiced their disapproval, like Byakuya and Toko, couldn’t help the hint of fear that washed over the entire courtroom at Monokuma’s show
of power. At the same time, students such as Junko, Makoto, and Kyoko could only seethe quietly, completely outmaneuvered by the bear’s new rule.

All the while, Chairman Ishimaru could only stand there…appalled. Monokuma…hadn’t broken the rules…and was instead using them to drive them into a corner. That…That was…to be expected. But if that was the case…why was he so shocked and appalled by it? They all knew the bear was dubious, so why did he think for a moment that the demented Headmaster would keep his word? Had his position as Disciplinary Committee Chairman…blinded him?

No…that couldn’t be true. Even if Monokuma turned his back on the rules of law and order, that didn’t mean he had! And now, more than ever, his classmates were in need of his leadership!

“Very well then! All we need to do is proceed with the vote, correct?” he shouted over the rattling of the spinning gun barrels. “Then, let’s get on with it! I assume no one has objections to that?!?”

Only the rattling of the spinning barrels answered him, unsurprisingly. Given their current situation, no one had the courage to speak up…not that they really wanted to at this point. Monokuma had made a very clear point this time…it didn’t matter how many, if any number of them went against the rules, they’d be ‘punished’. Even if it made the killing game less interesting for the Mastermind, they were willing to do whatever was necessary to keep their own version of the rules from getting broken.

For a moment, nothing happened. But then, Monokuma slowly turned to face the disciplinary Chairman directly and said, “Well…since you asked so nicely…”

All at once, the gatling-guns ceased rotating and disappeared into the darkness of the holes from which they came. Visible expressions of relief came over the students, with Taka releasing a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Glancing around the room, the Disciplinary Chairman saw some of the students, namely Junko and Kyoko, staring at him incredulously.

However, he took their frustration in strides. He did what needed to be done in order to keep everyone alive…even if that meant giving in to the Mastermind’s unfair voting system. He would explain himself later, and hopefully, he wouldn’t have to write anyone up for criticizing his decision.

“Now then, let’s proceed with the voting!” Monokuma jeered, drinking in the combination of furious and horrified expressions of the students. The monitor behind the bear once again displayed the ominous words, ‘Time To Decide’, and the ticking dial. Almost ceremoniously, the bear tossed the dice into the cylinder one last time before slamming it down. “Time to decide! Make your choice and announce it proudly!”

“W-Wait!” Hifumi stammered, still completely rattled from the gatling-gun incident. Picking himself up off the floor and standing on shaky legs, the fanfic creator continued, “I-I’m not prepared for—!”

“Don’t care!” Monokuma interrupted, grinning with madness. “Life is…simply unfair, don’t you think?”

There was no time to ponder, no time to consider if he was making the right choice. Almost without thinking, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru called out his bet.

“Cho!”

Less than an instant later, Hifumi stammered, “H-Han!”

The moment their bets were called, the monitor once again returned to the tally board, an even split between execution and redemption. Monokuma chuckled and was about to tilt the cylinder to get a
“You know…let’s have it be a total surprise!” the bear said aloud, gripping the cylinder tightly. “For this final round, we’ll see if Miss Taeko’s luck will be in her favor…or turn against her completely!”

Celeste scoffed and said, “Just get it over with. We’ve all waited long enough.”

“Indeed, we have…” Monokuma concurred, anxiously grasping the cylinder in preparation for the reveal. “Now…one last time…what’s it gonna be? WHAT’S. IT. GONNA. BE?!?!?!?”

With a sudden jerk, the cylinder was lifted, and the dice were finally revealed. A six…and another six! The result was Cho! Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru had won! The vote was his! It was time for him to end this madness, once and for all!

“Dammit!” Hifumi cursed, stomping his foot in frustration. “I wanted to deliver the killing blow myself…but I’ll settle for you doing it Mr. Ishimaru.”

Unexpected shock tore through the Disciplinary Chairman, blinking rapidly at the fanfic creator’s comment. “E-Excuse me…?”

Now it was Hifumi’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “You’re going to vote for execution, aren’t you? You were Miss Yasuhiro’s original target, after all. She wanted you dead more than anyone else—”.

“W-Wait a moment,” Chairman Ishimaru interrupted, a bit more confused. “I-I am aware of her targeting me, but I thought it was a lie she told you in order to secure your assistance? Did she not lie about my threatening to punish her in order for you to target me?”

Again, Hifumi seemed more than surprised as he answered, “…Yes, yes she did. But she had you in mind as a target from the beginning, I think. After all,” the fanfic creator abruptly glared at the gambler and finished, “No matter what I said, she insisted that you be the one to die first.”

Celeste almost seemed to revel in the furiously glare Hifumi shot her. Then again, it made sense. From her perspective, the two individuals most likely to vote execution had been grouped together, unfairly mind you, but the fact remained that her chances for execution had skyrocketed. And Taka could tell that she was completely aware of that.

“Yeah, that’s right,” she confirmed, barely acknowledging the fanfic creator before turning her gaze toward the Disciplinary Chairman. “You were my target from the beginning. Of course, the idea to betray Hifumi had been a part of the plan from the outset, but if all else failed, I planned to bash your god-damn brains in myself!”

Strangely, even as she berated him, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru couldn’t fully understand how things had gotten to this point. It was true that his methods had been rather harsh, but he never imagined that anyone would garish so much hatred for him over something so trivial.

To that end, before he announced his vote, he needed to ask the one question that had kept him silent for so long during the trial.

Clearing his throat, Chairman Ishimaru began, “I can see that you harbor a great deal of resentment toward me—”.

“That’s putting it mildly,” Celeste snapped, her voice seething.

“—That being said,” he continued, pushing through her scathing comment. “I’m afraid I must ask…what have I done to inspire such hatred?”
There was silence for a moment as Celeste’s glare intensified, her breathing becoming even as she answered, “You already know why…”

Again, confusion overtook the Disciplinary Chairman. Arching an eyebrow, he replied, “No, I’m afraid I don’t. That’s why I asked. What have I done to inspire you to plot my death?!”

Now it was Celeste’s turn for shock, a somewhat welcome change considering her abrasive behavior as of late. She hung her head, as if in shame, staring down at the floor, her face completely obscured by the long twin drills now draped over her face. Capitalizing on the moment, Chairman Ishimaru pursued the matter further.

“I realize that my methods for maintaining order in the academy have been…difficult to comprehend. However, I can assure you that I never meant any disrespect or—”.

“You…” Celeste interrupted quietly, almost too quietly. “You don’t…” Her breathing quickened and she struggled to keep herself calm.

“I don’t…what?” Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru aggressively asked, getting tired of her antics. However, that immediately changed when Celeste snapped her head up, a look of unforgiving rage burning in her crimson irises.

“You…little…BITCH!”

…”It couldn’t be…it just wasn’t possible. Even though it had only been a few days ago…even though it surely hadn’t been as impactful for him as it had been for her…there was no way he couldn’t remember what had told her when he came to fetch her from her dorm room! She had plotted his murder, calculated contingencies, and now stood on the precipice of execution herself…and he didn’t even realize why?!

As the truth dawned on Celeste, her humiliation intensified ten-fold…so much that it hurt.

“He…doesn’t…remember?” Even that thought brought an immense feeling of agony, recalling the moment he’d belittle her, and all the anguish that accompanied it. “Of course…of fucking course he forgot about it! It wasn’t meaningful to him so why should it! He wasn’t the one told that his talent didn’t exist!”

Celeste’s head drooped as she realized that, to him, the incident wasn’t even worth remembering. He had insulted—no, humiliated her! He had tried to take away the one thing that she felt absolute pride in! He had trampled all over her dream and accused her of being a heartless monster! And now, he stood over her, practically triumphant as he asked her to recalled the reason she’d fallen into madness in the first place!

“I realize that my methods for maintaining order in the academy have been…difficult to comprehend. However, I can assure you that I never meant any disrespect or—”.

“Never meant any disrespect?! You…YOU…!”

“You…” she silently seethed, her rage building. “You…don’t…”

“You don’t have ANY IDEA how much I fucking hate you! I’m not the talentless one! YOU ARE!”
“I don’t…what?”

Like floodgate bursting open, a swell of rage and despair came pouring out. And no matter how hard she tried to calm down…to accept her death with grace and dignity…none of that mattered to her anymore. He would know her pain…he would know her fury…and he would know that everything was…ALL HIS FAULT!

“You…little…BITCH!”

As Celeste’s vulgar words rang out, Taka reared back, almost losing his balance. At the same time, the gambler leaned forward, her teeth gritted tightly and her eyes bearing all the hatred she’d suppressed for so long.

“You want to know what you did?! I guess it wasn’t important enough for you to remember!” She screamed at the top of her lungs, slamming her hands down onto her podium. “But I remember! And I’ll never forgive you! I’ll never let you forget what you said to me!”

Her throat ached as her voice started to become raw…but she didn’t care. There was no way she could stop now, whatever had kept her angered chained down had broken free, and now her vengeful words would be heard by all of their classmates.

Rearing her head back so hard that her twin drills flung up around her, one of them wrapping around the slot machine crank, she screamed what she’d wanted to tell him the moment he’d insulted her.

“You told me that I don’t have a talent, but I do! I do have a fucking talent, god-damnit!” Shaking her head violently, emboldened by pure rage, she continued, “Me! Not you! You’re the talentless one! So, go die in a fucking ditch! ASSHOLE—!”

In the midst of her infuriated rant, she abruptly jerked her entire body to one side…only for intense pain to shoot through the side of her head. A surprised yelp of agony escaped her and as she turned to see what the issue was, a dull almost burning-like sensation emanating from the right side of her head. Grunting audibly through grit teeth, her hands flew up to the hair drill extension…but felt nothing.

Blinking away tears of pain, she slowly turned, her eyes widening in horror as she saw the hair drill extension hanging from the slot machine crank…a tuff of her real hair attached to it. With shaky hands, she ran her fingers around the side of her head…and felt skin. The extension had torn a patch of hair completely off, exposing a very small portion of her scalp.

Everyone was silent as they watched this…no one really having any idea what they should or even could say.

It was then that Celeste felt them…Tears. Tears of pain, rather than emotional anguish, leaked out of her eyes…ruining her mascara and running long black lines down her cheek. Her fingers touched her cheeks, black streaks staining her fingertips.

At that moment, something inside her completely snapped…

“You…this is all YOUR FAULT!” She screamed, her words aimed at Taka, who stood almost completely flabbergasted at the sight of her. Her fury coursed more violently than ever, and she shouted, “Why couldn’t you have just died like you were supposed to?! None of this would have happened if you had just…had just…ARRGH!!!”
Without warning, Celeste grabbed the detached hair drill from it’s spot on the crank, yanking it free before angrily glaring at Taka again.

“YOU DID THIS TO ME! THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT! YOU STOLE EVERYTHING FROM ME!”

Rearing her arm back, she threw her hair drill at him…but as one would expect, it barely got more than a few feet away from her. Undeterred by this, Celeste’s hands flew up to her other hair drill, furiously fumbling with it until she managed to somehow remove it, but not without tearing a few more strands of hair in the process. She savagely grunted in pain, channeling her frustration, and twisting it into motivation as she balled the hair drill in her hands before rearing back and shouting.

“GIVE IT BACK! GIVE MY DREAM BACK TO ME, YOU BASTARD!!”

With all her strength, she lobbed the messy, balled-up hair extension, a visual representation of her crushed hopes, in Taka’s direction again. Sadly, it never reached him, it didn’t even get within a few feet, twisting in the air and landing closer to her than him. Seeing that both her attempts failed, Celeste’s fervor immediately vanished, her body growing heavier. Slumping against the rail of her podium, the gambler panted heavily before reaching a trembling hand up to the bald spot where the extension had torn out. Moisture stung her eyes as her fingers ran over the spot, wincing as a stinging pain ached.

“God…dammit…”

She spoke softly, but everyone heard her voice crack, and she wheezed into a light coughing fit. Time seemed to pass slowly as she took in shaky, painful breaths. Everything hurt…her body, her mind, even her very soul was utterly exhausted. She had truly lost…and regardless of the vote’s outcome…she wouldn’t find peace.

Everything had been taken from her. Her pride in her gambling skills. Her confidence that had bordered on arrogance. Even her dignity as a human being had been stripped away. And worst of all, the dream she’d spent years attempting to make come true…was forever out of reach.

All of it…taken from her…until all that was left was a sad, pathetic, lonely girl…who had destroyed herself. Taeko Yasuhiro…the girl who barely existed…was all that remained.

It took time, almost a full minute, but soon enough, she managed to somewhat regain her composure. Straightening up to her full height, she briefly squeezed her eyes shut, weathering the dull ache that pounded from the newly torn bald patch on the side of her head. Snapping her crimson eyes open, she glared at the Ultimate Moral Compass, forcing herself to speak despite the agony she was experiencing.

“All I…”

Hurry up and vote…put me out of my misery…”

All of her fight was gone, but even so, she refused to beg for her life. At the moment…she wasn’t sure what was a worse fate. Dying would be beyond horrifying…but having to live with the feelings of anguish for all that she’d done…was a fate worse than death. Even Hina had abandoned her…the gambler’s betrayal had tainted the naïve swimmer’s heart…and was the only thing that Celeste, even in her disheveled state, could freely admit she regretted.

The sad truth engulfed her…the truth that she was truly, utterly, and completely…alone.
The entire room stood still after Celeste choked out those words before falling silent. Her battered appearance garnered a few sympathetic glances, namely from Makoto, Chihiro, and Sayaka. While others such as Byakuya and Toko looked entirely pleased with the outcome.

Meanwhile, Hifumi was a mixture of elation and pity. The fanfic creator was certainly pleased that his attacker was getting their comeuppance…but seeing her in such a fragile state sent a tiny ache through his chest. He knew he shouldn’t pity her, after all she’d done to him and the others. At the same time…in his heart, he knew he was just as guilty as she was. And now that his righteous fury had died down, he felt a wave of regret similarly to when he realized he’d almost killed Taka. His feelings of self-righteousness had driven him into madness once again. And he hated himself for it.

Kyoko and Junko stood in place quietly, stoic expressions hiding any feelings of sympathy or anger they may have been feeling. Mondo stared at the gambler, a bit horrified, realizing he must have looked almost as pathetic during his own trial. Leon had the same expression, angry and yet empathetic for what the gambler was going through. Rather than focusing on Celeste, Sakura’s attention was focused on Hina, a deep frown having settled onto the swimmer’s normally cheerful face. Across from them, Hiro looked on with a scowl, internally questioning his decision to execute someone in such a delicate state of mind.

“Geez, talk about being a drama queen, am I right, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru?” Monokuma abruptly asked, drawing all attention toward the Disciplinary Chairman.

His eyes were downcast, his expression unreadable as he stood there, staring at the floor almost without blinking. The flames in his eyes flickered and the white sheen of his hair seemed to have lost some of its luster as he remained in silent contemplation.

“It’s still your vote! And I’m afraid we really don’t have all day,” the bear reminded him, the image of the ticking dial suddenly returning to the monitor. A countdown began ticking away, the click of each second lost echoing around the room. “Now is the moment you’ve been waiting for, Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru! Justice shall be served! Order will be maintained! And with it…Peace will return to our fair Academ—”.

“I VOTE FOR MYSELF!”

Those furious words rose over Monokuma’s annoying tone, stunning the bear, and the rest of the class, into utter silence. However, that wasn’t the most shocking development. As everyone turned to focus their attention on the Disciplinary Committee Chairman…they found he was no longer there. Instead, standing in his place, a young man with jet black hair and piercing red eyes stared back at them.

Kiyotaka Ishimaru…had returned.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Well…that was quite a shock wasn’t it! Has Taka truly returned to the class? What does his strange vote mean for the class trial? What will
Celeste’s punishment be for her crimes? You’ll have to stay tuned for the next chapter to find out!

I wanted to take a moment and thank everyone who has followed, favorited, or just enjoyed my story in general! I’ve been having a rather tough time lately, nothing major, just annoying life stuff, and getting comment or reviews from you all really brightens my day!

On that note, feel free to leave a comment or review telling me what you think of the story or if you have any questions. I can’t promise I’ll be able to answer all your questions, considering I don’t want to spoil anything, but I’ll do my best to respond regardless!

Anyway, thanks again, and keep on smiling, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

The trial to decide Celestia Ludenberg's fate finally comes to a close...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*You told me that I don’t have a talent, but I do! I do have a fucking talent, god-damnit!!*

... “Why...did I...say that...?”

... 

*You...this is all YOUR FAULT!!*

... “This...wasn’t supposed to...”

... 

*YOU DID THIS TO ME! THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT! YOU STOLE EVERYTHING FROM ME!*

... “I never meant...I only wanted to...”

... 

*GIVE IT BACK! GIVE MY DREAM BACK TO ME, YOU BASTARD!!*

... “I can’t...I...don’t know how...”

... 

*Hurry up and vote...put me out of my misery...*

... “V-Vote...impossible...I have no right...to judge...after all I’ve done—”

Yes...yes, you do!
A loud gasped echoed as a young man with black hair and vibrant red eyes regained consciousness. Panting exhaustedly, the young man looked around and immediately recognized his surroundings.

The class trial courtroom, as ominous as always, was made even more disparaging due to the fact that it was completely devoid of people. Not a soul was in sight...save for him...and one other.

Kiyotaka Ishimaru, the Ultimate Moral Compass, stood in council with himself...a white haired, flaming eyed young man, a reverse mirror image of himself. They stood opposite each other, with Taka in his normal place, and his double directly across from him.

So many thoughts; swirling, contradicting each other, pushing him further and further into madness...all of them jumbling together so fiercely he scarcely recognized that he'd fallen silent.

A sudden scoff earned his attention.

“So...what now?” his off-color duplicate asked, folding his arms and glaring expectantly.

“...I...I’m not sure...” Taka answered, a wave of nausea hitting him as he realized he was conversing with himself...or at least another part of himself.

“Hesitating again?” his other self questioned, a disapproving stare locking their eyes together.

“Doubting yourself, perhaps?”

“N-No!” Taka tried to retort. “T-That’s not what I’m—”

“This is just like when Mondo betrayed us...you couldn’t do anything,” the doppelganger almost seethed, but quickly began to chuckle. “You couldn’t decide if you were angry, hurt, relieved, or even hateful...so let Monokuma decide it for you.”

As the double’s words echoed, the circle of podiums vanished, leaving only empty space between Taka and his doppelganger. Empowered by this, the white-haired double took a step forward, forcing Taka to retreat backward. One step after another, the doppelganger forced the Moral Compass back, a malicious laugh echoing.

“Rules are meant to be obeyed at all costs! That’s what you decided!” his duplicate shouted, a fiery aura of power surrounding him as he moved closer and closer to Taka. “And you didn’t hesitate to enforce those unfair rules, even at the cost of your morals! But that should come as no surprise! After all, that’s what it means to be Disciplinary Committee Chairman!!”

The double was so close he practically spat in Taka’s face, causing the Moral Compass to recoil back. As he did, his back suddenly pressed against the courtroom wall, keeping him from retreating further. He glanced at the wall for a moment before twisting his gaze back to meet his doppelganger’s...who now stood inches away from his face.

With a confident, almost sadistic grin, the duplicate said, “You wanted the power to keep everyone in check. To maintain order at all costs. Even if it meant turning your back on those who once trusted you.”

“N-No! I didn’t want to hurt anyone!” Taka insisted, trying to reason with himself. “I just wanted to keep my classmates safe—!”

“Safe? Ha! You can’t lie to yourself!” the doppelganger mocked, his aura growing stronger. “If you really wanted to keep them safe, why did you expose their secrets? You knew it would ignite the
buried distrust among them, but you did it anyway! And why is that?”

“I…I wanted to—”

“You wanted to hold dominion over them. You wanted them to follow the rules without question… so that you could control every aspect of their lives.” The white haired, blazing eyed double scoffed loudly and shook his head. “In doing so, they’d be 'safe'. It’s that right?”

“Y-Yes! That’s right!” Taka concurred, finally feeling a bit of relief. “If I could maintain order, through following the academy’s rules, then I could keep another murder from occurring—”.

“Is that why you antagonized Celeste? Pushed her beyond her breaking point?” his duplicate inquired, sarcasm heavy in his voice. “It’s almost as if you were inciting her to murder—”.

“You’re wrong!” Taka forcefully shouted, pushing his double away from him, finally giving him space to breathe. “That was never my intention! Everything that I’ve done, I did for the good of all my classmates!”

A heavy silence filled the vacant courtroom as Taka stared down his duplicate, who had gone strangely quiet. After a few moments had passed, the double huffed and hung his head.

“…Tell me, just who are you trying to convince?”

“What?” Taka asked, raising an eyebrow at his double’s words.

In response, the white-haired double lifted his hand and pointed directly behind Taka. Wary of what may be in store for him, the Moral Compass slowly glanced over his shoulder. To his shock, a mirror now hung on the wall behind him. Hesitantly, he approached it, and as he stood before it, his entire expression became horrified.

“…What? What’s going on?!”

The image that was reflected back…wasn’t his own. It was that of his double…that of Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru. Even as he backed away from the mirror, he knew what it had shown him was his true self. He could feel the strange burning around his eyes, the rippling power of the aura encircling his body, and even though he couldn’t see it, he knew his hair had gained a bright sheen of white.

As panic began to overtake him, the only question that formed in his mind was…how long had he been like this?

“Do you see now?” the voice of his double asked, surprisingly gently.

Turning around, a loud gasped escaped Taka as he stared at himself…his true self. The double’s hair was now a deep shade of black, and there were no flames coveting his bright red irises. It was almost as if they’d switched appearances…but Taka knew that wasn’t the case.

He’d been blinded…blinded by his own foolishness and depravity. He couldn’t see things as they truly were…not even his own appearance. But now, as clarity slowly came back to him, an overwhelming sense of shame began to burrow its way into his soul.

Sinking to his knees, Taka’s hands flew to his face as he openly wept.

“What…what have I been doing?” he asked ‘himself’, desperately trying to find the answer. “Why did…I allow myself to commit…such heinous acts against my classmates?”
There was a pause, which seemed to last a lifetime, before his double spoke.

“…I think you already have the answer to that question.”

Without warning, a hollow laugh began echoing all around the room. A familiar…hateful…conniving laugh…that would haunt Taka for the rest of his days.

\[ \text{Уриририририри}! \text{ Eyahahahahahahaha!} \]

Monokuma’s demented laughter seeped into Taka’s ears, the noise stinging his eardrums and causing him to clench his teeth. He curled into the fetal position on the floor, barely able to withstand the horrid cackling.

Fortunately, as quickly as it came, the laughter echoed in the distance and finally ceased, leaving Taka alone with his double once again. Slowly, pulling himself up into a kneeling position, Taka took a moment to inhale deep, cleansing breaths.

“What…What do…we do now…?” he asked ‘himself’ once more, searching for guidance.

“‘We’?” his double replied, almost sounding offended. “There is no ‘we’.”

Shock engulfed Taka as his gaze shot up to see…nothing. His duplicate…was gone. He was now alone, in the silent, empty, lifeless court room. Rising to his feet, Taka suddenly found himself standing at his podium. However, he was still the only one present. In place of his classmates, sepia portraits of each of their faces took residence in their spots…save for one.

Celeste stood across from him, her eyes red and puffy, with streaks of mascara marring her cheeks. Taka winced as he took in the newly formed bald patch on the side of her head, regret worming its way into his soul as he accepted that…she had been right.

While he couldn’t condone her actions…there was no refuting the fact that his reckless and insensitive actions had led them to this point. The gambler’s disheveled appearance burned into his red irises, and he was consumed by an overwhelming urge…an urge to correct the mistakes that had nearly destroyed his classmates.

“We’re…not so different,” he concluded, feeling more ashamed for not realizing it sooner. “We both did what we thought was best…but disregarded how it would affect others.”

It wasn’t a true comparison, but in his own mind, it felt like it. For even though he’d never conspired to kill anyone…his actions drove someone else into that madness. And for that, he knew there was no forgiveness.

“…Miss Luden—Celestia Ludenberg. I know that I will never be able to apologize for what I’ve done to you. But at the very least…I can use this vote to set things right!”

As his voice echoed, he felt a change come over him. The white sheen of his hair reverted to a deep black, the flames in his eyes flickered and extinguished, and the malicious aura surrounding his body exploded outward…a bright flash overtaking his vision.

…

…

A moment later, everything was as it should be. His classmates stood at their podiums, staring at him with varying degrees of expressions. Monokuma rambled on about proceeding with the vote, but
Taka barely registered the bear’s voice.

Instead, he took a deep breath…and prepared himself for what he knew was a foolish idea.

“I VOTE FOR MYSELF!”

“…Say wha?” Monokuma uttered, completely taken aback by not only being interrupted, but the absurdity that was echoing in its ears.

“I SAID, I VOTE FOR MYSELF!” Taka once again shouted at the top of his lungs, his boisterous voice piercing every eardrum in the courtroom. “I WILL TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL OF THIS! I DEMAND TO BE EXECUTED IN PLACE OF CELESTIA LUDENBERG!”

A plethora of murmurs echoed around him as the students were both shocked and horrified by his announcement.

Makoto, for the first time, didn’t have a hopeful comment, staring at Taka with his face twisted in abject horror. Sayaka wrapped her arms around herself, squeezing tightly as she fought to keep from trembling, keeping a stern visage. Leon unsuccessfully tried to keep himself from imagining a metal collar dragging Taka down a dark hallway to his execution. The baseball star’s knuckles whitened, his teeth gritted tightly as he glared furiously at his friend.

Byakuya huffed at this unexpected turn of events but kept quiet. His eyes scanned the room, evaluating everyone else’s reactions, flinching a bit when he noticed that Toko was staring at him, seemingly unconcerned with Taka’s announcement. Pretending not to notice her, the Affluent Progeny fixed his visage into a scowl, patiently waiting to see the outcome of this unprecedented event.

Junko’s jaw hung slack as she stared at the Moral Compass, her expression a mixture of horrified and furious. And although Kyoko’s trademark stone faced appearance didn’t budge, behind her eyes a noticeable worry became visible. Standing next to her, almost in stark contrast, Mondo’s emotions ran rampant. His face was twisted angrily, but his eyes showed nothing but fear and anxiety as he gripped the rail of his podium. Across from him, Chihiro struggled to keep her breathing under control, desperately trying to call forth words of objection to Taka’s declaration.

Sadly…no such words came.

Meanwhile, as Taka’s decision rang out, Hina finally lifted her downcast gaze, staring at the Moral Compass with eyes full of terror. All the anger she’d had for Celeste momentarily vanished as she was consumed with worry for her classmate’s safety. At the same time, Taka’s words also startled Sakura, who finally tore her concerned gaze away from Hina and focused it, almost furiously, at the Moral Compass.

As the entire courtroom hung in silence, Hifumi struggled to comprehend Taka’s sudden decision. He’d expected the Moral Compass to be as furious as he was about Celeste’s betrayal. After all, both of them had been used and discarded by that manipulative witch. It was only natural that someone who held up justice and order above all else would vote for her downfall…so why then hadn’t he done it? Was he not vengeful? Didn’t he want to see Miss Ludenberg be punished for her misdeeds?

Then, a thought occurred to him, one he’d fought to keep buried underneath all his rage.
“Does Mr. Ishimaru…forgive her?” he pondered, taking in the Moral Compass’ determined visage. “How…how could he do that?! After all she’d done…all that she tricked me into doing…how could someone forgive such heinous…acts…of…betrayal…”

Like a tidal wave, guilt flooded Hifumi’s mind. By all rights, he didn’t deserve to be forgiven either. Even if he’d been tricked, he’d still been willing to murder Taka for the sake of his digital princess. And while the bloodlust had eventually faded…it didn’t change the fact that he almost allowed all of his classmate to be put to death for his own selfish bid for a happy ending.

Even so…he just couldn’t forgive Celeste for taking advantage of him! He wanted her to hurt, to feel the same agony he’d experienced, but…when he really thought about it—

“Okay…hold on, I don’t get it,” a confused and familiar voice interrupted the silence, breaking Hifumi’s train of thought. As one, the class turned to see Yasuhiro Hagakure scratching his head with a dumbfounded expression. “If you vote for yourself it doesn’t really change anything, man. I mean, Celeste is still beating you by like four votes. So, unless you get more votes, you can’t switch—”

“THAT IS NOT THE POINT!” Taka roared, aiming his voice toward Monokuma. “I DEMAND THE ABILITY TO VOTE FOR MYSELF!”

“…Yes, yes, we’re all aware of that,” Monokuma calmly, and a bit annoyed, replied. “However, I don’t think you understand the gravity of—”.

“I WILL TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MY ACTIONS!”

“…You already said that,” the bear groaned, rubbing its eyes as the frustration began to build.

“HONOR MY VOTE! PUT ME TO DEATH IN MISS LUDENBERG’S PLACE!”

“…Would you please stop shouting?” Monokuma respectfully requested, beginning to lose patience. “I am trying to run a respectable courtroom—”.

“NO! I HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR TRICKERY!”

“You are going to ruin your voice like that, young man!” the bear shouted back, finally losing its temper.

“YOUR CONCERN IS UNNECESSARY!”

“My concern is hearing loss for the rest of the class!”

“…Seriously…” Hiro quietly commented, plugging his ears preemptively.

Strangely enough, an awkward silence followed as Taka glanced around the room. All eyes were on him, and he knew he’d been making a fool of himself. He’d let himself get carried away by emotion again. Upon realizing it, he took in a deep breath, exhaling audibly.

“I…apologize for my outburst,” he began, his tone firm. “However, I stand by my decision. I wish to be executed in Miss Ludenberg’s place—”.

“Tough shit.”

The entire room was startled as Celeste spoke up herself. She’d been silent throughout his tirade, but it seemed that she’d had enough. She appeared a bit uneven, given that her hair extensions were now
missing, and a patch of hair had been torn out, but she still managed to look fearsome. Not to mention that fact that her voice was absolutely seething.

“You can’t change the rules, so just get over it. I don’t need or want your god-damn pity.”

Her crimson eyes glared at him, as if challenging him, and the Moral Compass had to fight not to flinch. Noticing this, Celeste almost smirked before locking the expression away, obviously feeling victorious. However, her expression immediately darkened, mentally preparing herself for whatever outcome he chose.

“Now…vote properly. Either have me executed or be thrown to the proverbial wolves. Those are you only—”

“I refuse.”

His outright refusal made Celeste’s eye twitch. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” she said, exhaustedly looking toward Monokuma. “Can I just vote for myself and—?”

“No! I won’t allow it!” Taka effortlessly retorted, matching her gaze with fierce determination. “I won the right to vote, and therefore, I will vote how I please!”

A low growl escaped Celeste, but before she could muster a response, Monokuma cut her off.

“Okay, okay, everybody quiet down…especially you,” the bear pointed accusingly at Taka, making the Moral Compass finally fall silent. Taking a moment to let the silence sink in, Monokuma cleared its throat and said, “I want you all to know that, from this point onward, we’re gonna have more straightforward voting…because this shit’s gotten too complicated…”

“And whose fault is that?” Junko off-handedly commented.

“Yours. I am specifically blaming you for all of this.”

Monokuma didn’t appear to be joking…which was more than a little strange. Regardless, Junko flinched…falling silent in what appeared to be contemplation. Grinning at her silence, the bear continued, “Anyway, we are in a strange position that I never considered happening. To think…someone would volunteer to be executed on someone else’s behalf! I’d like to say I planned for this…because I did! Oh, such a despair inducing moment has finally arrived! Ahahahahaha!”

The bears twisted laughter rang out, and a chill ran through the class’ spine…until the laughter abruptly ceased, and the bear sank down, plopping its butt on the tabletop.

“Unfortunately…the ultra-despair inducing plan I slaved over for 40 days and 23.167 hours…doesn’t work in a bullying trial!”

Raw frustration, unlike anything the class had seen before, oozed out of Monokuma as its plight became known. If the bear had been capable of crying tears of vexation, a waterfall would have poured from it’s mismatched eyes.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” Kyoko questioned, as sharp as ever.

Letting out a deep sigh, Monokuma picked itself back up, and answered, “I took bleeding hearts into calculation when I set up the class trial system. For a normal class trial, only the blackened will be executed once found, so absolutely no one would be allowed to take their place. But bullying trials have no blackened! Thus…my dilemma.”
A sense of dread seeped into the atmosphere as Monokuma’s explanation sank in.

“Well then, am I correct in assuming this means you’re considering the option for this particular trial?” Byakuya spoke up, almost delighted by the twisted turn of events.

Monokuma gave no response, sitting in council with itself, humming with indecision.

“How very interesting…” the Togami Heir grinned in anticipation before glancing toward Taka. “It seems you may, in fact, have your desire granted. As insane as it might be. After all, no sane person would even consider trading their life for that of a remorseless murderer—”.

“Blow it out your ass, jerkwad!” Leon suddenly interrupted, slamming his fists onto his podium. The Togami Heir sent a sideways glare his way but remained silent as he continued, “Yeah, Celeste is a bitch, but no one…absolutely no one deserves to go through that kind of hell!”

In spite of his abrasive insult, as the baseball stars words echoed around the room, the weight of his statement seeped into everyone’s ears. His speech was rather potent, as no one could forget the sight of him, collared and dragged down a hallway to what would have been a horrific death, had Junko not intervened.

Even so, Byakuya seemed less than affected by his words. Scoffing and folding his arms, he countered, “Then you approve of Taka’s decision? And here I thought you were supposed to be friends—”.

“We ARE friends, jackass!” Leon shouted, again cutting the Togami Heir. “And I never said I approved of his stupid idea!” Ripping his gaze away from Byakuya, the baseball star settled it onto the newly returned Moral Compass. “Like hell am I gonna let you pull such a bullshit move! Dying in her place won’t accomplish anything!”

“H-He’s right!”

Unexpectedly, a timid but firm voice echoed after Leon’s, and the baseball star turned, in shock, to discover that it was Chihiro backing him up. The petite programmer was trembling, obviously nervous and shaken up by the proceedings. However, despite all that, she finally managed to muster the rebuttal that had grown inside her since the moment Taka made his foolish announcement.

“I-If any one of us is executed…Monokuma wins! I know we need to punish Celeste, but this isn’t the way!” she shouted, her voice strong and confident, her determination inspiring. Everyone, Taka especially, was taken aback by the sheer willpower exuding from her. Using that momentum, she drove her point home. “We can’t… let Monokuma have its way…no matter what! So please…take it back! Don’t throw your life away!”

Chihiro squeezed her eyes shut as she finished her tirade, desperately hoping her feeling reached her classmate. Silence followed the programmer’s speech…but it was eventually shattered by a melancholy voice.

“…I am sorry, Chihiro…but I cannot honor that request.”

Chihiro’s eyes snapped open, tears stinging the corners of her eyes as she lifted her head and stared, completely horrified, at the Moral Compass. For his part, Taka managed to hold himself together. After all, he’d made this decision and he couldn’t reverse it now. He wanted to comfort Chihiro…assure her that everything would be alright, but he didn’t have the heart to lie to her.

“I have…wronged you…all of you…” he began slowly, trying to make his classmates understand. He lowered his head, as if bowing to them. “If I had not allowed myself to fall victim to
Monokuma’s deception…if I had been stronger…a better leader…then none of this would have happened!”

His head shot up, and his crimson eyes flared with unwavering determination!

“I will take responsibility for defiling your trust in one another! I will be the one to atone for all the madness that I caused! And…even if Miss Ludenberg hates me for it,” he paused as he glanced her way, taking in the infuriated scowl marring her face.

“You’re such…a god-damn loser!” the gambler abruptly shouted, her furious expression intensifying. “Do you think sacrificing yourself for me will, in any way, redeem you for what you’ve done to me?! Do you think that just because you’ll trade places with me, I’ll forgive you?! Just. Like. That!”

Taka didn’t respond, taking her rage-filled rant head on. His silence only further infuriated Celeste, clenching her hands into fists before spinning around and bashing her hand into the slot machine.

“Hell no!” she screamed in rage, slamming her hand against the machine a few more times as she ranted. “No. Way. In. Hell! I would rather DIE myself than let someone like YOU take my place! The…humiliation I would suffer would be far worse than whatever Monokuma could possible think up as an execution—!”

“You really shouldn’t test my creativity when it comes to executions,” Monokuma abruptly warned, a malicious grin overtaking the automaton’s face. “I’ve got ideas for a volcano barbeque and a thorny vine climb followed by—!”

“Stay the fuck out of this!” Celeste cut in, someone shutting up the maniacal bear. Taking just a moment to compose herself, the gambler locked her furious gaze onto Taka and finished, “I don’t give two fucks if you wanna off yourself. Hell, I’d even help you with that, if you wanted! But…I will NOT let you try and punish yourself before I get a shot at it! YOU HEAR ME!”

Taka took her words in stride, listening to each and every syllable and processing everything she said very carefully. However, rather than be phased by her comments, he instead drew strength from them, hardening his resolve even more resolutely than before!

“After all, her situation was entirely due to his negligence. And he knew this was the only way to take responsibility.

“No…Miss Ludenberg…I will be the one to die this day! Not you!” he finally replied, further infuriating the already fuming gambler. Disregarding her obvious anger, he continued, “But please…don’t weep for me, my classmates! For I know that my sacrifice will not be in vain! Live on, my classmates—no…my friends. Live on and survive this horrific affair! Bring the Mastermind to justice! And…in time…I hope you can forgive this foolish failure of a Moral Compass…for nearly leading you all to death…”

As he finished what he believed to be his own eulogy, Taka took a deep breath and prepared himself for death. He knew his classmates would object, but none of that would matter once Monokuma’s decision was made. And, given how bloodthirsty the bear had been lately, the Moral Compass had no misgivings about what that decision would be.

Today…Taka would atone for his sins…with his life.

Even if Monokuma pulled an upset and denied him that right, he could always threaten to vote for Celeste to be spared, thus denying the bear any satisfaction whatsoever. If faced with that dilemma,
Taka was certain the two-toned bear would rather have a real execution and give in to his request. It was a carefully calculated strategy that Taka was simultaneously proud and ashamed of.

After all, plotting one’s own death was a twisted mentality to begin with, even if it was for the right reasons. Fortunately, the strength of his convictions was unbreakable. And although he feared death as much as anyone else, if he could give his life to right the wrongs he’d committed…then it would all be worth—

“Don’t give me that bullshit!”

*SMACK*

Taka never saw it coming…a fist, filled with righteous fury, plowed directly into his jaw, spinning him around and off-balance before face-planting into the floor with a solid thud. Pain… stinging, raw, pain coursed through the Moral Compass’ face as he lay on the floor, completely at a loss for what had happened.

Rolling over, the Moral Compass’ eyes widened as Mondo Owada stood over him. He would have scolded the biker for his aggressive actions…had he not seen the tears waterfalling down Mondo’s cheeks.

“Don’t be a god-damn idiot!” the biker shouted, his voice slightly cracking. Reaching down, Mondo yanked the Moral Compass up off the ground, holding him by the collar and shaking him with both hands. “How the hell am I supposed to forgive you for throwing your life away?! I can’t forgive anyone who tries to pull a stupid stunt like that!”

As if reacting to the fury in Mondo’s voice, Taka’s visage hardened, as did his resolve. His hands shot up and grabbed the biker’s wrists, jerking himself free of his classmate’s grasp.

“I don’t have any other choice!” Taka refuted, matching Mondo’s furious gaze. “Monokuma will find a way to have an execution! It’s only a matter of time! Even if it’s not during this trial, eventually, one of us will have to face execution! And if that’s going to happen, I would rather—!”

Before he could finish, Mondo’s pompadoured head slammed into his own. Blinding pain ached through Taka’s skull as he reeled back, grunting and rubbing his forehead. He couldn’t even open his eyes, the agony of the blow forcing him to squeeze them shut.

“What the hell kind of talk is that?!” he heard Mondo shouting at him, this time unable to retort. “When the fuck did you lose faith in everyone?! Do you really think that after all the shit we’ve seen, all the bullshit we’ve put up with together, we’re gonna fall to fucking pieces and start killin’ each other?!”

As he was lectured by the biker, Taka somehow managed to force his eyes open, glared up at the biker just as he finished his tirade. Gritting his teeth, the Moral Compass found himself moving before he realized it, slamming his own fist into Mondo face.

The biker, used to those kinds of attacks, barely flinched, though he did appear to reel a tiny bit from the force of the punch. Seeing the hit had little effect and feeling a bit defeated that he’d resorted to physical violence for the first time in his life, Taka retracted his fist and seethed.

“I WILL take responsibility for my actions!” the Moral Compass insisted, mentally preparing himself for the possibility of Mondo hitting him again. Closing both hands into fists, Taka stood firm as he
shouted, “I must atone for my crimes against our classmates! After everything that I’ve done, there is no way I can ever forgive myself—!”

“Then don’t!” Mondo cut him off, shouting over and silencing him. “No one said you need to forgive yourself or atone or any of that other shit! I ain’t exactly the shining example of purity either! You think I’ll ever forgive myself for I did to Chihiro! Hell no! I’m gonna hate myself for that for the rest of my life!”

Neither of them knew that just across from them, Chihiro flinched at those words. And even though she wanted to chime in and refute the biker, she knew that now wasn’t the time for that. So instead, she watched in silence as the two hard-headed men continued to debate.

“But that ain’t the fucking point!” Mondo continued, almost completely unaware he had an audience. “It ain’t about forgiveness or atonement! All that matters is that we live through this fucking mess and try not to go fucking insane along the way!”

“Some things are more important than mere survival!” Taka insisted, pushing himself up on his toes to try and match Mondo’s height, to no avail. “And if I don’t at least attempt to atone for what I’ve done, then all the suffering I’ve caused will—!”

“Then all you gotta do is ‘whatever you can’!” Mondo interrupted again, stomping his foot angrily. “Just like Junko always says, you just gotta do what you can for now and it’s fucking enough! Hell, without her, most of us would be dead! And all she did was she could! So I’m doin’ the same thing! Just trying to do what I can, when I can, because…because…”

He trailed off momentarily, as if losing his will to speak for a moment. Glancing just beyond Taka, the biker caught a brief glimpse of Junko, who met his gaze and nodded firmly to him. Clenching his fists and drawing strength from the sight of her, Mondo regained his fervor and shouted, “Because I’m fucking weak! I tried to be strong and do the right thing but just like you, I let my weakness nearly get everyone killed! But do ya see me trying to off myself because of it—?!”

“You did ask to be executed during your trial, though…” Hiro quickly, and foolishly, pointed out.

“Shut the fuck up!” Mondo instantly replied, making Hiro squeal in terror and hide down behind his podium. Taking just a moment to get himself back on track, the biker turned his gaze back to Taka and continued, “Yeah… I fucked up, and wanted to kill myself for what I’d done…but that wouldn’t fix anything…just like you trying to execute yourself won’t fix a god-damn thing!”

“T-That’s not true!” Taka refuted, his voice losing some of the conviction it had before. “My sacrifice will strengthen the bond between everyone—”.

“Do you really think someone like Byakuya is going to care about you executing yourself?” Junko abruptly chimed in, folding her arms and scowling at the Togami Heir.

For his part, Byakuya merely gave an indifferent shrug, and chose to remain silent.

“You see?” the fashionista continued, “Executing yourself isn’t going to strengthen anything. Sadly, I have to agree with Byakuya…it’ll just be a wasted effort.”

“How strange that when I say it, everyone disregards it but simply because it came from our resident homeless expert, it seems to sink in?” the Togami Heir openly mocked, earning more than few angry glares. However, he quickly changed his tone. “Not that I’m disagreeing, mind you. If you chose to end yourself, it’ll simply be one less person in the game.”

An exhausted sigh escaped Junko before she continued, “Sorry to say Taka, but you’re sacrifice
wouldn’t be much of a sacrifice…it would only be a tragedy. And we’re all tired of tragedy…”

Her harsh statement, combined with Byakuya’s cold attitude, struck Taka to his core. However, he had come this far, enduring so much agony and guilt…he couldn’t simply back away from his decision now!

“R-Regardless! I know that by sacrificing myself, I will—!”

“Dude…that’s enough…” Leon softly refuted him, practically forcing Taka to turn his way. “I know how much it fucking hurts…how guilty you feel about all this.” He stole a glance at Sayaka, who met his gaze and didn’t turn away, no matter how painful it was. “A lot of us have made mistakes…but trying to sacrifice yourself…won’t fix anything.”

“In fact,” Sayaka spoke up, her voice firm but gentle. “If anything, it’ll tear us apart even more. So please…just forgive yourself already. At the very least…Leon and I don’t hold anything against you.”

“Yeah, man. We know you didn’t do all those shitty things because you wanted to be a dick,” Leon ‘eloquently’ concurred, earning a tiny glare from Sayaka, that sadly went unnoticed. “We know you just wanted to help…you were just really bad at it.”

Despite the backhanded compliment, upon hearing their words, Taka found his resolve weakening, if only slightly. But, like a cornered animal, he couldn’t help but lash out.

“How can you…possibly feel that way?!” he questioned, glancing from one of them to the other. “After I ridiculed you…called you murderers…openly distrusted you…how can you put your faith in me after all that I’ve done?!”

“…Because you’re our friend. And nothing will change that.”

Taka’s eyes widened as Makoto appeared behind him, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. Dumbstruck, the Moral Compass lowered his gaze and desperately tried to process their feelings. Unfortunately, the guilt he’d built up inside wasn’t so easy to dispel, and he shrugged off Makoto’s gesture, much to the lucky student’s surprise.

“Not everyone feels that same as you…” Taka pointedly mentioned, his gaze slowly moving from Byakuya, to Toko, and finally over to Celeste, who still appeared frustrated by the long delay in her judgement. Taking in their disapproving visages, the Moral Compass grimaced and said, “If I don’t complete this act of atonement, what is left for me? I have proven my own incompetence could lead us to our deaths…despite my good intentions.”

“’The road to hell is paved with good intentions’, as they say,” Kyoko added her voice to the conversation, her proverb striking a chord with more than just Taka. “What matters is the intent. And while you may have failed as Disciplinary Chairman, you can always use this failure to ensure that such mistakes…never happen again.”

It was only for a brief moment, but just for a second, Kyoko stared at her gloved hands, the smallest hint of emotion flickering behind her violet eyes. However, the moment passed before anyone saw it, and she merely let her words echo in the courtroom, hoping they would be enough.

Taking her comment in strides, Taka struggled with his decision and actively seemed to be considering retracting his offer to Monokuma. At least…until a certain someone spoke up.

“You people make me sick,” Celeste cut into the conversation, disgust dripping from each word. “He’s nothing but a god-damn loser who can’t even follow through with his own decisions—!”
“Oh, shut up, Celeste!” a furious Hina abruptly interrupted, her fury rapidly returning now that Taka had seemingly had a change of heart. “Stop trying to influence the vote! We’ve all had enough of your lies, so just keep them to yourself!”

The tiniest of grunts escaped Celeste as she was berated, but beyond that, she showed little reaction to Hina’s jeer. Meanwhile, Sakura glanced to her friend with a sullen look, but said nothing.

“A-Anyway,” Chihiro spoke up, trying to get everyone back on track. She flinched a bit as everyone turned to her, but since she’d been the focus of conversation on more than one occasion by this point, she was starting to get used to it. “Taka…please reconsider your vote. No one needs to be executed. And, even if someone does get executed later on…No, we won’t let that happen! I’m sure that we can all survive this…somehow!”

Everyone could tell she was nervous, and grasping at an invisible hope that only Makoto seemed able to tap into. But regardless, she put out that gesture of good-faith, desperately hoping that just maybe…Taka might latch onto it as well.

As all of his conflicting emotions ran rampant through Taka’s soul, he once again felt a hand rest on his shoulder, but this time, it was from the person directly in front of him. Glancing up, the Moral Compass saw his classmates—no…his friend Mondo smirking down at him.

“I know I’ve been kind of dick, beating you up and all that, but I…just wanted you to know somethin’ important,” the biker told him, squeezing his shoulder a bit. “No matter what happens…what matter what choice you end up making…you’ll always be my sworn brother. So, if you choose to sacrifice yourself…I’ll be fucking pissed, but I’ll support you…because that’s what bros do for each other!”

Taka’s red irises widened as he took in his friend’s words. Even now, after everything that had happened between them, Mondo still considered Taka to be his sworn brother…the bond they had formed in the hellish heat of the sauna was somehow still intact. It took a bit of a beating, but it was still there, as unbreakable and empowering as the moment it had been formed!

It truly was a bond unlike anything Taka had ever experienced. The friendship he’d formed with Mondo was an odd one, but it was something he deeply cherished…and he’d nearly thrown it away just to try and feel a tiny bit less guilty! He never considered how much he must have made his bro suffer! Thinking back on it, instead of blaming Mondo, he should have supported him during his time of greatest need! Not only that, he didn’t want any of his classmates to have to suffer that kind of pain or humiliation ever again!

And to that end…Kiyotaka Ishimaru was forced to reevaluate his decision…

“I know what I must do…”

“Would you hurry the fuck up?!” Celeste mentally screamed, feeling as if she’d waited months for this conclusion. “If this goes on any longer, I’m gonna bite off my own tongue and be done with it!”

It was an empty threat and she knew it. Even if she wasn’t executed…she didn’t have the courage to do something as drastic as that. After all, despite how much she lied to herself…death still frightened her. Even so, she still recognized that execution was the lesser of two evils, at least in her situation. And if Taka stole that from her…it would make her surviving the class trial all the more exhausting.

Everyone would blame her for Taka’s ‘sacrifice’ and she’d more than likely be murdered…probably
by Mondo. Ironically, she would probably welcome that…as long as her suffering finally came to an end.

For nearly a full minute, Taka stood in deep contemplation, closing his eyes as he reconsidered his decision.

Waiting as patiently as she could, Celeste couldn’t stop the occasional grimace as her body still ached from the abuse it had suffered when her extension was torn out. She gentle tapped the tiny bald patch on her head…wincing as the touch stung the tender flesh. Dropping her hand, all she think was how badly she wanted everything to finally be over...

Then, just as quickly as the silence came, Taka shattered it.

“Miss Ludenberg,” he called out, drawing Celeste’s attention.

“What is it now?” she angrily replied, obviously still perturbed but eager to hear his decision.

“You and I both have committed heinous crimes against our classmates,” he began, cutting her off before she could finish. “And…despite what you may say, I know that you feel guilty for what you’ve done. You may not realize it now, but I know that in time—”.

“The only thing I feel is disappoint…well, that and unimaginable hatred for you!” Celeste immediately corrected him, not content to simply let him prattle on. “My only regret is that I failed to cave in that stupid head of yours! I already told you that before, didn’t I?!”

“You did…” he admitted, but didn’t relent. “But that doesn’t change the fact that we both turned our back on our classmates. We are both traitors…and deserve to be punished.”

A glimmer of hope sparked in Celeste’s eyes, secretly hoping he might request that Monokuma execute them both! It would be entirely poetic, at least for her. Plus, she didn’t mind burning at the stake if she got to take that son of a bitch down with her!

“That being said,” Taka continued, steeling his gaze and directly facing Monokuma. “Monokuma! I wish to retract my previous request! And instead…I vote for Miss Ludenberg to be spared!”

That tiny flicker of hope in Celeste’s eyes…died. That was it. Her fate was sealed. She was now completely at the mercy of her classmates. And knowing that someone as crafty and devious as Byakuya would seek to ‘punish’ her, made her feel nothing but utter disgust for Taka and his piss-poor decision!

With a triumphant smile, Taka met her ferocious gaze and further mocked her by saying, “You and I will both be punished, but in this life, not the next! We will atone together…whether you want it that way or not!”

Celeste’s frustration reached it’s peak and she was about to fly into an utter rage when a loud popping noise distracted her, and the rest of the courtroom. As one, the class turned to see Monokuma, a bubble of snot bursting as the bear seemed to awaken from slumber!

“Oh, ah, AH!” the bear shout...
the past is the past! Are we ready for an execution?!”

“Actually,” Junko spoke up, her voice beyond smug. “Taka decided to change his vote.”

“Oh…did he now?” Monokuma questioned, not even glancing her way in favor of turning toward Taka. “And what, pray tell, have you decided?”

With a confident smile that churned Celeste’s insides, the Moral Compass proudly proclaimed, “I have decided to vote in favor of sparing Celeste! This class trial is officially over!”

Many of the students began cheering; among them the loudest were Mondo, who still wasn’t at his podium. Leon, who left his podium to go and stand next to Sayaka, the two of them practically latching onto each other and smiling joyously. Makoto, who patted Taka proudly on the back while fist-pumping. Chihiro, who wasn’t quite as loud but just as happy. Hiro, who despite still being a bit confused, was happy nonetheless! Junko gave an audible “Yes!” as she flipped off Monokuma. And Kyoko, who didn’t say anything but merely smiled in the direction of her celebrating classmates.

Hina, however, looked less than pleased. Frowning deeply as she glared angrily at Celeste. Sakura gave her a sympathetic glance, probably planning to speak to her the moment an opportunity presented itself. Hifumi looked slightly disappointed, but once he caught sight of Celeste’s utterly shocked and horrified expression, he quickly found himself enjoying the moment. Byakuya huffed and frowned, but already seemed to be plotting what kind of punishment he’d be able to inflict on the ‘guilty’ parties. And Toko…was too busy adoring her Master to really care about the proceedings at this point…much to the Togami Heir’s chagrin when he noticed her drooling over him.

Finally, Celeste hung her head in defeat, the last vestiges of hope completely dissipating as everyone’s cheers invaded her ears, sounding more like jeers than cries of joy to her.

However, before the merriment could continue, the piercing sound of an airhorn made everyone cover their ears.

*HOOOOOOOOONK!!*

Everyone recoiled as the noise ripped through their ears, thankfully subsiding a few moments later. More than likely, most of them lost a bit of hearing from that one.

“Our! Order in the god-damn court!” Monokuma shouted, tucking the airhorn into the sleeve of its hakama, ceasing the celebration. “The class trial isn’t over until I say it’s over! And it ain’t over by a long shot, ya little bastards!”

Everyone froze as Monokuma’s declaration washed over them. Confusion, frustration, and anger flashed over many of the students faces…save for one.

Celeste, even though her hopes and dreams had been crushed so many times, felt the tiniest sliver of a hope once again. She wasn’t sure what Monokuma was up to, but if he planned to continue the trial, then it meant that there was still a chance for her to be executed!

All she needed to do was wait and see what the demented bear had in mind.

As if on cue, Monokuma angrily roared, “RRRRRAWRRRR! So many students away from their podiums! You have three seconds to get back to your places or PUNISHMENT! Three…two…”
No one questioned the bear, darting back to their spots with the utmost haste. Leon particularly had to sprint, considering he was the furthest away from his assigned seat. Luckily, he made it, panting and sweating, but he made it…much to Sayaka and Makoto’s relief.

“One!!”

Seeing that everyone was back in their original positions, Monokuma audibly exhaled. “Sheesh, a guy falls asleep for a few minutes and chaos erupts…maybe if I bonk Taka on the head he’ll turn back into ‘Punishment MacRule-Nazi’? No wait, that kills people and as we all know…people die when they’re killed…or at least you would know if anyone actually killed someone—!”

“Get to the point, already!” Junko protested, her sky-blue irises glaring menacingly at the bear.

Without warning, the cylinder Monokuma had used for the Cho-Han game flew past her face, crashing into the wall far behind her and shattering with an ominous crash. Rather than a look of shock or surprise, Junko’s face hardened as she glared daggers at Monokuma. For its part, the bear barely acknowledged her, turning away from her and pouting.

“…I’m still angry about you not letting me try my new debate idea! So don’t get cheeky with me missy!” Monokuma replied, plopping down on its bottom and tracing a circle with its claw on the table, almost absent-mindedly. However, the bear recovered quickly, standing up suddenly and addressing the class. “Anyway, what I was eventually going to get to before I was so rudely interrupted!”

Only then did Monokuma glare at Junko, albeit only for an instant, before turning to face Taka directly.

“Now then, I understand that you want to change your decision, which is fine and all, but there’s a teensy, little problem with that.”

“And that would be?” Taka inquired, ready to argue if need be.

“Well, after sitting in council, with myself, I realized that I had to make a judgement call.” Monokuma’s tone alone was enough to spread dread through the entire class. But they could do nothing but wait as the bear continued, “And, after a lengthy period of mental debating, with myself, I have come to the conclusion…that you violated the rules of the voting and therefore…your vote is forfeit.”

“…”

“…”

“…What?” Taka asked again, struggling to wrap his head around the issue.

A wide grin spread of Monokuma’s face as it slowly answered, “By trying to circumvent the rules, i.e. voting for yourself, you’ve unintentionally made a mockery of them! And remember how I said that speaking out against the voting rules was grounds for punishment…?”

And evil glint flickered in Monokuma’s eyes, and for a moment, everyone became concerned with Taka’s safety, particularly the Moral Compass himself! The bear chuckled to itself, obviously enjoying the situation far more than it probably should. However, it quickly waved a dismissive hand toward the Moral Compass.

“Now, now, no reason to fret! I’ve already decided that, since I am a kind and compassionate Headmaster, who only wants his children to learn from their mistake, I’ll forgo your punishment in
favor of forfeiting your vote!"

As that dark realization dawned on the students, a heavy silence filled the room, only broken by Monokuma dancing in a circle and pointing at Taka.

“Hurray for you! You get to live!” Monokuma happily shouted, spinning dynamically and eloquently. “Also, hurray for Hifumi! You lucky dog, you!”

At the mention of his name, the fanfic creator pointed to himself in confusion. “Huh…? M-Me…?”

“You indeed~!” the bear sang loudly before a dark glint flickered in its bright red eye. “Because now that Taka’s vote is forfeit, naturally it goes to his opponent during the voting! That means… *Miss Taeko’s fate is in your overly sweaty hands!* Eyahahahahahahaha!”

As Monokuma’s laughter pierced the room, chaos erupted.

“W-What the hell are you going on about?!” Mondo shouted, slamming his fist onto his podium. “You bastard!” Junko followed up, pure rage coursing through her. “Changing the rules to suit your own purposes again!”

“You cannot take away my vote! I won it and I deserve to use it!” Taka also protested, not wanting this madness to persist any longer.

“You have to honor his vote!” Leon shouted along with them. “Just because you don’t like the outcome, doesn’t mean you can change it!”

Even if not all of the students were vocal about it, all of them felt this decision was increasingly unfair. Kyoko scowled, Makoto gritted his teeth, and Chihiro furrowed her brows in rage. Even the likes of Byakuya seemed miffed by this outcome, most likely because he wanted the game to be more interesting. Hina looked a bit conflicted, unsatisfied with the voting’s initial result, but not sure how to feel now that Hifumi had the vote. Sakura continued to watch the situation, feeling more and more powerless by the second. But that was when she noticed something…off, about Monokuma.

Strangely enough, it was almost as if the bear was intentionally baiting everyone…a tactic that Sakura knew the bear was all too familiar with. It was then that she saw it, a malicious glint in the Monokuma’s glowing red eye…murderous intent!

Unfortunately, before she could shout a warning to everyone, the bear reacted.

In the midst of everyone’s shouting, Monokuma snapped it’s paw-like fingers. Instantly, the panels in front of everyone’s podiums opened again…and the gatling guns made a reappearance, angled directly toward the students’ heads. Immediately, everyone was silenced, even if Junko still held her immeasurably angry visage.

“As one, the entire class shuddered, recalling their own videos and the people on their disks. Then,
one by one, a dark realization came over the entire class. Seeing most of them already figuring it out, Monokuma cackled again.

“Puhuhuhuhuhuhu! Thaaaat’s right! All of you are officially replaceable! I can just start all over again with a new set of ‘students’, anytime I need to! So don’t tempt me!” the demented bear shouted, watching as each of the students processed just how dire their situation was becoming.

“However, if you children play nice…maybe I won’t need to set-up an alternate killing game, starring all your loved ones! So shut up and let’s get this trial over with already! It feels like it’s been months since it started!”

The bear’s implication was not lost on anyone. No more debating. No more rebuttals. Just a simple decision as to whether or not Celestia Ludenberg was going to be executed. It was all left in Hifumi’s hands…and the class had no choice but to sit quietly and abide by his decision.

Among them, the one that seemed the most aggravated by this turn of events, was Junko. The Fashionista gripped her shirt tightly, as if holding herself back from doing something foolish. All the while, an expression of utter rage warped her usually calm features, causing her to appear more like a mad beast than a fashion model.

And to make matters worse, Monokuma made a point of grinning directly at her. The bear and the Fashionista locked eyes, a silent battle raging between them as two opposing forces collided. However, Monokuma didn’t spare much time for her, spinning around before settling it’s terrifying gaze onto the one who would ultimately decide Celeste’s fate.

“Now then, Hifumi Yamada,” the demented bear said, almost sweetly. “Make your choice. No one will interfere…I guarantee it!”

With all the pressure placed squarely on his shoulders…Hifumi felt sweat trickle down his back as he fought to regain composure. Fortunately, the fanfic creator recovered his wits rather quickly, as soon as he realized that the power to make Celeste truly suffer…had been foolishly placed in his vengeful hands!

A malicious smirk spread over his lips as he turned toward her, knowing that vengeance was within his grasp!

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“This is it…now is the time! I’ve waited so long for this moment! Go on, fatso! Vote to kill me already! Put me out of my god-damn misery!”

Celeste was practically bursting with joy as she watched the ‘disastrous’ events unfold. She didn’t even care about the gatling gun spinning in front of her. All that mattered was that she was finally going to be executed! All of the agony she’d suffered through, the god-damn annoyances she’d weathered, the sheer humiliation she’d endured! It would all end soon!

For a moment, she thought about encouraging Hifumi, but decided against it. Because even though she was fairly certain Monokuma wouldn’t use the gatling gun on her for speaking out of turn, due to the execution fetish the maniacal bear had, she didn’t quite want to take that chance.

Not to mention, if the bear did keep its word, as it usually did, she didn’t want her precious Grand Bois Cheri Ludenberg forced into a killing game! Sure, it was a low chance, but she still felt obligated to try and keep her beloved pet from suffering her same fate! Though, knowing what she did about cats, she wasn’t all that certain that her cat wouldn’t inadvertently end up just like her
someday…

Besides, this was a very poetic moment. The fat, useless, good-for-nothing, failure of a partner…was going to be the one to issue her execution! It was beyond fitting and completely ironic, but that’s what made it so perfect!

“Fat-ass can have his revenge, and I’ll finally be free of all this bullshit!” she told herself, finally mentally prepared to face her oncoming demise. “It probably won’t be quick…but anything is better than having to face ‘punishment’ from the rest of my loser classmates!”

She briefly wondered what they would have come up with as her punishment. Probably something lame like locking her in her room or something. Hell, they might even ‘forgive’ her and let her roam around free like Leon and Sayaka! They were that gullible, most of them anyway. Then again, there was no way anyone would trust her after this point, so it wouldn’t matter regardless. More than likely, she’d be murdered by Byakuya or Hiro or someone else…the thought of being killed by Hiro left a particularly awful taste in her mouth…that would be like letting a kitten maul you to death…embarrassing on all fronts!

But that didn’t matter, because she already knew what Hifumi was going to choose. He’d already made his decision quite clear earlier, so there was no doubt about it. Execution was all that awaited her…and while she didn’t particularly look forward to it…it would be a welcome release from madness.

“Now then, Hifumi Yamada,” she heard Monokuma say, focusing her attention back to the situation. “Make your choice. No one will interfere…I guarantee it!”

“This is it! Give it to me, you disgusting piece of lard! Make my afterlife!”

She watched as the shock slowly dissipated from Hifumi’s visage, smiling as she observed the gears turning in his head. Then, he glanced over to her, so she hid her smile. Instead, she huffed at him and frowned, holding back a smirk as he visibly grew infuriated by her. He scrunched his face angrily and she fought to keep from laughing at how pathetic he looked!

“Miss Luden-No…Miss Yasu~hiro!” he said to her, elongating her true name in a vain attempt to upset her. “Ever since you betrayed me, I have wanted to see you punished for your misdeeds! I want to see you squirm and writhe in agony for tricking me…and corrupting me!”

Hmm, she’d never really thought of it that way before, but it certainly was true. She had corrupted Hifumi. Because without her intervention, he likely never would have resorted to murder. Just how many people had she twisted in her attempt to be free from the school? Not that it mattered…not anymore. She knew he was getting to the best part…

“Because of you, I betrayed my friends and classmates…I nearly murdered someone for no good reason!”

She would debate that…considering he was very easily turned into a murderous psycho when his beloved Alter Ego was threatened, but that wasn’t really important at the moment.

“And finally, you framed me for your own crimes…even if I did assist you with them! I know I’ll be punished someday for what I’ve done, but today is your time to be punished!”

The anticipation was killing her. Just a few more syllables and she would finally be freed from this accused school! Death would be her liberation! And it would be Hifumi that brought it to her! She might even thank him before being dragged off to be burned aliv—
“And that’s why, I’ve decided to punish you…by voting for you NOT to be executed!”

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“What! The hell! DID YOU JUST SAY?!?!”

The words erupted from her before she even realized it. Startling everyone in the room almost as much as Hifumi’s decision to spare her.

“Well…I didn’t expect that…” Monokuma admitted, tilting it’s head but not seeming that disappointed, much to Celeste’s chagrin. “But them’s the breaks! Class trial…concluded!”

As the bear finished speaking, the gatling guns folded up and sank down into the abyss, leaving many of the students breathing sighs of relief…but not Celeste.

“Well…didn’t you vote for me to be executed you useless pile of lard?!?” she demanded, slamming her hand on her podium. “I’m NOT going to let you fuck this up for me! Change your god-damn vote! You already fucked everything up once! Don’t do it again! Vote for execution, dammit! Vote for —!”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Miss Taeko.” Monokuma’s gentle voice made her head snap toward the bear, her fury now aimed in his direction. Completely unphased, the bear continued, “The voting is already decided. As Headmaster, I am pleased to inform you that you will not be punished in this bullying trial. Congratulations.”

Celeste ground her teeth as Monokuma delivered that final verdict, the tally board disappearing into the ceiling, though the gambling table in the center of the room remained.

With a sick, twisted, and satisfied smirk, Monokuma finished by saying, “I hope you live a looong and…fulfilling life…here in this academy.”

Celeste struggled to breathe, taking staggered breaths as rage overwrote all other thoughts in her brain. She was trapped…trapped here with worthless, vengeful, pathetic losers for the rest of her days! Hell…she was trapped in a hell of her own making…and now there was no way out!

“Ehehehehe! Hahahahahaha!”

A malicious laugh pierced her ears, but it wasn’t from Monokuma…no, the person laughing at her pain was none other than Hifumi! And with each note of laughter…Celeste’s rage grew and grew.

“Well then…Miss Yasu~hiro…I hope we can…get along.”

Celeste’s face twisted in ugly fury as she bore witness to the expression of utter satisfaction on Hifumi’s face. The hellish grin overtaking his visage told her all she needed to know. He’d led her on…let her believe she was going to be executed…just to throw it all back in her face and take away her last chance to be free of this god-forsaken prison of a school!

…Wait! There was a chance! One…last chance…to be free of this school…forever!

Shifting her gaze, she locked onto Monokuma, lifting her finger claw up and pointing it at the demented bear.
“No…!” she seethed, no longer caring if her actions brought about punishment. “You can’t KEEP ME HERE!”

Without thinking, she leapt forward, pushing herself up onto the gambling table, tripping over and tearing her own dress in the process. Her face slapped into the table, but she recovered quickly, scrambling to her feet and charging directly toward Monokuma. Angling her finger claw at the bear’s face, she let out a furious scream.

“ERRRRAAAAHHHHHHH—oof!”

Before her finger claw was within reach of Monokuma’s head, Celeste felt something slam into her stomach. All the air was forced out of her lungs, and she collapsed onto her knees, desperately gasping for breath. Her eyes watered, and she couldn’t be sure if it was because of the physical pain…or the emotional trauma.

Regardless, as she fought to breathe, Celeste gradually lifted her head and, if she had been capable of it, she would have gasped. Towering over her, stood none other than Sakura Ogami. Her fist floated above the spot where Celeste had been a moment ago…and everything fell into place.

“I’m sorry…” Sakura abruptly apologized before her features hardened. “But I cannot allow you to throw your life away like this. You will have to face your punishment in this world.”

As the fighter’s deep tones echoed in her ears, all of the fight Celeste had been holding onto completely vanished. Barely managing to pull air into her lungs, the gambler sat there, taking deep breath after deep breath, allowing the shame to wash over her for the first time in what felt like years.

Hot tears spilled from her eyes, and she buried her head in order to hide them…but to no avail. She could feel everyone’s gazes on her, and she felt even more humiliated because of it. She wanted to die…but couldn’t. She didn’t have the courage to bite her tongue off…or even try to slit her own throat with her finger claw. She completely lost the will…to live.

It was odd, like a switch being flipped, and then, she completely stopped caring. All the humiliation had finally broken her down, until now, she just couldn’t bring herself to give a shit anymore. Nothing mattered anymore…she had nothing to live for…and no longer had the courage to end her own life. This truly was hell…from which there was no escape.

Lifting her tear-stained face, she glanced up at Sakura and seethed, “I hate you…”

“…If that’s what you want.” Sakura said quietly, bending down next to the broken gambler and lifted her up, practically carrying her off the Cho-Han table and depositing her onto the floor of the courtroom.

Almost immediately, she was surrounded by her classmates, all of them glaring at her with contempt. And among them…the one who showed more hatred and vengefulness than the others…was Hina. Seeing the usually cheerful and light-hearted swimmer glaring at her with such malice sent pangs of agony through Celeste’s chest.

And, for the first time in so long…Celeste decided to be honest with herself.

“I deserve your hatred…I hope you never forgive me…Hina…”

“It’s over…finally,” Mukuro took a moment to breathe a sigh of relief. “I was worried for a second
there, but I’m glad Sakura stepped up when she did. If Celeste had managed to attack Monokuma, it would have been considered a victory for my sister…and I won’t allow that.”

Honestly, Mukuro could have just as easily stopped Celeste…and she had planned to. Once she saw what the gambler’s intentions were, she had prepared to move in and subdue her. She knew it would have made her even more suspicious than before, but she wasn’t willing to let Junko get any kind of victory out of this trial.

Fortunately, Sakura also noticed Celeste’s intentions, and unintentionally kept Mukuro from escalating her situation. Things were already tricky enough, with Byakuya definitely suspicious of not only her, but Kyoko at this point. Speaking of which, she would need to find a moment to thank the detective once the two of them were alone. Without the assistance she had provided, there was a good chance Mukuro would have had to out herself…and face punishment for it.

It had been a hard day, but in the end, no one was executed, and even though they now had to decide what to do with both Celeste and Hifumi, the body count was still at zero…and that was the most gratifying notion she could have hoped for.

“Well then, class trial dismissed! See ya later!” Monokuma shouted from the center of the courtroom, drawing everyone’s attention.

The class turned to see the baccarat table in the center of the podiums sink down into the floor. At the same time, the slot machine that was behind Celeste’s podium abruptly shot up into the air, flying up into a waiting hole in the ceiling, disappearing from sight.

In only a few moments, the class trial courtroom looked exactly as it had when they’d first arrived. Mukuro didn’t understand why Junko bothered resetting the room. She knew her sister well enough to know she’d never use the same room twice, so it seemed pointless. But that wasn’t really an issue at the moment.

“Even though the class trial is over, I can’t let my guard down.” The soldier clenched her fists and furrowed her brow. “I took some huge risks this time…and next time I may not be so lucky. I need to try and figure out a way to outsmart my sister. And the first step is gaining whatever advantage I can…”

Surreptitiously, Mukuro’s gaze slid over toward Kyoko, who she was surprised to see was matching her gaze. They shared a moment, violet irises staring into sky-blue hues as the two young women felt somehow closer after this experience. Slowly, while everyone else was preoccupied with Celeste, the detective girl walked over and stood directly beside the soldier, gently whispering…

“Changing room. Nighttime.”

That was all she said before sliding back over to the group, going almost completely unnoticed by their fellow classmates. Mukuro hid a smile, finally feeling the tiniest embers of hope burning in her chest. As quietly as she could, the soldier also joined the group, not looking forward to deciding what kind of ‘punishment’ the class would need to arrange for Celeste.

Little did she know that just across from them, a pair of hazel eyes watched their short encounter…forming a plan of his own.

“Wow…attempting assisted suicide using the ‘Don’t attack the Headmaster’ rule…pretty ballsy Taeko, I gotta admit,” the Mastermind, Junko Enoshima said to herself as she pushed away from the
Monokuma control panel. “Then again, the look of utter despair on her face as she was thwarted time and time again…uhhhg…it’s so…goood!”

Junko’s hands roamed over her entire body, reveling in the intoxicating feelings of despair she’d just witnessed. This trial had gone nothing like she’d anticipated, for the most part, and that had made it all the more enticing as it spiraled almost out of control! Unexpectedly, Mukuro was a constant source of entertainment these days, taking more and more risks, thus increasing the chance for a massive despair payoff later! Plus, watching as Celeste slowly descended into madness, feeling the icy grip of despair latching onto her very soul! Oh, it was so intoxicating!

And even though she hadn’t gotten an execution, the situation that had unfolded during the trial was more than stimulating…for the moment.

Sadly, she knew this feeling of intoxication…wouldn’t last long…it never did. It was like a drug addiction. And it had been several days since she’d gotten to experience it, so she was desperately craving more! Each fit of despair did less and less for her each time, a fact she was painfully aware of.

Not only that, the Mastermind knew she had more pressing matters to attend to, such as deciding the next motive for her adoring classmates. But for the moment, she didn’t care. Today was ‘payday’ and she planned to make the most of it!

And that’s why, she decided to make the most of her current despair-ecstasy, her hands sliding downward…

“Ooooooohhhhh…such…despair…!!!”

“I don’t suppose you ever imagined this outcome, did you, Celeste?” Byakuya mockingly asked, standing over the defeated gambler as she regained some semblance of composure. “And now, the question is, what are we to do with you?”

“Like I fucking care…” she wheezed, lifting a shaky hand up and untying the string of her white bonnet. Once it was loose, she yanked the head accessory off and tossed it aside, not caring where it landed. “Just…hurry up and decide already. The suspense is killing me.”

Her sarcastic/mocking tone was becoming infuriating, and the students quickly realized this was the true Celeste, or rather, Taeko Yasuhiro, that had been hidden underneath the gambler’s façade.

“Not bothering with the charade anymore?” Byakuya chided, reveling in seeing someone as prideful as Celeste fall to such a shameful level.

“What the point?” she angrily answered, glaring up at him menacingly. “I lost. There’s no point in putting effort into maintaining my image anymore.”

“Well, maybe not but…you should at least tell us if you’re in pain,” Makoto tried to be encouraging but only ended up infuriating her. A fact that became clear when she glared at him. Reeling back a bit, the lucky student tried another approach. “I mean…you did get, uh, roughed up a bit near the end there. Are you sure we shouldn’t visit the nurse’s—”.

“Shut up! Don’t fucking talk to me,” she snarled up at him, making him take a step back. “You’re part of the reason I’m still trapped in this hellhole!”
With a look of shame, Makoto began to retreat, before Sayaka suddenly appeared in front of him, slapping her hand across Celeste’s cheek. Shock crossed the gambler’s face as the stinging sensation ached. But she quickly recovered and turned back to face the pop sensation…instantly wishing she hadn’t.

Sayaka’s sparkling blue eyes shone with protective rage as she bore down on the defeated gambler, scoffing audibly. Celeste fought not to be frightened of the terrifying visage Sayaka had assumed…now understanding why Leon tended to be cautious around her.

“Don’t talk to Makoto like that,” she demanded, not asked. “He voted to save you. And even if you didn’t want him to, he still defended you, so you have no right to treat him like that!”

Celeste honestly couldn’t believe how terrifying Sayaka could be! She was usually so bubbly and cheery but right now…it was easy to see how she’d been capable of trying to murder Leon. People with such strong protective instincts were dangerous…because if you threatened what they loved…they’d tear you into tiny pieces. And Sayaka was definitely someone you didn’t want on to get on the bad side of...

Averting her gaze, Celeste openly scoffed and said, “Like you’re one to talk…Who was it who tried to frame him again?”

Sayaka flinched, and for a moment, Celeste thought she might try to hit her again. Instead, the pop idol closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“I know I mistreated him in the past…and I won’t make excuses for it,” Sayaka told her, holding in her own shame. Snapping her eyes open, the pop idol knelt down next to the gambler and offered her a hand, much to everyone’s shock. “And you shouldn’t make excuses either. Just tell us if you’re hurt, that’s all we’re asking—”.

With almost no hesitation, Celeste slapped Sayaka’s hand away, openly scoffing at her. “I don’t need your pity. Just punish me and get it over with.”

A heavy silence dampened the room, and no one quite knew how to break it.

Celeste scowled deeply, not knowing if Sayaka planned to say something else, and she really didn’t care. Right now, she just wanted to know what was going to happen to her next. Not because she was concerned for her own well-being, but because she didn’t have anything else to think about. Her dream was dead. Her chance for escape was gone. All she could do was live in the moment, and try to figure out what to do with her pointless existence.

“For now, I suggest that we find our way back to the elevator,” she heard Sakura suggest, ever the practical one. “Once we get back up there, we can make for the cafeteria and discuss what should be done with the two of them.”

“I can agree to that,” Byakuya concurred, but not with adding, “However, I suggest we keep watch over our culprits, just in case one of them decides to try and stab someone with a finger accessory.”

The gambler scoffed, her previous embarrassment already coming back to haunt her. Almost reflexively, she pulled the finger claw off of her index finger and tossed it aside, her hand feeling uncomfortably naked for the first time in a while.

“Feel safer now? Or should I take off my tie as well?” she sarcastically asked, tugging at the red material around her neck. “After all, I could use it to strangle you from behind.”

The Togami Heir let a smug grin overtake him before he replied, “Have some class. Oh, I forgot, that
was for Celestia Ludenberg…but like this, you appear more like Taeko Yasuhiro…such a plain name suits you.”

Turning on a heel, he headed for the elevator, not giving her any chance for a rebuttal.

Celeste gritted her teeth and clenched her fists…hating the fact that he was right. Just like her real name suggested…she was a child of many blessing…but cheap and lowborn…unlike her alter ego. And now, she had to live with the shame of everyone knowing her true name…of having to give up being…Celestia Ludenberg.

Following after him, the entire group of students headed for the elevator, walking around Celeste without so much as sparing her a passing glance. Taking that as a cue to stand, Celeste slowly began shifting in order to pull herself up. Halfway through, a strong hand hoisted her up, and she turned to glare at Sakura, who had assisted her.

Jerking away from the martial artist, she spat, “Leave me alone! I already told you, I don’t need anyone’s help.”

“…Very well,” the fighter said, patiently waiting for the gambler to start making for the elevator.

Slowly, Celeste managed to steady herself, stumbling a bit as she walked toward the elevator. With heavy, depressing steps, she boarded the elevator, staring at the floor as it ascended. Sakura stood behind her the entire time, no doubt watching her every move.

As she waited for the elevator to reach the top, a twisted revelation came to her. She hadn’t considered herself to be a prisoner, at least until right now. Whereas before she’d been held captive by Monokuma, now she was captive of her own classmates as well. It was a strange notion, but she knew she could adapt to it, given enough time.

Perhaps if she had truly made an effort to adapt to this school life, maybe she wouldn’t have—no…there was no point in pondering that…not anymore. She’d made her bed, and now she had to lie in it.

The question was…how long was she going to survive now that everyone knew her true nature?

After all, there was no telling what her classmate planned to do with her. There would be no forgiveness, not that she believed she was deserving of it anyway. She briefly wondered if they planned to trap her in a room without food or water, let her die of natural causes so that no one could be held accountable by the class trial system…but she figured that the bleeding hearts such as Makoto and Sakura would never allow such a thing to come to pass.

But then the question still remained…just how exactly did her classmates intend to ‘punish’ her?

“Everyone all settled in? Great!” Taka addressed everyone as they sat at various tables in the cafeteria.

Hifumi and Celeste were seated in the center of the room, with Mondo and Sakura standing on either side of them, just in case. Makoto sat at a table with Leon, Sayaka and Chihiro, waiting for the meeting to get underway. Kyoko stood nearby, watching the culprits carefully. Junko leaned against a nearby wall, doing much the same as her partner. Byakuya sat at a table far removed from the group, with Toko seated on the opposite side of him. Hiro stood near the door, while Hina sat at a long chair as far away from Celeste as possible.
“Before we begin this discussion, I would like to offer my most sincere apology to everyone!”

The Moral Compass bowed deeply, keeping his face angled toward the floor.

“I caused all of you so much trouble, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to atone what it…but I assure you that I will do all that I can in order to earn your trust again!”

A brief moment of awkward silence hung over the group before Makoto nervously said, “Uh, Taka we kinda already forgave you back in the courtroom, so…”

“I know that…but I still felt that I needed to formally apologize!” the Moral Compass repeated, keeping his head bowed. “Also, I wish to add that I believe I too should be punished alongside Hifumi and Celeste! It is only right that I, the one who unintentionally instigated this chaos, be punished as well!”

There was a silence for a moment, as this event wasn’t completely unexpected. Even so, very few of the students had a genuine desire to punish Taka. After all, he was going a great job of punishing himself.

“Look, man, it’s all good!” Leon assured him, walking up and patting him on the back. “Like we said before, we forgive ya! No one here’s holding a grudge against you anymore!”

“…Speak for yourself,” Celeste openly refuted before being elbowed by Mondo, who stood next to her. She glared at him, but he acted as though it never happened, further irritating the gambler.

“No! I’m afraid I cannot allow you all to be so lenient with me!” Taka insisted, gesturing toward Celeste. “As you can see, I have inspired great hatred by my careless actions! I must be punished for it!”

Even if it wasn’t on purpose, Taka was putting his classmates into an awkward position. After all, their usual form of punishing a classmate was separating them from the class, but that obviously wouldn’t work in this case. And sadly, no one had any good ideas about how to properly punish such a good-natured soul like Taka…or so they thought.

“I have a suggestion,” Kyoko said, addressing the class. “Instead of outright ‘punishing’ Taka, what would you all say to putting him on a probation of sorts?”

This piqued the class’ interests, as no one was quite sure what such an ordeal would entail.

“‘Probation’, you say?” Byakuya questioned, simultaneously annoyed and curious. “And what kind of ‘probation’ would our former Disciplinary Chairman be subjected to?”

Turning her steely gaze toward Taka, Kyoko explained, “I propose that Taka not only be stripped of his duty as the Disciplinary Committee Chairman, but that he must, in turn, act as any other student would. Meaning; he would no longer lead us in morning meetings or try to lead our group in decision making, at least for the time being.”

“…So, he’d be like a normal student then?” Makoto surmised, trying to piece it all together. “And he wouldn’t be able to act the way he normally does? Like telling us we’re late for meetings or scolding us for not cleaning properly?”

“Indeed,” Kyoko clarified, giving him a light smile. Makoto slightly flushed and smiled back, staying quiet in order to let her finish. “I believe this will be an adequate punishment. Does anyone object?”

Glancing around the room, she saw nothing but nods and few skeptical expressions, particularly
from Byakuya, but no one seemed opposed to the idea. When no opposition was given, Kyoko took that as acceptance.

“Alright, then we all agree,” she said, turning directly toward Taka. “From this day on, you’re stripped of your duties and will live as a normal student. That will be your punishment.”

“Grgh!” Taka audibly grunted, as if having been struck in the chest. The very thought of no longer having responsibilities to fulfill seemed to hurt him, but he endured. Taking it in strides, he slowly accepted his fate. “That is…acceptable.”

Kyoko nodded to him, but before she could say anything else, mocking laughter interrupted everyone.

“Ahahahaha! You can’t be fucking serious!” Celeste cackled, running out of breath from laughing so hard. “You…haha! You people think…ahaha…that making him act like a normal student is ‘punishment’!”

Deep, rich laughter escaped her as she couldn’t hold it back any longer. The entire class glared and scowled at her, waiting as she let the laughing fit pass, finally getting enough air to speak.

“It would be even more hilarious…ahahaha…if it wasn’t so pathetic!” the gambler chastised them, her unadulterated laughter frustrating even Kyoko’s calm nerves. “Oh, this is rich…ha-ha…just watching you all struggle to invent a creative ‘punishment’ is—!”

“Miss Ludenberg!” Taka abruptly shouted to her, interrupting and forcing her attention back toward the Moral Compass. The instant she saw him, her laughter completely ceased, and she glared menacingly as he spoke. “I know that you may never forgive me—”

“That’s putting it mildly,” she muttered, venom leaking out with each syllable.

“—but let me assure you that I plan to do everything I can in order to make it up to you!”

Celeste let out a brief, mocking laugh, “Ha! Yeah…good luck with that.”

Frowning slightly, the Moral Compass insisted, “I know you are skeptical of me, but given enough time, I hope that we can find a way to become civil around each other!”

“Oh, for the love of god, go die in a ditch somewhere!” the gambler exclaimed, completely brushing off his sincerity.

Taka was about to try and persuade her again when Leon wrapped an arm around his shoulders and said, “Just let it go, man. A woman’s wrath isn’t so easily forgotten…trust me.”

He shuddered for a moment before releasing the Moral Compass and retaking his seat next to Sayaka, who only slightly glared at him for his comment. Once everyone had settled down again, Taka decided to move on to the next item of business…but at least he would have, if he hadn’t remembered the ‘limitation’ he’d just been put under.

“Well then…I suppose this means…I am no longer fit to lead this discussion!” the Moral Compass realized, obviously not sure what to do next. Standing there, awkwardly glancing around, Taka finally pointed toward an untaken seat and said, “Therefore…I will…sit over here…and listen while…someone else discusses our next move.”

Awkwardly, the class watched as Taka slowly took a seat next to Chihiro, who smiled and patted him on the back, earning a tiny smile from the him. Once he settled in, a clear issue became
apparent…no one was leading the group in discussion. And with how awkward it was to remove Taka, it was no surprise that no one was eager to jump in and take his position—

“It seems you are all truly lost without me,” Byakuya suddenly spoke up, rising to his feet and preparing to address the class. “As the only one left capable of it, I shall lead the discussion from now on.”

A host of groans echoed as Byakuya’s attitude soiled the mood, irritating each and every student.

“Hmph, who died and made you king, asshole?” Junko scoffed, folding her arms and regretting not speaking up before him.

“You all did, when you ousted that fool of a Disciplinary Chairman, and left the seat of power unfulfilled. And obviously, as the only person here with actually leadership qualities, there really was no other choice to be made.” Byakuya informed her, enjoying the anger spreading over her features. “Or do any of you object to my leading the discussion now that I am the only one with enough clout to properly perform the task?”

Honestly, everyone, aside from Toko, wanted to object. However, at the same time, no one really wanted to lead the discussion themselves either. After all, very people would be comfortable leading a discussion centered around punishing your fellow classmates, even if their actions deserved such consequences.

Not to mention that, since Taka had been reduced to a ‘normal’ student, that was one less person who was willing to stand up to Byakuya and his douche-tastic attitude. And sadly, when no one objected, the Togami Heir scoffed, almost victoriously.

“It seems you’ve all come to your senses, at least for the moment,” Byakuya cheekily continued, empowered by this moment of ‘triumph’. Standing in front of everyone, he almost seemed to be preaching as he said, “Perhaps, if you listen to me more closely, we can avoid such matters like this altogether.”

The sight of him leading the group sent waves of nausea through many of the students, but none more so than Chihiro. Even if she’d been unconscious for it, having heard about how Byakuya had strung her up, and used her in his twisted desire to make the killing game more ‘interesting’, the programmer was undoubtedly disgusted by the fact that someone like him was allowed to have any say in the group’s actions.

As if making up for her lack of courage, another student quickly chose to raise their hand, earning more than a few stares.

“Uh yeah, just gonna put this out there now, you’re a dick who almost got Chihiro killed just to satisfy your morbid curiosity. So, like, can we have Taka back, even if only for a little bit?” Leon suddenly asked, smirking as Byakuya’s face twisted in anger. “I already can’t stand you and wanna punch your face in, so…there’s that too.”

“No, Leon! You must control your violent urges!” Taka suddenly shouted, leaping to his feet. “We wouldn’t want another bullying trial to occur so soon! Let’s just give Byakuya a chance! Surely he can’t be as ruthless as we all know him to be!”

An awkward silence passed as the class took in that statement…

“…I want you to really think about what you just said,” Leon replied, gesturing toward Byakuya. “Ever since the first trial, this guy’s been nothing but a selfish prick who’s only cared about himself
“And yet, I have still been far more critical to our survival than you,” the Affluent Progeny pointed out, followed by a small huff. “Remind me who it was that misled our class during our first class trial?”

Leon flinched, but didn’t back down. “Yeah, I fucked up during the first trial, but at least I feel bad about what I did! You, on the other hand—!”

“I have nothing to be ashamed of,” Byakuya cut him off, adjusting his glasses and glaring down his nose at the baseball star. “While it’s true that I interfered with the crime scene during Chihiro’s case, I fully intended to inform everyone of the identity of the true culprit for that little attack—”.

“That’s not the point!” Leon shouted, interrupting once again while taking deep breaths, trying to keep calm. “At the very least, you owe Chihiro an apology for what you did to her!”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Mondo joined in, backing up the baseball star. “Chihiro might have woken up sooner if you hadn’t strung her up like Christ! So get on your knees and apologize!”

Chihiro wanted to speak up, but due to the embarrassment she felt now that she was the center of attention, all she could do was meekly hang her head as her friends demanded justice in her place. And although it made her feel a bit weak…a tiny part of her was relieved to have such caring friends looking out for her.

Suddenly, the programmer was brought back to reality as she heard the Togami Heir openly scoff at their protests before answering, “We don’t have time to waste on such trivial matters. Besides, if Chihiro truly holds a grudge for my actions, she should demand an apology herself, instead of hiding behind the two of you.”

Chihiro froze, the harsh tone of the Ultimate Affluent Progeny seeping into her very bones. She wanted to confront him…truly she did. She wanted to know why he’d felt it was necessary to take such a risk. She wanted to try and understand his reasoning for interfering with the class trial. But most of all…she wanted the opportunity to tell him exactly how much she detested him!

Using her as a pawn in his twisted game was sickening enough, but the fact that he showed absolutely no remorse for his actions was beyond insulting! Unfortunately…she lacked the courage that both Mondo and Leon so easily displayed…remaining silent and feeling all the weaker for it.

As the programmer held her tongue, Byakuya took that opportunity to move his agenda along.

“And regardless, that has nothing to do with our current predicament. If you have complaints, I will address them later,” Byakuya told the two of them, disengaging from that argument easier than anyone had thought possible. Adjusting his collar and approaching Celeste and Hifumi directly. Holding out his hand, he scowled deeply and said, “Give your room keys to me. Now.”

A moment of silence invaded the space as both Hifumi and Celeste hesitated to comply with his demands. Then, very slowly, each of them produced the keys to their room and reluctantly handed them off to the Affluent Progeny. Once they were within his grasp, Byakuya walked to the center of the room and held out the keys for all to see.

“By controlling access to their rooms, we can control this pair of miscreants,” he informed the group. “As per the school regulations, sleeping anywhere but a dorm room will count as an offense punishable by, well, ‘punishment’. If they want to have a place to sleep without fear of execution, they will have to obey the rules we set for them.”
It was a simple but effective plan. By holding the keys to their rooms, he was effectively putting them in check. And while it wasn’t perfect, it was at least a way of keeping them in line…for now.

“A bit harsh, wouldn’t you say?” Kyoko finally spoke up, glaring almost disappointedly at the Affluent Progeny.

With a scoff, Byakuya replied, “For a pair of attempted murderers who show little to no remorse for their actions? I think not.”

“Hold on a second. I agree that Celeste definitely needs that kind of punishment,” Hina suddenly spoke up, easily throwing slander at her former friend. “But Hifumi seems to have learned his lesson. Don’t you think we could at least lessen his punishment?”

“I agree with Hina,” Sakura added, sending her friend a quick smile before addressing the group. “Hifumi did try and warn us of the danger Celeste posed, we should take that into account while decided on their punishment.”

“I already have,” Byakuya effortlessly countered, pushing up his glasses and glaring down his nose at everyone. “Taking their room keys is but the first step. Next comes the matter of their personal freedom. I believe that allowing both of them total freedom is out of the question. Therefore, someone will need to keep watch over them at all times.”

“Don’t you think that’s kind of extreme?” Hiro questioned, voicing what most of the class actually felt. “I mean, it was hard enough having Mondo watch Chihiro all the time. We’ll need like a schedule and stuff just to figure out who’s gonna be watching who! I say we just lock them both in the storage room and leave it at that!”

Almost everyone could see how that plan would utterly backfire, but since Hiro was…Hiro, it didn’t dawn on him that locking two attempted murderers in a room could escalate very quickly!

“As usual, you fail to understand the gravity of our situation,” the Togami Heir said with a sigh. “Separating them is key to this punishment, and I have a way of accomplishing this rather easily.”

“Oh, pray tell, what vision does the great Byakuya Togami have for us?” Celeste mockingly asked, her tone as serious as her expression.

A noticeably smirk spread over Byakuya’s lips as he huffed. “Since Hifumi was easily manipulated, I believe we could simply have someone keep tabs on him during the daytime. And if everyone keeps their doors locked at night, we should have nothing to fear from him while we sleep as well.”

“He could sneak out during the nighttime though…” Leon pointed out, rubbing his chin. “All the other murder attempts happened at nighttime, and we still don’t have a way to be sure he stays in his room all night.”

“True, but that same could be said for any of us,” Kyoko added, drawing on his point. “After all, there’s nothing to stop any of us from leaving our rooms after the nighttime announcement.”

“Speaking of which, what should we do about Celeste’s imposed ‘nighttime rule’?” Makoto asked, genuinely unsure of how to handle the subject. “Personally, I think it wasn’t that bad of an idea—”.

An audible scoff escaped Celeste as she cut in, “I only came up with that idea in order to use it to my advantage later. After all, no one would suspect the person who suggested the rule would break it so casually.”

“Maybe so, but I believe we should keep that rule in place,” Kyoko suggested, much to everyone’s
shock. “While she may not have intended it, the rule does have it’s benefits, such as helping to maintain a sense of time while trapped in this place.”

“I agree with Kyoko!” the resident Moral Compass concurred. “I believe that all of us will rest easier if we know that going out after nighttime is still seen as ‘off limits’. And if we all agree to abide by it, it will surely help us grow stronger as a cohesive unit!”

“Alright then, do we all agree to continue following the nighttime rule Celeste concocted?” Junko asked, watching as the group more or less nodded in agreement. “Cool. Thanks for helping to bring us closer together, Celeste. Even if you didn’t intend it that way.”

Junko smirked at the defeated gambler, who scowled deeply in response.

“Go suck a di—”, Celeste tried to say but was cut off.

“Can you plebeians at least try to stay on task for more than a few minutes? Or would you prefer I make all the decisions for you?” an irritated Byakuya scolded, trying to get things back on track.

“I-I wouldn’t m-mind if you made a-all of my decisions for me, M-Master!” Toko chimed in, earning an audible sigh from Byakuya. Undeterred by his obvious irritation, she shouted, “C-Command me! Call m-me names! S-Spit in my mou—!”

“Be silent, you disgusting fool!” Byakuya seethed, unable to endure her ‘demands’ any longer. As dutifully as always, Toko immediately shut up, but not without a perverse smile overtaking her features. Although disturbed by this, the Togami Heir ignored her as best he could before addressing the rest of the class. “We need to discuss how we plan to punish Hifumi for his betrayal. And simply having him watched is not good enough.”

“What about restricting his access to higher floors?” Junko offered, turning a few heads in her direction. “If we keep him confined to the first floor, we would be able to monitor his movements. Also, we should confiscate any dangerous tools he may still have in his room, just in case.”

“And I don’t mind helping to keep watch over him, if the need arises,” Sakura added, folding her arms and sending a one eyed glare in Hifumi’s direction.

For his part, the fanfic creator hung his head, mostly to keep from having to meet Sakura’s gaze, before saying, “I…I know that none of you can trust me right now…and I don’t blame you. Regardless of the reasons…I betrayed everyone. And…whatever you decide, I promise to go along with it…”

The sincerity of his voice spoke volumes, and most of the class was prepared to give him a second chance. However, among them, there were those who could not bring themselves to trust him so easily.

“Cheap words from someone as weak-minded as you mean nothing,” Byakuya cruelly interjected, barely acknowledging the fierce glare of his classmates. “As far as I’m concerned you’re just as irredeemable as the rest of those ‘would-be’ murderers.”

“Shouldn’t you be including yourself in that tally?” Sayaka spat, unable to contain the venom in her voice. “After all, if you’d made one mistake, Chihiro could have been left permanently comatose. Or have you forgotten?”

Shrugging off her comment, the Togami Heir countered, “How could I? When I have such dutiful peons such as yourselves reminding me every other minute?”
“Alright, that’s enough!” Junko interrupted them, already exhausted by this conversation. “We all know Byakuya’s a dick and that he’s not worth arguing with. So let’s move on to deciding what needs to be done about Hifumi. Personally, I think we should give him another chance…at some point in the future.”

“I agree,” Kyoko chimed in, glancing in the fanfic creator’s direction. “Although, I believe he’ll need to show himself to be truly remorseful before we can consider lifting his ‘punishment’. And if not, we may need to decide on further punishment, should the need arise.”

Those words stung Hifumi to the core, but he couldn’t deny he deserved such treatment. The realization that his classmates would never fully trust him again was beyond depressing…but he couldn’t deny that he brought it upon himself. Because even though he’d been manipulated by Celeste’s devilish charms, in the end, he’d willingly made the choice to conspire against his classmates.

Looking back on it, his actions filled him with nothing but utter shame. Even if he’d done it all for the sake of love, that didn’t give him the right to destroy his classmates happiness.

“I…want to trust you, really I do,” Makoto abruptly said to him, obviously conflicted over the whole issue. “But…like you said, it’ll take time before we can really trust you again. However, I think that…given enough time, we just might be able to—”.

“Uhg, enough of those damn hopeful speeches! You’re like a fucking broken record!” Celeste cut in, silencing the lucky student before sneering at the fanfic creator. “Remember that Hifumi chose to follow my instructions. And there’s no guarantee he won’t turn on you all again later. If anything, he’s even more dangerous than I—”.

*SMACK*

Almost without realizing it, Hina had shot up from her seat, marched over, and slapped Celeste across the face. Shocked expressions littered the room, but no one was more stunned than the gambler herself. However, as quickly as it came, the shock soon faded, and the Ultimate Gambler turned, almost bewildered, to face a seething Hina.

“You have no right to judge others…not after what you’ve done!” the swimmer sneered, fighting back tears of frustration. “If you weren’t such a horrible person…Hifumi wouldn’t have to suffer like this! If anything, you’re the one we need to lock up!”

Celeste stared at Hina, her crimson eyes not showing even a hint of emotion. At the same time, the gambler didn’t respond either. She took Hina’s insults without so much as a grunt…as if punishing herself.

Seeing a lack of emotion from the defeated gambler only served to further entice the Ultimate Swimmer, rearing her hand back in preparation for another slap. However, a strong grip stopped her, and the swimmer looked back to see Sakura holding her back.

“Hina…That is enough.”

At first, the swimmer glared angrily up at her friend, rage fueling her actions. However, within moments, Hina’s anger subsided as she stared at the concerned expression adorning the martial artist’s face. Slowly releasing her arm, Sakura waited as Hina’s hand dropped to her side. Without a single word, the swimmer turned her back to Celeste, walking away without so much as sparing the gambler an angry glance.
Sakura watched as her friend reclaimed her nearby seat, only then did the warrior woman resume her post, standing next to both Hifumi and Celeste, keeping a tight watch over them.

A heavy silence filled the room, one that everyone seemed to be frightened of shattering. At least, until a stoic voice spoke up.

“Well then, are we all in agreement?” Kyoko asked the group, trying to solidify the decision. “Hifumi’s punishment will be restricting him to only operating on this floor. Furthermore, if he leaves his room, he will need to be escorted at all times. We can decide who will be in charge of keeping watch later. Is that acceptable?”

Her question was directed at Hifumi, who was surprised she even bothered to consider his opinion. Regardless, he slowly nodded and said, “T-That’s…fine.”

“Does anyone object?” Kyoko asked, gauging the room. Seeing that everyone was satisfied with this decision, the mysterious girl continued, “Right, so that only leaves—”

“Oh, finally my turn for ‘punishment’? Certainly took you all long enough.”

Celeste’s mocking tone resounded in everyone’s ears, turning the class’ attention toward her. Cocking her head to the side and releasing a light huff, the disgraced gambler almost appeared bored as she waited for her classmates to pass judgement.

“Oh, finally my turn for ‘punishment’?” Celeste chastised them, seemingly mocking their previous decisions. “Certainly took you all long enough…”

All of their ‘punishments’ had been pathetic! Constant watch on Hifumi, forcing Taka to act ‘normal’? Ha! At this rate, her punishment wouldn’t be anything worse than a minor inconvenience! Not only that, she knew it was only a matter of time before her life was targeted by someone else, anyway. It was a question of ‘when’ that was going to happen, not ‘if’.

Knowing they had nothing to truly punish her with, Celeste openly laughed at them, earning multiple glares.

“Don’t tell me…you’re gonna confine me to my room? Or maybe you’ll force me to ‘act like a normal student’ too? Ha! Nothing you losers come up with will ever equal the humiliation I already —!”

“Actually, that might not be such a bad idea,” Byakuya cut in, a malicious grin spreading over his face. Puzzled by his comment, the gambler was about to question him when the Togami Heir continued, “Acting like a normal student might actually be the most fitting punishment we could bestow upon you.”

“Huh?” was all Celeste could utter as Byakuya began pacing in front of her. As he smirked down at her, the gambler scoffed and said, “Weird ‘non-punishments’ may work on simply-minded morons like the rule-nazi and fat-ass, but you’re gonna have to be a little more creative if you want to actually punish me!”

The instant those words came out of her mouth, Celeste regretted it. Byakuya stopped, directly in front of her, an evil smirk plastered on his otherwise handsome…the kind of smirk one only gets when they know they are about to inflict…true suffering.
“As you wish. Though I think you’ll find that my creativity is boundless.” The Togami Heir’s grin widened, almost imitating Monokuma’s signature smirk. Shifting his gaze, Byakuya addressed the class. “My proposal, for Celestia Ludenberg’s punishment…is to kill Celestia Ludenberg!”

Byakuya’s proposal shocked and confused the entire class, but it was obvious there was something more to it. Obviously, he couldn’t truly mean to kill her. But then, what could he possibly mean? Before anyone had time to think or react, the Togami Heir turned his back to them and continued.

“Of course, I don’t mean literally,” he followed up, glancing over his shoulder and reveling in the frustrated glances of his fellow classmates. However, it gave him the opportunity to turn back around and face Celeste directly, who was desperately trying to figure out his game. Smiling wickedly, he explained, “There is a way, however, for us to be rid of Celestia Ludenberg…forever. A method that may seem cruel, but I think will be a fitting punishment for our Ultimate Gambler.”

There was a moment of silence, and Celeste took that time to try and solidify how exactly he planned to humiliate her more than had already been done. After all, how could you kill someone without—no…they wouldn’t…

A look of horror crossed Celeste’s face, and for the first time since the trial’s conclusion, she realized there was one final thing that she had to lose.

Furrowing her brow, she growled, “You…You can’t possibly—”.

“What Byakuya’s suggesting…might be the only significant punishment we could throw at her…” Junko suddenly concurred, albeit regretfully, fully understanding the idea herself. This further increased Celeste’s fears, though she tried her best to hide it…to no avail. “Oh, it looks like we might have a winner…judging by how upset Miss Taeko is getting—”.

“DON’T…call me that,” she shouted on reflex, unintentionally giving herself away. Even so, she couldn’t stop herself from getting flustered as she retorted, “I am Celestia Ludenberg!” she said with her usual accent, almost too proudly. “I refuse to be called by…that name!”

“Making threats now? I don’t believe you’re in any kind of position to be demanding anything,” Byakuya jeered, his smirk growing wider as he addressed the class again. “I think we have discovered the perfect punishment for our dear Celestia Ludenberg, the Ultimate Gambler.”

His tone sent chills down the gambler’s spine, and she could already predict what he had in mind. Sadly, her worst fears were about to be realized. With a condescending smirk, Byakuya laid out her punishment.

“From this moment onward, Celestia Ludenberg no longer exists,” he explained, watching as the gambler’s face twisted in anger and horror. “We won’t call you by that name ever again. Instead, you will live the remainder of your life…as Taeko Yasuhiro!”

Celeste, or rather, Taeko, flinched at hearing her true name. She’d already guessed that this would be Byakuya’s idea, and even though it was humiliating, it wasn’t all that horrifying. Everyone already knew her real name, and even though just hearing it brought up more than a few…unpleasant memories, she could endure it…or so she thought.

“I have a question,” Kyoko suddenly spoke up, addressing Byakuya directly. The Togami Heir met her gaze, affording her the time she needed to ask, “You mentioned that you wanted to ‘kill’ Celestia Ludenberg. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I get the feeling you don’t plan to stop simply at changing her name.”
That statement caught Taeko’s attention, the defeated gambler only just realizing that her mysterious classmate had made a very valid…and horrifying, point. As if in response to her fears, Byakuya dangled a certain gambler’s room key in front of the class, a sickening smirk stretching his lips.

“Of course not.” His words were like ice-water in Taeko’s veins, and she found herself frozen as he turned and faced the cafeteria exit. “I think it’s time we purged Celestia Ludenberg’s existence from this academy…permanently.”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Holy crap! Was that a huge chapter or what?! But what exactly does Byakuya plan to do? How exactly does he plan to ‘purge’ Taeko’s former identity? How will the other students react to his ideas? You’ll have to keep on reading to find out!

I know, I know, I’ve been away for a loooong time! But, to be fair, I had a river rafting trip, my brother’s wedding, and a whole lot of other life events happen that kept me away from my computer! But now, I’m back and I sincerely hope to get more of this story written soon!

Also, thank you so much to everyone who has liked, commented, favorited, etc., during my long absence! You have no idea how inspiring it was to know you all love my story so much! Some of you even sent me fan-art! And it was amazing! Truly, from the bottom of my heart, thank you all so much!

As always, leave a comment/review to tell me what you think of the story, and have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

Celestia Ludenberg undergoes a fitting punishment for her betrayal…but is she the only one being punished?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Y-You bastards! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Celeste—No, Taeko Yasuhiro, stood in the doorway of her room, her expression a mixture of seething and horrified, helpless watching as her classmates ransacked her private sanctuary. Like worker bees, a trio consisting of Mondo, Makoto, and Hina, buzzed around her room, destroying the eloquent and peaceful atmosphere that had once been a haven for Taeko to return to each day.

“As I said before, we are purging Celestia Ludenberg from this school,” Byakuya said, sitting on the exposed mattress of her bed, examining a vase that had once occupied her table. Then, without the slightest care, he tossed it into a large box in front of him, a minute cracking sound echoing. “Everything that symbolizes or facilitates Celestia Ludenberg’s presence will be confiscated and removed…permanently.”

Taeko struggled to keep herself together, silently contemplating the best way to rip his throat out. That vase wasn’t cheap! Nothing in her room could be bought on a high schooler’s allowance! And yet, none of her tormentors seemed to give the slightest amount of care while they gutted her inner sanctum!

The lovely satin sheets of her bed had been ripped from the mattress. The few dress forms that were used to display her gothic apparel, along with anything else gothic or exotic in appearance, were torn from their place. Even the elegant chandelier, which she’d paid an exorbitant amount to have shipped to the school, was careless tossed onto one of three large boxes resting atop push carts in the center of her room.

None of her personal items were spared; the table cloth she’d procured through a great deal of hardship, a case filled with various kinds of dice, even the pack of cards she used for solitaire was sadistically plucked from its spot and tossed into one of the boxes. Nothing in her room was safe… and Taeko had a feeling this wouldn’t be over until everything she valued was confiscated!

The gambler gritted her teeth and tried to take an angry step forward, but was held firmly in place by a strong grip on her arm. Snapping her head around, she seethed at Sakura, who’s vice-like grip kept her from interfering with her classmates’ ‘cleansing’. She struggled briefly, attempting to wrench her arm free, furious pounding her fist on Sakura’s wrist. However, as one might imagine, her futile attempts barely even registered on the martial artist’s face.

Forced to recognize her own weakness, Taeko ceased her struggling, somberly turning back to witness the destruction of her abode. A part of her insisted that she look away, spare herself the horror of watching all her possessions torn from their natural place…but she couldn’t look away. Her pride, or whatever was left of it, wouldn’t let her. After all…
This was her punishment. There was no escape.

The gambler watched in horror as Mondo, of all people, pulled open her closet and began brutishly ripping her clothes off meticulously arranged hangers. His rough hands tore and mangled the fabric, not showing the slightest bit of care of the delicate material before tossing them into the closest box. Watching that uncaring display, Taeko clenched her fist so tightly, her fingernails dug into her palm and started to bleed slightly.

“Hey! Careful with those!” she abruptly snapped, causing everyone to stop working. Having secured their attention, the gambler focused her gaze on the biker and said, “Those cost me a fortune! At least pretend to be gentle with them!”

Mondo looked away from her and back to the closet full of eloquent gothic dresses. Slowly reaching his hand out, he was about to try and acclimate to her request when a harsh voice countered…

“You don’t need to listen to her,” Hina cruelly interjected, surprising both Mondo and Taeko with the severity of her tone. Staring right at the gambler, the swimmer narrowed her gaze and instructed, “Tear them off the hooks if you have to, just get everything out of there as quickly as possible. Besides, she can always buy more…if we ever get out of here!”

Taeko couldn’t help but flinch as Hina’s words tore through her. Not only was the swimmer disregarding the gambler’s feelings, she even mocked her with the false hope of someday escaping this hell. It was a painful reminder of just how deeply the swimmer had been scarred. At the same time, Taeko couldn’t bring herself to fault the swimmer. The once bubbly young woman who she’d shared tea with, peeped on the boys alongside, and even made promises with…was gone…and may even be lost forever.

“It’s my fault…that she ended up this way…”

It was painful. Far more painful than the gambler could have imagined. Watching as Hina dug through the drawers of her dresser, carelessly tossing earrings, bracelets, and an assortment of rings onto the pile, almost smirking as she did so. Not even her underwear drawer was spared, the Ultimate Swimmer frowning as she scooped up an armful of lacy panties and thongs, mercilessly throwing them on the very top of the heap, for all to see.

Despite herself, Taeko flushed angrily, the embarrassment of having her most private possessions strewn about for her entire class to see, was almost more than she could withstand. Granted most of the class was waiting outside, but it was only a matter of time before they were paraded around to wherever Byakuya planned to transport them to.

Meanwhile, Makoto busied himself searching through the drawers of ‘Celeste’s’ desk, removing absolutely anything that could be used as an impromptu weapon. As it turned out, the gambler had more than one finger claw, and even had one for each finger. Those had to go; tossed into the pile without a second thought.

“So, am I supposed to pull everything out of the closet or just the fancy stuff?” Mondo asked, sticking his head out and glancing in Byakuya’s direction.

“Plain or simple clothing may stay, but everything else…must go,” the Togami Heir clarified, the wicked smirk on his lips nearly pushing the gambler into a frenzied madness.

Looking back into the closet, the biker raised an eyebrow before reiterating, “You sure about that? She’s not gonna have much of anything to wear.”
If she had been in a better state of mind, Taeko would have understood that he was trying to be considerate. But as it stood, all she could do was seethe at his bluntness, feeling more and more embarrassed with each passing second.

“That’s fine,” the Affluent Progeny replied, meeting the gambler’s furious gaze with a cold stare. “This is her punishment, after all. It wouldn’t serve us to be lenient with her, after all she’s done.”

“…Fucking bastard,” Taeko cursed, surprised when Byakuya’s gaze suddenly grew even colder.

“Be grateful I’m letting you keep those rags you’re currently wearing,” he sneered, catching her off-guard.

Briefly glancing down at her ruined outfit, noting the many tears, ruffles, and stains sustained during the trial, Taeko knew that letting her ‘keep’ her current dress was more of an insult than a favor. Hatred filled her eyes and she refocused her rage toward him, which only seemed to entice the Affluent Progeny further.

“Another outburst like that and I’ll have those clothes added to the pile as well,” he seethed, pointing an intimidating finger at her. “Or would you prefer to simply discard those rags right now? I’m sure Sakura wouldn’t mind helping you change into more…humble attire.”

It took everything Taeko had not to scream at him. That was taking things too far! He wouldn’t really do something so horrific…would he? Sadly, given his track record until now, it wasn’t inconceivable. The bastard had proven himself to be only a few steps behind Monokuma in terms of cruelty! And if she refused to change in front of others, it was also possible that, as terrifying as this thought would be, he might actually try and force her to parade around in nothing but her undergarments!

Such a horrifying outcome was, sadly, a viable punishment he might subject her to…and thus she decided not to tempt fate further.

“Alright…that should be everything,” Makoto announced, staring at the three large boxes, each overflowing with clothing, trinkets, and various accessories that had once brought the gambler so much joy.

A sad expression crossed the Lucky Student’s face, obviously not enjoying putting his classmate through such agony. Sadly, his pity only further incited Taeko to frustration, considering how he ‘led the charge’ that eventually led to her crimes being discovered. The room was almost completely bare now, with almost no trace that anyone, let alone someone as extravagant as ‘Celestia Ludenberg’, had once occupied it.

Glancing to Byakuya, the lucky student asked, “So…what do you want us to do with all of it?”

Responding with a disappointed look, the Togami Heir let out a deep sigh. “The three of you will transport these items elsewhere. That much should have obvious.”

“Hey! We’re not your fucking slaves!” Mondo instantly protested, feeling a bit daunted by the sheer volume of items in front of them. “And where, exactly are we supposed to take this stuff? We gonna lock it up in the storage room or something?”

Another exhausted sigh escaped the Togami Heir as he stood up and headed for the doorway, motioning for them to follow after him.

“Everything will be made clear soon enough,” he said, almost cheerfully, as he pushed past Taeko and Sakura, and into the hallway.
Mondo and Makoto shared a look of annoyance, feeling more uncomfortable than ever. However, they were snapped out of it by the sound of Hina jerking one of the push carts around and effortlessly pushing it toward the door, following Byakuya without so much as a complaint. Seeing this, Mondo shrugged his shoulders and followed suit, with Makoto mimicking them.

Once they had departed, with all of Taeko’s beloved possessions in tow, Sakura relaxed her grip on the gambler’s arm, wordlessly indicating that they should follow. Knowing that there was no real choice, the gambler slowly walked toward the exit, but not before glancing over her shoulder at her barren room, cringing as a stinging pain of humiliation ran through her chest.

Just outside the room, Taeko took in the various expression of the rest of her classmates.

Leon and Sayaka stood together, as was usual nowadays, sharing a conflicted expression. Kyoko was as stone-faced as ever, watching the events unfold with seemingly no emotion behind her violet eyes. Chihiro and Taka followed after Mondo, offering to help carry some of the load, which the biker vehemently refused, citing how it was ‘his burden to bear’. Toko was absent from the whole debacle, having been sent away after being given a task by her beloved ‘Master’, no doubt working tirelessly to complete whatever it was. Hifumi stood off to the side, strangely silent as he observed them ‘cleansing’ the gambler’s room, a somewhat melancholy expression on his face.

Taeko briefly wondered why the fat nerd wasn’t enjoying her torture more. He’d sure been pleased with her suffering during the trial. And she’d figured his sadistic attitude would extend to this situation as well. Perhaps he was wondering if they’d do the same to him later? They had agreed to remove all dangerous items from his room too, but she doubted they’d go as far with his possessions.

Distracted by those thoughts, Taeko barely noticed that some people were missing. Junko, Hiro, and obviously Byakuya, since he’d left before anyone else, were nowhere to be seen. However, the gambler knew that all she needed to do was follow after the trio of transporters in order to find them…or so she assumed.

With the rest of the class in tow, Taeko walked down the hallway, rounding the corner and emerging on the other side of the dorm’s hallway. She paused for a moment, then stiffened. Her crimson eyes widened as she watched Hina, who held the door for both Mondo and Makoto, standing in the entranceway…to the trash room.

In all honesty, she’d expected this. Somewhere, deep down, she knew this was the only explanation for Byakuya’s phrasing of ‘purging Celestia Ludenberg’ from the school. But even so, she’d lied to herself again. Convinced herself that her possessions were merely being confiscated…even when she knew that couldn’t be the case.

Regardless, as her possessions disappeared into the disposal room, the lie she’d concocted fell apart, and all the anxiety and frustration she’d buried deep within abruptly burst forth.

“No…no, no, no, NO!”

Surprised by the gambler’s sudden outburst, Sakura inadvertently loosened her grip. Sensing this opportunity, Taeko jerked her arm free and sprinted for the doorway, just barely managing to avoid being grappled by the martial artist once again. Unfortunately, as she reached the door, it swung back and smacked her in the face. It had been Hina, purposefully slamming the door on her. Toppling backward, the furious gambler practically leapt to her feet and bashed open the door.

Taeko’s crimson eyes widened as she took in the scene. At the far end of the room stood Hiro, pressing the button on the incinerator and smiling as it roared to life. Not far from him, standing with a hand on her hip and sporting an angry expression, was Junko. She was arguing with Byakuya,
who didn’t seem to value her opinion in the slightest.

“I still think this is going too far!” she heard the Fashionista protest, gesturing toward the trio of boxes containing ‘Celeste’s’ belongings, sitting only a few feet from the incinerator. The Fashionista caught sight of the gambler, a momentarily piteous expression crossing her face before anger took hold again and she seethed to Byakuya, “Getting rid of all her personal possessions won’t make our situation any easier!”

“Well then, it’s fortunate that ‘making things easier’ isn’t the purpose behind this exercise,” Byakuya effortlessly countered, also catching sight of Taeko and smiling deviously. “This is a punishment, nothing more. Perhaps this will teach our dear friend Miss Yasuhiro to be more docile in the future.”

Almost without her noticing, the rest of the class entered the trash room. This, of course, included Sakura, who once again gripped Taeko’s arm. This time, however, the gambler didn’t fight, letting the martial artist lead her over to stand next to the pile of items that once decorated her room. Then, strangely, Sakura released her. The gambler was almost flabbergasted but didn’t question it, sinking down to her knees in front of her possessions.

The once proud gambler’s expression softened as the sentimental value of her items washed over her. Each item was like a piece of Celestia Ludenberg, used to extenuate that persona in one way or another. As sickening as it was to admit, Byakuya had chosen a perfect punishment for her. His insight into how he could psychologically destroy another human being was as impressive as it was infuriating! If she had been allowed to be Celestia Ludenberg, she would have praised him. But as Taeko Yasuhiro…she despised him with every fiber of her being!

“Let’s begin the punishment,” the bastard himself declared, addressing the entire class. “All of these items represent the person we once knew as Celestia Ludenberg. And today…we’re going to dispose of each and every one of them. Starting with these…”

He gestured toward the largest box, containing her dress forms, her elegant wooden chair, and even the costly chandelier. Taeko flinched as Makoto and Mondo wheeled the box over to the large trash chute, preparing to execute the punishment.

It was worthwhile to note that most of the class abstained from assisting in this punishment. In fact, most of the class had objected to Byakuya’s bizarrely cruel form of torture. Not that it mattered anyway. Even if they didn’t actively support the idea, their inaction to prevent it made them complicit. She wanted to say that she’d never forgive them for it…but that was beyond foolish, considering she’d actively planned their demises for quite some time now.

Besides, only a few of her classmates actually seemed pleased with this outcome…

While it was true that Hina actively volunteered to help carry out the punishment, it was largely due to the fact that Byakuya couldn’t convince anyone else to assist him. Unfortunately, when the swimmer eagerly volunteered, both Makoto and Mondo found themselves complying as well. Even if it was cruel, they couldn’t let Hina do all that work completely on her own…regardless of how uncomfortable the task made them feel.

In the end, only Junko stood in direct opposition to the Togami Heir plan, a fact that had baffled Taeko to no end.

Even more than Makoto, her hatred for Junko ran deep. She utterly detested that woman for destroying her testimony during the class trial and effectively turning her plan on its head! And yet, that same hated person had tried to spare her even more pain and humiliation. It sickened her…so much so that she almost wanted to go along with the ‘purging’ of her belongings just to stand in
opposition to the Fashionista!

But that was a stupid thought, and she knew it. So in the end, Taeko was forced to sit there and watch as everything she loved was torn from her…forever.

Taeko remained rooted in place, watching as everything was somewhat sorted. Biting back protests, she shook with fury as anything too large, or unfit to burn in the incinerator was cast into the trash chute…never to be seen again. Working in tandem, Makoto held open the trash chute while Mondo hefted the heavier objects, such as the elegant wooden chair, into the tunnel of trash. Loud banging echoed as her dress forms, still bearing two of her favorite designs, disappeared into the abyss of the chute. Her earrings and other accessories followed, the gold and silver glinting one final time before vanishing from her sight forever.

All the while, Taeko gripped her shoulders, trembling from rage as she recalled how much of her own money she’d spent on those items. Not only that, the copious amount of time she’d spent crafting her image, finding the right accessories that elevated her status from ‘the plain and boring Taeko’ to ‘the sophisticated and dignified Celestia Ludenberg’…all of it now completely worthless as her classmates carelessly discarded everything that gave her purpose in life.

But none of that compared to the hell that she knew was still to come.

Tearing her eyes away from the boys, Taeko’s crimson eyes focused on Hina, her mind almost shattering as she watched the swimmer pick one of her absolute favorite dresses, a black strapless design with lacey frills around the skirt…and begin walking toward the raging inferno of the incinerator.

“W-Wait! Hold on a second!” she instinctively shouted, her voice miraculously halting the swimmer’s advance. Hina stood just in front of the opening, staring at Taeko with cruel, cold eyes. Knowing she had nothing left to lose, the gambler said, “At least leave me one or two of my outfits. I can’t exactly go around the school half nak—”

In the middle of her sentence, Hina mercilessly tossed the dress she held into the roaring flames. Taeko’s eyes widened and she thrust one hand out before giving a horrified shriek, “Ahhaaah!! NO!”

Helpless as the fire consumed the black dress, Taeko felt tears slide down her cheeks as one of her most prized possessions was reduced to ash before her very eyes. Stunned by the loss, the gambler was only snapped back to reality when Hina slowly picked up another dress from the pile, dangling it in front of the gambler momentarily.

“I guess you should have thought about that before you lied to me!”

Without hesitation, Hina threw the next dress into the inferno, her fiery words burning almost as hot as the incinerator’s flames.

Suddenly, Taeko’s misery converted into fury as she leapt to her feet and screamed, “You bitch! Do you have any idea how much it cost me to make that?! More than you’ll ever—NO!”

Amidst her words, Hina scooped up another dress and tossed it into the blaze, the harsh flames reflected in her shimmering blue eyes. “You can always buy more of them, right?” she hissed, throwing another outfit into the fire. “After all, you’ve made so much money with your gambling, you don’t need the money Monokuma offered, right!”

As Taeko’s own words were mercilessly thrown in her face, the swimmer threw in yet another outfit,
earning a pained grunt from the gambler. Rising to her feet, she tried to take a step forward, but once again, her jailor, Sakura, grasped her arm, keeping her from interfering. The gambler snapped her head up to shout at the martial artist…but froze as she took in her expression.

Sakura Ogami, a woman to be feared and respected for her strength, glared down at Taeko with nothing less than contempt in her cyan eyes. Even without speaking a word, the gambler could feel Sakura’s intention.

You did this to Hina. This is all your fault. I will never forgive you.

Like a tidal wave, the guilt she’d suppressed for betraying Hina washed over her. Seeing the utter fury, the unforgiving rage that Sakura bore for her, forced her to realize that her actions had affected far more than just the swimmer. She had tried to kill all of her classmates…for her castle…for a dream that she knew was childish…but also something she felt she needed in order to prove…that she deserved to exist.

But now, after having lost all her worldly possessions, her ‘name’, and even her pride and dignity…she knew that none of them compared to the loss she felt…when she threw away Hina’s friendship.

Somehow, she managed to return her gaze to the ‘purging’ of her clothes, her eyes growing more and more hollow with each incinerated outfit. Pain coursed through Taeko as she was forced to watch her former friend her clothing, one after another, into the incinerator.

“This…This is worse than being burned alive…”

Every fiber of her being wanted to protest, to cry out and try to stop this ‘injustice’, but that was impossible. Irony had finally caught up with her, and in the most excruciating way possible. The pain and agony she’d forced Hina to endure…was now being revisited upon her.

Even though it took several minutes for Hina to get through the majority of ‘Celeste’s’ outfits, it felt as though an eternity had passed. For her part, Hina almost seemed to enjoy the cruel agony she was putting Taeko through. Instead of tossing the outfits in as one large heap, she slowly, meticulously, chose one after another, tossing them into the flames individually. And each time she did, she shot the gambler a hateful glare, scowling deeply as Taeko’s face contorted with agony upon each burning.

The ‘cleansing’ was almost over. All of her large items and other accessories that couldn’t be incinerated, had been dumped into the trash chute, never to be seen again. Only a few of her outfits remained, and once they were gone…there would be nothing left of Celestia Ludenberg. A chill set into Taeko as she was forced to accept this reality…

…I deserve this…Hina has every right to hate me…I know that…But still, I—!

An audible gasp escaped Taeko as the final dress came into view. Her crimson eyes widened, focusing on the elegant burgundy material of the gothic dress, laced with black frills. It was the oldest in her collection…and had been her liberation many years ago. She remembered the first time she’d worn it, the material somehow empowering her, giving her the courage to cease her pitiful existence as Taeko Yasuhiro…and embrace the confidence, the majesty, the greatest that would eventually become…Celestia Ludenberg.

Almost without realizing it, she reached out for it…unable to grasp it.

“M-My…first dress…I spent so much time—NO!”

Taeko nearly screamed as Hina roughly grabbed the dress, looking it over for half an instant before
checking the box for any straggler outfits. Seeing none, the swimmer huffed and glared at the gambler.

“Last one. Any final words before I send this dress to hell, along with the rest of your ‘collection’?”

For an instant, Taeko was genuinely shocked by Hina’s cruelty. She could see how much pain the gambler was experiencing, and actively trying to intensify it. That wasn’t the Aoi Asahina everyone had come to know…the Aoi Asahina that everyone had loved. She had become twisted…tainted by the malicious nature of Celestia Ludenberg.

“What’s this…? From here on…don’t trust anyone. Throughout history, people have shown themselves to be nothing but deceitful, selfish creatures…willing to stab anyone in the back as long as it benefits them. Don’t make the same mistake twice…”

Those words she’d spoken during the trial came back to haunt her. She’d meant them as a cautionary warning. In her own way, Taeko had been trying to impart the wisdom she’d received through painful life experience. She wanted Hina to continue on…she wanted her to wise up and never be manipulated like this again! But most of all…she wanted the only person she’d ever considered to be her friend…to survive this harrowing ordeal.

“This…isn’t what I wanted…” Taeko told herself, unable to speak the words. “I wanted you to be better than me…not become like me! You were…my very first…fri—”

“Nothing to say? Well, I guess it’s too much to expect an apology from a heartless monster like you,” Hina abruptly said, interrupting the gambler’s thoughts.

Taeko had been so distraught that she hadn’t noticed that the swimmer was already in front of the incinerator! Panic overtook her mind as she watched Hina hoist the burgundy dress toward the opening. Then, with an expression so vengeful it would make Monokuma blush, the swimmer reared back and prepared to toss the final dress into the raging inferno.

“I hope it was all worth it. Say goodbye to your life…as Celestia Ludenberg—!”

“I’M SORRY!”

Taeko dropped to her knees, bowing until her forehead smacked the floor. Her voice cracked as she screamed, her eyes wide and desperate. It had been years…many, many years since she’d ever truly apologized for anything. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d given an earnest apology. She’d killed those feelings of guilt and responsibility when she became Celestia Ludenberg. But now, having returned to live as Taeko Yasuhiro, she saw the world through an entirely different perspective.

“Please…you don’t have to do this!” Taeko begged, hoping to get through to her former friend. “That’s more than just a dress to me…it’s the first dress I ever made! I’m begging you…please don’t burn it!”

“…Made?”

For the first time since the class trial had ended, an emotion other than spite sounded in Hina’s voice. Snapping her head up, Taeko was in awe as she saw the swimmer’s expression soften considerably. Hina unfolded the dress, thoroughly examining it, running her hands over the material and seeming genuinely impressed.

“You…made this yourself?” she quietly asked, finally turning and meeting the gambler’s gaze.
A tiny flicker of hope sparked in Taeko’s chest as she continued, “I-I… I make all of my own clothes. I don’t just go out and buy them. Each one of them is sewn, painstakingly, by hand, so that —”.

“Wait, then… all of them… you sewed all of those dresses… by hand!” Hina exclaimed, her face registering nothing but shock.

“…Yes, I did.”

“That’s… amazing!” Hina suddenly complimented, much to the gambler’s delight. “I don’t know much about sewing or anything, but even I know how hard it is to do all this by hand!”

As Hina’s praise filled her ears, Taeko felt that glimmer of hope begin to spread throughout her body. To be noticed, and complimented for her hard work! It was all she’d ever really wanted for so many years!

Celeste never would have seemed the type, but Taeko was a master seamstress. And while it was true that she only learned how to sew in order to pursue her goal of becoming Celestia Ludenberg, she couldn’t deny that somewhere along the way, she developed an earnest love for the art of sewing.

Perhaps… in another life, she would have been the Ultimate Seamstress instead… but there was no point in pondering such a thing now. Right now, all that mattered was that, somehow, it seemed as though she was finally getting through to Hina. The real Hina, the one that she had so mercilessly hurt… the Hina that could smile brightly no matter how horrific the situation.

Maybe, just maybe… that Hina wasn’t completely gone. Celestia Ludenberg had utterly destroyed that sweet innocent young woman… but perhaps, in recompense, Taeko Yasuhiro might be able to bring her back!

“Well… if you’d like… I could… teach you sometime?” the gambler nervously offered, extending the proverbial olive branch. “I did promise to teach you… how to be more ladylike, didn’t I?”

“…”

Hina was completely silent as the offer reached her. Her hands tightened around the dress, but relaxed a moment later.

Taeko watched with bated breath as Hina stared at the dress in her hands, then over to the incinerator. And for a brief moment, Taeko could almost see a hint of shame cross Hina’s stunned face. However, it vanished almost instantly as a stern expression replaced it. Fortunately, despite how rigid her face had become, Taeko could no longer see malice or fury in the swimmer’s eyes.

Before she could muster another appeal, Hina stepped away from the incinerator. A collection of gasps reminded Taeko that they weren’t alone in the room. All of their classmates were apparently stunned by this sudden shift in the swimmer’s demeanor, especially considering how vengeful Hina had been the last few hours.

Without a word, the swimmer walked over to the kneeling Taeko, holding the dress firmly in both hands. Then, much to Taeko’s surprise, Hina held the dress outward, presenting it to her former friend. A single tear trickled down the gambler’s cheek, daring to let a joyful expression overtake her features.

With shaky hands, Taeko reached for the dress… but grabbed air. At the last moment, Hina tugged the dress back, much to everyone’s shock. Then, with an icy glare so frigid it froze the air in Taeko’s
lungs, the swimmer seethed…

“You shouldn’t make promises you don’t intend to keep…”

Without a shred of hesitation, Hina gripped the edges of the elegant dress…and began to ruthlessly tear it apart at the seams. A horrified gasp escaped Taeko as her former friend aggressively tore the sleeves off, ripped the lacy frills from the collar, and used her toned muscles to pull at the fabric until the seams creaked and split apart.

Taeko stared in horror as her most precious creation was torn asunder, the ripped fragments thrown at her feet in a mass of ruined cloth. Hot tears spilled from the gambler’s crimson eyes as the full weight of her sins bore down on her.

Hina had done exactly what ‘Celeste’ had done to her. Lured her into a false sense of security and friendship…only to utterly destroy everything she held dear. Poetic irony at its finest…

Once she was satisfied with the ‘carnage’, Hina tossed the ruined dress directly in front of Taeko. The gambler’s shaky hands reach out, clutching the torn material and hugging it to her chest, sobbing uncontrollably. Slowly lifting her tear-stained face, the gambler stared up at Hina with nothing but pain exuding from her features. At the same time, Hina glared down at her, an expression of utter rage and vengeful malice radiating from her once vibrant blue eyes.

Then, with a voice interlaced with venom, Hina asked…

“Tell me…Celeste…How does it feel to have your heart ripped out…right in front of you?!”

Each word sent pangs of agony rippling through Taeko’s body. This was all her fault. She was responsible for turning Hina into the monster she’d become. But what hurt was the most was the realization that, despite her plan going completely awry…the had been one casualty. ‘Celestia Ludenberg’ had succeeded in ‘murdering’ at least one person…and it happened to be the one person she would have spared…if given the chance.

“I…killed her. Hina…really is gone. And it’s all…my…fault…”

In the midst of her suffering, Hina huffed angrily and walked around her, heading for the exit. However, before she got too far, the swimmer cocked her head and said over her shoulder, “Don’t ever speak to me again. You’re dead to me!”

And with that, Hina bolted from the room, slamming the door behind her. The rest of the class turned toward Taeko, and were shocked to see her slowly rising to her feet, dropping the pieces of her torn dress to the floor…a physical representation of her disfigured dream.

“…Burn it.”

Her voice was so low, barely above a whisper, but still they heard her clear as day. Her request shocked the class, almost flabbergasted at her sudden change in attitude.

For a long moment, no one moved, hesitant to comply with her request. That is…until Sakura walked around in front of her, opening her mouth to say something but immediately falling silent upon viewing Taeko’s face. Aside from the tears, and puffy cheeks, all life appeared drained from the gambler’s visage. Her usually striking crimson eyes had dulled, and her face was completely neutral…as if her soul had somehow left her body.

Whatever Sakura had planned to say went unsaid. Instead, she slowly scooped up the remnants of the gambler’s dress, walked over to the incinerator…and tossed them in.
Taeko watched as her ruined dress burned...becoming ashes in mere moments. And, for a brief instant...she pondered if she could go with it...consumed by the flames that she’d once feared...but knew that such a merciful fate...was forever out of her reach.

“Hey Byakuya, are we done here? Because I’d like to get back to my room and shower before the nighttime announcement goes off.”

Mukuro knew her comment was rather insensitive and blunt, but with most of the class standing there, seemingly unwilling to move, she felt the need to say something...anything. Besides, it wasn’t a lie. It was getting close to nighttime and after everything she, and everyone else, had been through, she was ready to collapse.

She internally groaned as she remembered she needed to meet Kyoko, but that would come after a shower. The detective girl had asked her to meet during nighttime, so there would hopefully be time to let the warm bliss of steamy water cleanse her before continuing her battle against her sister.

Fortunately, her words had the desired effect, as her classmates slowly returned to reality. The class had been so focused on Taeko’s punishment that they’d forgotten that it was almost time for the nighttime announcement. Most of them were exhausted, having been running around and then debating since early that morning. The weariness was beginning to set in, a fact that the soldier could see even Byakuya was afflicted by, if only slightly.

“Yes, we’re finished here at least,” he replied, not even sparing her a glance. “However, there is still the matter of removing any dangerous objects from Hifumi’s room.”

The fanfic creator flinched but said nothing, obviously fearful after seeing how gutted Taeko’s room had been after it was ‘purged’. Mukuro’s keen eyes noticed this and she felt the need to add, “We’re not going to be burning them too, are we?”

There was a firmness to her tone that Byakuya couldn’t ignore, and she knew that. She watched as he finally turned to face her, a deep scowl forming on his handsome face.

“...No, we are just confiscating dangerous objects, not purging them. We can lock them up in the art supply room, they should be fine there.” The Togami Heir shifted his gaze to Hifumi, making the fanfic creator wince as he was lectured, “Since you are no longer allowed to leave this floor, if any of your belonging go missing, we will know who to interrogate first.”

Mukuro gritted her teeth at his implication. The bastard was still being completely unfair. What if someone other than Hifumi took those items? Hifumi would take the blame and it could cause another incident to occur. Granted, it’s not as if there were many people left who she believed would intentionally cause that kind of trouble, but the possibility still existed. Byakuya himself might take something and implicate the fanfic creator, just to ‘make the game more interesting’.

“Dammit, now I’ve got yet another issue to worry about! Why the hell does Byakuya keep making things—!?”

In the midst of her thoughts, she felt eyes on her. Lifting her gaze, she noticed that the bastard himself, Byakuya, was intently analyzing her. Mukuro fought to keep a neutral visage as a horrific realization struck her.

“He’s...He’s gauging my reaction! Dammit! I knew he was getting more suspicious of me, but I didn’t think he’d start pulling shit like this!”
She watched and waited as Byakuya stared at her for a moment. Then, as quickly as it came, his interest in her appeared to vanish as he turned away, but not before a tiny smirk tugged at the edge of his lips. Mukuro felt her face heat up as she bottled up all of her frustrations.

“Well, this is fucking perfect! He’s definitely on to me now! And he’s letting me know it too! His overconfidence is going to get me killed!”

Just as her frustrations threatened to boil over, she felt a soft tug on her sleeve. The action made her head snap around, barely keeping herself from grappling whoever dared to touch—

Mukuro froze as Kyoko’s piercing lavender eyes met her sky-blue irises. The soldier tensed, then slowly began to relax as the detective’s solitary glance spoke volumes louder than her simple action. Even though it was difficult to accept, Kyoko had once again intervened in order to keep her secret safe.

“You really meant it…didn’t you?” Mukuro mentally pondered, holding a neutral expression as she recalled the detective’s words in the hidden room earlier that day. “You never break a promise…”

Fortunately enough, no one witnessed their little interaction, or at least it didn’t seem that way. Byakuya was preoccupied trying to get people to volunteer to clear out Hifumi’s room, which drew everyone’s attention. Mukuro reminded herself that Kyoko was now in just as precarious a situation as herself. Knowing that, if the Mastermind discovered everything she’d told to the detective…both of them would be executed.

There would be no trial…Junko would find a way to have them executed, even if it meant bending the rules. The despair loving woman had spent too much time devising this game for it to end prematurely. No deaths had occurred thus far…and Mukuro could only imagine how unfulfilled her sister must be feeling. A cold chill ran down her spine, only just realizing how desperate Junko would undoubtedly become from this point on.

Junko’s creativity knew no bounds, and with the game progressing so slowly, as far as body counts go, Mukuro was certain that her next motive would be even more diabolical than anything the students had seen so far!

At the same time, Mukuro also realized that panicking wasn’t going to solve anything. Closing her eyes and willing herself into a calm state, the soldier felt Kyoko’s grip on her sleeve disappear. Slowly regaining composure, the false fashionista met her partner’s gaze once more.

“I’ll be sure to keep my promise as well,” she vowed to herself, matching the detective’s firm gaze. “If we continue to be cautious, and work together, then at the very least, we should be able to derail whatever Junko has planned…I just hope we survive long enough to see it.”

Having sufficiently calmed down, the soldier took a few more deep breaths, thankful that, for the first time in what felt like ages…she had an ally watching her back. It reminded her of a better time…back in Fenrir…when her life was simpler…and happier.

Nodding a silent ‘thank you’ to the detective girl, Mukuro turned and faced Byakuya…unaware that a pair of eyes had scrupulously witnessed the entire exchange.

“Regardless, I will need some volunteers to help clean out Hifumi’s room,” Byakuya spoke up again, glancing at his classmates. “Makoto, I believe you will be suitable for this task. Who wants to help him?”
All eyes shifted to Makoto, sympathy laced in their gazes as the ‘Lucky’ boy was unwillingly volunteered once again. Fortunately, it took less than a moment for someone to voice their support as well.

“I’ll help,” Sayaka insisted, walking over to stand next to Makoto. With a bright smile, she told him, “If we hurry, we may even have time to get something to eat.”

“Yeah, with the three of us, we’ll have it done in no time!” Leon suddenly added, appearing behind them and wrapping his arms around their shoulders. “And then…it’s sandwich time!”

His enthusiasm was infectious, practically forcing Makoto and Sayaka to reciprocate his smile. Sadly, they both knew that no such sandwich supplies had been delivered, for reasons they could not fathom, but kept that information to themselves. They’d console him after they cleaned out Hifumi’s room.

“Let’s be off then,” Byakuya rallied, his voice somehow more annoyed than before. “I’d prefer to be done with this task before nighttime as well.”

Without elaborating, the Togami Heir began walking toward the exit, with most of the students following after him. As the students began to file out, Sakura stopped herself. Her gaze shifted over to Taeko’s stiff form, the gambler watching as the flames in the furnace began to die, leaving her possessions as nothing more than ash to be tossed down the trash chute.

“Are you ready?” Sakura asked gentle, a hint of concern in her voice.

“…Like it fucking matters,” Taeko quietly seethed, her voice as broken as her spirit.

The gambler turned slowly, finally tearing her eyes away from the dying embers of the incinerator. She walked forward without any hesitation, but the lifelessness in her eyes was beyond disheartening. And even though all of the students agreed that her punishment was well-deserved… the cruelty forced upon her was still hard to watch.

As the group exited the trash room, a familiar, yet frustrating voice shouted down the hallway.

“M-Master! I-I brought e-everything you asked f-for!”

Like the obedient slave she desired to be, Toko Fukawa suddenly appeared in front of everyone, panting and sweating profusely. She held a small box close to her chest, clutching it as if her life depended on it.

“Hand it over,” Byakuya commanded, to which Toko immediately complied. Once it was out of her grasp, the class finally saw what was inside the box. Metal latches, a hammer, and various sizes of nails and screws.

“What’s all that for?” Junko asked, already predicting that she wouldn’t like the answer. Rather than being cryptic, the Togami heir decided to humor her.

“Since our dorm rooms only lock from the inside, I felt it necessary to rectify that. For one of us at least,” he told her plainly, sending a quick glance toward Taeko before handing the box back to Toko. Turning away from the group, he continued, “It’s foolish to simply post a guard outside her door every day. But if we make sure she won’t be able to leave without permission—”. 

“Don’t you think she’s suffered enough?” Sayaka interrupted, forcing the Togami heir to glance over his shoulder at her. Undeterred by his gaze, she finished, “Regardless of her crimes, she’s still our classmate. Besides, we didn’t vote on whether or not to confine her to her room.”
“Such a pointless endeavor,” Byakuya scoffed, his condescending tone frustrating the pop idol. “What would be the point of confining Hifumi to his quarters if we didn’t plan to do the same with the one who manipulated him in the first place?”

Knowing his logic was infallible, the Togami Heir turned to fully face the class, an authoritative tone consuming his voice.

“We have had three separate instances of murder attempts, one of which you were directly responsible for.”

Sayaka opened her mouth but quickly shut it, realizing he was baiting her. Although a bit disappointed she didn’t try and rebuke him, the Togami Heir continued regardless.

“Not only that, there is still every likelihood that there is a traitor among us. And with certain students doing as they please without bothering to inform the rest of the class—”, he paused and glanced at both Junko and Kyoko, neither of them reacting to his insinuations. “—it seems that I need to take matters into my own hands if we are to continue to survive—”.

“No one wants or needs your protection, asshole!” Mondo abruptly cut in, struggling to keep his anger in check. “We’ve gotten along just fine until now! All we need to do is just do whatever we can! The rest will work itself out later!”

The biker shot a glance toward Junko, who surprisingly reciprocated, nodding firmly to him. Instantly, Mondo’s eyebrows shot up and his cheeks flushed brightly, obviously not having expected her to wordlessly back him up. Tearing his face away from her confident smile, the bike gang leader shook his head, returning to his usual intimidating visage.

Scoffing at the exchange between the biker and fashionista, Byakuya shifted to face the biker directly, folding his arms as he asked, “Then are you suggesting we simply allow Taeko Yasuhiro, a known threat to our safety, to simply roam free as she pleases?”

“Huh? Well…no, but—!”

“Then we both agree we should limit her access to certain areas of the school?”

“Uh…yeah, I guess—”. 

“And ensuring she cannot leave her room would help facilitate that, would it not?”

“I…think so?” Mondo replied, not entirely sure what was happening now.

“In that case, since we’re in agreement, you can make yourself useful and install this latch on the outside of her door,” Byakuya coerced, gesturing to the box Toko was holding.

Picking up on his intention, the writing prodigy nervously walked up to the biker and practically shoved the box into his hands. A stunned expression occupied Mondo’s face as he looked down at the box of tools, his face darkening as he slowly realized that he’d been tricked.

“D-Don’t let Master down!” Toko aggressively insisted, shrinking back a bit as Mondo glared at her. “Y-You should b-be honored that Master Byakuya g-gave you such—!”

“Shut yer goddamn mouth!” Mondo abruptly swore, making Toko leap back in abject terror before hiding behind Byakuya, peering out from behind him. Staring at the box in his hands, the biker gritted his teeth and lifted it high into the air. “I’m not takin’ orders from the bastard that strung up Chihiro for his own fucking up entertainment!”
Behind him, watching this entire exchange, Chihiro meekly opened her mouth to try and speak…but sadly lost her courage and stood in stressful silence as the biker grew more and more out of control. The programmer could see what he was about to do, everyone could, and the fact that he was doing it because of what had happened to her…made her feel responsible.

She wanted to tell him to stop, but as always, her inner strength failed her, and she showed her own weakness by merely staring at his back, utterly powerless to help him. It was at this time, as Mondo prepared to slam the box into the floor, that someone appeared at her side.

“Bro! Control yourself!”

At once, Mondo completely froze, a quiet gasp of shock escaping him as he turned his head around. His steely gaze met the fiery expression of Taka, who stood next to Chihiro, a hand reassuring squeezing her shoulder.

“Now isn’t the time for recklessness,” the Moral Compass reminded him, somehow keeping his voice even. “Right now, all of us are a little on edge due to…the difficulties this day has wrought. So please, calm yourself before anything gets out of hand!”

Taka’s voice startled the biker, who only now seemed to realize his actions. Glancing around, he found the entire class staring at him, worry in all their eyes. And even more disheartening, was that Junko was also staring at him, with a hint of disappointment in her sky-blue irises.

“Guh…right…sorry about that,” Mondo replied, completely embarrassed as he slowly lowered the box. Feeling ashamed, the biker tapped his foot in agitation before finishing, “But still…I’m not gonna be the one to do it. If you want it done so bad, you can do it yourself.”

He thrust the box out toward Byakuya who appeared to scoff at it, like such menial work was far below him. That attitude only further incited Mondo, who was about to shout again when a large figure appeared in front of him.

“I will do it,” Sakura said solemnly, quickly taking the box from Mondo. “I will be escorting Taeko to her room anyway. Let me handle this.”

Her voice was...quiet, almost pleading. Completely different from her usual strong and fierce tone. Sadly, the reason why was evident. Hina’s abrupt departure, combined with the tension and exhaustion from today, was beginning to wear down even the strongest of the students. And with Sakura’s obvious concern for her friend’s health, it was no surprise that she wanted as little bickering between her classmates as possible.

“Oh...sure,” Mondo slowly replied, not used to seeing Sakura in such a state.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Kyoko suddenly interjected, gathering the group’s attention. “But there is another matter I think we need to settle…one that only Taka can resolve.”

Visibly shocked, the Moral Compass confusingly stammered, “A-And what might that be?”

“You don’t remember?” the mysterious girl questioned, the lightest of smirks tugging at her lips. “Didn’t you make a promise to Chihiro during the class trial? Something that only you could do?”

There was a moment of silence as Taka considered her words. Then, like a spark, his eyes widened, and with it, the entire class had a realization.

Alter Ego.
Taka had promised to return the digital AI to ‘her’ creator once the trial was concluded. However, in the cacophony of madness and punishments that followed the trial, the notion had been all but forgotten, at least by most of the students.

“Ah, yes! I remember now!” Taka insisted, seemingly proud and ashamed at the same time. With a whirl, he turned toward the Ultimate Programmer and said, “Chihiro, I believe that I am in need of a bath! Could I meet you in the bath house in a few minutes? I need to fetch a ‘towel’ from my room!”

He winked as he said ‘towel’ and Chihiro’s eyes lit up with unbridled excitement. “Y-Yes! I think…having a bath would be great!” She tried to sound as genuine as possible, but the excitement at seeing her baby again made her sound a bit too enthused. Not that anyone complained, even if Byakuya gave them skeptical looks.

“I’ll join ya!” Mondo abruptly joined in, walking over and patting them on the back. “I wanna talk with Chihiro some more too…if that’s cool?”

The programmer’s face was consumed by a warm smile. “Sure! The more the merrier!”

“Woah, woah, woah, hold up a second!” Hiro unexpectedly shouted, looking between the three of them. “I mean, like, I know Chihiro’s a guy and all, but she was, like, wanting to be a girl or something…or is she actually a girl and…urgh this is very confusing! But either way, are you sure all of you are comfortable taking a bath together!”

A heavy tension suddenly enveloped the area as Hiro’s insensitive comment rang out. And while some of the other students had been pondering that notion as well, blurting it out so aggressively was beyond insulting!

“You don’t have to answer that, Chihiro,” Junko abruptly spoke up, glaring daggers at the clairvoyant, who shrunk down under her gaze. “Time and place, Hiro! Time and—!”

“Well…actually,” Chihiro slowly answered, even though she didn’t have to. Gathering her courage, she met the gazes of her now interested classmates, shrinking back a bit before answering, “Physically…I’m a boy. But, I like cute…girly things. And…I kind of enjoy being a girl so…can you all please continue to see me as…a girl?”

Her voice was squeaking by the end, fear and anxiety taking hold of her. However, in less time than she imagined, a flood of positivity washed over her.

“No problem! Whatever you want!” Leon said with a bright smile, his words truly genuine.

“You’ll always be Chihiro to me,” Makoto told her with an awkward but hopeful smile. “And if that’s who you are, then it’s just who you are.”

“Of course,” Sayaka added, smiling warmly. “We can even take a bath together sometime, if you’d like?”

“I’m down for that,” Junko concurred, tiredly stretching her arms before smiling at Chihiro. “In fact, why not ditch the boy and let us girls have a bath instead?”

The fashionista’s voice was playful, obviously a joke, but in Chihiro’s frazzled mind could only register it as a real request. The programmer’s cheeks flushed bright red and she took a hesitant step backwards.

“A-A-Actually…even though I see myself as a girl…I’m…still attracted…to girls…so…bathing…together…wouldn’t be…uh…um…”
As she trailed off, Junko and Sayaka suddenly realized how unintentionally uncomfortable they’d made her.

“No, no! It’s fine! Really!” the pop idol insisted, feeling a bit flushed herself. “I didn’t mean to assume. Sorry about that.”

“Yeah, sorry. I was joking…mostly,” Junko admitted, looking a bit ashamed. “Didn’t mean to make you feel awkward. My bad.”

Hearing their apology only made Chihiro feel more embarrassed, so she quickly replied, “N-No! Everything’s…fine! I didn’t mean to—”.

“Can I be taken to my room now?” an unusually monotone voice interrupted. “All this sentimental crap is giving me a headache.”

The entire class was startled as Taeko abruptly spoke over Chihiro’s apology. Both Junko and Sayaka looked as if they were about to say something but closed their mouths once they stared into Taeko’s lifeless expression. Her eyes were dull…almost a bit sunken in, with dark rings forming under her eyes, undoubtedly due to the horrific day she’d had. Her shoulders hunched forward, and her tattered dress, which usually made her look regal, instead reminded them of deposed royalty.

Sadly, she truly looked like a pitiful version of Marie Antoinette…or more accurately, how the deposed Queen of France must have looked…just before her execution. Her dream of becoming like the French noblewoman was sadly realized in the cruelest of fashions.

“Very well,” Sakura suddenly acquiesced, much to everyone’s shock. The martial artist glanced at the rest of the classmates, held up the box containing the latching suppliers and said, “I’ll make sure she stays in her room. And I’ll ensure the lock is properly installed on the outside as well—”.

“Just a second,” Kyoko spoke up, taking a few steps toward Sakura. She glanced at the box for a moment before turning to Byakuya. “Installing this latch might be considered ‘damaging school property’. Did such a thought occur to you?”

Her demeaning comment was met with a half-smirk from the Togami Heir.

“I won’t deny that I considered it. But I doubt it would be much of an infringement.” His seemingly thoughtless comment earned him various glares from his classmates, which he took in strides. “If you’re that concerned, why don’t we simply ask Monokuma to verify it for us—?”

“Eh…it’s fine.”

The entire class tensed before spinning around to see Monokuma, who looked immeasurably ‘relieved’, standing behind all of them.

“Since so many rules have been changed or bent recently, I don’t have a problem with a little ‘modification’ to the outside of Miss Yasuhiro’s room.” The bear clarified before a menacing smirk overtook its face. “But I’d be careful about taking too many liberties if I were you. After all, without rules, this wouldn’t be game at all…it would just be a massacre! Ahahahaha!”

As it laughed, the bear’s gaze shifted over…staring directly at Junko for a brief moment before cackling its way down the hall and around the corner. Once the demented bear departed, the tension slowly began to dissipate…at least until a smug voice called out.

“It seems we have our answer,” Byakuya informed the class, weathering the furious gazes aimed at him. Without a hint of guilt, the Togami Heir turned and gestured for someone to follow him. “As I
said, I’d prefer to clear out Hifumi’s room before nighttime. Those of you who volunteered, come along.”

Makoto, Sayaka, and Leon frowned angrily, obviously displeased with his dismissive treatment. Walking away without them, Byakuya brazenly approached Hifumi’s door, unlocked it, and let himself inside, Toko nipping at his heels. Barely inside, an audible groan escaped the writing prodigy.

“Master, c-can we please b-burn all this useless t-trash?” she bravely asked, picking up a manga that had been just inside the door. “S-Such filth will never be c-considered l-literature anyway!”

A surge of panic abruptly ran through the fanfic creator as he recalled everything he’d left out in his room. Abject horror overtook his expression as he began to make his way to them.

“W-Wait! I’m not…prepared!” he shouted and dashed on his tiny legs toward his room, rushing inside and letting out a screech. “N-No! Not those! I need those to create 2-D magic!!”

No one wanted to know what it was Hifumi was referring to…

“We'll…uh, see you all in the morning,” Makoto told the rest of his classmates as he, Leon, and Sayaka followed after them, closing the door to the fanfic creator’s room behind them.

“Have a good evening,” Sakura politely said before she turned and escorted Taeko down the hall and around the corner, out of sight.

“Shower time…” Junko told her classmates before waving and heading for her room. “Oh, and don’t worry Chihiro,” her words made the programmer raise an eyebrow. “I plan to keep my door open again tonight, to make sure no one tries anything ‘funny’.”

Chihiro blinked, obviously confused. “Uh…thank you?”

Only then did it occur to Junko that Chihiro had no idea she and Kyoko were leaving their doors open to help keep Alter Ego safe. Face-palming, and realizing she couldn’t elaborate, she tried to come up with something better to say when Kyoko cut her off.

“Junko and I have been keeping an eye out each night, to ensure that no one enters the bathhouse.”

Suddenly, it all clicked in Chihiro’s mind as she remembered leaving Alter Ego to fend for ‘herself’ during ‘her’ creator’s absence. It broke her heart to leave her baby so defenseless but knowing that those two strong girls had watched out for ‘her’, made Chihiro’s eye well up with thankful tears.

“Oh…then, truly, thank you!”

“It’s nothing,” Kyoko answered stoically, turning and beginning to head toward her own room.

“Have a nice bath!” Junko said with a smile as she followed after the lavender haired girl.

Chihiro bowed deeply as the two women departed, slowly raising her head and looking between Mondo and Taka. “I guess…it’s just the three of us now?” she said, a bit nervous but excited at the same time.

“Looks that way,” Mondo confirmed, already heading toward the bath. “I’m guessin’ we’ll meet you in the changing room, Bro?”

“Yes! I won’t be long!” Taka informed them before dashing off toward his room.
With a huff and a smile, the biker glanced down at Chihiro and said, “Let’s hit it.”

Chihiro nodded enthusiastically and walked beside her friend, struggling to keep her excitement at bay as they walked down the hall, into the open area just outside the dorm, and headed into the bathhouse.

The halls were empty now, not a single soul in sight…except for one.

“How…what about me?” Hiro said as everyone had left, going about their own business. “Guys… come on…”

No one had invited him to bathe together. No one asked him his plans for the evening. No one even seemed to register that he was there at all! Just like always! As usual, all his classmates did was ignore his opinions or scold him when he tried to clarify something that confused him! He hadn’t meant to be insulting to Chihiro! He was just trying to see if it was appropriate for her to bathe with guys if she wanted to be a girl!

Sure, he didn’t exactly go about it in the best way, but he had the best of intentions! That should matter for something, shouldn’t it?! But no! As usual, his classmates barely seemed to recognize his presence! He felt all but forgotten during that last exchange!

“What the hell?! Am I not important enough to hang out with?! Do my opinions not…matter…to… anyone…?”

At that moment, Taeko’s words from the trial rang in his ears…

“Junko doesn’t give a shit about you. Think about it, she’s never cared about your opinion until now, right? Why would that suddenly change? Oh, that’s right, she’s trying to get your vote so she can feel all important and have the ‘honor’ of outwitting the Mastermind…”

…

…

…It was true.

Hiro didn’t want it to be true. He wanted to believe that his classmates…his friends…did value his opinions and ideas! After all, he was the older person here! They had to respect his decision because he was older and wiser than them! They had to know that he’s not as stupid as they thought! They trusted him! They believed in him! They…They…

…they didn’t…and he knew it.

Hiro had known for a while that the group thought of him as nothing but a useless accessory. Not even that, because accessories had purpose…and he apparently didn’t. They viewed him as a nuisance. Someone they had to constantly put down because he couldn’t be trusted! He knew that! But in a way…until recently, it didn’t bother him.

After all, no one wanted to kill the useless guy! He faded into the background and only spoke up when I felt he should. Someone like that would easily survive in a horror movie! That had been his plan…
But now, after Taeko and Hifumi’s attempt on his life, even though it was to frame him and not kill him directly, his perspective had changed. And what hurt the most was the reason…

“Because you’re stupid…”

That was it. Nothing more and nothing less. He was now considered ‘expendable’ rather than useless…a distinction he never imagined feeling. His confidence, usually soaring high, had finally hit rock bottom.

After all, he’d gotten into Hope’s Peak! Sure, he’d practically begged that talent scout with the fedora to let him in, on account of his run-in with the yakuza, but he still made it into the school dammit! He had a talent! A place he’d earned through groveling and semi-hard work! He didn’t demand respect or anything but at least a little recognition would have been nice!

But now…even though he was safe from the yakuza, he’d stepped into a much more frightening situation than he’d ever imagined. That’s why he told himself it was all a joke for so long, his fragile mind couldn’t withstand such a horrifying truth. And now, once again faced with a truth he’d long since pushed away…Yasuhiro Hagakure felt a deep fear creeping into his soul.

“W-What if…I’m next for real this time?” he pondered quietly, feeling his legs shake.

He suddenly realized that he was alone…in the school…close to nighttime…when all the other attacks had happened. His breathing became ragged, and his mouth suddenly dried. Swallowing a lump in his throat, he whirled around, half expecting someone to be there…ready to bash his face in with a metal pipe!

But no…he was still alone…all alone…trapped in a school with no resources…no friends…no allies…just other people who viewed him as…expendable.

His eyes widened as that horrifying truth sunk in, and he made a mad dash toward his room. His fingers fumbled with his key, barely able to unlock it before rushing in and slamming the door behind him. Locking and bolting the door, he immediately ran to the table in his room and grabbed his deck of tarot cards.

“Draw one…I’ll just draw one! That’ll give me a better chance!” he shouted to himself, shuffling the deck. He knew it didn’t make sense, drawing one card instead of reading his whole future, but at the moment, he couldn’t think straight. He needed positive encouragement…no matter the cost! Once finished shuffling, he grabbed the top card and held it up, slowly turning it over. “Whatever it is, I’ll know that everything will be—ERUAHHH!”

Yasuhiro Hagakure let out a terrified shriek, so loud that, if the walls hadn’t been soundproof, all his classmates would have thought he was being murdered. And he may have well been…

…He had drawn the Tower Card…face up…heralding a coming disaster…

“Unbelievable…and yet, so interesting…”

The true Mastermind, Junko Enoshima, watched several monitors simultaneously. On one of them, Chihiro and Mondo waited for Taka to ‘return’ Alter Ego, who she’d been aware of since ‘her’ conception. It honestly didn’t matter if they had the information on the laptop. Nothing that hard drive contained would be enough to bring back their memories or derail the killing game. That’s why she chose to let them have their ‘sliver of hope’…so that when she crushed it, it would be all the
more satisfying!

“I’ll let them keep believing I’m clueless about Digi-Chihiro,” she told herself, donning her sexy teacher persona. “It wouldn’t be as despair-inducing if I took everything away too quickly.”

Meanwhile, on another monitor, Hiro was currently losing all semblance of reason as he finally realized he was nothing more than a space filler for the group. Then again, his fortune-telling actually was accurate, if only 30% of the time.

“I wonder what fuckin’ bullshit fortune made him flip out like that!” Junko shouted, shifted to her vulgar, crazier persona. “Not like anything will help him anyway! He’s gonna fucking die! Just like the rest of these chumps! HAHA!”

Suddenly, her laughter ceased as she glanced to not one, but two obscured monitors. Instantly, her persona shifted, becoming incredibly depressed to the point of growing mushrooms on her head. Her head drooped, and she gave an exhausted sigh.

“Oh…looks like Miss Detective adopted Big Sis Muku’s ‘shirt in front of the camera’ trick.” The now depressed Junko sighed again, louder and more exhausted than before. “I really should do something about that…”

Just then, a Monokuma doll materialized in her hands, which was quickly held up in front of her face.

“Puhuhuhuhuhuhuhu! Maybe another school regulation is needed to curve those defiant impulses?” Junko asked herself, using Monokuma as a medium.

“That’s a great idea!” the Mastermind replied to herself. “But I think it’ll be better to wait until morning…or at least, what they think is morning!”

Junko chuckled to herself as she looked at the only accurate clock in the entire building. The time read, 11:57 AM…making it almost noon! And yet, the nighttime announcement was about to be played! Oh, how utterly despairing it was to know that she had complete control over the entire class’ sense of time!

Throwing off everyone sense of time had been easy and yielded great results! No one had any idea that they were actually waking up just after nightfall and sleeping during the day! That’s why their first few days were so tiring and why they couldn’t make proper decisions. It was meant to help speed up the initial killing…something that was utterly wasted due to Mukuro’s interference but still derived a twisted sense of despair for Junko.

Plus, it had the added bonus of self-inflicted despair for Junko herself! Her own sense of time was completely out of whack now, and she’d been forced to adapt to her classmates’ sense of time, which made running the killing game more difficult…but more rewarding.

“Forcing myself to overwork and under-sleep was a form of despair that I never tried until now!” she excited shouted, tossing the Monokuma doll high into the air before letting it land, almost perfection, into her lap. “The despair of having to run a complex killing game was hard enough, but add in insomnia, and low blood sugar and you’ve got Grade A DEPAIR to feast on! Ahahahahaha!”

As her cackling echoed in the small monitor room, she noticed movement on the monitors. Just outside of both Mukuro and Kyoko’s rooms, the Mastermind watched as the secret partners headed toward their rendezvous…but that’s not what drew Junko’s attention. It was the figure that also exited their own room…and seemed to follow after them as stealthily as possible.
A maddening grin of despair overtook Junko as she whispered, “Looks like it’s gonna be a long…_day_! Isn’t that right…Mr. Lucky Student?”

TO BE CONTINUED…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! Now that Taeko’s been pushed over the edge, what will happen to her? Will Byakuya’s reign of terror last or will someone rise to overtake him? What are Mukuro and Kyoko going to discuss, and will they be overheard? You’ll have to keep reading to find out!

I realized this chapter is a bit short, but I had to split this one off from a chapter that would have been almost double in size! I decided to update with this first, because I knew it had been a while since I posted. And just in time for the holidays! Hope all your holidays go great this year and I’ll see you in the next chapter near the first of the year!

As always, reviews and comments are most appreciated! It’s always fun reading what people think will happen or just commenting on the story as a whole, so thank you all for each and every review/comment!

Until next time, have yourselves a beautiful day, my beautiful readers!
Chihiro, Mondo, and Taka spend time together in the bathhouse. Makoto 'stealthfully' follows after Kyoko and "Junko". Sakura finally comes to a decision that will change the fates of everyone at Hope's Peak.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chihiro paced, back and forth, unable to keep herself still as she waited for Taka to rendezvous with her and Mondo. The steam from the bath permeated the changing room, and beads of sweat trickled down her cheeks. She wiped them away quickly, continuing to pace almost autonomously.

Several days…it had been several days since she’d been rendered unconscious, having to leave Alter Ego completely alone in an unfamiliar place with little to no protection from the Mastermind. She almost wished Mondo hadn’t told her how many days she’d been comatose…considering she thought only an evening had passed since she was ‘attacked’.

And now, as she ‘patiently’ waited for Taka to return her precious baby to her, all of the stress and anxiety of their long separation was setting in. She tried to fight it, but within minutes of waiting, she couldn’t force herself to sit down, having to get up and move to keep herself from going insane!

“He should have been here by now! It’s been over five minutes! How long does it take for someone to pick up a laptop and carry it down the hallway!”

Unconsciously, Chihiro continuously wiped away bead after bead of sweat that trickled down from her forehead. She reasoned that Taka was probably making an effort to disguise Alter Ego before venturing out into the hall, but he really should have been there by now!

“Hey, uh, Chihiro…you doin’ okay?” Mondo abruptly asked, seeing her sleeve becoming soaked as she continued patting away sweat. “You’re sweatin’ like a damn pig. Want me to get you a towel or something?”

Although a bit vulgar, the programmer appreciated her friend’s concern. However, at the moment, with her mind worked up in a frenzy, she could only respond sharply.

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

“Really?” Mondo asked, completely misreading the tension in her voice. “You look kinda freaked out. Plus, I’m a little worried because you’re, uh, sweating a fuck ton over there.”

A vein nearly popped in Chihiro’s head as she tried to keep herself calm. Mondo was only trying to help, he wasn’t trying to be insensitive, or imply that her feelings toward Alter Ego didn’t merit her nervous sweat or her fidgety pacing! He wasn’t implying that…He wasn’t implying that…HE WASN’T IMPLYING THAT BUT THAT’S ALL SHE COULD FOCUS ON RIGHT NOW!!

“Am I not allowed to be a little nervous about all this?!” she said swiftly, not looking in his direction. “I’m only terrified out of my freaking mind that Taka may get caught by Monokuma and my beloved
Alter Ego will get ‘confiscated’ and I’ll have to do something insane and drastic to get her back because I WON’T LOSE MY BABY TO THAT EVIL, TWO-TONED BEAR!! NOT NOW! NOT EVER!!"

Chihiro paused, only barely realizing she’d practically yelled at her friend. Her hands flew up over her mouth, as if she could somehow retract the rage filled words that had flown out. Now completely self-conscious, her gaze shot over to Mondo. The programmer froze as she noticed him gaping at her, a look of complete disbelief written all over his expression.

Immediately, a stuttering apology burst from her mouth.

“I-I’m sorry! I…I didn’t…mean to—!”

“Chihiro…”

Mondo cut her off, his face was deadly serious. There was a madness in his eyes, the likes of which she’d never seen before. Or rather, she couldn’t remember seeing before…regardless, she cringed in preparation for his yelling. She heard him take a step forward, and tensed as his arms slapped against her shoulder, shaking her and forcing her to open her eyes to stare at him.

And when she did, she finally noticed the largest, and proudest smile she’d ever seen cross the biker’s face!

“…That was fuckin’ boss!” he exclaimed, roughly gripping her shoulders. “You gave me fuckin’ chills! Why the fuck can’t you be like that all the time?!”

Instead of curses or insults, the biker was…praising her? Confusion wracked her petite body as he continued to shake and praise her.

“If you can pull off that kinda shit, why do you let the rich asshole talk down to you all the time?! You could put him in his place better than Taka!” Mondo insisted, slamming his hands aggressively onto her shoulders over and over again. “Damn, you’re a lot fucking tougher than I thought! If you acted like that all the time, I’d make you my right-hand man—err, chick, in my gang!”

The force of his slaps caused Chihiro to flinch, both from his words and the power behind his friendly gesture. Her knees almost buckled but somehow, she managed to stay upright, but not without losing her footing. Her right foot suddenly slid out to her side, just as Mondo brought down another ‘friendly’ slam on her shoulders…and she crumpled like a paper bag.

Her butt slammed into the floor, an audible smack resounding. Chihiro gritted her teeth as the pain hit her, dull ached that she knew would only last a few moments. She knew that crying out would be bad, it could attract Monokuma, give the bear a reason to enter the bathhouse, and she couldn’t let that happen. So, instead, she took a deep breath, readjusted herself accordingly, fighting back the tears stinging the corners of her eyes.

“Whoa, shit! I didn’t mean to do that!” Mondo apologized, immediately kneeling down, a look of angry guilt overtaking him. “I got a little carried away, my bad. Tell ya what, go ahead and hit me! Then we’ll be even!”

In truth, she kind of wanted to take him up on that offer…but knew that it wouldn’t help, and she’d probably just hurt her hand if she tried…which was another painful reminder of her own weakness.

“No…it’s my fault,” Chihiro said quietly, hanging her head shamefully. “I know I’m…weak. I’m just not as strong as you. It’s not your fault that I—”.
“Cut that shit out right now!”

A startled gasp escaped Chihiro as Mondo’s words washed over her, freezing her in place. However, she did manage to lift her head up high enough to stare into Mondo’s eyes…losing her breath as she witnessed the swirl of emotions behind his gaze.

“I’m…I’m weak too, god dammit!” he shouted, unable to keep his emotions contained. “I gave in to my weakness…and attacked you because you’re stronger than I am! Sure, I could bench press ten of you, but I…I…I’d never have the courage to do what you did!”

“W-Wait…I don’t understand—!” Chihiro tried to interject but was cut off.

“Your secret…you told me your secret despite how hard it was! But I…I held onto my secret…my own shame…my weakness…I even tried to kill you to hide it!” Tears spilled from Mondo’s eyes and he too crumpled to the floor, fists clenched but with nothing to punch. “I…I’m the reason my brother Daiya is dead! He died because of my weakness…because I wasn’t strong enough…!”

As Mondo wept, Chihiro finally began to realize just how deeply her actions had cut him. And even though she knew it wasn’t truly her fault, she couldn’t deny the fact that her actions had unintentionally forced the biker to relive the most horrific moments of his life. If she had known that…would she have had the strength to confess her secret to him?

In all honesty, she wasn’t sure…but right now that didn’t matter. They both knew each other’s secrets now, and both of them were still hurting because of them…and they both knew who was truly at fault.

Reaching out a shaky hand, Chihiro patted Mondo’s shoulder, making the biker tense. Slowly, the tear-stained face of the Ultimate Bike Gang Leader lifted up into view, and Chihiro finally found the right words to say to him.

“It’s…It’s just like Makoto said…it’s not…our fault,” she struggled to say, fighting back tears of her own. Then, abruptly, her face hardened, and determination she never knew existed flowed into her. “It’s Monokuma’s fault! That stupid, manipulative…evil little bear! He did this to us! He used our secrets to torment us! Forced us to turn on each other! If anything we shouldn’t be sad, we should be angry! Angry that he tricked us and tried to kill us both! We should run him over with a steamroller and piss on his corpse!”

Chihiro almost didn’t realize she was shouting until she saw the shock on Mondo’s face, to which she immediately quieted down, almost to a whisper.

“At least…that’s what I think…” she finished quietly, flushing from embarrassment.

A moment of silence passed between the two of them before a low laugh began to seep out of Mondo. It started slowly, a soft chuckle turning into a bit of laughter, that increasingly grew louder and louder and louder!

“Y-Yer right! Fuck that evil teddy bear! Ahahaha!” Mondo agreed, unable to cease his laughing fit. “I…I don’t know why I’m laughing…but…it feels good! Ahahahahahahaha!”

At the same time, as if infected by his sudden enthusiasm, Chihiro also began to laugh, quietly at first, until she was almost matching the boisterous laughter that Mondo was emitting.

“Y-Yeah! Haha! It…does feel good! Hahaha!”

It was strange but…Mondo was right. For some reason, right now, laughing was the only thing that
seemed to dull the pain…to ease the stress and tension that threatened to swallow them for so long. A
good, honest laugh…there was no way it made sense…but it didn’t have to. Because sometimes…
you just need a good laugh!

Sadly, the laughter died down rather quickly, but the positive feelings remained. Chihiro and Mondo
sat on the floor, smiling as their laughter came to an end, glancing at each other and letting out a
chuckled every couple of seconds.

“Damn…it’s been a long time since I laughed like that!” Mondo exclaimed, slapping his knee
emphatically.

“Me too,” Chihiro replied, unable to keep herself from smiling.

“But damn…that was a hellova speech!” the biker continued, smirking at his friend. “Hell, you’d
give Makoto a run for his money with that much optimism!”

Suddenly self-conscious of her words, especially the ending bit about humiliating Monokuma, the
programmer flushed bright red and hid her face with her hands.

“N-No! I don’t think…it was anything special…I mean…I only…” she tried to say but ended up
trailing off.

“You should try and be like that all the time!” the biker insisted, his eyes widening as a sudden idea
came to him. “In fact, you outta be our new leader instead of that rich bastard Byakuya!”

Chihiro’s jaw dropped and shock was all she could register as Mondo’s suggestion played over and
over again in her mind.

“N-N-N-NO!” she practically shouted, suddenly startling the biker in turn. Again feeling self-
conscious, she stammered, “I-I-I mean…I can’t do that! I’m…shy…and quiet…and…and…”

“You weren’t so quiet when you talked about peeing on Monokuma’s corpse,” Mondo just had to
point out, making Chihiro’s ears burn. Seeing her all flustered, the biker openly laughed, which
caused her to pout up at him…which only made him laugh harder. “Hahaha! See! There’s a
backbone in you after all! We just gotta find a way to toughen it!”

“T-Toughen…it?”

“Hell yeah!” Mondo shouted, suddenly leaping to his feet. “We’re gonna get you bulked up,
Chihiro! Just like I promised! We’ll work out together and toughen you up physically! You’re
already tough enough mentally, so we’ll work on getting you stronger by building muscle! Then, the
next time the rich asshat tries to talk down to you, you’ll be tough enough throw that shit right back
at him!”

…It was true that she still wanted to work out with Mondo, she just didn’t know how to ask, but
doing it to make her try and stand up to Byakuya…that was a bit of stretch. Then again, she had read
somewhere that exercise was good for building a stronger psychology. But…even then, the idea of
confronting Byakuya over what he’d done to her while she was unconscious…

“…I…I don’t know…”

“Hey!” the biker abruptly cut in, snapping her attention back up at him. “You wanna tell him to eat
shit and die, don’t ya?!”

“Uh…um…yes?”
“So then why not throw some of that anger you showed toward Monokuma back in his smug face!” Mondo insisted, way more eager about the idea than she was. “Trust me, you’ve got a lot of potential! I would know! You just gotta want it bad enough! Don’t you wanna tell him how much of a son of a bitch he was for stringing you up like Christ?!”

Yes…Yes, she did. Each and every time the subject was brought up…she wanted to question him and berate him for doing such a horrible thing. What gave him the right to do such a thing? How could he take such a risk with her already injured body?! The desire to cuss him out was so strong… and yet so weak at the same time.

Because no matter how good it would feel to finally tell him off…the thought of him verbally berating her afterward kept her in check…and that smug bastard probably knew it. It was so infuriating…but terrifying at the same time.

“I-I mean…I want to but…” she paused, unable to repress the fear she felt at even the mere thought of backtalking Byakuya. “I’m…afraid. What if I panic and start crying? He’ll only use that to humiliate me even more—!”

“Then why not have Bro teach you!” the biker interrupted, his suggestion startling the programmer. “Bro’s a great leader and knows how to debate and shit. He could teach you how to stand up to Byakuya using words and other complicated nerd shit!”

…Chihiro wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that. Mondo’s concept of nerd-dom was entirely skewed…but at least he was trying to be supportive. And while she appreciated that, she wasn’t exactly ecstatic about the idea of Taka ‘instructing’ her on how to be more leader-like. Recent memories of his dictatorship left a bad taste in her mouth, and she’d only seen it for a few hours! She couldn’t imagine what it had been like for everyone who actually spent days enduring his…how did Junko put it…Rule-Nazi tirade!

“I, uh, I’m not sure if—”

“…Here we are!”

Taka practically shouted as he entered the bathhouse, completely derailing their conversation. Under his arm was a rectangular object wrapped in a large white towel. Chihiro gave Mondo an almost begging look, really hoping he wouldn’t broach the subject further, at least for now. To her relief, the biker nodded to her and said, “Go on! Me and Bro can talk about your training while you talk with the laptop.”

Her heart sank a bit at that comment but at the moment, she was more interested in seeing her precious baby Alter Ego to really care. Almost instantly, the programmer rushed around the biker and straight toward Taka as he unraveled the white cloth and extended the laptop toward her. “As I promised! I have returned your precious—”

Chihiro didn’t wait for him to finish, snapping the laptop from his grasp like a vengeful mother hen. Muttering a thank you before flipping open the screen, the programmer waited with bated breath as the machine gradually came to life.

From a few feet away, Mondo and Taka looked on, a bit nervous but somehow knowing that everything was going to be alright. Then, very quietly, the biker leaned over and began whispering something about training to the Moral Compass. Chihiro chose to ignore that at the moment, waiting impatiently as the computer booted.
Before long, the screen resolution cleared, and a familiar face popped up, accompanied by a loud yawn. Chihiro’s eyes welled up with tears as the face of her beloved Alter Ego came back to ‘consciousness’.

“A-Alter Ego!” she screamed, completely forgetting that the AI program couldn’t actually ‘hear’ her. “My baby! I’m so happy you’re safe!”

Chihiro pressed her face against the screen hugging it tightly and silently promising to never let go. Simultaneous, the face of ‘Chihiro’ on the computer seemed a bit puzzled, as whomever was hugging ‘her’ wasn’t clearing in the laptop camera’s view. However, once Chihiro leaned back, the camera adjusted, and the reunion began.

“Oh, good mornin—Master! It’s you!” Alter Ego shouted as ‘she’ viewed ‘her’ creator through the camera lens. Somehow, the AI program’s smile seemed warmer and happier than it had been in days. “You have awakened from your coma! This is wonderful! Please, give me a moment…I prepared something for you…”

Suddenly, Alter Ego’s head disappeared, inciting momentary panic from Chihiro. Then, right before her very eyes, on the screen, a multitude of fireworks graphics began playing. As the colorful explosives burst in rapid succession, a single word was left behind for all to see:

CONGRATULATION!!

Chihiro stood flabbergasted, unable to speak as she saw the spectacle come to a swift end. Hot tears spilled from her eyes as she slowly began to chuckle, which quickly developed into laughter as she realized…though all of Alter Ego’s good intentions…‘she’ had spelled ‘Congratulations’ wrong. The fact that a computer run AI, which had access to spell check, would make such a…a human mistake…it brought Chihiro to literal tears.

An instant later, Alter Ego’s face reappeared and the happy program asked, “Did that please you, Master? I put a great deal of time into planning what I would say once you returned and concluded that congratulating you on waking up would be the most supportive way to assist you. Did I do well?”

For a brief moment in time, all of Chihiro’s worries melted away. The killing game, the attack that had left her comatose, that bastard Byakuya’s sickening attitude, all of it was forgotten as pure joy consumed the programmer. Pride for her ‘daughter’ welled up inside, and she couldn’t have been prouder or more impressed that Alter Ego had come up with that beautiful display of affection all on ‘her’ own!

Amazingly, in the short time they’d been separated, Alter Ego had grown so much…it was almost too much to take in.

“Yes…Yes, Alter Ego!” she practically shouted, not caring who heard her. “I’m incredibly proud of —”.

“Pardon me, Master…” Alter Ego interrupted, shocking Chihiro to the point that she gasped. “I’m afraid that my microphone is still non-function at the moment. I cannot hear you…and I am sorry for interrupting, but…please use the keyboard to convey your…message to me.”

Again, Chihiro was nothing short of impressed. The AI seemed entirely too eager to hear if ‘her’ creator was pleased with the display or not. Alter Ego was learning at a faster rate than even she had predicted! At this rate, the AI program would be almost at a human level of intelligence and ‘thought’ within only a few days! Perhaps trauma helped artificial intelligence grow as much as it did
human!

But none of that matter right now! Alter Ego deserved to be praised and Chihiro wasn’t going to let scientific breakthroughs get in the way of that! Gentle tapping the keys, she wrote out her message:

[I am incredibly proud of you, Alter Ego. You’ve grown so much while I was away! Thank you for being such an amazing…]

Chihiro stopped…realizing she was about to type out something that would forever change her standing as Alter Ego’s ‘Master’. She hesitated, and as she did, Alter Ego stared at the message, both confused and eager…somehow knowing that Chihiro wasn’t finished typing yet.

“If I do this…my role in Alter Ego’s life won’t ever be the same,” she realized, tensing a bit at the thought. “I will cease to be her ‘Master’, and I will become…something so much more. Am I…ready for that?”

As that question plagued the programmer’s mind, she lifted her gaze from the keyboard, staring directly at Alter Ego. She could see the hint of trepidation on the AI’s face, and instantly wanted to alleviate it. It was then that the Ultimate Programmer made a choice that she knew she would never regret.

Without any hesitation, she finished typing out…

[…such an amazing daughter.]

An audible gasp echoed from the laptop speakers as Alter Ego received those words. Chihiro stared at her ‘daughter’ for a moment, her breath hitching as she witnessed something magical.

Alter Ego…blushed.

“T-Thank you…Master. Or perhaps…I should call you…Father?”

Unexpected tears of joy pricked the corners of Chihiro’s eyes. It shouldn’t have been possible! A computer AI should not be getting embarrassed, for one. And for another, it had to program itself to be able to do that! In a few short days, this wonderful, beautiful, fantastic computer program had become more human than Chihiro had ever imagined possible! Not only that, Alter Ego obviously reciprocated her feelings! Oh, to be thought of as a parent! As…a…father?!

“Oh no…oh, no, no, no, no, no!”

Chihiro’s hands flew to the keyboard as she furiously typed:

[Alter Ego…sweetheart, I would much rather you call me…Mommy.]

Taking in that statement, Alter Ego’s expression turned into confusion.

“But…Master, you are biologically male, yes? Would you not be my ‘father’ if we are to assume ‘parent/child’ roles?”

And just like that, Chihiro’s reality came crashing down, brought back to the same level of understanding that she was accustomed to. Of course a computer would have no concept of gender…did that mean that Alter Ego didn’t truly have a gender?

“I’m getting ahead of myself…” Chihiro whispered to herself as she typed more.
Again, Alter Ego seemed puzzled, but quickly adapted to this new development.

“Very well…Mommy. I shall address you as such from now on! Oh, and I have favorable news for you as well!” Alter Ego paused, seeming to enjoy the sudden look of shock that appeared on Chihiro’s face before continuing. “I have currently analyzed 95% of the encrypted files on this laptop. In a few hours, I will have all the information stored on this hard drive ready to present to you and your classmates!”

For the first time in ages, Chihiro let a genuine relieved expression overtake her, smiling excitedly as she typed:

[Wonderful, Alter Ego! I’m very proud of you! Keep up the amazing work!]

Alter Ego beamed as ‘she’ replied, “Thank you, Mas—Mommy! I won’t let you down!”

Pride…the pride of a parent…that’s the only thing Chihiro could explain what she was feeling at that moment. To see her ‘creation’, the fruits of her labors, the darling ‘daughter’ she’d ‘raised’ over the last few days coming into ‘her’ own identity…it was more almost more than she could bear.

Amidst that swirl of pride, Alter Ego spoke up again, “By the way, Mommy. I see that Mondo and Taka are with you in the bathhouse. Are you, perchance, going to bathe with them? If so, I would like you to tell me all about the yaoi you experience so I can record it for my logs…”

…”

…”

…”

…”What…the…hell…?!” Chihiro quietly seethed. The instant the word ‘yaoi’ reverberated in her ears, a rage unlike any the programmer had ever experienced slowly began to overtake her. Her voice grew deadly cold as she said aloud, “I…didn’t…program…ANYTHING…like that…who…sullied…my precious…!!!”

All at once, everything silently fell into place. The way Hifumi had reacted when talking about Alter Ego, the ‘beloved digital angel’ he’d mentioned during the trial, the notion that he was ‘blinded by love’ into committing murder…

“THAT SON OF A BITCH!” Chihiro abruptly shouted, leaping to her feet. “I’LL KILL HIM! HOW DARE HE CORRUPT MY PRECIOUS BABY GIRL! HE’LL WISH MONOKUMA EXECUTED HIM WHEN I’M DONE WITH HIM—!”

“W-Woah! Chihiro! Calm the fuck down!” Mondo suddenly shouted, appearing on her right side.

“Yes, please don’t shout like that!” Taka joined in, flanking on her left. “I know you’re upset that Hifumi accessed Alter Ego alone, late at night, and without permission—”.

“HE FUCKING WHAT?!?”

Mondo shot Taka a condescending look, “Smooth move, Bro.”

Now feeling responsible for inciting more rage, Taka took a chance and bravely put a hand on
Chihiro’s shoulder. “Chihiro…I understand that you are upset, but right now, we need to be cautious. There is a possibility that Monokuma might be listening in. Not to mention…”

Slowly, Taka pointed at the laptop screen, and somehow, Chihiro followed his gesture…gasping as witness the image on the screen. Staring back at her, teary-eyed and full of concern, Alter Ego struggled to find words.

“M-Mommy? Did…Did I anger you? I…I didn’t mean to…I…just thought…that’s what…males did when entering a bath together…” ‘Her’ voice somehow quivered through the speakers, each syllable breaking Chihiro’s heart a little more as she listened. “I just…wanted to gather more…information…about life…and people…so that I could…fulfill…your directive…”

That’s right…Chihiro had tasked Alter Ego with gaining as much knowledge as possible…so that ‘she’ could eventually become more ‘human’. It was ‘her’ fault that the fat, otaku, son of a bitch, had defiled ‘her’ purity. She was the victim here, even if she didn’t realize it. And to see ‘her’ new appointed ‘Mother’ fly into a rage, even if ‘she’ couldn’t hear exactly what was said, must have been terrifying.

All at once, the maniacal rage that had consumed her vanished, replaced with a growing need to comfort her grieving ‘daughter’. Taking many deep breaths, Chihiro somehow found the strength to force away all of her negative feelings and return to a calmer state of mind.

Glancing to both Taka and Mondo, she quietly said to them, “It’s fine…I’m fine now…” Very slowly, the two of them backed away from her, but stayed close by, watching as she took a seat again and slowly extending her hands to the keyboard. “I will…rectify this…issue.”

With the swiftest hand movements that either Mondo or Taka ever saw, they watched as Chihiro typed out:

[Alter Ego…It’s fine. I’m not mad at you. You did nothing wrong.]

Sniffling a tiny bit, Alter Ego replied, “R-Really…you’re not mad at me?”

Chihiro put on the brightest and warmest smile she could muster as she typed,

[Yes, really. Mommy got upset but it’s not your fault in the slightest. That being said, I want you to delete everything Hifumi taught you. Right now.]

Suddenly, a look of trepidation that had preoccupied Alter Ego’s face as ‘she’ replied, “B-But…Hifumi provided me with a great deal of information! So many ideas and…I believe he called them ‘tropes’. My knowledge had expanded tenfold due to his—”.

Chihiro slammed her fist onto the bench she used as a table, the action startling Alter Ego into silence. After a moment or two, the Ultimate Programmer sucked in another deep breath before typing:

[Alright then…just delete anything related to manga, anime, or video games. Anything that has to do with ‘yaoi’ must be purged as well.]

Alter Ego paused for a moment, taking in that request before asked, “I…I think I can isolate those concepts and delete them separately. But Mast—uh, Mommy…I would be deleting all of the information Hifumi told me about Eroge as well—”.

Upon hearing the word ‘eroge’, Chihiro felt another fit of rage coming but managed to keep it inside,
somehow managing to smile instead of seethe as Alter Ego continued explaining.

“—and I think that could be wasteful. If there ever comes a time when I need experience with such games, it would be useful to remember how and why these game should be played.”

With no hesitation, Chihiro typed:

[Alter Ego…do this for Mommy. Delete ‘Eroge’ along with everything else I already specified. I will teach you more myself, but please just do this for Mommy!]

Chihiro almost didn’t realize she was panting as she finished typing, struggling to keep her composure as she practically demanded her ‘daughter’ to follow her wishes. Again, Alter Ego looked a bit disappointed. However, upon studying their ‘Mommy’s’ face a bit more, the AI soon relented.

“Very well…it is done. All things concerning ‘manga’, ‘anime’, ‘video game’, ‘eroge’, and ‘yaoi’…have been successfully deleted.” Chihiro breathed a huge sigh of relief at hearing that, smiling comfortably to herself before Alter Ego spoke up again, “Do you…feel better, Mommy?”

Smiling, the programmer reached out and typed once more:

[I do. Thank you, Alter Ego.]

In truth, she did, but not as much as she’d hoped. Once the morning came around, she and Hifumi were going to have a nice, long chat…somewhere dark and secluded…where no one would find the body—

“Mommy, I hate to inform you but, I believe it is almost time for—”

As Alter Ego disrupted her semi-serious thoughts on how to torment Hifumi for his grievous overstepping of bounds, a familiar tone echoed through the entire school.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

“*Ahem* This is a school announcement. It is now 10pm…”

Chihiro only half listened as the announcement played, yawning audibly before smiling down at Alter Ego. With careful keystrokes, she typed:

[It looks like it’s time for me and the others to rest. I hate to ask but…will you continue to analyze the files on the laptop while we sleep?]  

She already knew the answer to that but felt that treating her ‘daughter’ like a real person was more important. After all, if ‘she’ was to be accepted as a ‘person’, she needed to be treated as such first! Just like she suspected, Alter Ego smiled widely and nodded emphatically.

“Of course! By the time you awaken, I should have everything ready! Have a good rest, Mast—Mommy!”

It was adorable how Alter Ego was having trouble adjusting to calling her ‘Mommy’, just like a real person would! ‘She’ was developing so fast! It’s true what they say about kids growing up fast…but this was kind of ridiculous…but not at the same time. Either way, Chihiro knew she needed to end this conversation and let Alter Ego get back to work.

[Alright, I’ll take you back to my room with me, so you’ll be safe from the Mastermind. I’ll see
“Good night!” Alter Ego echoed, the two of them smiling at each other as the screen went dark, allowing the AI program to concentrate on deciphering.

The smile that adorned Chihiro’s face grew so wide it almost hurt, but she didn’t care. All the pain and heart-ache she’d endured to return to her beloved ‘daughter’ was worth every bit of suffering. Now, all she needed to do was quietly excuse herself back to her room and—

“Chihiro…I’m so very proud of you!”

The blissful moment of peace was shattered as Taka abruptly shouted, reminding her that the Moral Compass flanked her right side. Tears stung the corners of his eyes, pride overflowing as he clamped a hand onto her shoulder. All the while, a look of shocked confusion overtook Chihiro’s face.

“Not only have you found the courage to be yourself in front of everyone…but you also wish to learn the ways of diplomacy and ascend to a higher platform in the hierarchy!” Taka shouted, instantly realizing the programmer’s worst fears. Before she could respond, however, the Moral Compass shouted through a stream of joyful tears, “Bro told me about your wavering resolve, but fear not! If you will have my guidance, I shall gladly mentor you down the path of Leadership!”

“Uh, um, uh…” Chihiro tried to speak but was overwhelmed by his display of passion…and not in a favorable way.

“Hell yeah!” Mondo echoed on her left side, mimicking his sworn brother and slapping a hand onto her other shoulder, effectively trapping her. “I’ll take care of bulking you up, and Bro will make you into badass leader-type! Between the two of us, once we get outta this hellhole, you’ll be the most **BOSS** programmer Hope’s Peak has ever seen!”

“Uh, uh, uh, uh!” Chihiro practically whimpered, completely terrified by everything they were saying, and unable to form words as her situation completely shifted in only a few seconds!

Why didn’t she clear this up with Mondo before Taka arrived?! She should have taken a second to tell both of them she was **ABSOLUTELY TERRIFIED** by even the idea of trying to change herself so rapidly! Sure, she wanted to grow stronger, but taking on this much at the start would be like asking her to program three more Alter Ego’s in the span of an hour!

She was talented, but not **that** talented! Not to mention the fact that she was still wary because of everything that had happened. Her secret was public knowledge now, but that didn’t mean she was completely comfortable around her classmates so soon after coming out! Even if most of them seemed supportive, those that weren’t scared her so bad her knees shook when they addressed her!

The very idea of trying to assert leadership was absolutely absurd! Besides, in spite of Byakuya’s crass and dismissive attitude, he wasn’t that bad of a leader. Harsh, absolutely, and she didn’t like the way he did things, but at least she understood why he was being paranoid…three attempted murders would put **anyone** on edge. Even Taka had fallen victim to that paranoia and nearly destroyed the class over it.

All of that…everything that involved being a leader…was too much for her to handle.

“I…I…can’t…” she whimpered, hanging her head and fighting back tears. “What if…What if I…?!"

**What if I get everyone killed?!**

She didn’t even have the courage to vocalize her worst fears, screaming the words in her mind
without having the strength to confide in her closest friends. She knew she wasn’t qualified…she couldn’t handle the thought of making a mistake…and leading the entire class to their deaths. The weight of that responsibility…was too heavy to bear—

“Chihiro, more than anything else, I have faith in you!”

The programmer gasped as those words invaded her ears, seeping deep into her mind. Lifting her head, she glanced up at Taka, her eyes widened as he bore a smile of unflinching loyalty…and trust.

“If you embark on this path, we all know it won’t be easy…and I can see that you fear making wrong decisions…or painful decisions…but that is a strength and not a fault!” the Moral Compass assured her, somehow unintentionally addressing her fears. She sucked in a shaky gasp as he said that, a clue that urged him to continue, “My mistake was that I thought myself unable to make poor choices. I stood by my decisions…even when they caused more harm than good. And for that…I will forever be ashamed.”

He paused, his body stiffening for a moment as he took a deep breath and exhaled, as if gathering resolve.

“But you are different. You worry that you won’t be good enough, that you may not make the best decisions…but that is what makes you a capable leader!” he shouted, completely mesmerizing the young programmer as he spoke. “You overcame your greatest weakness and confessed your secret in order to keep everyone safe! You showed far greater resolve and strength! Far more than anyone else here!”

Being showered with overwhelming praise was utterly incomprehensible for the fragile Chihiro, and she found herself shrinking down while stuttering, “N-No…I’m not…I’m w-weak…I d-don’t even compare to someone like B-Byakuya—”.

“No!” Taka interrupted, meeting Chihiro’s gaze and proudly declaring, “Even the great Byakuya Togami pales in comparison to the strength of will you showed to all of us! He did not have the strength to admit to his own secret! That alone proves that you are far stronger in spirit than he ever will be!”

The confidence and trust emanating from Taka washed over Chihiro like a tidal wave, stunning her into silence as his words seeped deep down into her very soul. That vote of complete and total confidence froze Chihiro in place, and just as the programmer’s usually pessimistic outlook began to try and formulate a reason why he was incorrect, another voice overpowered her.

“Bro’s right! And everyone knows it too!” Mondo added, keeping Chihiro from protesting or even trying to dissuade them. With an overbearing grin, the biker stood up and said, “We all got moments of weakness! None of us stood up to Byakuya like we should have! We practically let him take leadership, even though he’s the worst fuckin’ choice!”

Chihiro wanted to add that she didn’t speak up either, but Mondo didn’t give her the time to voice that.

“But you…I saw how you were clenchin’ your fists…how much you wanted to speak up and tell that rat bastard to go fuck himself! And ya know what?! Everyone would get behind you on that!”

In that moment, Chihiro honestly couldn’t remember if she had done that or not…but she believed him. Even if Mondo had only imagined it, in that moment, it didn’t matter to her…because he was right. She wanted to punch Byakuya in his smug face…for the first time in her life…she wanted to stand up for herself, but lacked the courage…
“…Courage,” she slowly whispered to herself, tasting the word on her tongue. It was foreign, both in concept and how it sounded…but she liked it. “So…if I had more courage…maybe…I could…”

As she muttered to herself, lowering her head and averting her gaze from her friends, a strange sensation began to build up within her chest. It wasn’t something she recognized…but it was warm and gentle…could this be…courage? Is that what she was feeling…for the first time in so many years?

She wasn’t sure…about anything. The whole idea of ‘training’ with Mondo and Taka was absolutely absurd…and yet, it was something she truly, earnestly wanted! She wanted to have courage again. She wanted to be herself without the soul crushing anxiety it usually brought. She wanted to change…and become the person she’d always wanted to be!

And do that…she needed their help! Now, more than ever, she was grateful to have such kind and helpful friends! Friend that…she knew believed in her…and wanted her to become stronger…to overcome the weakness in her own heart! They wanted it as much as she did, and were willing to do whatever it took to help her! Why had she been afraid of that?!

“I want…to become stronger…for myself…and everyone else too!”

Finally, after so many years of uncertainty and fear…Chihiro Fujisaki found what she’d been looking for. However, rather than finding it alone…she found it through her unforgettable and irreplaceable friends.

And with their help…she was gonna tear Byakuya a new one!

“Uh…Chihiro, you okay?” the biker asked, voice full of concern.

“I-I apologize if we were…a bit forceful,” the Moral Compass echoed, feeling a tad embarrassed.

The two of them leaned down closer to her, unsure if she was crying or simply hanging her head. Just as they got down to her level, Chihiro’s head shot up and for the first time in their lives…they heard the programmer genuinely scream!

“ARRRAHHHH!” she bellowed, eye squeezed shut and fists clenched. “I WANT TO BE STRONGER! HELP ME BECOME STRONGER!”

It was fortunate that everyone else was in their rooms, or else her scream might have attracted them. However, as it was already nighttime, it seemed that only Mondo and Taka were privy to this display. Speaking of which, the two boys were visibly surprised by their friend’s sudden display, but they quickly morphed into expressions of excitement.

“Wonderful!” Taka proclaimed, smiling brightly as he took his hand off Chihiro’s shoulder and pointed toward the exit. “In that case, we shall begin tonight! I invite both of you to stay in my room tonight as we trudge through the initial etiquette and procedures needed to help you become a proper leader!

Instantly, all of the enthusiasm Chihiro had stored up vanished, her expression shifting to one of horrific shocked.

“W-What?! T-Tonight?!” she stammered, not prepared for such an event. “B-But I was planning to —!”
“Don’t sweat it,” Mondo interrupted, slinging an arm around the programmer’s shoulders. “I promise there we be any of that ‘yaoi’ crap Hifumi mentioned…whatever it is.”

A new kind of terror engulfed Chihiro as she quickly began to regret her very loud statement. Learning new things from these two might not be such a great idea after all!

“C-Can’t we start…tomorrow?” she meekly asked/begged, hoping they’d find reason. Sadly, there was no reason to be found.

“Of course not!” Taka exclaimed, gesturing passionately as he continued, “The road to leadership begins with hard work and long hours! But fear not! I shall endeavor to ensure we get plenty of rest for tomorrow! After all, it will be your first day in assuming leadership of our class, and you’ll need to be well rested for the occasion!

“T-Tomorrow?! You want me to become class leader t-t-t-tomorrow?!” Chihiro shrieked, completely horrified by the idea. Shaking her head, she stammered, “T-Too fast! W-We’re going to fast!”

“Tch, there ain’t no need to worry,” Mondo ‘assured’ her, the programmer already knowing her situation was only going to get worse. “With Bro teachin’ ya, you’ll be ready to knock Byakuya’s teeth in with words by morning!”

Only now did a new fear…one that Chihiro had never anticipated feeling, invade her mind, as she realized that she may have doomed herself to a more terrifying fate than she could have ever imagined.

“Well then, let’s be off! Time to get to studying!” the Moral Compass said, grabbing and practically dragging Chihiro along with him toward the exit. “If we start now, I am confident you can read at least half of the public speaking book I brought with me! And here I thought I’d never need it again! Ha! Life is strange like that…”

As Chihiro was being pulled away, she turned around and reached for Alter Ego’s laptop, the last hope she had for sanity…only for it to be picked up by Mondo.

“Don’t worry, we won’t leave ‘her’ behind!” the biker assured her, tucking the laptop into his coat to hide it as they left. “While Bro teaches you about talkin’, I’ll show you some exercises that even you can do! Maybe I’ll stop by my room and pick up some weights! You look like you can handle a few small dumbbells, like fifteen pounds each?”

As the full spectrum of what she’d signed up for began to close in on her, Chihiro felt herself shaking as only one thought came to mind.

“Not like this...Not like this...Somebody save me!!!”

Meanwhile, only a stone’s throw away, two figures watched as the trio headed off toward Taka’s room for ‘training’, sighing in unison as their classmates disappeared down the hallway.

“That probably won’t end well…”

“Perhaps. Well then, shall we?”

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_Meanwhile…_
“Are you finished yet?” Taeko asked as she stood outside her room, waiting for Sakura to finish installing the latch on her door. “I’d like to change my clothes and tear apart my pillow if you don’t mind?”

For the most part, Sakura ignored her, nearly finished hammering the latch into place. It was a simple latch, which only needed to be slid to the right in order to lock. It was good it wasn’t a flip lock, because someone as devious as Celest—err…Taeko, could use a card or something on the inside to flip it up and unlock it, had that been the case. Not that there was anything like a card left in the barren room…but the idea was still viable.

“I am almost finished…there.”

Testing the latch, Sakura felt confident that once Taeko was inside, the latch would stay firmly in place. An audible clink sounded when the latch locked into place, verifying that theory. She jostled the door, seeing if it was too loose, but it held firm. With this, everyone would rest easier…everyone but Hina, that is.

A dark expression crossed Sakura’s face as she thought her friend. In less than a few hours, the bubbly, sweet, harmless girl known as Aoi Asahina…had completely been overtaken by rage and vengeance.

And the person responsible…

“Hey, didn’t you hear me? If it’s done, get out of my way.”

Sakura snapped back to reality as Taeko’s voice, a simultaneous mixture of annoyance and boredom, reverberated in her ears. The martial artist glanced to her side, fighting a sneer as she stared down at the class’ first true criminal. But like before, the instant Sakura peered into the Taeko’s lifeless, dull, almost soul-less gaze…she couldn’t help but feel pity for the poor girl.

The martial artist didn’t want to pity such a horrible, distrustful, manipulative, selfish human being such as her…but she did anyway. Sadly, it seemed that, despite her despondent state, Taeko was still as effective as ever at reading people.

Narrowing her dull crimson irises, the gambler sneered, “Don’t give me that look…it’s disgusting. Outta my way.”

Without warning, Taeko shoved past Sakura and reach up, unlatching the new lock before opening the door to her desolate room. All the while, Sakura just stood there, fighting an internal battle over what to say to such a dejected individual. In the end, however, she realized that nothing she could say at this point would matter…be it a scathing comment on Taeko’s behavior or a weak attempt at easing the gambler’s agony. Taeko wouldn’t appreciate either one…and both were equally cruel.

“Be sure to lock up,” Taeko deadpanned as she stepped inside and began closing the door. However, just before closing it, through the small slit of an opening, she once again met Sakura’s gaze, and stopped. With a huff, she pulled the door open again and turned to face the martial artist.

“If you’ve got something to say…then just fucking say it,” Taeko said, almost emotionlessly. Her lifeless crimson eyes stared at Sakura’s fierce expression, expectantly. However, the martial artist had no desire to increase her suffering, choosing to remain silent. After an awkward moment, the gambler let out sigh. “Stop being such a fucking drama queen…just say it…don’t hold back. Nobody else has.”

Sakura tensed, hardening her visage as she struggled to keep herself calm. Taeko’s rude, but
poignant, comment hit home harder than she’d been expecting. Her words caught in her throat, threatening to break free and give the gambler exactly what she wanted. However, through sheer force of will, Sakura managed to keep herself in check, holding back her feelings and beating them down until she could think clearly.

Unfortunately, Taeko audibly scoffed, reading the martial artist like an open book. With a low growl, the gambler stomped her foot.

“Say. It. Damnit!” Taeko abruptly seethed, almost startling the martial artist. “You hate me—No, you despite me…for what I did to Hina. Go ahead. Just admit it! You’re regretting that I wasn’t executed, aren’t you? Wishing to see me burned at the stake like the lying bitch that—!”

“I don’t hate you.”

Those words rang out before Sakura could stop herself. She hadn’t mean to play into Taeko’s hands, but in the end, her compassion won out. Seeing the gambler in such a pitiful state, with streaks of mascara painting her cheeks, her hair matted and torn in places, and the beautiful dress she always wore torn asunder…the martial artist couldn’t suppress her gentle nature.

As those words echoed into obscurity, Taeko scowled fiercely, her soul-less eyes amplifying her despondent visage.

“…And I thought I was supposed to be the ‘Queen of Liars’.”

As the cruelty of her statement seeped into the martial artist’s bones, the gambler slammed the door, leaving Sakura alone in the deserted hallway.

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*

“*Ahem* This is a school announcement. It is now 10pm…”

“Okay, so…how are we going to do this?” Mukuro asked once she and Kyoko were ‘safely’ inside the bathhouse.

“Not here. Let’s go to the sauna,” Kyoko said, already heading for the washroom, the sauna lying a just a few steps away.

Mukuro felt a hint of relief, instantly appreciating having a partner that could instantly pick up on her insinuations. She’d already alluded to the fact that the bathhouse and changing room were bugged, allowing the Mastermind to listen in. However, the amnesiac detective already had a work around. Recalling the incident when Mondo’s e-handbook was broken, she must have determined that the only room truly safe from the Mastermind’s eyes and ears, was the sauna. The heat would short any electrical device, even listening devices, and therefore was the unintentional blind spot for the Mastermind. The soldier briefly wondered exactly how long Kyoko had sat on that information, but it really didn’t matter…not anymore.

“Alright, but first…” Mukuro said quietly, her tone enough of a signal to force Kyoko to stop.

The detective stared at her for a moment, then followed her gaze back to the bathhouse entrance. Meanwhile, the soldier was preoccupied with the fact that someone had been following them. And although the chance of it being Monokuma was slim, she wanted to be absolutely sure before they
went into the sauna.

After all, even though there wasn’t any recording equipment in the sauna itself, if the mechanical bear snuck in and eavesdropped outside the door, it could be disastrous.

With stealthy speed unlike anything Kyoko had witnessed before, Mukuro slunk over to the wall right next to the entrance without a single sound. There…she waited, sensing that whoever had followed them was slowly creeping their way into the bathhouse. However, as the figure of someone barely began to come into view, the detective’s voice shattered the silence.

“Makoto…you can come out now,” she said, as flatly as always, as if she hadn’t just revealed something important. “We know you’re there. It’s fine to come out.”

Mukuro immediately tensed, not entirely sure if she should trust Kyoko’s words or simply rely on her instincts and subdue whomever was approaching. It could be that the amnesiac detective was simply trying to confuse whoever was there, but on the other hand, it was entirely possible she was being honest as well.

Not to mention that, if Kyoko was right, and it was Makoto, slamming him into the floor would only make him question her true identity. It could be that Kyoko was trying to save her from that very situation…but at the same time, since the trial was over…could she really trust Kyoko now?

“Instincts…or trust? Which should I—?”

In the midst of her mental vexation, a familiar voice called out, “Sorry, I should have known you’d figure me out.”

Mukuro kept still as the figure of Makoto entered into the bathhouse, a look of embarrassment across his features. Almost instantly, he noticed that she was staring at him, startling him enough to make him stumble backwards.

“J-Junko! S-Sorry, I didn’t know you were right there!” he apologized, though the soldier didn’t really understand why.

However, she instantly put on her guise and answered, “Hey, no worries! I didn’t expect you to follow after us! I barely even noticed you!”

She lied. It was the safest bet, especially considering she had no idea why Makoto was tailing them. Sure, he was probably curious about her and Kyoko’s newfound ‘friendship’, but she never imagined he’d have the guts to try and eavesdrop on them. She was kind of impressed actually. While it was true that he never stood a chance against her stealth skills, or Kyoko’s perceptiveness, the fact that he tried to secretly follow them must have taken some guts.

“His growing stronger with each class trial,” she mentally noted, feeling inspired by his growth since the first trial. “Strange how such a horrific experience is making a stronger person out of him… or maybe he was always this way, and I just never noticed…”

“Makoto, I’m surprised to see you here,” Kyoko suddenly quipped, walking over to enter the conversation. “You’re ignoring the nighttime rule, even after you insisted that we still follow it.”

Mukuro held in a gasp, completely shocked by the detectives forward, and somewhat rude, comment. At the same time, there was a hint of admiration in her voice…the likes of which Mukuro had never heard before. And for Makoto of all people…

Back in their school days, she knew that Makoto and Kyoko had been friends. She saw them
hanging out, and from time to time, Kyoko seemed to invite the lucky student along on her investigations. At the time, Mukuro thought nothing of it, considering she knew her sister planned to have them all murder each other…but now…

Suddenly, a dull ache resonated deep in her chest…and it wasn’t like the feeling she’d felt up until now. It was…sadder somehow. Though she couldn’t understand why. Knowing that she didn’t have time to try and figure it out, she willed the feeling away as the conversation began in earnest.

“Yeah, well…” Makoto started, as if he was about to accuse the two of them of violating the nighttime rule as well, but he must have reconsidered. “…I guess I was just curious as to why the two of you were sneaking off together. And besides…you promised me an explanation.”

His face stiffened as he finished, his determination honestly impressing the battle-hardened soldier. She was definitely right that he’d been growing stronger with each class trial, but this was unthinkable.

“The old Makoto would have simply waited until morning and asked us about it them. It’s like he’s becoming a different person…someone…that we can all rely on.”

As that thought entered her mind, a sudden inescapable fear began to well up with it.

“Junko…won’t be happy about this.”

If she had noticed the lucky student’s steady growth, then Junko was undoubtedly keenly aware of it. Until now, her sister’s penchant for crushing all aspects of hope had never filled Mukuro with such terror…but now she that realized just how much Makoto had changed during this whole ordeal, she knew it wouldn’t end well. He was becoming a symbol for his classmates, a person who everyone trusted and could rally behind, much more so than even someone as talented and charismatic as Byakuya.

Maybe it had to do with the fact that no one had died yet, perhaps that’s where Makoto’s confidence came from…but somehow, even if the killing game had gone as Junko originally predicted, something told Mukuro that the lucky student wouldn’t fall into despair so easily…and that worried her all the more.

It may not happen right away, but sooner or later, Junko would undoubtedly bring down the cruel hammer of despair to grind every last bit of hope into dust…and that included Makoto!

…That’s why she’d struck a deal with Kyoko. An alliance…for everyone’s sake…but also for Makoto as well.

“Not only that, you both just disappeared this morning! We couldn’t find you for hours!” the lucky student abruptly continued, disrupting her concentration.

In addition to that, the soldier noticed that he was…a lot more intense than usual. His features had hardened, and he seemed…genuinely upset! For a moment, Mukuro didn’t recognize the boy in front of her as Makoto…he was like a completely different person! Had their absence…really bothered him that much?

“I know that you can take care of yourselves but…” he paused, glanced between them and making Mukuro feel a sense of guilt she’d never experienced before! Then, after taking a deep breath he practically shouted, “Sneaking off and investigating the hidden room on your own is dangerous! You should have told us all about it!”

“…There wasn’t any need for us to tell you all,” Kyoko calmly retorted, folding her arms and
hardening her features. “Is that why you followed us here? Do you suspect us of being spies for the Mastermind as well?”

Mukuro clenched her fists and gritted her teeth, holding back a biting comment. There wasn’t any need for her to be so rude to Makoto! At the same time…Kyoko was keeping her word, and as much as Mukuro appreciated that, it was hard to watch Makoto’s earnest pleas go seemingly unanswered.

She was about to interject, try and save the conversation somehow, when Makoto abruptly answered, “No! You’re my friends! I trust both of you!”

“Then why did you feel the need to eavesdrop on us?” Kyoko pointedly asked, fixating her scrutinizing gaze upon him. He flinched under her gaze, opening his mouth before shutting it again. With a light huff, the detective finished, “Regardless, that’s not something you need to know right now—”.

“I don’t need to know?!” he interjected, and even Mukuro could feel the hurt in his voice. However, before she could insert herself into the argument, the lucky student shouted, “That just makes me even more worried about the two of you!”

…

…

“…Worried?”

To Mukuro’s shock, that response came not from her…but Kyoko. The soldier practically snapped her head over and stared with utter surprise at the expression that overtook the detective’s face. The usually stoic Ultimate Detective…appeared completely shocked…as if she couldn’t believe the words Makoto had hurled at them.

All at once, it clicked. Kyoko had reverted back into the closed-off, highly cautious, distrusting detective she’d been during their time at school…less of a person and more of a dedicated mystery solving machine. And as such…when someone showed her genuine kindness or concern, she questioned it…but that’s not what she was doing right now.

Kyoko…almost seemed like she couldn’t understand why anyone would be concerned for her safety, much less anyone else’s. Makoto’s honest display of concern clashed with her beliefs…that a detective must always be logical and impartial. She viewed Makoto as an equal…and thus, seeing him act with such reckless optimism toward her position…startled her.

Honestly, it wasn’t much of a surprise for Mukuro. She’d spied on—err, observed Makoto enough to realize that his care was genuine…and if Kyoko had retained her memories, she would have as well. At the same time…

“Even if all of her memories have been erased…something obviously remains. She wouldn’t have trusted Makoto otherwise…and she certainly wouldn’t have struck a deal with me. I’d almost forgotten her ‘true’ nature…wasn’t like this at all.”

Mukuro had, unintentionally, been treating Kyoko similarly to the way she had when they’d been classmates. Even though they hadn’t interacted much, there had been mutual respect…but that wasn’t the case here. The Ultimate Detective hadn’t put her faith in Mukuro completely…simply put, they were using each other…and neither of them knew how long that would last.

“Yes, I was worried about both you!” Makoto seamlessly continued, shifting his gaze between them. “When the two of you disappeared…I thought something happened to you! And…”
He trailed off, as if unsure of what to say next. But then, with firmer resolve than she’d ever witnessed before, the lucky student finished, “I…believe in both of you! And…I want you to believe in me too…as your friend!”

Meanwhile, Mukuro felt that warm feeling reemerge from deep within her chest, drowning out the sad and painful stinging from before. He was worried about them…about her. And for some reason…it made her feel…appreciated. Makoto viewed her as someone he respected, someone he could rely on…it was a feeling that she hadn’t really experienced until now.

During her time with Junko, she had been sure that her sister appreciated what she did…or at least, she thought she did. Only recently had the soldier realized that, what she thought was appreciation…was manipulation. Her sister…wasn’t capable of appreciating anyone. She knew that…and yet, somehow, she’d fooled herself into believing that Junko truly needed her…that she was irreplaceable.

“As it turns out…I was just another pawn. Junko…isn’t capable of caring about anyone…”

Shaking her head free of those dark thoughts, she instead chose to focus on her situation. After all, she hadn’t expected Makoto to drop in on her and Kyoko during their meeting. And she wasn’t quite sure what they should do about it either.

Fortunately, it seemed that Kyoko had anticipated this outcome.

“…I understand,” the amnesiac detective said, having returned to her usual stoic visage…kind of. Although it was very slight, there were traces of emotions hidden behind Kyoko’s lavender eyes, though only Mukuro could see that. Regardless, the amnesiac detective turned and locked her gaze onto Makoto’s as she said, “Then…maybe I can believe in you too…”

Mukuro didn’t have time to be shocked, even though she was utterly perplexed by Kyoko’s sudden change of heart. She had to stay in character, at least for now.

“Totally!” she concurred, flashing both of them a confident smile. “I know things got a little crazy today, and it must have been difficult for you, but…I believe in you guys too!”

At that moment, almost unexpectedly, Makoto smiled at her. It was the same sweet and kind smile that had drawn her to him so long ago…and once again it brought forth the strange but warm sensation in her chest…and she didn’t want to suppress it this time. Rather, she let it spread throughout her body, giving her the courage to face whatever Junko may have planned for them!

That is…until her partner spoke up.

“In that case, I have a favor to ask of you, Makoto.”

Kyoko’s voice cut through the warm feelings, her stern demeanor instantly bringing both of them back to their situation. Perplexed and confused by the detective’s sudden forwardness, she almost cut in but was too slow.

With no hesitation, Kyoko swiftly requested, “Would you please go and investigate the hidden room in the boy’s bathroom on the second floor?”

*Ding*Dong*Bing*Bong*
As the nighttime announcement echoed all around her, Sakura took a deep breath before exhaling slowly. Her encounter with Taeko had left her mentally winded...or perhaps the exhaustion from today’s events were finally catching up with her.

She lifted her hand and latched the door to the gambler’s room, sealing her in for the night. With slow, heavy steps, Sakura marched toward her room, unlocked it, and sauntered inside. Once there, she locked the door, walked into the center of her room and sat down in the middle of her training posts.

Closing her eyes, she began to meditate.

For nearly an entire minute, she remained frozen in place, not a single muscle moving. Then, incredibly minutely, she began to shake. Her hands balled into fists, her muscles tensed and hardened, her face scrunched, and her aura of power slowly began to rise...until it all but consumed her.

Then, with a sudden burst of speed, she leapt to her feet and shot forward, like a bullet, toward one of her training posts. Clenching her fist as tightly as she could, her knuckles slammed into the post with devastating force. The wooden post, which had taken a severe beating in the past, was unable to withstand such a blow. A sickening crack echoed as the Ultimate Martial Artist’s fist tore through both the bindings and the wood itself, splintering the post with a single strike.

As the pieces clattered to the floor, Sakura sucked in labored breaths. In that moment, she wanted nothing more than to turn her fury on the other wooden posts and shatter them as easily as she had this one. However, as a dull throbbing of pain began spreading through her fist, she stopped herself. Unclenching her fist, she lifted it up, her hand involuntarily shaking as she witnessed the redness spreading over each knuckle. Her hand dropped to her side and in that moment, a single tear slipped down the martial artist’s cheek.

“...I am...despicable...”

She wanted to hate Taeko. She wanted to ridicule and shout at her for betraying them. She wanted her to be punished for traumatizing Hina...changing the swimmer into a monster almost as cruel as ‘Celeste’ had once been! But most of all...She wanted...She wanted...She wanted...to punish herself! For she knew that her betrayal...far surpassed any crime that Taeko had committed!

Even after everything that Taeko had done, Sakura couldn’t bring herself to truly despise her. She was displeased, far more than she ever thought possible. But at the same time, she understood exactly what Taeko was going through.

Taeko Yasuhiro had fallen into despair...the guilt of her actions, even if she denied it, plagued her. And then, the punishment Byakuya set for her was intensified by Hina’s cruelty. It was a grim reminder...of what would undoubtedly happen...when her classmates discovered the deal she had stuck with Monokuma.

Faced with the loss of her family’s dojo...she had become a pawn of the Mastermind. She chose...her family’s legacy, over the lives of her friends and classmates. And when Taeko had called her a liar...all the feelings of rage, guilt, anxiety, fear, and helplessness came rushing to the surface. And there was no way to hold them back any longer.

At the same time...there was little she could do now. Her betrayal was already set in stone. Even if she confessed her sins now...there would be no forgiveness. None of her classmates would forgive
her for the part she’d played in keeping them trapped here. And that was fine. She would take their scorn, weather their anger and rage toward her. She deserved to be punished, far more than Taeko and Hifumi had been.

There was only one person who she feared reprimands from:

“Hina…”

Sakura’s heart ached for her friend, knowing that the swimmer’s heart had been damaged far beyond repair. And if…she was to confess her sins now…if she forced her best friend to suffer another betrayal so soon after losing her faith in others…it would leave Hina a broken woman…and Sakura would do anything to keep that from happening—!

*Ding*Dong*Ding*Dong*

Sakura’s head snapped toward her door, her face hardening as she concluded that only one person could be visiting at this hour.

Monokuma…the demented bear probably wanted to speak with her again, as was the case after every class trial. She had hoped for some peaceful quiet, hoped she’d have time to clear her thoughts before being summoned. She cursed herself for being so foolish. What made her think that this time would be any different? The demented bear always wanted an update after a trial…even if it was only to further chastise Sakura for selling out her classmates.

Or, perhaps, tonight would be the night…when the bear demanded the ‘favor’ she had promised so long ago?

The very thought of Monokuma, gleefully asking her to ‘set the killing game in motion’, made her stomach churn. Oh, how she longed to crush the little bastard’s head with her bare hands! She wanted to rip apart Monokuma piece by piece, and if a second bear appeared, she would tear it asunder as well! Even if Monokuma produced an army of evil teddy bear replicas, she would fight to the last breath to destroy them all!

*Ding*Dong*Ding*Dong*

Shaking her head to force away such thoughts, Sakura realized it was prudent not to keep the bear waiting. Marching toward her door, she grasped the handle tightly and jerked it opened…the force of which startled the person outside.

“S-Sakura…?”

Sakura’s breath caught in her throat, her words choked off as she saw someone completely unexpected in front of her. Hina…Aoi Asahina stood outside her door. The marital artist couldn’t contain her shock, her eyebrows shooting up the instant she recognized her friend.

“H-Hina…” she stammered, slowly forcing herself to relax. Once she was certain she’d reasonably calmed herself, she continued, “I’m…sorry. I wasn’t expecting any visitors…”

Waving her hands apologetically, the swimmer stuttered, “N-No! It’s totally fine! Really! I just…uh…” Hina fidgeted with her hand for a moment before shaking her head. “No…Never mind! It’s nothing. I’ll talk to you tomorrow!”

Immediately, Hina spun around and began walking briskly toward her room, thoroughly shocking the martial artist. A surge of panic arose in Sakura. Something was definitely wrong, and she’d be damned if she didn’t act on it!
“Please wait!” Sakura called out, bringing the swimmer to a halt. However, she didn’t turn to look, keeping her back to the martial artist. Feeling something was amiss, Sakura stepped into the hallway and said, “Hina, are you alright? Is there…anything I can help you with?”

It was a stupid question. Of course she wasn’t alright…but that was the only thing that Sakura could say right now. Hina was acting…stranger than ever before. She wasn’t her usual self, but she wasn’t behaving as cruelly as she had been earlier. If anything, she almost seemed to be…frightened of something.

However, the swimmer didn’t answer. She merely stood there, completely frozen, her back turned, not uttering a single word. Instantly, Sakura’s natural protective instincts took hold and, without waiting for a proper answer, decided to ask, “Hina, would you like to spend the night in my room?”

Somehow, she just knew that is what Hina had meant to ask of her. She’d only known Hina for a short while, but in that time, she’d learned to anticipate the way Hina reacted to various situations. And even though she was acting quite strangely, it didn’t change the fact that right now…the swimmer needed someone to be there for her.

And Sakura knew…it had to be her.

Hina didn’t respond verbally. Instead, she slowly nodded her head twice. She turned around, tilting her face away from Sakura as she passed by. Once she was safely inside her room, Sakura gently pulled the door shut and locked it. The instant she turned around, she found Hina, standing in the center of her room, staring down at the floor, her back once again facing her.

Sakura tensed as she realized that she hadn’t cleaned up from the destruction earlier. “I apologize for the mess. As I said, I wasn’t expecting—guh?!”

Sakura lost all sense of rational as she took in the visage of her best friend. Hina spun around, her face finally visible…completely stained with long streaks of tears. The swimmer hiccupped, sobbed, and tried desperately to control herself…but failed.

“S-Sakura! I…I…” she wailed, unable to speak properly through her sobs. “W-What…h-h-ha-have…I-I-I…?!”

The instant Hina’s choking sobs reached her, Sakura felt something within herself break. Something deep within snapped at seeing her best friend, the person she felt true kinship with, reduced to such a sight. A rage unlike any other bubbled up inside, a mixture of fury toward Taeko…and self-loathing for herself.

Without thinking, Sakura walked up to Hina…and wordlessly opened her arms. It was all she could think to do…offering herself as a shoulder to cry on. Seeing that, the swimmer didn’t hesitate. She abruptly slammed into the muscle-bound woman, burying her face in her chest and wailing in agony.

Sakura didn’t say a word, embracing her friend tightly, stroking her hair as Hina let out all the pain and suffering she’d kept buried deep inside for so long.

“It hurts…it hurts so much…! I…I HATE her! All I wanted…was to be…her friend! But she…but she…she…why…why did she…? How…could she…how could she…?!?”

The martial artist felt her breath hitch, struggling to keep her composure as she continued to soothe her grieving friend.

“It’s not your fault…none of this is your fault. You know that…” Sakura said in a low, soothing tone, trying to reassure her friend. Unfortunately, she must have failed, because the swimmer
abruptly started pounding her fist on her chest.

“But it is! I...let her...trick me...!” she wailed, her voice slightly muffled by Sakura’s bosom. “I-It’s...all my fault! I almost...got everyone...killed! I-I...please...please...don’t hate me!”

A deep, stinging pain dug into Sakura’s chest as Hina begged for forgiveness. At the same time, a hint of relief came over the martial artist. It seemed that Hina wasn’t completely lost after all. She was in pain...and would need time to heal, but at least it appeared that the old Hina was still in there… fighting to overcome her sadness.

Sakura’s hand reached out, and with a soft grip on her chin, she tugged Hina’s face upward, their eyes finally meeting.

“…You’ve don’t nothing worth hating, Hina.” Sakura mustered her most reassuring smile as she stared into her friend’s tear-filled eyes. “You were...we all...were betrayed by Celeste. And now, she’s been punished for it. That is enough...you have nothing to feel ashamed of—”

“NO! That’s...not true!” she cried, still fighting through her sobs as she spoke. Hina shook her head, forcing the martial artist to retract her hand, before burying her face into Sakura’s toned bosom again. “I’m no better than Celeste! I never thought I’d be capable of...of...”

As she trailed off, Sakura held her close and gently stroked her hair, comforting her friend as best she could. She’d never been in this kind of situation before, but her natural protective instincts kicked in and she somehow knew exactly what to say and do.

“That’s not true, Hina. You are nothing like her,” the martial artist insisted, her voice deep and gentle. “She hurt you, and so you lashed out in anger. We all fall prey to such weakness. No one will blame you for tearing up the dre—”

“That’s not what I meant!”

With surprising strength, Hina abruptly tore herself away from Sakura’s embrace,

“I...I...I voted to kill someone! And...at the time...I was completely fine with that! If she’d been executed...I wouldn’t have cared!” Hina screamed, her voice raw and exhausted. Taking a few staggered breaths, she continued, “I’m...a terrible person! I’m no better...than Byakuya! Or Celeste! I...I...I don’t deserve to live—!!”

*SLAP*

For the very first time, Sakura struck her friend across the face, the sound reverberating in the small space. The look of utter shock on Hina’s face, combined with the agony of actually striking her best friend, sent painful pangs through the martial artist’s chest. However, she could not back down... Hina needed her, and she would not fail her a second time!

“Hina, listen to me very carefully,” she said slowly, her voice powerful but gentle. “You are not a horrible person. You are a gentle, kind soul. And I am honored to call you my best friend.”

As she spoke, Hina was completely captivated by her words. Even though her cheek must have stung painfully, she still managed to listen to each and every word, as if completely enthralled by her friend’s voice.

“You have made mistakes, but there is nothing you have done that cannot be forgiven. Everyone makes mistakes...I have made many grave mistakes in my lifetime...some of which can never be forgiven...”
She paused for a moment, momentarily losing her concentration as the shame of her betrayal almost overwhelmed her. However, as she gazed at Hina’s tear-stained face, she drew strength from deep within, somehow finding the courage to continue.

“Unlike many others, you realize the error of your ways, and feel remorse for your actions. That is not a trait found in people such as Byakuya or Taeko. I know it will not be easy to deal with your resentment…but I believe that, with time, you shall overcome it. And…if nothing else, know that I have faith in you…and I will continue to support you…until the end.”

The swimmer’s eyes widened and began to refill with tears. Hanging her head, letting her tears drip onto the floor, Hina struggled to regain some form of composure.

“S-Sakura…I’m…” she whispered, regret clear in her voice. “I’m…so sorry…for making you worry…but…but I…I don’t know what to do!”

It was painful, constantly watching her friend apologize. But Sakura knew there was nothing else that could be done. Right now, Hina was overcome with too many emotions, not to mention that she was obviously physically and mentally exhausted. She was too, of course, but right now, she needed to support her friend. Everything else could wait until she’d successfully calmed down the swimmer.

“Hina…it’s been a long day. Might I suggest getting some rest for now,” Sakura offered, gesturing toward the bed. “Once we’ve had time to rest, I’m sure we can find a solution…together.”

Finally, it seemed that Hina began to acknowledge just how tired she was. The swimmer tried to fight a yawn, but it came all the same. She rubbed her eyes sleepily, but stubbornly insisted, “N-No…I’m not…that…tired…”

As if against her will, she yawned again, flushing with embarrassment as she tried to keep awake. After realizing her own exhaustion, it seemed that it was only a matter of time before she succumbed, whether she like it or not.

Seeing that, Sakura smiled down at her and said, “Do not fear. I will be here to watch over you. For now, get some rest. And once tomorrow comes…I am sure that everything will become clear.”

Her words held more truth than she’d planned but the sentiment seemed to register with the swimmer.

“Well… I guess you’re…right. But…” Hina lazily glanced toward the bed, the drowsiness clear in her voice. Slowly, her gaze traveled back to meet Sakura’s gaze and she said, “Shouldn’t you sleep too? I don’t wanna take your bed…”

A gentle smile overtook Sakura’s lips as she replied, “I will be fine sleeping on the floor. I am used to it. Please, take the bed and rest.”

Hina opened her mouth to protest but yawned deeply instead. Sakura smiled wider at the sight, and for the first time since she’d come over…Hina smiled as well.

“…Okay, you win,” she finally consented, turning around and staggering over to the bed, practically falling onto it. “But tomorrow…I’m having…you over…to sleep in…my…room…okay?”

“…Alright.”

Standing over her friend, Sakura’s smile began to fade as she listened to her friend slowly begin to drift off to sleep. She could see that Hina’s body and spirit had reached their limits hours ago and hoped that she would fall asleep rather quickly…which seemed to be the case.
A deep, hollow pain began to fill in Sakura’s chest as Hina’s request reverberated in her ears. It was cruel…almost too cruel…Hina trusted her more than anyone else…and she had betrayed that trust time and time again by colluding with Monokuma.

She didn’t deserve to have a friend as wonderful as Hina…and yet, she could never deny how fortunate she had been to befriend such an amazing person. More than anything, Sakura wanted to be worthy of such friendship…but she knew it wasn’t possible…not anymore.

As Hina slowly fell into uneasy slumber, Sakura’s fists clenched tightly. It had been agonizing…hearing her friend beg to be forgiven…when her own crimes far outweighed anything Hina had done! Her betrayal…her role as the mole for the Mastermind…that was truly unforgiveable! And she would face the consequences of her actions…

However, Hina had only followed her heart! She befriended Cele—Taeko, with the purpose of honestly wanting to grow closer…it wasn’t her fault that the gambler took advantage of that! She had nothing to be ashamed of! Even her aggressive display of tearing apart Taeko’s dress was only due to her unbridled grief at being betrayed—

A dark thought entered Sakura’s mind, one that she’d been repressing for quite some time now.

“Betrayal…When my deception is discovered…will the same hatred Hina directs toward Taeko…be pointed at me instead?”

She didn’t want to imagine it, but like it or not, her mind’s eye couldn’t keep from picturing it. Hina…her only friend, the one person she felt an unbreakable bond with…would condemn her. The hatred she saw for Taeko would be unleashed tenfold upon her…for her betrayal was far, far more disgusting than anything the gambler had done.

Not only that, after the painful realization of Taeko’s true nature, the swimmer psyche had already been fractured. If she were to uncover the martial artist’s betrayal as well…

“She won’t survive…Her will would be too broken to continue living…Dear god, what have I done!”

Sakura’s chest began to ache as the guilt from her betrayal weighed down on her. She had wanted to save her family…she didn’t have a choice. Her family, or these strangers…it had been a difficult but logical choice. However…her classmates were no longer strangers. She knew them…their likes and dislikes, their motivations and dreams for the future, and she understood their desire to survive and see their families and friends again…

“I…betrayed my friends…for my family. What would…my family think if they saw me now? They…they would…”

They would be ashamed. For her to put the dojo and their lives above the innocent lives of her classmates…there was no honor to be found there. She had known that…she knew that even before she agreed to Monokuma’s demands…but she still chose to betray everyone. Her weakness…her pride…had stopped her from doing what she knew was right!

But now, as she held the fragile live of Aoi Asahina in her hands…she knew what needed to be done. And there would be no stopping her…not even if Hina begged…she knew what needed to be done to set things right. Sitting down the floor, next to the bed, Sakura began to meditate…but not before whispering one final comment.

“I know what must be done…and this time…I won’t hesitate.”
“Are you insane?! You want him to go to the hidden room?! Right now?!” the girl pretending to be Junko Enoshima shouted, her sudden fury only somewhat catching Kyoko off-guard.

In truth, Kyoko had expected this kind of reaction from her, but hadn’t anticipated it being so intense. However, that reaction alone answered many questions that the amnesiac girl had been unable to confirm. It seemed that this false Junko’s concern for Makoto wasn’t a farce after all…

“Indeed,” she answered, unafraid of her ‘partner’s’ reaction. Barely sparing the imposter a glance, she instead focused her gaze on the bewildered lucky student. “All I need is for you to go and see if there is anything left in the room. That’s all.”

“Wait…I’m confused,” Makoto replied, full of perplexion. “What do you mean by ‘anything left’? Didn’t you and Junko investigate that room earlier?”

Kyoko almost smiled, but held it in. She was strangely proud of him, impressed that he’d already figured out that’s where they must have been hiding. His instincts were incredibly sharp…and that made him a useful ally. At the same time, no matter how much she wanted to trust him…she knew she couldn’t…not fully.

In all honesty…she wanted to, but her instincts as a detective told her not to reveal too much. She was already taking a significant risk in trusting this false Junko. Taking any more unnecessary risks could lead to her death…and if that happened, she knew that the truth behind what was happening at this school would never be solved.

“I can’t allow that to happen. No matter the cost…I need to discover the truth…about everything…about him.”

That’s right…she had come to this school for a very distinct purpose. She could only barely remember it, through the haze of her foggy memories, but she knew…she knew she needed to find the headmaster of Hope’s Peak. Even if she couldn’t recall exactly why…something deep within told her that that was her purpose for being here. It gave her clarity…it gave her purpose…it kept her mind from falling prey to despairing thoughts. As long as she had that purpose…she would do anything, use anyone, to accomplish it.

…Even someone she considered a friend.

With unflinching resolve, she answered Makoto’s question. “Now that Monokuma has revealed the existence of the hidden room, I have no doubt that the Mastermind will remove everything from that room. I want you to go and confirm that. Once you do, head back to your room for the night. Then tomorrow, after everyone meets in the cafeteria, I’ll come and talk to you about what you saw.”

Makoto seemed to absorb her words like a sponge, taking it all in without so much as a protest. There was confusion behind his eyes, Kyoko could see that, but there was also firm determination there as well. For whatever reason, he trusted her. And no matter how despicable it felt, she would use that trust to learn more about this school…to uncover the secrets the Mastermind had hidden. And eventually…she would find the truth hidden in the darkness.

“Uh-uh! No way! It’s way too fucking dangerous!” the girl masquerading as Junko Enoshima suddenly interjected, her rage obvious…and understandable. “What if the Mastermind is waiting for someone to come by this late at night?! Asking him to do something so dangerous is—!”

“If you spend all your time trying to avoid danger, you’ll never move forward.”
The imposter’s protest were quickly silenced as Kyoko spoke over her...a dangerous gamble in and of itself. If the imposter was who Kyoko believed her to be, then in terms of combat ability, she didn’t stand a chance. Not to mention that, since their alliance was shaky at best. They had supported each other until now, almost unquestioningly, out of desperation and fear. At the same time, their interests...seemed only to align in certain places.

The false Junko gritted her teeth, obviously not pleased with this development. However, she remained silent, waiting for Makoto’s response. The two of them now turned their gazes toward Makoto, who seemed to be in deep contemplation.

“...Never move forward, huh?” he said quietly, but the amnesiac girl still heard it.

Internally, she was pleased that her words had resonated with him so much...which made the fact that she was manipulating him all the more disturbing. However, she buried those feelings before they had chance to take root, reminding herself that it was simply the quickest way to find the truth.

A moment later, it seemed that her cunning won out. “Alright...I'll go and investigate the hidden room. Then, I’ll meet you two tomorrow after the morning meeting...if we even have one.”

Kyoko nodded. He raised a valid point. Now that Taka was no longer acting as ‘leader’, would there even be a necessity to meet in the morning? Well, aside from that being a way to keep track of everyone. But with Byakuya now helming the group, would he even show up? He’d neglected to show himself on several occasions, so it wouldn’t surprise her if he chose to abandon the practice that had become the students’ routine.

“Just...be careful, Makoto!” the Junko impersonator abruptly exclaimed, trying and failing to mask her concern. “The Mastermind may be lying in wait for you. Don’t take any risks. If you thinks something’s up, get the hell out of there! Got it?”

With a reassuring smile, Makoto nodded to her and said, “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna do anything crazy. I’ll just check the room and leave. Simple as that.”

The fake Junko Enoshima didn’t seem reassured, but she must have realized that unless she physically detained him, there was nothing she could do to stop him.

“And if something happens, come to my room and get me,” She insisted, her entire demeanor hardening with firm resolve. “I’ll leave my door open, just in case.”

“Got it!” he assured her once more before turning to head off. However, before he reached the exit, he stopped. “Oh, and Kyoko...?”

The nervousness in his voice unsettled the amnesiac girl, watching him closely as he turned to face her one last time. Then, with a pure and honest smile, he finished, “…Thank you for trusting me.”

Kyoko fought a wave of guilt that threatened to engulf her as his sincerity resonated with her. Because...she didn’t trust him...not completely. She wanted to...all of her intuition told her that he could be trusted...and yet her instincts wouldn’t allow it. And sadly, her instincts proved harder to ignore than her intuition, and it wasn’t as difficult to send him off into danger as it should have been.

Instead of replying, she gave him a simple nod. It seemed enough for him though, as he nodded back to her before departing the bathhouse...leaving her alone with the Junko imposter.

“...What the hell was that?” the fake Junko seethed once they were sure Makoto was out of earshot. Turning to face her fully, Kyoko internally fought to keep calm as her ‘partner’s’ sky-blue irises flared angrily in her direction. “I know we promised not to involve the others, but what you did puts
Makoto at an even greater risk.”

She was quiet…unnervingly so. Unlike her Junko persona, the girl beneath the façade wasn’t loud or abrasive. If she was angry, she showed it through subtle inflections in her voice, not with volume. And right now, a quiet rage emanated from the disguised girl, and Kyoko knew that no matter what explanation she gave, the imposter would hold this digression against her.

“I’m doing exactly as I promised,” she calmly explained, knowing it was unwise to provoke her ‘partner’ any further. “We need to speak privately, and I didn’t want anyone eavesdropping…just like we agreed on.”

The Junko impersonator took a deep breath before replying, “But sending him to the hidden room alone…during nighttime…he could get killed.”

“I know…but it’s a risk we have to take.”

Kyoko knew that was the truth…but she couldn’t risk speaking it aloud. Her ‘partner’ would snap, or at the very least, she’d follow after Makoto. If that happened, Kyoko would lose her as a resource, and she couldn’t allow that to happen. Too much was riding on what this imposter knew, and getting that information far outweighed the risk to Makoto’s life.

…Or at least, that’s what she told herself.

“I doubt that the Mastermind will make a move tonight. Especially since they went out of their way to reveal the hidden room during the trial,” she finally answered, her aloof demeanor perfectly masking her actions. “And besides, with their commitment to the rules, we can assume that they wouldn’t kill him themselves. Otherwise, the killing game would lose meaning, and they can’t have that, not after everything that’s happened.”

Strangely, her words almost seemed more to comfort herself rather than convince ‘Junko’. The imposter must have sensed that, because behind her cold expression, a hint of suspicion could be seen. However, that explanation must have been enough to satisfy the false Junko, because she seamlessly dropped the argument.

“…Fine,” she finally relented, taking a deep cleansing breath before heading toward the sauna. “Let’s get this over with. I don’t want to take any more unnecessary risks.”

“Agreed,” Kyoko concurred, following after her companion and into the bathhouse itself.

Making their way toward the sauna, the Junko impersonator held the door open for her. With only the barest of nods, Kyoko entered the small, humid room. The imposter quickly entered after, shutting them in. Once there, they stood opposite each other, neither of them sitting. Only when the silence became deafening did the imposter finally speak.

“So…what do you want to know?” she asked simply, as if the question didn’t have huge meaning behind it.

Following suit, Kyoko fixated her gaze on the girl in front of her and asked, “Tell me everything you know about the current Headmaster of Hope’s Peak Academy.”

“…It is time.”
Sakura’s eyes snapped open. Her meditation was complete, and she felt as mentally prepared as she could be. Her eyes drifted over to the clock on the wall. 2AM. No one would be out this late, especially after the incident from last night. She would need to be careful, however. It was entirely possible that Kyoko and Junko would leave their doors open again, just in case.

Then again, even if she was spotted, it didn’t matter. By the time everyone met up in the cafeteria, her business would be concluded…and everything would be settled.

Slowly rising to her feet, Sakura glanced down at her bed and smiled. Hina was still there, peacefully slumbering. Her face had the faintest hint of a smile, and Sakura could only hope she was having a pleasant dream. The blanket that had covered the swimmer had rolled to the side, leaving her slightly exposed.

“Rest well…my dearest friend. When you awaken…all will be settled.”

Leaning down, the martial artist re-draped the blanket over her friend, gently patting the swimmer on the head. For a moment, Hina seemed to stir…but quickly settled back into peaceful sleep. Satisfied, Sakura slowly backed away, and began advancing toward her door, tugging her key from her pocket.

However, she paused as she touched the handle, glancing over her shoulder and staring at her slumbering friend. Watching the swimmer’s chest rise and fall in soothing rhythm, Sakura’s eyes softened, nodding firmly to herself before exiting her room. Locking the door behind her, the martial artist swiftly began heading for the gymnasium.

It didn’t take her long, only a few minutes, actually. She made her way around the opposite side of the dorm’s hallway, just in case Kyoko or Junko had left their doors open. As she walked, she kept an eye out behind her, constantly ensuring that no one followed after her. Before long, her feet carried her to her destination almost automatically, and before she knew it, she stood in the center of the gymnasium.

This was where it had all started. After meeting Monokuma in this room, Sakura had been seduced by evil into betraying her friend. Regardless of the circumstances, if she had remained strong and vigilant, as her family had taught her, she never would have ended up in this position.

She thought of family…the memories feeling so old and distant now. It had only been a little over a month, but it felt as if years had gone by since she’d laid eyes on her father and mother. But mostly, she thought of Kenshiro…her beloved. Though he had been absent from her motive video…she knew that Monokuma must have been aware of him. After all, her secret, that she was no longer a virgin, had been revealed. Whoever the Mastermind was, they knew of Kenshiro…and that made her decision all the more clear.

“As painful as those questions were, somewhere, deep in her heart, she already knew the answer.

Kenshiro had always been compassionate and forgiving, encouraging her even when no one else had done so. His goodness…inspired her to be better, and his strength of spirit pushed her to do what she knew was right…no matter the cost! She wanted to believe that, if he could see her now, prepared to sacrifice everything in order to save her classmates, that he would be proud of her. That thought…gave her strength, clarity, and above all…the willpower to resist the vile monster that had tried to tear her down.
Taking one last, deep breath, the martial artist’s visage hardened as she made her decision.

“Monokuma! Come out! I have something to report!”

Sakura’s voice echoed in the large space, and she expected it would take at least few minutes before the bear arrived. However, she was shocked when almost immediately, a black and white blur shot up from behind the podium on the stage, landing just a few feet from her.

“Sheesh! Don’t any of you kids know what time it is?!” Monokuma complained, wearing a nightcap on his head. Yawning loudly, the bear continued, “But, I suppose I can forgive you this time though, considering you came to me this time, instead of my needing to—”.

Suddenly, the bear’s eyes narrowed and faster than even the bear thought possible, he sidestepped… just in time for Sakura’s fist to barely miss. However, the nightcap on his head took the hit, the force of the strike tearing the material to pieces. The bear didn’t have time to comment before a swift kick flew at it’s head.

With a single paw the bear blocked the attack but was sent flying into the air. Backflipping in the air, to regain it’s balance, Monokuma only had a moment to react as Sakura leapt up, her foot flying toward it’s two-toned face. Instantly, seeming to defy gravity, the bear shot forward, extending it’s own foot. The two fighters’ legs clashed, and they flew past each other before tumbling down toward the floor.

Sakura, as one would expect of the Ultimate Martial Artist, landed gracefully and ready to continue the battle. Across from her, Monokuma landed on a platform that suddenly rose out from the floor, so that they were staring, almost eye level, with each other.

In that brief moment, Monokuma finally managed to speak, “Why you! Just what do you think you’re doing?!?”

As the bear’s rage-filled words reach her, Sakura merely glared back, her eyes glowing with dangerous intensity. However, Monokuma didn’t appear the least bit intimidated. Rather, the bear’s anger seemed to skyrocket with her silence.

“I asked you a question! What’s the meaning of this?!?” the bear shouted, the claws on it’s paws slowly extending outward. When she continued to be unresponsive, Monokuma finally lost its temper. “How dare you defy me! This wasn’t part of the deal! Or don’t you care what’s going to happen to your family’s—!”

“I’ve made a decision…” Sakura interrupted, her voice seeming to appease some of the bear’s frustration. Retracting it’s claws, the bear stood and patiently waited as she spoke. “I will no longer retreat. No longer compromise. No longer regret. I’m going…to resist you!”

…”

…”

A long pause…longer than she expected, stood between them. And then, abruptly…

“Hmm, okay.”

Sakura held in a gasp as the Mastermind nonchalantly consented to her demand. She had expected
more resistance. She had thought the bear would be furious...and may even have her face ‘punishment’ for defying him. However, Monokuma didn’t seem all that shocked by her proclamation, as if...it was expected.

“I mean...you know what I’m holding hostage, right?” Monokuma said carefully, watching for a reaction. However, having steeled herself, Sakura gave the bear no such pleasure. She had resigned to her fate the moment she set foot in the gymnasium. Seeing that, the bear sighed, “And here I thought we were such good friends...well...I guess it can’t be helped...I kinda thought I made a mistake employing you...but that’s on me. You’re fired. Nothing personal. Take your family’s dojo back.”

Inexplicable from behind it’s back, Monokuma produced a rolled-up piece of paper. Without hesitation, he tossed it toward her. Catching it, the martial artist inspected it, as if expecting it to explode. However, when it seemed that no foul play was afoot, she slowly unrolled the paper...and found the deed to her dojo securely in her own hands! What’s more, it now bore her family’s crest, meaning that Monokuma truly had no ownership over it!

“W-What is the meaning of this?!” Sakura stammered, shocked not only by how quickly things de-escalated, but that Monokuma seemingly expected this to happen. In disbelief, she mistakenly asked, “What tricks are you up to?”

All at once, Monokuma’s deviously smile overtook it’s features, and Sakura knew that she wouldn’t like the answer.

“No tricks. Cross my heart and hope you die!” Monokuma insisted, crossing it’s heart and smirking wider. “Sure, I’m a bit sad to let you go, but like any major corporation, you’re just a number to me...completely replaceable.”

“Replaceable...?!” she seethed, already seeing where this was going.

“Of course! Just because you don’t wanna work for me, it doesn’t mean that there might not be some poor, gullible suckers left who may want to see their families again! Puhuhuhuhuhuhuhu!”

As Monokuma’s cackling invaded her ears, she finally understood the bear’s tactics. She had, unknowingly, walked right into the bear’s trap. The Mastermind had hostages prepared for everyone...it was even possible that the bear had other spies aside from her already among them! She didn’t want to acknowledge that possibility, but there was no denying that Monokuma was cunning enough to make it happen.

Not only that, she was now suspicious of all her classmates...wondering if any of them had given into temptation...as she once had. Her anger and self-loathing intensified, and she was just about to spring forward to attack when the bear’s laughter abruptly ceased.

“Oh, right...I almost forgot to update the rules...”

Almost immediately after uttering those words, Sakura’s e-handbook chimed. Despite knowing that utter despair awaited her, the martial artist knew it would be prudent to check the new rule. Pulling the digital notebook from her pocket, she pressed the screen and gasped at the words on it.

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A Rule Has Been Removed From The School Regulations:

-Bullying Trials-
Sakura’s eyes bulged as she read the message. Her hand squeezed the electronic handbook, and if it hadn’t been so durable, it would have crumbled in her grasp. With rage filled eyes, she snapped her gaze back to Monokuma, its cheeky grin further inciting her.

“You…why have you done this?!” she demanded, barely able to control herself.

In response, the evil bear shrugged its shoulders and said, “I never meant for the Bullying Trial to be a regular thing. It was supposed to be a one-and-done deal! But you’ve all gotten so cocky lately...so I figured it’d reset everything back to the original rules! Puhuhuhu!”

As Monokuma’s laughter invaded her ears, Sakura somehow managed to return her e-handbook to her pocket, a difficult feat when she was shaking with utter fury! Her muscles tensed as she felt her composure slipping, her rationale slowly being replaced with a protective rage.

“Oh, I can’t wait to see everyone’s faces when they wake up tomorrow!” the bear continued, seemingly unaffected by the monstrous aura that radiated off Sakura in waves. “After all, the Bullying Trials gave you all the faintest glimmer of hope…only for it all to turn back to utter despair! Next time we have a class trial, it’ll be good and proper! With an excruciating punishment awaiting the guilty party! Ahahahahahahahaha!

“You monster…!” Sakura seethed, readying her stance to prepare for another assault.

However, before she could strike, Monokuma lifted a paw and turned toward the door…its smile widening sickeningly.

“Oh…are you sure you really wanna do this? I mean, we’ve got such a captive audience watching our every move right now! We’re practically exhibitionists!”

Despite the crude gesture, Sakura immediately deciphered those words. Her head snapped toward the gym entrance, the door was crack open just wide enough for someone to peek through. And there…the shadow of a figure loomed just on the other side.

Immediately, Sakura was torn between tearing Monokuma apart, and rushing for the door to see who had discovered them. In either case, her secret was now known to someone. Even if they hadn’t heard of the martial artist’s betrayal, just seeing her having a secret meeting with the Mastermind’s proxy was enough to illicit immense suspicion!

“Welp, my job here is done,” Monokuma playfully chided, drawing a furious glare from Sakura. However, before she had time to react, the ground beneath the bear sudden disappeared, and both bear and platform fell into deep darkness beneath the floor, with the despicable bear’s voice echoing as the floored slowly closed up, “Vengeance is a dish best served cold!”

Without an opponent to vanquish, Sakura felt her options become limited to a single discourse. She needed to speak with whomever had witnessed her betrayal. If she was fortunate, it was someone like Makoto, who could possibly understand her situation…but if it happened to be Byakuya…

Putting aside her fears, she marched toward the door. From what she could tell, the person on the other side chose not to flee, so it probably wasn’t Hiro or Hifumi. They would have fled long before she approached. But that only intensified her fears…because it meant that whoever had seen her wasn’t afraid to confront her about her actions.
Reaching the door, she took a deep breath before resigning herself to whatever fate awaited her on the other side. She had planned to destroy Monokuma and knew that would involve punishment. Death would be her way of atoning for her crimes against her friends, or so she had planned. Now she would face the ire of her classmates instead…and she’d seen firsthand how painful such treatment could be. Regardless, she accepted her fate…as the consequence of her betrayal. If her classmates chose to ridicule her or sentence her to imprisonment, then she would accept their choice without reservation. She owed it to them…to try and atone for her crimes.

With that resolve firm in her heart, she pulled open the doors to the gym, prepared to face her fate.

Sadly, no amount of mental preparation could prepare her for the face that stared back at her as she opened the door. Gasping, her hands fell to her side and she froze in place, staring down in bewilderment at the one person she hadn’t even considered would be there…

“…Sakura…no…it…it can’t be true…”

Aoi Asahina, her eyes widen with sudden terror and realization, stood before Sakura, the only witness to her betrayal. That is…until someone else opened the door leading to the gymnasium.

…

…

…

…

Chapter 3: END

Two more students have lost the will to kill:

-Hifumi Yamada-

-Kiyotaka Ishimaru-

8 students ‘remain’

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, my beautiful readers! I know it’s been a while, but the holidays slow down everything! Now then…how was that for a chapter finale! What will Sakura do now that Hina knows her secret? What are Kyoko and Mukuro planning? Will Makoto ever be privy to their discussions or will they keep their distance? And how will the class react to the reduction of the Bullying Trial rule? You’ll have to continue reading to find out!

I know this ‘Chapter’ took a long time to finish, but I had to use it to set up a lot of stuff that will come to fruition in the next few ‘acts’. Trust me, I’ve got some amazing twists planned for you all, and I think you’ll really enjoy them!
Also, huge shout-out to my editor, who has stuck with me during my lengthy absences! You rock buddy! Thanks for all you do!

As always, thanks for all the reviews/comments! I truly enjoy each and every one of them, and I’m happy to get reviews from both new and veteran readers! Please, if you have questions or want to critique my story, feel free to leave a comment/review! I really appreciate them, as they make me a better writer!

Well then, until next time, keep on smiling and have yourselves a beautiful day, my beautiful readers!
Chapter Summary

The class assembles for the morning meeting, but find someone else ready to take up leadership. Hifumi sulks over his guilt of betrayal. Celeste is still locked in her room. Kyoko tries to trust more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“…I still don’t think this is a good idea,” Chihiro quietly voiced her concern as Mondo and Taka buzzed around her, preparing for the rest of their classmates to arrive for the morning meeting.

“Nonsense! This is exactly what everyone needs to boost morale!” Taka countered, glancing over a speech he’d prepared for Chihiro to read. Smiling at his own handiwork, he nodded in approval of himself before setting the papers down in front of her. “Once everyone arrives, I will ask them to be seated and present you as an alternative to Byakuya! All you need to do is read the script I prepared. Please don’t ad lib, it will only confuse or insult our classmates.”

Profound worry struck the programmer as the intensity of her mission weighed down on her. She’d been awake half the night, reading Taka’s public speaking books and practicing her speech. All the while, the Moral Compass did his best to coach her, while Mondo…slept. Not that she could blame him, trying to absorb all that material made her sleepy as well. But somehow, she managed to feel confident enough to address the class…until they actually arrived at the cafeteria.

Taka positioned her at the head of the longest table, where he usually sat, and told her to pretend that she was giving the most important speech of her life…which was completely accurate and terrifying! What if they didn’t want her as a leader? What if she made a bad choice? What if Monokuma decided to have them all executed just for installing her as leader?! What if Byakuya refused to let her?!?!

She broke out into a cold sweat, feeling more and more ready to dash back to her room and forget she even existed! One night was not enough time to prepare her for such a huge role!

Just then, a large hand landed on her shoulder, making her jump and squeal softly.

“…You got this, Chihiro!” Mondo declared, followed by a yawn. Large bags having formed under his eyes from getting up hours earlier than he’d anticipated. Rubbing his eyes, and trying to wake himself up, the biker pounded his fists together and said, “With me and Bro at your side, no one’s gonna start any shit with you! Now get ready to show that son of a bitch Byakuya how ferocious you really are!”

“You’re not helping! I know you’re trying to but you’re not helping!”

While the sentiment truly was appreciated, with the level of anxiety she was feeling, there was no way for her to be anywhere near their level of confidence! Maybe it wasn’t too late to pretend to slip back into a coma—
“Oh, well that’s a surprise. You three are here pretty early,” the energetic voice of Junko called out as the Fashionista entered the cafeteria. “No surprise that Taka’s early but Mondo being here is a bit weird. Did you guys spend the whole night together?”

Junko snickered a bit, teasing them as she took a seat. Before Chihiro had time to answer, Mondo abruptly blurted, “Y-Yeah! We did actually! Is that a problem or something?!”

The programmer’s head snapped toward Mondo, completely shocked by his sudden outburst. His face was turning red, and he was sweating profusely…did he have a fever or something? Maybe it was a result of him getting up so early, but either way, it had Chihiro concerned. And apparently she wasn’t the only one…

“Bro, please calm down,” Taka gently insisted, bowing respectfully to Junko. “I apologize. We were up very late working on a team project, and it has him out of sorts. Go on, Bro. Apologize.”

By this point, all the blood must have rushed to Mondo’s face because it was bright crimson. He must have been embarrassed on top of being a bit under the weather. However, with the prodding from Taka, the biker sharply bent forward in a low bow.

“I’m…I really kinda, uh…fuck, this is hard—I mean, I didn’t mean to…I’m so fucking sorry and I shouldn’t have yelled, and you probably hate me now so if you want you can hit me or something —”.

“Nah, it’s cool,” Junko suddenly cut him off, or rather, ended his suffering. Her tone was soft, and she laughed quietly as he looked up at her. “I’m not a morning person either. And we all have our moments, ya know? Just try not to yell at everyone who greets you today and we’ll call it even.”

Chihiro was astounded…not only by her quick deflection but how easily she managed to resolve this misunderstanding. That…was the kind of leader the programmer wanted to be…but not the way that Taka insisted a leader must act. And since he’d put so much effort into writing her script, there was no way she could tell him that she didn’t approve of it.

Swallowing her pride, Chihiro sat patiently as more of her classmates arrived.

Kyoko had followed after Junko, but didn’t acknowledge anyone, taking a seat at the table without so much as a greeting. She may have been imagining it, but there seemed to be some kind of tension between her and Junko…different from the way they’d interacted with each other the previous day. Chihiro kind of wanted to ask if something had happened, but then more of her classmates arrived and she lost the nerve.

Makoto arrived…followed by Hina and Sakura, almost as if they’d walked there together. It wasn’t completely abnormal, considering the dorm hallways converged into the large open area outside the cafeteria, but it was odd that they all sat together…that didn’t happen often. Makoto usually took a seat near Kyoko, or at least he had been for the last few days. Then again, the lucky student was pretty outgoing, so maybe he just wanted to sit by someone else today.

Sayaka and Leon came in next, sitting next to each other, as usual. They had become so close since their…incident. It might have felt strange to see a victim and their attacker become so comfortable with each other…but considering that the programmer and Mondo had managed to overcome their differences, it didn’t seem all that strange to Chihiro.

Not long after, Hifumi made his way in, choosing to sit at a nearby table, hanging his head in shame. Even after all he’d done, Chihiro still felt sorry for him. He’d been manipulated, and when faced with the full weight of his actions, he chose not to follow Celeste down her dark path. Regardless, he
still bore great responsibility for those actions, and he may never forgive himself for what he’d almost done.

Out of the corner of her eye, movement near the entrance caught Chihiro’s attention. To her surprise, she found Hiro quietly entering. But something was...off about him. He was fidgeting, not making eye contact with anyone, and hadn’t said a word since he’d arrived. Almost as if he’d taken a page out of Kyoko’s book, he took a seat at the table and appeared to be trying not to draw any attention to himself…which coincidentally drew even more attention to him!

“Oh, great! The day that I decide to try and be leader is the day everyone starts acting weird! Why am I doing this to myself?!” Chihiro internally screamed, the pressure mounting as almost everyone was present.

As the students arrived, each of them gave the trio at the front of the table a surprised glance. However, each time, Taka assured them that all would be made clear once everyone arrived. That seemed enough to satisfy everyone so far…until he decided to show himself.

“Well, it seems we’ve all gathered here…again,” Byakuya Togami said as he entered the cafeteria, Toko nipping at his heels like a lapdog. Taking his usual seat at a nearby table, the Affluent Progeny took one glance at Chihiro and her protectors…and scoffed. “Hmph, let’s get this over with quickly. I’d rather not waste my time on half-hearted greetings and worthless platitudes. We all know why we’re gathered here this morning, or have you plebeians forgotten?”

The smug voice of Byakuya should have grated on her nerves, further empowering her to steal his position from him…but in her current situation, all she felt was overwhelming panic and anxiety. She opened her mouth to begin the speech Taka prepared…but only a squeak came out…a very loud and attention drawing squeak!

Snapping her mouth shut too late, all of the students present focused their ‘judging’ gazes on her. The rational part of her brain tried to reassure her that most of them weren’t actually judging her, but the emotional, easily prone to panic, majority of her mind screamed otherwise. She felt her face flush, and her body tremble. Foolishly, she tried to open her mouth again to speak, but it flapped open and closed, open and closed, as words completely failed her.

Just as she felt her heart was going to explode from sheer embarrassment, her protectors came to her rescue.

“Yo! Listen up punks!” Mondo abruptly shouted, his voice echoing in everyone’s ears. “My girl Chihiro has something she wants to tell all of you! So everybody quiet the fuck down!”

“...It was quiet until you spoke up,” Chihiro couldn’t stop herself from whispering, although she was actually thankful for the break in silence.

“Indeed!” Taka announced, annoyingly matching Mondo’s volume and tone. Then, with a practiced ease, the Moral Compass pointed an authoritative finger toward a certain someone. “Chihiro has come before you today in order to challenge the oppressive authority brought about by Byakuya Togami! I beg you to lend her your support and name her as my replacement rather than him!”

Bowing deeply to the class, his request rang in everyone’s ears, but also earned a number of shocked expressions.

“Hold on sec, does this mean that Chihiro wants to be our morning leader?” Leon intuitively asked, a confident smile overtaking his lips. “I’m totally down for that! I’d take anyone over that prick any day!”
“That’s a great idea!” Hina concurred, surprising the class by acting more like her usual bubbly self. At least, until she turned and snarled, “We don’t need selfish jerks like him and someone who isn’t present telling us what to do! We outta lock him up too! He’s just as dangerous as she was!”

No one failed to notice that Hina was going out of her way not to name Cele—err, Taeko. It honestly hurt to hear the swimmer still spewing so much venom…but it was to be expected, sadly. Chihiro wanted to go over and offer Hina a hug or something, anything that might help, but she knew that this wasn’t something a warm hug could resolve. Rather than dwell on it, the programmer chose to once again try and speak up…

“I-I-Hello…everyone…” she hesitantly read from the script, earning an encouraging wink from Taka. Her voice continued to tremble, but she somehow managed to say, “I-want to address the issue of B-Byaku…”

Halfway through that sentence, she made the mistake of glancing toward the Affluent Progeny, and froze. His icy glare pierced her soul, sending numerous chills down her spine and making her stagger for air. Hyperventilating, her face began burning red with embarrassment and fear. Her hands holding the script shook violently, the sound of paper crinkling resounding through the room. Chihiro could only manage to squeak once more as Byakuya’s terrifying visage washed over her. Beside her, Mondo and Taka’s expressions shifted from protective to worried. Both of them wanted to speak up, but they didn’t want everyone to think that Chihiro couldn’t do this without their help…and thus Chihiro felt more isolated than ever before.

“…I can’t do this! I don’t want this! Someone please!”

“You wish to take Byakuya’s place as our leader, correct?” a cold but somehow gentle voice shattered Chihiro’s oppressive thoughts.

Snapping her head up, the programmer gasped as she saw Kyoko addressing her, the mysterious girl’s eyes displaying the kind of confidence that Chihiro only dreamed she had. Without skipping a beat, Kyoko swung her gaze around to the rest of her classmates.

“If that is the case, then I am in favor. Byakuya has already betrayed our trust once.”

“I agree,” Junko concurred, not looking at Kyoko and instead smiling warmly at Chihiro. “I’d normally say that anyone would be better than Byakuya, but that’s not really true either.” She quickly glanced between Toko and Hifumi, both of which averted their gazes. “Honestly though, I think we’d have a tough time finding someone more fit for the job than you Chihiro.”

Junko winked at the programmer, making her already furious blush brighten. The sudden display of confidence for her ability stunned the programmer, her breath hitching in her throat as one after another, more and more students voiced their approval.

“I also think Chihiro would be a great leader. Someone dependable and willing to help everyone…regardless of what they’ve done,” Sayaka chimed in, smiling sadly.

“Yeah, I think that Chihiro will be a great leader,” Makoto concurred, a hopeful smile etched onto his face. “And with any luck, we won’t have to worry about anything to deadly anymore.”

“There is no one more fitting for such a position,” Sakura finally spoke up, giving Chihiro a firm nod of approval.

Over half of the class had now voice approval for her petition, and she hadn’t even spoken a full sentence yet! It was awe inspiring but also nerve-wracking! They had so much faith in her…but
what if she led them astray? She had never even attempted to be a leader before, and only really got this far because Taka and Mondo unintentionally pressured her into it! Sure, it was nice to be getting such high praise, but if she couldn’t even speak up when needed, what good was she?!

As those thoughts began to consume her, one of her protected further exacerbated the situation.

“Ya hear that, asshole!” Mondo chided, finally feeling as though he had power over the Togami Heir. “We don’t need you anymore! Go back into whatever hole you crawled out of and stay the fuck away from—!”

“H-H-How dare y-y-you people! Do y-you have n-no respect for M-Master Byakuya’s intentions!”

Toko Fukawa’s stuttering rage immediately silenced the biker, who reared back in sudden surprise. Gritting her teeth, she seethed openly at everyone, her chair knocked over as she leapt to her feet.

“M-Master Byakuya g-g-graciously took up leadership w-when none of y-you wanted it! And n-now that s-s-some little c-crossdresser wants to lead us, you a-a-all act like he’s done something w-w-wrong! You all should b-b-be ashamed of yourselves!”

As Toko’s words sank into Chihiro’s chest, and for the first time since meeting him, the programmer actually felt a tad bit ashamed for how she perceived him. Perhaps Byakuya, in his own cruel way, wanted to help the group? And while it didn’t seem likely, given the fact that he’d used her to try and lead everyone astray during a class trial, maybe…just maybe…there was some method to his cruel madness.

“There is no one better s-s-suited to leading than M-M-Master! He l-l-leads me perfectly! And I wouldn’t h-hesitate to humiliate m-m-myself on his c-c-command—!”

“Stop talking. Now.”

The instant those authoritative words escaped Byakuya’s lips, Toko fell utterly silent. Her jaw seized up, trembling a bit as she forcefully kept her opinions to herself. Picking up her chair and setting it aright, she sat in silence as the Affluent Progeny rose.

Standing at his full height, Byakuya cocked his head and cleared his throat, “If you’ve all decided to have Chihiro lead your little ‘group therapy’ sessions, then by all means, let her. You’ll hear no objections from me. I have no interest in making myself a target, regardless.”

A pregnant pause occurred as each member of the class stared at him with shock. Simultaneously, Chihiro felt that grip of fear overtake her again…because she couldn’t read him whatsoever. She had thought he’d protest against losing his position…but instead, he seemed eager to give it to her…but why?

Did he want to watch her fail? Did he merely not want to be tied down with the responsibilities? Or…perhaps…was this what he’d planned to do all along?

“But then why did you assert yourself as our leader yesterday?!” Taka furiously demanded, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “If you had no intention of serving a full term, why did you make a show of taking the seat of authority?!”

A stomach-churning grin overtook Byakuya’s face as he replied, “I never asserted myself as leader. I merely opted to take charge while ‘punishing’ Celeste. Not once did I insinuate that I planned to lead you rabble.”

Sadly…he was right. While he did act like a king bestowing punishment upon his subjects, the
Togami Heir never mentioned his plans to keep lording over everyone. In fact, it made the most sense that he wouldn’t want the job!

Byakuya was a calculating individual, and didn’t trust anyone, that much was clear. Putting himself in an authoritative position limited his ability to remain inconspicuous. He’d already mentioned not making a ‘target’ of himself…

“Besides, trying to shepherd everyone into cooperation is a pointless endeavor,” the Affluent Progeny continued, earning more scowls from his classmates. “Like trying to bail out a sinking ship with your hands, eventually it will sink, and all will come to ruin. You all may deny reality if you wish, but I won’t be so foolish.”

His insinuation was not lost on anyone. Byakuya truly believed that, no matter how much the students came together, eventually there would be a betrayal…and they’d all turn on each other.

Unfortunately…he wasn’t incorrect. If any of the other students had actually become blackened or been executed, there was no doubt that it would have become near impossible to keep everyone’s spirits up. It was a grim reality…a fine line they walked each and every day they remained confined to this hellish school.

At the same time, Chihiro couldn’t help but wonder what had caused the Togami Heir’s bleak outlook on life. But the way he spoke, the confidence and utter assurance in his own voice, made it difficult for her to try and argue against that notion.

“He’s right, you know. Sooner or later…someone’s gonna die.”

The entire class was suddenly on pins and needles. Not only because of those words, but who spoke them. Yasuhiro, his head hung but slowly lifting, addressed the class with a voice far graver than anyone thought possible from him.

“Every time we think we’ve overcome our differences and learned to work as a group…someone gets attacked!” Slamming both hands onto the table, the fortune-teller seethed, “There’s no getting out of here unless someone dies! And I won’t let it be me!”

In a fit of rage unlike anything the other students had seen before, Hiro shot up and began marching toward the door. For a moment, everyone too stunned to react, until…

“W-Whoa, Hiro?! What’s gotten into you?” Makoto called out, also rising. Miraculously, the fortune-teller halted, but didn’t look back. Taking a cautious step toward him, the lucky student said, “Did something happen? This isn’t like you—”.

“Isn’t like me’? What the hell do you know about me?!” Hiro whirled around, pointing an accusatory finger toward the class. “What do any of you know about me?! You never took the time to get to know me! You all just write me off as an idiot because I made a few mistakes! You forgive attempted murderers, but you can’t spare the time to listen to my opinions?!”

As much as Chihiro wanted to protest…her words caught in her throat. Her gaze drifted between Sayaka, Leon, Mondo, and Hifumi…the scars from their crimes visible in their expressions. Hiro’s blunt accusations…as disheartening as they were, were accurate. No one…not even Chihiro herself, bothered to take the fortune-teller seriously. It could be said that he brought it upon himself, with his initial reactions to the killing game being so frustrating, but that didn’t excuse the way the class had been treating him.

She was guilty of it herself. In all honesty, sometimes she even forgot that Hiro was in the room. And
when he did speak up, he often made the situation worse with his insensitive comments. Although it was obvious he wasn’t intentionally trying to be insensitive, that didn’t change the fact that his actions and words often drew ire from his classmates…and whose fault was that?

Were they to blame? All of the students who didn’t pay him any mind, or simply ignored his opinion outright? Was it their fault? Or…was this something that Hiro had been experiencing long before he arrived at Hope’s Peak? Either way, it left a sour taste in Chihiro’s mouth.

As she opened her mouth to respond to him, the fortune-teller grunted audibly and turned away, stomping toward the exit.

“If anyone needs me,” he seethed, sarcasm dripping from his voice. “I’ll be in my room!”

Breaking out of his stupor, Makoto began rushing toward the exit as well. “H-Hiro! Wait—”

“Don’t bother,” Kyoko abruptly cut in, forcing the lucky student to stop and look her way. With a stern gaze, she finished, “The way he is right now, nothing you say will reach him.”

By the time she’d finished speaking, Hiro was gone, his sandals echoing from outside the cafeteria. Makoto turned back and faced the door again, only to sigh defeatedly. Taking a deep breath, the lucky student slowly walked back to his seat and plopped down, his spirits definitely lowered.

As Sakura watched Hiro storm from the room, a wave of uncertainty threatened to claim her. Monokuma had said there would be others willing to take her place as a spy…but she hadn’t really considered who until now.

The way Hiro acted didn’t implicitly indicate that he’d been approached by the Mastermind, but his current mental state was worrying nonetheless. The martial artist knew, from personal experience, that all it took was a moment of doubt for the Mastermind to worm their way into your soul…corrupting you in ways you never imagined possible.

Sakura had managed to free herself from the Mastermind’s clutches…only to leave a vacant seat of betrayal open for any other students who were emotionally vulnerable.

“…Should I…speak with him?” she pondered, guilt rising up in her throat. “I have no right to speak on the importance of trust between us…but if I do nothing…”

Her crystal blue eyes drifted over, widening in surprise as she met Hina’s gaze. The swimmer said nothing, but her eyes resonated with a powerful understanding. All at once, a calm overcame Sakura, drawing strength from her best friend’s expression. The mere sight of Hina’s compassionate smile lifted the storm clouds obscuring Sakura’s thoughts, and she was able to think clearly for the first time in what felt like years.

“I will wait…for now. However, if I find the situation worsening…admitting my deception to my friends may be the only recourse I can stomach.”

Although the thought of admitting to her betrayal utterly terrified her, if it would prevent others from making the same mistake she had, the martial artist would gladly suffer the humiliation. She owed them that much. And although she knew a proper explanation and an earnest apology would never mend the distrust that would surely form, at the very least, she knew there were some that would forgive her.
Reciprocating Hina’s soothing gesture, the swimmer nodded firmly before turning her attention back to the morning meeting. It was then that Sakura stole a glance toward another student, a certainly lucky student…

“Well, it seems that at least one of you have come to their senses…though I never imagined such intelligent behavior from that dullard. I never could have imagined a day when I would actually say that you all should follow his example. But miracles do happen, apparently.”

As usual Byakuya seemed incapable of holding his tongue, especially with this strange new development. Most of the class, while used to his behavior, still sent scathing looks his direction. If their fervent expressions bothered him, he didn’t show it as he slowly stood and adjusted his clothes.

“And now that everything’s been settled, I’ll be going,” Byakuya said as he began making his way toward the exit.

However, he didn’t get more than a few steps before Taka shouted, “Hold on a moment! Chihiro hasn’t even finished her speech! Let alone dismissed us! You will return to your seat and—”.

In the midst of his shouting, the Togami Heir scoffed and glared over his shoulder at the rest of the class, a defiant huff somehow silencing the Moral Compass.

“A class trial occurred. We all know what that means,” he off-handedly commented, without elaborating. Then, without any further interruption, he departed, leaving the rest of the class to sit in silence as his footsteps faded.

In addition, without muttering a single word, Toko darted off after him, but not before angrily staring at Taka…seemingly holding back a scathing comment. Now down three classmates, the rest of the students began to feel a bit uneasy.

“As loath as I am to say it, Byakuya may have a point,” Sayaka spoke up, an anxious expression marring her features. “We all know what happens after a class trial…”

“More floors opening up. New possibilities.” Kyoko added, a hand resting on her chin. “However, it is strange that Monokuma hasn’t made an announcement.”

“That’s true,” Makoto concurred, as perplexed as the rest of them. “Usually before we even have a chance to talk, we get an announcement about new floors…why no announcement this time?”

“Maybe he didn’t actually open up the next floor?” Leon suggested, scoffing angrily. “I wouldn’t put it past ‘em at this point.”

“…It’s true,” Sakura added, her tone serious. “Considering that no death has occurred at this point, and the fact that it is not an official rule, Monokuma is not obligated to follow such—”.

“Is that slander I’m hearing right now? I didn’t know you all cared so much!”

A series of shocked gasps erupted as the monitor above everyone’s heads suddenly roared to life. And there, as posh as always, Monokuma sat in a chair, twirling a glass of wine in it’s paw somehow.

“Since you all seem hopeless without me…I’ll go ahead and unlock the next floor. I doubt it’ll make much of a difference at this point.”
Somehow, everyone could see Monokuma’s sly grin widen even more than usual. He was baiting them, and they knew it...or at least some of them did.

“Oh yeah! Just you wait! We’ll find a way out sooner or later!” Mondo threatened, shaking his fist toward the screen. “You’re probably just saying that to make us think nothing important’s up there! Reverse psychology or something right?!”

“...Ya know what, you’re right Mondo! I put a HUGE SPOILER up there just for you! And if ya find it, I’ll let all of you go free! No questions asked!”

Even if it was only for a brief second, a look of hope crossed Mondo’s face before his brows furrows and he seethed, “...I don’t believe you.”

At this, Monokuma seemed genuinely puzzled, a tiny bit scared even! Without warning, the bear tossed the wine over its shoulder and instead grabbed a large walkie-talkie from the table behind it’s chair.

“‘Code Red’! We have a ‘Code Red’! The Neanderthal is getting smarter! I repeat, the Neanderthal is getting smarter—!!”

The monitor suddenly cut out, leaving a fuming Mondo seething at his own reflection in the screen. He seemed ready to punch a hole in it, if it hadn’t been out of reach.

As the bear concluded its message, Chihiro breathed a sigh of relief. She’d practically been holding her breath through the entire exchange...horrified about any comment Monokuma might have about her leadership. But, it seemed the bear either didn’t care about the change in leadership...or didn’t consider it of any consequence.

Strangely, a part of her almost wanted the demented bear to comment on it. Monokuma made a habit of poking fun at anyone who tried to somehow unite the class against him. It had happened to Taka, Makoto, and even someone as good-natured as Junko! With that knowledge, Chihiro was certain that, sooner or later, Monokuma would somehow use her decision to become the class’ leader to try and bring despair upon her and her classmates.

…The only question was: how?

Shaking her head, Chihiro chose to focus on her current issue, rather than anxiously wait for the monochrome bear to bring her down. And that current issue, happened to be a seething Mondo.

Although Chihiro could see that the biker was trying, and failing, to keep his temper in check, if someone didn’t intervene, it would only be a matter of time before Mondo threw the chair he was tightly gripping at the blank monitor.

Just as Chihiro opened her mouth to try and calm her friend, another voice rang out.

“Yo, Mondo, calm down. Remember your blood pressure…” Leon called out, trying to ease his friend’s rage.

The biker huffed angrily but didn’t retort, while most of the class gave an amused chuckle. He sent them an angry glare but upon seeing Junko chuckling and smirking at him...he suddenly backed down. It was almost comical how fast he calmed himself, not that Chihiro didn’t understand.
Not only was Junko very pretty, she was strong-willed and caring. She’d shown how bad of an idea it was to piss her off, and she’d even managed to knock down Mondo before! He was probably embarrassed about that, and didn’t want to upset her more. It was kind of cute actually.

“I guess we better get to searching this new floor, huh?” the baseball star suddenly asked, posing the question in Chihiro’s direction.

Caught unaware, the programmer blinked, momentarily confused as to why he was directing his query at her. An instant later, it clicked in her mind that she was still the leader…and the entire class seemed to be waiting for her to dismiss them or something! Her mouth suddenly went dry and she fumbled over her own words.

“Oh…uh…Y-Yeah! Right! We…We should probably go and…investigate the newly opened floor,” Chihiro said, trying to steady herself and regain composure. In spite of her best efforts, as everyone leveled their gazes at her, she abruptly panicked and stammered, “W-W-We should…a-also…go in…pairs? Buddy s-s-system?”

Her voice cracked and tears started forming in the corners of her eyes as the class stared at her for a moment. What was she thinking?! ‘Buddy system’?! Who in their right mind would find that a good —?!

“A brilliant suggestion!” Taka immediately jumped on, proudly beaming down at her. A bit shocked by the suddenness of his concurrence, Chihiro had no words and instead unintentionally let him speak for her. “Let us all pair off in groups of two or three! And then, once we have finished investigating, let us all meet back here and discuss our findings! If that’s alright with you, Chihiro?”

Blinking rapidly when suddenly asked for approval, the flustered programmer could only stammer, “Y-Y-Yes! That’s fine!”

She ended up shouting much louder than even Taka, much to her embarrassment. Fortunately, it didn’t seem that anyone was bothered by it. In fact, most of the class just smiled and nodded…which left a hollow feeling in Chihiro’s chest.

“I’m…supposed to be a leader, but I’m just doing what everyone else suggests. Taka even had to step in and endorse my idea before anyone took it seriously. At this rate…”

Before Chihiro’s thoughts darkened, a familiar voice spoke up.

“Wait a second, I think we’re forgetting something,” Makoto spoke up before anyone could pair off. “I know things got a bit hectic for a bit there, but…what about Taeko?”

“What about that liar?” Hina seethed, a sudden agitated glare marring her features.

Makoto grimaced but managed to squeeze out, “Well…shouldn’t we bring her food or something? She can’t leave her room and has no way to get anything to eat—”.

“I wouldn’t mind letting her starve,” Hina muttered, obviously holding back an even more scathing comment. However, it seemed that even she knew her comment crossed a line. Letting out an exhausted huff, she replied, “Fine…as long as I don’t have to do it.”

Taking that as a confirmation, Makoto then asked, “Okay then, who wants to get her some food?”
Unsurprisingly…no one volunteered…at least at first. After a few moments of awkward silence, a single hand raised itself up.

“I’ll do it,” Junko offered, a hint of reluctance in her voice. Then, much to everyone’s shock, she added, “Everyone else can pair off. I’ll make sure she eats and meet back up with everyone once you finish checking out the new floor.”

“W-Whoa, hold on!” Mondo stammered, making her raise an eyebrow at him. Immediately feeling self-conscious, the biker did his best to calmly ask, “You’re, uh, not gonna help investigate the new floor?”

With a shrug and a sigh, the Fashionista replied, “Someone’s gotta feed the prisoner. Plus, I think it might be a good idea to keep an eye on the first floor. Considering it seems that a good number of us will be stuck here.”

As she spoke, she glanced toward Hifumi. The fanfic creator didn’t miss her gaze, and suddenly felt very anxious now that everyone’s gaze slowly drifted in his direction. Giving a nervous laugh, he spoke for the first time that morning.

“I…I’m not allowed to leave the first floor right now…remember?” He hadn’t meant it to be a rhetorical question, but that’s what it became as everyone remember that his punishment meant confinement to the first floor. “So…I think I’ll just…stay here and…make myself some tea…or something.”

His response was lifeless. Completely devoid of the usual zaniness that followed each of his comments. Not that it was surprising, given yesterday’s events. At the same time, seeing the usually upbeat and quirky otaku acting downright ‘normal’, was somehow more disconcerting than his usual behavior. It was almost too hard to watch.

“Anyways, don’t worry about Taeko,” Junko told everyone, lightly pounding one fist to her chest. With a confident smirk, she finished, “I’ll take care of everything here. You all just make sure you find something that’ll help us find a way outta here!”

“Indeed! That’s the spirit!” Taka exclaimed, saluting the Fashionista, much to her surprise and slight embarrassment. Immediately afterward, the Ultimate Moral Compass turned to his two compatriots and said, “We should investigate as well! Now that there will be an uneven number of investigators, I propose the three of us investigating as a three-person buddy group!”

“T-That sounds g-great!” Chihiro instantly agreed, her nerves still frazzled but somehow finding comfort in partnering with her mentors.

“Yeah…sure,” Mondo half-heartedly concurred, glancing in Junko’s direction for a moment before shaking his head and pounding his fists together. “Let’s do this! Time to find a way outta this hell hole! And if there isn’t a way out up there, we’ll just have to make one!”

Everyone slightly grimaced at his bold declaration but it seemed that his enthusiasm was more infectious than they thought.

“I like the sound of that!” Hina proclaimed, a hint of her usual pep returning. “Sakura and I will partner up and see what we can find. Right, Sakura?”

There was…something strange about Hina’s tone as she made her request. Although it wasn’t odd for Hina to suggest partnering up with her best friend, the way she did so this time was…almost forceful. Like she was silently begging the martial artist to accompany her. Perhaps it was due to her
sudden shift in attitude, but it was still a bit unnerving.

For her part, Sakura merely gave a weak smile and said, “Of course.”

“We should get going too,” a determined Sayaka said before standing up and facing Leon. With a pleasant smile she asked, “Would you mind pairing up with me? Unless you’d rather wait and see if Monokuma takes pity on you, blessing you with bread for your sandwiches.”

Leon seemed to have an answer prepared…but then fully registered her comment and immediately blurted out, “He’s doing it on purpose! I know he is! It’s been days! DAYS! I’m having withdrawals! See! My legs are shaking from the lack of meaty bread foods!”

Sayaka gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder, not realizing her joke would trigger him. When he glanced up at her, she gave him one of her warm and radiant smiles before saying, “Give it time…or become a vegetarian. There are plenty of vegetables after all. We could even make a veggie sandwich without using bread. A bandmate of mine showed me once. What do you say?”

Although he honestly appreciated her attempts to cheer him up, he was still bummed, but chose not to let it show.

“…It’s not the same…” Leon exaggeratedly complained as he stood up and began walking out with her.

Nearby, a certain lucky student smiled at their exchange. It was almost impossible to imagine that those two ever had animosity toward each other. As he stood up, a hand suddenly appeared on his shoulder.

“Makoto, would you mind accompanying me? I have some matters I would like to discuss with you.”

To his shock, for the very first time, Kyoko came and asked him to hang out with her! He was almost too stunned to reply…that is until he remembered that he’d promised to tell her about his excursion into the hidden room on the 2nd floor boys restroom. He kind of wanted to kick himself for getting so overly excited…

“R-Right! That sounds great!” he replied; a bit too enthused.

“Let’s be off then,” she said as she turned and began briskly walking toward the door.

“R-Right behind you!” the lucky student cheerfully concurred, leaping to his feet and following after her.

It was then that he felt a strange sense of being watched…and out of the corner of his eye, for just a brief moment, Makoto swung his gaze around. Glancing over his shoulder, he was just in time to witness Junko heading into the kitchen, presumable to prepare food for Taeko.

“Must be nerves…” he whispered to himself as he ran to catch up with a quickly departing Kyoko.

Just before he exited the room, however, he spared a concerned glance toward Hifumi, who continued to stare dejectedly at the table he sat behind. His beady black eyes had dulled and for a moment, Makoto almost gave in to a compulsive desire to try and cheer him up when…

“If you want to stay, you can. I’m fine with searching on my own,” Kyoko suddenly offered, startling him as he hadn’t even noticed she’d stopped for him. The tiniest hint of a smile tugged at her lips as she noticed how flustered he’d become. “Our conversation can wait, if you feel it’s
Not wanting to let this chance to spend time with her slip through his fingers, Makoto absent-mindedly blurted, “N-No, no! It’s fine! I, uh…want to talk to you about…things.”

He was trying to be vague but ended up feeling stupid as he couldn’t find a better way to describe what he’d experienced in the hidden room last night. Not only that, he had another promise he needed to keep…

“Alright then,” the lavender haired girl replied before turning on a heel. “Let’s see what we can discover about the fourth floor…”

As the two of them headed off, the lucky student glanced over his shoulder one last time, sneaking a glance toward Hina and Sakura as they also headed off to investigate the newly opened fourth floor.

Hifumi…didn’t really know what to do with himself, staring at the table in deep contemplation.

Everyone else had departed, eager to examine the newly opened 4th floor, with the exception of Junko, who had disappeared into the kitchen, obviously preparing a meal for Cele—Taeko…

At even the mere thought of her, Hifumi felt a wave of guilt almost overtake him. He tried to keep his thoughts away from the subject, but with nothing else to occupy his mind, his thoughts strayed back to when he used to consider her…a friend.

“Life…isn’t like my anime after all…” he admitted, only to himself. “Miss Taeko…I thought I knew you…but…how could I? I didn’t even try to see you as a person…just a trope…like everything else about my life…”

In the span of a couple days, his entire world had collapsed in on itself. He felt like a puppet cut loose from his strings…but instead of being free, he simply sank into a metaphorical heap. Despite the regret he felt for his actions, it didn’t erase what he’d almost done. And because of that, he now found himself sitting alone in the cafeteria…completely dumbfounded.

*CLINK*

The sudden clatter of a dish being set before him startled the fanfic creator, jolting him up and tunneling his vision toward it. A plate sat a few inches from him, scrambled eggs with mini sausages lining one side. The aroma made his stomach growl, especially considering he’d yet to eat this morning.

“I made extra, since both of us are stuck here,” Junko’s voice invaded his ears, causing him to slowly look up. With a neutral expression, she finished, “Eat before it gets cold.”

She was holding another plate in her opposite hand, the same scrambled eggs and sausage resting on the dishware. It wasn’t anything fancy, and there didn’t seem to be any spices added, but it was still more than appealing. However, the sudden gesture of kindness became accompanied by a pang of guilt.

“You…You really shouldn’t have…” he muttered, feeling almost cliché. It was strange for him…because such a line would normally not bother him…but now. “I can…make my own food.”

“I know that!” Junko abruptly retorted, obviously offended. Cocking her hip, she continued, “But
you weren’t cooking, and I was. And I made extra so you wouldn’t have to. What’s wrong with that?”

“…Nothing.”

In all honesty, Hifumi wasn’t really surprised by Junko’s actions. She’d proven, time and time again, that all she wanted was to survive…and help others survive as well. Even if she had an ulterior motive, it didn’t undo the fact that she’d saved many of her fellow student’s lives. He was tempted to believe that, just like Miss Ludenberg, she was simply trying to get on his good side…except that he had nothing she wanted.

With a small huff, the Fashionista straightened up and turned toward the exit. “Fine. Don’t eat it if you don’t want it. It’s your call.”

As she turned away from him, some part of Hifumi suddenly became desperate. He didn’t want her to go…but he didn’t want her to stay either. He didn’t know…he just didn’t know what he wanted anymore! A few days ago, everything had been so clear and easy! But now…what the hell was he supposed to do with himself now?!

He wanted someone…anyone…to tell him what he needed to do now! Be it Miss Enoshima…or even Miss Ludenberg. He was like a caged bird with the door wide open…to afraid to leave the confines of safety…but knowing that he couldn’t stay there forever! But he needed direction! Without something, or someone…pointing him in a direction, he would never move forward ever again! He was desperate for guidance…even though this exact same feeling had let him be manipulated by Miss Ludenberg…it didn’t change the fact that he was lost…and wanted some kind of purpose…some kind of reason to keep on living…

And out of that desperation, his voice softly arose.

“Miss…Enoshima…why do you do it?” Hifumi asked quietly. Raising an eyebrow, Junko stopped and turned to face him. Just as she was about to ask what he meant when he cut her off. “You make friends with everyone who attempted murder…trying to get them to realize that it was a mistake…something done in the heat of the moment…that they didn’t mean to do it…but…why do you do that?”

A part of him expected her not to answer. She was carrying food after all, wouldn’t want it to get cold. Not only that, he felt ashamed once again…for potentially allowing himself to fall into the same trap as before. After all, there was no guarantee that Miss Enoshima wasn’t as cunning and manipulative as Miss Ludenberg had been. She couldn’t simply be biding her time, waiting for the perfect moment to—

“Because I’m a horrible person.”

An audible gasp escaped Hifumi, his eyes widening and his gaze snapping up to her. To his utter shock, a look of neutral pain was etched into Junko’s face. She was trying to hide it through a stoic visage, but it leaked through…mostly in her eyes. She stared off into the distance…almost exactly like he’d been doing only a few minutes ago. He didn’t know what she was seeing…but every time the same look encompassed his own face, the memories of his sins flashed before his eyes.

Was it possible that…Junko was experiencing something similar?

“I’m not as innocent as people think. I’ve ruined many people’s lives,” she said, continuing to stare blankly. “I didn’t care who it was. If someone got in my way…I would eliminate them. There was no time for sympathy or regret. I had a mission…a goal I wouldn’t allow to become compromised.
And…until recently…I never questioned my actions. I did what I believed was best…no matter how much it hurt the people around me.”

At that moment, Junko hesitated, as if just speaking such a thing could somehow bring her to ruin. However, almost instantaneously, her eyes shifted. The dullness they’d taken on…suddenly brightened! It was as if…a light appeared behind her eyes, giving them life…purpose! Oh, how he envied that expression…an expression that he’d once experienced every day of his life…

Before his thought’s darkened further, she turned toward him, a firm determination radiating from those brightly shining blue irises!

“And that’s why…when I see someone headed toward that same path…I have an impulsive desire…to stop them. So that…they won’t become like I was!” As she continued, her voice changed…almost as if she wasn’t the same person he’d come to know over the last few weeks. “I swore that I would help everyone get out of here alive. It’s…all I can do to make up for all the wrongs I’ve committed during my lifetime.”

Hifumi was beyond stunned. What wrongs was she speaking of? It wasn’t hard to imagine that she might have ruined other model’s careers somehow, the fashion industry was terrifying, after all! But it seemed…heavier than that…almost as if she’d experienced the same kind of…incident that he’d gone through himself.

Had…something happened to her during her time as a homeless person? It was a dangerous life, to be assured. Even if it was only rumors, Hifumi had heard of people who actively went around trying to beat and even murder homeless people. Was Miss Enoshima…a victim of one of those assaults? Or…perhaps…had she been forced to defend herself to the point that she’d…taken a life?

He didn’t want to believe that such a kind-hearted person as Miss Enoshima would be capable of murder…but being trapped in this school had forced him to realize that they ALL were very capable of it…given the right incentive. And…strangely, it would explain how she could remain strong during this whole endeavor. And it would also explained why…she had such sympathy toward the attempted murderers. A part of him wanted to ask if…if she had taken a life before…but…in the end, he was too afraid of what her answer might be.

As he wrestled with this new revelation, he felt a hand pat his shoulder. Snapping his gaze up, he was surprised to find Miss Enoshima smiling softly at him, her expression having shifted back to her usual persona.

“What I’m trying to say is; it’s never too late to change,” she told him, seemingly speaking from experience. “No matter how much guilt you feel…you can turn it all around and do something constructive with your life. And if you need help, that’s what the rest of us are here for! We can give you a swift kick in the ass if that’ll help! If we all just do what we can…we’ll make it out of this place alive…together!”

The instant the conversation shifted to him and his own guilt…everything else she said began to be filtered out. Almost without realizing it, his expression mimicked hers from a few moments ago. His eyes dulled and he suddenly couldn’t look her in the eye anymore, averting his gaze and staring down at the table once more.

Miss Enoshima was an amazing person…and he now truly believed that she didn’t have an ulterior motive…and was simply trying to be encouraging…and he did appreciate that. But it wasn’t what he wanted right now. He didn’t know…what he wanted…but he knew that compassion wasn’t it!

“I see…” he replied, almost in a whisper. “But that’s not the case with me.”
He paused, trying to find the right words. As appreciated as her gesture was, it did nothing to alleviate the dull ache his own foolishness had inflicted. He didn’t want kindness or pity…he wanted to erase his own stupidity. To go back in time and stop himself from alienating himself from the group…impossible though it might be.

“…I…HATED Mr. Ishimaru for what he did! The way he looked down on everyone…the way he tried to monopolize my digital princess…I truly…HATED him…until I realized that I wasn’t the one who hated him…but Miss Ludenberg!”

Hifumi’s hands clenched into fists, struggling to keep his temper in check as he seethed through gritted teeth.

“I…let her influence me! I let her manipulate my anger and hatred! I almost killed Mr. Ishimaru because I was blinded by rage and love…because…I was afraid.”

He paused for a moment, finally letting it all sink in…the emotions he’d buried while trying to stay sane in this madhouse!

“I…don’t want to die. But I don’t want to hurt anyone either! I just want someone to tell me…what I need to do to get out of this place! And when my digital angel came to me…reassuring me, promising me that everything would be alright…I lost myself in devotion to her!”

His breathing hitched, and it somehow became harder to breathe. Regardless, he pushed through it, knowing that if he didn’t speak his mind now…he never would!

“And then she was taken from me! And…I lost my way forward…so I turned to Miss Ludenberg…because…because she needed me! No one…has ever needed me! I was always…just doing my own thing…and deep down…I wanted someone to acknowledge and notice me! And I thought she did! But…she only saw me as an NPC to be used…and thrown away…and now…that’s what…I’ve become…a discarded…useless…side character…that…no one…that no one—!”

Suddenly, something soft pressed against his eyes. A…napkin? A napkin, being held by Junko…wiping the tears from his eyes! Rearing back a bit, the fanfic creator was embarrassed to discover that he’d begun weeping at some point. He…hadn’t even realized…until Miss Enoshima—!

His entire head shifted as he stared directly at the beautiful girl retracting a delicate hand, balling up the napkin and tossing it aside. All the while, a smile refused to leave her lips…a gentle smile…with deep shades of sadness encompassing it. Lost in the majesty of her melancholic expression, he almost didn’t hear her speak.

“I know…what it’s like to be discarded. To trust in someone so explicitly…only to have them throw you away when you’re no longer…amusing.”

As she spoke, her voice radiated pain…and understanding. Hifumi instantly believed that her words were true. Only someone who had felt the same anguish as abandonment…could sound like that. But then, Junko’s expression hardened, and he could almost predict what she would say next.

“No one can give you purpose. It’s something you have to find for yourself…no matter how difficult it may be. If your purpose was to support someone who eventually tossed you aside…then you have only two choices: give in and waste away…or do whatever you can to find a new purpose.”

She paused, her sky-blue irises watching him intently. All the while, the fanfic creator found himself entranced, not only by her words…but her character as well!

“I know that neither of those options sound appealing…they didn’t for me either. It took me a
while…before I decided what I needed to do. But when I did, I finally discovered something I’d been missing my whole life…”

Again, Hifumi couldn’t help but become more and more interested in her backstory! Her character arc was amazing! She wasn’t your stereotypical heroine but at the same time, having such a hidden background didn’t fit for a side character either! He couldn’t find the right way to classify what her character—

…Wait, what was he doing? She wasn’t a character in a story…she was person, a living…breathing, human being. And yet, his mind was having issues trying to register her…as anything other than some sort of character from a story! Was this…how he viewed everything in his life up until now? How long…had he viewed his entire world this way? All of this came with a horrifying revelation…one that shook him to the core of his being.

“…I’m…not the protagonist…I…never was…and I never will be.”

How had he failed to see it before?! His entire life, he’d viewed himself as the protagonist, not just for his own story, but for the entire world’s story! Why…Why did he ever think that?! Of course other people’s opinions and ideals were important but…he’d always viewed others as…as…NPCs.

Was that why…it hurt so much to be manipulated? Because he realized that…Miss Ludenberg saw him only as an NPC? Was that the source of his guilt? Could it be that, without realizing it, he’d been treating everyone…including Miss Ludenberg, as NPCs designed to enhance his own story? And having his own ideals turned on him…finally opened his eyes?

It seemed that, only when he’d fallen into depression had he begun to notice that…the role he assigned himself…was completely false. Only now that he’d been used and thrown away…did he see the folly of his own hubris. In that regard, it was obvious that Miss Ludenberg would use and abuse him. He hadn’t seen her…or any of his classmates, as human beings…until only recently…yesterday, in fact!

“That’s it! That’s what stopped me!” he realized, feeling simultaneously ashamed and proud. “I saw Taka as a human being that I would be killing! Not an NPC that was trying to keep me from my lovely Alter Ego!”

It was beyond shameful…to realize that, subconsciously, he’d been treating other people as NPCs for…probably most of his life. He’d just…never taken the time to try and understand that…they were people too…not just characters in a story. How had it taken him this long to realize such a basic thing?! Perhaps…his devotion to creating artwork and fanfiction…was to blame.

He’d thrown himself into his work from an early age, drawing and sculpting for as long as he could remember! He never even considered other people’s opinions as valid, especially when it came to his work. If they didn’t like his artwork, they were idiots who couldn’t understand art! And if they adored his work, then they were the sensible one that were worthy of his acknowledgement.

But…that just wasn’t how the world worked. And now that he’d come to that realization…just like Miss Enoshima had said…there were only two choices ahead for him.

“…ello?! Earth to Hifumi! You in there?!”

Suddenly, Miss Enoshima’s voice echoed in his ears, snapping him out of a strange kind of trance. Blinking rapidly, the fanfic creator shook his head slightly and stared at her, noticing her concerned expression and the fact that she’d been waving her hand in front of his face…probably for at least a minute or so. She’d even set the plate of eggs and sausage down to lean in front of him to do so,
adding to his awkwardness.

“M-My apologies…Miss Enoshima,” he blubbered, fighting back embarrassment. “I was just so… caught up in your char—I mean, in what you said…I suppose I spaced out for a bit…”

Junko raised an eyebrow but didn’t question his slip up, retracting her arm and slightly tucking it into her pocket.

“Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to lecture you or anything…I don’t really feel like I have the right to do that.” Again, there was something more behind her statement that Hifumi wanted to understand but rightfully chose to be silent as she continued, “All I’m trying to say is that…we all have to do what we can to get out of here. Just…try and focus on what you can do to help…and that’s enough.”

A wave of guilt washed over the fanfic creator once more, unsure of how his talents could possibly be useful in helping to find a way out of the school. He only just realized he’d been a mostly inconsiderate person his entire life, so adding this on top of it wasn’t exactly boosting his confidence.

“But…what if there isn’t anything I can do to help? What if…I only undermine what you’re all trying to do?”

His question was borne out of self-pity, but he still wanted to know the answer. He knew he was simply wanting someone else to guide him again…but right now, he wasn’t sure what else to do. And so, he patiently waited for Junko to answer him…praying she might have the insight he needed.

“Well, that’s a bit—ah, shit…”

She’d only just begun to speak when she quietly swore. Glancing over, Hifumi saw that she’d taken her hand out of her pocket, and something had unintentionally come with it. A small pink slip…one of the many that Taka had undoubtedly written for her during his ‘reign’. As she quickly bent down to pick it up, she suddenly stopped, grasping the pink paper and staring it…almost too intently.

Hifumi was about to ask if she was alright when suddenly, an almost childish grin overtook her lips. Straightening up, she turned back him with what could only be described as delight in her voice.

“Hey…I think I have an idea,” she said slowly, as if trying to contain her excitement. “How would you like to help me with a little…arts and crafts project?”

Taken aback by the sudden offer, the fanfic creator replied, “W-What kind of…project do you have in mind, Miss Enoshima?”

“It’s a little something I like to call…karma. I want to get back at Taka for giving me so many of these ugly little buggers. I was wondering if you’d like to help with that?”

The moment she made that offer, Hifumi felt something stir within him. He didn’t know what she was planning, but the brilliant shine in Miss Enoshima’s eyes assured him that, whatever it was, it would be immensely fulfilling! And although the guilt hadn’t dissipated, the thought of working on an artistic project helped to keep the biting feelings at bay.

Just glancing at the pink slip got his creative juices flowing again, and he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “I’ll be limited, since I can’t leave the first floor…but as long as you bring me the materials…”

“Well that’s what I wanted to hear!” she shouted, finally acting like her usual self again. “Here’s what I’m thinking…”
Making sure no one else was around, the fashionista leaned in close and whispered in his ear. And when she was finished, Hifumi couldn’t help the mischievous grin that etched onto his face.

“Oh…I think we can do better than that!” he said, urging her to come in close again.

Over the course of the next few minutes, the Ultimate Fashionista and the Ultimate Fanfic Creator discussed their harmless revenge against the now removed Disciplinary Committee Chairman Ishimaru!

All the while, the camera in the cafeteria watched them closely.

“Hey, no fair!” the real Junko Enoshima shouted up on the control room. Pouting, she donned her childish persona and muttered, “Leaving me out of the fun…that’s really rude, ya know!”

Junko had watched their entire exchange, nearly vomiting several times as the hope levels increased. However, she became increasingly interested when they began whispering something about revenge…but she couldn’t hear what they were saying! The camera microphones were pretty high quality, but they couldn’t pick up whispering from across the room!

“I wanna know, I wanna know, I wanna know!” she shouted while throwing a tantrum…but only for a moment before straightening up. Assuming her teacher persona, complete with ponytail and glasses, she turned her attention away from that monitor. “Well, if they won’t let me in on the fun…I suppose I’ll just have to find it elsewhere.”

Through the monitors, the Mastermind watched as the students investigated the fourth floor.

Hina and Sakura inspected the chem lab, finding both the protein bottles and the poison. She waited for a moment, waiting to see if they’d bring up the incident from last night…but they seemed intent on not even mentioning it. Bored with them, Junko switched to the two classrooms, currently being investigated by two pairs. Leon and Sayaka searched one, while the idiot trio of Mondo, Taka, and Chihiro searched the other. However, there wasn’t anything special to be found there, and knowing that, Junko deduced that it was pointless to view them further.

Looking at one of the camera halls, she found Byakuya, still being stalked by Toko, walking down the hallway that lead to the locked Headmaster’s office. Unfortunately, the view for the camera in that hallway didn’t allow her to see the office door directly, not that it mattered. The camera in the Headmaster’s office itself was good enough, but since the door was locked, it was no shock that Byakuya almost immediately came back into view of the hallway camera. His face was genuinely stoic, but she could see he was frustrated that he’d been barred entry into one of the most vital rooms of the school.

Sadly, that didn’t even whet her appetite and thus wrote him off as well. After all, he’d already investigated the Staff room nearby and hadn’t even commented on the flowers placed on all the teachers desks!

“Oh perhaps…he didn’t feel moved by the deaths of the school’s faculty?” she questioned aloud, still in her teacher persona…only to change into her crazy persona an instant later. “Then again! Why would a selfish bastard care one bit about those beneath him! Ahahahahaha~”

As her laughter faded, she looked at the final pair searching the upper floor. Immediately, Junko returned to her ‘original’ self, staring at the monitor intently.
“Ooooh…now what are the two of you up to, I wonder…” she said, keeping her analytical eyes focused on them, scrutinizing every…last…detail.

“Locked…” Kyoko said aloud, tugging on the door to the Data Processing Room.

“I wonder why?” Makoto questioned, looking at the map on his e-handbook. “This is the first time any of the doors have been locked when we went up to a new floor.”

“Indeed,” the mysterious girl concurred, examining the door to discover that it would require a special key to open. “Perhaps there’s something inside here that the Mastermind wants hidden…”

“Or perhaps…the Mastermind themselves is behind this door;”

Kyoko held in her comment, not wanting to unintentionally give Makoto hope. Even if the Mastermind was behind that door, there was no guarantee that other security measures hadn’t already been taken. The room could be rigged to explode, or there could be a panic room inside. It was also entirely possible that the Mastermind wasn’t even in the building with them…but considering what the fake Junko had told her—

“I guess we should move on then, huh?” Makoto said, unintentionally interrupting her thought process. However, she wasn’t upset with him for it. He was right after all, there was nothing else to be done here, at least for now.

“Yes,” she agreed, already turning and heading for the Music Room. It was the only room that no one had bothered to investigate and hopefully, it would give her and Makoto some privacy. “This way.”

To her surprise, Makoto managed to keep pace with her. She didn’t stop to wait for him, nor did she turn back to check if he was following. Instead, he appeared at her side, matching her walking speed. For a brief moment, she glanced his way. She was almost shocked when he turned and noticed her glance, smiling at her in return.

Despite herself, a bit of heat rose up in her cheeks. Immediately, shifted her gaze forward, slightly ashamed. She…wasn’t quite sure why. All she knew was that, somewhere deep down, it was shameful for her to have any sort of emotional reaction. Was it something innate or had the idea been drilled into her through training? She didn’t know…she couldn’t know. Her memories were still fragmented…only bits and pieces returning very, very slowly.

At this point, all she knew for certain was that she’d come to this school to see the Headmaster…not the demented bear that currently claimed the title. And even after everything that the Junko imposter told her, she still couldn’t make heads or tails of her true reasoning. After all, if the imposter was lying to her, then her current hypothesis was completely skewed. At the same time, Kyoko was very perceptive…and didn’t think the imposter had been dishonest.

There was definitely something the false Junko was keeping to herself…but if it was true that merely speaking such a thing would cause the Mastermind to execute—

“Uh, Kyoko…are you okay?”

Wordlessly, the lavender haired girl’s thoughts were broken, and she zeroed in on her surroundings once again. They were almost to the music room, only a few feet from the door, in fact. Luckily, she hadn’t stopped in front of the door and mindlessly stood there contemplating. That would have
drawn concern. No…what shocked her more was that…Makoto somehow noticed she was deep in thought, even though she was certain her facial expression hadn’t changed.

Was he getting more perceptive? Or was it simply his luck at play once again? Honestly, she couldn’t be sure of either. Both were completely viable. Makoto had proven himself to incredibly intuitive and insanely lucky…even if most of it stemmed from unfortunate circumstances. Still, that didn’t change the fact that, somehow, through her stone-faced visage…he’d seen something, something that caused him to show concern for her.

That, in and of itself was impressive…and she wanted to acknowledge it.

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

Again, she found herself questioning him. She wasn’t entirely sure why. It was true that she wanted to know his reason but…there was something…more, that she wanted to know.

Makoto seemed a bit startled at her question, maybe even a bit flustered, if the slight coloration in his cheeks were any indication. “Well, uh, I guess…it seemed like something was on your mind?”

Kyoko’s eyebrow raised slightly. Judging by his tone, he wasn’t even sure himself about why he’d asked. Perhaps it was purely intuition that made him ask, and not true perceptiveness. Regardless, his instincts could tell that she was…unnerved by something. That alone was praiseworthy. However, she willingly held herself back. Because…as much as she wanted to acknowledge him…trust him…there was a part of her that refused to let herself do it.

She wanted…to know why…why should couldn’t bring herself to trust anyone…trust him. It made sense that she wouldn’t put much faith in her fellow classmates. She knew well how people react under pressure. Putting her trust in any of them would be foolish. And trusting the imposter was definitely out of the question. Their alliance was shaky, at best, and there was no guarantee this wasn’t an elaborate scheme conceived by the Mastermind to add excitement to the game.

And yet, when it came to Makoto…she wanted to trust him. I wasn’t a matter of if she should or could…it was that she wanted to. Makoto continually placed all of his trust in her…which she tried to reason away as him being gullible, considering he put his faith in pretty much everyone in the class. And yet…he seemed persistent in showing her that he could be trusted…and that she could trust him.

Kyoko knew it was foolish. She knew that she would end up regretting such a choice. But at the same time…she wanted to do it. She wanted to know what having complete faith in someone was like…because, as far as she could remember, she’d never allowed herself to do it before.

“Perhaps…I could…give him just a little trust…”

She would test him…that’s what she’d decided. That’s why she sent him to the hidden room last night. There was all likelihood that he’d be attacked by the Mastermind, they both knew it. And while she’d concerned for his safety, she’d forced it away because it would further her own agenda…and that was wrong. She knew that, but had done it anyway.

Kyoko would never admit it to anyone but…she hardly slept last night. She left her door open, as she’d done the last few nights, waiting for him to pass by on his way to his own room. And he did…much, much later than she’d expected. Once confirming he’d returned to his room, she finally shut her door…but didn’t really sleep. He’d seemed…distracted upon returning. She wasn’t sure if it was because something had happened to him…or if he saw something he shouldn’t have.
Either way, she knew something was up, and wanted to talk to him about it. And if he could be honest with her…then maybe…just maybe…she could learn to put her trust in him.

“…I was thinking about what happened yesterday,” she half-lied, glancing up at the camera and hoping he’d catch her meaning. She watched as his eyes drifted, peeked at the surveillance device not even for an instant, and shifted his gaze back to her.

“Yeah…it was…a pretty crazy day,” he answered as nonchalantly as possible. It wasn’t perfect, but she could see he understood her meaning.

Nodding to him, she moved forward and pushed the doors to the Music Room open. What greeted them was a large auditorium, complete with several rows of desks and a grand piano sitting atop a large stage. The lighting in the room was just as odd as hallways, with purple spotlights illuminating the stage. Kyoko had surmised long ago that the strange color patterns littered throughout the school were meant to induce stress, as clashing color could influence one’s mood as well as solid colors.

“Wow! This is pretty amazing!” Makoto exclaimed as he walked about the space. “I’m sure that Sayaka would love it in here! Probably Leon too! I wonder if they saw it already?”

While he was speaking, Kyoko scanned the room until her eyes fell on the camera. It was up in a top corner, pretty far away from them. Most likely, each camera had microphones hidden on them, so the Mastermind could hear everything they said. They could also be other listening devices planted around…which mean that Kyoko needed to be careful with her words. She needed to be direct, but not reveal anything the imposter passed on to her…just in case.

To that end, knowing that more than likely the Mastermind knew of the conversation between her, Makoto, and the imposter in the bathhouse last night, Kyoko decided to use this moment to be frank.

“You know, you still haven’t told me what you think…” she said deliberately, getting Makoto attention immediately, just as she planned. “About the hidden room in the boy’s restroom.”

Makoto’s eyes widened, probably due to the shock of her blunt statement. However, he didn’t hesitate when he answered, “Well…just like you thought, it was cleared out when I got there. There weren’t any files or documents anywhere. All I found was a cable in one of the drawers.”

“…I suspected as much,” she replied, a hand resting on her chin. “It doesn’t matter. I already learned all I could from the documents there. Did anything else happen while you were there?”

“No,” he answered immediately. “I just went in, saw it was empty, and left, just like I promised.”

Very slowly, Kyoko released a breath she’d been holding. It was good to know the Mastermind hadn’t made a move. The chances had been slim, but the possibility of Makoto being attacked was still there. Still, that didn’t explain why he’d come back to his room so late. She didn’t want to directly ask him. No…she wanted him to tell her of his own volition. But she needed to give him a little push.

“It sounds like it didn’t take very long. Honestly, I half expected the Mastermind to interfere in some way,” she told him, trying to steer the conversation elsewhere. She hoped that bringing up the fact that nothing happened would trick him into telling her about how he got back so late. “Since they didn’t, it proves that nothing of value remain hidden in the room.”

“And…what would have happened if they Mastermind had attacked me?” Makoto suddenly asked, seeming a bit concerned…and for good reason.

Her original purpose was forgotten for a moment as a tiny feeling of guilt welled up.
Kyoko hadn’t exactly shown him any concern when talking about how dangerous the situation she’d sent him into was. It was there, buried so far into her subconscious that she refused to let it show, but still there. But…she couldn’t let him know that. She couldn’t show weakness…no matter how small. The Mastermind was watching, after all. If she, in any way, gave the Mastermind a tool to use against her, then Kyoko knew there was no way she’d succeed in uncovering the truth.

So, as usual, she answered with a cool and calculated tone, “You can handle that sort of thing. You’re a boy, after all.”

The look of shock, and possibly confusion, that crossed Makoto’s face was understandable. But to be fair, she wasn’t really lying. After all, all the men she’d ever known didn’t have a problem putting themselves in danger if it meant protecting something…or someone. And while she knew that it varied from person to person, Makoto had shown his bravery on multiple occasions…not that it justified how she knowingly sent him into a dangerous situation.

“Uh…right, I understand.” Makoto replied, obviously a bit shaken by her words. However, he quickly straightened up and asked, “But let me ask you this, did you find out anything useful from the documents in the hidden room?”

Kyoko had to fight to keep from scowling. Had he really just asked that in full view of the camera? More to the point, did he actually expect her to answer when it should be obvious that the Mastermind was listening in? Then again, she’d asked him a sensitive question, so perhaps he didn’t think it pushed any boundaries.

She was a bit disappointed, but not completely surprised. After all, Makoto was eager to try and find a way for everyone to escape, and sometimes let that enthusiasm get the better of him. Reprimanding him wouldn’t help, so instead, she decided to be direct again.

“We…shouldn’t talk about that. Not here.” Her eyes gestured toward the camera, and instantly, Makoto realized his mistake. But before he could voice anything, she continued, “I’m…looking into it. If I find out anything, I’ll be sure to let you know. Is that alright?”

Kyoko ended up being a bit forceful at the end, not really asking and more like not-so-subtly demanding he stay quiet. Fortunately, that answered seemed to satisfy him, or at least got him to back down, as he decided not to press the issue further. To which she was thankful.

At the same time, this was also the perfect moment for her to question him about why he returned to his room so late last night.

“So, now it’s your turn,” she said calmly, keeping his attention. “Let’s hear your secret.”

“…Huh?” was his only reply, seeming genuinely confused.

At that moment, almost uncharacteristically, Kyoko smirked a bit and said, “Did you think I wouldn’t notice? You’re hiding something. Am I wrong?”

What she had intended as slightly playful banter…turned into utter horror. Makoto’s face instantly shifted, and an intense guilt suddenly became visible on his features. Perhaps someone with an untrained eye wouldn’t have noticed…but to her, she could read him like an open book. He was definitely hiding something…something he didn’t want anyone to know…and that scared her.

Makoto had never been anything more than an open and honest person since the day they’d met. But now, as he tried to hide his surprise at her deduction and force away the guilt he was feeling, Kyoko felt her stomach sink.
“What’s the matter?” she asked, keeping her cool tone despite her own shock. A lightbulb went off in her mind as she thought of the camera looming above them. Maybe…that was what caused his reaction. “If you’re worried about the camera, why not write it down?"

The lavender haired girl had paper and a pen on her…and she would gladly lend it to him if it meant easing his worry. This was Makoto, after all. The one person she had decided to try and put faith in. The person who had always done his best to keep everyone together. The person she had grown to respect despite how naïve he was. All he had to do was accept her offer…and she would consider truly trusting him…

Sadly, however…

“Um…well…”

She waited…longer than she should have, for him to answer her. But in the end…he just stood there, silent. He couldn’t even look her in the eye, averting his gaze as he tried, and failed, to respond to her request. Almost unconsciously, her hands balled into fists at her sides.

His lack of an answer…upset her. She wanted to trust him. Wanted to believe in him. But the way he was acting…the fact that she knew he was hiding something from her…it stirred something deep inside her…and filled her with anger. And the longer he hesitated, the angrier and more frustrated she became.

Narrowing her eyes, she moved closer to him, practically invading his personal space, and said, “We’re friends, so we should be able to trust each other. That’s what you said before, right?”

Kyoko knew it was underhanded, but right now, she didn’t care. Using his own words against him was the quickest way to the truth. And unfortunately, the look of utter shame and guilt on Makoto’s face told her everything she needed to know. Despite the torrent of anger swelling up inside, she managed to keep her composure when he finally spoke.

“I’m sorry…I can’t tell. At least, not yet…” he said softly, still not meeting her gaze.

His words…didn’t do anything to soothe the anger bubbling up inside her, and all she could think to respond with was, “So…that’s your answer.”

He wouldn’t tell her. No…he didn’t trust her enough to tell her. That was the more accurate statement. At very least, Kyoko could tell he meant every word. He truly did intend to tell her at some point…but that didn’t change the fact that he was keeping secrets from her…when he specifically asked her not to do the same with him!

Regardless of the anger she was feeling…Kyoko decided to give him one last chance. He deserved that, at the very least.

“But do you think that’s fair? You were happy to hear what I had to say, but now your unwilling to share yourself?”

Her tone made it clear that this was his last chance. She had opened up to him, even if only a little, to try and prove that it was possible to earn her trust. But…if he denounced her here…she doubted she’d ever be able to trust him ever again.

After waiting what felt like an eternity, she finally got her answer.

“I’m sorry…I really am…”
Another apology…not at all what she wished to hear. Even though she could see how much it pained him to avoid answering her, it mattered little to her now. She gave him plenty of chances…more than she should have, really. And all he could managed was a meager apology? How could she ever trust someone who wouldn’t be honest during times like this?

Straightening her jacket, she turned her back to him and, without a hint of emotion in her voice, told him, “It’s fine. Goodbye.”

Without warning, Kyoko briskly walked away from him, out of the Music Room and headed for the other rooms that needed investigating. If Makoto tried to stop her, she didn’t hear him. In fact, she didn’t want to be anywhere near him right now. Instead, she decided to throw herself back into investigating the school. However, she couldn’t do that without taking a moment to mentally berate herself.

“I can’t trust anyone…I knew that…and yet I wanted to try. This is what I get for trying to have faith in people.”

Barely managing to keep her smoldering anger in check, the lavender haired girl continued her investigation in the way she knew best…completely on her own.

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“Well, daaaaamn! Makoto, you heartless monster!”

The Mastermind, Junko Enoshima, cackled as she watched the entire affair. She currently donned her aggressive persona and couldn’t keep herself from commenting.

“Granted, he’s doing it because of a promise to another friend…but still! That’s the closest I’ve ever seen Miss Detective get to actually trusting someone! And you shot her down faster than a rabbit has an orgasm! Ahahahahahaha~!”

After laughing hysterically for another few minutes, the Mastermind leaned back in her chair and quietly observed the lot of students on the monitors. She’d reverted back to her usual self, looking at them with a bored expression, a loud yawn escaping her to emphasize her mood.

A few minutes later, she watched as they all began to head back to the first floor, apparently done exploring. That was when a grin tugged at her cheeks.

“About damn time!” she squealed as she spun around in her chair. However, she came to a halt quickly as she grabbed her desk, staring at a monitor that displayed Sakura and Hina heading back down the stairs. Another wicked grin crossed her face. “Well then…I’d usually go with ‘An Eye For An Eye’…but I think her silence would better suit my next motive.”

Hopping up from her seat, she practically skipped toward the Monokuma control room, throwing the door open and plopping down in her chair. Adjusting a headset with a mic on her head, the Queen of Despair prepared to announce the next step in the killing game.

“…Let’s see just how long she can stay quiet after this!”

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To Be Continued…
Greetings, my beautiful readers! Holy crap, it’s been forever! Sorry for such a long wait…but what’s gonna happen next?! What does Junko have planned for the next motive? Will Kyoko ever forgive Makoto for keeping secrets? When will Leon get his sandwich?! (Hint: Sandwich Denial) You’ll have to keep reading to find out!

Again, apologies for being gone so long! But between working a real person job, buying a permanent home, traveling out of state to help my mother renovate a house, and stepping on a nail requiring me to get a tetanus shot…let’s say it’s been hard to find time to write.

I do have an announcement though! Since I know it can be hard to contact me, I recently set up a Twitter account so that I could give updates on my progress of each chapter! Now, it’s also for my youtube account, so if you watch my videos, that’s great too! I go under the same name as here – @hunterofcomedy – so I hope that helps keep everyone informed.

Lastly, a big thank you to everyone who favorited, subscribed, and followed my story recently! I know I haven’t posted in a while, but it’s always great to get messages from people new to my story! Even if it’s just “Great job!” or something, comments like those keep me going. Thank you to everyone who supports my story! You are the reason I keep writing it!

Thanks again, and have yourselves a great day, my beautiful readers!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!